Research and Practice in Transition: Improving Support and Advocacy of Transgender Middle School Students

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Abstract

In this essay, our purposes are to inspire particular avenues of future research addressing Transgender students, in middle school in particular, and to inform the professional development of teachers in support of these Transgender youth. In relation to the ways in which research can more authentically represent Transgender identity, we argue for the use of Transgender theory as a guiding framework for research addressing Transgender students, issues, and needs. We also describe the particular affordances of qualitative, ethnographic, and phenomenological studies in capturing the unique and highly personal experiences and realities of Transgender individuals, and specifically, in middle school. We then discuss how schools are structured socially and politically along heteronormative and cisnormative lines, presenting a stumbling block for Transgender rights advocacy in educational contexts. Finally, we review the potential of teachers to be the necessary educational change agents to spur greater understanding of and advocacy for students' gender inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

The Transgender rights movement and other efforts to legitimize Transgender individuals have met with adverse societal reactions (e.g., Beaulieu & Marine, 2017; Elliot, 2010; Friedman, 2017; Leung, 2005; Sardenberg & Costa, 2017; Stone, 1991). Beginning in the 1990s, Transgender issues entered into the forefront of critical discussions and relevance (Catalano & Shlasko, 2013; Elliot, 2010; Roth, 2017; Tebbutt, 2013). Although the term *Transgender* is relatively modern, the concept or phenomenon of Transgender is not, with documented instances of gender fluidity emerging since the 18th Century (Beaulieu & Marine, 2017). As a term, *Transgender* recognizes an inherent human orientation of individuals who are born as one sex but identify and express themselves as a gender different from their sex assigned at birth (Currah, Minter, & Green, 2000). Transgender individuals can identify as or internally feel "male, female, a blend of both or neither" (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2018) and can express their identity outwardly via "behavior, clothing, haircut or voice" that ranges across a continuum of gender identity and expression (HRC, 2018). In this essay, we focus on Transgender people[1] instead of other individuals represented under the larger Trans* umbrella.[2] While grouped together with LGBQ+ peers, Transgender individuals' experiences can be quite different

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[1] We choose to capitalize Transgender to denote the importance of and respect for Transgender individuals' identity, culture, and community. Transgender with a capital "T" is a label used to index the norms, beliefs, and values of the Transgender Community and to members of the Transgender Community. The lowercase term transgender refers to the act or transition of altering, identifying, and expressing oneself as a gender different from the sex assigned at birth. Therefore, the linguistic capitalization of the term Transgender is a sociopolitical act to empower and recognize Transgender identity and grouping. Similar to the use of "Black" to connote members of the African diaspora (Tharps, 2014) and "Deaf" as a means of embracing the cultural affiliation, beliefs, and values of the Deaf Community (Lane, 2002), capital "T" Transgender linguistically acknowledges and represents the culture and community of individuals who identify and express themselves as a gender different from the sex assigned at birth.

[2] The shorthand form *Trans** is typically used as an umbrella term to encompass a variety of gender-different or nonconforming gender identities and expressions; such as transsexuals, transvestites, cross-dressers, female-to-male, male-to-female, two-spirit, third sex, genderqueer, to name only a few (Beaulieu & Marine, 2017; Beemyn, 2005; Norton & Herek, 2013; Stryker, 2008).

because of the uniqueness of their gender identity, gender expression, and gender transition (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Namaste, 2000; Stone, 1991; Stryker, 1994). Moreover, the widespread misunderstanding and bias around Transgender issues warrants a singular focus on the experiences of these individuals.

Schools offer an important space within which to investigate these issues, affording a common experience across youth and representing a place of education and socialization where students begin to understand themselves and their identities. Students are increasingly embracing their Transgender or gender-expansive[3] identities in schools, from 0.7% identified in 2017 to 3% identified merely one year later (Herman, Flores, Brown, Wilson, & Conron, 2017; Rider, McMorris, Gower, Coleman, & Eisenberg, 2018). This may be in response to a growing awareness of Transgender issues and increased safety in gender exploration (Rider et al., 2018). This presents stakeholders with the responsibility of determining how to welcome, accommodate, and support Transgender students' educational and socio-emotional needs.

Middle school is a particularly crucial time point for LGBTQ+ support, as students begin expressing their gender and sexual identities; are at a higher risk of victimization based on their sexual/gender orientation; and have the least access to resources and support (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). While educational institutions have the potential to promote acceptance, they have more often been found to be predominant sites of discrimination and harassment for Transgender youth (Mulcahy, Dalton, Kolbert, & Crothers, 2016; Norton & Herek, 2013; Smith & Payne, 2016). Epitomizing this reality is a recent event at a Virginia middle school where a Transgender student was barred from taking shelter in the boys' or girls' locker room during a school safety drill over concerns of other students' welfare (Leshan, 2018). Unfortunately, the substantial body of research that exists on the needs and issues of LGBQ+ students provides little discrete focus on Transgender students (Bowers, Lewandowski, Savage, & Woitaszewski, 2015; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; McGuire,

Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Norton & Herek, 2013; Silveira & Goff, 2016).

The purpose of this essay is threefold: (a) to argue ways in which research can more authentically align with and capture the lived experiences of Transgender students; (b) to describe the potential of educational sites and agents to advocate for Transgender middle school students; and (c) to call for research and practice that moves beyond being informative to promoting action and agency with/in middle school educational sites and agents for Transgender students.

Qualitative Ethnography as a Methodology of Empowerment for Transgender Research

A schism exists in the type of research currently conducted on Transgender individuals. The majority of studies presently available have emerged from western psychiatric and medical investigations into Transgenderism, approach their investigation from the lens of diagnosis and care. Unsurprisingly, much of their results pathologize Transgender identity as a form of mental illness or biological malady (e.g., gender dysphoria, gender identity disorder) (Mueller, De Cuypere, & T'Sjoen, 2017). The impact of such scholarship threatens to strengthen the promotion of gender binary norms and reinforce hetero-/cisnormative societal structures that are detrimental to efforts to legitimize Transgenderism and the support of Transgender students at particular age levels, such as middle school. In heated debate with these notions are researchers from sociological and anthropological domains, whose critical, postmodern studies position Transgenderism as a legitimate identity on the gender continuum (e.g., Silveira & Goff, 2016; Smith & Payne, 2016). The World Health Organization's recent decision to no longer classify Transgender people as mentally ill (Simon, 2018) has provided additional momentum and validation for social science researchers examining Transgender individuals' experiences from asset-based stances.

A second issue plaguing Transgender research, emerging even from sociological domains, is that

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[3] We use the term "gender-expansive" to represent broader, more fluid definitions of gender that are inclusive of different

expressions, identities, or the use of different markers to understand gender (Baum et al., 2014).

many available studies present findings from large-sample quantitative data collected from surveys and questionnaires (Lewis & Sembiante, 2018). For example, the highly cited work of Greytak and Kosciw (2014), Kosciw et al. (2009), and McGuire et al. (2010), concerning Transgender students in middle school is informed by data from national or online/web-based surveys. While these studies are useful and insightful, as evidenced by their popularity, additional studies that emerge from a qualitative methodological tradition would add diversity and depth to the research domain. Although more qualitative work is being done, a preponderance of survey-based research is problematic when Transgender individuals' experiences are subjectively and contextually dependent: in their encounters with family, friends, and strangers; in the way they choose to show themselves to the world in their dress and mannerisms; and in the inner conflicts they navigate in choosing if and how to be themselves. These experiences may occur in many subtle moments in their lives, and while much of it may transpire in the context of school, the nuanced nature of these experiences often might be too sensitive or subjective to be overtly named and discussed in multiple choice or short-answer response formats.

Instead, more qualitative, ethnographic, and phenomenological studies should be conducted to capture the unique and highly personal realities of Transgender individuals. Since these realities shift across age level, this recommendation is particularly pertinent for middle school students whose adolescent student experiences differ from those in elementary school as a child and the later high school years as a teenager and young adult (Alasker & Flammer, 2016; Alasker & Kroger, 2016). Designing research that is responsive to and reflective of these experiences means engaging in longer term studies where naturalistic observation and informal, open-ended interviews are employed to gain personal insight into the lived moments. These will increase the potential for documenting spontaneous instances in which Transgender students negotiate and make sense of the hetero-/cisnormative cultures within their schools, teachers, and peers. Some researchers have already begun to explore the potential of such types of research for informing subjective understandings of Transgender identity aspects and challenges (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Smith & Payne, 2016). Such work offers promising insight into novel, productive ways of supporting and advocating for Transgender students.

Encouraging the Use of Transgender Theory in Transgender Research

Researchers investigating LGBTQ+ issues have predominantly framed their studies using Queer theoretical perspectives (e.g., Shelton, 2015; Silveira & Goff, 2016; Snapp, Burdge, Licona, Moody, & Russell, 2015; Woolley, 2012) and, to a lesser extent, Structuration theory (e.g., Fredman, Schultz, & Hoffman, 2015), Ecological Systems theory (e.g., Kosciw et al., 2009; Kolbert et al., 2015), and Feminist theory (e.g., Shelton, 2015; Woolley, 2012). These theories provide insight into some of the constructs particular to LGBTQ+ adolescent youth and are often paired to provide a more comprehensive lens of their realities. However, Transgender students' lived experiences are very different from those of their LGBQ+ peers, and studies attempting to shed light on the lives of gender-expansive individuals should be careful to use a theoretical framing that attends to the particular nature of Transgender students' gender identity and expression (Lewis & Sembiante, 2018). Below, we argue that, in distinction to Queer and other theories, Transgender theory represents the complexities of gender-expansive identities in more nuanced and genuine ways, providing a conceptual framing that more fully and authentically conceptualizes Transgender adolescent students' unique identity-based realities and experiences.

Queer theory, for example, rejects the social constructions of gender that are typically used to normalize or control sexual/gender expression (Butler, 1990). Having emerged in response to women's attempt to gain control over their own bodies and sexual freedom (Friedman, 2017), Queer and Feminist theory were created to deconstruct and problematize sexual and gender categorizations and the power relations tied to these constructs. While these theories characterize gender fluidity in similar ways to Transgender theory (e.g., Butler, 2004), these theories are borne from women's gender oppression, gender roles, and sexuality. When applied to schools, Queer theory sheds light on how homosexual students might navigate heteronormative structures in the process of reaffirming their sexual identity and expression (Shelton, 2015; Silveira & Goff, 2016; Snapp et al., 2015; Woolley, 2012).

Feminist theory is often used to complement Queer theory but has historically focused on women and their empowerment through their reproductive, land, marriage, and voting rights (Sanders, 2004). Although Feminist and Queer theory both address gender and sexuality, Feminist theory has been primarily employed with the equality of, challenges of, and rights of women and has only recently encompassed the gender and sexuality of a more diverse range of subjects (e.g., Transgender individuals, effeminate males) (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). Contemporary applications of Feminist theory are often employed in studies concerning female equity issues (e.g., Fields, 2008) or sex education related specifically to the benefit or empowerment of women (e.g., Fields, 2013; Gilbert, 2007, 2014). While Queer and Feminist theory both champion non-heteronormative sexuality and critique normative and deviant social labels placed on sexual identity, both do not recognize the often invisible, and specific needs of the Transgender community (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Thus, although Queer theory is currently the most prevalently applied theory in LGBTQ+ studies (Lewis & Sembiante, 2018) and Feminist theory is often used in consort, these framings do not provide the means for appropriately examining the gender expansiveness of Transgender students.

Instead, structuration theory provides a lens for understanding human behavior and agency within social systems and structures and how entities influence or limit human choices (Giddens, 1984). When used for framing Transgender issues in middle school contexts, structuration theory provides a lens for understanding the impact of hetero-/cisnormative school structures on the action or inaction of individuals in accordance with school policies (Fredman et al., 2015). Although structuration theory is helpful in identifying the pressures for adherence to school systems and policies, it may be limited in theorizing the creation of counter-systemic spaces that promote inclusivity for Transgender students.

Lastly, an Ecological Systems framework foregrounds environmental influences on an individual's development, identifying five different ecological environments (micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono systems) and supporting the analysis of how development and interaction is influenced within and across these contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This conceptualization is useful for analyzing the factors and impacts of

self, home, school, community, and societal contexts upon Transgender students' wellbeing (Kolbert et al., 2015; Kosciw et al., 2009). While an ecological framing pushes researchers to consider environmental aspects involved in Transgender students' experiences, it is not as productive in presenting researchers with a way to investigate Transgender students' internal worlds. However, Ecological Systems Theory can and should be paired with Transgender theory to present a more comprehensive understanding of the connections and relationships between Transgender students' external and internal worlds. For example, pairing the affordances of an Ecological Systems framework with Transgender theory, studies can gain insight into how the realities of Transgender students coincide with the social, physical, and psychological developments that are particular to students between the ages of 10-15 within the context of middle school. Thus, emerging from a need to conceptualize the gender-expansive identities of Transgender individuals, Transgender theory endorses all gendered ways of being (Roen, 2001), advocates for normalizing societal views towards gender and sexuality differences (Leung, 2005), and criticizes binary labels as constraining the experiences of Transgender individuals (Whittle, 2006). Transgender theory provides a more accurate understanding of the specific issues and needs of Transgender students and the complexities of one's self and one's identity within the middle school structure or system (Namaste, 2000; Stone, 1991; Stryker, 1994). In this way, Transgender theory can be used to challenge the perpetuation of hetero-/cisnormativity of school culture. Alone or in combination with the aforementioned theories present in the LGBTQ+ literature, Transgender theory ensures that the constructs unique to Transgender individuals' gender identities are appropriately represented and framed. For Transgender middle school students, the use of Transgender theory works to implicitly acknowledge and affirm an adolescent student's identity during the sensitive time period between the ages of 10-15, while helping to contextualize the analysis of data from a perspective that honors these middle school students' inherent nature.

Hetero-/Cisnormative School Culture Slows Enforcement of Transgender Policy

The following vignette pieces together several real-life accounts of bullying and discrimination as experienced by different Transgender middle

and high school students and as documented in various research articles and news sources. Featuring Maxine, a fictional yet realistic character, this narrative provides a snapshot into some of the dangers and issues faced by Transgender middle school students in hetero-/cisnormative school cultures.

Maxine, a Transgender student, has recently transitioned from male to female and identifies as, dresses as, and asks to be recognized as a girl. She visits the restroom at her middle school and sees the images of a girl and boy demarcating the gender specific restrooms. No longer allowed to enter the female bathroom following complaints from a few female students[4], Maxine feels anxious about who may be inside the male lavatory.[5] She recalls the bullying she experienced a week before when two male students peered over the top of the toilet door attempting to film and take pictures of her using the facilities.[6] She decides to hold her need to use the bathroom instead.[7] As Maxine continues down the school hallway and turns into her classroom, she hears a student announce to another, "He's not a real girl. My father says he's just a boy in a dress."[8] Maxine's teacher, Ms. Carter, overhears the comment but is unsure about how to respond given the risk of addressing this topic in public school. Just a month prior, a female teacher was placed on leave for showing a picture of her wife to her students.[9] Ms. Carter turns away as peers who overhear the comment laugh and continue teasing Maxine. Later on, Ms. Carter assigns a persuasive essay to students on any topic they choose. Maxine raises her hand and asks Ms. Carter if she can write her essay on LGBTQ rights. Ms. Carter, inwardly fearing repercussions, suggests that Maxine focus on a less controversial subject.[10] Maxine rests her head on her hand and sighs in frustration. Her gaze lands on a school-designated poster on the wall that states, "This classroom is a safe place."

Schools often perpetuate cisnormative beliefs, or the assumed expectation that the gender identity and expression of all individuals corresponds to their anatomical sex. The heteronormative and cisnormative structures that are at work within schools can implicitly suggest to Transgender students that they do not belong or that they must "pass" as a particular gender to fit in. The pressure to "pass" as a specific gender may be heightened in middle and high school because of the prevalence of gender binary beliefs at this age level and in these contexts (McGuire et al., 2010), working to place additional hindrances upon Transgender individuals' identity and expression. Nonetheless, much progress has been made in developing educational policy that addresses and acknowledges Transgender students' rights. For example, federal laws have been created to protect against discriminatory actions (e.g., *Title IX; The Equal Access Act; The*

[4] Lightcap, A. (2018, November 29). My high school's transgender bathroom policies violate the privacy of the rest of us. *USA Today.* Retrieved from https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2018/11/29/transgender-bathroom-debate-privacy-school-lawsuit-column/2123946002/

[5] Meyer, E. J., & Keenan, H. (2018). Can policies help schools affirm gender diversity? A policy archaeology of transgender-inclusive policies in California schools. *Gender and Education,* doi:10.1080/09540253.2018.1483490

[6] Collison, C. (2018, June 22). Trans toilet access still a struggle. *Mail & Guardian.* Retrieved from https://mg.co.za/article/2018-06-22-00-trans-toilet-access-still-a-struggle

[7] Stark, J. (2017, March 31). For some transgender students, the school bathroom is a battleground. *ABC News.* Retrieved from https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-01/transgender-students-bathroom-battleground/8395782

[8] Schmidt, S. (2018, December 8). Recruitment war raises questions about what it means to be a girl or a boy. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/recruitment-war-raises-questions-about-what-it-means-to-be-a-girl-or-a-boy/2018/12/08/c3cac538-f700-11e8-8d64-4e79db33382f_story.html?utm_term=.bf5aa9734fc0

[9] Hauser, C. (2018, May 10). Texas teacher showed a photo of her wife, and was barred from the classroom. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/us/gay-teachers-wife-texas.html

[10] Minero, E. (2018, April 19). Schools struggle to support LGBTQ students. *Edutopia.* Retrieved from https://www.edutopia.org/article/schools-struggle-support-lgbtq-students

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA); The First Amendment; and The Fourteenth Amendment) while state laws and school district policies provide more specific guidelines, such as *Florida's Anti-Bullying Law - s.1006.147, F.S.; Anti-Bullying Policy 5.9; and the Non-Discrimination Policy 4001.1.* Some districts have developed supplementary policies addressing the discrimination of particular individuals, such as *Broward County Public Schools' Policy Guidance for Transgender Procedures, Safety and Resiliency*. The presence of these policies does not guarantee their implementation. For this reason, Broward County Public Schools developed further guidelines (i.e., the Broward County Public Schools LGBTQ Critical Support Guide) to help with the implementation of the previously developed Non-Discrimination Policy 4001.1, and specifically produced a chapter on Policy Guidance for Transgender Procedures, Safety and Resiliency.

Although policies are present, stakeholders and administrators are seldom informed of their existence, are inadequately trained to implement these faithfully, and often fail to execute these in practice (Kolbert et al., 2015; Linville, 2011; Norton & Herek, 2013). Improperly publicized non-discrimination policies engender disciplinary actions that maintain hetero-/cisnormative school cultures such as "safety transfers," where Transgender students are forcibly transferred to another school (Linville, 2011), or "safety discourse," where Transgender students are positioned as "victims" in need of saving (Payne & Smith, 2012). These disciplinary actions appear most often at the middle and high school level, where Transgender students, who no longer wish to conform to a gender binary, may begin exploring or expressing their gender identities, and become increasingly targeted for harassment (Kosciw et al., 2012). Although these are believed to promote supportive school climates, these practices evade important opportunities to increase faculty and student understanding, awareness, and acceptance of gender fluidity.

Hetero-/cisnormativity is further propagated when curricula are constrained to exclude or minimize controversial topics that do not conform to heteronormative societal values. By prohibiting the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics, school policies promote the misconception that such issues are detrimental, hazardous, and/or taboo (Fredman et al., 2015; Linville, 2011). Even in the attempt to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ topics, schools may urge the discussion of these in isolation or as affiliated to health-related issues (e.g., HIV/AIDS, suicide, self-harm, disease, or death), creating a negative image of LGBTQ+ individuals, and further perpetuating hetero-/cisnormative structures of the school (Fredman et al., 2015).

Teachers' Potential as Change Agents for Transgender Students

The following vignette weaves the documented lived experiences of Transgender students who engage with their teachers as they attempt to navigate and seek acknowledgment and acceptance of their gender expression in middle and high school contexts. While all characters are fictional, the described events emerge from real-life accounts. The narrative serves to provide examples of the important role and influence of teachers in advocating for Transgender middle school students.

Mr. Hamilton, a popular teacher among students, sees his student Susan approaching him after class one day. He notices that she has begun to wear baggy clothing and has cut her hair short. Susan steels herself, knowing that she is about to ask Mr. Hamilton to address her as "he" and that he begin calling her "George," as she is in the process of transitioning from female to male. As George finishes his request, Mr. Hamilton tries hard not to show his surprise, although he is left gaping at him. Mr. Hamilton has known Susan for several years, having previously worked with her mother, and is taken aback by her choice to transition. Unsure and untrained on what to say, Mr. Hamilton finally responds, "Are you sure? I mean, have you tried speaking with the school guidance counselor? Perhaps this is just a phase. Does your mother know?"[11] George visibly tenses in response to Mr. Hamilton's line of questioning, embarrassed and hurt by his

[11] Singal, J. (2018, July). When children say they're trans. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive /2018/07/when-a-child-says-shes-trans/561749/

assumptions.[12] *George quickly answers, "I thought, of all the teachers, you would be the most understanding! Just nevermind!" before walking away quickly. After that day, Mr. Hamilton rarely called on George in class, not knowing if it was appropriate to use his requested name and pronoun, and found that George would no longer make eye contact with him or participate in class discussions.*[13]

In their role as educators and mentors, teachers have the potential to act as protective agents for gender-expansive students who are searching for acknowledgement and advocacy from trusted adults (Mulcahy et al., 2016). Transgender students report school as the location where they first encounter physical victimization (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006) and where they are most likely to experience continued abuse (Fredman et al., 2015; Woolley, 2012). Moreover, the prevalence of physical harassment, the use of verbal slurs, and bullying increases significantly for students enrolled in middle and high schools (Kosciw et al., 2012). Since the risk of harassment for Transgender students is increased at school (Sausa, 2005), middle and high school teachers are central proponents in identifying, apprehending, and preventing such events. Regardless of personal biases, teachers have a professional duty to support all students and are the first agents of change towards promoting safer, more inclusive school climates for Transgender students (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008). However, as a result of the potential power and influence of teachers in these roles, moments in which teachers fail to intervene can have detrimental effects for Transgender students. In so doing, teachers implicitly and, perhaps, unintentionally endorse bullying, harassment, or other exclusionary acts (Kolbert et al., 2015), implicating them in the preservation of inhospitable hetero-/cisnormative school climates (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2014). Deficit-based teaching practices also exacerbate and reinforce these climates (Smith, 2015) through the belief that Transgender students are victims in need of "saving" or "fixing" by their teachers (Fredman

et al., 2015; Linville, 2011; Payne & Smith, 2012; Smith, 2015; Woolley, 2012).

Conversely, teachers can become allies through taking deliberate steps to catch and counter school events that put Transgender students at risk of victimization (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). Teachers are empowered to intervene when provided with LGBTQ-related training that prepares them to advocate for Transgender students within the parameters of school policies (Kolbert et al., 2015; McGuire et al., 2010; Norton & Herek, 2013; Silveira & Goff, 2016). By normalizing and increasing the representation of homosexual and Transgender topics in the classroom, teachers are able to create the opportunity for students to learn about gender-expansiveness and inclusivity (Airton, 2018; Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). In turn, these practices can cultivate safe spaces where Transgender students feel more secure in forming trusting relationships with adults and peers. For example, after participating in a LGBTQ-focused professional development, middle and high school classroom teachers became supportive allies by hanging up "Safe Space" posters, creating safer/supportive school climates, and intervening when bullying occurred both within/out of the classroom (Smith, 2015). Such dynamics have been shown to affect the larger school culture by inspiring students towards self-agency and activism (Wernick et al., 2014) and changing school culture through the establishment of LGBTQ+ clubs, activities, and school policies (Russell, McGuire, Lee, Larriva, & Laub, 2008).

A Call to Action

LGBTQ+ students in middle school face more hostile school environments, experience more victimization, and have less access to resources and support than peers in high school (Kosciw et al., 2012). In comparison to LGBQ+ students, Transgender individuals are at a significantly higher risk of encountering violence, attempting suicide, and experiencing homelessness (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014). Moreover, Transgender rights are under attack from the

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[12] Allen, K. (2018, December 7). Virginia teacher fired for referring to transgender student as female. *ABC News.* Retrieved from https://abcnews.go.com/US/virginia-teacher-fired-referring-transgender-student-female/story?id=59669818

[13] Pryor, J. T. (2015). Out in the classroom: Transgender student experiences at a large public university. *Journal of College Student Development, 56*(5), 440-455.

Trump administration, with attempts to remove Transgender people's previously garnered recognition and protection in education, health care, and military avenues (Green, Benner, & Pear, 2018; Miller, Mayo, & Lugg, 2018). Together with DeVos' denial of appeals in Transgender students' cases (Emma, 2018), the need for research and professional development in support of Transgender students is especially heightened. With Transgender middle school students facing these stark realities, the purpose of this article has been to shed light on the current concerns regarding the ways that middle schools are serving and supporting Transgender students. Educational sites and agents are hindered from advocating for Transgender students because of the hetero-/cisnormative structures currently in place and the associated risks that hamper teacher agency for safeguarding Transgender students. Transformation in these areas will require a multilevel approach, incurring both structural and interpersonal shifts:

- Integrating recurring training and informational sessions for administration and faculty on existing anti-harassment policies to increase the likelihood of their routine use and implementation.
- Using or creating supplementary guidelines that translate policy and specifically outline appropriate practices for supporting and advocating for Transgender students.
- Establishing professional learning communities for teachers that empower them to develop authentic and creative ways of infusing Transgender topics within the curriculum and outside of stereotypical areas (e.g., disease and death).
- Implementing a mandatory professional development for teachers covering specific issues faced by Transgender students and training teachers to actively intervene and provide support for Transgender students.
- Intervening on behalf of Transgender students in order to discourage bullying, harassment, and victimization and promote safer school climates.
- Ensuring that faculty are made aware of changing legislation around Transgender rights while empowering faculty to continue to advocate for

Transgender students' equitable treatment and education.
- Developing safe classroom environments where Transgender students are able to form trusting relationships with teachers and peers.
  - Hanging posters that represent and advocate different gender identities and sexual orientations to identify the teacher as an ally or trustworthy/supportive adult to gender-expansive students.
  - Encouraging students to engage in role play around bullying events to increase students' empathy and understanding of the social and emotional repercussions of harassment and victimization.
  - Facilitating class discussions around current political events related to Transgender rights that enable students to talk, think critically, and consider solutions to the issues.
  - Inviting a Transgender speaker or selecting a fiction/nonfiction class text featuring Transgender individuals to normalize and promote awareness of gender-expansive identities and Transgenderism.
  - Having students complete an *All About Me* activity where the teacher explicitly asks students to disclose their preferred names and pronouns in order to increase students' comfort level and feelings of inclusion.

Much of the research currently available on Transgender individuals pathologizes their gender-expansive identities as dysfunctional; presents objective, impersonal results from large-sample quantitative data; and employs theoretical framings that are not distinguishing of Transgender individuals' unique realities and experiences. Novel, productive avenues of Transgender research should more authentically align and capture the lived experiences of Transgender students by:

- Conducting studies solely on Transgender participants to increase representation of these individuals in the literature and provide more insight into their unique affordances, needs, and challenges.

- Employing qualitative methodologies such as ethnography and phenomenology to collect data that sheds light on individuals' cultures, emotions, and worldviews.
- Using Transgender theory to ensure that the constructs unique to Transgender individuals' gender identities are appropriately represented and framed in the research.
- Using longitudinal studies with observation and interviews to capture the subjective and personal moments of Transgender individuals' lived experiences.

Given the points made above, there are multiple paths forward in mobilizing educational sites and agents to become advocates for Transgender middle school students. While feminist and queer movements have provided foundational footing for the Transgender rights movement, continued advocacy requires the pursuit of a distinct path that fully attends to Transgender-specific needs, issues, and rights. If scholars and practitioners can continue working towards problematizing restrictive norms in schools, pushing research and conceptual boundaries, and expanding structures and agents of support in schools, these small victories might add significant force for the larger rights and acknowledgement for Transgender students and individuals in general.

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