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Toward Transformative Gender Justice: Listening to ~~Gender Non-~~ ~~binary~~ Individuals' Experiences of School

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TOWARD TRANSFORMATIVE GENDER JUSTICE: LISTENING
~~TO GENDER NON-BINARY INDIVIDUALS' EXPERIENCES~~
OF SCHOOL

by

Katherine Lewis, M.Ed.

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate and understand gender diverse individuals' retrospective accounts of their experiences of school and to interpret these experiences under the influence of deconstruction. A second purpose is to use these experiences to inform a model of gender-inclusive education.

In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviewing served as the primary method of inquiry. Eight ~~gender non-binary~~ adult participants were purposefully selected and individually interviewed. The participants were asked to describe their gendered experiences in K-12 schools. The secondary method of inquiry was a focus group interview in which seven participants were asked to offer suggestions for gender-inclusive schooling. Data from individual interviews was analyzed using two methods: open-coding, inductive analysis and a deductive analysis with Derridean deconstruction in mind. Data from focus group interviews was analyzed using open-coding and inductive analysis methods. Emerging themes were then analyzed in light of the literature, theoretical framework, research questions, and selected gender inclusive curricular materials.

Findings showed that participants felt little sense of belonging and safety in K-12 schools and that working toward gender-inclusive schooling (and Transformative Gender Justice) requires providing continuous educational opportunities (focused on learning about both gender writ large and gender diversity) to all members of a school community.

Keywords: LGBTQIA, educational leadership, transgender, gender non-binary, gender

I. INTRODUCTION

Background

We learn many things in schools, from basic skills and concepts to socialization and learning to navigate both our own and others' complex identities. Gender is one of many socially constructed identity categories that we learn about and practice/perform from a very early age; we continue learning how to perform our gender within the structures of family and social institutions, such as public schools (MacNaughton, 2001). These gender lessons are not without consequences. Several scholars note that schools in the United States are deeply gender-stratified environments (Blount, 1999) with a high degree of social regulation (Butler, 1990; Davison & Frank, 2006), particularly in relation to gender identities and expressions deemed as either appropriate or inappropriate in these settings.

Blount (1996, 1999, 2000) contends that schools are deeply gender-polarized institutions, built upon a long-standing foundation of sexism, heteronormativity, and homophobia. Addressing these -isms and phobias and proactively supporting gender and sexually diverse students are vital components of promoting equity-oriented, inclusive learning environments through social justice leadership practices (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010; Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003; MacGillivray, 2004; O'Malley, 2013; Theoharis, 2007). In a recent chapter about building inclusive schools for youth with diverse gender and sexual identities, O'Malley (2013) explains that injustices faced by these individuals point to the problematic heteronormative and homophobic assumptions within the larger systems of schooling and society. Equity-oriented leaders who recognize and name these problematic assumptions often call for

“large-scale systemic effects on the way public schools approach [these] issues”
(Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, p. 145).

In tracing the history of gender transgression in school employment throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Blount (1996, 1999, 2000) explicates the role homophobia and heterosexism played in maintaining strict and rigid gender boundaries within schools in the United States. Throughout her work exploring the intersection of gender and education, Blount (1996, 1999, 2000) explains that the Common School Movement of the 1800s required schools to serve more students and hire additional teachers. Many school leaders hired female teachers to fulfill this need as women made up a cheaper labor force (i.e., females were offered lower salaries than their male counterparts). As the field of education employment moved from male-dominated to female-dominated in the early nineteenth century, a societal shift in perspective occurred in the United States—male teachers were viewed as too effeminate and many female teachers as too masculine. More women had joined the field pre- and during WWII (because many men were fighting in WWII) and served as both teachers and administrators. Post-WWII, however, the field of educational administration was dominated by males and schools became deeply gender polarized institutions in which teaching was female-dominated, administration was male-dominated, and school employees who transgressed traditional gender roles were singled out as suspected homosexuals and, in turn, barred from school employment. Unfortunately, a cultural fear of homosexuality emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century, in response to popular sexuality studies and medical reports pathologizing any sexuality not associated with procreation.

Blount (2000) points to the fact that educational institutions at the beginning of the 21st century had still not become appropriately inclusive and welcoming of educators with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender (LGBT) identities. As she explains, “this marks a critical development in the gender-identification of schoolwork, as cross-gender behaviors and characteristics have been linked in the popular mind with homosexuality and all of its attendant taboos since the late 1920s” (p. 84). Because homosexuality is associated with cross-gender behaviors, Blount argues that until LGBT employees are valued in these settings, rigid gender norms are likely to remain in place within schools.

This tendency to link gender identity with sexuality (noted by Blount and others) leads to the problem of *compulsory heterogenderism*—a term recently introduced by Nicolazzo (2016) to describe the ways in which transgender individuals’ identities/expressions are often misinterpreted as indicative of their sexuality. Nicolazzo (2016) states that this linking of sexuality and gender identity (i.e., *compulsory heterogenderism*) works alongside dominant gender binary discourses to erase transgender identity. For example, when a person’s sexual orientation is assumed based solely on their expressions of masculinity and femininity, sexual orientation becomes the primary focus and any opportunities to recognize and celebrate diverse gender identities and expressions are lost.

With a documented history of strictly enforcing gender role stereotypes for school employees, it is not surprising that educational institutions continue to operate in a gender segregating fashion. After all, school employees who have transgressed traditional notions of gender either received sanctions or were fired (Blount, 2000), so educators adhering to the strict gender norms served as the models of appropriate gender behavior

for students. In short, schools “have served as powerfully important institutions for reflecting, creating, enforcing, and restricting the gendered behavior and characteristics of both students and school workers and, by extension, of American culture” (p. 85). In this way, gender stratification was (and is) socially constructed (Blount, 1999), which means the gendered discourses and practices of schooling are not static; they can be analyzed and adjusted.

Schools are both shaped by and take part in institutionalizing rigid gender norms and stereotypes. Because gender is a social construction, gender stratification is also socially constructed (Blount, 1999), which means we can address the stratification when it is problematic and excludes students. It is equity-oriented educators who must engage in critical reflection about gender segregation (Davison & Frank, 2006), heterosexism (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006), homophobia (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003; Lustick, 2016; O’Malley, 2013), and compulsory heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2016) to address these deeply gender polarized climates. After all, homophobia (which is intertwined with heterosexism, transphobia, genderism, and sexism) is something educational leaders can and should address (Airton, 2009, 2014) and the burden must be on educational leaders “to provide and reinforce an inclusive school environment where the confrontation of transphobia and homophobia is normalized” (Lustick, 2016, p. 163). In the words of Davison and Frank (2006)—

As educators, we have a responsibility to ensure that students feel safe and supported in schools, yet the refusal of schools and educators to acknowledge how hegemonic femininity and masculinity are implicated in social exclusion, bullying, harassment, violence, and low academic performance is tantamount to

an act of abandoning students that are marginalized by the everyday inequity of gender discourses. (p. 162)

With this dissertation project, I intend to uncover some of the gender-stratifying practices and structures within K-12 schools and notice moments in which gender creates friction in these settings. Listening to adult ~~gender non-binary~~¹ individuals' retrospective accounts (Beck, 2014) of their K-12 educational experiences should illuminate the rigidity of binary gender categories as a non-binary gender identity is “always already positioned as fluid, influx, and liminal” (Nicolazzo, 2016, p. 1178). Green and Maurer (2015) define *gender non-binary* as a “spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the gender binary’s assumption that gender is strictly an either/or option of male/men/masculine or female/woman/feminine” (p. 8); a more complex and robust review of the construct *gender non-binary* is included later in this chapter (see pages 12-17). Such gender transgressors naturally struggle with feeling welcome and included in gender-stratified educational environments.

In preparing to study ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' retrospective accounts (Beck, 2014) of their experiences of school, I engaged in reflexive journaling (Ahern, 1999; Ortlipp, 2008; Tufford & Newman, 2012) about my own experiences in relation to the research interest—gendered schooling. Although I do not identify as ~~gender non-binary~~, I wrote these reflective pieces to explore how gender polarized educational environments affected me personally. Identifying and articulating some of the ways that

¹ The use of a strikethrough in the title and throughout the dissertation serves as a visual cue that I am using this term “under erasure.” The term is simultaneously used and troubled (Derrida, 1967/1976). Further explanation of this philosophical technique is provided on p. 15.

stereotyping and separation affected me served as a valuable exercise for conceptualizing how gendered structures and practices affect all people. Perhaps engaging in reflexive journaling about gendered schooling could serve as a valuable activity among other educators with binary gender identities that are seeking to understand the role gender plays in inequitable learning environments. This reflective activity could serve as a valuable component of a gender inclusive professional development framework informed by this project.

In one of these retrospective essays, I remember moments where, as a young girl, I argued with others about gender roles and expectations, particularly around what it was girls *could* like and do. I argued with my brothers, with classmates, and even with a few teachers. My first reflections were couched in the gendering of colors and my feelings of frustration about not being able to choose things I liked without being confronted by my peers. The following excerpt from this reflective writing activity highlights one of these experiences:

From as early as I can remember, blue was my favorite color. Whenever presented with the option, I chose blue. When I was in elementary school, I looked forward to art class. This was the place I could draw what I wanted. You might describe these early artistic experiences as my “blue period.” Of course, to be fair, I was mildly obsessed with drawing dolphins swimming in the deep blue of a vast ocean, against the backdrop of a bright blue sky. Blue was my favorite color. Maybe I loved blue so dearly because it reminded me of my grandfather. I spent many childhood summers being tossed around in the waves of the Atlantic

Ocean with him—there was the blue of the ocean and the blue in his eyes.

In school, I consistently chose blue school supplies, created my blue period artworks, and proudly played with the blue versions of popular 1980s-era toys. My favorite toy was a teddy bear of sorts, the blue Popple, who was obviously a boy. When treats were offered at school parties, there were usually pink cupcakes and cookies for girls while the blue-frosted options were for the boys. Of course, I preferred blue treats. Others informed me that the blue ones were for the boys but that I could have a pink one. Well, I wasn't going to turn down a sugary treat. This obsession with blue was only a problem when I was confronted by other kids, who would say things like, "why do you want the boy one?" and "blue is for boys." No—blue is not a color for boys; blue is *my* favorite color, and I am a girl. Although minor annoyances in the grand scheme of things, these early memories represent the beginning of my continued experiences of arguing about what I could or could not like or how I was expected to behave as a girl. (Personal Reflection, 2016)

In reading and thinking about these memories of my educational experiences related to gender, I found that many moments were about choice. During the elementary and middle school years, the books I loved most were tucked away on shelves labeled *boys*. I remember feeling annoyed when my peers would ask me why I read boy's books. This reflective writing snippet speaks to the gendering of reading materials in school:

Adventure—the promise of a good book. I can't tell you the total number of books (or how many times I read one book in particular) included in the popular Choose Your Own Adventure book series of the 1980s and 1990s. In these stories, I became the main character and made important choices that would affect the entire course of my adventure. I remember pretending to be all sorts of characters: knights, doctors, spies, to name a few. I -didn't think about whether I was a boy or girl. I just pretended to be the character. Although these books lined the shelves of my bookcase at home, it seemed this particular series was set aside for male readers at school. In elementary school, I would often rummage through the *boy* shelves to find the books I wanted to explore. Most of the adventure books were housed near books about cars, science experiments, and space. These topics were, of course, targeted to the boys in class. After all, nearly every Choose Your Own Adventure cover featured a boy character. Couldn't there be a girl spy? Other kids commented on my reading choices— “Why do you like boy books?” “Those are supposed to be for boys, not girls!” These distinctions were not a part of my home life, so I just read what I wanted to read. (Personal Reflection, 2016)

I remember a moment early in middle school where I felt angry about this idea that some books were meant for boys and some were only for girls. I was looking through the adventure books in the library and found a much-loved book I had read many times—*Julie of the Wolves*. Holding the book in my hands, I realized I was in the boy's section of the library, even though it wasn't labeled as such; my elementary school experiences carried over, I guess, and I was trained in this

gendering of books. In this moment, I felt angry. I remember approaching the librarian to tell her that this book, *Julie of the Wolves*, was in the wrong section. See, there's a girl on the front. She is the main character and she's not a boy. This is not a book for boys. It's for girls. It's for everyone. (Personal Reflection, 2016)

Within these early experiences, I notice many instances of separation by binary gender categories of boy/girl; there were boy lines and girl lines, games to be played by boys and games to be played only by girls. In my own reflections about separation by (and often competition among) categories of binary gender, I realize that the segregation (and competition) carried over into other educational settings, like the playground:

Most kids looked forward to Fridays in elementary school because, on Fridays, we often played games. We would have mock spelling bees, flashcard math facts races or play games like Hangman and Heads Up Seven Up. In my memory, the games were almost always structured as boys versus girls. A title of *boys* on the upper left corner of the dusty chalkboard and the complimentary *girls* title at the upper right corner, all for the purposes of tallying total scores for each game.

It didn't really matter who won the games. I dreaded it either way. I knew the teasing would last all day and would carry over to recess and lunch. Fridays were the days dedicated to all out verbal warfare among boys and girls. We made up rhymes like "boys go to Jupiter to get more stupider" and chanted them from one gender mob to the other. Recess, on these days, wasn't very fun for me and I stopped looking forward to Fridays. (Personal Reflection, 2016)

Within these gendered settings and experiences, my peers did not view me as *girly* and I quickly became known as a *tomboy*. Despite failing to meet stereotypical

expectations of what it means to be *girly* (or unquestioned notions of femininity), I regularly argued with others, defending my own presence and behaviors, saying things like, “I’m a girl and this is what I do, so it must be girly.” This response did not stop others from making assumptions about my sexuality and calling me names, nor did it quell my own feelings of inadequacy and, at times, isolation; I did, however, say what I could to claim some space for my own presence.

It was after reading a text about viewing qualitative data across multiple theoretical perspectives (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011) and, in particular, viewing data with Derrida in mind, that I began to see my own gendered experiences in school as potential deconstruction events. According to Derrida (1991), “deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organisation of a subject, or even of a modernity. It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed ...” (pp. 270-276). Framed as deconstruction events, these experiences are moments in which I held space, pushing back on the norms, being present as different. This notion of holding space, or being present, in a system that may not be constructed with you in mind, represents a subtle form of activism—an activism of presence.

These types of deconstruction incidences can also be described as *fairy dust events* (Stengers & Pignarre, 2011) that have the potential to expose a need for reworking some of the structures and practices that are not inclusive, not constructed with a wide variety of people in mind. In the world of political activism, fairy dust events involve imagining the possibilities of other worlds through disrupting notions of normality and embracing wider and imaginative approaches to understanding experiences and problems. Within these activist arenas, political action involves embracing an element of chance.

Perhaps nothing will change. Perhaps something will change.

Although the subtle activism of presence is not as direct or confrontational as many important political activist movements (e.g., the *Queer Nation* slogans supporting LGBTQIA+ rights—*We're here, we're queer, get used to it*—or the simple *Yo existo* slogan of the current *Undocuqueer* movement), mere presence as difference is considered a deconstruction event or fairy dust event as there is potential for disrupting assumptions about normalcy. This notion of subtle activism through presence in environments that are unwelcoming and, at times, hostile, inspires me to work toward building more inclusive and welcoming climates that allow all people to be seen and heard. How might these moments play out in educational settings? Could the presence of students with non-normative/Other identities (particularly in relation to gender) within educational institutions illuminate the need for adjustments in the way we structure and carry out schooling?

In the spirit of deconstructing gender (and its associated roles and stereotypes) for all students and in creating gender inclusive environments, how might we respond to situations in which gender diverse students are present within a system not constructed with them in mind? After all, it is those individuals who do not neatly fit within the predetermined categories who may offer the most insight about the more rigid, traditional, or practiced institutional structures and practices that exclude some students.

With this dissertation project, I seek to understand ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' retrospective accounts of their experiences within K-12 schools. To clearly define the construct *gender non-binary*, I must first expound on the concepts of *gender*, *gender expression*, and the *gender binary*. Clearly defining *gender* is challenging because “the

term is a rapidly shifting sociological and cultural construct,” but for the purposes of this project, *gender* refers to the socially constructed characteristics (behaviors, attitudes, roles, activities) of individuals—the “set of roles and behaviors that individuals are expected to follow as determined by societies and cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious groups of what it means to be male and female” (Lugg, 2003, p. 98). Although these characteristics are typically assigned to us based on our sex designation at birth (listed as either male or female on most United States birth certificates), gender identity and expression are not dependent on biological sex or sexual orientation (American Psychological Association, 2015; Blount, 1996, 1999, 2000; Green & Maurer, 2015; Lugg, 2003). It is through social interactions with others that we learn about the attitudes, expressions, and roles associated with our assigned gender (Meyer & Pullen Sansfaçon, 2014).

Whereas *gender identity* refers to a person’s deeply felt, inherent sense of self (American Psychological Association, 2015), *gender expression* is about how people “dress, walk, talk, accessorize, etc., in ways that express one’s gender identity” (Meyer & Pullen Sansfaçon, 2014, p. 220); it is about the presentation of self through physical appearance and behavior. In this way, gender is the “social construction of roles, behaviors, and attributes that is considered by the general public to be ‘appropriate’ for one’s sex and which is assigned at birth” (Miller, 2009, p. 193). It is important to note that a person’s gender identity is not always visible to others; other people often learn about our identity through our expressions of gender—which are masculine, feminine, both, or neither.

According to Green and Maurer (2015), *gender binary* is a normative concept that involves viewing gender as “strictly an either/or option of male/men/masculine or female/woman/feminine based on sex at birth, rather than a continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions” (p. 7). Such a strict either/or concept of gender limits the expression of many people, especially ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals. *Gender non-binary* is an umbrella term included under the larger umbrella category of *transgender*.

Transgender (the T of the LGBTQIA+ acronym where L refers to Lesbian, G to Gay, B to Bisexual, T to Transgender, Q to Queer, I to Intersex, and A to Asexual or Aromantic) serves as a collective, umbrella term that represents a variety of gender diverse identities and is inclusive of gender variance (Valentine, 2007). The category *transgender* may include transgender men, transgender women, and any individual who transgresses traditional, culturally bound gender categories. *Gender non-binary* is included in the category of *transgender*. Whereas *transgender* is a term used to broadly refer to individuals whose gender identity and/or expression differs from the gender assigned at birth (Beemyn, 2015; Beemyn & Rankin, 2016), *gender non-binary* is a subcategory of *transgender* and is defined (as referenced above on page 5) as:

a continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the gender binary’s assumption that gender is strictly an either/or option of male/men/masculine or female/woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth. (Green & Maurer, 2015, p. 8)

Other terms used to describe ~~gender non-binary~~ identities include: *genderqueer*, *genderf*ck*, *gender nonconforming*, and *agender*, to name a few. According to the American Psychological Association (2015), *genderqueer* is—

a term to describe a person whose gender identity does not align with a binary understanding of gender (i.e., a person who does not identify fully as either a man or a woman). People who identify as genderqueer may redefine gender or decline to define themselves as gendered altogether. For example, people who identify as genderqueer may think of themselves as both man and woman (bigender, pangender, androgyne); neither man nor woman (genderless, gender neutral, neutrois, agender); moving between genders (genderfluid); or embodying a third gender. (p. 862)

Put simply, an individual with a non-binary identity expresses their gender along a continuum and may be both man and woman, neither man nor woman, or genderless. This means that ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals express variations of masculinity and femininity and their identities and behaviors do not fit neatly into binary categories of man or woman, boy or girl. Although both *transgender* and *gender non-binary* are umbrella terms representing gender diverse or gender variant identities, some *transgender* individuals have identities within a gender binary (i.e., their gender identity is “opposite” the gender assigned at birth) (Meyer & Pullen Sansfaçon, 2014).

In the world of popular culture, several celebrities have discussed their own ~~gender non-binary~~ and gender nonconforming identities and expressions. For example, Jayden Smith, child of actors Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith, was recently featured as a model for Louis Vuitton’s line of women’s clothing. Although assigned male at birth, Jayden is known for transgressing traditional gender roles, especially related to clothing. In the role of fashion model, Jayden regularly wears skirts, dresses, and high-heeled shoes. Other celebrities with non-binary gender identities include Ruby Rose, a

genderfluid actor from the popular television series *Orange is the New Black* and Sean Miley Moore, a genderqueer singer featured on the popular talent search series *X Factor*.

As noted in a later section outlining insights from a recent preliminary inquiry (**Early Explorations**), *gender non-binary* is not a universally-accepted term for naming these gender identities/expressions and some people may use a range of terms to describe their gender (i.e., agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender nonconforming, genderf*ck, etc.). Because half of the participants in this study discussed the negative connotations associated with the term *gender non-binary*, and half of the participants did not view the term as problematic (see **Supplementary Data** in Chapter IV.), I decided to simultaneously use and trouble the term; in other words, I use *gender non-binary* “sous rature” or “under erasure” (Derrida, 1967/1976), hence the use of the strikethrough in the title of this project and throughout the text. Derrida used the philosophical technique of *sous rature* (like Heidegger and Nietzsche before him), crossing out a word but ensuring the word was still legible, as a visual reminder that the words we use are both imperfect and impermanent. The *sous rature* technique (indicated by the visual cue of a strikethrough) serves as a recognition of the tensions at play with this term, but allows us to simultaneously use the term as a tool and trouble it enough to keep it open and flexible.

When referring to ~~gender non-binary~~ identities, there are several distinctions to be made: a transgender individual is not necessarily ~~gender non-binary~~; any person can transgress traditional gender roles and expectations, whether they have an identity categorized as transgender; and sexual orientation is separate from gender identity and expression (Green & Maurer, 2015).

Non-binary gender identities are included under the T (Transgender) of the LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, etc.) acronym and an individual with a non-binary gender identity rejects the idea that gender is either man/masculine/male or woman/feminine/female (Green & Maurer, 2015) and, instead, expresses their gender along a continuum of masculinity and femininity (Meyer & Pullen Sansfaçon, 2014); they may be men, women, both, or neither (American Psychological Association, 2015).

The overarching LGBTQIA+ acronym refers to individuals with marginalized sexual and gender identities and expressions and is one way of grouping diverse individuals into a single community for the purposes of discussing potential inequitable practices and policies related to gender and sex. The LGBTQIA+ acronym is sometimes represented as LGBT+ or LGBTQ or LGBTQI+ or LGBTQIA+, to name a few examples. Within these examples of an expanded acronym, the A typically refers to Asexual or Aromantic, the I to Intersex, and the Q to Queer. It is important to note that any acronym used to discuss the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals “does not in fact reflect the totality of identities subsumed under the umbrella of the community that transgresses norms of gender identity and sexual orientation” (Marine, 2011, p. 4). In his 2013 chapter *Creating Inclusive Schools for LGBTIQ Youth, Staff, and Families*, O’Malley discusses the limitations of using such all-inclusive acronyms. As he explains, [these various acronyms] point to incomplete historical efforts at widening inclusion as well as partial struggles over assumed hierarchies. Evolutions of the terminology reflect fluidity in how we understand and experience gender and sexuality, but ought not to be read as providing exhaustive, totalizing, or

constraining descriptors for queer populations. (p. 357)

For the purposes of this study, I use LGBTQIA+ when referring broadly to this diverse group of individuals. Like using the term *gender non-binary* “under erasure” (indicated by the visual cue of a strikethrough in the title and throughout), I included the symbol + as a visual cue that the acronym LGBTQIA may be inclusive of many identities but is also imperfect and incomplete. In this way, the + symbol communicates that the acronym is on the move; the + symbol might mean “etcetera” or “plus more” or “more to come.” In addition to using the imperfect LGBTQIA+ acronym, I am careful to resist essentializing my participants’ individual experiences.

Through reflexive journaling, I uncovered some of my own gendered educational experiences in which I failed to adhere to the strict gender norms in place and, consequently, was viewed as either too masculine or not feminine enough. In my schooling experiences, there was no room for variations in gender expression so I carved out a little space of my own (Woolf, 1929). Although similar to Woolf’s (1929) notion that women needed to create *rooms* of their own (i.e., private physical (and symbolic) spaces in which women could be free from interruption, exercise their independence, and have time to write), the space I created for myself was not meant for achieving privacy and independence, per se; these small spaces helped me establish my own pathways for navigating a wider space of diverse expressions and experiences. In other words, I did not want a space in isolation from others; I wanted to be part of the larger space and valued as a member of that community, without changing what I liked and who I was. It was a difficult space to hold and I can only imagine this act of pushing back on the norms could prove quite challenging for students with ~~gender non-binary~~ identities. In seeking

to understand ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' experiences within K-12 schools, I was curious about what these participants might say about their schooling experiences and what they might want to say back to their schools.

Personal Beliefs about Education

This dissertation project is rooted in my own beliefs about the nature of education and the purpose of schooling. I believe one of the primary purposes of schooling within our current pluralistic and democratic society is to provide an education for *all* young people who learn to “engage with, and thus come into, the world...on their own terms” (Biesta, 2013, pp. 5-7). Such democratic aims are not perfect; working toward systems that are more just and equitable requires significant effort and deliberate interventions (Goodlad, 2004). According to Glickman (1998), questions about what is just and democratic should “be the heart and soul of school practices” (p. 18) and inform all educational decisions. We must take actions to uphold the fragile ideal that all individuals in a democratic society are equal in value and are equally deserving of the right to freedom through education. Education in a democratic society, then, is centered on concepts of democracy, social justice, equity, and inclusion.

Upholding this fragile ideal requires that we take deliberate actions. Many equity-oriented scholars recommend taking an analytical and open stance toward education, developing critical consciousness (Freire, 1970)—a heightened awareness of marginalization and oppression. After all, it is through this heightened awareness that we are more likely to see the injustice of categorizing individuals as either normal or abnormal and then separating out or overlooking those categorized as abnormal.

In the field of educational leadership, many scholars point to the significant role leaders play in schools (Gunter & Fitzgerald, 2008; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Equity-oriented leaders play a vital role in establishing inclusive learning environments (Causton & Theoharis, 2014; Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011) and in promoting a positive school culture and climate (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015). According to Theoharis (2007), it is social justice leaders who focus on "issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions" (p. 223) when engaged in teaching, leadership and advocacy. This type of leadership requires taking action to ensure inclusive and welcoming spaces are created and maintained. With these examples, we see that the role of an educational leader requires going beyond managerial tasks. In working toward fragile and democratic ideals, today's educational leaders are deeply involved in the social and relational aspects of education.

In light of the public and democratic nature of schooling in the United States, we must continually engage in the difficult work of serving *all* students well. Serving all students—the students we have—is no easy task; this requires understanding and responding to the experiences of diverse student populations. One such population is students with ~~gender non-binary~~ identities/expressions.

Early Explorations

In attempting to narrow in on the topic of study, further refine the interview and research questions, and practice research skills related to the larger dissertation project, I recently engaged in a preliminary exercise—discussing gendered educational experiences

with one ~~gender non-binary~~ individual. The purpose of this brief exercise was to explore the theme, listen to an insider's perspective, and to begin tracing out potential research questions and methods.

I met Chuck (a pseudonym chosen by the participant) through a student organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ students and their allies. At the time, Chuck was the only officer who identified as agender and, after hearing me talk about my research project, volunteered to speak about their educational experiences. Chuck was 21, Chicana, a senior in the university's Psychology program, agender, and used they/them pronouns. Over the course of two months, I conducted two informal, unstructured interviews (Merriam, 2009) with Chuck, carefully considering the terminology and phrasing of all questions. The first interview lasted an hour and the follow-up interview, several weeks later, was forty minutes in duration. I transcribed both interview sessions for the purpose of analyzing the conversations.

It was during the preparation phase for these informal interviews that I wrote about my own gendered experiences in schools. This reflexive journaling process (Ahern, 1999; Tufford & Newman, 2012) was an attempt at *bracketing* my own assumptions and biases (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) about the phenomenon of interest. For example, I assumed that most participants would share memories representative of negative educational experiences related to gender (because *I* had negative experiences) and I assumed that participants had previously reflected on these gendered educational experiences (an assumption based on knowing that participants came to their current ~~gender non-binary~~ identity).

Following the reflexive journaling activity (as introduced on page 5), and considering my role as an outsider (not a member of the ~~gender non-binary~~ community), I realized the value of an insider's perspective in exploring some of the questions and methods under consideration for inclusion in the research design for this dissertation. After engaging in the first conversation with Chuck and then revisiting my reflective journal, I realized I needed to include specific interview questions to help participants think about and talk about K-12 memories. In other words, I could not assume that participants had previously reflected on their gendered educational experiences; instead, I needed to facilitate these reflective conversations through pointed interview questions. Although this preliminary exercise had several limitations (i.e., not a formal study, occurred in a brief amount of time, and relied on interviews with only one participant), an insider's perspective and experiences helped balance some of the limitations of my (an outsider's) reflective journaling activities.

The first round of analyzing the interviews, an inductive process, involved reading through the transcripts several times with the purpose of practicing analysis skills related to the intended dissertation topic. It is important to note that this was not an objective process and that the transcripts and audio recordings of the sessions were not data in and of themselves but served as "resources for data construction within which data must be discovered" (Erickson, 2004, p, 486). Using the transcripts as resources, I highlighted important words and phrases (Wolcott, 1994) and then coded these highlighted sections with memos indicating potential sub-topics worthy of further exploration. Prominent sub-topics were then displayed on a rudimentary chart and considered in light of the guiding research questions.

The second round of coding was more deductive in nature and included reading through fresh copies of transcripts and listening to audio recordings of interview sessions with Derridean deconstruction in mind. I specifically listened for moments in which the participant was present (whether participating or not) during activities or events that were organized around binary gender. The point of this coding process was to notice these occurrences as deconstruction events that are always already happening.

In analyzing patterns from the initial coding process, I discovered the following sub-topics: language limitations, conforming and a sense of belonging, silenced topics, powerlessness, and unnecessary gendering. The participant, Chuck, shared early descriptions of their gender identity as “in the middle, just like a random thing that’s just floating around” until learning a new term—*agender*—that led to the revelation “that sounds exactly like me.” Chuck also talked about the limitations of language when referring to diverse groups of people. ²They made statements about not being masculine or feminine, male or female, but just a person, a human being. Embedded within conversations about language were indications that Chuck often felt like an outsider. They said there was no way to *look* agender and that gender is “in everyone else’s mind.” When discussing a common term for describing gender diversity—*gender non-binary*—the participant stated that the prefix *non* communicates that someone is not normal, but “awkward, weird, and eccentric;” and if you try to be “your authentic self, you’re out casting yourself.”

² Many gender non-binary individuals use gender-neutral pronouns such as *they/them/their* (American Psychological Association, 2015). For the purposes of the preliminary exercise, I refer to the participant as *Chuck* (pseudonym) and use *they/them/their* pronouns to describe Chuck’s experiences and statements.

Chuck could not remember having any discussions about gender with school personnel, aside from hearing phrases like “boys will be boys” or statements about how girls and boys usually enjoy different objects and activities. “If I heard about sexuality, it was super rare and gender conversations were basically non-existent.” When we discussed challenging the gender binary norms, Chuck expressed feeling powerless: “I didn’t necessarily accept it but I already knew that’s just how it was [and the] answers always came from someone else.”

During the second coding process, I found several instances of the participant’s presence of difference during activities centered on binary gender categories. In one example story, Chuck talked about being identified by others as a girl and trying to join the all-boys middle school football team. They wanted to play football, and although there was pushback from peers and adults, Chuck asked “why not?” and attempted to join the team. Although most team members did not mind, the coach was not open, at first, to having a girl on the team. Chuck eventually joined the school’s non-competing football team but many of their girlfriends were upset by this change and chose to end the friendship. Chuck, however, continued to play football with the team.

In our conversations about school climate, Chuck said that interacting with people across difference was an effective way to address feeling like an outsider or a victim of harassment. They discussed how important it is to meet people and introduce yourself because “it’s really hard to dis someone that’s right in front of your face.” For Chuck, interacting across difference is akin to saying, “I’m a person. I have a soul and I’m right in front of you.”

Chuck then talked about how they wanted to write a long letter to schools asking why “everything is gendered;” they made statements like: “nothing should be gendered if it doesn’t need to be,” [heavily gendered practices] are “putting limitations on people’s masculinity,” and “[schools] should erase all of those little micro things you took time to gender when you didn’t have to.”

Finally, we briefly talked about Chuck’s experiences of school life in the context of higher education. Chuck explained that they used to write professors in order to ask if they would mind referring to Chuck with a different name and pronoun than was listed on the class roster. Chuck later learned that asking a question allows opportunities for denying the request. So, they stopped asking questions. In their words, “Now, I just say, ‘my name is this. I go by this. Call me that.’”

Conducting this preliminary inquiry had a twofold purpose of narrowing the dissertation topic and refining interview questions. Some of the themes that emerged during the initial coding process prompted me to add interview questions related to: the specific terminology participants might use to describe their gender identities, whether or not participants felt a sense of belonging at school, and memories about gender-related discourses within classroom or school environments.

Chuck’s experiences as a *different presence*, holding space as a non-example, helped me think about the many ways in which a person might experience pushing back on the strict and communicated norms of binary gender enactments within educational contexts. For example, potential deconstruction events might occur after school hours, at school-affiliated sports events.

In thinking about the significance of this preliminary inquiry, I realized that these moments of deconstruction shed light on a fact about many historically marginalized students—they are always already there. Realizing that we may have overlooked or misunderstood our ~~gender non-binary~~ students encourages us to engage in dialogue about the complexity and uncertainty of gender identity categories and leads to additional conversations about reworking some of the discursive structures and material practices within educational environments that exclude some students, especially ~~gender non-binary~~ students.

Statement of the Problem

This research project addresses several problems: a lack of research exploring the diversity of sexual and gender identities/expressions within educational discourses, particularly within the area of educational leadership (O'Malley & Capper, 2015); recent studies indicating that most LGBTQIA+ youth experience negative school climates (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016); and the need for school improvement efforts informed by student perspectives (Mansfield, 2014).

Currently, LGBTQIA+ identities (and particularly gender diverse identities located under the broad category of *transgender* [the T in LGBTQIA+]) are minimally explored within educational discourses, even within conversations focused on equity, justice, and inclusion. Several scholars point to a lack of studies addressing both sexual orientation and gender identity in equity-oriented educational contexts (Capper & O'Malley, 2012; Lugg, 2003; O'Malley & Capper, 2015). For example, in a recent survey of educational leadership preparation programs at universities in the United States, O'Malley and Capper (2015) documented that LGBTQIA+ topics were among the *least*

addressed of social justice themes in both the educational leadership literature and in the preparation of school leaders. My dissertation project investigates the topic of ~~gender~~ ~~non-binary~~ identity in K-12 contexts, an identity that is itself minimally represented within the broader LGBTQIA+ literature in the field, to address this gap.

Topics related to the T (transgender) of the LGBTQIA+ umbrella are rarely addressed within research discourses (Movement Advancement Project, et al., 2015) and when these topics are addressed, they are frequently mentioned as part of the larger acronym (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Minter, 2000; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), even though gender identity topics are markedly different from those addressing sexual orientation (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Taylor, 2007). The minimal exploration of gender identity and expression in educational leadership research arenas is problematic because equity-oriented educators and leaders are better prepared to serve *all* students when LGBTQIA+ topics are regularly included within these discourses (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010; Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003; MacGillivray, 2004; O'Malley, 2013). This study addresses the topic of non-binary gender identity experiences within the context of K-12 schools as a manifestation of gender diversity.

In the United States, gender diverse people face many hurdles related to securing housing, employment, and safety (Movement Advancement Project, et al., 2015) and regularly deal with harassment and bullying in schools (Brill & Pepper, 2013; Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016; Rands, 2009). These creative and resilient individuals often struggle for mere acknowledgement, while inadvertently making visible the culturally dependent, rigid, and dominant gender norms that are pervasive within

educational institutions. All students, including ~~gender non-binary~~ students, have the right to a safe and inclusive learning environment and educators and leaders benefit from listening to and responding to these students' experiences of school.

Supporting gender diverse students requires taking social actions (Meyer & Pullen Sançfacon, 2014), including: offering gender complex/gender diverse curricula (Rands, 2009; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013); interrupting heteronormativity within schools through proactive interventions across the domains of policy development and professional practices (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010; Lugg, 2003; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; O'Malley, 2013; O'Malley & Capper, 2015); and analyzing the overarching structures that limit the participation and inclusion of students with gender diverse identities (Butler, 1990, 2011; Doan, 2010; Thurer, 2005). According to Butler (1990, 2011), prominent and rigid categorizations of binary gender fail to include all individuals, especially gender diverse persons. Failing to fit the stereotypical notions of predetermined categories of gender, especially in the context of highly gendered activities and spaces, may lead to incidences of social isolation and feelings of low self-esteem for many students (Doan, 2010; Thurer, 2005). In this way, a rigid gender system both "forms and deforms us" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996, p. 403) and working toward gender-inclusive climates is one way to address this problem of misreading or overlooking students who do not fit neatly within the binary gender categories of girl/boy.

This study also addresses a second problem—LGBTQIA+ youth in the U.S. experience negative school climates. In *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited: A Survey of U.S. Secondary School Students and Teachers*, Greytak, Kosciw,

Villenas, and Giga (2016) found that LGBTQIA+ students hear high levels of biased language from both school personnel and other students (e.g., over half of surveyed students reported that they heard homophobic and biased remarks related to gender expression either “often” or “very often”) and that perceived negative climates affected student achievement levels and perceptions of safety and belonging within these educational institutions. This 2016 report is the most recently published of seven biennial studies conducted by GLSEN over the duration of ten years. Although, overall, “students in 2015 reported lower incidence of all types of biased remarks, except racist remarks, than students in 2005” (p. 3), there is still much to be accomplished in supporting LGBTQIA+ students in K-12 schools. Findings also indicated that school personnel were less likely to intervene when hearing negative remarks about LGBTQIA+ students than they were ten years ago and were least likely to intervene when hearing negative remarks about gender identity and expression (Greytak, et al. 2016). Clearly, educators could do more to support LGBTQIA+ students in schools. Another important finding is that institutional supports (i.e., inclusive and supportive policies, administrative support, teacher training, and LGBTQIA+-focused clubs) are essential components of creating safe and inclusive learning environments for all students.

The importance of institutional supports that promote LGBTQIA+-inclusive learning environments is echoed throughout the educational leadership literature base (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010; Lugg, 2003; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; O’Malley, 2013; O’Malley & Capper, 2015). In *A Measure of the Quality of Educational Leadership Programs for Social Justice: Integrating LGBTIQ Identities Into Principal Preparation*, for example, O’Malley and Capper (2015) identify the

following equitable leadership strategies for creating inclusive and welcoming climates for LGBTQIA+ individuals: provide professional development to increase numbers of supportive faculty and staff, promote inclusive curriculum, increase the number of representative library and media resources, develop inclusive policies, support student organizations (i.e., Gay Straight Alliances), develop anti-harassment policies, and make efforts to both track and stop anti-LGBTQIA+ harassment in schools. Koschoreck and Slattery (2006, 2010) emphasize the importance of identifying curricular issues and developing LGBTQIA+-inclusive teaching strategies; they also recommend that educational leaders engage in continuous self-reflection not only about what is being taught and how it is being taught but also about who they are as individuals and leaders. The overall aim of this dissertation project is to begin developing a framework of gender inclusive professional development (which includes continuous self-reflection activities) that serves as one strategy for creating inclusive, positive climates for gender diverse individuals.

What constitutes a positive school climate? Positive climates are created in relation to the areas of “safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the (external) environment” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009, p. 182). According to the National School Climate Center (2014), determining whether a school climate is positive or negative must be “based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life, and reflect norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices and organizational structures” (p. 4). If school climate is determined by “people’s experiences of school life” (National School Climate Center, 2014, p. 4), and LGBTQIA+ students report negative experiences that lead to lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression,

listening to ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' experiences of school life, in particular, should illuminate some of the dominant norms, values, and structures of current schools that may be limiting ~~gender non-binary~~ participation and inclusion; this serves as a first step in making the adjustments necessary for working toward more inclusive learning environments for all students.

According to Marshall and Oliva (2010), educational inequities result from “systemic organizational practices and policies...that have not been analyzed or acted on with respect to their impact on non-mainstream students” (p. 7). O’Malley and Capper (2015) laid out some of the important practices and policies involved in creating LGBTQIA+-inclusive learning environments (i.e., professional development, inclusive curriculum, library resources, inclusive policies, student groups, and tracking and stopping anti-LGBTQIA+ harassment), reiterating other calls (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010) for proactive system-level interventions across the domains of student organizations, policy, curriculum, and professional development.

In their survey of educational leadership preparation programs at universities in the United States, O’Malley and Capper (2015) documented that most of these programs were “not effective at preparing principals to provide professional development in order to increase the number of LGBTIQ supportive faculty and staff” (p. 310). As previously noted, such professional development activities are a vital component of LGBTQIA+-inclusive school climates and leaders who continuously provide these opportunities are taking a proactive stance by anticipating the possibility of sexual and gender diversity within their schools. As O’Malley (2013) explains, a proactive stance toward professional development actively addresses heteronormativity in schools:

Educational leadership practices that do not expect and anticipate sexuality and gender diversity among youth, staff, and families participate in a silence that actively constructs school communities as presumably and exclusively heterosexual and gender conforming. (p. 356)

In the context of this project, the early development of a professional development framework focused on adapting practices and structures to be more gender inclusive serves as an institutional support that promotes a positive climate for *all* students, including ~~gender non-binary~~ students.

The third problem encouraging this project is the need for school improvement efforts informed by student perspectives. Student voice initiatives, in particular, are vital components of developing school systems that are equity-oriented (Cook-Sather, 2006), inclusive, and culturally responsive (Gay, 2010). These perspectives and experiences are essential elements of school improvement efforts because they help us consider how initiatives are experienced by those most affected by such change (Mitra, 2008; Mitra & Gross, 2009), the students themselves.

Student voice scholars point to the many benefits of considering how improvement initiatives are experienced by students: upholding the democratic mission of schooling through increased student engagement (Mitra & Gross, 2009), discussing subjects that adults may be reluctant to broach (Mitra, 2008), and improving the wellbeing of students who simply desire to be heard. Student voice initiatives are particularly important for efforts to promote LGBTQIA+ inclusion in schools. According to Hernandez and Fraynd (2015),

School leaders have a tremendous amount of influence over the culture and climate of their districts and schools. If schools are to become truly inclusive, leaders at the school, district, state, and federal levels must examine the experiences of students who are LGBTQ and those perceived to be LGBTQ, and take appropriate action to ensure the protection and care of these individuals. (p. 115)

In developing a pyramid model of the common ways student voice is used in school improvement discourses, Mitra (2008) explained that the most basic, foundational use is to ensure that students are simply being heard. The top of the pyramid, a rather small area, shows that student perspectives are not commonly used to build leadership capacities among the student body. According to Mitra and Gross (2009), it is empowered student leaders who have the opportunity and freedom to question “issues such as structural and cultural injustices within schools” (p. 524). This research project seeks to highlight those student experiences that are not often heard within educational discourses. Listening to ~~gender non-binary~~ student perspectives also opens the door for increased leadership opportunities among gender diverse students.

Considering the literature base and insights from a recent preliminary inquiry exploring one ~~gender non-binary~~ individual’s experiences in K-12 schools, I maintain that, for many LGBTQIA+ students (and especially for ~~gender non-binary~~ students), a primary concern is that these student perspectives are not often heard. If we, as educators, aim to serve all students well, we must first hear them. This study addresses the need for increasing student voice within school improvement initiatives by using student interviews as the primary method of data collection.

Through an investigation of gender diverse experiences in K-12 contexts that utilizes student voice to inform a model of gender inclusive professional development, this dissertation project addresses a literature gap, problem, and documented need. Specifically, the investigation of ~~gender non-binary~~ identity addresses the lack of research exploring LGBTQIA+ identities in educational contexts (especially within the field of educational leadership); the early development of a model of gender inclusive professional development represents an institutional support necessary for promoting positive climates; and using student interviews as primary data serves as a response to the call for school improvement efforts that are informed by student perspectives.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to understand ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' experiences of school and to interpret these experiences under the influence of deconstruction (Derrida, 1967/1976; Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002; MacLure, 2009). In my reflexive journaling activities, which I wrote to explore my perceptions and experiences of this topic, I noted instances that I recognized as the subtle activism of an individual's presence within systems or structures that did not appear to be constructed with that person in mind—in other words, a presence of difference. With *deconstruction*, we see that differences are always present, always there, always already happening (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011). In other words, people who are viewed as different, as Other, always exist within our structures and systems.

Deconstruction is a difficult concept to define (Biesta, 2009; Derrida, 1967/1976, 1985). In one text, Derrida defined *deconstruction* as what happens when the presence of individuals who do not belong transgresses and destabilizes the dominant and dormant

hierarchical arrangements (Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002) that swallow people who do not fit the norms, allowing us to overlook them or sometimes rendering them invisible. The presence of those who are different or Other disrupts these notions of normativity. In this way, the presence of difference illuminates opportunities for transformation and change, opportunities to disrupt the ways in which we have organized our world and the people in it. Before delving further into what is meant by *deconstruction*, it is helpful to consider the poststructural concept of *absent presence*.

An *absent presence* refers to “where the relationship with the other is marked” (Derrida, 1967/1976, p. 47). Derrida (1967/1976, 1982) explained that concepts are only understood in their relation to opposing concepts—as what they are not (as the absence). For example, the term *female* can be understood as a negative definition, as what it is not, as the opposite of *male* (presence). Such oppositions rely on assumptions about presence (i.e., the first term represents a fuller presence and the second term represents an absence) and meaning is often determined by the term with fuller presence, the first term (Biesta, 2009).

Poststructural feminists, like St. Pierre (2000), describe these relationships between concepts as problematic, arguing that, within these binary oppositions, the first term is often privileged over the second term. In the example of binary sex categories, *male* is thought to be privileged (and hence preferred) over *female* and *male* represents a fuller presence of meaning than the secondary *female*. Serano (2016) also notes this privileging of maleness or masculinity (especially in Western cultures); she argues that sexism is intertwined with genderism and homophobia and can be understood as two distinct issues: (1) sexism (the privileging of masculinity over femininity) and (2)

oppositional sexism (i.e., male and female are the only possible sex (and hence gender) categories). This tendency to privilege a binary understanding of gender (and to prefer one binary term over the other) is a failure to recognize gender diversity, glossing over the beautiful complexity of an interplay between both biological and sociological variations that shape our gendered lives (Serano, 2016). With poststructural critiques of language, we can see that the words we use to describe our identities often “produce very real, material, and damaging structures in the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 481), hierarchical structures that privilege specific identities over others.

In the foundational text *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1967/1976) further explains the relationships between concepts using the metaphor, “there is no outside-text” (p. 158). This metaphor does not mean that nothing exists outside of the language we use; instead, it refers to the unavoidability of context (Derrida, 1988). This means that no text is an island; the way we understand a term is always situated in our social context, our subjective experiences, and our command of language (Derrida, 1967/1976). Or as Biesta (2009) explains it, “we can never make a total break, that we can never step outside of the tradition that has made us” (p. 89). The metaphor “there is no outside-text” (Derrida, 1967/1976, p. 158) also represents the realization that there is no complete or total meaning and meaning is always deferred (Derrida, 1993). When we think of the sex terms *male* and *female*, for example, we understand each term in relation to the other (female is not male) and we determine what is meant by a specific term like *male* based on context (social, cultural, historical, etc.). With *deconstruction*, we play with this relationship and its contexts, asking questions like: *Under what conditions does male end and female begin? What are the points of transition between male and female?* or *What*

does it mean to exist as neither male nor female? With *deconstruction*, we also see that our world depends on absence and difference to define constructs and their relationships.

In other words, language works *because* there is an absence (Derrida, 1967/1976);

language is therefore an important aspect of deconstruction. As St. Pierre (2000) puts it,

One of the most significant effects of deconstruction is that it foregrounds the idea that language does not simply point to pre-existing things and ideas but rather helps to construct them and, by extension, the world as we know it. In other words, we word the world. (p. 483)

Deconstruction can be thought of as the deep and continuous analysis of exploring relationships between texts and meaning. This critical philosophy and practice (Biesta, 2009; St. Pierre, 2000) involves first locating opposing meanings and then disrupting them. Derrida's deconstruction is not a method in and of itself (Derrida, 1991); it is not about deconstructing and then reconstructing, nor is it about reversing the dominance of binary oppositions. *Deconstruction* is an ethical (Critchley, 2014) and political pursuit that involves "cracking nutshells" (Caputo, 1997, p. 32) to expose the tensions between structures in place and what is in flux. In thinking with Derrida and deconstruction, we might ask, *what is falling through the grids we built?* In this study, gender binary categories are the grids in place and understanding ~~gender non-binary~~ experiences within educational institutions exposes an *absent presence* (i.e., the concept of gender binary is dependent on the concept of ~~gender non-binary~~).

The recognition that differences are always present and that we just fail to notice them is one kind of *deconstruction event* (Derrida, 1967/1976; Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002). Because "deconstruction is first and foremost an affirmation of what is excluded

and forgotten—an affirmation, in short, of what is other” (Biesta, 2009, p. 91), it is the awareness that deconstruction is always already happening and the recognition of moments of deconstruction that help us see individuals who are often overlooked within our school systems. As previously noted, a *deconstruction event* is a moment in which an individual is present within a system that does not appear to be constructed with that person in mind. These events (or moments) are always occurring whether we recognize or interpret them as deconstruction events. When we do recognize deconstruction events, we may more clearly see what or who was (and is) being forgotten or left out. Although ~~gender non-binary~~ identity is minimally explored in educational research discourses, these students are always already present as members of our school communities. Derridean deconstruction is an appropriate frame for viewing Other/non-binary experiences; it helps us notice missed meanings and overlooked individuals, making room for new concepts and experiences.

A second purpose is to use these student perspectives to inform professional development efforts focused on gender inclusion. Planning and executing effective and meaningful professional programs aimed at promoting inclusive and positive educational environments demands not only listening to students’ experiences of school but requires understanding the components of contemporary educator training programs focused on supporting LGBTQIA+ students in K-12 schools. GLSEN provides several public, free, and downloadable toolkits and webinars for these purposes. The goal of this dissertation project is to begin developing a model of gender inclusive professional development informed by these (and other) resources that have been adapted in light of student and focus group interview data.

Several components from a variety of GLSEN resources influence the overall design of the gender inclusive education framework being developed from this study. Put simply, I consider resources related to gender and social constructions of gender, adapting them in light of the literature and empirical data, to begin developing a model of gender inclusive professional development. For example, the GLSEN toolkit entitled *Ready, Set, Respect: GLSEN's Elementary School Toolkit*, provides tips and lesson plans across several categories, including a set of four lesson plans for discussing gender roles and stereotypes. This tool kit, intended for use by elementary school teachers, lists an overall goal of cultivating respect, inclusion, and positive attitudes at the classroom level. The daily tips, lesson plans, and multimedia resources related to gender and social constructions of gender inform some of the design elements of the gender inclusive model of professional development. The *Safe Space Kit* is intended, primarily, for secondary school personnel and provides tips, strategies, and resources across several areas, including: knowing about LGBTQIA+ issues, learning related terminology, intervening and responding to anti-LGBTQIA+ behavior and language, supporting individual students and student clubs, and assessing personal beliefs. Components from each of these areas (and especially around assessing personal beliefs) that address gender and social constructions of gender inform a framework for gender inclusive professional development.

In addition to the toolkits offered, GLSEN also provides downloadable resources aimed at developing LGBTQIA+-inclusive classrooms, including curriculum that supports LGBTQIA+ students of color. These resources highlight a variety of critical reflection activities and questions for promoting LGBTQIA+-inclusive dialogue among

school personnel and several of these activities can be adapted and incorporated in the professional development model.

Additional suggestions for LGBTQIA+-inclusive professional development include the following strategies: countering heteronormativity (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010; O'Malley, 2013), creating rituals and activities, implementing equity audits, and becoming aware of policies, laws, and the community (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015). Overall, elements of these kits, resources, and strategies were adapted in light of interview data to inform the proposed model of professional development.

Need for the Study

Several needs are addressed by this dissertation project. First, a focus on LGBTQIA+ topics, and specifically on topics of gender identity and expression, fills an educational research gap. As noted by O'Malley and Capper (2015), LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences are minimally represented in educational research literature, and particularly within educational leadership discourses. In an extensive review of the relevant literature, these authors discovered that "LGBTIQ experience is nearly absent from the literature on leadership preparation, and, at best, peripheral within the social justice leadership preparation literature" (p. 292). This project adds to the educational literature base by focusing, specifically, on ~~gender non-binary~~ experiences of school and using these experiences to inform professional development for educational leaders, with an overall goal of promoting positive, gender inclusive learning environments.

Second, this study addresses the need for proactive strategies related to supporting gender diverse students in schools (Beck, 2014; Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015; O'Malley, 2013), including providing meaningful and relevant professional development

opportunities for educators. In discussing viable strategies for creating inclusive schools for LGBTQIA+ individuals, O'Malley (2013) argued in favor of a proactive approach—developing professional training sessions related to supporting sexual and gender diversity and integrating these approaches across campus and district-level improvement plans. In a study of transgender persons as public intellectuals in school contexts, Beck (2014) concluded that further research about trans-inclusive professional development for educators across all grade levels was a current and significant need directly related to creating inclusive educational environments. Hernandez and Fraynd (2015) explain that leaders who are proactive in their efforts to create inclusive environments for LGBTQIA+ students provide continuous and meaningful professional development opportunities for faculty and staff. The challenge in building these LGBTQIA+-inclusive environments is to “create awareness, promote safety, and reduce stigma without resorting to reductionism or stereotyping” (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015, p. 109). With the goal of building a model of gender inclusive professional development, this project addresses the need for proactive strategies for supporting gender diverse students, including providing professional development opportunities focused on creating awareness and promoting safety.

This study speaks to the combined need for increasing awareness related to LGBTQIA+ identities (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015) and for using student perspectives to inform school improvement efforts (Mansfield, 2014). Viewing ~~gender non-binary~~ students' experiences through the lens of Derridean deconstruction may increase awareness about these identities in educational contexts as this lens helps us recognize these students as *always already there*. Through projects like this, some educators may

experience hearing gender diverse perspectives for the first time. They also have opportunities to learn new terminology related to gender identity that aids in understanding and promoting a more inclusive learning environment for gender diverse students.

This project is focused on one way to use student perspectives to inform school improvement efforts. In working toward more positive and inclusive school climates, student experiences of school life provide valuable insight into the ways some individuals are excluded in educational institutions. Exploring and understanding the experiences of those individuals who are most affected by institutional supports related to policy, structures, and practices—the students themselves—leads educators to a clearer understanding of the ways in which improvement initiatives are implemented in relation to students' experiences of school.

Research Questions

This study documents ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' retrospective accounts of their experiences of school (Beck, 2014) and uses these perspectives to inform professional development models focused on gender inclusion. The goal is creating inclusive, positive climates for all students. The research questions guiding this inquiry are: (1) What are the retrospective accounts of ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' experiences in K-12 educational institutions?; (2) How might these experiences serve as deconstruction events, making visible the excess of discursive structures and material practices that reinforce binary gender within these institutions?; and (3) How might we take up these student perspectives and experiences to inform gender inclusive professional development for educators?

Definition of Terms

In the following section, a list of terms and associated definitions that are relevant to this dissertation project are provided. This is not, however, an exhaustive list of all the important and relevant terms. The following terms are listed in alphabetical order and most of the associated definitions include citations.

Absent Presence—a poststructural term referring to “where the relationship with the other is marked” (Derrida, 1967/1976, p. 47); the notion that concepts are only understood in their relation to opposing concepts—as what they are not (Derrida, 1967/1976, 1982).

Agender—According to a non-binary gender education and advocacy network (nonbinary.org, 2016), “Agender is an identity under the non-binary and transgender umbrella terms. Agender individuals find that they have no gender identity, although some define this more as having a gender identity that is neutral”; Green and Maurer (2015) define agender as “a person who does not identify as having a gender identity that can be categorized as male or female, and sometimes indicates identifying as not having a gender identity” (p. 8).

Deconstruction—a critical and open philosophical stance rooted in the deep and continuous analysis of exploring relationships between texts and meaning (Biesta, 2009; St. Pierre, 2000); it involves first locating opposing meanings and then disrupting them; deconstruction is what happens and is always already happening (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011); “it [deconstruction] takes place...it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organisation of a subject...” (Derrida, 1991, p. 270).

Deconstruction Event— a moment that occurs when the presence of individuals who do not belong transgresses and destabilizes the dominant and dormant hierarchical arrangements (Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002); these moments are always occurring, whether we recognize them as such.

Gender— “A set of cultural identities, expressions and roles — codified as feminine or masculine — that are assigned to people, based upon the interpretation of their bodies, and more specifically, their sexual and reproductive anatomy. Since gender is a social construction, it is possible to reject or modify the assignment made, and develop something that feels truer and just to oneself” (GLSEN, 2016).

Gender Identity—how a person views their social performance of gender; “refers to an individual’s identification with male-associated roles or female-associated roles” (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015, p. 104); According to GLSEN (2016), gender identity is “how an individual identifies in terms of their gender. Gender identities may include, ‘male,’ ‘female,’ ‘androgynous,’ ‘transgender,’ ‘genderqueer’ and many others, or a combination thereof” (p. 41).

Gender Expression— “The multiple ways (e.g., behaviors, dress) in which a person may choose to communicate gender to oneself and/or to others” (GLSEN, 2016, p. 41).

Gender Binary— “A socially constructed system of viewing gender as consisting solely of two categories, ‘male’ and ‘female,’ in which no other possibilities for gender are believed to exist. The gender binary is inaccurate because it does not take into account the diversity of gender identities and gender expressions among all people. The gender binary is oppressive to anyone that does not conform to dominant societal gender norms” (GLSEN, 2016, p. 41).

Gender Non-Binary— an umbrella category included under the larger umbrella category, *transgender* (the T in LGBTQIA+); “a continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the gender binary’s assumption that gender is strictly an either/or option of male/men/masculine or female/woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth” (Green & Maurer, 2015, p. 8).

Genderfluid—a term for describing individuals whose gender identity does not align with a binary understanding of gender and who may think of themselves as moving between genders (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Hermeneutics—the art and science of interpretation (Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2007)

Inter-subjectivity— “a sense of being for the other” (Slattery, et al., 2007, p. 537); “existence as a shared event” (p. 538)

LGBT, LGBTQ, or LGBTQIA+— “An umbrella term referring to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. Sometimes the acronym is written as LGBTQ, with the “Q” referring to those who identify as queer and/or questioning. The acronym can also include additional letters, in reference to other identities that do not conform to dominant societal norms around sexual orientation and gender identity and expression” (GLSEN, 2016, p. 41); in this study, the acronym LGBTQIA+ (where the I stands for Intersex and the A represents Asexual/Aromantic) is used to refer broadly to individuals who do not conform to dominant norms for sexual orientation and gender identity/expression; the purpose of the + symbol is twofold—to be inclusive of any additional letters that

reference these identities and to keep the construct open.

Poststructuralism—a philosophical movement (emerging in 1960s France) in response to structuralism and modernism (Butler, 1990; Crotty, 1998; Gannon & Davies, 2007; St. Pierre, 2000; Thurer, 2005); involves resisting essentialism, determinism, and universal, indisputable truths and, instead, taking a more critical, open stance of embracing ambiguity and relativity (Crotty, 1998).

Poststructural Hermeneutics—the art of interpretation as influenced by poststructural theories; an “endless process of critique and deconstruction” showing that all interpretations are “contingent, emergent, and incomplete” (Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2007, p. 548) and, therefore, concepts should be kept open and flexible.

Sous Rature—a French term (meaning “under erasure) describing a poststructural philosophical technique used by Derrida (1967/1976) and others; the visual cue of a strikethrough exposes the weak relationship between words and concepts and signals that we simultaneously use and trouble term(s).

Transgender—a collective, umbrella term inclusive of gender variance; According to a prominent, transgender activist and scholar, transgender is an “umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity and/or expression is different from the gender assigned to them at birth” (Beemyn, 2015); a transgender person is an individual whose “gender identity and/or expression are not aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth. ‘Transgender’ is often used as an umbrella term encompassing a large number of identities related to gender nonconformity” (GLSEN, 2016, p. 42).

Transformative Gender Justice—an anti-essentialist, poststructural framework that involves recognizing the role institutional structures and cultural expectations play in reinforcing rigid gender roles and stereotypes (Travers, 2008, 2014); problems are located outside individuals and within sociocultural structures and factors; a gender spectrum is embraced as the norm (Fausto-Sterling, 2012).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Poststructural Theoretical Framework

This inquiry is rooted in poststructural theory—a multi-faceted, open, critical, and political practice addressing the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of identity categories and organizational structures. Taking a poststructural stance allows for interrogating notions of normalcy, highlighting the power relations within systems, and transforming structures and practices that might be oppressive. Viewing individuals' subjective experiences through this lens also leads to a realization that identity categories are socially constructed (socially performed and based on changing definitions) and may be used as elements of exclusion. As a society, we are implicated in such inequitable practices and have a responsibility to change those practices. As St. Pierre (2000) puts it, a poststructural stance “does not allow us to place the blame elsewhere, outside our own daily activities but demands that we examine our own complicity in the maintenance of social injustice” (p. 484).

Poststructuralism, a branch of postmodernism (Blackburn, 1994; Fink-Eitel, 1992), is a theory that emerged in France during the mid to late twentieth century in response to structuralism (Butler, 1990; Crotty, 1998; Gannon & Davies, 2007; St. Pierre, 2000; Thurer, 2005). Postmodernism was a cultural response to modernism—a focus on scientific methods and a belief in our ability to use rational reasoning and logic to discover absolute truths. In contrast, postmodern (and poststructural) thinkers opposed essentialism, determinism, and universal, indisputable truths; instead, poststructuralists took a more critical and open stance, embracing ambiguity and relativity (Crotty, 1998). Before exploring the tenets of poststructuralism, it is helpful to review some features of

structuralism. Both schools of thought have roots in linguistics and particularly in postmodern linguistic theory (Thurer, 2005).

Basic Tenets of Poststructuralism

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a structural linguistics theorist, described language (one of many systems) as a self-enclosed and “ultimately determining system” (Crotty, 1998, p. 197) for human affairs. His theories were centered on the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs (Saussure, 1974/2001) and other scholars, including the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, took up Saussure’s work with linguistics as a source of social meaning. Or as Milner (1991) puts it, structuralism makes the claim that “methods of structural linguistics can be successfully generalised so as to apply to all aspects of human culture” (p. 62).

Within structural linguistic forms of analysis, all languages are viewed as having a common structure and analysis techniques are guided by the following tenets of structural linguistics: (1) The language we use is situated within our unconscious minds; (2) The meaning attached to words comes from the relationship to other words, not from a pre-linguistic reality; (3) Words must be understood in relation to the overarching structures of language and in consideration of specific contexts; and (4) General/universal laws can be discovered through logical deduction (Crotty, 1998; De Saussure, Baskin, & Meisel, 2011).

Poststructuralist thinkers are similar to structuralists in that they generally agree with the first three tenets of structuralism: (1) The language we use is situated within our unconscious minds; (2) The meaning of words develops in relation to other words, not from an objective reality that exists outside of language; and (3) Language is positioned

in societal relations and within historical, political, and cultural contexts. Essentially, structuralists and poststructuralists agree that a category or word is “what it is only because it differs from other categories or words. So, language is made up of a vast system of conventionally agreed-upon differences; and the meanings of words derive from their relationship to other words, not from any factors outside the system” (Thurer, 2005, p. 34). Poststructuralists, however, reject the fourth tenet of structuralism—universal laws are discoverable.

Structuralists and poststructuralists disagree about the strength of the relationship between a word and its concept. Whereas structuralists believe this relationship is strong enough to develop general laws, poststructuralists view the relationship as wavering, at best. Within a poststructural view, meanings are unpredictable and individuals’ interpretations of meaning will always vary. It is the structures (linguistic and social) in place that determine how we interpret our world; unfortunately, “the structures that underlie words and social phenomena perpetually break down and collapse into each other. Words are unable to stop evolving, revolving, resolving, and dissolving into other terms and concepts” (Thurer, 2005, p. 33). In other words, the connections between words and their meaning are fragile.

Poststructural Approaches

In critiquing the structural tendency toward binarism and universalism, poststructuralists take a critical and open stance, emphasizing ambiguity and gaps in meaning and focusing on the instant of difference between a word and its concept. When we insist on universal meanings, we often impose interpretations that merely hide or ignore the gaps in meaning. Perhaps it is within these gaps (what we missed) that we may

discover deeper meanings. According to Butler (1990), poststructural thinking is about “rejecting claims of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification” (p. 40). Taking a poststructural stance means that our structures and practices (whether dominant or nondominant) are always open to scrutiny. Poststructuralism, then, is an opposition to absolute certainty, to essentialism and determinism. What have we missed or taken for granted?

To answer this question, poststructural thinkers take a multi-faceted approach, critiquing how dominant knowledge and interpretations have been produced and considering how history and culture have influenced these dominant structures. When we understand the multitude of cultural and historical influences, we are more likely to recognize the power relations at play and the moments of bias and misinterpretation. After all, “all cultural manifestations mask things (like power) and should be grist for the analytical mill” (Thurer, 2005, p. 44). What have we misunderstood or overlooked? And what are the consequences of our dominant interpretations?

Another aspect of poststructural thinking is the recognition that identity categories are socially constructed and contingent; they are not fixed. The process of naming an identity requires constructing a negative definition (defining an identity based on what it is not) that is both culturally and historically dependent. For example, what does it mean to be a woman? First, a woman can be defined as *not* a man. Woman becomes a more complicated construct to define when considering the historical, geographic, and cultural contexts. What does it mean to be a woman in the United States in the 1950s? In the 2000s? What does it mean to be a woman in twenty-first century Iran? The answers to

such questions can easily illustrate the instability of socially constructed identity categories. Poststructuralism allows us to consider both the instability and the context of these constructs, helping us to “demonstrate the artificiality of the way we think and label things” (Thurer, 2005, p. 35).

Poststructural theorists point to the importance of questioning traditional practices; just because we have always done things a certain way does not mean such activities and concepts are static, rigid, untouchable, and unchangeable (St. Pierre, 2000). The continuous acts of resistance within a structure eventually force the structure to change. Poststructural thinking involves noticing and illuminating these moments of resistance. In this way, poststructuralism is political; it is an active process of transformation, of changing our situations.

Poststructural Concepts

In their chapter covering postmodern, poststructural, and critical theories in feminist research, Gannon and Davies (2007) briefly outline five major poststructural concepts: discourse, subjectivity, agency, power, and truth. The emergence of poststructuralism is considered a linguistic or discursive turn in that poststructural theorists recognize the power of language and discourse in both forming and regulating individuals within cultural life. Poststructuralism shifts the focus from “language as a tool for describing real worlds to discourse, as a constitute of those worlds” (Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 81) or, as St. Pierre (2000) puts it, “language does not simply point to pre existing things and ideas but rather helps to construct them and, by extension, the world as we know it” (p. 483). With this discursive turn, discourse serves as a primary unit of analysis and subjects are viewed as discursively produced.

Discourses are “complex interconnected webs of modes of being, thinking, and acting” that “bring language into the material world” (Gannon & Davies, 2007, p. 82). In other words, the way we word our worlds determines our social identities, daily practices, and interactions with other individuals. The poststructural concept of subjectivity refers to the contingency of identity categories (as referenced above). Our identities are continuously forming and reforming; there are no fixed, immovable versions of an identity (Gannon & Davies, 2007). Agency is about identifying the possibilities for taking action. Once we are aware of discursive constitutions and recognize those constitutions that are oppressive, what can we do to transform systems and structures? Finally, the concepts of power and truth operate alongside each other within a poststructural framework; knowledge/truth are always produced within power relations. Some of the dominant, oppressive practices within a specific time and culture may be held in place (or seem immovable) based on unquestioned knowledge or taken for granted assumptions. A poststructural analysis seeks to uncover such assumptions and knowledge.

What is poststructuralism? It is a philosophical movement that emerged in 1960s France in response to structuralism and modernism. Poststructuralism involves: taking a critical, open, anti-essentialist stance; rejecting rigid binary oppositions; and recognizing that meanings are unstable and shifting, identity categories are social constructions, and discourses shape our realities.

Viewing ~~gender non-binary~~ students’ experiences through a poststructural lens allows for the recognition of multiple realities, the privileging of subjective experience, and the critique of essentialism and binary oppositions (Crotty, 1998). Through this framework, I intend to uncover some of the discursive structures and material practices

that may appear rigid and unchangeable and that are not inclusive of gender diverse individuals. As the sociologist Susie Scott (2010) explains, discursive and institutional factors severely limit our repertoire of possible selves and, through performative regulation, we are capable of both producing and negotiating the powers that limit how we express our identities. Viewing gender diverse (including non-binary) experiences within educational institutions (with their own regulations of identity performance and expression) may help us name some of the discursive and institutional factors that limit gender expression.

Derridean Deconstruction

Further narrowing the poststructural focus, this project's research questions and data collected are analyzed with Derrida and deconstruction in mind. According to interviews with the philosopher Jacques Derrida (Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002), *deconstruction* is a term used to describe what happens when those who do not seem to belong are present within an organized structure, transgressing the hierarchical order at play. It is a common misconception that deconstruction is about dismantling and then revamping ideas and structures or that deconstruction involves reversing dominant terms that are in binary opposition (e.g., switching binary sex term arrangements from male/female to female/male).

Deconstruction can simply be thought of as what happens and is always already happening (Jackson & Mazzei, 2011). In other words, deconstruction is about bringing to the surface what is already there. The point is that deconstruction *events* are moments that are always happening around us. It is helpful to think of the deconstruction event as a snapshot in time. Something happened (or is happening) and difference was present;

someone or something was left out. When we are looking for what or who we have forgotten, it is our job to recognize and name these moments; yet, a deconstruction event is still a deconstruction event, whether we name it or not. This stance of highlighting identities and experiences as always already there assumes that such identities and experiences are hidden away, lost in the depths of a variety of human experience. It is also assumed that these minimally recognized identities and experiences are often considered abnormal or on the fringes. It is the voice of *difference as presence* that disrupts these notions of normality and abnormality.

As noted by Jackson and Mazzei (2011), thinking with Derrida may lead us to ask, “what is falling through the grids we assembled?” The visual of arranging grids to create a structure is a powerful metaphor as it illuminates the fact that grids are built with the purpose of sorting ideas into the categories of belongs/does not belong. In the context of this dissertation project, the binary gender categories of boy/girl are the grids in place. And what about the students who fall through these grids? Exploring and understanding ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals’ experiences within educational systems may expose such *absent presences*.

The presence of difference—an individual’s presence within a system that was not constructed with that person in mind—is considered one type of *deconstruction event* (Derrida, 1967/1976). This dissertation study is centered on locating and discussing the *deconstruction events* of ~~gender non-binary~~ students’ presence within educational systems built on grids of binary gender identities. Derridean deconstruction, then, is an appropriate framework for viewing these Other, non-binary experiences of schooling as this poststructural lens helps us notice missed meanings and experiences and makes room

for new concepts and possibilities within our institutional structures and practices. We can question the rigidity of the grids in place as a way of proactively addressing current and future structures and practices that exclude some students.

Gender from a Poststructural Perspective

Before discussing the experiences of gender diverse (including ~~gender non-binary~~) individuals in schools, it is helpful to explore some theories around gender identity and expression. Many poststructural thinkers describe gender as a socially constructed category of identity (Butler, 1990, 1997; Francis, 2000; Lugg, 2003; MacInnes, 1998). Expounding on the social construction of gender, Butler (1990) explains that binary gender categories of man/woman or boy/girl represent a false duality of sex (male/female) and that traits and behaviors tied to a specific gender are not necessarily tied to the biological sex category.

In conversations about biological sex, we might rely on the terms *male* and *female*; but in discussions about gender, we often use the terms *masculinity* and *femininity* (Francis, 2000). In seeking to both express our own identities and understand other's identities under these dominant binary categories, we often expect girls to behave in feminine ways and have feminine characteristics and boys are expected to look masculine and perform their gender in masculine ways; however, a girl might behave in ways that are considered stereotypically masculine and a boy can behave in stereotypically feminine ways. Our feminine and masculine behaviors are our performances of gender and *gender* is: “an ongoing, lifelong series of evolving performances” (Lugg, 2003, p. 98)— “an evolving relationship negotiated among your lived experience, your context and your feelings about your body” (Airton, 2009, p. 224).

So, gender is not a stable construct and our performances of gender change over time.

These notions of sex and gender serve as a tool for societal organization and expectations related to how gender should be performed vary wildly across global cultures and societies (MacInnes, 1998). Within the context of a specific culture, for example, an individual's masculine and feminine behaviors are often deemed either appropriate or inappropriate based on their gender identity. In short, these concepts of maleness and femaleness are products of the dominant cultural discourses. Through such discourses, power relations are at play; we are both placed in and formed by these discursive notions of gender. According to Francis (2000), the realization that power operates through discourse "can explain the gendered nature of society as produced by gender discourses that position all selves as men or women" (p. 11).

Transformative Gender Justice

Ann Travers (2008, 2014) recognizes the role institutional structures and cultural expectations (and practices) play in reinforcing rigid gender roles and stereotypes. In 2008, Travers introduced a Transformative Gender Justice framework—an anti-essentialist interpretation of Fraser's (2007) framework for gender justice. Whereas Fraser (2007) states that gender justice for women requires both recognition and redistribution (i.e., deliberate moves toward material and cultural inclusion for women) and that gender inclusion is a vital component of democracy, Travers (2008, 2014) builds on Fraser's (2007) work by taking a more poststructural stance and recognizing that gender injustice is fueled by rigid two-sex systems and highly gendered structures.

In a recent chapter entitled *Transformative Gender Justice as a Framework for Normalizing Gender Variance among Children and Youth*, Travers (2014) cites Judith

Butler's work (1990, 2004) outlining the oppressive nature of normative gender structures to make the point that it is structures, not individuals, that must change.

According to Travers (2014),

A transformative gender justice paradigm locates “the problem” outside of the individual child, youth or adult and squarely within the sociocultural realms of wealth inequality, racialized sex-typing and gender categorization. We are not able to dismiss binary-based and stereotypical sex-typing as merely indicative of outdated attitudes. This is because it sits squarely within ongoing and deeply structured relations of gender inequality-structures... (p. 62).

Travers also recognizes the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1998) of gender injustice, stating that gender always operates alongside other categories like race, class, ability, etc.

Adapting oppressive systems and structures related to gender inequality, Travers argues, is intersectional work because such oppressive gender structures are inextricably linked to systems of race, ability, and class privilege.

A transformative gender justice framework involves questioning “the naturalness of the sex binary” (Travers, 2014, p. 59) and embracing a gender spectrum (Fausto-Sterling, 2012) that recognizes gender identity and expression as fluid and diverse. Using such a framework, we recognize the importance of shaping environments to be more inclusive of diverse groups of people and take a more proactive stance toward creating and sustaining gender inclusive spaces. Building these inclusive environments requires recognizing a wide variety of gender expressions. As Travers (2014) puts it, “A coercive gender system is limiting for everyone, so efforts to advance the gender spectrum as the norm is a pro-active and structural way of working toward inclusion for transgender and

gender-variant children and youth” (p. 63). This dissertation project is focused on moving toward Transformative Gender Justice in that discursive structures and material practices limiting gender expression in schools are illuminated and addressed to help educators create gender inclusive learning environments for all students.

Framing notions of gender through a poststructural lens also allows us to critique the dominant discourses surrounding gender identity and performance and recognize the multifaceted and fluid nature of personal identities. Identity—the “individual and subjective perception of one’s self” (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015, p. 104)—is about how we experience the social roles we play. Gender identity describes our individual and subjective perceptions of and experiences of femininity and masculinity within the context of societal structures. According to MacNaughton (2001), gender is more than a social role; it is a “complex and dynamic set of ideas, actions and feelings about what it means to be a boy or a girl in a specific place, culture and time” (p.134). This study adds another layer of complexity to this “dynamic set of ideas, actions, and feelings” (p. 134) in that it addresses what it means to be *neither* a boy *nor* a girl in the context of contemporary K-12 educational settings. A poststructural view of gender is appropriate for this project because it involves recognizing gender as: socially constructed, discursively formed and enforced, and as fluid performances of masculinity and femininity that are dependent upon the diverse cultural and societal norms of a particular moment in time.

Gender Diversity

The discussion of ‘gender diversity’, which follows, then, is less about what gender *is* and more about what gender *does* and how we tend to recognize

‘gender’ only in certain limited ways. (Airton, 2009, p. 224)

Although topics centered on transgender and gender diverse identities and experiences in educational contexts are minimally explored in the field of educational leadership (Beck, 2014; Wimberly, 2015), scholars in other social science fields (including the areas of higher education, gender and sexuality, anthropology, and social work) conduct research concerning transgender or gender diverse individuals across a variety of contexts (Airton, 2009; Beemyn, 2003, 2015; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Beemyn & Rankin, 2016; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Seelman, 2014; Seelman, Walls, Costello, Steffens, Inselman, Montague-Asp, & Colorado Trans on Campus Coalition, 2012; Taylor, 2007; Valentine, 2007).

David Valentine, a cultural and linguistic anthropologist, traced the development of the term *transgender*, describing it as a collective term that is inclusive of gender variance. Although his ethnographic work encourages us to consider new and possible categories of gender, Valentine (2007) warns that assumptions about race and class hierarchies are particularly harmful for transgender and gender diverse individuals of color from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Clearly, not all transgender individuals have the same experiences of daily life and schooling. With Valentine’s work in mind, researchers must be careful not to essentialize transgender experiences. It is these complex intersections of identity (across race, class, gender, ability, etc.) that inform individual and subjective experiences. By addressing some of the discursive structures and material practices that limit gender expression, we have an opportunity to build institutional environments that are inclusive of diverse experiences in general and of

gender diverse expressions in particular.

Genny Beemyn, a prominent transgender scholar and activist, states that *transgender* is an “umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity and/or expression is different from the gender assigned to them at birth” (Beemyn, 2015). Beemyn has conducted extensive research into the lives of transgender individuals, especially in the context of higher education settings. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Beemyn (2003) has written about the growing number of transgender students enrolled at universities and colleges in the United States and the failure to address transgender students’ unique needs within such institutions (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005). Beemyn’s most recent work shows that transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ students face elevated levels of harassment and discrimination on college campuses in the United States (Beemyn & Rankin, 2016).

Seelman and others (2012) found that transgender students on college campuses faced harassment related to being constantly questioned about their gender identity and, in some cases, evicted from campus housing because of their gender identity. Other scholars argue that transgender student needs are rarely addressed within educational institutions in the United States, even when compared to the resources and services provided for students with marginalized sexual orientations, such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity (Greytak, et al., 2013; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Seelman, 2014; Seelman, et al., 2012; Taylor, 2007).

It is clear that LGBTQIA+ students, and transgender students face serious obstacles within educational institutions. While there is a lack of research exploring LGBTQIA+ experiences in K-12 schools, there are a growing number of articles

highlighting these experiences on college campuses. Before engaging in deeper analysis of the available literature exploring LGBTQIA+ topics (and especially transgender topics) in the fields of educational leadership and curriculum, it is helpful to consider some of the gender-related discourses in education.

Gender in Educational Contexts

In 2008, Howard Glasser and John Smith wrote about the misuse of the term *gender* in educational research. They explain that researchers often provide only vague meanings of gender (no explicit definitions) or rely on the synonymous use of sex and gender. In their analysis of articles featuring conversations concerning gender, Glasser and Smith (2008) note that most researchers stated or implied that gender categories were male/female; categories of male/female, however, are based on biological sex differences and fail to consider cultural interpretations of sex categories or the enactment of gender in social groups. Gender is certainly a complicated construct; it is no surprise that there appears to be a lack of consensus on the meaning of the term. Glasser and Smith (2008) call for clarifying the meaning of gender in educational research, “removing sex as the default meaning for gender”, and recognizing that the term *gender* “holds promise for studies of the norms and expectations that influence people’s behaviors in social contexts, including school classrooms” (p. 349).

In consideration of the notion that norms and expectations influence gender behaviors in educational settings, MacNaughton (2001) states that gender (and appropriate gender behavior) is learned from family, peers, media, and school through observation, imitation and modeling. In fact, very young children know about gender differences and practice gendered behaviors (gender expression); by the age of three,

children often exhibit gender differences and engage in free play activities that reinforce gender stereotypes (Browne & Francis, 1986; Honig, 1983; MacNaughton, 2001).

MacNaughton (2001) conducted a study with young children who played in traditional gender stereotyped roles; she attempted to re-socialize children to play in non-stereotypical gendered ways and found that language was a crucial factor in this process. For example, she recommended using terms like *police officer* rather than *policeman* and *policewoman* when teaching children about community helpers. It is clear from these studies that gender behaviors can be learned, especially in institutional settings, and that the language used to discuss gender plays a part in either enforcing or challenging traditional, stereotypical expectations related to gender identity and expression.

Some of the traditional structures of educational institutions are built upon and enforce binary categories of gender that are most often equated with binary sex categories. For example, within educational institutions in the United States, enrolled students have traditionally been categorized and sorted based on whether they were assigned male or female at birth. In many co-ed K-12 educational institutions, classroom rosters are often created with a balance of male and female students. Several scholars argue that the dominant structures of K-12 institutions that categorize and sort students based on binary sex categories enforce heterosexism and gender conformity (Lugg, 2003) and make it difficult for students to resist the labels attached to them by others (Francis, 2000) or to have a gender identity outside the traditional structures (Doan, 2010). As Francis (2000) stated, the current system of education in the United States “freely and pervasively categorizes pupils as boys and girls, making it difficult for pupils to resist such identification within an educational context” (p. 15).

This combination of conflating gender and sex, modeling and reinforcing traditional and stereotypical notions of gender in school settings, and categorizing and sorting students by binary categories of boy/girl, has led to the production of educational research studies that reify, rather than challenge, gender differences (Francis, 2000; Skelton & Francis, 2002). Through the overrepresentation of gender differences in school settings, educational researchers may claim that boys' education is qualitatively different than girls' education and that there are innate learning differences among boys and girls. These arguments fail to question traditional notions of gendered behavior as constructed within and reinforced by institutional structures and language; instead, the observed gender differences are taken as natural or innate behaviors, based on the sex categories traditionally used to sort students. In fact, claims that there are natural brain and learning differences among males and females have recently been refuted by several scholars (Browne, 2004; Gerhardt, 2004; Karmiloff-Smith, 2001; Whitehead, 2002). Perhaps there are alternative explanations (e.g., institutional structures, cultural norms and expectations, or material practices that reinforce stereotypical notions of gendered behavior) for some of the observed behavioral differences among individuals with diverse sex and/or gender identities (Francis, 2000).

Gender diversity in education. Although some scholars point to the importance of supporting gender diverse children across a variety of social contexts (Meyer & Pullen Sansfaçon, 2014; Travers, 2008, 2014), many educational discourses highlighting gender, it seems, have primarily focused on binary gender categories of boy/girl (or binary sex categories of male/female). And what about students with transgender or gender diverse identities and expressions? As noted in a previous section (see **Gender Diversity**), within

educational research studies, transgender student needs are rarely addressed outside the larger LGBTQIA+ acronym and transgender-specific topics are not typically discussed as qualitatively different than sexual orientation topics (Greytak, et al., 2013; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Seelman, 2014; Seelman, et al., 2012; Taylor, 2007). In short, these scholars note that the term *transgender* is often included in a list of the expanded LGBTQIA+ acronym but transgender topics are not explicitly discussed. Perhaps this is why the editor of the recent AERA (American Educational Research Association) book *LGBTQ Issues in Education: Advancing a Research Agenda* makes the following recommendation for further research:

...conduct research that differentiates among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people and issues. In some way it is a misrepresentation of the issues to lump LGBTQ research into one category...very little research differentiates among these groups in relation to the same school experiences. (Wimberly, 2015, p. 244)

In the context of educational leadership, a recent text about inclusive leadership in K-12 schools (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015) includes an equity audit tool that allows administrators to evaluate school culture with LGBTQIA+ students in mind. Even within this recent text, sexual orientation and gender identity are lumped together into one category for most questions. There is, however, an equity audit question that specifically addresses ~~gender non-binary~~ students. The question is worded as follows:

Do you have students in your school who are gender non-conforming (e.g., biological boys who are stereotypically more feminine and biological girls who are stereotypically more masculine)? How are you ensuring these students are

supported and protected from teasing, harassment, or pressure from students or staff to be gender conforming? (p. 208).

Even within this important question about equitable school practices, the terms *biological boys* and *biological girls* are used to discuss gender nonconforming identities and expressions. This language could potentially reinforce the problem of conflating sex and gender in educational research discourses (Glasser and Smith, 2008). It could be assumed from this language that gender is a biological, innate construct. Such assumptions reinforce the false idea that gender identity is stable and static.

Topics centered on transgender identity should be discussed within educational discourses because many transgender students develop their gender diverse identities early in life and are often targets of harassment and discrimination in schools. Pollock and Eyre (2012) traced the development of transgender identity among a group of adults and learned that these individuals saw themselves as different—as Other—very early in their elementary school experiences. The participants remember being singled out and picked on for not exhibiting stereotypical performances of feminine behavior early in their schooling experiences and said that the pressure to fit feminine norms intensified in middle and high school settings. Overall, these transgender and gender nonconforming individuals faced constant criticism and, as a result, suffered from low self-esteem and diminished self-worth.

LGBTQIA+ students have continuously been targets of harassment and discrimination in U.S. schools. According to results from the 2013 National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN, LGBTQIA+ students attend school in predominantly negative and hostile environments and “routinely hear anti-LGBT

language and experience victimization and discrimination at school” (p. xvi). This report states that over half of LGBTQIA+ students with marginalized sexual orientations felt unsafe at school and just under half of these students felt unsafe because of their gender identity or expression. Over half of all surveyed students (56.4%) reported hearing negative remarks about their gender expression (i.e., not behaving masculine or feminine enough) and a third of the participants reported hearing negative remarks specifically regarding transgender identities. Because of feeling unsafe or uncomfortable, roughly 35 percent of these LGBTQIA+ students avoided gender-segregated spaces (including bathrooms and locker rooms) within educational institutions. Most student participants also reported lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression because of feeling unsafe and unwelcome at school (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014, pp. xvii-xix.)

Recently, GLSEN published another school climate study (Greytak, Kosciw, Villegas, & Giga, 2016) documenting that LGBTQIA+ students continue to experience negative school climates. Greytak et al. (2016) explain that over half of the surveyed secondary school students report hearing LGBTQIA+-biased language from both school personnel and other students either often or very often and that negative climates impact student achievement levels as well as students’ sense of safety and belonging in these educational environments. Surprisingly, this recent report also documents that school personnel are least likely to intervene when hearing students make negative remarks about another student’s gender identity or expression.

These studies make it clear that LGBTQIA+ students are more frequently harassed than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers and stand to benefit from deliberate institutional-level interventions and support. The National School Climate Center (2014)

states that determining whether a school climate is positive should be based on “people’s experiences of school life” (p. 4) and, according to the results of these school climate studies published by GLSEN, many LGBTQIA+ students have negative experiences of school life. It is clear that many improvements must be made in efforts to create and maintain positive educational environments for these students.

What role do leaders play in supporting LGBTQIA+ students in schools? One way inclusive leaders support all students is by ensuring positive and safe school climates. According to Hernandez and Fraynd (2015), school leaders “have a tremendous amount of influence over the culture and climate” (p. 115) of their schools, and they must be “committed to creating environments that are safe and inclusive of students across these multiple dimensions of diversity” (p. 102). Anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies are important components of a safe learning environment, but educational leaders must also be well informed and aware of issues affecting LGBTQIA+ students. When inclusive leaders are informed and aware, they are more likely to take proactive steps in advocating for these students.

Method of Literature Review

The following comprehensive review serves as an analysis of the available literature exploring LGBTQIA+ topics in the fields of educational leadership and curriculum studies. As noted by other researchers (Beck, 2014; O’Malley & Capper, 2015; Wimberly, 2015), LGBTQIA+ topics are minimally explored within educational leadership discourses. Just two years ago, Beck (2014) conducted a review of leading educational leadership journals (selected based on high impact factors) and found that “transgender persons and experiences are highly peripheral in the educational leadership

research base” (p. 60). O’Malley and Capper (2015) recently carried out a survey of social justice-oriented leadership preparation programs in the United States and discovered that, within these programs, LGBTQIA+ topics were rarely addressed. Arguing that educators and leaders should support LGBTQIA+-inclusive (and specifically gender-inclusive) schooling may prove challenging because LGBTQIA+ topics and concerns are minimally represented within educational leadership preparation programs and within top-ranked journals of educational leadership. A review of the available literature covering LGBTQIA+ topics in the field of curriculum studies is provided as a comparison. How, for example, are these topics being covered in other educational fields?

Purpose

The purpose of this review is to continue the work accomplished by other scholars and to bolster discourse by including the comparison of LGBTQIA+ topic coverage within the field of curriculum studies. This review of the literature is not only a summarization of the representative studies showing the current state of research but is also a clarification of the problem (minimal exploration of LGBTQIA+ topics) that outlines features of the existing literature base. This updated review highlights both the conceptual and methodological similarities among the representative studies and acts as the glue connecting the arguments and claims of the overall dissertation project.

Several scholars argue the purpose of the literature review (Boote & Beile, 2005, 2006; Maxwell, 2006). Whereas Boote and Beile (2005, 2006) contend that generativity (building on the prior research) is the distinctive feature of effective research, Maxwell (2006) claims that the purpose of a literature review is to inform and justify the overall

research project. According to Boote and Beile (2005), scholars conduct literature reviews to improve collective understanding, become familiar with previously conducted studies, and “analyze and synthesize the research in a field of specialization” (p. 3). Maxwell (2006), on the other hand, states that relevancy is the primary focus for a literature review and that only those works that “have important implications for the design, conduct, or interpretation of the study” (p. 28) should be included in the review, not works that merely deal with the topic or field under consideration. In a sense, Boote and Beile (2005, 2006) believe scholars conducting literature reviews should ask, “What is there?” and Maxwell (2006) believes it is better to ask, “How do we make what is there work?” A strong review of the literature can address both questions, but starting with “what is there” seems a more effective strategy for making the claim that gaps exist in the literature base.

Because the primary problem guiding this dissertation project is a lack of research exploring LGBTQIA+ topics within educational discourses and particularly within the area of educational leadership, updating the review of literature is vital for supporting these claims. Analyzing the literature within a clearly defined field of educational leadership supports the claims of minimal representation and justifies decisions made regarding the design of the overall dissertation project.

Review Criteria

The literature review for this inquiry is guided by the following five criteria set forth by Boote and Beile (2005): coverage, synthesis, methodology, significance, and rhetoric.

Coverage. The inclusion and exclusion of literature was justified based on topicality and placement within educational leadership and curriculum studies discourses. In short, the focus was on those discourses that are dominant, prevalent, current, and accessible.

Sample selection. The primary sample of journal titles selected for this review was based on the following criteria: (1) Indexed and ranked by 5-year impact factor in the category of Education and Education Research, as published by Thomson Reuters™ Journal Citation Reports®, Social Science Edition for 2015; and (2) Journal aims and scope address the fields of educational leadership and curriculum studies. Curriculum studies was selected as an adjacent scholarly field that informs educational leadership and that includes a corpus of LGBTQIA+ and gender-oriented inquiry. It is important to note that some journal titles dedicated to the broader field of educational research were included. The decision to include these titles was based on whether educational leadership topics were listed in the aims and scope of the journal. This primary sampling technique generated a list of top-ranked journals in the fields of educational leadership and curriculum studies, which provided access to dominant and prevalent discourses.

The initial sample selection criteria provided a list of only 11 journal titles. Five journals were added to the sample, based on a secondary set of criteria—journal use in educational leadership preparation and curriculum studies courses at the institution where I am studying (Texas State University). These journals were selected based on two criteria: (1) Listed on syllabi across my doctoral-level courses (courses I enrolled in as per the degree requirements for a Ph.D. in School Improvement); and (2) Journal aims and scope cover the fields of educational leadership and curriculum studies. The final list

of 18 journal titles was then organized by field (educational leadership or curriculum studies) and by rank (listed from highest 5-year impact factor to no impact factor).

Search criteria. A total of 18 journal databases were searched to select articles addressing LGBTQIA+ topics. Because the focus was on current conversations in the fields, only those articles published within the past decade (January 2006-July 2016) were included in the review. Search terms included variations of the LGBT acronym (i.e., GLBT*, LGBT*, GLBT*) as well as terms related to sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g., “sexual orientation,” “transgender*” and “lesbian*”). The search was also limited to location within the title, abstract, or keywords (denoting a more prevalent placement than search terms placed only in the body of a text).

As noted earlier in this section, the focus for this review was on the dominant, prevalent, current, and accessible discourses. The decision to include journal articles, and not textbooks or handbooks, in the review was based on a general pattern of accepting journal review as the gold standard of peer review in education research. This does not discount the value of handbooks, books, and textbooks, but rather is a decision to focus the review of literature within the criteria of journal review.

This purposeful inclusion and exclusion of literature assumes that minimal representation of a topic within a field indicates that the topic holds little importance within these discourses. With this assumption in mind, if the current state of educational leadership research shows minimal exploration of LGBTQIA+ topics, then the review of literature also supports other elements of the overall research design. For example, if these conversations are not occurring, educational leaders may be unaware of this identity, which, in turn, makes it difficult to address the needs of LGBTQIA+ students.

Therefore, a minimal exploration of LGBTQIA+ topics in educational leadership discourses supports the method of interviewing LGBTQIA+ students to understand their experiences of school. Additionally, analyzing the interview data with Derridean deconstruction in mind highlights those student experiences that may be misunderstood or overlooked. The components of the research design are interactive in that the data methods, sources, and analysis techniques are focused on highlighting LGBTQIA+ student experiences in schools. The assumption here is that if such experiences are brought to the surface, so to speak, LGBTQIA+ topics might be discussed more frequently in the field of educational leadership.

Synthesis. To gain deeper insight into the field of educational leadership, current and relevant literature was reviewed to understand what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done. As Lather (1999) noted, literature reviews should not simply summarize or mirror what has been done but should generate productive work. Continuing the work accomplished by other researchers, the existing literature highlighting LGBTQIA+ topics was summarized and then analyzed for evidence of discourses exploring gender diverse identities (i.e., transgender identity, including ~~gender non-binary~~ or gender nonconforming identities) within educational contexts. Does the current and dominant literature base include conversations around gender identity as qualitatively different from sexual orientation or are mentions of gender diverse identities simply included as part of the larger LGBTQIA+ umbrella topic?

Methodology. The following literature review also offers a critique of the main methodologies and research techniques used within studies highlighting LGBTQIA+ topics. Does the sample of literature represent more quantitative or qualitative methods of

inquiry? Have any studies utilized poststructural methods of data analysis, which are appropriate for troubling the historical essentialization of gender?

Significance. The scholarly and practical significance of the research problems, as stated in the articles included in this review, was also considered. What are some of the limitations and shortcomings of the articles covering LGBTQIA+ topics?

Rhetoric. Finally, the review of literature is arranged according to prevalence in the field. Specifically, like Beck's (2014) arrangement, the review is organized by journal title and 5-year impact factor (as listed by Thomson Reuters™ Journal Citation Reports®, Social Science Edition for 2015), from highest impact factor to lowest (or no) impact factor. Within these sections, scholarly articles are further analyzed in relation to the research gap (minimal exploration of LGBTQIA+ topics and rare exploration of transgender topics) and with methodological similarities in mind. Following each review section is a theme-based analysis of the sample. Both the leadership discourses section and the curriculum discourses section include a theme-based analysis following the detailed review (organized by journal title and impact factor).

This review is a continuation of the prior scholarly studies highlighting the minimal representation of LGBTQIA+ topics within the field and shows that, when LGBTQIA+ topics are included in these discourses, these topics are often part of a lengthy list of diverse identity groups, rather than a stand-alone topic worthy of deeper inquiry. Conversations related to transgender or gender diverse individuals are even rarer. In this sense, gender diversity is a silent topic in the field. With minimal attention in the field, it may be challenging for educational leaders to argue in favor of additional resources for supporting gender diverse students. Overall, this critical evaluation of the

current and prevalent educational discourses exploring LGBTQIA+ topics serves as a consideration of the “progress of research toward clarifying a problem” and suggests next “steps in solving the problem” (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 10).

Leadership Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics

In continuing the work accomplished by other scholars, this review documents the continued problem of minimal representation of LGBTQIA+ topics, including topics exploring transgender or gender diverse identities, within educational leadership discourses. The following review includes articles published between January 2006 and July 2016 in 14 journals dedicated to the topics of educational administration, policy, and research.

As previously noted, the primary criteria for journal sample selection was prevalence in the field of educational leadership. Using the indexed and ranked (by 5-year impact factor) list of 231 journals included under the category of Education and Education Research, as published by Thomson Reuters™ Journal Citation Reports®, Social Science Edition for 2015, a total of 11 journal titles were selected from this larger list, based on the secondary criteria for selection—journal aims and scope covering the topic of educational leadership. This list of 11 indexed and ranked educational leadership journal titles were then organized based on the 5-year impact factor (highest impact factor to lowest impact factor). Three additional journal titles (not indexed in Journal Citation Reports®) were added to the sample of literature based on a second set of criteria—use in the educational leadership preparation program at this institution (as listed on course syllabi) and addressing the field of educational leadership (as listed in the aims and scope of the journal). A total of 14 journal titles were included in the review.

The following review is organized by journal title and includes these journals: *Review of Educational Research*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *Educational Researcher*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Review of Research in Education*, *Journal of Educational Policy*, *Urban Education*, *Educational Policy*, *Educational Management, Administration, and Leadership*, *Educational Leadership*, *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, and *Journal of School Leadership*.

Within these leading educational leadership journals, a small number of articles explored LGBTQIA+ topics and even fewer articles explored topics related to transgender and gender diverse identities. Overall, a total of twenty-six articles met the criteria for inclusion in this review. To put this into perspective and considering the year limits for the search (past ten years), that averages out to roughly three articles per year, spread out over 14 journals. It is interesting to note that the journal with the highest impact factor (*Review of Educational Research*) featured no articles covering LGBTQIA+ topics, whereas the journal with the third highest impact factor (*Educational Researcher*), published the most articles featuring LGBTQIA+ issues and topics, with a total of six articles. The following four journals published zero articles related to LGBTQIA+ topics in the past decade: *Review of Educational Research*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Journal of Educational Policy*, and *Educational Management, Administration, and Leadership* (see **Table 1**, which displays journal titles, 5-year impact factors, and number of articles included in the sample). It is also interesting to note that three of these journals are specific to the field of educational leadership, one has a broader focus but is the top-ranked journal in the field of educational research, and

two of these journals address educational policy.

Table 1. Educational Leadership Journals: 5-Year Impact Factors and Number of Articles Included in Review.		
<i>Title</i>	<i>5-Year Impact Factor</i>	<i>Number of Articles Included</i>
Review of Educational Research	7.963	0
American Educational Research Journal	4.398	2
Educational Researcher	4.050	6
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis	2.417	0
Educational Administration Quarterly	2.107	5
Review of Research in Education	2.096	1
Journal of Educational Policy	1.928	0
Urban Education	1.015	2
Educational Policy	0.924	1
Educational Management, Administration, and Leadership	0.830	0
Educational Leadership	No impact factor	2
Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership	No impact factor	4
Journal of Research on Leadership Education	No impact factor	1
Journal of School Leadership	No impact factor	2

It is alarming that LGBTQIA+ issues and topics seem to be missing from highly circulated policy discourses within the field of educational leadership, especially considering studies showing that principals are unaware of how frequently LGBTQIA+ students are bullied and harassed in school settings. In a survey of principal perspectives on school safety and bullying, Markow and Dancewicz (2008) found that principals were aware that students faced harassment for gender identity and expression but believed these bullying incidents were rare (i.e., only 12% of principals stated this type of harassment happened “very often”). On the other hand, the same study showed that a much larger percentage of students reported being harassed for gender expression (i.e., 90% of LGBTQIA+ students stated, “very often” and 60% of non-LGBTQIA+ students reported “very often”). There is an opportunity for educational leadership scholars to explore the role policies play in supporting and protecting LGBTQIA+ students. Policy-related conversations could include topics related to Title IX statutes (including both the Dear Colleague letters providing guidance to school personnel published in the time of the Obama administration and the recension of those guiding documents under the current administration), non-discrimination policies (federal and local), and anti-bullying policies and legislation that affects school climate.

Review of *Review of Educational Research*, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year

Impact Factor of 7.963.

No articles addressing LGBTQIA+ topics were published in the *Review of Educational Research* between January 2006 and July 2016.

Review of *American Educational Research Journal*, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 4.398.

American Educational Research Journal published two articles, both in 2008, which addressed LGBTQIA+ issues. While Ashcraft (2008) wrote about the importance of teaching sexuality in sex education courses, Eckes and McCarthy (2008) discussed the legal protections in place for teachers with LGBTQIA+ identities.

The Ashcraft (2008) article is an ethnographic study of a community-based sexual education program in which the researcher collected qualitative data (observations and interviews) to evaluate the current program. While this study emphasizes the importance of discussing sexuality with teenagers, LGBTQIA+ sexuality is not explicitly addressed as a topic covered in this program. Several of the peer educators who were interviewed identified as gay and shared that they felt scared and depressed in school settings, but these anecdotes were embedded in interview excerpts and were not highlighted in the abstract, title, or keywords.

Eckes and McCarthy (2008) discussed the legal protections in place for teachers with LGBTQIA+ identities. The authors offer an analysis of all litigation related to LGBT educators and of state-level non-discrimination statutes that protect LGBT employees. After searching legal research databases and reviewing policy across all 50 U.S. states, Eckes and McCarthy (2008) discovered that school administrators often failed to address harassment of LGBTQIA+ teachers and that most state statutes included protection for sexual orientation but not for gender identity. The authors reiterate that policies and legal protections play a key role in protecting LGBTQIA+ employees and recommend that both school district and state level entities expand protections for these

employees, including adding terminology that protects against discrimination based on gender identity and expression.

Review of *Educational Researcher*, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 4.050.

There were six articles published in *Educational Researcher* that addressed LGBTQIA+ topics and issues. The most recent article, published in 2014, covered the problem of what Robinson-Cimpain (2014) calls *mischievous responders* on self-administered questionnaires. The author argues that these mischievous responders affect disparity estimates, including those disparities based on sexual identity and gender identity. In this article, LGBTQIA+ identity is only briefly mentioned in the abstract and the overall focus (methodological in nature) is on improving the way questionnaires are structured and administered.

Just a year earlier, Mayo (2013) conducted a case study of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at one high school and found important implications for teacher development, including using critical pedagogical techniques (including Critical Multiculturalism) to create reflective and activist-oriented learning environments within secondary school settings. This article specifically addresses LGBTQIA+ topics in K-12 educational contexts through its focus on Gay-Straight Alliance groups. The implications and recommended strategies are intended, primarily, for secondary teachers.

Two articles published in *Educational Researcher*, both written by Robinson and Espelage (2011, 2012), highlight the connection between inequities among LGBTQIA+ students (as compared to non-LGBTQIA+ students) and an increased number of bullying incidents that target LGBTQIA+ students in secondary school settings. In the 2011

article, the authors make this connection and state that LGBTQIA+ students, overall, have a higher risk of victimization than their peers, and that bisexual students, in particular, are frequent targets of bullying. Robinson and Espelage (2011) conclude by calling for school improvement efforts that aim to create safer schools for LGBTQIA+ students.

The following year, the same authors (Robinson & Espelage, 2012) conducted a quantitative study that used student survey data to show that LGBTQIA+ students experienced higher rates of harassment and bullying than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers. LGBTQIA+ students also indicated they had higher rates of depression and skipped school more often. The authors state that “policies aimed simply at reducing bullying may not be effective” (p. 309) in addressing the disparities (in both educational and psychological outcomes) among LGBTQIA+ students and their non-LGBTQIA+ peers. Overall, Robinson and Espelage argue that additional policies are needed to provide safe and inclusive school environments for students with LGBTQIA+ identities.

LGBT and Queer Research in Higher Education: The State and Status of the Field was the only article published in 2010 that addressed LGBTQIA+ topics. In providing a review of the literature exploring LGBT and Queer issues in the field of Higher Education, Renn (2010) found that the available scholarship lacked theoretical depth and suggests using Queer Theory to study LGBTQIA+ populations in these contexts. Most of the articles included in this review cover topics related to sexual orientation and do not include conversations related to gender identity. Overall, the literature is primarily focused on visibility, campus climate, and identity studies; Renn (2010) suggests conducting additional research that addresses transgender identity and

the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students of color and utilizes Queer Theory to question normative constructions of identity.

An article published in 2007 explores the tensions of doing multicultural work in the field of teacher education. Asher (2007) argues that teachers must learn to engage students across difference and recognize intersections of identity (including identities at the intersection of race, culture, gender, and sexuality). She states that conversations covering the topics of Asian American identity and sexuality are minimally represented in Multicultural Education discourses and recommends that researchers and educators, alike, engage in continuous critical engagement with these identities and experiences.

Review of Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 2.417.

No articles published in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* between January 2006 and July 2016 addressed LGBTQIA+ topics.

Review of Educational Administration Quarterly, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 2.107.

A total of five articles were published in *Educational Administration Quarterly* over the course of the past ten years. Two articles were published in 2015, two in 2013, and one in 2007.

O'Malley and Capper (2015) conducted a survey study with faculty members who taught in social justice leadership preparation programs in the United States (as indicated by institutional designation as a University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) program). The authors documented that LGBTQIA+ topics are rarely included in equity-oriented principal preparation programs and, when these topics are included,

only one faculty member is typically responsible for addressing them. O'Malley and Capper (2015) recommend integrating LGBTQIA+ topics across these preparation programs and state that faculty members need additional strategies for integrating social justice topics, especially LGBTQIA+ topics and issues.

A second article published in 2015 is primarily centered on proposing new Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards that address equity issues. Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) argue that current ISLLC standards contain limited terminology related to addressing equity and access issues across “race, class, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexuality, or other marginalized identities” (p. 372). The authors explain that not including these terms in the standards language sends the message that addressing inequities related to these identity categories is not important to K-12 educational leaders. In this article, LGBTQIA+ identity is referred to broadly and briefly, in an extensive list of diverse identity categories and broad terms like *gender* and *sexuality* are used. LGBTQIA+ specific terms, such as *lesbian*, *gay*, or *transgender*, are not mentioned.

The two *Educational Administration Quarterly* articles that were published in 2013 specifically address sexual orientation in relation to the field of educational leadership. Marshall and Hernandez (2013) conducted a qualitative analysis of their students' written reflection assignments within a social justice-oriented educational leadership preparation program and discovered that: these future leaders' experiences with LGBTQIA+ topics and persons varied wildly, discussions around sexual orientation were primarily influenced and complicated by individual student's religious beliefs, and reflections changed over time (from emotionally-driven to rationally-driven). Although

the broad acronym LGBT was used throughout to discuss current issues facing LGBTQIA+ individuals in educational settings, this study only focused on the topic of sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities or the LGB of the larger acronym). The authors conclude by recommending additional inquiries into educational leaders' attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ topics and leaders' actions that promote heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools.

In *Cycles of Fear: A Model of Lesbian and Gay Educational Leaders' Lived Experiences*, Deleon and Brunner (2013) sought to understand the lived experiences of lesbian and gay educational leaders. They conducted a national qualitative study of these PK-20 leaders and used queer legal theory, critical phenomenology, and post structural hermeneutics to analyze these experiences. The authors found that gay and lesbian leaders moved through cycles of fear in which, at times, their voices were silenced; the fear cycle, however, led to increased strength and visibility for these individuals. Deleon and Brunner (2013) call for additional support, both personal and professional, for school leaders with gay and lesbian identities. This article only addresses sexual orientation, not gender identity, and is focused on leader experiences rather than student experiences.

The article published in 2007 was written by George Theoharis and the overall focus was on developing a theory of social justice leadership. This is essentially a qualitative interview study with a sub-group of school principals who have been identified as social justice leaders. The article is included in this review because a small piece of the LGBTQIA+ acronym is included in the abstract. In describing the role and actions of social justice leaders, Theoharis (2007) states that such leaders "make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other marginalizing factors central

to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 221). Like the Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) piece, this article includes “sexual orientation” in a list of diverse identity categories. Theoharis (2007) does point to important implications for preparing equity-oriented school leaders. He reiterates the importance of keeping historically marginalized identities central to the work of leading school communities. While one could argue that the broad category of “other marginalizing factors” (p. 221) might include transgender students, transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ identities are not specifically mentioned.

Review of *Review of Research in Education*, January 2006–July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 2.096.

The *Review of Research in Education* published only one piece addressing LGBTQIA+ topics from January 2006 to July 2016. Nearly nine years ago, Mayo (2007a) wrote a book chapter dedicated to examining the patterns evident in LGBTQIA+ and queer educational research for the duration of twenty years. The author notes that early research with LGBTQIA+ populations positioned individuals as victims of homophobia, heterosexism, and harassment and contemporary studies highlight the resiliency of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Mayo (2007a) argues that a focus on resiliency still points to the fact that LGBTQIA+ individuals are either not represented, not treated fairly, or both. The author also points to the problem of coming out, explaining that research with LGBTQIA+ individuals usually requires that participants are open about their identities. As Mayo explains, studies with only those individuals who are “out” leaves out a large part of the LGBTQIA+ population. Although Mayo uses the LGBT acronym throughout this chapter and the title includes the word *transgender*, the review

is focused, primarily, on studies exploring sexual orientation. Gender diverse identities, such as transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ identities, are not specifically discussed.

Review of *Journal of Educational Policy*, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 1.928.

No articles featuring LGBTQIA+ topics were published in the *Journal of Educational Policy* from January 2006 to July 2016.

Review of *Urban Education*, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 1.015.

A total of two articles were published in *Urban Education* from January 2006 through July 2016. Russo (2006) wrote about the importance of nondiscrimination policies that protect students with LGBTQIA+ identities in public school settings and, nearly five years later, Henry, Fowler, and West (2011) surveyed teachers' perceptions regarding historically marginalized student populations.

Russo (2006) conducted a national study of the non-discrimination policies in place at both governmental and educational institutions in the United States. After reviewing the policies and case law literature, the author concludes that additional public policies are needed to protect LGBTQIA+ students from discrimination and harassment. Although the title includes the word *transgender*, the author only discusses sexual orientation and does not expound on transgender-specific topics and issues. As is the case with many of the articles included in this review, transgender is referred to only as an identity listed under the larger LGBTQIA+ umbrella category.

In the 2011 article *Campus Climate: An Assessment of Students' Perceptions in a College of Education*, the authors surveyed pre-service teachers who were enrolled in courses through the College of Education at an urban university in the Southeastern

region of the United States. Additional data was collected in the form of focus group interviews. Through this mixed-methods study, the researchers discovered that a sizable percentage of participants (nearly 80%) felt “uncomfortable being around gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) students” (p. 696) and that less than half of pre-service teachers felt they were provided ample opportunities to learn about LGBTQIA+ individuals. The authors conclude by pointing to the need for curricular emphasis on LGBTQIA+ populations in teacher education programs. Transgender identities are only referred to as part of the GLBT acronym in this study, although the survey instrument does include several questions that refer to “sexual orientation/transgender identity,” so the survey questions at least imply there is a difference between gender identity and sexual orientation.

Review of *Educational Policy*, January 2006-July 2016, 5- year Impact Factor of 0.924.

The only article published in *Educational Policy* between January 2006 and July 2016 is entitled *School Staff Responses to Gender-Based Bullying as Moral Interpretation: An Exploratory Study*. In this qualitative study, Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, and Lichty (2009) studied gender-based bullying in secondary education settings and collected data in the form of interviews with faculty and staff at one high school in the United States. The authors define gender-based bullying as comprised of “threatening and harassing behaviors based on gender or the enforcement of gender-role expectations” (p. 520) and state that the most frequent targets of gender-based bullying are girls and students with marginalized sexual orientations, specifically gay and lesbian students. The authors use the LGBT acronym and the terms *gay* and

lesbian to discuss how these students are affected by gender-based bullying, but they do not refer to *bisexual* or *transgender* students. Interestingly, Anagnostopoulos, et al. (2009) do provide a footnote stating that they recognize that referring to only gay and lesbian students excludes bisexual and transgender students but that the terms *gay* and *lesbian* were the only terms used by the faculty and staff at this school. Findings show that personnel rarely respond to gender-based bullying and are ambivalent toward their responsibility to intervene when gay and lesbian students are being bullied. The authors conclude by recommending that school communities adopt anti-bullying policies, assess school culture and climate, and provide faculty and staff workshops focused on addressing gender-based bullying.

Review of *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 0.830.

There were no articles addressing LGBTQIA+ topics published in *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* between January 2006 and July 2016.

Journals with No Impact Factor

This section serves as a review of articles from the following journals with no impact factor: *Educational Leadership*, *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, and *Journal of School Leadership*.

Although these titles are not included in the Thomson-Reuters™ Journal Citation Report®, Social Science Edition from 2015 (and therefore have no 5-year impact factor), articles from these publications are included because they are relevant and prevalent in the field of educational leadership (as determined by frequent use in preparation programs (based on syllabi and conversations with professors at this institution) and/or

aims and scope that address the field of educational leadership).

The magazine *Educational Leadership* is published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), a non-profit, membership-based organization with a broad educational focus that includes topics of supervision and leadership. *Educational Leadership* is also widely circulated (estimated 135,000). Both *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* and *Journal of Research on Leadership Education* are electronic, peer-reviewed, focused on the preparation and practice of leadership, and sponsored by the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA). The *Journal of School Leadership* is dedicated to the study of educational leadership and is circulated by the independent publishing company Rowman & Littlefield.

Review of *Educational Leadership*, January 2006-July 2016, No Impact Factor

Educational Leadership featured two articles related to LGBTQIA+ issues and concerns over the past ten years. In 2011, McGarry wrote about the importance of speaking out against homophobic slurs in secondary school settings. As a high school administrator, McGarry learned that a gay student was alerting other students about anti-gay language he was hearing on campus. After realizing that teachers were not intervening when they heard these homophobic slurs, the author/administrator started a dialogue, which became a series of critically-reflective professional development sessions with faculty, centered on the importance of speaking out against hate speech. This administrator's personal story sheds light on the role language plays in creating negative learning environments and offers practical strategies for addressing the problem of a lack of intervention on the part of school personnel. This story was focused on one gay student and did not mention any other LGBTQIA+ identities.

Two years later, *Educational Leadership* published an article entitled *There's Always that One Teacher* that featured interviews with several high school students. Sadowski (2013), the author and a high school administrator, conducted in-depth interviews with several students with diverse identities. One of the students he interviewed discussed the harassment she faced because of her sexual orientation (lesbian) and another student shared experiences related to both their gender identity (transgender) and sexual orientation (gay). Sadowski (2013) focuses on each student's resiliency and the significant role caring adults play in their lives. Overall, the author discovered that it only took one caring and listening adult to make a difference in these student's experiences of school life. In this narrative, the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, and *transgender* were used to describe students' identities.

Review of *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, January 2006-July 2016, No Impact Factor.

The *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* published four cases within the past five years that addressed LGBTQIA+ topics. The most recently published case, *The Yearbook Photo and Graduation Speech: Intersection of Sexual Identity, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Race*, explores how one high school principal responds to equity issues on campus. After conducting a campus wide equity audit, the principal learned that the needs of both students of color and students with LGBTQIA+ identities were not be appropriately addressed. The White male principal enrolled in an educational leadership course centered around topics of equity and diversity, interviewed some of his students, and attended Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) meetings on his campus. He advocated for one transgender girl to be able to wear a dress in her yearbook photo and supported another

transgender boy (the class president) who decided to share that he was transgender during his graduation speech. Fleig (2016) specifically addresses transgender identities in high schools and provides activities and discussion questions that assist educational leaders with supporting transgender students.

Two years prior, Kaiser, Seitz, and Walters (2014) presented a case related to supporting transgender students in a high school setting. The administrative team grappled with how to ensure access to sex-segregated locker rooms for one transgender student. The authors present the case and discuss the ethical and moral standings of educational leadership as well as the legal frameworks and policies in place that protect transgender students. The case focused, specifically, on transgender student issues and rights in public schools.

In 2012, the *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* published one piece that addressed LGBTQIA+ issues. Wright, Roach, and Yukins (2012) presented one family's story of choosing a safe high school for their gay son. Although the high school community is committed to diversity, these parents notice that most of the LGBTQIA+ advocacy efforts are left to students, with little active support from educational administration. The authors state that positive school climates for LGBTQIA+ students must be fostered through continuous advocacy efforts from all stakeholders. The case offers a glimpse into one gay student's experiences of school. Transgender issues and topics are not part of the conversation.

The fourth case addressing LGBTQIA+ topics was published in 2011 and explores a scenario in which a student leader (president of the diversity club) advocated for observing the national Transgender Day of Remembrance on the high school campus.

The principal initially approved the event but then postponed it due to scheduling conflicts, voicing additional concerns that the event might offend some people. Because the student leader was persistent, the principal allowed students to observe Transgender Day of Remembrance at another scheduled event. Fusarelli and Eaton (2011) discuss the use of queer pedagogy and queer activism in this scenario and provide discussion questions exploring administrator dilemmas related to supporting campus diversity. This case was one of the few articles that focused on transgender-specific topics.

Review of *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, January 2006-July 2016, No Impact Factor.

The *Journal of Research on Leadership Education* featured one article that addressed LGBTQIA+ topics between January 2006 and July 2016. Friend, Caruthers, and McCarther (2009) discuss the use of online reflective journaling in social justice-oriented educational leader preparation programs. Online journaling allowed educational leadership students to discuss diversity and equity issues related to “race, ethnicity, class, language, ability/disability, gender, sexual orientation, and other facets of diversity” (p. 1) more openly and freely. The authors suggest that educational leadership faculty use similar strategies to help students discuss these important topics. Terms related to LGBTQIA+ identities are not discussed beyond the repeated mention of *sexual orientation* in a list of diverse identity categories.

Review of *Journal of School Leadership*, January 2006-July 2016, No Impact Factor.

Two articles related to LGBTQIA+ topics were published in the *Journal of School Leadership* over the course of the past ten years. Both articles addressed the importance of exploring LGBTQIA+ topics in educational leadership preparation

programs that were focused on preparing social justice-oriented school leaders. Capper, Alston, Gause, Koshoreck, Lopez, Lugg, and McKenzie (2006) provide educational leadership faculty with practical strategies and resources that aide in the integration of LGBTQIA+ topics across several courses in preparation programs. The activities and resources “raise consciousness, increase knowledge, and develop leadership skills to prepare leaders to confidently meet the needs of LGBT individuals in their schools” (p. 142). The acronym LGBT is used throughout the article and *transgender* is used, briefly, to present statistics related to rates of discrimination and harassment faced by individuals with transgender identities.

Three years later, Reed (2009) used life notes methodology and personal narrative to explore her approach, as a faculty member in an educational leadership preparation program, to preparing social justice-oriented school leaders. Reed (2009) presents, specifically, that she expanded her social justice leadership lens to be more inclusive of individuals with LGBTQIA+ identities. Like Capper et al. (2006), Reed (2009) used the LGBT acronym throughout the article but did not address the specific needs and identities of transgender individuals.

Leadership Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics: Themes

Across the 26 articles included in this review of leadership discourses and LGBTQIA+ topics, are themes related to “what is there” (Boote & Beile, 2005, 2006) and “what is missing.” In other words, of the articles addressing LGBTQIA+ topics, how “present” are conversations related to gender diversity? Or, as asked in an earlier section (see **Synthesis** on page 71), “does the current and dominant literature base include conversations around gender identity as qualitatively different from sexual orientation or

are mentions of gender diverse identities simply included as part of the larger LGBTQIA+ umbrella topic?” Like noticing *deconstruction events* and *absent presences* for ~~gender non-binary~~ students in K-12 schools, we can view “what is there” across the sample as the grids in place (grids as representing the available LGBTQIA+ research in the field) and ask, “what is falling through these grids?” With this question in mind, the articles included in this review are categorized into three major themes related to the presence (level) of conversations about gender diverse identities and experiences (i.e., gender diversity, transgender, gender nonconforming, ~~gender non-binary~~, etc.). When it comes to the topic of gender diversity, what is there? A glimpse, a mild presence, or a fuller presence?

A Glimpse

Roughly a quarter of the articles included in this review are categorized as “a glimpse” into the topic of gender diversity. Most of these articles did not use a variation of the LGBTQIA+ acronym but used terms like *gender*, *sexuality*, and *sexual orientation*. These articles featured brief mentions of gender and/or sexual orientation, usually as part of a lengthy list of historically marginalized or underrepresented identity categories. For example, in one article published in the *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, Friend and others (2009) discussed online journaling as an avenue for discussing diversity issues related to “race, ethnicity, class, language, ability/disability, gender, sexual orientation, and other facets of diversity” (p. 1). In a similar fashion, Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) argued that Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards should include terminology related to addressing equity issues across “race, class, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexuality, or other marginalized identities” (p. 372).

When reading the articles included in this theme, readers are given a glimpse into the topic of gender diversity in that gender and “other marginalized identities” (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015, p. 372) are listed as important topics in the field of educational leadership.

A Mild Presence

A large majority (16 of 26) of the articles included in this review are categorized as a “mild presence” of gender diversity topics. The authors used variations of the LGBTQIA+ acronym and most featured an expanded definition of the acronym that included at least brief mentions of a *transgender* identity (the T in LGBTQIA+). In four articles (of 16), some variation of the acronym was used broadly, lumping together marginalized gender and sexual identities, and conversations about gender diversity were limited to this brief mention of T representing *transgender*.

Most (10 of 16) of these articles featured a variation of the LGBTQIA+ acronym and briefly defined the acronym’s letters, but the conversations were focused only on sexual orientation (e.g., lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities and experiences). Finally, three (of 16) articles featured variations of the LGBTQIA+ acronym, defined the acronym’s letters, and remained focused on sexual orientation topics; however, the authors included additional information related to gender diversity. For example, Anagnostopoulos and others (2009) included a footnote in recognition that transgender students were not included in their study because participants only talked about gay and lesbian individuals. In a review of LGBTQIA+ research in higher education discourses, Renn (2010) discussed the focus on sexual orientation in the literature base and suggested further research into transgender identity and experiences. The topic of gender

diversity has a “mild presence” in these 16 articles in that terms like *transgender* are mentioned (and sometimes defined) as one of the historically marginalized identity categories included in conversations about LGBTQIA+ topics in the field of educational leadership.

A Fuller Presence

Although none of the articles included in this review of LGBTQIA+ topics in educational leadership discourses featured conversations about ~~gender non-binary~~ topics, a small number of articles (four) are categorized as “a fuller presence” because authors define and discuss gender diverse identities, particularly in relation to transgender students’ experiences in schools. Three of these articles are published in the *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* and include case narratives about how educational leaders supported transgender students in high schools. The fourth article, published in *Educational Leadership* features an in-depth interview with a transgender student about their experiences in high school. The topic of gender diversity has a “fuller presence” in these four articles because *transgender* is defined and highlighted and transgender experiences are the primary focus of these leadership discourses.

Leadership Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics: A Summary

This review of educational leadership literature addressing LGBTQIA+ topics shows that additional research related to LGBTQIA+ issues and concerns and, specifically, research exploring transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ topics is needed. Most the articles included in this review only briefly refer to LGBTQIA+ topics in educational contexts, use variations of the LGBTQIA+ acronym, and primarily use specific identity terms (including *transgender*) in an extensive list of identity categories. Over half of the

articles included in this review used variations of the LGBTQIA+ acronym, roughly three-quarters referred to sexuality or sexual orientation, nearly a third mentioned the term *transgender*, and no articles mentioned or explored ~~gender non-binary~~ identities within the field of educational leadership.

Out of 26 articles, four were quantitative inquiries, one was a mixed-methods study, and the remaining majority of articles were qualitative in nature. Of these qualitative studies, about one-third used interviews, another third was categorized as case studies, and the remaining third relied on a variety of document analysis methods. Perhaps most of these studies are qualitative in nature because research with LGBTQIA+ communities often requires LGBTQIA+ individuals to be open regarding their gender and sexual identities; however, many of these individuals may not feel that the environment is safe and welcoming enough to be open in this way. In addition, the overall purpose for most of these studies was to highlight the individual experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals, rather than to tally, rank, or compare numerical data.

The sample of 26 articles showed equal representation among K-12 and higher education contexts, but many of the articles (just over half) highlighting LGBTQIA+ topics in a K-12 context were focused on secondary education, particularly within high school settings. Roughly a quarter of the articles in this sample addressed LGBTQIA+ topics in leadership preparation programs. Overall, a limited number of articles explored these topics in the context of elementary and middle school settings. Finally, only half of the reviewed articles focused, specifically, on the role educational leaders play in supporting LGBTQIA+ students; other articles considered the role of teachers, programs, or overall school culture and climate.

Although transgender identities and experiences receive limited attention within educational leadership discourses, the articles addressing broader topics of LGBTQIA+ identities and issues highlight the key role school leaders play in supporting diverse and/or historically marginalized students. Equity-oriented and inclusive school leaders are expected to proactively support all students, especially those individuals from historically marginalized populations, and “create spaces where all students feel safe and are free from victimization experiences” (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015, p. 108). The message is clear—school leaders are responsible for and have a vital role in addressing inequities faced by LGBTQIA+ students, including transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ students, within our educational institutions.

Curriculum Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics

The second part of this review documents the exploration of LGBTQIA+ topics within curriculum discourses, especially in comparison to educational leadership discourses. The following review includes articles published between January 2006 and July 2016 in four journals dedicated to curriculum studies. These four journals were selected based on criteria like those considered for the educational leadership journal search. Using the list generated by Thomson Reuters TM Journal Citation Reports®, Social Science Edition for 2015 in the category of Education and Education Research, curriculum-centered journals were ranked by 5-year impact factor. Additional curriculum journals were selected based on use in curriculum studies courses at this institution (as listed on course syllabi and in consideration of recommendations from professors with expertise in curriculum and instruction).

Like the previous review of literature, this review is organized by journal title and includes the following: *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, and the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*. Within these leading curriculum journals, 25 articles covered LGBTQIA+ topics, although a small number of these articles addressed transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ identities. Overall, a total of 25 articles met the criteria for inclusion in this review (see Table 2 for a list of journal titles, 5-year impact factors, and number of articles included in the review). In comparison to the review of LGBTQIA+ topics within the field of educational leadership, this review shows that curriculum studies discourses cover these topics more frequently than educational leadership discourses. With a total of 25 articles over the past ten years, spread out over only four journals, the representation of LGBTQIA+ topics in discourses about curriculum averages out to nearly three articles per year. The journal with the highest impact factor (*Journal of Curriculum Studies*) featured one article covering LGBTQIA+ topics and the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* (no impact factor) published the most articles featuring LGBTQIA+ issues and topics, with a total of 16 articles.

Table 2. Curriculum Journals: 5-Year Impact Factors and Number of Articles Included in Review		
<i>Title</i>	<i>5-Year Impact Factor</i>	<i>Number of Articles Included</i>
Journal of Curriculum Studies	1.238	1
Curriculum Inquiry	0.756	6
Journal of Curriculum Theorizing	No impact factor	2
Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy	No impact factor	15

Review of *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 1.238.

The only article featured in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* from January 2006 to July 2016 that covered LGBTQIA+ topics was published in 2015. Schmidt (2015) conducted a qualitative survey study with high school students to explore some of the ways educators might discuss issues of sexuality in curriculum. In this article, the author focuses on the role safe, student-friendly spaces play in promoting enhanced discussion about seemingly invisible topics (i.e., topics exploring sexuality and sexual orientation). Schmidt (2015) primarily uses the acronym LGBQ throughout the article and includes a footnote rationalizing the exclusion of the T (transgender), stating, “I focus on sexuality and do not always complicate it with gender identity” (p. 271). In other words, transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ identities are not discussed.

Review of *Curriculum Inquiry*, January 2006-July 2016, 5-year Impact Factor of 0.756.

Curriculum Inquiry published six articles covering LGBTQIA+ topics and issues in the past ten years. Although the search included articles published from January 2006 to July 2016, the first article addressing LGBTQIA+ issues was not published until 2011. In this piece, Diorio discusses the importance of using political theories in citizenship education activities to help students understand that there are political contests about participating as a citizen. Diorio (2011) uses the example of same-sex marriage debates in the United States as a political contest over who counts as a citizen and is treated both equally and justly. Gender identity is not explicitly addressed.

In 2013, four articles addressing LGBTQIA+ topics were published in *Curriculum Inquiry*. Three of those four articles were published in a special issue (issue 4) entitled *Queers of Color and Anti-Oppressive Knowledge Production*. The following paragraphs serve as a review of the special issue's articles; the introduction and conclusion are not included in the review, as these two shorter pieces do not cover significant or updated content beyond the three articles that serve as the core of the issue.

Roland Sintos Coloma (2013) talks about the problem of White, Global North-dominated queer research and uses the emergence of the first LGBT political party (LadLad), which is in the Philippines, as an example of LGBTQIA+ civic engagement for Queers of Color in the Global South. The author argues that queer individuals should use parrhesiastic pedagogy, or "truth-telling as a political and educational activity" (p. 503), to inform activism. Coloma (2013) specifically uses terms related to transgender identity and shares stories from two transgender candidates from the LadLad party. The article is, primarily, about using parrhesiastic pedagogy.

Marquez and Brockenbrough (2013) discuss two decades of California lawsuits that address anti-LGBTQIA+ bias in schools. Although these legal cases led to the development of policies and programs that supported LGBTQIA+ students in schools, Marquez and Brockenbrough (2013) argue that identities at the intersection of race and sexual orientation are often ignored. Using a "queer of color critique" frame, the authors argue for policies and practices that specifically address the needs of queer youth of color. The term *queer* is used to discuss LGBTQIA+ topics and although *transgender* is not used, the authors refer to *gender identity* and *gender expression* and share a case about a gender nonconforming student.

The third article published in this issue features an essay about proposing a radical curriculum for supporting LGBTQIA+ students of color. What Cruz (2013) proposes is a video poem curriculum in which students use visual narratives to present autobiographical poems related to their experiences as students of color (as either Latino or African American) with LGBTQIA+ identities. The author uses the acronym LGBTQ and discusses presentations made by transgender students. The overall focus is on using video poem tools to help students develop critical consciousness and engage in self-reflection activities.

Lee Airton (2013) makes a compelling argument for centering queerness, not individuals with queer identities, in our efforts to fight homophobia in schools. The author notes that public discourses about gender (including transgender identity) are less taboo than discourses about sexuality (and especially homosexual identity), when applied to children's lives and experiences. Airton (2013) argues that educators should focus on subtracting homophobic and heteronormative components of the curriculum, rather than simply adding LGBTQIA+ topics to the curriculum. Moving from a focus on suffering queer individuals requires a shift in school culture "toward decreasing the stress attending local, contextual norms of gender and sexuality" (p. 553). The author does not use any variation of the LGBTQIA+ acronym but refers to students who are *queer*, *gay*, and/or *transgender*.

Nearly three years later, Stiegler (2016) analyzed arguments set forth by activist groups that campaigned against statewide transgender rights laws in California. Using critical discourse and document analyses, Stiegler (2016) finds that the language these activist groups use to discuss the statutes protecting transgender individuals treats

transgender students as Other. The analysis also shows that transgender students are not included in the group's statements about ensuring privacy for all students. This article specifically addresses transgender identity; as Stiegler (2016) explains, "I use 'trans' in this paper as an umbrella term for both *transgender* and *gender non-conforming*" (p. 353).

Journals with No Impact Factor

The following section is a review of articles from two journals with no impact factor: the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* and the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*. Although neither of these journals are indexed in the Reuters™ Journal Citation Reports® from 2015, these titles are included in the review because they are relevant within the curriculum field (as determined by the aims and scope of the journal and recommendations from professors at this institution).

The *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* is an interdisciplinary journal that is dedicated to the topic of curriculum studies, published by The Foundation for Curriculum Theory, and associated with the Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice. The *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* is an international and interdisciplinary journal that is dedicated to the study of curriculum theory and publishes articles covering many topics, including articles that explore gendered and queer curriculum issues.

Review of *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, January 2006-July 2016, No Impact Factor.

Two articles featuring LGBTQIA+ topics were published in the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* between January 2006 and July 2016. Both articles were

published between 2012 and 2013, with no articles covering LGBTQIA+ topics published since 2013.

Nicole Ferry (2012) examines current mainstream gay and lesbian movements by analyzing historical outcomes and reviewing relevant literature. In problematizing some of the concepts underlying civil rights movements in the United States, Ferry (2012) argues that classroom curriculum is often “lacking in its examination of multidimensionality of equality and equal rights” (p. 104) and fails to provide opportunities for the examination of struggles, failures, and compromises associated with these movements. The author provides examples of analytic tools that can be used by instructors to construct curriculum that is centered on notions of equality and equal rights. Although Ferry (2012) shares statistics about the lives of LGBTQIA+ in general, the article is primarily focused on gay and lesbian identities in the United States.

A year later, Clawson (2013) provided an analysis of the Gay Liberation Movement of the early 1970s in the southern region of the United States. The author describes the Gay Liberation Movement as an educational tool and ties the significance of this movement to understanding how curriculum and pedagogy is vital to the liberation struggles of LGBTQIA+ individuals. For example, members of the Gay Liberation Front (an advocacy group established in the seventies) educated straight people about gay experiences and issues. The author does not discuss transgender identities and experiences.

Review of the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, January 2006-July 2016, No Impact Factor.

The *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* published the largest number of articles covering LGBTQIA+ topics from January 2006 to July 2016, with a total of 16 articles. It is interesting to note that only one article was published in 2006 and the remaining 15 pieces were published in the second issue for 2007.

In 2006, Gosse shares a chapter from the first novel to be designated as gay, literary fiction in Newfoundland. The author uses this coming-of-age novel, *Jackytar*, as an example of arts-based educational research that acts as a bridge between academic communities and the larger public sphere. Gosse (2006) offers a queer reading that speaks to “examining what knowledge is being accepted as ‘natural,’ ‘normal,’ ‘good,’” (p. 10). Gosse (2006) primarily uses the term *queer*, but briefly and specifically connects *queer* to the LGBT acronym.

A total of 15 articles, all perspective pieces, were published in the second issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* in 2007. MacGillivray and Whitlock (2007) introduce the perspectives section by stating that all authors were asked to answer the following question: “What recent developments have you seen in the curriculum and pedagogy of schools and/or universities on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning (GLBTIQ) issues, queer theory courses, and gay-straight alliances?” (p. 19).

Monnin (2007) shares her own experiences as a lesbian teacher. She talks about being forced to resign from her first teaching position at a Catholic school for being perceived as gay; the administration thought her homosexuality was harmful to the

children. She talks about a moment when a colleague suggested she hide her gay identity while applying for university-level jobs. The author concludes by reiterating the importance of building bridges between gay educators and straight, supportive allies.

Three articles published in this 2007 issue feature discourses about Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). Mussman (2007) tells a personal story about starting a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in high school and then joining a GSA in college. The author compares current GSA curriculum to the curriculum he used in high school. Whereas the high school GSA was solely an educational organization, many contemporary GSAs have a strong social component and current curriculum broaches more topics related to transgender identities and experiences. Mussman (2007) concludes by stating that GSAs create open and supportive learning environments for all students and recommends encouraging more people to become involved in GSAs, including straight allies.

In another essay, Conway and Crawford-Fisher (2007) argue that federal and state legislation and programs that developed in response to the American Civil Rights Movements did little to protect and serve students with LGBTQIA+ identities. The authors explain that, although some school districts have nondiscrimination policies that protect all students (including LGBTQIA+ students), “many districts fall short to foster their psychological, social, and emotional development” (p. 125). Conway and Crawford-Fisher (2007) make the following suggestions: use critical feminism, queer theory, and critical humanism to inform discussions with students and provide professional development opportunities aimed at helping school personnel confront their biases and world views. These authors use the acronym LGBTQ and refer to both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression in this essay.

Macintosh (2007) traces the development of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in North America, stating that proponents used to spend most of their time fighting for the mere existence of these organizations and that, now, GSAs are primarily focused on supporting and celebrating students with LGBTQIA+ identities. Macintosh (2007) argues that the responsibility to teach about LGBTQIA+ identities in schools has fallen on students and that “teacher candidates are not given enough repeated exposure to methods and discussions dealing with homophobia and heteronormativity across courses and subject areas” (p. 133). She suggests providing professional development sessions for preservice and in-service teachers that allows educators an opportunity to think about their own roles in promoting ideologies about normalcy. Although she uses the acronym LGBTQ throughout this essay, Macintosh (2007) primarily refers to students with marginalized sexual orientations.

Seven perspectives pieces published in the second 2007 issue of *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* cover LGBTQIA+ topics in the context of higher education. In one of these pieces, the authors describe the development of and outcomes achieved by one university organization in Australia. The organization, Queer Allies Network, consists of faculty and staff from the Department of Education who are interested in participating in monthly training sessions aimed at supporting gender and sexual diversity on campus. Curran, et al. (2007) lay out how the organization responded to a homophobic vandalism incident (i.e., filing an incident report, removing the vandalism, sending a letter showing support for LGBTQIA+ students to all members of the campus community, and providing additional training sessions not only for faculty and staff but also for students). The authors use the acronym GLBTI to refer to the broader community

of individuals with diverse gender and/or diverse sexuality identities.

Joyce (2007) discusses the problem of minimal representation of LGBTQIA+ issues within college courses and ties this minimal representation to a reluctance on the part of faculty, staff, and students to discuss LGBTQIA+ topics they consider to be private, rather than public conversations. The author points to the emergence of LGBTQIA+-related topics in the public realm of media and argues that such conversations should occur in the public sphere because many LGBTQIA+ individuals face elevated levels of harassment and discrimination, specifically within educational institutions. Joyce (2007) states that changing attitudes, increased activism among both students and faculty, and increased availability of information work to close the gap between private conversations and those deemed appropriate for public arenas. Although the acronym LGBT is used throughout this piece, the author refers, primarily, to sexual orientation and does not mention gender identity.

In *Emergences of Queer Studies in the Academy*, Talburt (2007) theorizes the emergence of queer studies in higher education settings and notes that the field of queer studies is both part of and apart from LGBT studies. The author states that queer topics have become increasingly visible within the curriculum of colleges and universities in the United States (i.e., there are more courses, minors, and majors related to queer topics of study). Although Talburt (2007) discusses LGBT studies, gender identity (including transgender identity) is not part of the conversation.

Stewart (2007) calls for a queer and radical approach to higher education that continues to expand and grow while remaining both flexible and inclusive. He notes the growth of queer faculty and queer topics of study in the context of higher education in the

United States since the 1990s, citing examples of additional courses, certifications, minors, and degrees related to sexual identity, sexual orientation, LGBT history, and queer theory. Stewart (2007) argues that, despite the increased representation of queer topics in higher education, scholars must continue to work toward developing queer curricula and pedagogies. Specific identities related to gender or sexuality are not discussed.

After discussing the progress made (both at the societal level and in the context of higher education) for LGBTQIA+ individuals in the United States, Misawa (2007) states that educators need to “create a space for discourses on the intersection of race and sexual orientation” (p. 81). This essay is primarily about using an intersectionality framework when developing LGBTQIA+-related programs and organizations on college campuses. Misawa (2007) argues that, within programs and organizations dedicated to LGBTQIA+ topics and issues, sexual orientation is the primary focus and LGBTQIA+ people of color are not adequately represented. The author refers to the broad LGBTQ community and only uses the term *transgender* when listing the identity categories included within this acronym.

Khayatt (2007) traces her pedagogical perspectives on teaching about sexuality in university settings over the course of thirty years. In the 1980s, gay and lesbian identities were virtually invisible in educational institutions and Khayatt (2007) exercised extreme caution about sharing her own identity as a lesbian educator. During the 1990s, she began using stories that featured LGBTQIA+ characters in curriculum and, when faced with some of her students’ discomfort with these identities, explained that the story was the focus; the characters just happened to be gay or lesbian. It was during this time that

Khayatt (2007) realized that sexual categories should be “located in space and time, historically and geographically, because they do not always make sense in the same way in different cultures” (p. 27). The author uses the acronym GLBTIQ and terms like *sexuality*, *sexual orientation*, *gay*, and *lesbian* but does not refer to diverse gender identities.

In the essay, *Teaching Gender and Sexual Diversity*, Slattery (2007) outlines his approach to teaching both undergraduate and graduate students about gender and sexual diversity at a large university in Texas. The author explains that his lectures are informed by three major texts and are divided into two parts—Gender and Human Sexuality. During lectures about gender, Slattery (2007) discusses biological sex, gender identity/sexual identity, and gender roles; during the human sexuality lectures, he covers the following topics: sexuality, sexual behavior, and sexual orientation. The author refers to and defines several LGBTQIA+ identities, including gender diverse identities (e.g., transgender).

Two perspectives pieces published in the second 2007 issue of *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* address LGBTQIA+ topics in the context of K-12 schools. McCready (2007) calls for the development of a framework for queer urban education that takes into consideration the social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics that affect LGBTQIA+ students’ lives. In other words, “curriculum and pedagogy for LGBTQI youth that is grounded in their everyday lived experience in the city” (p. 76) is needed in urban, K-12 schools. McCready (2007) suggests that urban educators use: an intersectionality framework to theorize identity, anti-homophobia education strategies, and performed ethnography as a tool for exploring the complexity of LGBTQIA+ identity

in urban arenas. The author refers to the acronym LGBTQI and only refers to transgender identity when listing the identities that fall under the LGBTQI umbrella.

In *Excuse Me, Sir?!: Gender Queer Pedagogy in our Schools*, Dominique Johnson (2007) argues for the development of “pedagogical frameworks that consider gender beyond a binary” (p. 88) in both schools and universities. The author cites several examples of how school districts have intervened in efforts toward inclusive curriculum for LGBTQIA+ students and states that gendered clothing requirements are often used as a form of social control within educational institutions. Overall, Johnson (2007) suggests using a gender queer pedagogy that questions the conflation of gender with sex and sexuality, recognizes the experiences of gender nonconforming students in schools, and challenges dress codes that limit gender expression. This piece addresses transgender identities and, specifically, ~~gender non-binary~~ identities in schools. The author uses several terms related to ~~gender non-binary~~ identity, including *genderqueer* and *gender non-conforming*.

In the final essay published in the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* from January 2006 to July 2016, Mayo (2007b) urges researchers to use an intersectionality framework to theorize LGBTQIA+ identities in educational contexts. The author points to a lack of research with queer youth of color and reminds readers that queer identity within racialized communities takes a different shape than queer identity without the consideration of race. Mayo (2007b) suggests focusing on intersectionality because such a framework “not only opens our research to more possibilities, it also reminds us that we cannot centralize queerness without focusing on race, gender, ethnicity, age, and a whole array of other aspects of identity” (p. 71). The author uses the acronym LGBTQI and

refers specifically to an individual with a transgender identity.

Curriculum Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics: Themes

Like the themes in the review of LGBTQIA+ topics in educational leadership discourses, the themes across the 25 articles included in this review of curriculum discourses and LGBTQIA+ topics are related to “what is there” (Boote & Beile, 2005, 2006) and “what is missing.” In this sample of 25, how many articles feature conversations about gender diversity? Do curriculum-focused authors present gender identity as qualitatively different from sexual orientation or are mentions of gender diverse identities simply included as part of the larger LGBTQIA+ umbrella topic? The articles included in this review are sorted into three major themes related to the coverage of gender diverse topics: A Glimpse, A Mild Presence, and A Fuller Presence.

A Glimpse

A small number of the articles (4 of 25) included in this review are categorized as “a glimpse” into the topic of gender diversity. The authors of these articles did not use any variation of the LGBTQIA+ acronym; they either referred broadly to marginalized sexual and gender identities using terms like *queer* or remained focused on gay and lesbian topics. For example, Clawson (2013) analyzed the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1970s and talked about the importance of gay communities educating straight communities. In a piece published in the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, Monnin (2007) shared her experiences as a lesbian educator. These articles are classified as “a glimpse” into gender diversity because, although gender diversity is not discussed, some authors refer to queer curricula and pedagogies (which includes gender diverse identities and experiences).

A Mild Presence

A large majority (13 of 25) of the articles included in this review are categorized as a “mild presence” of gender diversity topics. The authors used variations of the LGBTQIA+ acronym and most featured an expanded definition of the acronym that included at least brief mentions of a *transgender* identity (the T in LGBTQIA+). Eleven of these articles included some variation of the acronym and briefly defined the acronym’s letters (including the term *transgender*) but most discussions were focused on sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual) and not gender identity/expression. For example, in tracing the development of Gay-Straight Alliances in North America, Macintosh (2007) focused on the needs of students with marginalized sexual orientations. Curran and others (2007) described how one university responded to homophobic vandalism; throughout the piece, they used a broad acronym to refer to all individuals with marginalized identities related to sexual orientation and gender.

Two (of 13) articles featured variations of the LGBTQIA+ acronym, defined the acronym’s letters, and remained focused on sexual orientation topics; however, the authors included additional information related to gender diversity. For example, in describing the difference between Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in high schools and in universities, Mussman (2007) explained that GSAs in higher education contexts covered content related to transgender identities and experiences. In a piece published by the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Schmidt (2015) included a footnote explaining why transgender students were not included in the qualitative survey study (the focus was on sexuality). The topic of gender diversity has a “mild presence” in these 13 articles in that authors briefly mention (and define) gender diverse terms (such as *transgender*) and

show that gender diverse identities are essential elements of conversations about LGBTQIA+ topics in the field of curriculum studies.

A Fuller Presence

Eight (of 25) articles included in this review of LGBTQIA+ topics in curriculum discourses addressed gender diverse topics with a “fuller presence.” Some of these articles featured stories about transgender, ~~gender non-binary~~, and gender nonconforming individuals. In one essay, Slattery (2007) outlined his approach to teaching college students about gender and sexual diversity and defined several gender diverse identities (including transgender). In 2016, Stiegler wrote an article in which he used the term *trans* to refer to both *transgender* and *gender nonconforming* individuals. The topic of gender diversity has a “fuller presence” in these eight articles because multiple gender identities are highlighted and defined and most of these authors make gender diverse experiences and identities the primary focus of the curriculum discourse.

Curriculum Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics: A Summary

This review of literature addressing LGBTQIA+ topics in the field of curriculum studies shows that these topics are more frequently discussed within curriculum discourses than within educational leadership discourses. Although only four journal titles were included in the sample, 25 articles addressed LGBTQIA+ topics and issues. It is important to note that a substantial portion of this sample (15 of 25 articles) were in one 2007 special issue. Excluding this special issue, one could argue the need for additional research related to LGBTQIA+ issues and concerns in the field of curriculum studies. In consideration of the full sample of articles, though, additional research related to transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ identity is still needed.

Many of the articles included in this review (roughly three quarters of the sample) use variations of the acronym to refer to diverse gender and sex identities and most authors list out the identity categories included under the acronym. A large majority of the articles (close to three-quarters of the sample) included discussions of sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexuality, whereas only a third referred to gender identity, gender expression, and/or transgender identity. Three articles specifically addressed ~~gender non-binary~~ or gender nonconforming identities in educational contexts.

All 25 articles are qualitative inquiries using the following methods: 20 essays, one case study, one survey, one literature review, and two articles featuring document analysis methods. As noted in the summary of the review of LGBTQIA+ topics in educational leadership discourses, inquiries with LGBTQIA+ communities are primarily qualitative for the following reasons: oftentimes, studies may require that an LGBTQIA+ individual is open about their identity; and many studies are focused on highlighting individual experiences and perspectives. Additionally, curriculum scholars typically investigate relationships between curriculum theory and practice and curriculum studies are often interdisciplinary, incorporating philosophical and sociological ideas and theories. Naturally, such investigations tend to be qualitative.

The sample of 25 articles showed equal representation among three contexts: K-12, higher education, and K-20 and/or broad educational research. Specifically, about a third of the sample addressed K-12 settings, a third focused on higher education contexts, and a third referred to either the broad field of educational research and/or K-20 educational settings. Many of the articles (just over half) addressing LGBTQIA+ topics in K-12 settings centered on secondary institutions and high schools. LGBTQIA+ topics

in the context of elementary and middle school were minimally explored.

Like the review of LGBTQIA+ topics within educational leadership discourses, most of the articles included in this review of LGBTQIA+ topics in curriculum discourses shows that transgender identities and experiences receive limited attention, especially when compared to the articles that feature conversations around sexual orientation and sexuality. Although transgender identities and experiences receive limited attention within these discourses, the field of curriculum studies appears to include more conversations specific to transgender (including ~~gender non-binary~~ and gender nonconforming) identities and experiences.

Summary

This review of LGBTQIA+ topics and issues within the fields of educational leadership and curriculum studies demonstrates that these topics are minimally represented in the literature. This finding mirrors the results of other studies documenting the minimum representation of LGBTQIA+ topics and issues in educational contexts (Beck, 2014; Capper & O'Malley, 2013; Lugg, 2003; O'Malley & Capper, 2015). Although over half of the literature sample included mentions the LGBTQIA+ acronym, most of these articles only briefly mentioned LGBTQIA+ identities in a long list of identity categories.

In addition, when LGBTQIA+ topics *were* addressed, gender identities and expressions (and especially transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ identities) were underrepresented within the broader LGBTQIA+ category. For example, only about one-third of the literature sample mentioned gender identity and significantly less than a third of these articles addressed gender diverse and transgender identities and experiences.

Again, gender diverse identities were predominantly either briefly mentioned in a long list of identity categories or excluded from the conversation altogether. This finding aligns with the work of other scholars who documented that topics related to transgender identities are typically (and briefly) listed as part of the larger LGBTQIA+ acronym (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Minter, 2000; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). As noted by several researchers (Greytak, et al., 2013; Taylor, 2007), students with diverse gender identities have qualitatively unique needs than students with marginalized sexual identities. When topics related to gender diversity are predominantly addressed within the larger LGBTQIA+ group, and not as a standalone topic within educational research discourses, it is arguable that it becomes increasingly difficult to meet the needs of gender diverse individuals in educational contexts. If we are unaware of these students and their unique needs, we may lack awareness of the need to work toward more gender inclusive learning environments.

Considering this minimal representation and in light of studies showing that transgender individuals face high levels of harassment and discrimination within public schools in the United States, viewing transgender students' experiences of school through the lens of Derridean deconstruction highlights important issues and topics related to gender identity and expression in education. Overall, the review is comprised of articles that include several suggestions and conclusions: individuals' experiences of school matter; educational leaders have direct responsibility in supporting all students, including those with LGBTQIA+ identities; in striving to meet the needs of diverse students, educators should view student identity and experiences through the lens of intersectionality; and there is still much work to be accomplished in our efforts to

adequately support LGBTQIA+ (and especially transgender) individuals.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This basic qualitative research project is grounded in the interpretivist approach of poststructural hermeneutics (Slattery, Krasny, & O'Malley, 2007) and, as such, is guided by the notion that “all interpretations are contingent, emerging, and relative” (p. 548). Individual interviews served as the primary method of data collection and a subsequent focus group interview with selected participants (from the individual interviews) was the secondary method of data collection. A third and supplementary method of data collection included ongoing reflective entries in a researcher journal. In other words, Phase I of data collection involved conducting individual interviews, the focus group interview served as Phase II data, and the researcher journal was a supplementary and continuous dataset.

These data were collected to answer three research questions developed in light of the extensive review of literature exploring Derridean deconstruction, gender, and LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, etc.) topics within the fields of educational leadership and curriculum studies. The primary (Phase I) research questions guiding this inquiry were as follows: What are the retrospective accounts of ~~gender non-binary~~ adults' experiences in K-12 educational institutions; and how might these experiences serve as deconstruction events, making visible the excess of discursive structures and material practices that reinforce binary gender within these institutions? The secondary (Phase II) research question was: How might we take up these student perspectives and experiences to inform gender inclusive professional development for educators?

The primary research questions directly address the problem of minimal representation of LGBTQIA+ topics in educational leadership discourses as educational experiences specific to ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals (an identity included within the T of the LGBTQIA+ acronym) are highlighted as important topics worthy of consideration within these discourses. The secondary research question addresses two problems: LGBTQIA+ individuals in the U.S. have negative experiences of school; and the documented need for using student voice to inform school improvement initiatives. Data collected during individual and focus group interviews with ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals (student voice) was used to begin building a framework of professional development focused on improving school conditions related to gender (negative school climate) for all students, including ~~gender non-binary~~ students.

Qualitative Inquiry

Because the primary purpose of this project is to understand the retrospective accounts of ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' experiences in K-12 schools, a qualitative design is appropriate. Key features of qualitative research include: researcher as instrument, findings as inductively derived in the form of themes, purposeful sample selection, and a flexible design (Merriam, 2009). With this study, I am the researcher serving as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in that I will conduct and analyze all interviews. The qualitative research process is also *inductive*, meaning that data is collected to build concepts or theories, rather than to deductively evaluate a previously-formed hypothesis (Merriam, 2009). According to Patton (2002), inductively analyzing data also involves discovering themes; the findings from this study are organized by theme headings.

With qualitative inquiries, participants are purposefully selected based on predetermined criteria and in consideration of the extent of knowledge and experiences a participant brings to the study (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). All eight participants were purposefully selected for both phases (Phase I and Phase II) of data collection (see **Participants** section). Finally, qualitative designs are flexible in that methods and tools are easily adapted in light of new information. With this flexibility in mind, individual interviews were semi-structured with broad, open-ended questions and the focus group interview was loosely structured to allow for robust generation of ideas and strategies among the group.

This qualitative dissertation project is categorized as basic research because it is “motivated by intellectual interest in a phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 3) and aims to extend knowledge about the phenomenon (i.e., gendered educational experiences). During Phase II, the focus moves to developing strategies for improving practice; in this way, Phase II is a form of applied research, with the goal of addressing “a specific problem within a specific setting” (Merriam, 2009, p. 4). Participants were directly involved in this phase of the research process, which aims to produce practical solutions for enacting social change.

Large-scale quantitative and mixed-methods studies may present valuable information, such as findings showing that ~~gender non-binary~~ students experience discrimination and harassment in U.S. schools either often or very often (e.g., Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016), but qualitative interview studies, such as this one, help researchers consider the subjective experiences of individuals and uncover specific practices and structures that are not inclusive of these gender diverse students.

Theoretical Perspectives

The broad theoretical perspective guiding this inquiry is interpretivism, a perspective rooted in the epistemological influences of subjectivism. With a philosophical grounding in subjectivism, “meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). In short, subjectivism is a theory of knowledge centered on the view that there are no absolute truths (truth with a capital T) and that truth(s) is relative to the subjectivity of individuals (Palmer, 2010). Interpretivism only serves as a *broad* theoretical perspective for this study in that the interpretivist paradigm (and its subset of phenomenology) is a general frame for all qualitative work. The core paradigm guiding this study, however, is poststructuralism (a form of interpretivist work) and, specifically, poststructural hermeneutics (Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2007).

Within a poststructural perspective (see **A Poststructural Theoretical Framework** for a more robust discussion), elements of a research project are designed based on the view that multiple realities and truth(s) exist and we should put forth deliberate effort in seeking to understand subjective experiences (Crotty, 1998). Because poststructural theory involves recognizing multiple realities as situated in political, social, cultural, and historical contexts, this poststructural project is built on the underlying assumption that K-12 schools in the U.S. are structured (discursively and materially) in a way that privileges binary gender identity over non-binary gender-identity. Poststructural methods of inquiry are an appropriate response to this assumption as poststructuralism involves continuously challenging the stability of binary oppositions (including concepts of binary gender categories, such as girl/boy or woman/man) and opening our structures

and practices to scrutiny (Crotty, 1998; St. Pierre, 2000).

Phenomenology, one of three major subsets of interpretivism, is a perspective centered on understanding “people’s conscious experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25) of their everyday lives, their lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990), in relation to a phenomenon of interest. This project is influenced by elements of phenomenology in the sense that “all of qualitative research draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). Prior to designing this dissertation study, for example, I reflected on the phenomenon of gendered educational experiences to bracket my own biases and assumptions (see blocked paragraph excerpts from personal reflections on pp. 5-10).

As noted above, phenomenology is but one subset of interpretivism; the other major subsets include symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics (Crotty, 1998). Whereas symbolic interactionism is about highlighting broad cultural understandings (Crotty, 1998), hermeneutics is described as “the art of interpretation” (Howard, 1982). This dissertation project is guided by the theoretical perspective of poststructural hermeneutics (Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2007). Before describing the basic tenets of a poststructural approach to hermeneutics, it is helpful to connect the broad theoretical perspectives included in this section using visual metaphor.

In efforts to understand the concept and location of poststructural hermeneutics, it is helpful to visualize the broad theoretical perspective of interpretivism (a general frame for all qualitative work) as a porous umbrella. Interpretivism is symbolized as an umbrella because this theoretical frame includes categorical subsets (i.e., phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and hermeneutics). And why must the

umbrella symbol be porous? This is to let the rain drip through the umbrella's surface, to permeate both the umbrella category and the sub-categories. The rain in this visual metaphor is representative of the poststructural perspective. The core poststructural paradigm, then, influences a core dimension of interpretivism—hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics (the art of interpretation) is about focusing on interpretation and context (Patton, 2002); it is about reading (and interpreting) texts (defined broadly, beyond the written word) with the purpose of developing a deeper understanding. The creative act of engaging in interpretation to increase understanding is heavily influenced by the language we use and the ways in which we word our worlds (St. Pierre, 2000). Crotty (1998) points to the significant role language plays in the interpretive process—

This outcome [of increased understanding] squares with the centrality of language in any concept of human being. We are essentially languaged beings. Language is pivotal to, and shapes, the situations in which we find ourselves enmeshed, the events that befall us, the practices we carry out and, in and through all this, the understandings we are able to reach. (p. 82)

With Crotty's (1998) description, we see that our subjective realities are often constituted by language. This is not to say that the process of interpreting our realities is accomplished in isolation. Hermeneutics is an act of sharing meaning between people, with a focus on inter-subjectivity, which "calls attention to existence as a shared event as the process of living unfolds in a unique and unrepeatable sequence" (Slattery, et al., 2007).

Poststructural Hermeneutics. Poststructural hermeneutics is essentially the art of interpretation as influenced by poststructural theories. In a review of six traditional approaches to hermeneutics, Slattery, Krasny, and O’Malley (2007) describe poststructural hermeneutics as an “endless process of critique and deconstruction” (p. 548), an interpretive process that involves: playing with words and pushing the boundaries of language, interrogating traditional concepts (such as identity), and showing that all interpretations are “contingent, emergent, and incomplete” (p. 548). With poststructural hermeneutics, then, the goal of interpretation is not the discovery of truth; the goal is to show that our interpretations are always incomplete. If, in fact, our interpretations are always incomplete, there is a need to keep concepts and structures open and flexible. Poststructural hermeneutics is an appropriate perspective for this project because several components of the study (i.e., selecting a sample of ~~gender non-binary~~ participants, using Derridean deconstruction as a form of interpretive analysis, and developing a framework for gender inclusive professional development) involve questioning the rigid structures of binary gender categories and pushing the boundaries of language.

In recognition that our interpretations are always imperfect and incomplete (Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2007), this study takes up a philosophical technique—*sous rature*—to expose the weak relationship between the words we use and the concepts they represent. Jacques Derrida (1967/1976) used this philosophical technique of *sous rature* (or “under erasure”), striking through a written word while making sure the word was still legible, to show that we can simultaneously use and trouble terms. In this project, the term *gender non-binary* is used “under erasure” (indicated by the visual cue

of a strikethrough in the title), showing that the term may be useful (especially as a teaching tool) but the concept must be kept open and flexible—which is the goal of poststructural interpretations (see **Poststructural Hermeneutics** in above section).

As outlined in the previous chapter (see **Derridean Deconstruction**), this study is also informed by Derridean deconstruction, a poststructural concept that allows for highlighting the *presence of difference* as always already there, whether this presence is explicitly acknowledged by others. Whereas the first stage of data analysis (Phase I) began with an inductive process, the second stage of analysis (also Phase I) involves reading data under the influence of poststructuralism and, specifically, thinking through individual interview data with Derrida and deconstruction in mind. These processes are further explained in the **Data Analysis** section.

Participants

When conducting a basic qualitative study, participants must be carefully and purposefully selected based on specific criteria (Merriam, 2009). For this project, eight participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria: understand their current gender identity as non-binary (or similar terminology describing a non-binary gender identity), located in Central Texas, and adults (after K-12 schooling) who were interested in sharing retrospective narratives about their gendered experiences in K-12 schools. These individuals' perspectives serve as the primary data throughout all phases of the project.

An important distinction should be made here regarding the participants' gender identities and expressions. To be selected for participation in this study, participants should currently have a ~~gender non-binary~~ identity, but may or may not actively express

or articulate their ~~gender non-binary~~ identity. As defined in Chapter one, gender identity refers to the deeply felt, inherent sense of self (American Psychological Association, 2015) and gender expression is about how individuals “dress, walk, talk, accessorize, etc.” (Meyer & Pullen Sansfaçon, 2014). In short, selected participants may understand themselves as ~~gender non-binary~~ but may or may not express themselves in ways that communicate a non-binary gender identity to others. Participants with current ~~gender non-binary~~ identities were selected for participation, whether they understood and/or expressed their gender identities as non-binary while attending K-12 educational institutions. The individual interview guide includes inquiries into each participant’s process of coming to their current gender identity (as non-binary) and these narratives are presented in chapter four.

The study participants were recruited, primarily, through members of a student organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ students and their allies. The specific types of purposeful sampling used were convenience sampling and snowball/chain/network sampling (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Convenience sampling involves purposefully selecting participants based on availability and location. Recruiting participants using snowball, chain, or network sampling means, “locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria” (Merriam, 2009, p. 79) for participation and then asking these individuals for a reference to other potential participants. The following techniques were used to recruit participants: face-to-face, word-of-mouth, and correspondence through a social media site’s page for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals and their allies.

According to Patton (2002), qualitative sample sizes vary in relation to what researchers want to know (research questions) and what can be accomplished during a study (research timeline). Eight participants were selected to highlight a variety of ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' perspectives and for the purposes of generating ideas and strategies (during the focus group interview) based on these individuals' diverse experiences.

When forming focus groups, Merriam (2009) recommends purposefully selecting between six and ten participants, whereas Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007) suggest recruiting between eight and twelve individuals. For this project, the seven of the eight participants (from individual interviews) were recruited for the focus group interview.

As noted in a previous section (see **Participants** on page 123), although participants were asked to volunteer based on understanding themselves as having a ~~gender non-binary~~ identity, these individuals were not required to be open to the public about their ~~gender non-binary~~ identity to participate in this study. For the purposes of the individual, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, participants discussed gender identity status in a confidential and secluded setting. In the context of focus group interviews, the seven participants were invited to participate in the focus group and were informed that sharing gender identity status with the larger group was not necessary considering the purpose—to offer suggestions to K-12 schools related to promoting gender diversity and gender inclusion. It was explained to participants that the group may include both individuals with binary gender identities and non-binary gender identities that volunteered to participate in the problem-solving session. The goal during the focus group activity (Phase II) was not to explore personal identity and experiences, but to

generate ideas for adapting the structures and practices of schooling.

One of the limitations of this purposeful sampling is that findings are based on the perspectives and experiences of those individuals who have volunteered to participate and are either interested in the topic and/or overall purpose of the project. This limitation is addressed further in a discussion about the model of gender inclusive professional development generated by this project (see Chapter V) because the intended users of this proposed model will be educators with diverse gender identities (both non-binary and binary) and with varied background knowledge related to the topic. For example, the professional development model requires adding an exploration of common terms (used by ~~gender non-binary~~ participants) at the front end of each professional development session. On the other hand, selecting participants that are interested in the topic and purpose of this project is valuable in that these participants were more likely to have some background knowledge related to gender diverse perspectives and experiences, which means they were more likely to actively participate in the conversation (during interview sessions).

Researcher Role

Several scholars have explored researcher positionality as a component of conducting ethical qualitative research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Macdonald, 2013). Whereas insider positionality means the researcher is a member of the population involved in the study, outsider researchers do not have group membership. Some of the benefits attributed to insider positionality are that researchers are quickly and/or completely accepted by participants and that participants are more likely to be trusting and open with the researcher. One of the risks associated with insider status is that

participants might assume the researcher has a similar experience or perspective and, therefore, may not share as many details about their individual experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

After weighing the risks and benefits of dichotomous insider/outsider researcher positionalities, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest taking a dialectical approach in which researchers operate in a third space (e.g., the space between insider versus outsider) and appreciate the “fluidity and multilayered complexity of human experience” (p. 60). In this way, the dialectical approach is rooted in poststructuralism (Crotty, 1998)—challenging the idea that only two possible researcher positionalities (insider or outsider) exist. Because they play an intimate role during all phases of research, taking a dialectical approach means that researchers deliberately engage in reflection about their biases and assumptions. Although it is not possible to take a completely neutral position, reflection leads to a heightened awareness of positionality.

As the sole researcher conducting this inquiry, I do not identify as a member of the ~~gender non-binary~~ community, which means I lack an insider’s perspective—first-hand knowledge of ~~gender non-binary~~ experiences. Although I understand feeling frustrated about the prominent and rigid stereotypical ideas about how gender should be performed, particularly in school settings, I do not have the experience of interacting in these environments as a ~~gender non-binary~~ person. As an ally and an active member of an organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ students and their allies, I have opportunities to position myself in that third space, somewhere between being an insider and being an outsider. Attempting to conduct inquiries within a third space, however, requires much work on the part of the researcher. Even when working alongside ~~gender~~

~~non-binary~~ colleagues (i.e., co-facilitating allies trainings and workshops), I must deliberately and continuously reflect on my positionality in relation to the topic.

MacDonald (2013) offers several suggestions for conducting ethical qualitative research with gender diverse communities, explaining that “marginalized communities often have rather loaded relationships with academic research, especially if the researchers do not live in those marginalized communities themselves” (p. 137). Conducting ethical qualitative research means that participants must have authority over their own identities, experiences, and words throughout all stages of the research process. Researchers must also take care not to essentialize gender diverse experiences as the “communities we live in contain a much wider range of [sic] experiences than are currently reflected in scholarly work” (MacDonald, 2013, p. 147). Everyone’s subjective perspectives and experiences must be carefully considered and honored. I honored my participant’s perspectives and experiences through preserving (and not adapting) the terminology used during interviews and through conducting ongoing member checks.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and data chunks selected for analysis preserved the specific words and phrases participants used during interview sessions; I did not adapt or edit participant terminology and phrasing. The themes and associated participant quotes discovered during the analysis stage were sent to participants for the purposes of member checking. For example, as I synthesized data and wrote narratives about participants, I sent drafts to each participant for the purposes of approval and/or clarification. As participants returned these drafts (with their comments), I ensured that all comments and suggestions were addressed in the final draft. This member checking activity gave participants a chance to “clarify what they had meant in

their interview responses” and to “look at and comment on the researcher’s analysis of the data that they have played a part in generating” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 701).

Researchers who are not members of the community must: deliberately engage in critical reflection about researcher role, take care to honor participants’ words, and use member checking to ensure the accuracy of findings. With the goal of building gender inclusive professional development for educators, this study’s focus moves from individual experiences to system level structures and practices connected to those experiences. The point is to learn from participants and their experiences to gain insight and adapt some of the structures and practices of K-12 school systems.

Data Collection

This study involves two distinct phases of data collection (Phase I and Phase II) that rely on interviewing as the method of data collection and, as noted in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, the primary method was individual semi-structured interviews with eight participants and a focus group interview with seven (of the eight) participants served as the secondary method of collecting data. For both phases of data collection, informed consent was obtained for all participants in which the purpose, risks and benefits, and the participant's' right to privacy and protection from harm were explained (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 715).

In recognition that neither the research nor the researcher can be completely neutral, the interview tool serves as a negotiated text (Fontana & Frey, 2005) in which relational, interactional engagements lead to contextually based results. Although the interviewer may engage in continuous self-reflection and attempt to bracket assumptions and biases related to the topic of study, every researcher carries some unavoidable

motives and feelings throughout the process. In short, the interview is not a neutral methodological tool; it is more akin to a mutual storytelling event “in which persons divulge life accounts in response to interview inquiries” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 699). Recognizing the interview as relational, interactional, and negotiated text led to the decision to use semi-structured interviews that allow for greater flexibility during interviewing sessions.

Phase I

During Phase I, primary data was collected in the form of individual, semi-structured interviews with eight adult participants. Each interview session began with the same prompt, lasted no more than an hour, and was audio recorded and transcribed.

According to Merriam (2009), semi-structured interviews are:

...guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic (p. 90).

After eliciting demographic information (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, pronouns, preferred pseudonym), each participant was encouraged to share retrospective stories about their gender-related experiences in K-12 schools. I was particularly interested in hearing stories about their presence during school activities/events that were organized around binary gender categories. The interview guide included the following open-ended questions:

1. What was the process of coming to your current gender identity like?
2. What can you tell me about your gender identity throughout your K-12 educational experiences?
3. Tell me about some of your experiences in school related to gender.

- a. What are some examples of conversations about gender that happened in your school?
4. How did these school experiences related to gender affect your relationship to school?
 - a. Tell me about your sense of safety and of belonging in school.
5. Think of a time in elementary, middle, or high school when you were involved in activities or events that were organized around binary gender categories of boy/girl. Describe the situation. In what ways did you participate or not participate? What was your response at the time? How do you feel about this experience now?
6. What is one thing you would like to say back to your schools about these gendered experiences?

Although an interview guide was created and used during individual interviews (including the six questions outlined above), questions were used flexibly and in no predetermined order. As the researcher guiding the interview, I remained sensitive to the individual participant's conversational style and preferred terminology. For example, a question might be rephrased in consideration of the words or phrases a participant uses; As Patton (2002) explains,

using words that make sense to the interviewee, words that reflect the respondent's worldview, will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview. Without sensitivity to the impact of particular words on the person being interviewed, the answer may make no sense at all—or there may be no answer (p. 312).

The reason for using this flexible and open-ended format was to remain focused on the mutual creation of stories about gendered experiences in K-12 schools, rather than seeking robust responses to each question listed on the interview guide.

These initial face-to-face interviews gave participants an opportunity to explore their K-12 educational experiences related to gender and to reflect on specific moments in which they were present but did not feel included in school settings. This initial phase

of data collection addressed the primary research questions guiding this inquiry: What are the retrospective accounts of ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' experiences in K-12 educational institutions?; and how might these experiences serve as deconstruction events, making visible the excess of discursive structures and material practices that reinforce binary gender within these institutions? Data from individual interviews provided clarification about the phenomenon of interest as participants were asked to name some of the discursive structures and material practices that limited their participation (and, in some cases, excluded them entirely) during school-related activities.

Initial interviews also helped to identify confusing and/or unnecessary terms and questions and to establish rapport with individual participants prior to interacting with the larger focus group. As Merriam (2009) explains, power balance is an important aspect of interviewing, especially within group interviews, as an imbalance of power could inhibit participation. Establishing rapport with participants prior to and during interviews alleviates some of these power imbalances. As a member of a student organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ students and their allies, I continued working to establish rapport with all participants prior to conducting individual interviews. Finally, the initial exploration of gendered educational experiences and clarification of the phenomenon of interest was used to outline talking points and inform the agenda for the subsequent focus group interview session.

Phase II

Following individual interviews, seven of the eight adult participants were selected for a two-hour focus group interview session, which was audio recorded and transcribed. Although all eight participants were invited and agreed to participate, one

participant (Onyx) was unable to attend the focus group session due to a scheduling conflict. The rationale for conducting a two-hour session is based on recommendations from several researchers who state that a focus group interview should last between 1 ½ and 2 ½ hours (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). The purpose of the focus group session was to generate ideas and strategies for promoting gender inclusive schooling. Prior to the focus group meeting (approximately one week before the scheduled meeting date), participants were given a brief executive summary (including lay language) of the Phase I or individual interview findings. Participants were asked to read and review these findings in preparation for the focus group interview.

During the focus group session, participants were asked to share what they want to say back to their schools in relation to their gendered educational experiences (Beck, 2014). Then, participants were asked to discuss the individual interview findings (referring to the executive summary). Finally, members of the focus group participated in a facilitated brainstorming session in which strategies promoting gender inclusive schooling were outlined and discussed among members of the group.

Focus group interviewing is a method of collecting qualitative data that emerged from U.S. marketing research in the 1950s and is rooted in a perspective that recognizes data as socially constructed within group interactions (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007); in other words, focus group interviewing is a data collection technique situated in a “social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Merriam, 2009, p. 386).

Like conducting individual interviews, facilitating a focus group interview requires: purposefully selecting participants, establishing rapport, paying attention to

power relations, and remaining focused on the overall purpose of the session (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). The focus group interview has several unique features: the interviewer acts as moderator or facilitator of the social interactions among members of the group; participants hear responses from other participants and have an opportunity to make “additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (Patton, 1990, p. 335); and focus groups usually occur after a researcher has conducted a considerable amount of research (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). It is important to note that, within the group interactions, it is not required that participants reach consensus nor is it required that they disagree.

Some of the problems associated with conducting group interviews include: one or more group participants might dominate conversations; some participants may be reluctant or hesitant to offer suggestions; and it is difficult to obtain responses from all participants and ensure full coverage of the topic (Merton, et al., 1956). Some of the advantages associated with using focus groups to collect data are that focus groups are: relatively inexpensive, produce rich data, are stimulating for participants, and have flexible formats.

The focus group interview was structured as a brainstorming or problem-solving session in which the researcher took a nondirective approach. Providing less direction and allowing conversations to flow allows for balancing what is important to the researcher with what is important to the group participants. Because the objective was to learn about what is most important to participants, the nondirective approach to group facilitation served as an appropriate choice for this phase of data collection.

Taking on the role of a facilitator requires paying careful attention to group dynamics, encouraging reluctant members to participate, redirecting individuals with a tendency to dominate conversations, and adapting questions and activities considering group interactions and comments. In the first part of the focus group session, a few participants tended to dominate the conversation and a few participants were quiet (not participating as often). As a response to this dynamic, all participants were asked to record any observations, responses, or contributions on pieces of paper. These responses were then shared in multiple ways (with small breakout groups, recorded on large posters, and then shared orally with the larger focus group).

The facilitated group conversation began with a broad question (i.e., What do we want to say back to our schools about our gendered experiences?) and the group was asked to generate a list of talking points based on individual answers to this question. Next, the group was asked to review the findings from individual interviews. Questions to promote further discussion included: What do you find surprising about these findings? Are any of the findings listed on this summary incorrect, outdated, or not useful? How can we expand on these suggestions? After elaborating on the list of ideas, the group was encouraged to group similar ideas and brainstorm strategies or solutions to be used by educators.

The purpose of the focus group interview was to give participants an opportunity to make gender-inclusive suggestions back to their schools; this process addressed the secondary research question—How might we take up these student perspectives and experiences to inform gender inclusive professional development for educators? The development of gender inclusive strategies that are based on gender diverse individuals’

experiences in K-12 schools also serve as one way to use student voice to inform school improvement efforts.

Incorporating a second phase of data collection required a deeper level of commitment from participants in that they were asked to participate in an individual interview and in a subsequent focus group interview several weeks later. Even though a greater level of commitment was required, the two phases served an important function: the individual interviews helped participants think about and talk about their gendered experiences in school; and the elapsed time between the two phases of data collection provided an opportunity for participants to consider what they feel comfortable sharing in the larger group and to spend more time thinking about possible suggestions for K-12 educators.

Supplementary Data

An ongoing reflective researcher journal (Ahern, 1999; Ortlipp, 2008) served as a third, supplementary method of data collection. Keeping a reflective journal created a level of transparency in the research process and made “visible to the reader the constructed nature of research outcomes” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 695). The reflective journal entries provided a research trail of sorts, showing the way in which methodologies, analyses, and terms were adapted throughout the research process, based on decisions and choices made by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Although both individual and group interview data were analyzed using similar methods, Phase I data was analyzed prior to the collection of Phase II data as the findings from individual interviews were shared with participants and informed the structure of

the focus group interview. The following sections outline the data analysis procedures for both phases of data collection.

Phase I

Data from individual interviews was analyzed using two coding processes: an open-coding, inductive analysis to locate emerging themes (Wolcott, 1994) and a subsequent deductive analysis with Derridean deconstruction in mind (i.e., reading for moments in which the participant was present during activities organized around binary gender).

The data analysis process involved listening to audio recordings of individual interviews, noting the tone and inflection of participant's voices. The purpose of this initial analysis process was to locate possible themes that elicited an emotional response from participants; such responses point to practices and/or structures that affect individual students. After listening to the audio recordings, each interview transcript was reviewed several times to isolate a wide variety of potential themes. Salient words and phrases (Wolcott, 1994) were highlighted and then coded with memos indicating a potential theme. Prominent themes were displayed on a rudimentary chart and considered in light of the literature base, framework, and guiding research questions.

The second round of coding was more deductive in nature and involved reading through fresh copies of transcripts and listening to audio recordings of interview sessions with Derridean deconstruction in mind. Specifically, moments in which the participant was present (whether participating or not) during activities or events that were organized around binary gender categories were highlighted. The point of this process was to consider these occurrences as potential deconstruction events. These highlighted sections

of the interview transcripts were isolated and displayed in an electronic spreadsheet and then considered in light of the literature outlining Derridean deconstruction and the second research question.

All themes and moments emerging from Phase I data analysis were synthesized for the twofold purpose of developing an executive summary (to share with participants in preparation for the focus group discussion); and creating an agenda to be used during the focus group session (Phase II data collection). Themes derived from the first round of Phase I analysis were used as talking points for the focus group.

Phase II

Like the analysis procedures outlined for the first round of coding in Phase I of this study, data from focus group interviews were analyzed through open-coding, inductive analysis to locate emerging themes to be used in building the gender inclusive professional development model. Audio recordings and transcripts from the focus group interview were reviewed several times for identifying common themes across suggestions made by the group. Salient words and phrases (Wolcott, 1994) were highlighted and then coded with memos indicating the common theme. These themes were then displayed in a word processing document and considered in light of the literature, theoretical framework, and guiding research questions.

Supplementary Data

Reflective researcher journal data was analyzed using inductive, open-coding methods, like those used during analysis of Phase II data. Journal entries were continuously revisited (and read multiple times), for the purpose of locating prominent themes relevant to the overall project. These themes were highlighted and served as

guiding topics for the researcher's continuous reflective writing. After both Phase I and Phase II data sets were collected and analyzed, researcher journal themes were used as a guide for organizing and recording some of the final conclusions for this project (see Chapter V).

A poststructural theoretical framework, as the core paradigm guiding this dissertation project, informs the data collection and analysis methods in the above paragraphs. The two phases of data collection (individual semi-structured interviews and a loosely structured focus group interview), were designed in consideration of the poststructural view that multiple realities exist and deliberate efforts should be put forth in attempting to understand subjective experiences (Crotty, 1998). With this stance in mind, efforts were made to preserve the openness and flexibility of these interview sessions to highlight the variety of ~~gender-non-binary~~ individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives. With Phase II data collection, the poststructural concept of agency (Gannon & Davies, 2007) informed the focus group purpose of generating gender inclusive solutions for school improvement (i.e., what can be done to transform systems and structures?).

The data analysis processes for both Phase I and Phase II data were also informed by the guiding poststructural paradigm. The first coding process, an open and inductive analysis generating emerging themes (Wolcott, 1994), aligns with the poststructural commitments to openness and privileging subjective experiences (Crotty, 1998; Slattery, Krasny, & O'Malley, 2007) in that individual accounts of experience (that preserve participants' words and phrases) generated the themes. Although the second coding process proposed for Phase I data involved a more deductive analysis (viewing interview

data with Derrida and deconstruction in mind), Derridean deconstruction is a poststructural concept that describes what happens when those who do not appear to belong within an organized structure are present as different within that structure (Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002).

Finally, the techniques used for Phase II of the data analysis process are similar to the first coding process for Phase I analysis in that an open-coding, inductive analysis was used to locate emerging themes (Wolcott, 1994). Focusing on individual participant's perspectives and suggestions aligns with the poststructural stance of privileging subjective experiences (Crotty, 1998) and taking up these perspectives and experiences to inform a model of professional development is informed by the poststructural concept of agency (Gannon & Davies, 2007) and the importance of questioning traditional structures and practices (St. Pierre, 2000).

Summary

In this basic qualitative research study, participants were purposefully selected for participation in two data collection phases: a one-on-one semi-structured interview (eight participants) and a focus group interview (seven participants). The individual interviews addressed the first two research questions related to retrospective accounts of ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' experiences in K-12 schools and the focus group interview served as a problem-solving session in which participants made suggestions related to gender inclusion back to their schools. Themes from the first coding activity of Phase I data and from Phase II analysis informed the overall structure of the proposed model of gender inclusive professional development and moments from the second coding activity of Phase I data were considered as a possible resource for building case narratives that may

serve as a component of the gender inclusive professional development model.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Participant Data

All eight participants were recruited from the Central Texas area through an organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals and their allies. Originally, there were nine total participants. In the process of scheduling the individual interviews (Phase I data), one participant decided to opt out of the study and offered the following explanation: “I’m having a lot of anxiety and dysphoria even thinking about talking about my past, especially my school life.” After ensuring that this participant had access to counseling services, I moved forward with eight participants.

Prior to the individual interview sessions, each participant completed a basic, open-ended form in which they shared their name, preferred pseudonym, age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, pronouns, and answered an open-ended question about identity (i.e., is there anything else you want to share about your identities?). Each question included in this demographic survey was formatted as open-ended (i.e., participants write in all answers) to preserve the terminology used by participants (see **Table 3** for self-reported participant demographic information). The following paragraphs include a description of each participant in which all names (of individuals, cities, and schools) have been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Onyx (Participant One)

Onyx is 20 years old, African American, agender (i.e., “does not identify as having a gender identity that can be categorized as male or female” (Green & Maurer, 2015, p. 8)), and uses gender neutral pronouns (they/them). Onyx volunteered to participate in this study via a social media post (through the organization for transgender

and ~~gender non-binary~~ students group). Onyx attended K-12 schools in Central Texas. In our conversations about coming to their³ current gender identity, Onyx described their gender journey as a lengthy process in which they moved from identifying as a gay man to androgynous to genderfluid to agender. Onyx said that, when they identified as a cisgender male (throughout K-12 experiences), they always felt different and noticed they had different interests than the “typical male”—

I like being creative and I like arts. I like makeup. And people think creative artsy things are usually for females. I always knew that I wasn't the “tough guy” they all want males to be. I was more emotional. I don't like watching sports. It kind of coincided with the female gender so I always kept that inside.

Onyx explained that being *agender* means, “I am neither a boy or a girl and... I'm nothing on the binary; I'm just floating around the binary as my own individual self.”

Kirk (Participant Two)

Kirk is 20, White, labeled as having a disability (albinism), genderqueer (i.e., “identity does not align with a binary understanding of gender” (American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 862)), and uses they/them pronouns. Like Onyx, Kirk also volunteered to participate in this study through a student group for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals. They grew up in a military family that moved to various places throughout Kirk's K-12 schooling experiences. Kirk's K-2 experiences were in a large city in Texas; they attended third grade in Massachusetts, fourth and fifth grade in Virginia, sixth and seventh grade in Texas, eighth and ninth grade in Maryland, tenth grade in Texas, and then finished high school at a Department of Defense school in

³ All eight participants use the gender-neutral pronouns they/them/their. Throughout this chapter, I use *they*, *them*, and *their* to report each participant's experiences, narratives, and suggestions.

Germany. Kirk came to their current gender identity—genderqueer—in college. They explained that, as a younger person, they did not realize that “gender was something that’s in your mind and not what is assigned to you at birth.” Kirk had this to say about the term *genderqueer*:

It is like an umbrella term because I still kind of question my gender sometimes. Right now, I'm really leaning towards gender fluid, because, when I wake up in the morning, every day it's like different. When I wear clothes, I try to separate what society thinks a gender *should* wear versus what I feel like wearing.

Kirk talked about their involvement in multiple feminist and LGBTQIA+ student organizations in college; through these experiences, Kirk learned about diverse sexual and gender identities, concluded that gender was a social construct, reflected on their personal struggle with body image as connected to gender identity, and came into their identity as non-binary and then genderfluid:

It just opened this whole new world to me when I realized gender, as I had come to understand it, was this complete societal construct. I wanted to look more androgynous and not have so much of a feminine body...I was always like, “this just doesn’t feel right. This doesn’t look like me.” Basically, from there, I realized that it’s okay to say, “I’m not a girl.” I started realizing that, in my mind, I don’t feel like a girl all the time and I’m genderfluid...sometimes I kind of feel like a boy and sometimes I do kind of feel like a girl. Sometimes I feel like neither.

Steve (Participant Three)

The third participant, Steve, is 23, White, non-binary trans masculine, and uses both they/them and he/him pronouns. Like most of the participants included in this study,

Steve volunteered to participate via a post in a Facebook group for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals and their allies. All of Steve's K-12 school experiences occurred in one public school system in West Texas. In talking about the process of coming to his current gender identity, Steve shared the following:

It all starts when I was a little kid, about four or so...I'd write wish lists ...and my top two things were always to be a Jedi and to have a penis, so that was where it really started. I cried to my mom, "Why can't God give me a penis?" ...and she was like, "That's just not something that's going to happen." So, I gave that up. Through childhood, I was a tomboy. It was in college that I realized that my masculine identity was more than just a female person that was masculine; I realized that my identity was something other than what was assigned to me at birth.

Early in his college experiences, Steve identified as a trans man, thinking "If I'm not a woman, I have to be a man." He said he tried to be exceptionally masculine during this time, but realized he had a lot of feminine qualities he enjoyed. Steve then realized they were somewhere on the gender spectrum: "To me, I define it as... I feel 60% masculine and 40% feminine, so instead of being on a binary of man and woman, it's on a spectrum of masculine and feminine."

Harper (Participant Four)

Harper is 19, Hispanic mixed, non-binary (with a feminine-presenting expression), and uses they/them pronouns. Harper volunteered to participate through a Facebook post on a page for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals and their allies. Harper attended K-12 public schools near a large city in North Texas. They

identified as genderfluid in high school— “I was playing around with the ideas of gender, switching up names, and playing around with pronouns, and seeing what really kind of fit me.” They learned about non-binary identities in high school, while researching how best to support their friend who had come out to them as a transgender man. Harper realized the term *gender non-binary* fit them and explained further, “While I do have this gender identity [non-binary], my expression is typically feminine because of my body type and what I feel comfortable wearing.”

Nix (Participant Five)

Nix is 24, White, gender nonconforming, uses they/them pronouns, and says they “mostly feel like a woman.” Nix was recruited through a Facebook group for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals and their allies. Nix did not remember much about school before fifth grade; they shared that their biological father took them from their mother and moved around a lot: “I know I went to like four different fourth grades all around Texas and I guess first through third grade were somewhere in Colorado.” Nix spoke, mostly, about their experiences from fifth through twelfth grade in a small suburban area outside a large city in Texas. Nix describes the process of coming to their current gender identity as “long—I *thought* I was a boy; I didn't think there was any alternative, because I didn't realize there was a difference between sex and gender until later in life.” Nix talked about their fervent desire to wear more feminine clothing and makeup as a young teenager but stated that it wasn't allowed for boys. In college, Nix felt depressed; they stopped attending classes and, instead, used their time to practice applying makeup.

Blaine (Participant Six)

Blaine is 22, Chicax/Latinx, agender, and uses they/them pronouns. Blaine volunteered to participate during a weekly meeting for a student organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals. Blaine's elementary and middle school experiences occurred in a small town in California and they attended high school in a medium-sized city in Central Texas. Blaine came to their agender identity in college and described the process in this way:

When I was younger, it was just this weird air of not quite fitting in. For a long time, I just identified as lesbian. Even though that felt more comfortable than being straight, I felt like that was the extent of my identities that I had. Then when I was in a relationship with somebody else, I was talking to them about how I felt in general, about not necessarily being comfortable wearing feminine clothing and stuff like that. We basically just Googled it and *agender* popped up. I was like, "that describes me perfectly!" Ever since then I was like, "that's definitely me!" ...You just feel out of place for a long time and then you come across a word and it fits with you.

Nikki (Participant Seven)

The seventh participant, Nikki, is 19, Asian/Filipino, genderfluid/androgynous (genderfluid meaning "moving between genders" (American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 862)), and uses they/them pronouns. Nikki volunteered to participate in this study during one of the weekly meetings held by an organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals. Nikki attended a private school in Kindergarten but attended public schools from first through twelfth grade in a suburban area outside a large

city in Central Texas. Nikki started questioning their gender identity during their senior year of high school but did not come out as genderfluid until college. They describe their gender journey as follows:

I knew that I wasn't just a girl before. I always knew that there was something weird. Whenever someone would refer to me as a girl, I just felt uncomfortable. I thought it was just because I just didn't feel like wearing an outfit. I found out later that it was much more deeper than that...I just felt kind of in the middle. That's been a thing my whole life, but I just didn't know how to sit down and come to terms with that.

Sky (Participant Eight)

Sky is 21, White, genderqueer (and non-binary female-to-male), and uses they/them (or he/him) pronouns. Sky states that they have a male-presenting expression of gender and are in the process of medically transitioning. Like Nikki, Sky volunteered to participate during a weekly meeting for an organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals. Sky's school experiences from Kindergarten through eighth grade were in Central California and their high school experiences were in a small town in Central Texas. Like several other participants, Sky describes always feeling "weird" about their gender growing up but not really knowing why; they came out as gay in high school and was the only openly gay student in their small Texas town. During their junior and senior years of high school, Sky began exploring their gender identity and learned about the term *genderqueer* online:

I didn't even know what *trans* or *genderqueer* or any of those words meant until I was in high school. I just always felt weird...So once I learned, I was just like,

“Wow. This makes so much sense. Why didn’t someone tell me about this?” This was such a good thing for me. Junior year, I was suffering quietly, trying to figure out what I was doing and then, senior year, I took some steps towards it. Once I was out of high school, I felt a lot more comfortable.

Table 3. Self-Reported Participant Demographic Information

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Pronouns</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>
1	Onyx	Agender	they/them	20	African American
2	Kirk	Genderqueer	they/them	20	White
3	Steve	non-binary trans masculine	he/him or they/them	23	White
4	Harper	non-binary	they/them	19	Hispanic mixed
5	Nix	gender nonconforming (a work in progress)	they/them	24	Caucasian
6	Blaine	Agender	they/them	22	Chicanx/Latinx
7	Nikki	genderfluid/androgynous	they/them	19	Asian/Filipino
8	Sky	genderqueer or nonbinary female-to-male	they/them (or he/him)	21	White

Primary Research Question #1 Data—What are the Retrospective Accounts of Gender Non-Binary Individuals’ Experiences in K-12 Educational Institutions?

“Everything was gendered. Everything you did. Getting in line, playing sports, the way people talk to you, all that sort of stuff” (Blaine). During one-on-one interviews, participants responded to several questions focused on the following topics: gender identity/expression while attending K-12 schools, conversations and messages about

gender in school settings, general educational experiences, and how these experiences affected participants' relationship to school. As each participant recalled and talked about their K-12 experiences, the following themes emerged: limited (or no) sense of belonging, feeling unsafe, conforming and hiding, silenced topics, and gendering of structures, policies, and practices.

Limited (or No) Sense of Belonging

Across all eight individual conversations, participants discussed feeling as if they did not belong in their school communities. They used words and phrases such as “weird,” “different”, “disconnected”, or “like an outsider” to describe this limited sense of belonging.

Onyx said they “never really enjoyed school,” felt “disconnected from teachers and students,” and was “just ready to go.” Throughout their K-12 schooling experiences, Onyx struggled with making friends because they were so quiet and did not want to interact with others because, as they explained, “I just felt like I was just there for the time I would have to be there and then I could leave.” When asked about why they wanted to leave school, Onyx replied...

I was just through with everyone's attitudes about how you're supposed to fit in the box of either a tough guy who loves sports or a girl who loves fashion and there's no in-between. But they keep trying to put me in the box, which wears down on people. When they keep trying to put you into a certain area but you're just like, “just let me be me.”

Kirk said they felt “distant,” “other,” and “disconnected” throughout their K-12 schooling experiences and shared that their identity as a person with a disability played into their

relationship to school: “I have Oculocutaneous Albinism, so I’ve always looked different from everyone else. I’ve always felt other to my peers. I just didn’t feel like the other kids. I was always singled out because of my disability.” In tracing their K-12 experiences, Kirk said they felt “other” in elementary school but that “middle school was a disaster” in which they felt dysphoric and other students pressured Kirk to “try to look more feminine.” Because Kirk experienced gender-based bullying for not appearing feminine enough in middle school, they began dressing and behaving in stereotypically feminine ways in high school to “fit in and make friends.” Kirk said this time in high school was “the worse my mental health has been” and that they experienced dysphoria and continued feeling “disconnected.” During senior year, Kirk started presenting more masculine (wearing menswear-inspired clothing) and, although they felt confident, Kirk did not feel a sense of belonging:

I never liked school. I hated it. I never felt like I belonged in school. I always felt like a burden. One, I felt like a burden because of my disability...Also, just like me as an individual, I never felt like I fit in anywhere at school.

In elementary school, Steve was labeled “dyslexic,” and, therefore, was pulled out of classes on a regular basis, to receive targeted interventions. Although regularly being removed from class made them feel “different” from their peers, Steve felt most isolated in middle school (and the first years of high school) because they were teased (about race and gender) by peers:

I was getting teased for being a minority, getting teased for being smart, because of my gender and being smart...I also didn’t have people that I identified with, so that made me feel very isolated a lot of the time...Sometimes I’d come home and

be like, “I don’t want to go to class.”

Like Kirk, Steve tried expressing their gender in very feminine ways throughout high school to “fit in and make friends.” They thought being and expressing their authentic self would not grant them “a stable friend group.” Despite these efforts to fit in and belong, Steve concludes, “I just didn’t really have somewhere I belonged, per se.”

Throughout their K-12 experiences, Harper felt “uncomfortable,” like they were “on the outside, looking in,” and sensed “discomfort—a quiet that I couldn’t quite place.” Nix said they “always hated school” because they were teased so often. Blaine did not experience bullying in school but never felt like they belonged—

There was no group where I felt like, “This is my group. This is my identity” ...I just thought I was weird, in general. I just floated by kind of pretending to be whatever...but I just wanted to do whatever I wanted and not have someone put a label on me while I do it.

Nikki was “wary” of most people in school— especially teachers—but said they usually felt like they belonged: “I was just kind of forcing myself into it. ‘You’re a girl so you belong in girly groups around girls...I would just try to be friends with everyone to make myself feel comfortable.”

Sky, on the other hand, “always felt really out of place and unsafe...like the odd one out.” They said they always had a lot of anxiety in school and felt uncomfortable in the girls’ locker room and bathroom— “I just felt so wrong for being in there. I was not supposed to be in there. I would get dressed as fast as I could, closing my eyes.” Sky said that, before they came out as transgender, they were just the “weird lesbian.” Because Sky often felt uncomfortable and unsafe, they avoided gender-segregated locker rooms:

I would just hide or come to school in my gym clothes so that I wouldn't have to change in there, and go to my car to change or something; try and find safe places that I felt comfortable changing. I just felt so wrong.

Feeling Unsafe

Although not all participants had safety concerns in K-12 schools, most participants described varying degrees of safety, from “somewhat safe” to “scared and unsafe.” Harper said, “it was always very difficult to feel safe” because, to *really* feel safe, they had to identify as a woman (even though it was uncomfortable) “because that was the norm.” Nix did not feel safe in schools. They explained their relationship to school (i.e., whether they felt safe and/or that they belonged) as follows:

Well, I didn't feel like I belonged. I didn't really feel safe, I mean people were threatening to beat me up regularly. Junior high was the worst. I had a crush on this guy, and he found out, and he punched me in the eye, and I got a black eye, and I told people I ran into a pole.

Although Blaine did not feel “particularly unsafe” in school, they said they would have felt unsafe had they come out as transgender in those settings. Blaine felt like, even if people know they are transgender in high school, “there was a sense of ‘what might happen if we did [come out as transgender]?’”

Nikki felt “somewhat safe” during elementary and middle school— “I felt kind of safe, kind of not, depending on the teacher and the classroom setting and who I was around”—but said they “felt really scared in high school.” Nikki had anxiety and dysphoria in high school as they struggled with coming out about their gender identity:

“What if I did come out during high school? How much that would affect me? And how much it would affect my mental state? And how I would get through the day?”

Sky said they felt safe in elementary school but started feeling scared and unsafe in middle school and into high school:

Once I got to middle school, I started getting really quiet and scared... That's when I started having a lot of anxiety and panic attacks. I just got picked on and bullied a lot, and got in a lot of trouble for getting in fights because I was defending myself... I would just ditch school all the time, just go home and be in a safe place.

Sky missed a lot of school. First, they avoided bathrooms and locker rooms; then, they started skipping classes. Sky felt “trapped,” “uncomfortable,” and “unsafe;” they described getting out of high school as a “relief.” “I felt safer to explore myself more. Once I was out, I was like, ‘Well, those people can't affect me or hurt me. Let me just be who I am and figure it out.’”

Conforming and Hiding

All participants talked about the pressure to conform to gender norms in school settings. Some participants attempted conforming to these norms to fit in, belong, and make friends (e.g., Steve felt their feminine expressions in high school led to securing a “stable friend group”) and some participants conformed to feel safer. For example, Kirk said they learned to perform their gender in more feminine ways during high school because conforming was one way to “minimize bullying.”

Other participants hid aspects of themselves that did not fit neatly into the expected expressions tied to the traditional binary gender category assigned to them.

Onyx said they were an emotional person throughout elementary school but quickly learned to hide their emotions in fifth grade: “I just realized I needed to fall into the binary of male and being unemotional and acting tough.” Onyx also regularly hid the things they liked, for fear that other students would tease them about liking “pretty, creative” things. “I always knew how to keep things hidden,” they said.

Silenced Topics

All eight participants said that gender was rarely a topic of conversation in schools, beyond simple comments about boys’ activities and girls’ activities. Several participants felt that most people are uninformed about gender diversity and often confuse sex and gender and/or equate diverse gender expressions with homosexuality. In one example, Nix explains,

If you did anything that was different, then it had to do with your sexuality.

People were calling me gay for as long as I can remember, before I even knew what it meant, before I even considered that I might be. I remember in 5th grade, being just told all the time that I was gay [by peers].

Some participants remembered moments in which conversations about gender diversity were cut short or “shut down.” In a high school government class, for example, Nikki presented on the topic of gender neutral restrooms; some of Nikki’s peers made negative comments like “that’s disgusting” and the teacher quickly stopped the conversation saying that the idea that gender neutral restrooms are needed in schools is “just dumb.”

Gendering of Structures, Policies, and Practices

When responding to the prompt, “Tell me about some of your experiences in school related to gender”, most participants started the conversation by making comments

about the gendering of school structures, policies, and practices. Participants used phrases like “super separated,” “unnecessarily gendered,” “very binary thinking,” and “everything was gendered” to talk about their educational experiences related to gender. Participant responses are further categorized as follows: General Gendering, Dress Codes, Extracurricular Activities, Sex Education, and Language and Messaging.

General gendering. Several participants made comments about school as a gendered system, in general. For example, Sky said that schools (and especially elementary schools) gender *everything* (including always color-coordinating by binary gender): “It’s very she/he, pink/blue...the girls’ team and the boy’s team and the girls on the left and the boys on the right...just super separated.” Nikki said schools were stuck in “very binary thinking” about gender and that “everything was boy and girl.” Blaine agreed that schools are generally organized with binary gender categories in mind and that...

it’s just the little things that make it *very* obvious...guys on this side of the room, girls on this side of the room. It's how the conversations flow, with the added assumption that all guys act a certain way and all girls act a certain way. It changes the tone and the way the conversation could've gone if you hadn't made those assumptions.

Dress codes. Over half of participants pointed to strict dress codes as school policies that are “oppressive” and “unnecessarily gendered.” Onyx felt they were stuck wearing “male attire” when they preferred wearing outfits that were considered feminine. Several other participants talked about dress code policies for school dances (including prom). For example, Kirk said they wanted to wear a suit to high school prom but that

girls were not allowed to wear suits.

Extracurricular activities. It is interesting to note that all eight participants talked, primarily, about their gender-related school experiences outside of the general classroom setting. These extracurricular activities include: recess, sports, physical education/gym class, and school dances (including prom). Harper discussed the “arbitrary gender rules” of an elementary school playground:

You're just like, "Okay, we're going to go play on the playground, but girls can't play in the tree house thing because that's the boys territory. The boys are up in the tree but the girls have to go play with dolls” kind of thing.

Most participants mentioned the gender-separating practices of sports teams and physical education classes in schools. With high school sports, for example, Harper said, “it’s like the girls are always the cheerleaders and then there’s the guys that are football players. That’s it.” Steve was involved in several high school sports teams and said one sport—wrestling—was “very macho and masculine...an area of toxic masculinity.” They further explained,

In the sports atmosphere, it's not good to be a girl, at least in the atmosphere that I was developed in through at least high school. So, it pushed me away from that feminine identity more. It made me not want to be part of that, because if you're more masculine, if you're a guy, you're good at your sport. You excelled at what you were doing.

Half of the participants discussed their experiences in physical education classes. According to Sky, “P.E. is always the worst, no matter what grade it is. It’s just so *genderized!*” Sky explained this “genderizing” of physical education as follows:

There's no middle. You're either on the girls' team or the boys' team. There's no options. And, for some reason, boys are always seen as stronger and girls are seen as weaker...but there are strong girls and there are weak boys.

Both Harper and Nix echoed this frustration with gender-separating structures and practices in physical education classes. As Harper explained,

You would always split into groups. You'd always be like "boys on one side, girls on the other." In high school, when I started exploring my gender, there was a P.E. class where boys were on one side, girls were on the other side, and I was in the middle like "I don't know." I just had to join the girls' side because that was the norm.

Nix chose to join marching band in high school because "it gave you P.E. credits and I had a bad experience in junior high school in gym class." Nix explained that their peers perceived them as gay and that locker rooms were only for straight guys: "If you're not straight, then it becomes an issue. I had already got punched in the eye because someone told another guy I thought he was cute." Nix avoided locker rooms in high school for "fear of what *could* happen."

Several participants also talked about the ways in which school dances were segregated by binary gender categories. Some participants felt uncomfortable with strict dress codes (i.e., boys must wear suits and ties and girls must wear dresses) and some participants avoided school dances because they were not allowed to have dance partners or prom dates of the same gender.

Sex education. Several participants talked about how introductory videos to puberty (in late elementary school and middle school) and subsequent sex education

classes (junior high and high school) were “always structured very binarily.” Kirk said that these separate sex education groups made them feel uncomfortable because “I didn’t fit into either one of those categories.” Harper said that, as an adult, they learned that sex categories were not limited to binary categories of female and male— “You have people who are intersex, people who have chromosomal differences that are not X and X or X and Y”—and thought it was odd that they never learned about these biological variations in K-12 schools.

Language and messaging. When asked the sub-question, “What are some examples of conversations about gender or gender-related messages you heard in K-12 schools?” participants shared a variety of phrases, such as: “Boys will be boys. That’s not ladylike. Girls aren’t supposed to do that. You’re not supposed to do that; you’re a boy. You run like a girl. Why are you being a sissy? Man up. That’s not gentlemanly.”

Steve noticed that teachers often used more affectionate, sweet words when speaking with girls. For example, teachers were more likely to refer to girls, not boys, as “sweetie” or “sugar.” Onyx said they were teased by peers for being “like a girl” because they “liked pretty things” and regularly volunteered to answer questions in class. Kirk remembered having a “potty mouth” in elementary school and being told, “oh, you know, girls aren’t supposed to do that; girls aren’t supposed to cuss.” Those participants who were involved in school sports talked about regularly hearing comments about running/playing “like a girl” and that they needed to “man up.”

Participants also talked about gender-related messages received in school settings. Onyx received the message that boys are “rowdy, unemotional, and loud” and girls are “creative, smart, and quiet.” Harper learned (through curriculum and literature) that

women are “kind, gentle, and motherly” and that men are “strong providers for the family.” Within a school sports environment, Steve received the message that girls are not good at sports and that to be a “manly man” is to be both good at sports and heterosexual.

During one-on-one interview sessions, each participant answered questions about their gender-related experiences in K-12 schools; they talked about their gender identities and expressions, dominant gender-related conversations and messages, and their overall relationship to schools. Although all eight participants felt they had a different (or Other) gender throughout their educational experiences, only three participants openly expressed a ~~non-binary~~ gender identity while attending K-12 schools. Most of the participants said they came to their current ~~gender-non-binary~~ identity after graduating from high school.

As they shared retrospective accounts of their K-12 experiences related to gender, it was clear that nearly all participants felt very little sense of belonging and most felt unsafe in schools. All participants felt pressure to either conform to the gender norms in place or to hide aspects of their personalities in these settings. Each participant spoke fervently about the “gendering of everything” in schools, from gender-segregated games and sports to strict dress codes based on “very binary thinking.”

The key takeaway in relation to ~~gender-non-binary~~ individuals’ retrospective accounts of their schooling experiences is that nearly all participants felt like they did not belong. This key finding begs the question, “*Why* did these individuals feel like they did not belong in their K-12 schools?” Perhaps the highly-gendered structures, policies, and practices of schooling (as outlined above under **Gendering of Structures, Policies, and Practices**) left little room for gender diverse expressions and experiences. In the

following section, data related to the second primary research question is presented; these potential deconstruction events shed light on some of the gendered structures, practices, and policies that limited diverse gender expressions in these settings.

Primary Research Question #2 Data—How Might Some of these Experiences Serve as Deconstruction Events, Making Visible the Excess of Discursive Structures and Material Practices that Reinforce Binary Gender within these Institutions?

During individual interview sessions, each participant described moments from their K-12 schooling experiences that serve as potential deconstruction events. Because deconstruction is a difficult concept to define (Biesta, 2009; Derrida, 1967/1976) and because the following deconstruction events are meant for an audience of educational leaders (to show them that ~~gender-non-binary~~ students are always already present in our school systems), I did not use the term *deconstruction event* with participants. Instead, I asked participants to talk about moments in which they were present as different; I asked them to recall (and discuss) school activities or events that were organized by binary gender categories of boy and girl. Although some of these moments surfaced in response to questions posed throughout the interview session, many deconstruction events were illuminated through the answers participants provided to the following prompt and questions:

Think of a time in elementary, middle, or high school when you were involved in activities or events that were organized around binary gender categories of boy/girl. Describe the situation. In what ways did you participate or not participate? What was your response at the time? How do you feel about this experience now?

This prompt and set of questions exposed potential deconstruction events because each memory shared by participants documented a situation in which an individual student was present within a system or structure that did not appear to be constructed with that person in mind. The argument here is that these moments in which an individual was present as different (no matter how subtle or acknowledged) serve as deconstruction events of the past. The point is that, when these deconstruction events of the past are brought to the surface (are explicitly told), educational leaders may see that gender diverse students are always already members of the school community and are often present as different (whether we see them or not).

How were the following data sets selected as potential deconstruction events? As outlined in a previous chapter (See **Data Analysis**), I read through transcripts and listened to audio recordings of the individual interview sessions, highlighting any moments in which the participant was present during activities or events that were organized around binary gender categories. I then considered how the participant responded to the situation. For example, were they angry, frustrated, or confused? Did they feel Other or like they did not belong? Finally, each brief narrative outlined below serves as a deconstruction event in that the presence of difference illuminates opportunities for transforming the way we carry out schooling.

All eight participants shared stories in which they were present during activities that did not seem to be constructed with them in mind. It is interesting to note that most of the participants remembered partaking in these activities, often reluctantly, minimally, or while feeling some discomfort. When responding to the prompt and questions outlined above, all eight participants told stories about activities outside the general classroom

setting, including: physical education/gym class, extracurricular activities (sports, choir, band, etc.), special events (i.e., field day, school dances, prom), and recess. Three participants spoke, primarily, about gendered activities in high school. One participant discussed both middle and high school experiences. Two participants described experiences from elementary school and two participants shared memories across K-12 settings.

“Sports, in general, are weird and gendered—extremely. I always felt like I was the outsider, so I was just by myself most of the time” (Onyx). Onyx talked about their K-12 experiences in gym classes. They remembered how gender-segregated all the games were, recounting many moments in which games were structured as competitive—as boys versus girls. Onyx said their peers would often tease each other, saying things like “boys are stronger than girls” and “boys always win.” Onyx remembered feeling “weird” about the common boys versus girls structure for games and “did not want to be in either group.” When given an option, Onyx often chose not to participate and, instead, would sit alone on the sidelines because they did not want to be in either group. Blaine also talked about their presence during highly gendered activities in physical education classes:

To me, regardless of which side I was on, I’d be uncomfortable. I’m not supposed to be with the guys; I’m not supposed to be with the girls, so it wouldn’t matter...Of course I participated because I *have* to.

They said that activities were often organized around binary gender categories of boy/girl and that boys and girls were typically not allowed to play together, “unless it’s a sport that’s really easy, like tag.” Blaine said they were “annoyed” by the lack of choices but always (reluctantly) participated, explaining: “As a kid, you just appeal to authority and

do what you are told to do. If you do not participate, you can receive a failing grade or an absence for the day.” So, Blaine participated in the activities while feeling “annoyed,” “uncomfortable,” and like they “didn’t belong.” Like Blaine, Nikki often felt like they had limited choices and needed to appeal to authority figures in school:

I feel sad that I couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't know because no one had told me about it. No one had made me feel comfortable...Why can't I play boy games? Why can't we all just be playing the same games? I never understood it.

In one of Nikki’s stories, they shared memories about gender-segregated activities during field day and recess in elementary school: “They would separate us in boys and girls and girls could only play certain games and guys could only play certain games.” Nikki loved to play outside but, during their school’s field day events, most of the boys’ activities were outdoors and most of the girls’ activities were held indoors. Because Nikki was placed in the girls group, they missed opportunities to participate in outdoor events. Nikki remembers feeling sad and uncomfortable: “What if I want to play outside? What if I want to play these other games? Why does it have to be so divided?” Nikki did not voice their feelings to teachers because they were afraid they might “get in trouble...I had those small thoughts to myself, but I didn’t feel comfortable telling other people.”

Harper was a member of school choirs from sixth through twelfth grade and, because they were assigned female at birth, was given only soprano singing parts. Harper said that choirs are usually “highly-gendered” groups, based on binary sex categories of male/female, because of “these ideas that we have about who can sing what.” As a student in choir, Harper was “complicit”—they participated and did not question the structure. As a college student, Harper looks back on this choir experience as “very

gendered” and “ridiculous” because, even though Harper had the range for a wider variety of singing parts, they were only allowed to sing soprano parts—

Now it feels kind of ridiculous because, while I was a soprano, I could sing alto parts. I could sing tenor parts... it just depends on the range that you have as a singer. You can sing most anything if you put in the work to do it.

Both Kirk and Steve shared stories about participating in high school prom events. Kirk really wanted to wear a suit to prom but their school’s policies did not allow students assigned female at birth to wear suits to school dances. Kirk attended the event wearing a dress but felt uncomfortable the entire time. They felt jealous of all the boys wearing suits. Kirk said they only wanted to dance with other girls (and not boys), but same gender dance partners were not the “norm.” They described their time as “terrible” and left their high school prom quite early—

It’s not what I wanted out of my prom...we have this idea of what prom is supposed to be—fun and special—but it just wasn’t. I ended up feeling super melancholy and calling my parents.

Steve also left prom early. When describing this experience, Steve said they tried to follow stereotypically feminine gender roles to fit in with peers: “So, I had a dress, I got my hair done, I went all out...but the whole entire time, I didn’t enjoy myself. I didn’t have a fun time...I just kept trying to cover myself up.” Steve left prom early and later reflected on the experience—

I feel like it was just so silly. Why did I bother? Why did I go to this extent of presenting myself in a way that other people would like versus allowing myself to be how I wanted to be? 'Cause for myself, I would have loved to go in in pants

and a vest and a button-down with a tie. I would have looked dope! There was all these things I wanted to do to express myself that were being denied.

As Steve discussed the memory of attending and then reflecting on their high school prom experience, they appeared to have regrets: "Man, I really should have done it the way that I wanted to. The experience would have been way different."

Two participants, Nix and Sky, talked about gendered moments in which they chose not to participate. Nix chose not to participate in their high school prom, saying, "We weren't allowed to take same-sex partners to prom, so I didn't go." Nix said that, at the time, they were angry about the situation, angry that school administrators did not understand that same-sex couples wanted to participate in school functions. Now, Nix feels like they "missed out on something, missed an experience."

Sky spoke about their elementary school experiences in physical education class and during structured recess activities. They explained that, in the gym and on the playground...

it was always so separated, not even playing the same sport. It was always the girls would be playing softball and boys would be playing soccer...it wasn't, 'what sport do you want to play? It was, 'girls will do this and the boys will do this.' There was no option.

When recounting these early experiences, Sky remembered feeling like they "just wanted to go home" on those days. Oftentimes, they refused to participate in girls' activities, protesting by sitting down in the middle of a field, rather than playing the game. Sky said they received consequences (i.e., detention) for refusing to participate in these activities.

At the time, Sky thought, “This is unfair” and, after reflecting and talking about these memories, they said, “This is wrong;” explaining further, Sky said...

There’s no reason to separate us; what’s the point of this? Now, it's like, I know what I'm protesting...versus then, I didn't know what I was protesting. I was just upset about it. I wasn't taught what I was protesting. I had no idea. I just knew something was wrong.

During individual interview sessions, each participant recalled moments in which they were present during activities that did not appear to be constructed with them in mind. All moments described by participants (as outlined in the above paragraphs) occurred outside general classroom settings (e.g., gymnasiums, playgrounds, fields) and the majority took place during the middle and high school years. In these moments, participants described feeling “weird,” “uncomfortable,” “sad,” and “annoyed;” despite these feelings, some participants joined in, while others left early, avoided the activity altogether, or protested in refusal.

Framing these memories as deconstruction events of the past reveals a simple fact about gender diverse individuals— they are always already present as members of our school communities. The memories (framed as deconstruction events) outlined above not only help educational leaders see that gender diverse individuals are present in schools but also pose several important questions related to creating inclusive, welcoming school climates—Are we creating spaces inclusive of a wide variety of individuals? How are our dominant systems, structures, and practices excluding some students? In what ways can we adapt the way we carry out schooling to create more inclusive environments? Why might we be comfortable with excluding some students? Data related to the secondary

research question (as outlined below) helps address some of these questions as the purpose of this secondary data was to make gender-inclusive suggestions back to K-12 schools.

Secondary Research Question Data—How Might We Use These Student Perspectives and Experiences to Inform Gender Inclusive Professional Development for Educators?

Each of the eight participants made gender inclusive suggestions back to their K-12 schools during Phase I (individual interviews) of data collection and seven of these eight participants made suggestions during Phase II (focus group interview) of data collection. The initial suggestions emerged from participants' responses to the final individual interview questions—What is one thing you would like to say back to your schools about these experiences? And is there anything else you would like to share about gender in schools?

In the following paragraphs, suggestions from Phase I (individual interviews) are outlined. These suggestions were included in the executive summary, which was shared with all participants prior to collecting Phase II data (focus group session). In this way, the initial suggestions for gender-inclusive schooling served as potential talking points for the focus group interview.

Phase I Suggestions

As they made suggestions back to their K-12 schools during individual interviews, it was clear participants felt that working toward building gender-inclusive learning environments would lead to increased safety and a stronger sense of belonging for gender diverse students. As Sky explained—

I think just being inclusive from a young age is important, because if I knew what trans was at a younger age, I would have been able to come to this realization so much sooner, and maybe had such an easier path, or felt safer in school.

The initial gender-inclusive suggestions made by participants (outlined below) are organized under the following categories: cultivate inclusive mindsets and practices; stop gendering everything; adapt dress codes; provide facility choices; use gender-inclusive language; and recognize and learn about gender diversity.

Cultivate inclusive mindsets and practices. When discussing the importance of cultivating inclusive mindsets and practices, participants said that inclusive environments made *all* students feel more comfortable in schools. Suggestions were made across the following areas: Teacher Selection, Gym/Physical Education/Sports, and Sex Education.

Creating comfortable spaces for all. All participants talked about feeling alienated or invisible in their schools and said that gender inclusion creates space in which all students feel comfortable and welcomed. As Onyx explained, “A lot of students feel pressured to fit in and the rules are kind of strict instead of trying to be more broad so people can be flexible with who they are;” Onyx suggested letting students “be who they are and who they want to be.” So, what does it look like to create inclusive spaces that have broad, flexible rules and allow students with diverse gender identities/expressions to “be who they are?”

According to Steve, gender-inclusive spaces “allow them [students] to have any expression of masculinity or femininity they want.” In other words, gender inclusive environments are open and flexible; all students receive the message, “you don’t have to be stereotypically a boy or a girl or be a tough guy or tough girl or tom boy. You can be

whoever you want to be.”

Teacher selection. Several participants talked about the importance of hiring and keeping teachers who are open-minded, inclusive, and interested in learning about diverse kinds of people. All participants made comments about the vital role teachers play in helping kids feel more comfortable with themselves. Nikki explained that a ~~gender non-binary~~ student would benefit greatly from hearing a teacher say something like, “It’s okay if you don’t feel like a boy or girl. That’s fine.”

Gym/physical education/sports. All eight participants offered suggestions for cultivating inclusive mindsets and practices across extracurricular arenas involving physical activity—gym, physical education, and school-sponsored sports. Some suggestions included forming competitive teams in non-gender-segregating ways (e.g., by counting off rather than creating a boys team and a girls team). Several participants suggested doing away with gender-segregated sports altogether (e.g., softball as a girls’ activity and baseball as a boys’ activity). Most participants suggested allowing students to choose the physical activities and sports that interest them.

Sex education. During individual interviews, several participants wondered why schools created two separate sex education classes organized around binary sex categories. As Nikki explained, “girls would watch this and boys would watch this. I feel like they should show both of those videos to everyone.” The consensus among participants was that all students would benefit from learning about and discussing topics covered in the different puberty and sex education videos.

Stop gendering everything. When participants were asked what they wanted to say back to their schools, several initial responses included: “Stop. Just stop,” “Stop

gendering stuff,” and “Stop genderizing everything.” A few participants stated that reinforcing rigid gender roles and stereotypes in schools affects *everyone*, not just gender diverse individuals. Blaine said that gender-segregating practices in schools “takes too much money and time...why do it? It’s going to take too much effort...why would you train teachers to do it?” Nikki said they would tell schools to stop gendering everything because “there are some kids that may be finding themselves at a young age and you should help them feel comfortable in those settings.”

Adapt dress codes. All eight participants said that dress codes should be adapted to be more inclusive of a variety of gender expressions. Before launching into specific suggestions, several participants offered a rationale for changing strict dress codes; they said things like, “Clothes don’t have a gender;” “Dress codes should be more inclusive of students’ cultures;” “How somebody outwardly expresses their gender has nothing to do with anybody who’s not that person;” and “The dress code is completely oppressive. Clothing is super important for how some people express themselves.” Some suggestions for adapting school dress codes involved allowing all genders to wear makeup, dye their hair, wear shorts, and wear tank tops and/or shirts with thin straps. Onyx noted that some school dress codes include exceptions for specific groups (i.e., cheerleaders may wear short skirts and spaghetti straps) and they felt, “That’s not right. You should let everyone wear what they want to wear.”

Provide facility choices. Most participants said that gender-neutral options for bathrooms, locker rooms, and changing rooms are needed in schools. Some participants suggested providing the option of using a single-stall, unisex bathroom and/or a private changing room for all students. Sky added, “There should be some single bathrooms and

even single changing rooms. And if you're saying they can use the one that they feel comfortable using, protect them."

Use gender-inclusive language. Every participant talked about the importance of using gender-inclusive language in schools. Some suggestions pertained to spoken language and some addressed written language. Several participants said that school personnel often used gender-separating phrases like "boys and girls" or "ladies and gentlemen" and that these phrases could easily be adapted to be more inclusive. For example, Onyx suggested saying "he, she, they" or "boys and girls and all those in between." In another example, Blaine said that, instead of asking, "What is *she* doing?" you could simply ask, "What is your *friend* doing?" Nikki offered an example using the gender-neutral pronoun *them*: "Instead of saying, 'Switch papers with him or her,' you might say, 'Switch papers with *them*, your partner.'" Other participants reiterated the importance of recognizing and using gender-neutral pronouns like they/them/their in school conversations and documents. Sky talked about the power of incorporating gender-neutral pronouns:

It's just recognizing that there's more than just two genders. Pronouns are a thing. I know a lot of non-binary people who started using they/them in high school, and it's just not a respected thing. Stop using the argument "They/them is plural..." People constantly use they/them in singular and just don't recognize it.

Other suggestions made by participants included using gender inclusive language on school documents and learning materials. Nix thought schools should provide student questionnaires (like those used by some teachers on the first day of class) with a "preferred pronoun" section: "This way, you're not singling out anyone, because you've

got everyone's preferred pronoun. But, if they put it down, you're gonna call them by that."

One participant suggested minimizing gender-segregating language used in word problems, stories, and on worksheets. They noticed that many word problems, especially at the elementary level, are structured using binary gender categories of boy/girl and often reinforce gender stereotypes:

A lot of the time, the boy thing will be something sporty and the girl thing will be something artsy. It's just that tone of, "Well, this is a boys' thing. This is a girls' thing..." Why can't there be an example that includes non-binary identities?

Recognize and learn about gender diversity. Each participant made suggestions about recognizing and learning about gender diversity in school settings. These suggestions addressed the ways in which school personnel could both learn and lead, including providing rich educational opportunities (focused on gender diverse experiences) to all members of the school community. As Nikki explained,

I feel like that's just something you can't really ignore. It's inevitable. There are going to be people who have different genders that people don't understand, but I feel like sitting down and talking about it so that people won't be close minded and so angry about gender, I feel like would help.

Speaking to the inevitability of gender diversity in schools, Kirk said, "Just be aware that trans kids and genderqueer kids and gender diverse kids *exist*. To acknowledge that and try not to have activities that exist along the gender binary, because, the gender binary is a myth." Steve noticed that most school systems seem to be organized by binary gender categories of boy/girl and that educators...

need to recognize that there can be the girls that are tomboys and boys that are tom girls. But also recognize that, not all the times, but sometimes, that can be the beginning steps for either a gender transition or just a gender non-binary expression in a kid. For schools, it's just really recognizing that it's not this binary. Other participants echoed the need for school personnel to learn about gender diversity, saying things like, "Learn as much as you can;" "Know that there are more than just two genders;" "Understand that gender is fluid;" "Let people know that these [queer] identities are real and that they're valid;" and "See how gender affects everyone."

Participants also spoke about the need for increased educational opportunities for students. Nikki suggested introducing the concept of gender diversity in elementary and middle school:

I think that people underestimate children's ability to grasp things. I feel like if you tell them at a younger age, they might absorb it easier than at high school...I feel like if you already tell a child, "there's multiple genders and there's a difference between sex and gender," then children will feel more open to it and not as close minded as they grow up.

Sky felt that students should learn about gender diversity as early as middle school, stating, "I think if you're at a point where you're teaching kids sexual reproduction, you can teach them about gender identities." Onyx suggested inviting speakers and organizations to school campuses to address gender diversity with both students and staff.

Essentially, schools that provide educational opportunities (about gender diverse experiences) for the community: create spaces in which gender diverse students feel more "comfortable and understood," foster dialogue that helps all students "process their own

identities,” and “model gender inclusion for other schools, leading by example.”

The suggestions for gender inclusive schooling made by all eight participants during individual interviews were organized into six main categories (i.e., Cultivate Inclusive Mindsets and Practices; Stop Gendering Everything; Adapt Dress Codes; Provide Facility Choices; Use Gender-Inclusive Language; and Recognize and Learn about Gender Diversity) that spoke to the need for creating open, flexible learning environments for all students. These suggestions were focused on helping school communities “see how gender affects everyone” and encouraged school leaders to adapt structures, practices, and policies to be more open and inclusive of a variety of individuals.

Many suggestions offered by participants were about creating choice for students (e.g., choosing sports based on interests and allowing all genders to express themselves using accessories like makeup and hair dye) and about building inclusive environments through adopting explicit hiring and training practices (e.g., hiring open, inclusive teachers and coaches and/or requiring that all teachers and administrators attend an allies training).

Phase II Suggestions

Prior to participating in the focus group interview, each participant received an executive summary of Phase I findings (outlined in previous section). During the focus group session, seven participants discussed Phase I findings and then offered additional suggestions for gender inclusive schooling. The first part of the focus group was dedicated to whole-group discussion. The second half of the session involved individual writing time (on sticky notes and large posters), small group discussions, and sharing

ideas out to the larger group (using co-created posters). The participants collaborated to organize all suggestions into the following six categories: Education, Protecting Students, Gendered Facilities, Gendered Microaggressions, Language Matters, and Dress Codes.

Education. All seven participants agreed that education is the “most vital” component of gender-inclusive schooling because “the first step is learning about *what* you’re trying to include...and *who* you’re trying to include.” Several participants responded to these initial comments by stating that gender-inclusive education involves learning: “about the existence of non-binary individuals,” “to recognize that non-binary identities are valid,” and “the difference between sex and gender.”

The participants also agreed that every member of a school community should have access to educational opportunities focused on gender diversity but that “teachers should go through this process before the children” and that “*all* teachers should go through an allies training.” When asked to generate ideas for gender-inclusive activities, participants said high schools could organize a school-wide assembly that features gender diverse speakers or start a conference about gender diversity and inclusion. Participants said that elementary and middle schools could start a festival or day of activities (with booths, games, and conversations) centered on gender diverse people and experiences. Several participants suggested incorporating this gender diversity day across K-12 schools: “When they’re young, just make it kind of a fun thing, where you get to know about people around you...when they’re older, they can do the harder learning.” A few participants talked about how booths could be incorporated into an elementary school’s gender diversity day:

Children could go to each booth and ask whatever questions they have, so long as they're appropriate...Yeah, because they're curious. I mean, they're kids. They're going to want to ask questions. They're gonna want to like get into it. Because you set it up as something that's gonna be fun for them. And they're going to enjoy it because they're kids. And they're like, "I want to learn as much as I can."

Participants also said that gender diverse speakers should be invited to these events to make sure it is not just "cis people teaching cis people" about gender diverse experiences. Another similar suggestion involved recognizing and celebrating a day of visibility during which students (especially elementary students) could spend the day learning about diverse gender cultures.

When asked about how long these ideas (i.e., allies training for all teachers, school-wide assemblies, conferences, festivals, days of visibility) would take to implement in schools, participants said the time needed depends on: the school community/broader community (how accepting the culture is) and the breadth and depth of the curriculum. When addressing potential concerns from community members, one participant suggested responding with, "We're just teaching about people. We're not saying that they have to *be* this way." Participants agreed that *at least* an entire school day should be dedicated to learning about gender diversity and that learning opportunities should: "slowly build on concepts," "take time," and be "in-depth," "continuous," and repetitious."

Additional education-related suggestions for gender-inclusive schooling generated by small group conversations and individual writing activities included: "implement education at the start; begin young and keep it going;" "ask students to write their

pronouns as well as names on assignments [to introduce gender pronouns];” “explain the difference between sex and gender (especially in high school);” and “begin educating younger children about gender diversity using children’s books, worksheets, and activities that include gender diverse people.”

Sex education. In our discussions about the education category, participants also made suggestions for improving sex education (including puberty talks and sex education classes) in schools. Participants said that learning about sexual health should include learning and reviewing: the difference between sex and gender, gender diverse identities, “body dysphoria that may occur while students go through puberty,” sexually-transmitted infection facts (including specific rates for queer communities and addressing stigmatization), and about available resources for gender diverse individuals.

Participants also suggested starting sex education programs with younger students (starting with topics like “establishing healthy relationships”) and continuing/building upon this throughout their schooling (moving into sex education after puberty). They recommended showing different puberty videos to all students, regardless of their sex designation at birth, because “they may wish to be informed about bodily functions of all people.”

Protecting students. All seven participants (Kirk, Steve, Harper, Nix, Blaine, Nikki, and Sky) agreed that part of building a gender-inclusive schooling environment involves ensuring that gender diverse students are protected:

The education piece is really important but what is almost more important than that is schools actually backing up the non-binary community and protecting the kids that are out, to give that safety and recognition that non-binary people are

accepted and will be protected.

When asked about the ways in which schools protect non-binary and gender diverse students, participants said, “first, you need to have an administration that is all allies and supportive so that they can set the tone...for the whole school...and lead by example.”

Other suggestions for protecting gender diverse students included: creating a general safety plan (e.g., What to do and who to talk to when a teacher is not following inclusive guidelines); having a no-tolerance policy for bullying (including for name-calling); and enforcing anti-bullying policies (and giving consequences when bullying happens).

Participants said that protecting students is not just about rules and policies: “It is beyond...it’s the social acceptance...it’s where they’re allowed to feel comfortable being who they are in school settings.”

Additional suggestions recorded on posters and overheard during small group conversations included: hire a school counselor who is trained as an ally for LGBTQIA+ students and is familiar with gender issues; “if police officers are part of your school, include LGBTQIA+ officers;” discuss no tolerance policies with all students involved when a bullying incident happens; start with administration; “don’t just protect students from other students—protect them from intolerant and problematic teachers;” “support student organizations for queer students;” pair an allies-trained teacher with a gender diverse student; and designate safe spaces (and offices) on campus.

Gendered facilities. Regarding facilities (like gyms, locker rooms, bathrooms, changing rooms, etc.), participants noticed that many schools have separate facilities for boys and girls and the buildings were originally “built that way” so the gender-separation can be harder to address. Participants referred to current events about school bathrooms

and, as one member noted, “there’s just a huge push against just allowing people to be in various rooms just because of their sex assigned at birth.” Overall, participants recommended, “changing the idea behind bathrooms and locker rooms rather than building a whole new facility.”

Bigendered facilities are not inclusive of gender diverse students, so participants made the following suggestions for adapting these facilities: “allow students to use the facility that best matches their gender identity;” “make showers and locker rooms more private for the individual;” “hire coaches that understand gender diversity and are open to students who wish to have privacy;” “foster an overall environment for gender inclusion in gym classes;” and “teach all students not to harass each other in bathrooms and locker rooms.”

Several participants expounded on the problem of inappropriate behaviors in bathrooms, stating that transgender and gender diverse people are usually the victims in such situations and that *all* students should be taught about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Participants also said that schools should ensure that a trusted adult is near bathrooms and locker rooms, in case a student is being bullied in these settings. One participant gave an example of housing a coach’s office within a locker room, as a safety measure. Other focus group members suggested making gym class optional in schools. Finally, all participants agreed that changing the way students use these gendered facilities should begin at the elementary school level so that students are “familiar with the changes” by the time they enter middle school.

Gendered microaggressions. As the conversation moved to the gendered structures and practices of schooling, most participants expressed frustration with what

they initially called “the gendering of everything” in K-12 schools. One participant said, “it’s just all these little things adding up;” another participant agreed, explaining, “it’s like little mosquito bites that add up every day and there’s just more and more. Most people don’t even think about it.” Several participants noted that what was being described reminded them of the concept of *microaggression*. The group then decided to compile a list titled “Stop Gendering Everything: A List of Gendered Microaggressions” as we discussed and made suggestions for addressing the “little gendered things that were adding up” in schools.

Most items on the list pointed to dominant structures and practices in K-12 schools, but some referred to common school policies (including dress codes). The following is an abbreviated version of this list of “gendered microaggressions:” boys versus girls activities, phrases like “man up” and using gender as an insult, Presidential fitness tests, bathroom passes, associating certain colors with one gender, gendered prizes/toys, valentine’s cards, school spirit items, prom/dance, dress codes, concert wear, using pet names with students, addressing groups as “ladies and gentlemen,” calling students “Mr.” and “Miss” and using “Ma’am” and “Sir.”

Participants then made several suggestions for addressing these microaggressions. The remainder of this section outlines some of the suggestions related to the structures and practices of schooling and any suggestions related to language and dress codes are featured in the sections **Language Matters** and **Dress Codes**.

Separating by binary gender categories. All participants agreed that schools should stop “pitting boys against girls” and should not rely on the practice of separating

students by binary gender categories when organizing competing teams. As one participant explained,

They do it in gyms. They'll do it in classrooms...I remember distinctly in a classroom where we were having to do an activity...they put boys on one side, girls on the other. And whoever won got a prize...having to fight against each other in that way.

Participants also said that schools should stop separating students by binary gender for the purposes of conducting competitive physical assessments (i.e., Presidential Fitness Tests). Several members of the focus group stated that these physical assessments are both sexist and ableist. Explaining the sexist nature of these assessments, one participant said, “If you can’t do as many pushups as the guys, you are seen as weaker and you associate yourself with what a girl can do.” Another participant stated, “It’s totally ableist—assigning some number of pushups that a person's body is supposed to do to say that they're healthy. You can't tell how healthy someone is by these arbitrary measurements.”

Associating colors and toys with gender. All seven participants discussed the frequent practice of associating specific colors and toys with either boys or girls and they recommended that educators stop: using specific bathroom passes for boys and for girls, choosing pink learning materials for girls and blue learning materials for boys, and sorting prizes and toys into binary gender groups. As an example, one participant described the gendering of prizes in elementary school:

They had a box for boys and a box for girls. So, it was like boys were always blue, Hot Wheels, stuff like that. And then girls were always like the little Disney

princess toys, or mini Barbies or Polly Pockets or something. But the idea is we still have to have two separate toy buckets versus just allowing them to be mixed...they're all toys.

Intervening in free play activities. Several of the microaggressions listed by participants referred to educators intervening during free play activities (i.e., recess, unstructured/free play, dress up) in elementary schools to “correct behavior and tell them ‘you can’t do those things because they’re not for your gender.’” Overall, participants said that educators should not set up “gendered activities” during free play time and should allow space for students to explore: gender identities, gender expressions, names, pronouns, occupational roles, family roles, and more. Some examples of allowing space and time for exploration were: “When kids are playing house, they can be whoever they want;” “During dress up, teachers should encourage kids to wear what they want and not tolerate bullying based on what kids choose to wear;” and “Teach kids that clothes don’t have a gender and that there are no ‘normal’ clothes.” A few participants tied the free play activities in elementary school to theater classes in middle and high schools. They suggested that theater instructors allow all students to play both male and female characters and just let students “play the part they want to play.”

Hiring teachers and coaches. When discussing some of the gendered microaggressions related to the structures and practices of schooling, many participants talked about the vital role that teachers and coaches play in building gender-inclusive learning environments. They made comments like: “It matters who you hire. Please hire coaches and teachers who are allies;” “Don’t assume the most masculine man is going to

be the best coach. Some of my favorite coaches were women;” “Don’t hire bros for coaches;” and “What teachers and coaches say and do matters.”

Inclusive curriculum. Some of the microaggressions identified by participants referred to pedagogical practices and curricular choices that are not inclusive of gender diverse people. For example, some participants said that most reading materials (textbooks, classroom/school wide library collections, worksheets, etc.) in schools were focused on “cisgender, heteronormative narratives” and that schools should provide reading materials that feature gender diverse experiences. Some suggestions offered by participants included: add gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., they) to stories and word problems that use “he/she” and “he or she;” use gender-neutral names for characters in stories and word problems; diversify reading materials to show a variety of gender expressions across diverse cultures; and incorporate some gender-neutral pronouns when modeling how to “do different types of writing, like essays.”

Language matters. As a group, we noticed that many of the microaggressions on our list pointed to the prevalence of gendered language in schools, which included: using pet names for specific genders (e.g., sweetie, little man, pumpkin, sport, sweetheart), referring to students using binary gender titles (i.e., Mister or Miss), addressing large groups using binary gender (i.e., “ladies and gentlemen” or “boys and girls”), enforcing rigid gender roles (i.e., “boys don’t...” and “girls don’t...”), and using gender as an insult (e.g., “you hit like a girl”). Based on these observations, participants made the following suggestions regarding gender-inclusive language: Call students by their name (avoiding pet names and gendered titles); stop making statements about what boys/girls can/can’t do; do not assume a student’s gender and start with gender-neutral assumptions (e.g.,

saying “they” or “the student”); when speaking to a large group, using gender-neutral greetings (e.g., “Hey, y’all” or “Welcome folks”); ask students for their preferred names and pronouns (and keep this information confidential, between student and teacher); and foster open and safe environments that allow space for students to both experiment with different pronouns/names and to speak up about what they prefer (e.g., letting others know when something makes you uncomfortable).

Dress codes. All participants agreed that the conversation about dress codes was a standalone topic, “with a whole set of microaggressions in and of itself.” Participants talked about how strict and gendered dress codes were enforced across different activities in schools, including: dances/prom, homecoming, graduation, band (uniforms and concert wear), and sports (uniforms). Some dress code-related suggestions made during small and large group discussion and recorded on posters included: promote free gender expression (no color rules or outfits belonging to just one gender); allow students to wear make-up and experiment with hair colors; “Don’t police assigned female at birth bodies! (i.e., don’t outlaw tank tops and shorts);” allow students to explore gender through expression (clothes, hair, etc.); and “ensure that prom and performance wear is unisex and interchangeable.”

During the focus group interview, seven participants discussed the executive summary developed from Phase I suggestions, providing some clarification about initial recommendations and offering ideas for the practical application of these gender-inclusive suggestions in K-12 schools. In the span of our two-hour conversation, the group constructed six main themes related to gender-inclusive schooling: Education, Protecting Students, Gendered Facilities, Gendered Microaggressions, Language Matters,

and Dress Codes. Of these six themes, the consensus among the group was that *Education* is the “most vital” component of gender-inclusive schooling, closely followed by *Protecting Students*.

Participants explained that the education piece includes providing ongoing, in-depth learning opportunities about gender diverse lives and experiences for all members of a school community; it is about understanding the difference between sex and gender, recognizing that gender is not a binary, and basically “teaching about people.” Protecting gender diverse students (the second theme constructed by focus group members) is about creating and enforcing gender inclusive (and anti-bullying) policies, fostering a climate of social acceptance for gender diversity (including supporting LGBTQIA+ student organizations), hiring LGBTQIA+ individuals and training all school personnel as allies, creating safe spaces, and ensuring protection from discrimination (as perpetuated by both other students and by teachers). The consensus among the group was that focusing on providing educational opportunities and protecting students would naturally lead to promoting discourse about the other four themes constructed by the group (i.e., Gendered Facilities, Gendered Microaggressions, Language Matters, and Dress Codes).

Supplementary Data

The reflective researcher journal, which served as supplementary data, showed the ways in which some elements of the project changed over time, including: the addition of a follow-up question during individual interviews, the incorporation of a philosophical technique (Derridean *sous rature*) to address both researcher and participant tensions with terminology, the title of the project, and adapting participant quotes after member checking. Both prior to and while conducting individual interviews, I wrote about my

own tensions with the term *gender non-binary*. The following snippet is from my reflective writing after the first few individual interviews:

I've been thinking a lot about this problem of language, especially when talking about diverse gender identities and expressions along a spectrum...identities that are "on the move" and deeply personal. Before talking to my participants, I thought, "This is not a perfect term." Now that I am asking participants about whether the term is problematic or not, I hear that some folks are okay with the term and some don't like using the prefix *non* because it communicates that something is "not normal." To address some of these tensions, I need to both use and trouble this term. (Personal Reflection, 2017)

Prior to conducting the first interview, I read some of my reflective journal entries and decided to add a follow-up question during individual interviews: "I am wondering about the term *gender non-binary*. Some people think it describes their gender identity well and others say that the term is problematic and/or has negative connotations. What are your thoughts on the term?" Participant responses to this question are outlined below.

Half of the participants in this study stated that *gender non-binary* can be problematic, "too exclusive," or have "negative connotations" because the prefix *non* communicates that "this is something Other." The other four participants did not view *gender non-binary* as a negative or problematic term and said things like: "It's very neutral and to the point. It doesn't feel offensive;" "It's just a descriptor, like a tool for education;" and "It's not negative, to me, but I like to use other words, too." All eight participants were then asked which terms they preferred to use when talking about their gender identities and expressions. Onyx said they used many terms, including: *gender*

nonconforming, gender diverse, agender, and gender non-binary. Kirk preferred using *gender diverse* or *gender nonconforming*. Steve said they still used *non-binary* but they preferred *gender diverse*. Harper and Nix preferred *non-binary*, Blaine preferred *gender diverse*, and Sky used both *genderqueer* and *non-binary*. Nikki liked to use a variety of terms to talk about their identity: *genderfluid, gender diverse, non-binary, and gender on a spectrum*.

Throughout these conversations with participants, I realized that the term *gender non-binary* can serve as a useful tool when teaching others about diverse gender identities and expressions:

I'm thinking the term is useful for teaching people who express their gender in a strict binary way about folks who do not have a gender identity and/or expression that fits neatly within a gender binary. So, it can serve, temporarily, as a teaching tool of sorts. I also want to honor my participants' thoughts and tensions (as well as my own tensions) about the language we use to talk about ourselves and others. The point, here, is to both use and trouble the term (until something better comes along?). (Personal Reflection, 2017)

These continuous reflective writing activities led to the decision to use a Derridean technique “*sous rature*” (under erasure) to signal (through the visual of a strikethrough) that the term *gender non-binary* was simultaneously used and troubled throughout this study. Other journal entries explored the possibility of incorporating a framework—Transformative Gender Justice—into the project:

A Transformative Gender Justice framework gets at the poststructural. We are looking at institutional structures and practices and cultural structures and

practices as problematic. The attention moves away from “fixing” individual people to analyzing the systems we’ve built to see if they’re problematic...to see what needs to be changed. This is really the point—to address the structures that are not inclusive of gender diverse individuals. Transformative Gender Justice needs to be part of the title and I need to incorporate the framework into chapter two. (Personal Reflection, 2017)

The reflective researcher journal entries traced the ways in which the member-checking process led to adapting participant quotes. I wrote about how participants responded to data snippets that had single word errors or misunderstandings. For example, I originally wrote that Sky was the only gay student in their small town. Through member-checking procedures, Sky informed me that they were the only “openly” gay student. Adding this one word changed the context of the sentence. In another example, I originally thought Harper learned about ~~gender non-binary~~ identities in college; through the member-checking process, they informed me that this was a misunderstanding; they learned about ~~gender non-binary~~ and genderfluid identities during high school.

Finally, the reflective journaling activities were an attempt to bracket some of my assumptions related to the project. Because I wrote about my own gendered educational experiences and recalled several negative memories and because all participants had non-binary gender identities, I assumed that participants had negative educational experiences and that they had previously reflected on those experiences. After revisiting my journal entries, I made concerted efforts to address these assumptions by including clarifying questions during both individual and focus group interview sessions.

The supplementary data (reflective researcher journal) provided a deeper analysis of several components of this project. Through this reflective writing process (and especially through further analysis of the journal entries), several changes were made to the overall study design. For example, additional follow-up questions were posed during individual interviews, a poststructural philosophical technique was utilized for the purposes of keeping the construct *gender non-binary* open and flexible, and a poststructural framework (Transformative Gender Justice) was incorporated to reinforce a focus on transforming systems and practices (rather than attempting to “fix” individuals).

Summary

The first data included in this chapter presented a detailed summary of each of the eight participants involved in this study. This detailed participant data section was followed by data related to the three research questions guiding this inquiry. Data related to the first research question was outlined using five main themes that described ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals’ experiences of K-12 schools: Limited (or No) Sense of Belonging, Feeling Unsafe, Conforming and Hiding, Silenced Topics, and Gendering of Structures, Policies, and Practices. Data related to the second research question documented one narrative per participant that serves as a deconstructive event illuminating the discursive structures and material practices that limit gender expression in schools.

Data related to the third research question documented gender-inclusive suggestions made by participants during both Phase I and Phase II of data collection. During Phase I (individual interviews), participants made suggestions across six major

themes: Cultivate Inclusive Mindsets and Practices, Stop Gendering Everything, Adapt Dress Codes, Provide Facility Choices, Use Gender-Inclusive Language, and Recognize and Learn about Gender Diversity. Phase II data also addressed the third question guiding this inquiry and focus group members made gender-inclusive suggestions across six main themes: Education, Protecting Students, Gendered Facilities, Gendered Microaggressions, Language Matters, and Dress Codes.

Finally, the supplementary data (reflective researcher journal) documented changes made to the project over time, including: adding a question about terminology to individual interviews, deciding to use a poststructural technique (*sous rature*), adding a framework, changing the project title, and adapting terms post member-checking.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Interpretation of Results

Gender diverse students like those involved in this project (Onyx, Kirk, Steve, Harper, Nix, Blaine, Nikki, and Sky) have valuable perspectives and experiences that inform the way we carry out schooling; simply hearing these perspectives is the most basic, foundational use of student voice in school improvement initiatives (Mitra, 2008, 2009), so it is surprising that a review of recent, widely-circulated educational leadership literature documents a continued lack of representation of LGBTQIA+ topics writ large and a near silence around the topic of gender diversity within leadership discourses (see **Leadership Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics**).

Educational leaders play a vital role in creating and reinforcing inclusive environments (Causton & Theoharis, 2014; Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015; Lustick, 2016; O'Malley, 2013; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015) for all students (including LGBTQIA+ students). If gender diverse topics and concerns are minimally-represented in the field, leaders may be unaware that gender diverse individuals are enrolled in their schools and, as a result, may fail to proactively address systems that are not inclusive of a variety of gender identities and expressions. In other words, serving our students involves first seeing and hearing them. The primary data collected in this study offer a glimpse into these student experiences and shows that ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals are always already members of our school communities.

The primary research questions guiding this inquiry were concerned with exploring the retrospective accounts (Beck, 2014) of ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' experiences in schools and interpreting those experiences under the influence of

deconstruction (Derrida, 1967/1976; Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002; MacLure, 2009).

Deconstruction is a critical philosophical practice that involves affirming “what is excluded and forgotten” (Biesta, 2009, p. 91) through the recognition that difference is always present (and that we often fail to notice differences). Interpretations of results generated from the primary research questions are outlined below.

Interpretation of Primary Research Question #1 Data

The following interpretation of results generated from the first research question—What are the retrospective accounts of ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals’ experiences in K-12 educational institutions?—is organized by five major themes constructed from individual interview data: (1) Limited (or no) Sense of Belonging; (2) Feeling Unsafe; (3) Conforming and Hiding; (4) Silenced Topics; and (5) Gendering of Structures, Policies, and Practices.

Limited (or no) sense of belonging. The first two themes constructed from individual interview data (i.e., Limited (or no) Sense of Belonging and Feeling Unsafe) are directly related to the documented problem of LGBTQIA+ students experiencing negative school climates in the U.S. According to school climate reports published GLSEN, negative climates impact LGBTQIA+ students’ sense of safety and belonging within these institutions (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016). Most of the gender diverse participants involved in this study felt like they did not belong in schools; they felt isolated (Steve), other (Kirk), and out of place (Sky). As a result, Nix, Sky, and Kirk hated school and Onyx said that never fitting in “wore [them] down.”

Creating inclusive school climates involves developing positive relationships with and ensuring safety for students (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009); these

gender diverse participants' experiences of school life show that their K-12 schools did not deliberately work toward developing positive relationships with and ensuring safety for them. According to the National School Climate Center (2014), climates "reflect [the] norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices and organizational structures" (p. 4) of schools. Considering that most participants felt they did not belong in schools, educational leaders in these settings benefit from thinking about how school climates (as experienced by these students) provide insight about the dominant relationships, practices, and structures of these institutions. These factors (e.g., relationships, practices, structures, values) that influence school climates are intertwined with gender diverse students' sense of belonging and safety in schools; as Meyer (2014) explains— "When students are denied space to express themselves and to feel recognized and valued for who they are, they experience isolation, undergo damage to self-esteem, and are vulnerable to bullying" (p. 73).

Feeling unsafe. The second theme constructed from individual interview data also speaks to school climate in that, as explored in the above section, negative climates impact LGBTQIA+ students' sense of safety and belonging within educational institutions (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016). Steve, Nix, Kirk, and Sky regularly experienced gender-based bullying (including both verbal and physical harassment) in their K-12 schools and, as a result, did not feel safe in these settings. This finding is in line with other studies documenting that LGBTQIA+ individuals regularly deal with harassment and bullying in schools (Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Brill & Pepper, 2013; Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016; Rands, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011, 2012). Because LGBTQIA+ students experience

much higher rates of bullying than their non-LGBTQIA+ peers (Robinson & Espelage, 2011), many scholars urge school leaders to create (and enforce) policies that ensure safety for all students (Robinson & Espelage, 2012) and to regularly assess school climate (Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2009) in efforts to proactively “create spaces where all students feel safe and are free from victimization experiences” (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015, p. 108).

It is alarming that most participants involved in this study felt as if they did not belong and many participants felt unsafe in schools. Safety and belonging are important components of a positive school climate (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016) and it is educational leaders who must “provide and reinforce an inclusive school environment” (Lustick, 2016, p. 163), ensuring that students “feel safe and supported” (Davison & Frank, 2006, p. 162). It is clear there is much to be accomplished in building and sustaining positive climates for LGBTQIA+ students.

Conforming and hiding. The third theme constructed from individual interview data showed that all participants felt pressure to conform to the gender norms in place at their K-12 schools. This theme of conforming and hiding is related to school climate in that many participants said they chose to conform and/or hide aspects of their personalities for several reasons related to safety and belonging. For example, Kirk conformed to minimize bullying and Onyx hid their emotions and interests to avoid being teased by peers. All participants said the pressure to conform to gender roles and stereotypes increased in secondary schools. This increased pressure to conform is also documented among gender diverse adult participants in a 2012 study published by Pollock and Eyre.

It is no surprise that all participants felt they needed to conform and/or hide aspects of themselves in schools. Blount (1996, 1999, 2000) asserts that educational institutions are (and have been) gender-segregated sites of social regulation and that individuals who transgress gender roles and expectations are faced with consequences. Other scholars, particularly poststructural thinkers, have also noted the role gender—a social construction (Butler, 1990, 2011)—plays in schools: appropriate/acceptable gender-related behaviors are learned and practiced in educational institutions (MacNaughton, 2001); the binary structures of schooling enforce gender conformity (Lugg, 2003); gender expectations are discursively formed and regulated (Butler, 1990; Davison & Frank, 2006; Gannon & Davies, 2007); and diverse gender identities are erased through the linking of gender identity and sexuality (Nicolazzo, 2016).

When gender diverse students must generally either conform or hide to protect themselves from harassment or to feel like they belong in a school community, it is clear that the way we carry out schooling is not working for all students (and especially gender diverse students). It can be difficult to resist the labels (and related norms and expectations) put on us by others (Francis, 2000); the individuals involved in this study shared stories in which they attempted (briefly) to meet the expectations for gender “normalcy” in their schools. What is it about our K-12 schools that makes students feel pressure to conform or hide? This theme should remind educational leaders to move away from a focus on individual students and toward a framework of Transformative Gender Justice (Travers, 2008, 2014)—a focus on the institutional and discursive structures and practices of schooling that limit our repertoire of possible selves (Scott, 2010).

Silenced topics. For all participants involved in this project, K-12 school-based conversations rarely included the topic of gender diversity; it was virtually absent. It is as if this important topic fell through the grids, so to speak. In some cases, students attempted to discuss gender and the conversation was silenced *for* them. For example, Nikki remembers attempting to broach the topic of gender neutral restrooms and their teacher quickly ended the discussion. Perhaps gender diversity was a silenced topic because it was considered taboo. As Blount noted (2000), “cross-gender behaviors and characteristics have been linked in the popular mind with homosexuality and all of its attendant taboos since the late 1920s” (p. 84); this linking of gender identity and sexuality leads to the problem of compulsory heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2016) in schools, erasing gender diverse identities and experiences. Airton (2013) challenges the idea that LGBTQIA+ topics are societal taboos and argued that conversations with children about gender are inherently less taboo than conversations about sexuality. These (and other scholars) make the point that LGBTQIA+ topics writ large, should not be missing from school-based discourses and that student-friendly, inclusive climates will naturally encourage discussions about gender and sexuality (Airton, 2013; Schmidt, 2015).

Considering the minimal representation of LGBTQIA+ topics (and seeming silence around gender diversity) in prominent educational leadership discourses (see **Leadership Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics**), it is not surprising to learn that gender diversity was a silent topic in participants’ schooling experiences. Educational leaders play an important (and proactive) role in bringing these conversations to the surface; as O’Malley (2013) explains, leaders who “do not expect and anticipate sexuality and gender diversity among youth, staff, and families participate in a silence that actively

constructs school communities as presumably and exclusively heterosexual and gender conforming” (p. 356). In other words, having conversations about gender diverse identities and experiences is a *proactive* way to address homophobia, sexism, genderism, and compulsory heterogenderism in schools. Building student-friendly, inclusive climates may help bring these conversations to the fore as such climates involve including students in discussions about gender diversity. After all, one of the benefits associated with using student voice initiatives to improve schools is that students are often able to talk about subjects that adults may be reluctant to broach (Mitra, 2008).

Gendering of structures, policies, and practices. The fifth (and final) theme constructed from individual interview data describes the general gendering of schooling. All eight participants made comments about schools as inherently gendered and gender-segregated systems. This finding is in line with Blount’s (1996, 1999, 2000) historical analysis of U.S. public schools as highly gender-stratified environments that strictly enforce rigid gender roles and stereotypes; as Blount (2000) explains, it seems the role of schools has been (and continues to be) “reflecting, creating, enforcing, and restricting” (p. 85) gendered behaviors.

As participants discussed the “gendering of everything” in schools, they gave examples across several sub-topics (i.e., General Gendering, Dress Codes, Extracurricular Activities, Sex Education, and Language and Messaging) related to the dominant structures, practices, and policies that worked to limit gender expression in these settings. According to several poststructural theorists (Lugg, 2003; Meyer, 2014; Travers, 2008, 2014), educational leaders must address these multiple factors (structures, practices, policies) impacting student’s educational experiences rather than attempting to change (or

fix) the individual student. Like Travers (2008, 2014), the participants involved in this study recognized that institutional structures and cultural expectations played a role in reinforcing strict gender roles and stereotypes in their K-12 schools; they spoke to the “super-separated” system “stuck in very binary thinking” and explained that the material practices tied to this binary thinking (e.g., color-coordinating by binary gender categories of boy/girl; setting up competitive boys versus girls games; enforcing strict dress codes) served as a reminder that, if they did not conform to the gender norms in place, they did not belong. Highly gendered structures certainly fuel injustices (Travers, 2014) and, according to Lugg (2003), the most rigid binary structures serve a simple purpose—to enforce gender conformity.

As participants talked about their gender-related experiences in K-12 schools, they identified several spaces that were highly gender-segregated (including playgrounds, gyms, locker rooms, bathrooms, and fields) and shared that, within these spaces, gender-related injustices were amplified (Travers, 2008, 2014). In one example, Steve said, “In the sports atmosphere, it’s not good to be a girl...if you’re more masculine, if you’re a guy, you’re good at your sport.” Some participants remembered avoiding these spaces altogether (e.g., opting out of activities like physical education and school dances) because they felt like they did not belong (as members of one binarily-structured gender group). Policies (such as strict dress codes and/or only allowing heterosexual couples to attend school dances) and language-related practices (e.g., “boys will be boys;” “you play like a girl;” “ladies and gentlemen;” etc.) played a part in enforcing gender conformity (Lugg, 2003) for the participants involved in this project. In fact, several participants attempted to conform to the strict gender norms in place, in efforts to participate in these

activities as a valid member of the school community.

As noted above, the dominant language practices reinforced the gender norms in place at participants' schools. Poststructural thinkers, and especially poststructural feminists, recognize the power of language and discourse in both forming and regulating individuals within systems (Gannon & Davies, 2007; St. Pierre, 2000). According to St. Pierre (2000), "language does not simply point to pre-existing things and ideas but rather helps to construct them and, by extension, the world as we know it" (p. 483). The gender-segregating language practices at participants' schools created the bounds within which an individual could express their gender (based on binary gender categories as determined by sex assigned at birth) and still be accepted as a valid and valued member of the school community.

Overall, the participants' K-12 experiences pointing to the highly-gendered structures, practices, and policies of schools show that many factors impact students' sense of belonging in these settings. In a 2014 chapter about supporting gender diversity in schools, Meyer talks about the importance of addressing these factors; she had the following to say:

It is the current structures, policies, and cultures of schools that are problems to be fixed, and not the individual child. A more developmentally appropriate, and legally defensible approach would be to examine where the sites of tension and conflict are for the school community and examine why these spaces are not inclusive and affirming for students of all gender identities and expressions. (p. 82)

Working toward gender-inclusive environments, then, must be a proactive, system-level (O'Malley, 2013), multi-faceted approach that includes critiquing previously unanalyzed school practices and policies that affect non-mainstream students (Marshall & Oliva, 2010), including gender diverse students.

Interpretation of Primary Research Question #2 Data

The following section serves as an interpretation of results generated from the second primary research question: How might these experiences serve as deconstruction events, making visible the excess of discursive structures and material practices that reinforce binary gender within these institutions? As explained in Chapter IV, during individual interview sessions participants were asked to recall (and discuss) a moment in which they were present during an activity or event that was structured in a bigender way (e.g., separation into groups based on binary gender categories of boy and girl).

All eight participants shared memories about activities that occurred outside the general classroom setting (including physical education classes, recess, sports-related events, and school dances). Considering that participants' most memorable moments of being separated by binary gender occurred in extracurricular spaces tells us something about the dominant structures and practices of those spaces—they are highly gendered.

Onyx, Blaine, Nikki, and Sky shared stories about their presence during physical education activities (e.g., gym class, sports events, recess) that did not seem to be constructed with them in mind. They explained that “everything was boy and girl” and they often felt like they did not belong in either category and/or they preferred activities meant for the “opposite” group. Although half of all participants focusing on physical education/gym/sports is a significant finding, it is not surprising. In 2008, Ann Travers

began developing her framework for Transformative Gender Justice through efforts to transform organized sports in the U.S. Travers (2008) explained that sports teams promote rigid two-sex systems (Fausto-Sterling, 2012) and perpetuate gender injustices; she suggested using feminist strategies to reform the sports world (i.e., analyzing and addressing inequitable systems, policies, and cultures). When educators hear that students in physical education classes feel “sad and uncomfortable” (Nikki), like they “don’t belong” (Blaine), and/or prefer to “sit on the sidelines” (Onyx), we should take a system-level approach to solving problems and consider the ways in which activities *could* be structured to be inclusive of all students. The stories shared by Onyx, Blaine, Nikki, and Sky documented that they were present during these activities (even if they felt as if they did not belong or chose not to participate). They were there, in that space, and efforts could have been made to include them.

Onyx and Sky were present within systems that did not appear to be constructed with them in mind and they chose not to participate (i.e., “sitting on the sidelines” and sitting down in the field, refusing to play); they held space, pushing back on the norms, being present as different. They made it easier for educators to *see* them. Blaine and Nikki were also present within systems not constructed with them in mind but they appealed to authority and participated (although reluctantly). Nikki did not voice their concerns because they were afraid of “getting in trouble” and Blaine participated because they “*had to.*” The memories shared by Onyx and Sky serve as more obvious deconstruction events because they moved their bodies in protest; they were more easily *seen* as different in those situations.

When educational leaders notice that students are choosing not to participate or protesting an activity, they must react; there is an opportunity to analyze (and adapt) the dominant (and oppressive) structures and practices that exclude some students. When students are merely present as different, but do not protest with their bodies, it can be difficult for educational leaders to notice them. The memories shared by Blaine and Nikki also serve as deconstruction events in that Blaine and Nikki were simply present (yet overlooked) as different, which serves as a subtle form of activism. According to Derrida, deconstruction is what happens when individuals who do not belong are still present; unfortunately, the dominant structures in place often swallow individuals, allowing others to overlook them, rendering them invisible (Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002). In these stories, Blaine and Nikki were present as different, yet overlooked.

Three participants—Kirk, Steve, and Nix—shared memories about high school prom. Kirk and Steve left prom early because they felt uncomfortable wearing clothing that adhered to the strict dress code policies. Both Kirk and Nix felt like they did not belong at prom because their school policies did not allow students to bring same-gender prom dates. Because Nix was not allowed to take their same-gender partner as a date, they chose not to participate in prom. These deconstruction events of the past serve as an affirmation of *who* “is excluded and forgotten” (Biesta, 2009, p. 91); high school prom was not constructed with students like Kirk, Steve, and Nix in mind. Recognizing that gender diverse students were excluded from these activities leads us to ask an important question—What are some of the discursive structures and material practices tied to school dances that exclude gender diverse students?

While each deconstruction event of the past (as presented through participants' memories) exposes a need for reworking some of the structures of schooling that are not inclusive of a variety of students (Stengers & Pignarre, 2011), the memories in which participants did not actively protest (but were merely present as different) points to the importance of anticipating that some of the structures and practices in place are not inclusive of gender diverse students. After all, "deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organisation of a subject, or even of a modernity. It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed ..." (Derrida, 1991, pp. 270-276). Recognizing these individuals' memories as deconstruction events of the past helps us see that deconstruction is always, already happening (e.g., difference is always present) and we should make space for what is to come. In other words, educational leaders must *anticipate* problematic structures and practices and must proactively build inclusive environments. This is consistent with previous research calling for proactive, system-level approaches to building and sustaining positive (and inclusive) school climates with LGBTQIA+ students in mind (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010; O'Malley, 2013; O'Malley & Capper, 2015).

The memories constructed from data related to the second primary research question documented that gender diverse individuals are always already present as members of school communities (even if they are overlooked and/or excluded). Noticing this presence of difference leads to opportunities for transforming the way we carry out schooling in that listening to gender diverse individuals' memories of school life illuminates some of the dominant norms, values, and structures of educational institutions (National School Climate Center, 2014) that limit non-binary participation and inclusion.

After all, our institutional structures and practices are always open to scrutiny (Butler, 1990, 2011) and we are all responsible for uncovering problematic structures and practices and transforming those that might be oppressive (St. Pierre, 2000); exposing and transforming gender-limiting structures and practices serves as the first step in working toward gender-inclusive learning environments for all students.

Interpretation of Secondary Research Question Data

The following interpretation of results generated from the secondary research question—How might we take up these perspectives and experiences to inform gender-inclusive professional development for educators? —is organized by six major themes constructed from focus group interview data (see list ending this paragraph). Although an initial set of six themes related to the secondary research question were constructed from individual interview sessions (i.e., Cultivate Inclusive Mindsets and Practices; Stop Gendering Everything; Adapt Dress Codes; Provide Facility Choices; Use Gender-Inclusive Language; and Recognize and learn about Gender Diversity), these initial themes were taken up (and synthesized) by focus group members, which resulted in a new set of themes. The following interpretation of results is organized by these six themes constructed by focus group members: (1) Education; (2) Protecting Students; (3) Gendered Facilities; (4) Gendered Microaggressions; (5) Language Matters; and (6) Dress Codes.

Education. As we discussed the ways in which schools could become gender-inclusive places of learning, all participants agreed that education is the most vital component of developing and sustaining gender-inclusive climates because it is important to learn about “*who* and *what* you’re trying to include.” This need for increased

educational opportunities is echoed throughout studies calling for additional institutional-level supports for meeting the needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals in U.S. schools (e.g., Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010; O'Malley, 2013; O'Malley & Capper, 2015); these scholars offer several recommendations for improving educational outreach, including: provide ongoing training for teachers (Greytak, et al., 2016), integrate LGBTQIA+ topics into educational leadership preparation programs (O'Malley & Capper, 2015), and develop LGBTQIA+-inclusive teaching strategies and curricular resources (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010).

There is clearly a need for increased education about LGBTQIA+ topics writ large in schools, as documented by these and other scholars. The participants involved in this study agree and they take it a step further, stating that all members of a school community (including administrators, teachers, coaches, other school personnel, and students) should have continuous access to these educational opportunities and that gender diversity should be treated as a standalone topic, worthy of deeper inquiry.

During both individual interviews and the focus group interview, participants touched on the *who*, *what*, and *how* of gender inclusive education. Who is involved? Although (as outlined above), they agreed that *all* members of a school community should be involved in LGBTQIA+ educational opportunities (and especially trainings focused on gender diversity), participants also said that adults should learn more about the topic before teaching their students about gender diversity. This suggestion is in line with several studies calling for increased educational opportunities (for both preservice and in-service teachers and administrators) that are focused on supporting transgender (and gender diverse) students (e.g., GLSEN, 2016; Meyer, 2014; Miller, 2009; O'Malley

& Capper, 2015; Rands, 2009; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013).

What should educators learn? Overall, participants suggested providing training sessions focused on learning “about different people” and “how gender affects everyone.” During our group conversation (Phase II), participants explained that, in a gender inclusive environment, educators understand the difference between sex and gender, recognize that there are more than two genders and that gender diverse (and especially ~~gender non-binary~~) people exist, that their “identities are valid.” This need for increased understanding around the topics of gender and sex in educational arenas was put forth by Glasser and Smith in 2008; they reviewed educational research literature and discovered that gender was often vaguely defined and/or conflated with sex. As a result, Glasser and Smith (2008) suggested that educational researchers “remove sex as the default meaning for gender” and recognize that gender “holds promise for studies of the norms and expectations that influence people’s behaviors in social contexts, including school classrooms” (p. 349). More recently, Nicolazzo (2016) introduced the term *compulsory heterogenderism* to talk about the ways in which linking gender identity to sexuality erases transgender (and gender diverse) identities and experiences. Understanding the differences between sex and gender (and sexuality) also serves to address the problem of heterogenderism in schools.

How should school communities learn about gender diversity? In a recent text about supporting transgender and gender diverse youth, several scholars suggest that K-12 schools support anti-transphobia policies through ongoing “teacher training and community outreach/education” (Travers, 2014, p. 65) and point to the importance of providing these professional development opportunities for all school staff (Meyer,

2014). As noted in the paragraphs above, participants said that adults should learn about gender diverse identities and experiences (through professional development activities) prior to teaching their students about these topics. Participants also suggested incorporating school wide educational activities/celebrations, like recognizing the national Transgender Day of Visibility, inviting gender diverse speakers to campus, or hosting conferences, assemblies, and festivals focused on gender diversity.

Overall, participants' suggestions for gender-inclusive schooling couched within the broad and vital theme *Education*, pointed to the need for school wide educational opportunities (for teachers, administrators, school staff, and students) centered on gender diversity, writ large. In further explanation, participants said such education pieces should point to gender as: a social construction, encompassing more than two categories, fluid, and not synonymous with sex. Additionally, educational outreach should be an ongoing process focused on learning about and celebrating gender diverse experiences and cultures.

Protecting students. Creating inclusive school environments requires not only educating our communities about diverse individuals and experiences but ensuring that all members of the community feel safe, protected (especially by those in positions of power), and included. Hernandez and Fraynd (2015) speak to the vital role educational leaders play in protecting LGBTQIA+ students: "...leaders...must examine the experiences of students who are LGBTQ and those perceived to be LGBTQ, and take appropriate action to ensure the protection and care of these individuals" (p. 115).

Participants explained that protecting non-binary (and gender diverse) students was "almost more important" than the education component of gender-inclusive

schooling. According to participants, protecting students involves not only creating non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies but consistently enforcing those policies. Additionally, protecting students goes beyond establishing and enforcing rules and policies: it is about creating a climate in which gender diverse students are accepted as valid members of the community.

Whereas many researchers state the importance of establishing LGBTQIA+-inclusive policies in schools (Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016; MacGillivray, 2004; Russo, 2006), other scholars argue that policies, alone, are not enough (Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2012) when working to address the elevated numbers of LGBTQIA+-based bullying incidents in U.S. schools (Greytak, et al., 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). According to recent studies outlining the ways in which educational leaders create LGBTQIA+-inclusive climates, one way to enforce anti-bullying policies is to track and stop harassment incidents on campus (O'Malley, 2013; O'Malley & Capper, 2015). Clearly, enforcement efforts like these were not in place at participants' schools.

Several researchers (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006, 2010; O'Malley, 2013) point to the need for *both* protective and inclusive policies for LGBTQIA+ youth in schools. Koschoreck and Slattery (2006, 2010) state that school policy structures can easily be adapted to interrupt heteronormativity by ensuring that both protective and inclusive policies are in place. O'Malley (2013) agreed, stating that school policies should be created with an educative, rather than a punitive, purpose in mind and should go beyond protection to achieve inclusion: "Inclusive policies extend the focus found in protective

policies, which is on creating a (minimally) safe environment, to create a more authentically equitable environment” (p. 371).

Although not all participants said they felt unsafe in school, most participants experienced gender-based bullying and harassment in these settings. When making suggestions for school improvement, participants said that the enforcement of anti-bullying policies should include consequences for students who are teasing others. This call for enforcing school policies that protect LGBTQIA+ students is consistent with previous research pointing to a fundamental problem in today’s schools—staff and faculty rarely respond to or intervene in gender-based bully situations (Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016). Teaching and encouraging educators to enforce anti-bullying policies through responding to gender-based bullying (perpetrated by both children and adults) is a first (and minimal) step toward creating learning environments in which gender diverse students not only feel safe and protected but feel included as valid, celebrated members of the school community.

Gendered facilities. Considering the physical structures and layouts of school buildings (especially those that have remained standing for decades) allows us to notice the historical nature of U.S. public schools as deeply gender-stratified environments (Blount, 1999). In fact, it seems that many school facilities (especially gyms, bathrooms, and locker rooms) were built with a rigid two-sex system in mind (Fausto-Sterling, 2012) and several poststructuralists remind us that these rigid structures limit the participation and inclusion of individuals with diverse gender identities and expressions (Butler, 1990, 2011; Doan, 2010; Thurer, 2005). The participants involved in this study noticed that

most facilities were “built that way” (i.e., constructed to facilitate the separation of two gender groups) and agreed that gender-inclusive suggestions related to facilities were about “changing the idea behind bathrooms and locker rooms rather than building a whole new facility.”

Because gender is a social construction (Butler, 1990, 2011), gender stratification is also socially constructed (Blount, 1999), which means, even if changing the layout of buildings may prove challenging, we can still analyze and adjust gender-stratifying practices in these settings. According to focus group members, “changing the idea” behind these facilities includes providing *all* students with privacy, choices, social education, and trusted adults. For example, school leaders might focus on adapting spaces like showers and locker rooms to allow for privacy (e.g., adding curtains or screens); hiring inclusive and understanding coaches and physical education teachers; requiring instruction about appropriate, respectful behaviors in these settings; and recognizing the need for attention to physical education as a possible site of gender-based bullying and isolation for students.

Gendered microaggressions. Participants made many gender-inclusive suggestions back to schools across the dimensions of structures, policies, and practices (categorized as “gendered microaggressions”). The interpretation of results included in this category is line with a poststructural view of gender and speaks, in particular, to the importance of working toward Transformative Gender Justice (Travers, 2008, 2014) in schools.

As participants discussed their frustrations with the “gendering of everything” in schools, they made suggestions focused on: open and inclusive learning environments,

student choice, freedom of expression, and the diversification of learning materials. Participants asked that educators not assign colors, toys, prizes, and activities to a specific gender group; they said teachers should not create gendered activities nor should they intervene during free play activities. Other suggestions related to promoting open and inclusive climates included a focus on hiring faculty and staff who are open-minded (and preferably trained as allies of the LGBTQIA+ community).

Finally, in addressing all the “little gendered things that were adding up in schools,” the focus group said schools need to diversify learning materials (e.g., texts, word problems, and stories that include gender diverse and/or gender-neutral characters and incorporate gender-neutral names and pronouns). This suggestion is in line with recommendations put forth by Koschoreck and Slattery (2006, 2010), who stated that addressing heterosexism (and other isms and phobias) in schools requires taking a system-level, proactive approach that involves addressing both teaching strategies and curricular issues. Other scholars (O’Malley, 2013; O’Malley & Capper, 2015) agree that building LGBTQIA+-inclusive educational environments necessitates proactive, system-level approaches to transformative action.

Participants’ suggestions for addressing the gendered microaggressions of schooling illuminated some of the discursive structures and material practices limiting gender expression in these settings. These recommendations help us see clearly the oppressive normative structures in place (Butler, 1990, 2004) that fuel gender injustices by reinforcing strict gender roles and stereotypes (Travers, 2008, 2014). Through adapting the structures and practices of schooling to be more open and inclusive of gender diversity, we “advance the gender spectrum as the norm...a pro-active and

structural way of working toward inclusion for transgender and gender-variant children” (Travers, 2014, p. 63).

Language matters. Considering that “language builds the world as we know it” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 483), language and discourse are pivotal to interpreting (and hence gaining a deeper understanding of) the diverse identities and expressions that make up our social worlds. If we, as subjects, are discursively produced and regulated (Crotty, 1998; Gannon & Davies, 2007), then the words we use to describe our identities and experiences have the potential to “produce very real, material, and damaging structures in the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 481). Interpreting the data constructed from the secondary research question showed that language is a key factor to consider when building gender-inclusive school climates and that some school-related discourses produce “damaging structures” for ~~gender non-binary~~ (and gender diverse) students.

The participants involved in this project discussed the prevalence of gendered (including gender-segregating) language in K-12 schools that enforced (and reinforced) strict roles and stereotypes assigned to binary gender categories. Participants noticed that school staff and students regularly used gender-specific pet names and binary gender titles and salutations; they sometimes used gender as an insult and often made statements reinforcing gender roles and stereotypes (e.g., “boys will be boys”).

In making suggestions back to schools, all participants agreed that “language matters” to inclusive school climates. The group recommended several language-related strategies: call students by their preferred name; practice noticing (and then adapting) the gendered language you use; start with gender neutral assumptions and greetings; and, most importantly, create open and inclusive climates in which students feel safe to both

experiment with gender-related words and expressions and to speak up when they feel uncomfortable or excluded.

These suggestions are in harmony with the many calls for creating LGBTQIA+-inclusive school climates (e.g., Greytak, et al., 2016; Lustick, 2016; O'Malley, 2013) and the recommendation that educators engage in critical reflection about the language they use in schools is certainly echoed throughout this literature base (Davison & Frank, 2006; Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003).

Dress codes. Strict dress codes are common educational policies rooted in narrow views of gender (as conflated with and limited to binary sex categories) and, when enforced, become gender-segregating practices that limit the ways in which students are allowed to express themselves in educational settings. Participants described their K-12 school dress codes as oppressive policies, “with a whole set of microaggressions in and of itself;” essentially, the gender-inclusive suggestions offered by participants were focused on honoring student choice and promoting an open, inclusive environment that allowed space for a variety of gender expressions. Such results may lead us to ask, “What is the purpose of these strict dress codes and why are we enforcing them?”

Summary

Overall, results generated from the secondary research question highlight the importance of taking a system-level approach when working toward inclusive, positive school climates. Within the six themes outlined above, participants made gender inclusive schooling suggestions that cut across the dimensions of structures, practices, and policies. This is an important finding considering that educational inequities result from “systemic organizational practices and policies...that have not been analyzed or

acted on with respect to their impact on non-mainstream students” (Marshall & Oliva, 2010, p. 7).

Most participants felt a limited sense of belonging and safety in schools, so it is not surprising that they said providing continuous educational opportunities and protecting gender diverse students are of utmost importance to establishing inclusive learning environments. The results generated from the secondary research question are rooted in the poststructural notion of agency (Gannon & Davies, 2007) in that participants: shared their experiences, identified problematic components of schooling, and made suggestions for improvement.

In answering the question “How might we take up these perspectives and experiences to inform professional development for educators?,” we unearth many possible sites of tension for ~~gender non-binary~~ (and gender diverse) students in schools and pose a follow-up question: “What can we do to transform these structures, policies, and practices that limit gender expression in schools?” In this way, we (as educators) express our own agency through increasing awareness about oppressive constitutions, identifying possibilities for taking action, and beginning the process of transformative action (Gannon & Davies, 2007).

Applications—Taking Up these Perspectives and Experiences to Inform Gender Inclusive Professional Development

This section outlines some ways in which educational leaders can take up the data presented in this project to inform a model of gender inclusive professional development. Considering that most gender diverse students have negative experiences in U.S. schools (Greytak, et al., 2016) and that the topic of gender diversity is virtually absent from

prevalent educational leadership discourses (see **Leadership Discourses and LGBTQIA+ Topics**), developing a model of professional development informed by student perspectives (Mansfield, 2014) is one way to take transformative action, to begin seeing and including gender diverse students in schools, and to answer the follow-up question posed in the previous section—What can we do to transform these structures, policies, and practices that limit gender expression in schools?

If education *about* and protection *for* gender diverse individuals are the most vital components of gender inclusive schooling, then models of professional development must be organized with a focus on deep inquiry into the topics of gender diversity and gender-related school policies. Considering participants' suggestions to teach all members of a school community that “gender affects everyone,” the model should be structured as an inquiry into gender in educational settings. In this way, educators learn that gender is: a social construction, not synonymous with sex, more than two categories, and affects all people. In other words, the primary purpose of the professional development is to teach educators about gender (and the social construction of gender) writ large.

A secondary purpose of this professional development is to highlight the perspectives and experiences of gender diverse (including ~~gender non-binary~~) individuals in schools (to show educators that these students are members of the community and efforts should be made to include them). In the following paragraphs, I outline some applications for using the data presented in this study to inform gender inclusive professional development efforts; these applications are further categorized by the primary purpose (Gender Writ Large) and secondary purpose (Gender Diversity *in*

Schools) of this model.

Gender Writ Large

Data related to the secondary research question guiding this inquiry documented the need for professional development opportunities for educators that focus on the topic of gender, writ large. Based on the education-related suggestions made by participants, these professional development sessions should address gender as a social construct, explore differences between gender and sex, and show that there are more than two categories of gender.

Applying these suggestions need not involve creating a full set of lesson plans. Several organizations, such as GLSEN, provide public, downloadable toolkits meant for training school personnel (with a target audience of classroom teachers and coaches) to be inclusive of all LGBTQIA+ students. Several lessons included in these kits focus on gender identity and expression and can be adapted to meet the needs of different audiences. In fact, many activities constructed for the purposes of training LGBTQIA+ allies (e.g., GLSEN, 2016) can be tailored to increase focus on the topic of gender (i.e., reflective writing activities about interacting with gay and lesbian individuals can, instead, ask about interactions with people who transgress gender norms).

Other resources, such as *The Teaching Transgender Toolkit: A Facilitator's Guide to Increasing Knowledge, Decreasing Prejudice, and Building Skills* (Green & Maurer, 2015), include lessons and activities (for adult learners) covering topics like “Understanding Transgender Terminology,” “Thinking about Gender Messages,” and “What Does Non-Binary Mean?” These resources feature several other examples of activities broadly focused on gender and gender-related terminology that can be adapted

for different audiences. The point, here, is to remain focused on gender as a social construction and to see how “gender affects everyone.”

As outlined previously (see **Interpretation of Secondary Research Question Data**), the words we use influence our interpretations of the world and our understanding of others, so gender-related terminology is a critical component of a gender inclusive professional development framework. Because the focus is on gender writ large, the exploration of gender terminology need not include an exhaustive list of terms related to LGBTQIA+ identities and expressions, nor should educators need to commit terms and definitions to memory. The primary purpose of learning about and discussing gender-related terms (i.e., *gender*, *sex*, *gender identity*, *gender expression*, *gender binary*, *gender non-binary*, *transgender*, *gender diverse*, *genderqueer*, *genderfluid*, *gender non-conforming*, etc.) is to inform the larger discussion about gender as: socially-constructed, not conflated with sex, and encompassing more than two possible categories. While familiarizing oneself with the relevant terms is an important knowledge-building component, it is also important to discuss the imperfect and impermanent nature of the words (and associated definitions) we use to talk about diverse identities and expressions. For example, for the educators participating in this professional development, the primary takeaway is a deeper understanding of gender, including an understanding that gender (identity and expression) is a diverse and complex construct that impacts the lives of all people.

Learning about gender as a broad topic also involves gaining a deeper understanding of the gender-related policies and rules in place within educational arenas. For example, the model of gender inclusive professional development should include

activities centered on two tasks: (1) exploring and understanding federal (and local) policies protecting against sex-based and gender-based discrimination (e.g., Title IX and other nondiscrimination policies); and (2) investigating and discussing additional policies (not currently in place) that both protect and include gender diverse individuals in schools.

Finally, the goal of gender inclusive professional development is to build positive, inclusive school climates for all students (across diverse gender identities and expressions). Therefore, learning about gender writ large should also include exploring and modeling classroom-based lessons focused on the topic of gender. For example, GLSEN (2016) offers several public, downloadable lessons for elementary school classrooms included within the category “Gender Roles and Diversity;” the objective of these lessons is to promote dialogue about: gender-segregating practices (“That’s Just For.[Boys; Girls]”), gender stereotypes (“Such a Tomboy”), and gender messages (“Let’s Go Shopping” and “What are Little Boys and Girls Made Of?”). Another text (Green & Maurer, 2015) features lessons focused on locating and discussing the dominant gender messages of popular children’s books.

Gender (especially gender diversity) was a silenced topic in school for the participants involved in this study. If positive, inclusive climates are determined by student’s experiences of school life (National School Climate Center, 2014), then the proposed model of professional development (with a goal of creating gender inclusive climates) should include learning to break this silence by incorporating gender-related lessons and conversations in K-12 classrooms.

In summary, the primary purpose of gender inclusive professional development for educators is to learn about gender, broadly, as a social construction impacting the lives of all people. The professional development activities should include: exploring gender-related terminology, challenging narrow views about gender (i.e., only two categories and conflated with sex), understanding and analyzing gender-based policies, locating the self within gender conversations, and modeling classroom-level conversations focused on the topic of gender.

Gender Diversity *in* Schools

The secondary purpose for developing a model of gender inclusive professional development is to highlight the perspectives and experiences of gender diverse (including ~~non-binary~~) individuals in schools. Data related to the secondary research question guiding this project showed that participants wanted educators to “just be aware that trans kids and genderqueer kids and gender diverse kids *exist*” (Kirk, focus group interview). While exploring the broad topic of gender includes learning about gender diversity, studying gender diversity *in* schools (as a component of the professional development model) is primarily about increasing our awareness that gender diverse persons are members of our school communities; it is about noticing, about *seeing* our students.

Using the deconstruction events of the past (as illuminated by participants’ memories of being present during activities not constructed with them in mind) to create case narratives is one way to go about showing that gender diverse individuals are always present as different. For example, educational leaders can read about and discuss Kirk’s disappointing prom experience or Sky’s experience of receiving consequences for protesting their exclusion from specific sports activities. Simply sharing these memories

as case narratives brings these participants' presence as different into the light, whether they protested or were noticed at the time. Each case narrative would be followed by a list of discussion questions and topics asking educators to analyze the structures, policies, and practices that served to limit students' inclusion and participation. After noticing the presence of the student (through reading the case) and then participating in system-level analysis (through targeted discussion questions), educators could then discuss possibilities for transformative action related to the case (through additional discussion questions and activity prompts).

The list of discussion questions and topics following case narratives could also address the themes for gender-inclusive schooling constructed by focus group members. For example, when reading about Kirk's deconstruction event of the past (prom), discussion questions might cover topics related to dress codes and gendered microaggressions. In this way, the deconstruction events of the past shared by participants serve as powerful components of a gender inclusive professional development model; they are personal stories (based on ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' retrospective accounts of their experiences in K-12 schools) that not only show educators that ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals are always already present as members of our school communities but that discussing these experiences with a system-level approach in mind helps to address the multiple factors limiting gender expression in schools.

Limitations

It is important to note that the findings of this project may be restricted, based on several limitations common to basic qualitative research (Patton, 1999). Of the three most common limitations associated with qualitative research studies (i.e., limitations in

consideration of situation, time periods, and sample selection), the primary limitations occurring in this project were of the sampling and situation types.

Findings are limited because participants were selected using purposeful sampling methods. All eight participants involved in this study volunteered to participate through an organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals, which means the participants were likely highly interested in the topic and/or overall purpose of the project. This is an important limitation to consider when developing the framework for gender inclusive professional development because the intended audience (educational leaders) includes individuals with both binary and non-binary gender identities and expressions and with various levels of background knowledge related to the concepts of gender and gender diversity. With this limitation in mind, the proposed gender inclusive professional development (see **Applications** section on page 214) includes exploring gender-related terminology (and associated definitions) as a key component of the model for all educators, no matter the level of background knowledge.

Because I was also involved in the organization for transgender and ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals, I already knew six of the eight participants before interviewing them. In consideration of this increased familiarity, participants may have made assumptions about shared understandings around the topic of gender diversity and, as a result, may have thought it unnecessary to clarify some of the details presented during individual and focus group interview sessions. In the role of interviewer, I had to make deliberate efforts to notice when these moments (assumptions about shared understanding) were occurring and respond by asking several clarifying questions.

Several limitations related to situation also occurred during this project. Situation-related limitations refer to the inability to observe all possible situations associated with a research topic (Patton, 1999). In this case, the inquiry is limited because I did not interview ~~non-binary~~ students currently attending K-12 public schools; rather, I intentionally interviewed ~~gender non-binary~~ adults (post K-12) about their retrospective accounts of their K-12 educational experiences. This analysis was focused on listening to participants reflect on their schooling experiences and then sharing those memories. It would be interesting (and more challenging) to conduct an additional study that features interviews with ~~gender non-binary~~ students who are currently enrolled in K-12 schools and then compare those students' experiences with the retrospective accounts of experience presented in this study.

Other situation-related limitations of this study are that one participant dropped out and that the focus group only met once. At the beginning of the project, nine total participants volunteered to participate in this study; however, prior to the individual interview phase, one participant opted out of the study, explaining that they were experiencing elevated levels of anxiety “just thinking about talking about my past, especially my school life.” Losing this participant limited the study in that their educational experiences (which were visceral enough to affect their current state of mind) could have illuminated specific elements of school life that were problematic, helping to shape the components of the model of gender inclusive professional development. The final limitation related to situation is that the focus group only met once. If, instead, the group had met several times more, we would have had opportunities to seek further clarification about some of the initial suggestions made by the group and/or to generate

additional suggestions and strategies for gender inclusive schooling.

Future Research and Implications

This project opens the door to several major areas of future research including: taking up Derridean deconstruction as an analytical practice within educational research arenas, further developing a framework for gender-inclusive professional development, and listening to ~~gender non-binary~~ youth who are currently attending K-12 schools.

Derridean Deconstruction

Additional research exploring Derridean deconstruction as a useful analytical practice is needed. Because viewing data with Derrida in mind helps researchers notice moments in which people are present as different (especially when individuals are present within a structure not constructed with them in mind (Derrida & Rottenberg, 2002)), a Derridean deconstruction lens is particularly useful for other studies focused on proactively creating and sustaining LGBTQIA+-inclusive school climates. This poststructural frame assists with anticipating problems yet to come and in uncovering the multiplicity of factors influencing climate. Taking up Derrida and deconstruction leads educators to ask questions like “Who is falling through the grids (not being seen) in this school?”; “What am I doing that excludes and overlooks these students?”; and “What aspects of schooling can be transformed to be more inclusive?”

One possibility for future research that involves taking up Derridean deconstruction as an analytical practice would be an inquiry into educational leaders’ gendered experiences in K-12 schools. It would be interesting to conduct a study in which educational leaders (ideally those involved in gender inclusive professional development activities) write about their own educational experiences related to gender

(like my own reflexive journaling activities) and then practice reading those memories with Derrida and deconstruction in mind. Such reflective activities not only help educators see how gender has affected their personal lives but may also help them recognize moments in which they were present as different (placing themselves within conversations about gender and education). Eventually, I would like to meet with and help educational leaders work through these reflexive journaling processes. Such a study would provide valuable information about the effectiveness of using reflective journaling activities as a component of gender inclusive professional development.

Gender Inclusive Professional Development

While the findings generated by this study pointed to what (e.g., curriculum) and who (i.e., all members of a school community, but teachers first) should be included in gender inclusive training, further research is needed into *how* these professional development activities should unfold. An important question to pose is “According to professional development scholars, what is the most effective way to incorporate ongoing educator training?” It would be interesting to use the findings generated by this project in conjunction with studies outlining the most effective elements of professional development models for educators, in general. Such a study would incorporate both adult learning theories and results from recent research exploring the ways in which school staff prefer to learn.

Several researchers point to the role that high-quality, effective professional development programs (for K-12 educators) play in meeting the needs of all students (Gordon, 2005; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007; Sparks & Hirsch, 2000). Organizations like the National Staff Development Council (Sparks & Hirsch,

2000), for example, created standards for effective professional development and identified several areas of improvement: context, process, and content. *Content* speaks to the need for professional development efforts appropriate for specific environments and students. Considering that LGBTQIA+ students experience negative school climates and that educators rarely intervene in gender-based bullying situations (Greytak, et al., 2016), a framework for gender inclusive professional development is appropriate for the learning environments and students of most U.S. public schools.

In a text outlining important standards for the supervision of professional development in schools, Gordon (2005) said that professional development for educators should: include job-embedded activities, provide opportunities for dialogue, facilitate self-assessment, and offer differentiated activities (to meet the needs of educators' learning styles). These are notable features to consider when further developing a framework for gender inclusive professional development for educators. Other features of effective professional development to consider include: type (i.e., workshops, professional learning communities, coaching, lesson study, etc.), space (on or off site), and time (i.e., duration; one-time or continuous).

Coaching would likely be the most effective type of professional development for building gender-inclusive learning environments in that, with the coaching model, a pilot group of educators participate in the initial gender-focused learning experiences and then provide support and guidance to their peers and colleagues (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). Several scholars also note the importance of considering the space in which professional development occurs (Penuel, et al., 2007; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009); according to these studies, site-based trainings are more effective than those that take

place off-campus. Gender-inclusive professional development, then, should be offered at the school site level.

Considering that participants involved in this study said that educational experiences focused on gender diversity should be ongoing and continuous, the professional development model should include training sessions that take place over extended periods of time (as opposed to providing a single day of training). This suggestion is in line with studies reporting that professional development efforts are most effective when spanning longer periods of time (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). In fact, some of these scholars go so far as to recommend between 30 and 100 hours of training sessions occurring over the course of six months (Wei, et al., 2009).

Additional inquiries into *how* a model of gender inclusive professional development should unfold in schools should take elements of effective professional development (for K-12 educators) into consideration; these elements include: using a coaching model (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009), piloting the training (on-site, at the school-level) with a small group of volunteers (Penuel, et al., 2007; Saunders, et al., 2009), offering differentiated activities and providing opportunities for dialogue (Gordon, 2005), and ensuring that educational experiences span longer periods of time (Penuel, et al., 2007; Wei, et al., 2009).

Listening to ~~Gender Non-Binary~~ Youth

This project is limited in that ~~gender non-binary~~ adults reflected back on their K-12 schooling experiences. While the findings are useful for illuminating potential practices, structures, and policies that limited gender expression in those settings and for

highlighting essential components of working toward gender-inclusive schooling, it would be interesting to talk to ~~gender non-binary~~ youth who are currently attending K-12 schools. The participants involved in this study graduated from their high schools within the past five years and most participants had not attended K-12 schools in more than two years. Although some recent studies focus on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students currently enrolled in K-12 schools in the U.S. (Greytak, et al., 2016), many of these studies rely on quantitative methods of inquiry (primarily questionnaires/surveys). Qualitative projects involving these students could provide a wealth of information about the many factors impacting their schooling experiences. Some of the problematic structures, practices, and policies identified by this study's participants could have changed in the past few years; so, conducting qualitative studies with ~~gender non-binary~~ youth (who are currently in school) could provide greater insight about both the gender-limiting and the gender-inclusive features of today's schools.

Conclusion

Gender diverse individuals (like Onyx, Kirk, Steve, Harper, Nix, Blaine, Nikki, and Sky) play a significant role in showing educational leaders some of the ways in which schools can become gender-inclusive learning environments. This project investigated ~~gender non-binary~~ individuals' retrospective accounts of their K-12 schooling experiences and interpreted those experiences under the influence of deconstruction. Additionally, this project outlined several important components of a model of gender-inclusive professional development for educators.

The guiding theoretical framework, poststructuralism (including poststructural hermeneutics, Derridean deconstruction, and Transformative Gender Justice), showed

that we often overlook individuals and misinterpret concepts (like gender) within educational arenas; this lens also helps us take a system-level approach (O'Malley, 2013) to transformative action, moving us away from attempting to “fix” individuals and toward critiquing (and addressing) the multiple system-level and sociocultural factors (Travers, 2008, 2014) limiting gender expression in these settings. The review of recent and prevalent literature documented that LGBTQIA+ topics are minimally represented in educational leadership (and curriculum) discourses and that topics related to gender diversity receive even less attention within these fields.

The themes emerging from ~~gender non-binary~~ participants' K-12 educational experiences were: Limited (or No) Sense of Belonging, Feeling Unsafe, Conforming and Hiding, Silenced Topics, and Gendering of Structures, Policies, and Practices. Several areas for improvement (related to gender-inclusive schooling) were interpreted from the data: Education, Protecting Students, Gendered Facilities, Gendered Microaggressions, Language Matters, and Dress Codes. Some essential components of gender-inclusive professional development were presented, limitations were explored, and several areas of future research were outlined.

Gender diverse people are *always already* members of our school communities, whether we have overlooked them or rendered them invisible, and we should make concerted efforts to protect, include, and celebrate them. We, as proactive and inclusive educational leaders, should recognize that gender (and its associated stereotypes and roles) affects the lives of all people. When we notice our gender diverse students and analyze (and address) the many factors limiting gender expression in schools, we take actions toward Transformative Gender Justice (Travers, 2008, 2014); we foster inclusive

spaces that allow all members of a school community “to express themselves and to feel recognized and valued for who they are” (Meyer, 2014, p. 73).

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