

# Unpacking the T: Sharing the Diverse Experiences of Trans Students Navigating Schools

Bethy Leonardi <sup>1ab</sup>, Amy N. Farley <sup>2b</sup>, Emmett Harsin Drager <sup>c</sup>,  
Jax Gonzalez <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Educational Foundations, Policy, & Practice, University of Colorado Boulder

<sup>b</sup>Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, University of Cincinnati

<sup>c</sup>University of Southern California

<sup>d</sup>University of Colorado Boulder

“She considers herself a girl, and uses she/her pronouns ... she knows she is transgender and doesn’t like how it feels, like it’s not quite the right descriptor for her and says things like she wishes we didn’t have to label bodies.”

“I am a boy.”

“60% girl, 40% boy”

“I’m a girl. I’m just a girl.”


“non-binary, fluid, gender expansive”

“Male, Boy/male, Dislikes the word transgender”

Scholars who focus on gender and sexual diversity in education have called for research that differentiates narratives regarding LGBTQ+ students (Renn, 2010), resists lumping gender and sexuality together, and attends to students’ experiences “across the acronym” (Mayo, 2017, p. 534). In this project, we heeded that advice and focused specifically on *gender identity*—that is, on how people see and recognize themselves with regard to gender, which may differ from the sex they were assigned at birth. Yet, as the opening quotes suggest, there was a need to go further.

Our initial aim in undertaking this study was to understand and narrate the story of trans students and their experiences navigating schools. Yet the “story” turned out to be more complex than we imagined, and the focus of our research evolved as a result. Although we began our inquiry with a singular focus on the “T” as one collective group,

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<sup>1</sup> Bethy Leonardi  0000-0002-4052-2765. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Bethy Leonardi, University of Colorado Boulder, Fleming Building, Room 300A, 249 UCB Boulder, CO 80309 Email: [bethy.leonardi@colorado.edu](mailto:bethy.leonardi@colorado.edu)

<sup>2</sup>Amy N. Farley  0000-0001-7602-3354

we quickly realized that the complex ways students identified *within the T* mattered to their experiences. We therefore undertook an analytical process that intentionally wrestled with that complexity, seeking to understand broadly what is sacrificed (and gained) in the name of a cohesive narrative (i.e., the T) when reporting on the experiences of trans students, particularly within PK-12 education.

As a team of scholars who identify as queer and trans (Authors 1, 3, and 4) and as a straight, cisgender accomplice (Author 2), we are committed to doing this work well. Therefore, throughout this article, we share results from our analyses, but we also underscore our learning processes. That is, we trace the evolution of our methodological approach—and the challenges and tensions that surfaced as a result—to demonstrate how our interest in “unpacking the T” unfolded. We hope this transparency will illuminate new and different insights that arose from that process. Though we remained primarily interested in narrating the experiences of trans students in school, our research questions evolved to focus on qualitative differences in the experiences of students across a range of (trans)gender identities. Specifically, we asked:

1. How might norms, discourses, and systems function differently to affect trans students across this spectrum of gender identities?
2. How might students’ bodies be read differently, and how might those readings affect students’ lived experiences and senses of self?

To explore these questions, we called on trans theories and concepts of materiality, embodiment, and subjection.

Our findings demonstrate the extent to which differences exist across student identities, and they highlight the intersections between normative school environments and students’ lived material bodies, including how they are read by their teachers and peers and which “rules” they purportedly “break.” Though limited in their ability to generalize to the entire population of trans students, these findings do have one clear implication for future research and practice: Unpacking the T provided insights into the experiences of trans students that we would have otherwise missed.

### **Research that Differentiates the T**

To situate this article in the growing body of literature that differentiates between the needs and experiences of trans students as a diverse group, in the section that follows, we call on scholars who argue for attention to complexity and nuance in understanding gender as a construct. We begin by exploring how PK-12 and higher education research have wrestled with the need to unpack the T or to differentiate between the unique experiences of people with regard to gender. We pay close attention to what scholars and theorists demand and also the nascent findings within the existing literature regarding differences among various trans identities. We conclude with a forward-facing discussion of the field—what is left to do and how leading trans scholars suggest we do this work well.

### **Calls for Unpacking the T**

The notion of unpacking the T has been a significant focus for various scholars of gender in and beyond education. Within the field of education, scholars in both higher education (Catalano, 2015; Jourian, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016; Nicolazzo et al., 2015) and PK-12 have called for research that attends to differences between subgroups of trans

students (e.g., Greytak et al., 2013; Greytak et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2018). Jourian (2017) importantly notes that in the literature trans students have been treated problematically as a monolithic group, resulting in a lack of “attention to the diversity among the population or in intersection with identities other than gender” (p. 246). This conflation has resulted in trans students’ “understandings of masculinity/ies, femininity/ies, or variations thereof [not being] explored” (Jourian, 2017, p. 245–246). Nicolazzo et al. (2015) agreed that social awareness of “(particular) trans people” is increasing, and that “(some) trans people” and issues are gaining traction. However, these scholars underscore the need to understand students’ experiences beyond a singular focus on gender and to attend to students’ intersectional identities—along lines of gender, sexuality, faith, race, ethnicity, social class, language, and dis/ability.

### **Early Insights into Differences Within the T in PK-12 Schools**

Though studies that seek to unpack the T appear more common within higher education, some research within PK-12 schools has begun to tease out how students’ unique gender identities impact their school experiences. Most notably, several recent studies have addressed the consequences of different school experiences on the physical and emotional health of trans students (e.g., Baum et al., 2013; Kahn et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2016; Toomey et al., 2010; Toomey et al., 2018). The results of these studies largely reflect conflicting findings. For example, Greytak et al. (2009) found no differences in the experiences of a diverse sample of trans students (e.g., trans male, trans female), whereas Grossman et al. (2006) found that trans females experienced more physical victimization and earlier gender-related teasing than trans males, and they were also encouraged by their parents to conform to binary gender rules at an earlier age than trans males. In their study, Kosciw et al. (2016) found the opposite relationship: School contexts were most hostile toward transgender male students. A 2018 report from the Human Rights Campaign also acknowledged the diverse gender identities of youth, indicating some variation in reported stress levels by gender identity (Kahn et al., 2018). Finally, Toomey et al. (2018) found stark disparities in suicide attempts by gender identity: 51% of trans male adolescents reported a suicide attempt, compared to 42% of non-binary students and 30% of trans females.

However, despite discrepancies in the direction of findings reported by Greytak et al. (2009), Grossman et al. (2006), Kosciw et al. (2016), Kahn et al. (2018), and Toomey et al. (2018)—with some research showing increased risk or negative outcomes for different groups—each found important differences when they sought to intentionally attend to various trans identities. Thus, although there is not yet consensus, this body of research does encourage us to dig more deeply and to consider nuanced distinctions across the T (Labuski & Keo-Meier, 2015; Mayo, 2017). Moreover, these differences are found not only with regard to troubling statistics—increased levels of bullying and biased language; lack of safe access to bathrooms/locker rooms; lack of anti-bullying and harassment policies; and lack of resources and supportive adults—but also how those experiences affect students’ personal well-being and senses of self.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These complex ecosystems require careful and diligent research to fully unpack the various ways gender identity interacts with school systems and affects the experiences of students. That research must be informed

### **Moving Forward: Heeding the Call**

Despite emerging questions about how to move the field forward, there is some consensus in the literature on the need for complex research that intentionally deconstructs the T.

Trans scholars in higher education, for example, have noted that while there is increased attention to trans people in general and trans students in particular, there is a lack of attention to subgroups of trans students, particularly those whose identities challenge gender normativity or binarism (e.g., nonbinary and genderqueer trans students) (Catalano, 2015; Jourian, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2016; Nicolazzo et al., 2015). Thus, scholars have made a clear call for additional research focused on non-binary trans students. Attention to non-binary students, Nicolazzo (2016) contended, is necessary to disrupt trans-normativity, or the belief that all trans people “should transition from one socially knowable sex to another (e.g., male-to-female)” (p. 1175).

To further disrupt trans-normativity, some researchers have also suggested that it is not enough to categorize students within the T at all. By adding more categories, they reason, we may inadvertently suggest we simply need to find more accurate but still discrete groupings of students. Instead, they call for research that allows participants to self-identify in terms of gender identity, to not only center the voices of trans youth but to also disrupt any normative categorization (Baum et al., 2013; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018; Mayo, 2017; Sausa, 2005). This practice allows researchers to “desubjugate,” as Stryker (2013) called it, “previously marginalized forms of knowledge about gendered subjectivity and sexed embodiment” (p. 13). Takeaways highlight the diverse ways that youth identify, which are not always captured in fixed-response surveys and may, in fact, serve as barriers to identification (Schilt & Bratter, 2015).

### **Perspectives**

In this article, we respond to this call for more nuanced distinctions based on student identity and extend the discussion in PK-12 research. Though disaggregating data is central to our project, unpacking the T goes beyond creating more categories. We call on scholars of trans theories to help us think about the ways that transness makes visible normative school systems, how those systems affect the lived experiences of students, and how students’ bodies in those systems may be read and regulated differently across the T. We question how normative school environments not only impact students’ opportunities or experiences—in divergent ways across the T—but also how those environments impact the most intimate parts of who students are/becoming.

### **Subjection, Embodiment, and Materiality**

#### ***Subjection***

Ideas of what counts as “normal” permeate school ecologies, privileging certain identities and marginalizing others. Well documented in the literature on gender and sexual

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by scholars of trans theories and trans scholars themselves, who have both the scholarly expertise needed to push the field forward and the embodied and lived experiences to recognize the unique positionality of trans individuals across the T.

diversity in schools are the ways that cis-normativity and heteronormativity function as normalizing systems (e.g., Blackburn & Smith, 2010; García & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010). Heteronormativity refers to a pervasive system of belief that assumes everyone is straight, that straight is normal, and that any sexual identity that deviates from that norm is abnormal, weird, and deviant. Cis-normativity refers to another dominant belief system that assumes everyone is cisgender, meaning our gender identities line up with the sex we were assigned at birth. It also perpetuates the belief that cisgender is the only normal and natural gender identity and that anything that deviates from that norm, including trans and non-binary identities, are unnatural and abnormal. In schools, these interlocking systems are pervasive; they operate all around and often go unnoticed because they are considered status quo—the way things are. These powerful and often invisible systems of meaning and control send strong messages about what counts as normal with respect to families, relationships, gender, and gender roles, and research shows that these messages are institutionalized through policies, dress codes, curriculum, language, and teaching practices. Considering schools as ecologies of normativity helps us make sense of why bodies are policed in different ways, why troubling statistics persist, and how those statistics serve as symptoms of unsafe and toxic environments. In his work, Spade (2015) has used *subjection* to address the complex ways that power and control operate, specifically through forms and intersections of racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. Spade has used subjection rather than *oppression*, explaining that oppression often indicates a top/down relationship, with one group having power over another (i.e., oppressor/dominator, oppressed/dominated). In Spade's view, if we are to imagine transformative change, we must understand power as more complex than that. Subjection is meant to capture the ways that power works through systems of meaning and control to affect how we know and understand ourselves. Spade argues that we internalize the standards set forth by these systems; they “keep us in our places and help us know how to be ourselves properly” (p. 54).

Spade's (2015) attention to the ways that we internalize normativity is important to this project and useful in understanding schools. Spade argued that power and control “impact how we know ourselves as subjects ... the ways we understand our own bodies, the things we believe about ourselves and our relations with other people and with institutions, and the ways we imagine change and transformation” (p. 26). Subjection addresses how power operates beyond legal barriers or individual acts of harassment and instead through regulatory standards. Those standards teach us “proper” behavior, what counts as a “proper man, woman, boy, girl ... or whatever qualities are valued in our context; and how to avoid (or attempt to avoid) being labeled ... whatever qualities or types are discouraged” (p. 53). In schools, subjection looks like organizing and addressing students in binary ways related to gender (e.g., ladies/gentleman, boys/girls), social policing of masculinity and femininity, and the relative silence regarding LGBTQ+ topics in the academic curriculum.

When we consider the experiences of trans students through the construct of subjection, we might wonder not only what barriers (e.g., impoverished policy landscape, being bullied) or affordances (e.g., access to supportive teachers, Gay-Straight Alliances) to equal educational opportunities exist, but also how students' subjectivities are shaped by those conditions. In other words, subjection helps us better understand that these

systems affect students in deeply personal ways. Cis-heteronormative systems of meaning and control organize school discourse, determine students' learning, and dictate social norms, all of which impact how students are read and how they experience and understand their bodies; the process is intersubjective and deeply internal. Understanding the impact of these systems on students' sense of self involves asking questions like: How might lining up or addressing students as boys and girls impact students who might identify beyond the binary? How does the silence around LGBTQ+ people throughout curriculum impact students who identify as LGBTQ+? What messages are sent *to all students* about who counts as a leader? Who's worth remembering? Whose rights are worth fighting for? What happens when we assume that our school is safe because we have a Gay-Straight Alliance—THE dedicated space for talking about gender and sexuality? What about the ways that we discipline students? Do we dismiss behaviors because “boys will be boys” and hold “girls” to different standards? What messages do our discipline practices send about who needs policing, especially when we consider how those practices are distributed across students' intersectional identities?

### ***Embodiment & Materiality***

Trans scholars argue that understanding trans-subjectivities is impossible without recognition of embodiment and materiality (Plemons, 2017; Prosser, 1998; Stryker, 2006). Transgender studies has tended to embrace the idea that both sex and gender are socially constructed while also foregrounding the affective and material (sensory and sensing) dimensions of embodiment, that is, how it *feels* to have a body. This focus on fleshy matter—on how bodies move through the world, are read, touched, and seen—is what we are referring to when we talk about trans materiality and embodiment. Embodiment, as Prosser (2013) explained, is “a process of storytelling through which one's identity is communicated to Others” (p. 257); it is about inhabiting material flesh and about the flesh itself. In foregrounding embodiment and materiality, we understand gender as socially constructed *and* as lived—in bodies that often bump up against/exceed expectations related to gender normativity. We follow Plemons' (2017) understanding that trans bodies acquire their meaning not just by how they are named and labeled (e.g., male or female) but how they are read and understood by others. Masculinity and femininity, “male” and “female” faces, bodies, and mannerisms may be social constructions maintained by discourses of cis-heteronormativity, but their instantiations are perceived in consequential ways. Our material bodies—the instruments through which we *are* in the world—are critical to our experiences (Sullivan, 2003). Existing in specific times and places, our bodies become “recognized, defined, and important in relation to what [we] and others think about them; they move from a being into meaning” (Plemons, 2017, p. 125). What we know from trans students in schools is that much of the victimization they face with respect to gender is due to their gender expression, regardless of their gender identities. For example, 90% of trans students reported hearing negative comments about their gender expressions, not being “masculine” enough or “feminine” enough (Greytak et al., 2009). The “problem” of the body, then, is signified through *being* (Plemons, 2017; Stryker, 2006). Trans bodies acquire meaning through experiences of daily life within particular contexts, and trans theories account for the ways that those bodies can be limiting, unintelligible, or unrecognizable, and endure physical, social, and psychic consequences (Prosser, 1998).

It is important to foreground the materiality of the body when we assess the experiences of trans students. Doing so allows us to consider how they are recognized, honored, affirmed, or “busted” (Plemons, 2017, p. 128) for aligning with or transgressing normative rules associated with gender. How bodies are read—especially with respect to masculinity and femininity and related normative expectations—can mark limits to recognition and result in harmful consequences. For example, research has shown that trans youth report higher levels of suicide behavior than cisgender youth (Toomey et al., 2018). Yet, consequences can also look like engaging in relentless internal policing based on values and practices that are rooted in expectations around binary gender. Masculinity and femininity are operationalized into material artifacts; maleness and femaleness are seen in faces, bodies, and gaits; sex is “spread across the body and even more crucially located outside of the body in spaces of ongoing social interaction and recognition” (Plemons, 2017, p. 2). Historically, particular forms of recognition denote what it means to be male and what it means to be female, and these understandings are advanced through ideologies and agendas influenced by race, social class, religion, and nationality (Stryker, 2006). As Plemons (2017) suggested, “[t]o the extent that we understand ‘woman’ and ‘man’ to be social and not anatomical identities, differences between bodies make men and women possible, and social recognition is what makes them real” (p. 130).

Serano (2016, 2018) extended this conversation by linking social stigma and being culturally marked to a particular form of subjection: trans-misogyny. In her explanation of trans-misogyny, Serano (2016) problematized the focus on “‘transgender’ as a one-size-fits-all category” (p. 5) and links the disdain for trans women in particular to traditional sexism. She argued, “in a world where femininity is so regularly dismissed, perhaps no form of gendered expression is considered more artificial and more suspect than male and transgender expressions of femininity” (p. 5). Trans-misogyny, Serano argued, explains why jokes made at the expense of trans people are typically those centered on “men wearing dresses”; why it’s okay for girls to wear “boy’s” clothing, but not the other way around; “why the majority of violence and sexual assaults committed against trans people is directed at trans women” (p. 15). She argued that by embracing femaleness and femininity, trans women pose a threat to “the supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity” (p. 15). In this study, with these theories we wondered about how (much) the body matters. We focused on embodiment and materiality to better understand the diverse ways that trans students experience school, and to consider the ways that transness “reveals the operations of systems and institutions that simultaneously produce various possibilities of viable personhood, and eliminate others” (Stryker, 2006, p. 3).

### **Method**

As noted in the introduction to this article, our primary research focus evolved over the course of the study, demanding that we relied not only on additional literature and scholarly perspectives, but also on necessitating more complex methods to allow us to examine how our findings differed when we considered trans students as a cohesive group versus when we unpacked the T. In this section, we discuss the context of our study, research participants, and our approach to data collection and analysis under this new paradigm. We explore what might be sacrificed by not attending to the diversity of trans identities, based on perceptions of parents/guardians of trans students. We asked ourselves which important

nuances get lost when data are not disaggregated. Although we do not intend for our results to generalize to all trans students, we strive to understand the role that embodiment, materiality, and subjection play in shaping student experiences across various identity groups and, most importantly, what may be missing from research that does not unpack the T.

### **Research Context & Participants**

In this study, we had two main goals. First, we wanted to understand the schooling experiences of a wide range of trans students, including elementary, middle, and high schoolers. And second, we sought to understand the role of schools broadly construed—including how trans students interact both formally and informally with systems, structures, and policies. To work toward those goals, we collected survey data from the parents/guardians of trans youth and children, rather than the students themselves. We used purposive social network sampling (Pfeffer, 2018) to recruit participants in one Mountain West state from a statewide organization designed to support trans students and their families ( $N = 47$ ). Given that our sample was recruited from a parent advocacy and support organization, our participants were likely supportive of their children and more likely to advocate on their behalf than the average parent of trans students—some research has shown that nearly half of the LGBTQ+ students who were out to their parents reported that they were made to feel badly about their identity (Kahn et al., 2018).

We agree that voices of trans students should be centered in conversations about their own experiences in schools; however, we also believe parents/guardians are uniquely qualified to talk about structures, supports, and challenges that school systems present and what it looks like to navigate those systems. These voices add important perspectives in accounts of their children's gender. As Meadow (2011) put it,

They are ... the proxy voices permitted (and often required) to make declarative statements in the medical and social environments their children inhabit .... They become, in this way, the intermediaries between the entirely personal, emotional and cognitive experiences of their children and the larger, surveilling glance of social institutions. (p. 730)

Parents not only recount families' experiences, but they also speak to systemic forces at play, forces that students might not see or have the language to articulate. In this way, we position parents as key informants with unique insights into the complex school systems with which their children interact. While parents often rely on expert discourses to understand and navigate their children's gender identities, they also revise and reimagine those tropes, "reimport[ing] them into institutions they inhabit and, in that way, make social change" (Meadow, 2011, p. 742).

### **Survey Data**

We designed and administered a survey to assess trans students' experiences in their school contexts, as reported by their parents/guardians. We sought specifically to gauge perceptions regarding the (a) school's overall role and preparedness to support trans students, (b) importance of various school policies and practices, and (c) parental

## *Unpacking the T: Trans Student Experiences in School*

willingness and previous experiences advocating for a variety of school policies and practices. The survey also included open-ended items related to each of the topics above. In total, these items yielded a rich tapestry of narrative responses with participants writing over 10,000 total words. This level of engagement is exceptional in survey research and enabled rich qualitative analyses.

### *Participants*

Electronic surveys were administered to parents/guardians via organization listservs and social media. In total, 47 parents/guardians responded to the survey. Table 1 presents demographic data about the 47 trans students whose parents participated. Though we did not seek to generalize to the whole population of students in the state, we did have a heterogeneous group of students in the sample. Students represented a range of grades, from kindergarten to post-secondary, something relatively unique to this study given the literature's focus on secondary students. Students also represented a wide geographic range—attending 14 different school districts. Although students in the study were more likely to attend a district in the metro region of the state (87%), we still found a wide range of enrollment and poverty data within the districts included.

Despite this heterogeneity, our sample does differ from the state in some meaningful ways. In general, respondents were more likely to live in suburban areas and attend districts with slightly lower percentages of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) than the state average. Students were more likely to identify as White than the state average, with only 21% of students identified as students of color ( $n = 10$ ), compared to 47% in the state; this included three students who identified as Asian, two as Black or African American, two as Latinx, and three as multi-racial or multi-ethnic students. These 10 students of color differed in some important ways from the other students included in the study. They were less likely to identify as beyond the binary: Only one student of color (10%) identified this way, compared to 11 of the 37 remaining students (30%). They were also more likely to be located in a city district and in higher-income districts (e.g., those with fewer than 25% of their students eligible for FRL).

**Table 1**  
*Student and District Demographic Data*

Characteristics	Student <i>n</i>	Student <sup>a</sup> %	Statewide <sup>b</sup> %
<b>Student Grade</b>			
K–5 (Elementary)	23	49%	46%
6–8 (Middle School)	15	32%	23%
9–12+ (High School)	9	19%	31%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White	36	78%	53%
Student of Color	10	22%	47%
Choose not to respond	1		
<b>District Enrollment<sup>c</sup></b>			
Fewer than 25,000 students	5	12%	42%
25,000–50,000 students	22	51%	25%
More than 50,000 students	16	37%	34%
<b>District FRL<sup>c</sup></b>			
0–24% FRL	20	47%	19%
25–49% FRL	14	33%	49%
50–74% FRL	8	19%	26%
75–100% FRL	1	2%	6%

<sup>a</sup> May not sum to 100% due to rounding.

<sup>b</sup> These data were collected from publicly available data available through the state’s Department of Education website.

<sup>c</sup> Data regarding district enrollment and FRL are only reported for the 43 families reporting their child attended a traditional or charter public school.

### Data Analysis

Our analyses relied on both qualitative and quantitative survey data, with analytical approaches informed by the prior literature and theoretical framework. By engaging a mixed methods approach, we speak to the quandary that Mayo (2017) named—that disciplinary differences between qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches “cause challenges not only to how LGBTQ subjectivities are represented but what counts as LGBTQ research” (p. 530). We see the qualitative-quantitative debate as overdrawn (Howe, 2003) and instead recognize the value that each methodology brings. Quantitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring possible differences across groups and surfacing relationships between parent/guardian reflections. Engaging qualitative methodology allows us to peel back layers of those patterns and to consider, as Mayo pointed out, “the contingency, relationality, and space-related aspects of gender and sexual identity” (p. 530). Together, we used both methods to destabilize restrictive identity categories and to honor the complex identities and subjectivities of trans students (Mayo, 2017). Through our analyses, we situated our emerging understandings about the lived, embodied experiences of these students within larger school contexts in an effort to unearth and interrogate the ways in which subjection works to organize systems of meaning and

control.

### ***Exploring Gender Identity***

To understand the various gender identities present in the data, we asked parents to describe their child’s gender identity, in their child’s own words if possible. We also asked them to indicate whether their child’s gender identity could be described using a variety of predetermined categories, choosing as many as applied (Table 2).<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2**  
*Parent and Guardian Responses to Fixed-Response Gender Identity Categories*

Reported Gender Identity Category	Student <i>n</i>
Transgender Male	22
Transgender Female	20
Gender Nonconforming	8
Gender Expansive	2
Gender Creative	2
Gender Queer	2
Nonbinary	5
Different Identity Category	4

### ***Initial Results: Getting Curious About the T***

Despite asking for students’ unique gender identities, we initially considered the T as one unified group. Through our first round of qualitative and quantitative analyses, this method raised questions. For example, as we explain below, our initial analyses suggested that less than 30% of parents/guardians indicated their schools were *not* prepared to honor their child’s pronouns. This finding surprised us, as Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) (Kosciw et al., 2016) most recent climate survey found that 51% of trans students in the United States reported they had been prevented from using their chosen name or pronouns. Although we recognized that both geographic peculiarities and this particular sample of parents may account for this departure from the literature, we still found ourselves curious about the fact that 33 of the 47 families felt that their schools were, in fact, prepared. We wondered who these families were—were they randomly dispersed across participants, or did they disproportionately fall within any particular trans identity? (How) did students’ intersectional identities matter here? Was race/ethnicity a factor?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We did not ask participants to share information about their child’s gender expression (i.e., outward expressions of gender identity—clothing, mannerisms, hairstyle). This limits our ability to consider how these students are perceived by peers and educators and narrows our understanding of how materiality and embodiment affect their lived experiences. In the conclusion, we grapple further with the impact of this omission on the present study.

<sup>5</sup> Data on the experiences of LGBTQ students of color show that in addition to challenges related to their sexuality and/or gender, their negative school experiences are impacted by race/ethnicity (Diaz & Kosciw,

A second curiosity came from our initial round of qualitative analyses. In the survey, we asked participants to describe their experiences advocating for their children.<sup>6</sup> Though responses from our participants revealed a diverse range of reasons for and experiences with advocacy, 14 of the 47 reported not having to advocate at all. We recognize that parent/guardian advocacy can be complicated by educational histories, school/community relationships, and deficit conceptions of marginalized parents and families (e.g., Ishimaru, 2014). In reviewing responses, however, we realized that rather than simply saying that they did not advocate, participants actively indicated that they didn't have to, sharing responses such as "0." "None!" "Never had to!" and "Nothing could have gone better." These instances made us wonder: What made it so that some parents were advocating "on a weekly basis" and others "not at all"? With respect to pronouns, we wondered if there were differences between the experiences of students who use binary pronouns (e.g., he/she) and those who use gender-neutral/expansive pronouns (e.g., they/them; ze, hir). In short, those questions led us to unpack the T.

### ***Methodological Decisions Toward Unpacking the T***

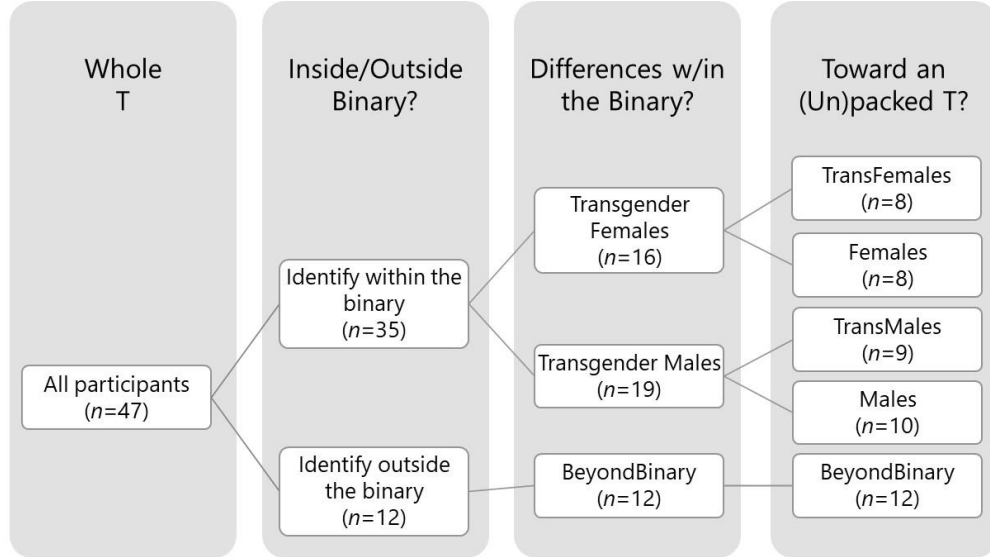
To address our research questions and to explore patterns across various groups within the T, we constructed five discrete gender identity categories using both the open-ended item wherein parents described how their child self-identified and the fixed responses summarized in Table 2. As shown in Figure 1, we first created an indicator for students who identified beyond the [trans]male-female binary: Students who identified as gender-nonconforming, gender-expansive, gender-creative, gender-queer, and/or non-binary were coded as *BeyondBinary*. We then created two separate categories: one each for transgender males and females.

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2009). Burdge et al. (2014) reported that "LGBTQ youth of color face persistent and frequent harassment and bias-based bullying from peers and school staff as well as increased surveillance and policing, relatively greater incidents of harsh school discipline, and consistent blame for their own victimization" (p. 4). These findings suggest that rather than honoring these students' pronouns, educators potentially target them instead.

<sup>6</sup> Though largely unexplored in the literature, an understanding of parent advocacy with regard to LGBTQ+ students is growing. In their 2017 National Climate Survey, GLSEN found that 25% of LGBTQ students surveyed reported that their parents advocated in some way to make their school safer and more inclusive. Most commonly, LGBTQ+ students (20%) reported parent advocacy due to bullying and victimization, with few students (5.5% and lower) reporting advocacy for reasons other than those. Transgender and gender nonconforming students (10.4%) were more likely to report parent advocacy for bathroom and facility access as well as to be treated as their affirmed gender. Kosciw et al. (2018) also found that certain conditions make parent advocacy more likely: a hostile school climate and more LGBTQ-related school resources and supports.

**Figure 1**  
Methodological Decisions Toward Unpacking the T and Disaggregating Gender Identity



Among those students identified as transgender female and transgender male, however, we noticed another interesting distinction. When asked how their child described their gender identity using their words, some parents said that their child embraced a trans identity in their language choices—often reporting their child identified as “trans” or “transgender.” However, for a subset of students, open-ended responses were clearer about an identity as just male or female; for these students, responses included language like, “I’m just a girl!”; or “Male. Period.”; or even “Boy/male. Dislikes word transgender.” To capture this variation within trans males and trans females, we further categorized students as *TransFemale*, *Female*, *TransMale*, or *Male*. Presented in Table 3, these categories provide an imperfect way to capture the nuanced variation among these students’ identities and uncover the ways the data differed by identity group.

**Table 3**  
*Constructed Gender Identity Categories*

Constructed Gender Identity Category	Student <i>n</i>	Student %
BeyondBinary	12	26%
Transgender Females		
TransFemale	8	17%
Female	8	17%
Transgender Males		
TransMale	9	19%
Male	10	21%

**A Note on the Limitations of Categorization.** Despite our use of these categories, we recognize the complexity in “conceptualizing and operationalizing a category of [queer and trans] youth” (Cimpian & Herrington, 2017, p. 497), even as we try to unpack the T. We echo concerns from Horsford et al. (2019), who noted that when designed “to expose inequalities, quantification can provide us with a broad map of policy problems .... But once we convert complex social categories like race or gender into variables, we have limited our chances for a nuanced analysis” (p. 42). The question remains, as Harrison-Quintana et al. (2015) explained, about how best to “construct a liberating versus limiting set of ‘boxes’ to uncover the depth and breadth of trans experience” (p. 167). They further pointed out that trans folks are skeptical of surveys in general, “because the limited options presented all too often collapse and marginalize trans experience rather than expand and uncover the richness and complexities of trans lives” (p. 167). In fact, Labuski and Keo-Meier (2015) suggested, “a growing number of trans people explicitly resist categories that stabilize gender in any way, rendering quantitative methods unwieldy” (p. 14), and yet they also argued that there is value in trying to, imperfectly, assess their lived experiences. We follow Labuski and Keo-Meier (2015) in that we aim to honor the contingency of trans identities, while recognizing “how meaningfully [the term trans] organizes experience” (p. 26; see also Mayo, 2017).

### ***Descriptive Analyses of Fixed-Response Items***

For fixed-response items, we first characterized the whole T via simple descriptive analyses. To explore deeper, we then re-examined the quantitative data, disaggregating by the constructed identity categories. Here, we noted differences by groups and considered how those differences may have stemmed from the ways that embodiment and materiality affect the lived experiences of trans students. We then put those identified differences in conversation with parental responses to open-ended questions.

To evaluate the statistical significance of any identified differences between groups, we used the Mann-Whitney U Test for ordinal data (e.g., school’s preparedness to support trans students, ranging from “very prepared” to “not at all prepared”) and Fisher’s Exact Test for binary data (e.g., comparing the number of respondents who indicated their school was “very prepared” to all other responses). Though some differences were statistically significant, using the convention of  $p < 0.05$ , many were not—an unsurprising finding given the small sample sizes. The limitations of statistical significance are well-documented (e.g., Carver, 1978; Kirk, 1996; Nuzzo, 2014; Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016), with some scholars suggesting the quest for significance has harmed educational research by “cherry-picking promising findings, also known by such terms as data dredging, significance chasing, significance questing, selective inference, and ‘p-hacking’” (Wasserstein & Lazar, 2016, p. 132). This prioritization of statistical significance has also likely suppressed statistically insignificant results within the discipline (Simonsohn et al., 2014) and encouraged researchers to avoid presenting disaggregated quantitative data with small sample sizes unlikely to result in a significant result.

For research on trans students in schools, these concerns are particularly salient given the challenges in accessing these students in general, let alone in numbers large enough to

enable complex statistical analyses. As such, we present descriptive data, even when the identified differences between groups were not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). We believe quantitative data can and should give voice to participant experiences in authentic ways, even when statistical limitations require cautious interpretation and researcher guidance about over-generalization.

### ***Qualitative Analyses of Open-Ended Responses***

Similar to quantitative analyses, qualitative responses were initially coded to identify patterns and themes within the whole T. Initial themes included: *schools supportive, but not prepared*; *teachers need support/education*; and *parents/guardians positioned as educators*. Although compelling, these preliminary results inadequately captured nuances within the data. To dig deeper, we used initial themes to construct narratives for each discreet category. We reanalyzed each narrative and identified new patterns and inconsistencies across the T. In doing so, we realized that some themes were more prominent within certain categories. For example, with respect to advocacy, participants who reported that there was “no need” to advocate were most often parents of *Male* (6 of 10) and *BeyondBinary* (6 of 12) students; only one of the 16 participants from the *Female* and *TransFemale* categories reported not having to advocate. In fact, eight of those 16 participants reported having to advocate due to bullying or safety concerns. Of the 31 parents/guardians of *Male*, *TransMale*, and *BeyondBinary* students, only four reported having to advocate for issues of safety or bullying. Guided by our research questions and theoretical framework, we then used concepts of embodiment, materiality, and subjectivity as analytic tools to understand the themes that we found through thematic analysis.

## **Results**

The results of our analysis center on two categories: (1) school preparedness and (2) advocacy. We start with school preparedness. We begin by sharing a thematic analysis of the whole T and focus on the most prominent theme to surface, which was that schools were *supportive but unprepared*. Next, we share our analysis of that same theme, though we do so by unpacking the T, or digging into nuances within that theme based on identity categories that we created. Specifically, we look at ways in which participants’ reflections, by identity category, revealed differences in their experiences with schools being *supportive but unprepared*.

Our second category of analysis is advocacy. When comparing results across the constructed gender identity categories, we found the most substantial differences in participants’ reflections with regard to advocacy. Therefore, we end by sharing those findings, and we present each constructed gender identity category as a separate narrative.

### **School Preparedness**

In analyzing participants’ responses regarding how prepared schools were to support their children, the main theme that emerged was that schools are supportive but not prepared.

### ***Schools Supportive but Not Prepared: The Whole T***

Analyses of quantitative responses for the whole T suggest schools played a mostly positive role in supporting families and students in their gender process: 87% of parents indicated schools' roles were supportive ( $n = 26$ ; 55%) or very positive ( $n = 15$ ; 32%). In fact, only six (13%) of 47 parents/guardians reported their school's role was "not so positive" ( $n = 5$ ; 11%) or "damaging" ( $n = 1$ ; 2%). Despite an overwhelming perception that schools were supportive or very positive overall, there was some variation in the perceptions of schools' *readiness* to support students in particular ways. When asked to indicate how prepared their school was to support a wide range of items, families reported schools were most prepared to support their trans child by honoring gender pronouns (71% selected "very prepared") and providing supportive teachers and staff (55%). Nevertheless, fewer than half reported their schools were "very prepared" to provide a safe school environment (41%) or inclusive and safe bathrooms (41%), support name changes (46%), share gender processes at school (42%), develop individual gender support plans (40%), or provide families with additional resources (21%). Though not statistically significant using the threshold of  $p > 0.05$ , we found some differences across subgroups of students with regard to perceptions of the schools' overall role, with parents of students of color (50%) and students attending high school (50%) more likely to report their schools played a "very positive" role than comparison groups (28% and 28%, respectively). However, both groups also differed from the study population in terms of gender identity, with each having fewer students identified as *BeyondBinary* than the comparison groups. As such, we caution against over-interpreting these differences because it is difficult to disentangle the effects of race and school level from gender identity in our data.

Participants' qualitative responses expanded upon those summarized in Figure 1. They further revealed the ways that schools, though trying to be supportive, were largely unprepared and also acknowledged the multiple levels of engagement that this work demands: district, school, and educator. Several participants attributed a lack of preparation to the fact that their district "wasn't ready," was "not financially prepared," or "lacked a comprehensive plan around inclusive curriculum." At the school level, some parents acknowledged their child was "the first" trans kid and that this was "new territory for [their school]." These insights point to the ways in which districts and schools, as cultures of normativity, are challenged by the presence of trans students. Most reflections addressed the preparedness of teachers and administrators and the lack of education they seemed to have. The overall message was, as one participant shared, "they were not prepared at all but have tried to support as much as they can without any knowledge or training." Another said, "I still find that some teachers, their level of actual knowledge and understanding about what it means to be a trans kid is lacking." Participants felt as though teachers and schools were "trying to do the right thing, but [that they] don't really know what [they] need to do." Educators' efforts also seemed to be more reactive rather than proactive, as this participant pointed out: "There has been some harsh things said to my child from older children, but staff have tried to help when they are notified." In parents' views, it was not a lack of willingness, but rather a lack of support structures and comprehensive plans in place for "dealing with LGBTQ issues." Being unprepared and lacking knowledge about what it means to be trans, no doubt, contributes to the ways that educators reinforce normativity and limit their potential to disrupt oppressive systems of meaning and control.

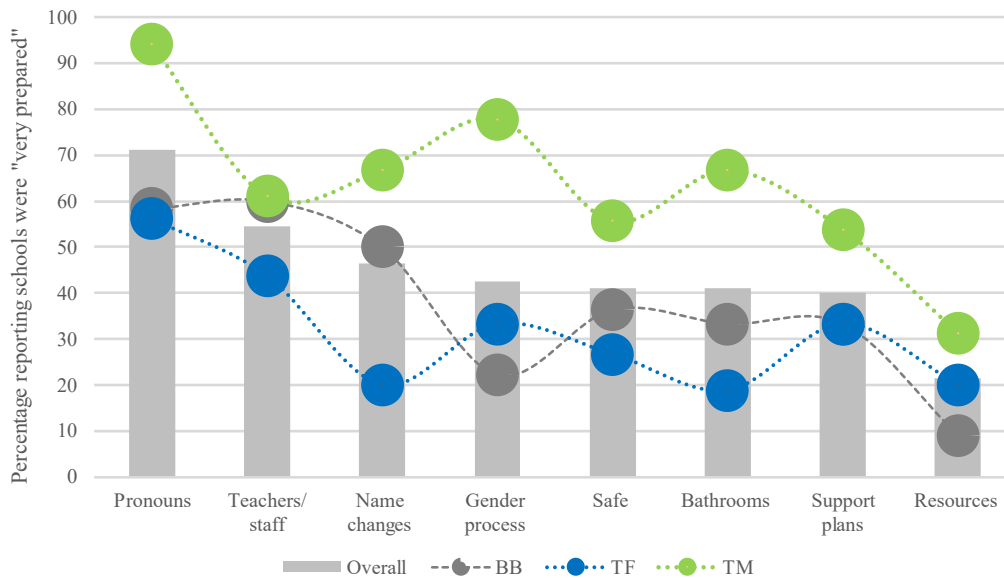
***Schools Supportive but Not Prepared: Unpacking the T with Quantitative Results***

Analyses of the whole T suggested schools generally played a positive role in supporting families and students—87% of families indicated their schools' roles were either supportive or very positive. When conducting analyses to unpack the T, however, a different narrative emerged. Here, we note two important and complementary findings. First, 100% of parents and guardians of *TransMale* and *Male* students reported their schools played a “supportive” or “very positive role.” Second, all six instances where schools were perceived to play a “not so positive” or even “damaging” role occurred within families of *TransFemale*, *Female*, and *BeyondBinary* students. Though these differences were not statistically significant, they highlight the importance of unpacking the T. When viewed as a single group, the results suggest schools were doing well to support trans students in general, with very few exceptions. However, there were variations across group perceptions that suggest something systematic may be impacting student experiences. This result might illuminate persistent challenges or highlight particular student groups that are not being supported, thus spotlighting cultural aspects of schools. These differences may also contribute to the differences we noted previously as a function of race and school-level, which further highlight the importance of taking an intersectional approach.

Disaggregated results regarding school preparedness also highlighted differences across student identity groups. Like the data reported above, Figure 2 presents parental perceptions of their schools' readiness on a wide range of items. Unlike the discussion above, this figure presents overall data alongside disaggregated data for students with different gender identities, including (a) *BeyondBinary*, (b) *TransFemales* and *Females*, and (c) *TransMales* and *Males*. Here, we see that parents of *TransFemale* and *Female* students were generally the least likely to report their school was very prepared, whereas parents of *TransMale* and *Male* students were much more positive overall. In fact, on all items but one (i.e., provision of resources), more than half of *TransMale* and *Male* families reported their schools were very prepared. *BeyondBinary* families were slightly less consistent across items—with results sometimes similar to families of *TransMale* and *Male* students, and other results more similar to families of *TransFemale* and *Female* students. For two items—supporting students' gender processes and the provision of resources—parents of *BeyondBinary* students reported their school was considerably less prepared than all other groups.

**Figure 2**

*Parent/Guardian Perceptions of School Preparedness to Support Trans Students*



Note. Although results from *TransFemale* and *Female*, and *TransMale* and *Male* have been collapsed in this figure for ease of interpretation, the accompanying text highlights distinctions between the five identity groups.

When disaggregated further, results from families of *Female* students were considerably less positive than families of *TransFemale* students; this was true across all eight items. In fact, the majority of families of *Female* students always rated their schools less than “very prepared,” a response pattern distinct to this group. Differences between families of *TransMale* and *Male* students were less consistent, although we did see larger differences in parental perceptions regarding school readiness to provide a safe school environment, share their gender process at school, and provide families with additional resources; for these three items, parents/guardians of *TransMale* students were less positive than *Male* students.

### ***Schools Supportive but Not Prepared: Unpacking the T with Qualitative Results***

Open-ended responses about school preparedness also revealed interesting differences as a function of gender identity. To surface those differences below, we present a narrative that examines the findings from parents of *Male*, *BeyondBinary*, and *Female* students, respectively. These narratives allow us to highlight the findings that emerge when these groups are considered as unique, rather than grouping all the students together within the T. As such, each group is presented individually.

**School Support and Male Students.** Parents of students identified as *Male* were most positive about their schools in open-ended responses. The general sense was that, as one parent/guardian put it, “school staff were wonderful.” Reasons for their satisfaction seemed

connected to schools being on board to learn and to work with families. One participant explained that even though this was “new territory” for the school, they were “willing to meet with us and seemed supportive enough.” In another participant’s view, their school provided “flawless support.” What that support looked like was the school helping their child “opt out of gym for the semester due to anxiety from body dysphoria” and following their child’s lead as “he changed gender three times ... going back and forth.” In this case, “flawless support” meant this school honored this child’s process and his developing sense of self and responded positively to his embodied experience. In general, participants’ responses suggested they recognized the in-process nature of supporting gender diversity and seemed to indicate an appreciation, not for schools that necessarily have this all figured out, but that are willing to grow. Another parent/guardian, who shared that their school “has been amazing,” spoke to that process: “[Our school was] without knowledge at first but over past 3 years they have become knowledgeable and begun to lead the way on the work for all transgender kids, not just our child ....” The process was part of what this participant felt was “amazing,” as was, importantly, the school’s motivation to go beyond supporting this child and to work to create a culture that was ready for, and welcoming to, all trans students. This would necessitate a focus on school culture and on troubling normative standards that have historically served to privilege some students and alienate others.

**School Support and BeyondBinary Students.** Related to the central theme that schools are supportive but not prepared, parents of *BeyondBinary* students, more than any other participants, were positioned as educators in their school communities. Schools being “uninformed,” as one participant put it, meant that parents “seem to be teaching the staff.” This participant went on to say, “I am astonished that I seem to have to be educating the school.” And, while participants expressed appreciation for the willingness of educators to listen to them, they also expressed frustration. For one participant, being in the role of educator meant having to “continue to remind about what it means to be trans and what it doesn’t.” There was a strong desire for schools to take on more of a leadership role. As one parent lamented, “I’m just a parent, navigating this, not trained to provide education for others.”

Positioning parents of *BeyondBinary* students as educators may stem from the ways that schools, as institutions, are ill-prepared to support students who do not fit into binary categories, even when progressive policies are in place. For example, model policies, such as those put forth by GLSEN (2016), recommend that schools honor the gender identity asserted by each student, which means honoring their gender pronouns, whether they have legally changed their names or not. This practice might work for students whose pronouns correspond to those listed in systems used for grading and attendance (e.g., he/she), but students who use gender-neutral pronouns, such as they/them and ze/hir, might have a harder time navigating those systems.

A similar predicament arises for these students and their use of bathrooms and locker rooms. Model policies, according to GLSEN, assert that “[w]ith respect to all restrooms, locker rooms or changing facilities, students shall have access to facilities that correspond to their gender identity” (p. 6). The material bodies of nonbinary students pose a challenge to the physical space of schools, in that bathrooms and locker rooms have historically been separated by “sex.” Schools on board to support *all* students are left scrambling to find

single stall restrooms, which are often designated for “teachers only.”

As ecologies of normativity, schools are designed in ways that reject the disruption of students who do not fit. Perhaps this is why educators are looking to parents for support with good intentions but complex impact. It is worth noting, as we later explain, that parents of *BeyondBinary* students felt least equipped to advocate, meaning the reliance on these parents to educate the school may have been perceived as particularly burdensome. This might also help explain the finding that families of *BeyondBinary* students felt their schools were the least prepared—when compared to other families—to provide resources or support gender processes at schools. These findings further support Nicolazzo et al.’s (2015) claim that in aiming to understand the experiences of trans students, attention must be on the diversity within the T and beyond binary trans identities.

**School Support and Female Students.** Consistent with the patterns seen in the quantitative data, parents of *Female* students overwhelmingly shared in open-ended responses that their schools and districts were not prepared to support their children. This was particularly true with regard to safety concerns, a finding corroborated by the quantitative data: Parents of *Females* were less likely to report their schools were prepared to provide a safe environment than other parents. In fact, only 14% of parents/guardians of *Female* students reported their school was very prepared, compared to a staggering 70% of *Male* students. In qualitative responses, parents of students we identified as *Female* explained this lack of preparedness in a variety of ways and spoke to varying tiers of support. As mentioned above, one parent shared that their district “lacked ... comprehensive plans around inclusive curriculum,” though other participants reflected on policy concerns and a lack of educator knowledge. With regard to policy, one participant stated, “the school was not aware of state law that permitted students to use the bathroom they identify with.” Another recognized the supportive efforts of the social worker, but lamented, “the rest of the school staff needs some help.” This lack of preparedness caused this participant to be “scared about the safety of [their] child more than anything. ... I feel like the school will try but bullying is terrifying to think of.” Though they acknowledged that the school’s heart might be in the right place, fear for their child’s safety was front and center. For another participant, their school and district’s lack of preparedness caused them to transfer. They shared, “[we] told counselors, teachers, and principal but felt that the school/district wasn’t ready. We ended up transferring to a neighboring district with more experience and a better policy.” Of note, eight participants reported transferring schools: one *Male*, two *TransMale*, two *BeyondBinary*, one *Female*, and two *TransFemale* students, who reported that they transferred “twice” and “four times” both related to their children being “outed.”

### **Participants’ Experiences with Advocacy**

It was responses to questions around advocacy, and our initial analysis of whole T responses, that led us to wonder *what might be sacrificed in the name of a cohesive narrative?* Though most participants shared stories of advocacy (89%), a significant number of participants ( $n = 14$ ; 30%) reported not having to advocate at all. As we mentioned previously, we wondered, what made some participants have to advocate “weekly” and others “not at all”? We wondered how a variety of factors might impact parent advocacy, including relationships with/in their communities and how they might be

perceived. Given what we know about multiply marginalized students and the hostile school environments that they face, we also wondered if race/ethnicity might further complicate parents' experiences (Burdge et al., 2014). However, upon further analyses, we found that race did not seem to meaningfully explain these differences—slightly more parents of students of color (4 of 10; 40%) reported they did not need to advocate than parents of White students (10 of 37; 27%). Instead, we found that students' identifications across the T appeared to be driving the differences related to advocacy.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Advocacy within Families of Male Students***

Of the 10 responses from parents of *Male* students, the most salient theme was that these students had little challenges at school and the parents did not have to advocate. Six out of 10 shared responses such as “my school is supportive; I did not have to advocate”; “nothing could have gone better”; “none, stealth”; “never had to”; and “0. The school and peers are very inclusive and don't seem to have any visible issues.” One participant shared that, although they met with the school team regarding their son's transition, the

school has worked on [policies, curriculum, educating teachers, educating school community] and, to date, I can report that my child has not been bullied nor made to feel lesser in our community. It's a beautiful story when a school takes care of its children, and that's exactly what my school has done. They are exemplary in my book.

This parent did not have to advocate, it seems, because the school was proactive in addressing an ecology of normativity; essentially, this school was working to subvert subjection.

When parents of these students did share stories of advocacy, most had to do with meeting with the school team to plan for social transitions (e.g., updating gender support plans, name changes, pronouns, bathroom accommodations). One participant shared the complex process of what that advocacy looked like. They said,

When I advocated for his use of his preferred gender bathroom, there was a problem with the aftercare program when he was yelled at for using the “wrong” bathroom. When I talked to the coordinator ... she said she would respect his choice as long as he didn't “go back and forth” with his decision on which bathroom to use. I found that remark offensive, as just because he hadn't wanted to publicly transition ... didn't mean he was uncertain of his gender preference.

Although families of *Male* students may have had to advocate less, and their stories of mistreatment were few compared to other families, this example illustrates that students' material bodies, and what is perceived as “right” and “wrong” when it comes to rules of the gender binary, persist to affect students' lived experiences.

### ***Advocacy Within Families of TransMale Students***

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<sup>7</sup> This finding complicates Birnkrant and Przeworski (2017) study of 56 parents of trans youth, which found no differences by child sex at birth for parents' advocacy.

Of the seven responses from parents of *TransMale* students, five answered open-ended questions and those responses were limited, as very few offered detailed narratives. Only three talked about advocacy—two for access to bathrooms. One participant shared their experience with a school counselor who “was strongly pushing [their child] to use the staff restroom ‘so that other students wouldn’t be uncomfortable,’” which prompted this family to switch schools. This is an example of how subjection works: Systems of power and control are so solidly in place that some educators cannot imagine disrupting them. It also points to an historical prioritization of the needs of cisgender people to not have to come into contact with trans folks (Serano, 2016). Instances like these, that reinforce normative standards of being, no doubt, affect students’ senses of self in problematic ways. Another participant advocated due to “bullying,” and one to register their child, but reported, “I wish I didn’t have to tell anyone at his school. The more people who know, the more people can out him, which is NOT their place.”

The theme of privacy was unique to responses from parents of both *TransMales* and *Males*. Participants mentioned wanting gender to “not come up” and “not having to worry about being discovered” and stressed that “privacy is key.” These findings speak to what some studies have found, which is that trans students who “pass,” or who choose not to share their trans identities and who are “read” as their actual genders, experience less harassment (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Toomey et al., 2010). Perhaps this is why, in our data, there were such powerful differences in stories of advocacy. Of the *Male* and *TransMale* students, five were “stealth” at school according to their parents, compared to two *BeyondBinary* students and none of the *Female* or *TransFemale* students. When students’ embodied gender identities challenge what counts as normal, no matter how much they performed that embodied identity, their chances of being “busted” increased. We saw this throughout our data.

### ***Advocacy Within Families of BeyondBinary Students***

Parents of *BeyondBinary* students, for the most part, provided more detailed responses to the open-ended questions. Advocacy from these parents/guardians was varied. Most often, advocacy was around “educating” the school, as detailed above. This was particularly noteworthy given that these families felt less equipped to advocate than others: Despite reporting they were similarly comfortable advocating, only 25% of families of *BeyondBinary* students reported feeling “very equipped,” compared to 46% of parents of all other trans students.

When advocacy was necessary, participants spoke specifically to the often-unintentional practices that educators enacted to reinforce the binary (e.g., separating groups by “boys” and “girls,” or referring to students by gendered monikers “ladies,” “girlfriends”) and their advocacy to change those practices. Advocacy also looked like meeting with school teams prior to school, to “come out” before school started, and to talk about names, pronouns, and bathroom use. Several participants indicated the need to advocate because their children were mistreated. One participant advocated “weekly” due to “bullying” and another to “appropriately handle harassment.” Sharing a more detailed response, this participant explained that their child “started the year out getting laughed at for wearing nail polish . . . Now because he’s been made fun of, he struggles to ‘be himself’ in how he dresses at school (and frankly at home).” In this detailed response, we get a sense

not only of the mistreatment this student experienced, but also of the effect that this instance had on this child's understanding of himself. Based on regulatory standards rooted in cis-normative "rules" about who is and is not allowed to wear nail polish, this student was policed by other students—and in turn, began policing himself, what Spade (2015) explained as effects of subjection. This instance also, importantly, points to how those same normative standards were internalized by this students' classmates: Nail polish breaks a rule if you look like a boy, no matter how you identify. This instance, and ones we share below, also brings to light the ways femininity was policed in our data, perhaps more harshly than expressions of masculinity.

Six of the 11 responses from parents of *BeyondBinary* students indicated that there was no need to advocate. Reasons for a lack of advocacy indicated that schools were proactive rather than reactive. For example, one participant mentioned that the school was "excellent" and wrote,

the principal called me and wanted to know if I wanted to change name in administrative system, the teacher contacted interventionist with my approval, listen to child, me. Ideal environment ... high bar of respect. Educated the entire 5th grade, kindergarten buddies had exposure.

Another parent noted their family "didn't need to advocate, as my child's pre-school was staffed with individuals who were open and accepting of gender non-conformity and who did a great job of helping other kiddos accept our child for who he is." In these reflections, a lack of advocacy was explained by the ways schools are moving toward subverting subjection—addressing normative ecological factors that affect how certain bodies are regulated and consciously working to disrupt them. Two of these respondents explained that their lack of advocacy was due to their children's gender identity not being known at school.

### ***Advocacy within Families of TransFemale Students***

Regarding advocacy, four of the eight responses from parents of *TransFemale* students had to do with student safety or mistreatment. One participant shared their process of working with the school to create gender-neutral bathrooms and also mentioned that advocacy involved having a "safety plan with the school, which makes [their child] feel better." Other parents/guardians shared more egregious instances of bullying or harassment. For example, one participant reported that in their K-8 school, "harsh things have been said to [their] child from older children" and that they had to advocate

several times throughout the year when problems of kids being mean or asking lots of questions. Our child was in 1st grade and kids ... mostly asked questions about her being transgender and what happened to her old name. Kids, especially boys, would sometimes laugh at her or say she wasn't really a girl .... our child is now very nervous about people making fun of her and she will no longer wear dresses to school .... She does not want to be seen as different, so we did not have the class read a book about being transgender.

This reflection points to the ways that students' subjectivities are both deeply personal and

also shaped by the social conditions in which they exist, and it further speaks to the complexity of educating the school community (e.g., when cisgender students are taught about trans identities, who does the curriculum land on?). Importantly, this example also underscores the ways that students police themselves as a result of normative standards and practices, and in this case those specifically related to what it means to be a girl. Throughout our data, instances of bullying and harassment seemed linked to questions of femininity or students' performances of femininity that were called into question or attacked by other students. We take this up further in the discussion.

Two respondents shared instances in which they had to advocate because their children were "outed" at school. One parent reported an instance "when a classmate inadvertently outed [their] daughter," explaining that while the school was "very supportive," they were "unsure what to do." Another respondent mentioned having to advocate "a few times" the last of which was when an "insensitive student was trying to out my [8th grade] child . . . . We decided to transfer schools this year to avoid the other students at the last school. It's a constant stress. This is the fourth school for my child." We wonder if this instinct to "out" students coincides with Serano's (2016) idea that "deception" is "the noose . . . draped around the neck of transgender women" (p. 248) and Stryker's (2013) insights about gender presentation being a lie that specifically targets "innocent and unsuspecting others" (p. 9), namely, cisgender people.

### ***Advocacy Within Families of Female Students***

Similar to findings from *TransFemales*, five of the eight responses from parents of *Female* students spoke to safety concerns, which for four resulted in the need to advocate. Although this participant admitted that they could not "prove gender [was] at the root of the problem," they had to advocate due to their "child being bullied by the principal." Another participant shared an example of having to "advise and teach the summer coordinators, when [their child] was publicly outed by the teacher." And for yet another, advocacy was in the form of "various meetings with school admin and teachers regarding the need for support due to bullying." In response to the question of advocacy, one parent shared a detailed narrative beginning with: "Any parents first instinct is to protect their child. 'Are they safe?' is the first question." To answer that question, this participant shared a series of their inquiries—checking district policies, meeting with school teams to talk about social transitions, investigating the degree to which LGBTQ+ topics were taught in the curriculum. Discovering that there was, in fact, "not much education on even the rudimentary definitions of terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, TRANSGENDER, queer, questioning," this parent believed this lack of education "harbors stupidity and in [their] opinion puts [their] kid in danger." They went on to share a specific instance of advocacy, which they named "a terrifying true example" of the effects of ignorance and which involved a Snapchat from a fellow student that said, "You should go kill yourself." This student was homeschooled for the remainder of the year. This parent attributed this act of harassment to a lack of education and advocated for the district to take a more cultural approach to supporting their child: "it is the responsibility and duty of [the district] to bring education, awareness, and language regarding sexual orientation and gender identity" and to "educate and give these kids tools and language they need to understand everyone."

## **Discussion**

To better understand the experiences of queer students in schools, Kosciw et al. (2016) pointed to the need for a better understanding of parent advocacy—when and why do parents actively advocate, and how effective is their advocacy? This focus can illuminate pain points—places where schools continue to construct challenging environments for students, or ways that they replicate damaging structures or phenomena like heteronormativity. In this study, we aimed to get at those outstanding questions by soliciting information about the experiences of trans students, a group that is often missing from this conversation. We find it important to acknowledge the ways these families spoke about their experiences as a collective, and, especially, to call out the nuances that emerged as we unpacked the T. These nuances highlight how the environments within schools—and the sometimes-challenging structures—differ for families of students with different trans identities. In the findings section that precedes this one, we presented results within the constructed gender identities that highlight what was uncovered as our methodological approach evolved. In the narrative that follows, we highlight what emerged as we looked within and across the T. Here, we look across those groups to name more explicitly what we may have missed had we, as researchers, not attended to complexities within student identities. We also conclude with an acknowledgement of a missed opportunity to take a more intersectional approach to our study.

### **Subverting Subjection Across the T**

Overwhelmingly, participants spoke to systems of meaning and control and the need to subvert subjection. In other words, rather than focusing on policies related to bathrooms or bullying, typical go-tos in discussions about trans students, participants spoke to an ecology of normativity and to the critical importance of disrupting that ecology. They identified ways that these systems functioned—through gender policing, language/discourse, lack of curricular inclusion of LGBTQ topics—and how they affected the experiences of their children and their internal senses of self.

Throughout our analyses, what became clear was that these systems of meaning and control functioned differently across the T. For example, as we unpacked the T, we saw variance in just how unprepared schools were across different items and what perceived impact that lack of preparedness had. As we noted, had we stopped with an assessment of parents' perceptions as a whole T, we would have mistakenly concluded that for the most part, schools were getting pronouns right. In unpacking the T, we found that schools' preparedness to support pronoun changes varied across trans identities, with parents/guardians of *Female*, *TransFemale*, and *BeyondBinary* students reporting their schools were much less prepared than parents of *Male* or *TransMale* students. Moreover, two of the three respondents who indicated their schools were not at all prepared to support pronoun changes were parents of *BeyondBinary* students. As scholars who work closely with educators in support of trans students, this finding is consistent with feedback we hear about the perceived linguistic challenges of using gender neutral pronouns (e.g., "I just have a hard time using 'they' to refer to one person"); in fact, upon closer inspection of responses from those respondents, we discovered these two *BeyondBinary* students used they/them or ze/zir, respectively.

### **Embodiment and Materiality Across the T**

These differences persisted as we analyzed our data with ideas of embodiment and materiality in mind. Gender theorists have pointed to the different ways that gender presentation, how people's material bodies are perceived through expressions of gender, determine how they are received in public (e.g., Halberstam, 1998; Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2016; Stryker, 2013). Specifically, they have noted the ways that expressions of masculinity and femininity function in general as well as how they relate specifically to trans identities. Namaste (2000) underscored the ways in which gender transgressions, for both (cis)men and (cis)women, make them targets for both verbal and physical abuse. "Effeminate" men and "masculine" women transgress "acceptable limits of self-presentation" (p. 141). And though Namaste acknowledged that both (cis)men and (cis)women are at risk of harassment for these gender transgressions, she builds the argument that trans women experience the most risk. In a discussion of the need to pass for trans survival, Namaste explores studies of passing in which "the interpretation of sexed bodies was overwhelmingly skewed in favor of masculine referents" (p. 145). In other words, in a study in which participants were given images of different types of bodies and asked to assign each a gender, they were more likely to assign a body "male" with any indication of masculinity than they were to assign a body "female" with multiple indications of femininity. This finding underscores the challenges that trans females face when trying to pass, and because the ability to pass is wrapped up with the ability to avoid or mitigate violence, trans women face more violence in public spaces. Pointing to the precision it takes to get femininity "right," Halberstam (1998) offered a discussion of how "one finds the limits of femininity so quickly" and makes the claim that "it is remarkably easy in this society not to look like a woman" (p. 28).

### ***The Regulation of Masculinity and Femininity***

Within our data, we found similar patterns and discrepancies across the T, most notably around the different ways masculinity and femininity were regulated. For example, quantitative findings suggested that parents/guardians of *Female* and *TransFemale* students reported more challenges with safety, bathrooms, and name changes than any other group. These differences were also salient in our analyses of qualitative data. Throughout participants' open-ended responses, particularly with respect to advocacy, we noticed distinct differences. Parents of *TransFemale* and *Female* students shared stories of advocacy that were distinguished by a focus on safety and instances of bullying; this was consistent with our finding that only 27% of those families reported their schools were very prepared to provide a safe school environment. Though not all respondents included details about those concerns, those that did indicated that instances of mistreatment or policing were linked to questions of femininity, or what it meant to be a girl. This also came through in the "nail polish" instance shared by a parent of a *BeyondBinary* student.

In their reflections, instances of mistreatment shared by parents of *TransFemale* and *Female* students seemed to follow what these theorists have put forward: What made these students targets was not necessarily their gender identities as trans students, but their expressions of gender for which they were "busted" (Plemons, 2017, p.128). And, at least in our data, students who embodied aspects of femininity seemed to be the most heavily targeted. This finding deepened our understanding of how subjection works, particularly

through trans-misogyny. Serano (2018) argues that trans women are “culturally marked, not for failing to conform to gender norms per se, but because of the specific direction of their gender transgression—that is, because of their feminine gender expression and/or their female gender identities” (para. 1). This targeting of trans women is even graver for trans women of color, as they continue to be victims of violence at disproportionate rates (e.g., Forestiere, 2020).

No responses in our data indicated that advocacy was due to bullying related to distinct performances of masculinity. In fact, as we reported, many responses from parents of *Male* and *TransMale* students suggested there was no need to advocate at all. Unique to reflections from these parents was the desire to remain private, or for gender not to come up. As we report, of participants who explained that their children were stealth at school, five of the seven came from these two categories. Research suggests that students who “pass” might experience less harassment (McGuire et al., 2010). Perhaps this is due to gender theorists’ claim that it is easier to pass as a man than as a woman, and that performances of femininity are more closely policed. In our data, no parents of *Female* or *TransFemale* students reported that they were stealth at school.

Reflections from parents of *BeyondBinary* students were complex, potentially providing insight into the nuances between gender identity as it is voiced and asserted, and gender expression as it is read by others. Although these parents reported that they felt less equipped to advocate than other families, half of them indicated that there was no need to advocate. This paradox is one area ripe for additional research, as scholars have pointed out (e.g., Nicolazzo et al., 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016) and it causes us to wonder if these parents feel less equipped to advocate because they have not needed to, or because they feel ill-equipped, and are therefore unsure what to advocate for. The latter possibility would be even further confounded by schools that consistently position these parents as experts—something they may not feel prepared to be. Among those who did not advocate, two characteristics set them apart from the other *BeyondBinary* students: First, two of the six were stealth and three of the six, upon further investigation, also identified as trans males in addition to non-binary.

Thus, we wonder the extent to which the differences in advocacy—and need for advocacy based on negative experiences—might be related to gender expression, or how students’ bodies were read. Students who identified as both *TransMale* and *BeyondBinary* might occupy gender identities that bump up against binary notions of gender, but their ability to pass as male and live stealth may shelter them from the violence faced by students whose very bodies render them unintelligible (i.e., students who are read as neither “male” or “female”). Research has, in fact, pointed to the ways that students who are gender nonconforming report higher levels of victimization (D’Augelli et al., 2006). Though small sample sizes in these studies warrant cautious interpretation, these nuances point to the importance of acknowledging materiality and embodiment across the T and how they might shape families’ experiences. These differences may provide a glimpse into what we could have captured more fully had we solicited information about students’ gender expression; we recommend future research more carefully consider the interplay of gender identity and expression and how those interact with school contexts.

### **Intersectionality and Unpacking the T**

As we mentioned, we also explored how students' racial identities intersected with their unique gender identities. There were some notable differences. For example, parents of students of color were more likely than parents of white students to report their schools played a "very positive" role. This is an interesting finding, as it challenges what research has found about the experiences of queer and trans students of color (Blackburn & McCready, 2009; Burdge et al., 2014; Singh, 2013). This subset of students represented a range of grade levels (three middle school, two high school, and five elementary) and, as we mentioned, were enrolled in public schools in higher income city districts. Research has suggested that despite the visibility of queer life and resources in urban centers, queer students, in urban schools, experience bias-based discrimination similar to their rural and suburban peers (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Research has also suggested that racism and transphobia together may place trans students of color at risk of both environmental and interpersonal stressors (Singh, 2013). And, although systemic forces multiply marginalize these youth in particular, evidence also suggests that trans students of color use numerous resilience strategies to navigate racism and transprejudice (Singh, 2013). In their open-ended responses, parents focused on their children's experiences with regard to gender, likely because of the ways that we asked questions on the survey. Had we asked questions aimed at understanding how students' intersectional identities were impacted by school experiences, we may have been able to better understand this unique finding. This was a missed opportunity.

### **Conclusion: The Importance of Unpacking the T**

What we found in these data are part of a larger, longer, and necessarily complex conversation. In many ways, our findings support what trans/gender theorists continue to say: Gender is a complicated construct that is embodied, read, politicized, and policed in material ways through forces of subjection. These findings underscore the need to unpack the T when it comes to understanding the diverse experiences of trans students. This may be particularly important as research focused on trans students—though still limited in both depth and breadth—has grown rapidly over the past decade, bringing with it various approaches to exploring the T (Greytak et al., 2013; Heck et al., 2016; Jourian, 2017; McGuire et al., 2010; Nicolazzo et al., 2015; Poteat et al., 2017). A handful of recent studies (Baum et al., 2013; Frost et al., 2019; Greytak et al., 2013; Greytak et al., 2009; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006) have acknowledged the diversity of trans identities and have collected data on subgroups (e.g., transgender female, transgender male, genderqueer, non-binary), though these studies often present a single story of the T and focus on demonstrated differences between trans and cisgender students. Understanding the experiences of trans students involves honoring their diverse, embodied knowledges—even when they complicate the narrative or when traditional research conventions make it challenging. Our findings point to the importance of continuing and deepening this ongoing conversation.

Our findings also point to the need to understand how students' material bodies—how they express gender and are read by others—relate to how they experience school, whether they are able to "pass" if they want to; if they are accepted for who they are; or if they are "busted" for breaking restrictive normative rules that function through systems of subjection. Data and statistics that drive the conversation about LGBTQ students in schools

often call attention to important trends around safety. They motivate policy discussions, legislation, and action, and they galvanize support, yet they are often atheoretical. As Horsford et al. (2019) asserted with regard to quantitative studies of policy in particular, studies that are “theoretically agnostic ... [fail] to interrogate the assumptions underlying their hypotheses” (p. 42). Reading our data through lenses offered by trans theorists offered insights beyond symptoms of unsafe schools or the degrees to which students are bullied and into the ways that subjection functions systemically to affect their lived experiences. Understanding those experiences embedded in these powerful systems will allow researchers and educators to think differently about solutions. Spade (2015) encouraged us to think about problems as complex, multi-layered, historical, and ever-changing, involving self-reflection. Considering students’ experiences as embedded in normative systems of meaning and control challenges us to think in complex ways about solutions and to consider the multiple layers of what creates negative experiences that students report. This may also allow schools to do the proactive work that these parents call for by addressing the underlying forces of subjection rather than reacting to its many symptoms.

Thinking with trans theories helped us make sense of these particular data; however, it also raised important questions—both methodological and substantive—about how to do empirical work that attends to complexity within the T while also utilizing sound analytical approaches. Throughout our research, we found ourselves struggling with myriad tensions: how to reconcile best practices for sample size with our desire to unpack student identities; what to do about the related push-pull between individualism and collectivism; how to consider categorization in thoughtful ways that do not further entrench definitions about what is or is not trans; and how to consider the impact of race and other aspects of identity as they compound and multiply marginalize certain students. We have tried to articulate these decisions throughout this manuscript in order to support other researchers—within queer and trans scholarship and general PK-12 research—in imagining their work differently. But we also recognize that these decisions may have been imperfect ones.

We have one concluding thought: In thinking about solutions—to create affirming schools and to adopt research practices that allow us to better understand how to do so—parents of trans students are vital. Social institutions such as schools, as Meadow (2011) pointed out, are in the process of “developing complex ways to taxonomize, describe and recognize different forms of gendered identities and behaviors” and parents/guardians “are key actors in these projects” (p. 6). Although this research did not seek to center parental experiences, the insights from parents as key informants cannot be underscored enough. As we look to the future, however, we also need to involve trans students themselves more directly by centering their experiences in substantive ways. The argument that trans people, youth and children included, should be the most prominent voice in the movement toward trans liberation is heard loud and clear through the voices of trans theorists (Namaste, 2000; Prosser, 1998; Rubin, 1998; Serano, 2016; Spade, 2015; Stryker, 2013). The more that we acknowledge and raise up the diversity of identity and experience within trans communities, the more power and promise there is both for individuals as well as the community-at-large (Harrison-Quintana et al., 2015). Building on Stryker’s (2013) call for *desubjugated knowledges*, we might position trans students as experts of their own lives and allow ourselves as researchers to be pushed. As Mayo (2017) asserted: “[q]ueer, questioning, trans, intersex, and ally student practices push us to broaden what kinds of

*Leonardi, Farley, Drager, & Gonzalez*

questions and approaches we consider to be legitimate research and what ends of our research will be” (p. 531). Involving trans students in the research we do, the questions we ask, and the goals we set with respect to creating change will help us better understand their embodied experiences, the ways their material bodies are read, and how the structures of school serve to position them, all of which are critical to subverting subjection.

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*Unpacking the T: Trans Student Experiences in School*

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