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U.S. High School Administrators' Challenges in Creating Transgender Inclusive Policies

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Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Kimberly Stilwill

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2022

Abstract

U.S. High School Administrators' Challenges in Creating Transgender Inclusive Policies

by

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MS, Walden University, 2017

BA, University of North Carolina Charlotte, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2022

Abstract

A gap in practice exists regarding the lack of inclusive policies in U.S. schools for transgender students. U.S. high school administrators experience challenges in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. Guided by empowerment of minority students theory and minority stress theory, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. Data were collected using semistructured interviews with 12 current high school administrators across the United States who have implemented transgender-inclusive policies. Data were analyzed using open coding to identify themes. Three themes emerged including (a) existing school bathrooms and procedures for their use are not developed to address the unique needs of transgender students, (b) administrators are challenged by the behaviors of adults and students concerning the issues of transgender inclusive policies, and (c) administrators expressed difficulty developing an all-encompassing set of inclusive policies that take the needs of all students into account. By learning more about administrators' challenges, recommendations can be made to help overcome those challenges. The findings of this research have potential implications for positive social change by bringing more awareness to the challenges administrators face when developing transgender-inclusive policies. The inclusion of more open communication with students, faculty, and staff could lead to positive improvement of policies and practices to address transgender students' experiences at school.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to educators who strive to make all students feel welcome and safe. This study is dedicated to my mother, Andy Watson, who has always been there for me and has pushed me to be the best version of myself. This study is also dedicated to my supportive husband, Michael, who has encouraged me during my graduate journey and life. This study is dedicated to my sons, Corey, Jordan, and Weston, to whom I strive to be an excellent example of dreaming big and following your dreams.

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Many people helped me along the way on my journey. I want to thank them.

First, I would like to thank my committee. Without their guidance, it would have been difficult to have made it. Dr. Jamie Patterson went above and beyond to support me in this journey. Dr. Stacy Wahl provided valuable feedback and guidance. Dr. Andrea Wilson pushed me to do more than I thought possible.

To my friends, coworkers, and extended family: You put up with me not having time to spend with you. I am thankful for your understanding and support. I hope to reconnect with all of you.

To my husband, Michael, Mom, my sons, Corey, Jordan, Weston, daughters-in-law, Jess and Meagan, and grandchildren, Connor and Avery: Your love and understanding sustained me as I traversed my journey. You all never doubted that I could do it, even if, at times, I doubted myself. I will now need to find another answer when you all ask what I am doing. "Working on my paper" will no longer be my answer. Let's celebrate!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Schools have the responsibility to be a safe and nurturing place of learning for all students, but the needs of transgender students have not been taken into account at many schools (Philips, 2017). This basic qualitative study was conducted to explore U.S. high school administrators' challenges in creating inclusive policies for transgender students. School administrators are tasked with creating climate and policies that support transgender students (Watkins & Moreno, 2017). Watkins and Moreno (2017) advised that administrators and faculty must have policies protecting all students. This topic needs to be studied to help close the gap in practice related to high school administrators' challenges in creating policies to protect all students, especially transgender students.

Recent research has shown that transgender students generally do not feel safe at school and are victimized more than other students (McBride, 2021). Bringing more awareness to administrators' challenges could lead to more open communication with students, faculty, and staff and, consequently, positive improvement of policies and practices to address transgender students' experiences at school. Mistakes happen, but talking about the challenges, policies, and needs of transgender students can help make things easier. The needs of transgender students are new to many adults but meeting those needs can improve over time. In this chapter, I present the background of the lack of transgender-inclusive policies and how transgender students do not feel safe in school. The problem statement and the purpose of the study are presented. The conceptual

framework of empowerment of minority students and minority stress theory is explained. The nature of the study and the significance of the study are discussed.

Background

There is a lack of rules and policies that protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students in schools, and this lack of rules and policies could potentially increase violence toward LGBTQ students (Abreu et al., 2020). According to Farley and Leonardi (2021), only 41% of parents of transgender students in their study felt that schools are prepared to provide a safe environment for transgender students, and 40% of the transgender students' parents in their study thought schools are not prepared to offer safe bathrooms. Similarly, Gower et al. (2021) learned that some transgender students are bullied so severely they change schools. An adolescent transgender participant from Pacey et al.'s (2020) study said the school environment becomes more hostile when teachers and administrators do not support transgender students.

In this study, I addressed the gap in practice in the lack of inclusive policies in U.S. schools for transgender students. This topic is sensitive and involves minority students; many studies about transgender victimization have been conducted at the collegiate level. Norris and Orchowski (2020) learned from their research that transgender students experience more peer victimization than other students. Steck and Perry (2018) found that few schools have inclusive policies. A possible reason for the lack of policies is that administrators are challenged to establish and implement them.

My study helps fill the gap in practice related to why transgender-inclusive policies are lacking. Knowing more about the challenges high school administrators face in creating these policies will help inform other policymakers. The omission of transgender-inclusive policies frames transgender students' perceptions about safety and school climate (Paceley et al., 2020). More information is necessary to help ensure inclusive policies are in place to create a safe environment for transgender students.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed by this study is that U.S. high school administrators are challenged to create inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. Day et al. (2019) suggested that schools establish policies that focus on the particular risk factors for victimization and bullying that transgender students might experience. Additionally, according to a high school administrator, inclusive policies for transgender students need to be addressed but have not yet been discussed (personal communication, August 10, 2021). Demissie et al. (2018) found that school administrators can be challenged to establish and implement inclusive policies for transgender students for several reasons, including community members who are in opposition.

Although inclusive policies for transgender students have been incorporated in learning environments since 2012 (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State, 2012), many administrators have not developed inclusive policies for transgender students, even though bullying continues (Porta et al., 2017). According to Steck and Perry (2018), only one of the seven high school administrators they studied had

proactive transgender-inclusive school policies in general, including policies for inclusive bathrooms. In their study, Kosciw et al. (2020) found that 10.9% of the participants reported their schools support transgender policies. Goldberg et al. (2019) found similar results with higher education institutions not having inclusive policies for transgender students, including policies regarding dorms and bathrooms for transgender students. Day et al. (2019) determined that in schools with more inclusive policies, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students experience less harassment and bullying, which included being shoved, hit, or threatened, compared to LGB students in schools with less inclusive policies.

Steck and Perry (2018) and Meyer and Keenan (2018) suggested the need to add safety policies for transgender students in schools and develop a better understanding of the needs of transgender students. Policies for transgender students began to emerge in 2006 when Susan Doe started using the restroom that she identified with and obtained permission from the school administration and staff (*Doe v. Regional School Unit 26*, 2014). In 2007, the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association implemented the first gender-inclusive policy for high school athletics (Evans, 2017). However, even with gender identity being added to Title IX in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), administrators have not implemented policies that cater to the needs of transgender students (Philips, 2017; Watkins & Moreno, 2017). For example, students who identify as transgender want to live as the person they are and not be defined by binary gender policies, such as having to use birth gender bathrooms (Watkins & Moreno, 2017).

Schools should include inclusive policies to create an environment where transgender students can be protected (Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. Pryor et al. (2016) found it beneficial to include transgender students' input in creating policies. Goldberg et al. (2019) conducted a study of college students who identified as transgender, and the students provided innovative suggestions to address ineffective policies, such as not having gender-inclusive bathrooms located around the campus and only having one bathroom transgender students could use, which could shape future transgender bathroom policies. Pryor et al. (2016) conducted a case study of transgender college students regarding their perspectives on policies at their college. Understanding administrators' perceptions of the challenges in creating inclusive policies could provide valuable information to influence the creation or amendment of inclusive policies in U.S. high schools.

Research Question

The following research question guided my study:

RQ: What challenges do U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was empowerment of minority students theory (Cummins, 1986) and minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003). The empowerment of minority students theory pertains to educators and students working collaboratively to challenge educational and social inequities (Cummins, 1986). In their study, Boyland et al. (2018) mentioned that policies and best practices that support LGBTQ students in schools align with Cummins's empowerment of minority students theory. Likewise, Wong (1996) explained that Cummins' (1986) empowering minority students framework forms a beginning place to create school policies for minority students. Wong (1996) said there should be community collaboration in developing inclusive curriculum and policies.

According to Meyer (2003), minority stress refers to the excess pressure individuals from stigmatized social groups are exposed to because of their social position. Bry et al. (2018) indicated that most stigmatized students experience minority stress, which can cause anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts or ideation. Woodford et al. (2017) explained that due to the discrimination and stigma transgender students experience, their stress can have adverse consequences, such as academic difficulty or suicide. Lewis and Eckes (2020) found that some students experienced stress, specifically due to the inconsistencies in implementing restroom policies. In the case of Lewis and Eckes (2020), the transgender-inclusive bathroom policy permits students to use the restrooms of the gender they identify with. A noninclusive policy would include a single-use bathroom (Lewis & Eckes, 2020). Several researchers have explored the need for policies to protect transgender youth from harassment, increase their feelings of safety,

and reduce their stress (Lewis & Eckes, 2020; Weinhardt et al., 2017; Wernick et al., 2017).

Nature of the Study

In this study, I used a basic qualitative design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that in a basic study, a researcher wants to understand the participants' experiences. In this study, participants were U.S. high school administrators who implemented transgender policies at their educational institutions. Qualitative studies are conducted by researchers interested in how people make sense of their experiences in their world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, the research question in this study was focused on the challenges of U.S. high school administrators regarding transgender inclusive policies.

Definitions

The following words and terms informed my study:

Binary: Gender defined as male or female; also known as gender binary or gender binarism (Goldberg et al., 2020).

Cisgender: Youth who identify with their birth gender identity (McBride, 2021).

Inclusive policies: Policies that concentrate on sexual orientation and gender identities (Day et al., 2019).

Transgender: Youth who do not identify with their birth gender identity (McBride, 2021).

Assumptions

Creswell (2013) explained that assumptions are the guiding philosophy in qualitative research. In this study, I assumed the research participants understood the concept of inclusive policies, understood the interview questions as intended, and would answer honestly. I assumed the participants understood policy development and implementation in a high school setting. I assumed the participants would not conceal any biases toward the transgender community and would be open and neutral in sharing unbiased opinions. I assumed that participants would not feel coerced to answer any questions or participate in my study.

Scope and Delimitations

To assist in making the design of the study clear, the scope and delimitations were defined. According to Ellis and Levy (2009), scope and delimitations are used to narrow the focus of a study and outline what was not included in the study. For my study, the parameters I set included participants who were current administrators who implemented transgender policies in their high schools in the United States.

Several conceptual frameworks were considered but not used in this study. According to Stewart and Ayres (2001), systems theory builds on understanding experiences. I did not investigate systems theory because administrators may not be aware of transgender experiences. Taylor (1997) explained critical theory as being related to policy's language and its consequences. My study dealt with the challenges in creating transgender inclusive policies and a lack of policies, so this theory was not investigated. Another framework is group theory, which is based on groups trying to influence policy

creation and change (Anyebe, 2018). Group theory was not investigated because in this study I focused on administrators' challenges and not on transgender students rallying together to change policy.

Limitations

All research is imprecise, and limitations are the most important weaknesses of a study (Brutus et al., 2010). Participants were self-selecting, and the pool may not represent a cross-section of the United States. I made the participants as comfortable as possible and let them know there were no wrong answers. I was limited by the time administrators had available for the interview. I made myself as flexible as possible to interview at a convenient time for the participants. Another limitation was that only high school administrators were participants. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted how I collected data. Holding virtual interviews limited my observations of body language. I made notes during the interviews to help minimize the impact. Chenail (2011) stated that when the researcher is the primary data collection instrument, there is a concern about bias. I was the only interviewer and sought to minimize personal biases through reflective journaling and participant checking of transcripts for accuracy.

Significance

Creating effective transgender-inclusive school policies could reduce health issues among transgender students (Lewis & Eckes, 2020). Investigating this topic could positively impact schools by informing administrators' decisions about how to approach creating transgender-inclusive policies. Once administrators know better how to develop

inclusive policies for transgender students, they can drive positive social change by applying those same skills in developing policies for other marginalized subgroups.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced this basic qualitative study about administrators' challenges in creating transgender-inclusive policies. I discussed the gap in practice with the lack of transgender-inclusive policies. The problem addressed by this study is that U.S. high school administrators are challenged to create transgender-inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. This study aims to inform high school administrators whose schools do not have transgender-inclusive policies about the challenges they may encounter in creating transgender-inclusive policies.

In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review on transgender-inclusive policies, including dress code, name and pronoun usage, transgender bathroom policies, and school safety for transgender students. In the next chapter, I also discuss how the conceptual framework of empowerment of minority students and minority stress applies to my research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The problem addressed by this study is that U.S. high school administrators are challenged to create inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. According to Steck and Perry (2018), only one of the seven high school administrators they studied had proactive transgender-inclusive school policies in general, including policies for inclusive bathrooms. Goldberg et al. (2019) found similar results with higher education institutions not having inclusive policies for transgender students, such as dorms and bathrooms for transgender students. Day et al. (2019) found in their study that transgender-inclusive policies were associated with less harassment and bullying of transgender students, which included being shoved, hit, or threatened. Many administrators have not developed inclusive policies for transgender students, even though bullying continues.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched for literature for this review by using electronic databases: ERIC, MEDLINE with Full Text, APA PsycInfo, Directory of Open Access Journals, SociINDEX with Full Text, ScienceDirect, Education Source, Journals@OVIC, Supplemental Index, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, ProjectMUSE, Gale Academic OneFile Select, and Academic Search Complete. The sources included in this literature review are scholarly peer-reviewed electronic articles, reports, and a court case. Most of

the research used in this literature review was conducted in the United States; six international studies were also included. I used research primarily published from 2016 to 2022, excluding seminal works. Search terms included *inclusive policies, transgender bullying, transgender bathrooms, minority stress, transgender high school students, gender identity, administrators inclusive policies, and empowerment of minority students theory.*

Conceptual Framework

In this study, I used the theories of empowerment of minority students and minority stress. The empowerment of minority students theory and the minority stress theory has evolved from racial minority groups. These theories could be applied to transgender students and their experiences.

Empowerment of Minority Students Theory

The empowerment of minority students theory refers to educators and students working collaboratively to challenge educational and social inequities (Cummins, 1986). Cummins (1986) explained that the theory's central view is that students from minority groups can either be empowered or powerless depending on their interactions with educators. Cummins (2001) stated educators are responsible for defining the social role that culturally diverse students and their communities adopt. Minority students are often excluded from activities because society deems them unworthy (Cummins, 1986). Schools should empower minority students and not make them feel powerless like they are reflected in society (Cummins, 1986). Students define their identities by their

interactions with peers, parents, and teachers (Cummins, 2001). Educators can bring about the power to confront inequity in small but meaningful ways (Cummins, 2001).

Several scholars have used empowerment for minority student theory in their studies. Leon et al. (2021) conducted qualitative research using responsive interviews with administrators in Texas school districts regarding English language learners. Cummin's empowerment for minority students theory usually focuses on minority ethnic students but can be applied to any discriminated minority group (Boyland et al., 2016). Boyland et al. (2016) wrote about curriculum development for future principals to provide effective leadership to protect LGBTQ students and used empowerment of minority students as their framework. Boyland et al.'s (2018) study method was an anonymous online survey and they collected data from 116 middle school principals in Indiana. Boyland et al. (2018) were interested in the best policies and practices to support LGBTQ students. Boyland et al. showed that schools with supportive policies and best practices for LGBTQ students have the lowest amount of reported bullying toward LGBTQ students. According to Leon et al., school administrators should seek input from stakeholders and create positive relationships to permit policies to become best practices. School administration should have policies and best practices to ensure all students are safe and secure (Boyland et al., 2018). Boyland et al. (2018) showed a correlation between supportive LGBTQ policies and the amount of bullying in their results. Principals need to model expectations to build positive relationships with minority students (Boyland et al., 2016). Leon et al. found weak sustainability when stakeholders are not involved in planning and implementing policies.

The empowerment of minority students theory applies to this study because transgender students are a minority group. Administrators and transgender students working together to meet the needs of transgender students can only have positive results. Better understanding the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies could also provide some insight into how and whether administrators work collaboratively with transgender students to create policies.

Minority Stress Theory

Minority stress pertains to the excess pressure individuals from stigmatized social groups experience because of their social position (Meyer, 2003). Extensive evidence suggests that LGB people have higher occurrences of mental disorders (Meyer, 2003). Meyer said the formulation of minority stress is supported by studies that show social stressors are associated with mental health outcomes. There are two conceptual views of stress, the subjective and the objective (Meyer, 2003). The subjective view is that a person evaluates their condition and how to cope with stress, while the objective view looks at ways to improve the environment to reduce the stress (Meyer, 2003). The burden for the subjective view is on the individual, and the burden for the objective view is on society (Meyer, 2003).

Several scholars have used minority stress theory as their theoretical framework. Renley et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study using a survey to ask students about their school life, including correct name and pronoun use and the use of the bathroom that matched their identity. Bry et al. (2018) examined the process that sexual minority and transgender youth use to maintain their well-being. Bry et al. used semistructured

interviews of 10 sexual minority young men and transgender young women ages 18–22. Davies and Kessel (2017) shared the life experiences of a transgender student and stated minority stress has an impact on transgender people's mental health. Woodford et al. (2017) used a mixed-method study about transgender college students' environmental microaggression experiences and outcomes. Woodford et al. used an anonymous online survey and semistructured interviews and collected data from 152 trans college students. Woodford et al. explored different microaggressions, such as binary gender bathrooms, and how they can be stressful to transgender college students. Participants' stress could have adverse consequences due to the discrimination and stigma that transgender students experience (Woodford et al., 2017).

In contrast, Bry et al.'s (2018) research was focused on describing specific social support that can promote toughness against minority stress. Bry et al.'s (2018) qualitative data provided information about participants' various coping strategies. However, the sample included young adults, and the coping strategies might not be appropriate for younger adolescents. Woodford et al.'s (2017) quantitative results showed that academic performance is affected when a transgender student does not have access to safe restrooms. Woodford et al.'s qualitative results highlighted some of the issues that transgender students experience regarding bathroom use, such as locating gender-neutral bathrooms if they exist. I explored administrators' perceptions of transgender students' experiences. Marginalized students experience more stress. Stress was mentioned in participants' descriptions of their students' transgender experiences. My study included interviews with high school administrators in the United States to explore the challenges

in creating policies for transgender students. The conceptual framework of empowerment for minority students theory and minority stress theory applies to my research.

Transgender students are in the minority, and the lack of inclusive policies can cause them stress (Davies & Kessel, 2017).

Paceley et al. (2020) implied that collaborative relationships with transgender students and educators could help create transgender inclusive policies, which aligns with the empowerment for minority students theory. Likewise, Omercajjic and Martino (2020) stated that policymakers should understand transgender students' experiences to implement inclusive environments. The empowerment for minority students framework is appropriate in this research. School administrators want to provide a safe learning environment for all students, and if transgender students feel safe in their educational settings, minority stress could be lessened.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Inclusive Transgender Policies

Current research indicates that few schools have inclusive policies for transgender students (Steck & Perry, 2018). McBride (2021) mentioned that out of 83 studies examined, only a few had transgender-inclusive policies. The first mention of any type of inclusive policy was in 2006 with Susan Doe in Maine (Doe v. Regional School Unit 26, 2014). Susan obtained principal and staff permission and had a 504 (a formal plan typically used for students with disabilities) allowing her to use the bathroom she identified with (Doe v. Regional School Unit 26, 2014). The Washington Interscholastic Activities Association was the first to create gender-inclusive policies in high school

sports (Evans, 2017). Demissie et al. (2018) studied the percentage and trends of U.S. secondary school policies that support LGBTQ students. Demissie et al. found there was not a significant increase in supportive practices for transgender students. School administrators struggle to balance the needs of transgender students, legal requirements, and the comfort of all students (Kurt & Chenault, 2017; Philips, 2017). School policies need to be designed to deconstruct gender stereotypes and remove transphobia among adolescents (Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019). School leaders must know the challenges transgender students face so that inclusive and safe policies can be created and implemented (Kurt & Chenault, 2017).

In discussing transgender challenges, Boyland et al. (2018) conducted a study informed by bullying theory and examined the implementation of antibullying policies and best practices supporting LGBTQ students. Similarly, Pacey et al. (2020) found from their qualitative research of 19 transgender youth that the lack of inclusive policies shapes the youths' perceptions of climate and safety. Pryor et al. (2016) conducted semistructured interviews in a qualitative case study of 12 transgender college students to explore their college experiences. Participants shared their violent and passive-aggressive harassment experiences, such as being attacked in the bathroom (Pryor et al., 2016). Day et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study with 113,148 participants from 263 middle schools and high schools in California to investigate students' experiences of victimization and bullying, skipping academic achievement, and perceptions of the school environment. Day et al. determined there was an association between inclusive policies and outcomes that included less cutting, less bullying, tremendous academic

success for transgender students, and a higher perception of a positive school climate. Goldberg et al. (2019) provided information about the perspectives of transgender students in higher education, finding that inclusive policies enable students to feel safe. Pacey et al. found it is essential to implement policies that advocate the rights of transgender people. Similarly, Pryor et al. explained that the experiences of transgender students confirm the need to create a school climate that is inclusive for all students.

Hillier et al. (2020) stated that professional development of gender identities is essential to implementing inclusive policies successfully. One such study was McQuillan and Leininger (2021), with their mixed-methods approach to surveying 1,425 educators on the need and relevance of gender-inclusive professional development. In their results, McQuillan and Leininger stated that educators want more professional development to make their classrooms and schools more gender inclusive. Ullman (2017) mentioned there needs to be improved teacher-student relationships for LGBT students by increasing the understanding of these students' needs. Persinger et al. (2020) said school administrators seeking to implement inclusive policies should educate the stakeholders about gender identities. Most of the school counselors in Abreu et al. (2020) research did not feel supported by their administration to engage as advocates for transgender students. Many of the educators who had the professional development felt the training was relevant (McQuillan & Leininger, 2021). The beginning step to supporting gender-inclusive schools should be gender-inclusive training (McQuillan & Leininger, 2021).

Ullman (2017) recruited 704 Australian students from Facebook for their quantitative study. Ullman stated there is a correlation between positive teacher support

and academic achievement for sexually and gender diverse students. For participants in the Craig et al. (2018) study, the perception was that all the faculty and staff should receive affirmation training to meet the needs of LGBT students. Henderson et al. (2020) mentioned that inclusive policies and educator support benefit transgender students, and faculty need to understand and enforce the policies.

Omercajic and Martino (2020) suggested schools should have supportive teachers, student clubs, curricular resources, and anti-harassment policies to support transgender students. In their qualitative study, Steck and Perry (2018) interviewed administrators using semistructured, open-ended questions from several private and public high schools in the northeastern United States to explore high school administrators about Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA). According to Steck and Perry and Porta et al. (2017), participant GSAs provide a safe place for students. The study's findings provided administrators with the benefits of working with students, parents, school board, and GSA supportive community members in creating a safe, inclusive, and nurturing school climate (Steck & Perry, 2018). Similarly, Craig et al. (2018) conducted focus groups of 180 GSA students from across the United States. The participants expressed a desire to be in places where they could be open about their identity and an unmet need for inclusion in school (Craig et al., 2018). Craig et al. mentioned that knowledge of the social stressors of LGBT students and being an advocate of LGBT inclusive policies contribute to a safe and affirming school environment.

Steck and Perry noted administrators should not just rely on GSA as the sole method for change. For example, a full-time LGBTQ advocate to help with professional

development would be beneficial (Hillier et al., 2020). Martino et al. (2019) examined Ontario's transgender inclusivity and gender identity policy-making processes. Martino et al. mentioned that certain events, such as a GSA banning in Catholic schools, created a policy response to allow GSA in any school. Abreu et al. (2020) found in their qualitative study of school counselors from across the United States that some participants reported a need for schools to create an inclusive climate for transgender students. Persinger et al. (2020) explored adult support for policies and practices for transgender students across the United States, using 765 adults to draw conclusions. Persinger et al. found that being around transgender people could increase acceptance and support of inclusive policies for transgender students.

Omercajic and Martino (2020) conducted semistructured interviews with one policymaker and two educators familiar with the school board's trans-affirmative policies in Ontario and studied their implications for supporting transgender students. Stakeholders need to understand the specific experiences of transgender students (Omercajic & Martino, 2020). A participant in Abreu et al. (2020) study mentioned they did not understand transgender students' experiences. Kurt and Chenault (2017) found that adults are likelier to push back on inclusive policies than students.

Many studies have recognized the importance of supportive, inclusive policies for the safety of transgender students. For example, Kurt and Chenault (2017) conducted a qualitative study using semistructured interviews with three superintendents and one middle school principal from the same mid-western United States. School safety for all students without singling out transgender students was a priority for all the participants

(Kurt & Chenault, 2017). Martino et al. (2020) conducted a case study in Ontario within one elementary school to investigate policies and practices that support transgender students. Martino et al. used a general interview guide to understand the principal and two teachers' understanding and approaches to transgender inclusion at their school. In this study, the school board established trans affirmative policies (Martino et al., 2020). In Farley and Leonardi's (2021) mixed-method study, they used two years of survey data from parents of transgender students, and the parents felt that inclusive policies gave them peace of mind and ensured that their children would be supported. Parents also felt that if inclusive policies exist, the responsibility of providing a safe environment falls back on the school (Farley & Leonardi, 2021).

Meyer and Keenan (2018) evaluated 10 San Francisco area districts' inclusion policies using the policy archeology methodology. California is the only state with transgender laws that impact schools (Meyer & Keenan, 2018). The Association of School Administrators supports transgender students to use the gender identity that the student identifies, and these students should be in a safe and positive school climate (Kurt & Chenault, 2017). However, Parodi et al. (2022) reported an unexpected finding in their study of 252 14-18-year-old transgender and gender diverse youth; there were no fewer mental health concerns in states with non-discrimination policies. Trans inclusion was driven only by transgender students at the school and not institutional change (Martino et al., 2020).

Meyer and Keenan (2018) suggested administrators rethink temporary individual solutions that happen once it is known that there is a transgender student at their school.

Kurt and Chenault's (2017) study participants mentioned that having general district-wide policies but allowing school administrators to create a case-by-case policy is more comfortable. Alternately, Horton (2020) stated transgender policies need to be school-wide, not individualized. Schools should not define students' gender but allow them to learn and grow into their multidimensional identities (Meyer & Keenan, 2018). School leaders know that students' social and emotional well-being plays a role in the students' academic success (Kurt & Chenault, 2017).

Austin et al. (2019) mentioned that educators should be aware of policies based on cisgender assumptions. Horton (2020) said interviewing transgender students to gain their insight is required in future research. Demissie et al. (2018) mentioned future studies should be done to understand better the barriers to implementing supportive transgender student practices. Kurt and Chenault (2017) suggested that future research could focus on the experiences of transgender students and their educational experiences. Martino et al. (2019) stated their transgender-inclusive policies investigation demonstrated how difficult it is to form policies. Work still needs to be done to provide equal, inclusive, and safe climates in U.S. high schools (Steck & Perry, 2018).

Dress Code Policies

Abreu et al. (2020) mentioned that some schools have policies that discriminate against transgender students. These policies usually involve dress codes and restricting displays of affection (Abreu et al., 2020). Whitman (2020) explained that if students are forced to dress in a manner that goes against their gender identity, irreversible harm can be done to a student's development of their identity. When creating dress code policies,

administrators should consider students' gender identities (Whitman, 2020). For example, in Palkki (2020), choral students usually wear tuxedos for men and black dresses for women, which could place the transgender student in an uncomfortable position.

Reddy-Best and Choi (2020) analyzed 725 handbooks from U.S. high schools from 2016 to 2017. Themes from their qualitative study of dress code policies included passive and active marginalization of transgender students' identities and unsupportive gender expression (Reddy-Best & Choi, 2020). None of the dress code policies examined mentioned transgender (Reddy-Best & Choi, 2020). Kosciw et al. (2020) reported that 5.2% of the LGBTQ students surveyed stated their school's dress code policy matches their gender identity, while 49.2% of the students whose school has a dress code inclusive policy said the dress code policy matched gender identity. Kosciw et al. recommend that the dress code policy not discriminate against LGTBQ students.

Name and Pronoun Policies

Paceley et al. (2020) had a participant share that their school had policies that would not allow students to change their name to a name they wanted to be called. Kosciw et al. (2020) reported that 10.9% of the transgender students surveyed could use the pronoun of their choice, while 89.5% of transgender students with inclusive policies could use pronouns that match their gender identity. Participants in Hillier et al. (2020) mentioned they were upset when teaching the adults at school about the school's gender identity policy. Hillier had a participant mention that there are issues with the roll being called by a substitute when the wrong name or pronoun is used. None of the dress code policies Reddy-Best and Choi (2020) examined used inclusive transgender pronouns.

McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2018) used critical ethnography to explore LGBTQ experiences in one high school in New Zealand. Using pronouns is a way to confirm gender identity and commend diversity (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Renley et al. (2022) mentioned, in their quantitative study of 4000 youth who stated they were transgender in the 2017 LGBTQ National Teen Survey, that there was a significant association between equity laws and correct pronoun and name use for transgender students. With the absence of anti-LGBTQ laws, there was an association of higher use of the correct name or pronoun (Renley et al., 2022). Palkki (2020) conducted a narrative study about three high school transgender students in the United States. This study highlighted that even if teachers are advocates for their students, school administrators need to look at the high schools' policies to make them more inclusive for transgender students (Palkki, 2020).

Transgender Bathroom Policies

Kosciw et al. (2020) reported schools are becoming more accepting of transgender dress codes and pronoun use but have not become more lenient with the restrictive bathroom use policy. Bathrooms are a source of anxiety for transgender students (Davies & Kessel, 2017). Many scholars found evidence that bathrooms can cause many issues for transgender students. Wernick et al. (2017) studied high school sports participation and the unequal participation of LGBTQ students, the feeling of safety using locker rooms, and the relationships of gender identities. Patel (2017) interviewed transgender people in South Africa about discrimination and violence in bathrooms. Patel's participants shared their experiences and highlighted the bullying in

bathrooms. Kulick et al. (2019) and Wernick et al. showed disparities in transgender students feeling safe in high school locker rooms in their studies.

McGuire et al. (2021) used focus groups with 36 participants whose ages ranged from 12 to 23, in addition to interviews of 90 transgender youth from the U.S., Canada, and Ireland to explore transgender youth's bathroom experiences. The participants shared their constant stress using the restrooms due to the fear of harassment or violence (McGuire et al., 2021). Vanaman and Chapman (2020) conducted a quantitative online, observational, population-based study with 663 participants with U.S. I.P. addresses. Vanaman and Chapman found that a possible way to overcome the barrier of bathroom use is to have cisgender people spend more time with transgender people. Porta et al. (2017) conducted interviews with 66 students in Canada and the U.S. to determine the LGBTQ students' bathroom experiences and preferences. The study's results showed the participants had concerns with multi-stalled bathrooms and a preference for having gender-neutral bathrooms (Porta et al., 2017).

Watkins and Moreno (2017) provided information about protecting the right of transgender students and ensuring that they feel safe using the bathroom at school. Crissman et al. (2020) surveyed 508 high school students, and a majority of the participants felt transgender students should use the restroom of their choosing. Kjaran (2019) used data from an ethnographic study from two Icelandic high schools, including interviews, field notes, photos, and other images. Kjaran stated one of the high schools changed their binary restrooms to non-gender bathrooms at the request of students. Kjaran explained that by making students choose which binary bathroom to use,

transgender students must confirm which sex they identify with. In contrast, Renley et al. (2022) found a marginally significant association between a state banning a minor from having conversion therapy and the increased ability of students to use a bathroom that matched their identity.

Price-Feeney et al. (2020) suggested offering gender-neutral bathrooms, not having restrictive policies, and a private area to change clothes may improve mental health. Having special toilets for trans students to use still singles them out and increases the risk of bullying students (Porta et al., 2017). Porta et al. (2017) mentioned that gender-neutral bathrooms for any student to use might be the best solution rather than having trans students use staff restrooms or the restroom in the nurse's office. Also, providing gender-neutral bathrooms in remote areas of a school can be unsafe for transgender students because other students might identify the student as transgender (Cicero & Wesp, 2017). If transgender students must ask to use the bathroom they gender identify with, it may require them to out themselves and might make them feel uncomfortable (Omercajic & Martino, 2020).

In McGuire et al. (2021), the participants shared the anxiety they had picking which bathroom to use because they did not necessarily want to be identified with the bathroom gender they chose to use. According to the findings of Vanaman and Chapman (2020), conservative people usually support bathroom restrictions for transgender people due to pathogen disgust. McGuire et al. suggested schools educate faculty to prioritize the safety of transgender students and to create policies to prohibit harassment based on

gender identity. Davies and Kessel (2017) stated there is evidence that the stress level can be lessened by having policies that support bathroom choice.

School Safety for Transgender Students

All stakeholders are against bullying, promoting positive interactions, and creating inclusive policies (Persinger et al., 2020). Numerous scholars voiced concern about the bullying that occurs to transgender students. Dominguez-Martinez and Robles (2019) suggested that many changes need to happen for schools to protect transgender students. Goodrich and Barnard (2019) used a case study method in Albuquerque, New Mexico to share with other schools about the success and challenges in meeting the needs of transgender students. To prevent and stop bullying in schools, programs need to include students, faculty, and staff (Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019). Professional development should be done with educators to reduce bias and change attitudes (Endo, 2021). Dominguez-Martinez and Robles' found in their research that administrators should create conditions and practices that address transgender students' needs. More research is needed to follow up on the programs and interventions described in the study (Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019).

Future studies may improve policies, practice, and research if there is a broader focus on school culture instead of just those considered bullies (Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019). Goodrich and Barnard found the school district had a Safe Zone program to identify safe adults in the school building, and a task force was created to recommend a list of safety and equity items for LGBTQ students. Dominguez-Martinez and Robles mentioned inclusive schools are those schools that permit students to identify and express

their desired gender and make gender diversity normal. The researchers suggested that future research should include studying the impact that a safe school program has on the safety of LGBTQ students compared to schools that do not have a safe school program (Goodrich & Barnard, 2019). The study demonstrated the need for inclusive policies and programs to improve the well-being of transgender students (Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019).

Henderson et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study with semistructured online interviews with 20 participants from the U.S. to understand their bullying experiences. Hillier et al. (2020) interviewed 22 students and alumni from a Philadelphia public high school using semistructured interview questions to understand transgender students' way of facing challenges. In addition, Endo (2021) surveyed, interviewed, and observed ten Asian LGBTQs to study their experiences in an urban high school in the Midwest. In a quantitative study, Norris and Orchowski (2020) surveyed 2766 14 to 17-year-old high school students from 27 Northeastern high schools. McBride and Schubotz's (2017) study investigated the educational experiences of transgender students in Northern Ireland. McBride (2021) reviewed 81 worldwide studies that investigated transphobia and how this exposes transgender students to bullying and harassment. Austin et al. (2019) used the Social Speaks Out online survey of 1,310 college students throughout the U.S. and Canada in their qualitative study to understand the experiences of transgender students with microaggressions.

Recent research has shown that transgender students are victimized more than other students and generally do not feel safe at school (McBride, 2021; Park et al., 2022).

Park et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study using 7095 participants from the 2015 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey. White transgender/non-binary students had significantly greater odds of depression compared to white cisgender students, and the white transgender/non-binary students had 1.91 times the odds of being bullied while at school compared to white cisgender students (Park et al., 2022). All of Endo's (2021) participants shared they experienced violence at school. Henderson et al. (2020) participants' bullying experiences included verbal harassment, gender policing, physical violence, and the practice of exclusion. McBride and Schubotz (2017) showed in their results that bullying of transgender students occurs, and transgender students do not feel safe at school. Norris and Orchowski (2020) learned from their study that transgender students experienced more peer victimization than other students. Likewise, Cicero and Wesp (2017) stated that bullying of transgender students could come from their peers and faculty. Weinhardt et al. (2017) provided information about transgender students not feeling safe at school and the relationship to their resilience, anxiety, and medical problems. Pampati et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study of 10,231 students in an urban Floridian school district using a questionnaire that assessed students' school environment perceptions and experiences. Horton (2020) mentioned transgender students need not only physical protection but emotional safety. The participants shared how transphobic reactions, decisions, or comments in the classroom would make them feel unsafe (Austin et al., 2019). Goodrich and Barnard (2019) mentioned students could not learn in schools where they do not feel safe and are supported by their work. Hillier et al. (2020) mentioned some of the techniques used by the participants included avoidance,

risk confronting, and empowerment. Pampati et al. (2020) found in their study that transgender students had higher absenteeism. The amount of bullying and the lack of feeling safe at school may contribute to the number of absences transgender students had in the study (Pampati et al., 2020). Dominguez-Martinez and Robles (2019) and Endo mentioned bullying transgender students is not usually reported and is compounded when schools do not have inclusive policies. Some transgender students had been bullied so severely that they had to change schools (Cederved et al., 2021; Gower et al., 2021).

Horton (2020) reviewed the literature on transgender students and analyzed guidelines on transgender educational inclusion. Similarly, Dominguez-Martinez and Robles (2019) used a literature search to find programs to reduce transgender bullying and promote inclusive school climates for transgender students. Educators can reduce barriers for transgender students by prioritizing transgender students and offering professional development for teachers to feel supported to act positively toward transgender students (Horton, 2020). McBride (2021) said school staff usually assume that all students align with their birth gender and enforce rigid gender norms. Horton stated that many faculty do not realize that any professional development for transgender students applies to them because they are unaware a transgender student might be in their class.

Significantly, Norris and Orchowski (2020) stated that 75% of transgender youth experienced at least one type of bullying within 6 months of their study, and transgender youth reported high rates of harassment. Additionally, Wernick et al. (2017) found a strong correlation between transgender identity, bathroom safety, self-worth, and

academic achievement and determined transgender students feel less safe in the bathroom than cisgender students. Similarly, Weinhardt et al. (2017) had close to half of the participants in their study share incidents of fear and harassment in multiuser restrooms.

Summary and Conclusions

The research indicated that transgender students could experience frequent bullying and harassment and often feel unsafe at school. Numerous scholars suggested that inclusive policies reduce the victimization of transgender students (Craig et al., 2018; Day et al., 2019; Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019; Pryor et al., 2016). There is a need to create an inclusive environment for all students, including transgender students (Park et al., 2022; Pryor et al., 2016). The literature review brings to light the policies that discriminate when it pertains to dress code and pronoun usage. While some schools have policies that discriminate, other schools lack policies. Numerous studies' participants shared their bullying experiences and their lack of feeling safe at school (Endo, 2021; Henderson et al., 2020; McBride, 2021; McBride & Schubotz, 2017). The bullying of transgender students is not usually reported and is complicated by the lack of inclusive school policies (Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019). One location where bullying occurs is in the bathroom. Bathrooms are a cause of stress for transgender students (Davies & Kessel, 2017). Similarly, transgender students do not feel safe in locker rooms in high schools (Kulick et al., 2019; Wernick et al., 2017). Inclusive policies permit students to feel safer at school (Goldberg et al., 2019).

The current research about practice does not explore the challenges high school administrators in the United States have in creating inclusive policies. My study filled a

gap in practice by exploring high school administrators' challenges in creating inclusive policies for transgender students. To learn about the challenges, I interviewed high school administrators from around the United States who implemented transgender-inclusive policies. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design and rationale and the researcher's role. I examine the methodology, including the participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, and the data analysis plan. I also discuss the trustworthiness, credibility, and ethical procedures in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to explore the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. In this chapter, I present the research design and methodology. I start with the qualitative research design used for my study and the role of the researcher. I then cover the data collection process, including participant selection and instrumentation. Finally, I discuss the plan for data analysis and trustworthiness.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question guiding this study was: What challenges do U.S. high school administrators face creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed? According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), quantitative researchers use number relationships in their research studies, whereas qualitative researchers use people's feelings and experiences. A qualitative approach was the most appropriate because I explored the challenges high school administrators in the United States experience in creating transgender inclusive policies. I considered conducting a case study; case studies are used to investigate the understanding of a specific situation and how it fits into the real world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As my primary interest was in exploring the experiences of geographically and otherwise disparate administrators, the participants were not bound by space and time in a way that a case study would require. Researchers conducting phenomenological studies are

interested in participants' personal experiences of a shared event (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Because of ongoing challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic, immersion in the lives and experiences of administrators was not feasible, so a phenomenological study was removed from consideration. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that a basic qualitative design seeks to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. A basic qualitative design was the most appropriate because, in this study, I used interviews to understand the challenges of high school administrators in creating policies for transgender students.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers seek to understand people's experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I am currently a classroom teacher with my principal's license. I established my role as a researcher with the participants by introducing myself and the research. Because I had no prior interactions with participants, I did not have any additional ethical issues; I did not collect data in my workspace. I was not, nor will I be, in a supervisory position with any of the participants. I had no prior relationships with the participants, and they were unknown to me before their involvement in the study. When a researcher is the primary data collection instrument, there is a concern about bias (Chenail, 2011). Burkholder et al. (2020) explained that the interviewer is prepared for hunches and notions that will help attach biases to the data. I controlled bias by doing reflexive journaling, using an interview protocol, and conducting member checking. Burkholder et al. stated reflexive journaling is a way to bracket so that preconceptions will not taint the data. Member checking is more than verifying the interview transcript

because it requires feedback from the participants to validate conclusions (Burkholder et al., 2020). I composed my interview questions to help manage any bias carefully. Data were collected until saturation of the topic was reached.

Methodology

My study used a qualitative methodology. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that when a basic study is used, a researcher wants to understand the participants' experiences. Researchers in qualitative studies are interested in how people make sense of their experiences in their world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, my research question was focused on the experiences of U.S. high school administrators in creating transgender inclusive policies.

The participants in my study were high school administrators who implemented transgender-inclusive policies from educational institutions across the United States. Twelve high school administrators participated in semistructured interviews. The data were collected and analyzed with open coding. Semistructured interviews employ questions prepared ahead of time, with follow-up questions asked of the participants as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Participant Selection

The criteria for the population for my study included being a current administrator in a high school located in the United States. Another criterion was that the administrator was a principal or an assistant principal who had implemented transgender policies in their U.S. high school. Participants self-identified as meeting the inclusion criteria. The sampling strategy I used was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling requires

participants to meet a specific criterion, such as an experience or location and permits researchers to gather the needed information to answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used purposive sampling along with snowball sampling. Cohen and Arieli (2011) explained that snowball sampling is when one participant gives a name of a potential participant, and the sample size grows like a snowball. I used purposive sampling and snowball sampling by asking if any other high school administrators would make good participants at the end of each interview. Snowball sampling is appropriate because it has been proven beneficial when researching populations that may be difficult to attain a representative sample (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

The criteria for participants to self-select into the study included being a current high school administrator in the United States who implemented transgender policies in their high school. I achieved 12 participants for inclusion. Guest et al. (2006) confirmed that six was the number to reach saturation in most basic qualitative research studies. Participants had the opportunity to self-select and were contacted through several different sources, such as high school administrator associations, social media, direct email, and the Walden University participant pool.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I was the data collection instrument in this study. An interview protocol was used (see Appendix A), and the interviews were recorded. As Rubin and Rubin (2012) advised, my interviews started with an introduction, and participants were reminded that there were no wrong answers. Rubin and Rubin suggested that interviews begin with an

easy question before moving on to harder questions. My first question asked the participants their definition of inclusive policies for transgender students before moving on to questions about the challenges of creating inclusive policies and strategies used to include the needs of transgender students. The framework shaped a question about the administrators' perceptions of transgender experiences to see if there was any mention of stress. I asked the administrators about incorporating the needs of transgender students, such as pronoun use, name use, bathroom usage, into the transgender-inclusive policies they created. Rubin and Rubin explained that the interview session should close, but the door should be left open to continue the dialog. I maintained contact with the participants by emailing my takeaways from the interviews.

I created the interview questions to obtain data-rich responses from the participants to help answer the research questions. Follow-up questions were asked as needed to gain further understanding from the participants. Rubin and Rubin (2012) mentioned using probes to direct the interview. I used probes to help guide the direction of the interview and attain the information to answer the research question. I kept records of information on instrument development.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I contacted potential participants through several different sources: Walden University participant pool, social media, and various high school administrator organizations, such as the National Principals Conference and the National Association of Secondary Principals. I also used snowball sampling to recruit. Participants were recruited using electronic flyers, email, snowball sampling, and direct outreach working

with these organizations. Electronic flyers were posted on social media and were posted by any cooperating organization.

Participants were emailed informed consent forms after they expressed an interest in participating in my study. Participants responded by email stating “I consent” to indicate their consent before collecting data. Participants were also informed they could exit the study at any time without fear of reprisal. My study’s only data source was semistructured interviews with school administrators. The interviews were virtual using Zoom at a mutually agreed-upon time and lasted from 37 to 61 minutes. The semistructured administrator interviews were based on participants’ knowledge and experiences. Upon completing the semistructured interviews, I followed up with the participants with my takeaways of our conversation (member checking), so they could confirm, add to, or clarify my understanding. The member checking took the participants 20–30 minutes to complete. Follow-up interviews were not needed. Participants will receive a two-page summary of the study after I publish it in ProQuest.

Data Analysis Plan

I used Otter.ai to transcribe the interview recordings into transcripts, and I listened back to manually correct the transcription where the automatic transcription did not reflect what was said. I used Excel to organize data collected from my one-on-one interviews. I used open coding to develop themes (Saldana, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that open coding is being open to any type of theme from the data. The themes emerged after first coding the transcripts, then categorizing the codes into larger, meaningful units of analysis, followed by making sense of the codes and categories with

the developed themes. Merriam and Tisdell mentioned discrepant cases could challenge a researcher to strengthen and help to find the best themes in the data. A discrepant case does not fit the patterns and allows a researcher to find the best fit with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Discrepant cases should not be thrown out; rather, the research should see how they fit into the other data (Waite, 2011). In my study, there were no discrepant cases. This study dealt with a sensitive topic, and all administrators willing to participate had the same mindset of supporting transgender students. There were some different ideas and opinions, but all participants agreed that transgender inclusive policies are necessary. Although all participants agreed on this point, participants had other ideas for achieving these policies but not to the point that the data could be considered discrepant.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

I ensured trustworthiness through member checking. Member checking is a credibility method (Shento, 2004; Stahl & King, 2020). Participants were emailed a summary of their interview to confirm my takeaways from their interview. Interview data collection and data analysis occurred ongoing, one respondent at a time until saturation was obtained. Creswell (2013) stated that once no new information is being added to the category, then data saturation has occurred. During the interview process, I determined that I reached saturation when participants added no further information. I kept a journal to maintain a continuous record of my thoughts and ideas concerning my study and reflected upon them regularly. Ravitch and Carl (2016) mentioned reflective journaling is

a common and suggested practice for qualitative researchers to reflect on, which can deepen the research process.

Transferability

Thick rich description has detailed descriptions of data and the contexts of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative research is not generalizable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, transferability is up to the reader. Burchett et al. (2013) concluded that only relevant research should be considered in transferability. By having a purposive sample of U.S. high school administrators who had implemented transgender policies, the study was not restricted to a specific school district, city, or state, and this could contribute to transferability. Data saturation is how a researcher can tell that they have enough data to answer their research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) and, therefore, enough data to provide the possibility of transferability.

Dependability

Dependability in a qualitative study is equivalent to the concept of reliability in qualitative research and indicates the stability of the data in the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The data collection process was detailed and replicable. Audit trails are methodical collections of records that permit an independent auditor to determine facts about the data (Kemparaj & Chavan, 2013). Some of the records included documents about the raw data and notes about the data collection process. My deidentified participant transcripts and reflective journal are safe-guarded in a locked desk that only I can access. My data will be kept for five years, and then it will be destroyed.

Confirmability

Confirmability is sought after by qualitative researchers, and it means having findings that can be confirmed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I kept detailed records, allowed for member checking, and employed reflexivity. Carlson (2010) mentioned that reflexivity is being aware of biases and that journaling is a way to keep track of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs throughout the research process. A journal was maintained throughout the study. Member checking is the process of participants checking the interpretation of the data from their interviews (Carlson, 2010). I provided the participants with my takeaways from their interviews for them to verify.

Ethical Procedures

Shaw et al. (2020) defined ethics procedures and practices separately. According to Shaw et al., ethics procedures attain an institution's ethics committee's formal approval. Ethics practice occurs when working with people and responds to ethical issues that can unexpectedly arise (Shaw et al., 2020). I followed Walden University's ethics procedures and did not collect data until I achieved Walden IRB approval. The IRB approval number is 03-14-22-0725768.

All prospective participants were asked to confirm their informed consent by emailing, "I consent." My participants' identities were protected and are known only to me. The participants selected their own pseudonyms to safeguard their privacy. If participants chose a name already used, I asked them to pick another name. Allowing the participants to choose their own pseudonyms protects security in knowing that their identities would be protected. Any quotes used the participants' chosen pseudonyms.

Participants were informed that they could discontinue their involvement at any time without fear of reprisal.

The interviews were held virtually and, from my perspective, in a private location. The interviews did not occur in my workplace. Each interview lasted between 37 and 61 minutes, and the audio was recorded on Zoom. I had no previous knowledge of or interactions with my prospective participants. I had access to the collected data along with my committee members. The data are stored on a flash drive and kept in my home office in a locked filing cabinet where I only have the key. Five years following CAO approval of the final document, the raw data will be destroyed by me.

I offered incentives as a small token of appreciation. Incentives included gift cards that were given once. Participants were provided \$25 Visa gift cards. After analyzing the data, I sent the gift cards digitally using the participants' email addresses. The reason behind the incentive for each participant was to show them an appreciation for their willingness to participate and that their time was valued.

Summary

In this study, I used a basic qualitative design. I used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants for my research. I took great care to ensure trustworthiness and follow ethical procedures. In Chapter 4, I examine the research data in detail.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. I interviewed current U.S. high school administrators. The research question was: What challenges do U.S. high school administrators face creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed?

Setting

This study was set in the United States. Participants were from California, New Mexico, Iowa, Rhode Island, Illinois, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Georgia. Urban, suburban, and rural areas were all represented. All but one of the administrators were principals of public schools, and one participant was an assistant principal. The administrative experience ranged from the first year to 26 years. Three of the participants shared personal or family ties to the LGBTQ community. Each participant was allowed to choose a pseudonym. If they could not think of one, I offered a name from my family. The names that appear in my results and with the participant quotes are their chosen pseudonyms.

Data Collection

I conducted semistructured interviews of 12 administrators using Zoom starting on March 25, 2022 and ending on April 19, 2022. Each interview lasted from 37 to 61 minutes. I recorded the interviews using Zoom, and as a backup, I used a handheld audio

recording device. The backup device had a USB adapter to transfer the recordings to a password-protected laptop, and then I deleted the handheld device after each interview. All backup recordings were then transferred to a flash drive to be stored in a locked filing cabinet that only I had access to. The interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, and I conducted member checking with each participant within 3 days by emailing my takeaways from the interview to the participant. Four participants gave feedback. Two affirmed my takeaways, and two wanted to clarify by adding additional information. I understood and agreed with their feedback.

To recruit participants, I posted my invitation flyer in several Facebook principal and doctor of education groups. These groups included: EdD Graduate Students, Principal Principles Leadership Group, The Principal's Desk, Principals & Administrators Networking and Collaboration, School Principals, Administrators, & Counselors Networking Group (USA), Assistant Principals Collaborate: Alve' Pro, and Doctor of Education (EdD) Network. My study was posted with Walden University's Participant Pool. I reached out to two of the National Association of Secondary School Principal's Google group facilitators and asked them to post my flyer with their group. One of the facilitators agreed to do so. I also sent out direct emails to high school principals. I started the search for email addresses of principals by Googling high schools individually and seeking out the principal's email on the school's website.

After a couple of days, I discovered that several state departments of education have lists of schools with the principal's email address online. These data lists can be easily downloaded into Excel to obtain the email addresses of high school principals. I

then copied and pasted principals' email addresses into emails inviting them to participate in my study. I sent out mass batches of 50–100 emails during the week. A total of 530 emails were sent out. I acquired 10 participants from direct email, and the other two responded to my flyers posted in one of the groups. I attempted to gain participants from snowball sampling, but I was unsuccessful.

All participants responded with “I consent” in an email before the interviews. Except for the planned transcription method of the interviews, there were no variations. I planned to use Word online to transcribe the transcripts, but Otter.ai offered more free minutes and was a better transcribing software. I did have one participant who wanted to use their real name, but after consulting with my chair, a pseudonym was suggested and accepted by the participant. I had another participant who agreed to be interviewed but was anxious about being identified. They wanted assurance that they would not be video recorded and that I use their personal email address to communicate. I assured this participant that video recordings were not part of the data collection.

Data Analysis

I used Otter.ai to transcribe the interview recordings and manually corrected them where needed when the automatic transcribing missed or misspelled a word. My committee chair verified transcripts for transcription accuracy and adherence to the interview protocol. I did not start coding until all the data were collected, but I could see themes emerging from the participants' responses. In the first step of data analysis, I used open coding to develop the themes (Saldana, 2016). I used an Excel spreadsheet to organize data. I managed the interviewees' responses by sentences in one column on each

Excel spreadsheet. Each sheet represented a different question. I coded the participants' responses by keywords in a second column and combined all the sheets onto one Excel page. I then sorted the responses by the initial code. Glesne (2011) noted that initial coding and organizing are only the beginning of the qualitative analysis. I had 29 different codes. The initial codes included dress code, needs, staff, parents, community members, bathroom, mental health, presentation, GSA, comfort, identities, and inclusion. Table 1 presents information regarding the development of the themes from the open coding, including evidence from the data.

Table 1*Coding Chart*

Open code	Category	Theme	Evidence
Bathroom	Bathroom facilities and policies	Existing school bathrooms and procedures for their use are not developed to address the unique needs of transgender students	“We don’t have very many single-stall bathrooms, especially ones that are lockable on the inside.” — Jordan “They’re permitted to use the bathroom of their choice.” — Jack
Parents	Challenges with adults	Administrators are challenged by the behavior of adults and students concerning the issues of transgender inclusive policies	“The kids are trying to figure out how to come out with their families have been very good at letting us know, we feel safe at school. It’s home. We don’t know what to do, but schools are a safe place.” — Lynn “The biggest pushback is coming from parents.” — Kilgore
Community			“With different varied voices on a school committee and in the community, and dissenting voices tend to usually speak the loudest that makes it difficult to get some of those progressive policies changed and implemented.” — Jordan
Staff			“I guess I’m lucky that our teachers are, are tolerant and accepting.” — Jack “Some of our teachers, it’s difficult for them just because of their background, but they make the effort they make. I know it’s more difficult just based on your own background and experiences.” — Lauren
Student body	Challenges with students		“I’m not saying our students are flawless all the time, but, you know, they’re pretty accepted.” — Corey “We’re finally hitting the critical mass of both the student body and the adults that are onsite to make the default more inclusive, instead of the default being hetero normative old school.” — Lynn
Bullying			“I think it’s identified this like three out of four students who identify as transgender students have experienced bullying either by an adult, by a family member, or by students.” — Peter “There was one incident where a student was mistreated because they’re transgender, which was dealt with very swiftly. And we were very clear that we weren’t going to tolerate it.” — Jack
Peers			“I think we still have a lot of work to do to educate our children on how to accept.” — Connor “Maybe in the next few months to really talk to kids about it, about how you feel about it, and that kind of thing, because I think that’s what we could do is more just a little bit more education with that.” — Lauren
COVID -19			“I think school climates have been interesting or hard to judge because of the COVID -19 piece.” — Fred “The pandemic has been very trying for many of our students, especially the isolation pieces.” — Peter
Dress code	Policies	Administrators expressed difficulty developing an all-encompassing set of inclusive policies which take the needs of all students into account	“We have an androgynous dress code. — Lynn “We have a dress code policy, but it’s not particular to any one set of student groups.” — Fred

Table continues on next page

Open code	Category	Theme	Evidence
Equity			<p>“Equity is extremely at the forefront and not just including race. It’s very much a common thing to talk about gay talk about transgender, binary, nonbinary.” — Lauren</p> <p>“The issue being the equity policy or transgender feeling included the inclusion policies. There’s a ton more that needs to be done.” — Connor</p>
Policies			<p>“We’ve never had any policies that excluded them.” — Weston</p>
Strategy policy			<p>“I think a big thing as a school administrator is modeling.” — Jordan</p>
Nondiscrimination			<p>“We don’t really have transgender policies, per se, what we do have is antidiscrimination, antibullying policies, which do cover, in my opinion, pretty much all manners of behavior that would be discriminatory towards any particular group.” — Ted</p>
Name	Transgender experiences		<p>“We can luckily set our systems up to do that, even if they haven’t a court-ordered name change, we can have it shows up like on the rosters, and things like that get a little trickier when you get to the diploma.” — Lynn</p> <p>“Students can list their preferred names, so those names are respected if administrator, test proctor, or substitute does come in.” — Peter</p>
Pronouns			<p>“I do think that there are maybe some intentional, but more so unintentional issues that come up with students, so like pronouns would be a big one, I don’t know that we all understand the impact or the importance of that amongst our transgender students.” — Fred</p>
Identities			<p>“It’s interesting how transgender issues, how certain phases go through schools, where students are clearly searching for something searching for their identity and searching for who they are.” — Corey</p>
Mental health			<p>“I do feel like mental health probably I would tell you, mental health is something that I feel like in the school systems, we need to be able to provide more mental health support.” — Jack</p>
Needs			<p>“One of the things that we really tried to do with all of our students, but particularly our transgender students, or students that are, are in transition, is, understand what their needs are and what their wants are.” — Fred</p>
Support			<p>“We have gender support plans for individual students who do request one whose family request one who does need one.” — Peter</p>
Comfort			<p>“We want to make sure that the kids feel welcome and respected.” — Jack</p>
GSA			<p>“We have a GSA.” — Weston</p>
Inclusion			<p>“This school really tries to be inclusive of lots of things.” — Lauren</p>
Positive Presentation			<p>“I think overall, it’s positive.” — Ted</p> <p>“They were vocal. They came to the school board meeting, they advocated for themselves, and the school board heard what they had to say and passed the changes to the policies.” — Kilgore</p>

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated open coding is being open to any type of theme from the data. I completed open coding in the next step and then listed the themes. I realized I needed to explain my thought process, so I took a week's break. I returned to the open coding and copied the Excel sheet to add a column for my open coding. I sorted the coding sheet and had five categories. Some open codes included bathrooms, adults in the community, COVID-19, dress code, equity, identity, mental health, needs, policies, staff, student body, and transgender experiences. The themes emerged after first coding the transcripts, then categorizing the codes into larger, meaningful units of analysis, followed by making sense of the codes and categories with the developed themes. In the last step, I made a copy of the open coding sheet to create a third column for themes.

I sorted the themes to organize the data. Three themes emerged: (a) existing school bathrooms and procedures for their use are not developed to address the unique needs of transgender students, (b) administrators are challenged by the behavior of adults and students concerning the issues of transgender inclusive policies, and (c) administrators expressed difficulty developing an all-encompassing set of inclusive policies that take the needs of all students into account. Although the administrators had differing ideas and strategies, there were no discrepant cases. The lack of discrepant cases might have been due to the sensitive nature of this study and the fact that participants were supportive of transgender issues.

Results

Three themes resulted from the data collected through interviews of 12 participants. This study had only one research question, and all the themes answered the

question. The themes that emerged were (a) existing school bathrooms and procedures for their use are not developed to address the unique needs of transgender students, (b) administrators are challenged by the behavior of adults and students concerning the issues of transgender inclusive policies, and (c) administrators expressed difficulty developing an all-encompassing set of inclusive policies which take the needs of all students into account (see Table 2).

Table 2

Theme Table

Research question	Theme	Subtheme
What challenges do U.S. high school administrators face creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed?	Existing school bathrooms and procedures for their use are not developed to address the unique needs of transgender students	The challenges of the physical school building as it relates to inclusive bathrooms The challenges of policies of using which bathroom
	Administrators are challenged by the behavior of adults and students concerning the issues of transgender inclusive policies	The challenges with behaviors of outside adults (parents/ community) The challenges with behaviors of the adults in schools The challenges of the behaviors of the student body The challenges of student behaviors post covid -19 interruption
	Administrators expressed difficulty developing an all-encompassing set of inclusive policies which take the needs of all students into account	The challenge of inclusive dress code policies The challenge of general policies for transgender students The challenge of transgender identities The challenge of knowing transgender needs The challenge of mental health support for transgender students

Theme 1: Existing School Bathrooms and Procedures for Their Use Are Not Developed to Address the Unique Needs of Transgender Students

Within Theme 1, there were two subthemes. The challenges of the physical school building as it relates to inclusive bathrooms and the challenges of policies of using which bathroom. Of the 12 participants, some of the common words associated with the themes were “single-stall bathrooms, any student can use, bathroom of their choice, identify with, comfort,” and “preference.” Transgender students should be asked which restroom they would like to use and not told which restroom to use.

Schools are built with multi-stall binary bathrooms. Lynn and Lauren shared that older school sites have difficulty providing non-gender bathrooms. Every participant said they had at least one non-gender bathroom available for any student, but these are not always convenient. Jordan mentioned, “We did implement a gender-neutral bathroom in our school is in, unfortunate, what was probably a better word is the bathroom is fairly off the beaten path.”

During renovations, some administrators mentioned that single-stall bathrooms were created. With new construction, single-stall restrooms were built instead of multi-stall restrooms, or the building was constructed with single-use bathrooms around the school. Weston explained, “I knew that we probably better put in single-stall bathrooms with the lock. So now, on both ends of the building, we have single-stall bathrooms with locks that any student can use.” Corey explained that single-use bathrooms have always been in the building. “We also have a number of single-use bathrooms just throughout the school. That’s just the way the school was designed.”

I learned during the interviews that the number of single-stall restrooms a school has plus a policy of choice increases the comfort level of transgender students. Lauren said, “We do let students go to whatever restroom they’re comfortable with, whatever they identify with. That’s the restroom they get to go to.” Lynn agreed, “It’s really about them and their comfort level. If they feel comfortable going into a gender-assigned bathroom, fine. We also made sure that they could come to the front office, which had single-stall restrooms.” While Peter stated, “We are still evolving in terms of restroom access because we run through preference but also, we do have gender-neutral restrooms available by key for students.”

All 12 participants explained that transgender students could choose to use the bathroom of their choice. Ted gave an example of a transgender student saying to him, “I would like to identify as a male, and I would like to be able to use the male locker room or the male restroom,” and Ted’s response to the student was “no problem.” Connor, Jack, and Jennifer also confirmed their school’s choice policy, “Our policy allows students to access the bathroom they identify.” Fred explained, “We have not had an issue about the use of bathrooms and identification of bathrooms, even though we do have some opportunities for our transgender students to make choices and really be in charge of what their needs are.” One of the administrators mentioned that they had made assumptions about the transgender students’ needs.

Inclusive policies are not separate policies but policies that include all students, transgender or not. Fred shared:

As we look at schools and how schools are designed, we need to consider not just transgender students but students in general. There are a lot of religious beliefs as well, where a little more privacy is probably where that opportunity for a little more privacy is more important than it ever has been. Whether transgender or not, maybe they're just a shy freshmen boy, and they want to have a little bit, a little bit of a different environment. So, we're trying to create those opportunities for all students.

There was a mix of sharing of issues with the bathroom. Jordan shared, "We're having an issue right now, there's a male student, biologically male student identifies, as a female identifies as feminine dresses like a male student, stereotypical, and is using the girl's bathroom." Others had more positive experiences. Corey mentioned, "The bathroom is just an easy one, like, we didn't really have issues around bathrooms, kids felt really comfortable with how we were approaching it." Kilgore explained, "We've had a student recently kind of pushed the issue a little bit and start to use one of the regular bathrooms that had been reserved for female students, and there hasn't been an issue with that. No one has pushed back or said anything." At the same time, Fred stated that they had issues in the past but no longer have major issues.

Only a few of the administrators had multiple single-use restrooms in their buildings. Most of the bathrooms in schools are binary. Other administrators shared that single-use restrooms are available while they may be in less-traveled areas or the front office. There have not been too many issues with students using the restroom of their

choice. There has been very little student pushback with transgender students using a bathroom not aligned with their birth gender.

Theme 2: Administrators Are Challenged by the Behaviors of Adults and Students Concerning the Issues of Transgender Inclusive Policies

Within Theme 2, there were five subthemes. The 12 administrators in this study shared challenges they experienced both outside and inside the school building. Outside the building included members of the community and parents. Inside the school, there were faculty and staff. Administrators shared challenges with the student body, including bullying and harassment and students' behavior after the COVID-19 epidemic. Some of the common words the 12 participants used included "resistance, communication, parents, pushback, supportive staff," "mistakes," "accepting, bullying, harassment," and "COVID-19". All the administrators mentioned the COVID-19 quarantine caused a recession in student behavior.

Several administrators shared that much of the pushback comes from the community regarding transgender-inclusive policies. Ted stated:

I think what's very interesting in this day and age is that there is this inaccurate public perception by a very small minority advocating this alternative beliefs or this alternative reality that transgender people are attempting to force others to accept or go with quietly.

Corey said, "Some people are not as positive or receptive to the needs of transgender students, and I think sometimes you get pushed back to the end." Jennifer agreed, "The challenge is people who aren't inclusive." Jordan shared that with varied voices on the

school board in the community, the dissenting voices are the loudest, and that can make progressive policies be changed and created. Jack mentioned, “I think out on the outside, there were some concerns and just a lack of an understanding of maybe what it means to be transgender and the complexities of that.” Kilgore’s experience was that “the real resistance came from the town, mostly from some parents that are opposed to that.”

Challenges with parents include walking the fine line of supporting the students and being transparent with the parents. Corey stated, “We have to be honest and transparent with parents, but at the same time, we want to be true to be trusted by the students as well.” Another challenge is dealing with parents’ reactions when their child indicates they are transgender. Kilgore mentioned, “The parents of transgender students, that’s where the spectrum sort of widens. You have parents on both ends, some very supportive, and others in complete denial.” Lauren explained that some parents tell her, “Don’t call her that name, “ which can be challenging for the student.

Jennifer said, “I think we struggle with talking to the parents because we now don’t want to out anybody” Several administrators try to support transgender students in coming out to their parents. Lynn stated, “The kids are trying to figure out how to come out with their families have been very good at letting us know, oh, we feel safe at school. It’s home. We don’t know what to do, but schools are a safe place.” Corey also mentioned that parents could be brought in to help facilitate conversations with transgender students with a school counselor while other students are comfortable living a dual life.

Challenges with the parents also included parents of gendered students. Fred stated, “I’ve personally had a lot of individual conversations with those that might be concerned about their daughter being exposed to a transgender female in the locker room, and how do we deal with that.” Jennifer explained some parents “feel like it’s not fair and feeling another child is going to harm their child for us being more inclusive of them.” Kilgore mentioned, “We did have some parents speak out at a school board meeting against the policy.”

Several administrators stated that their staff is very supportive of transgender students. Ted said, “We’re very open-minded and tolerant of others with our staff.” Jack and Weston stated they each have supportive staff who are tolerant and accepting and have good relationships with transgender students. Lauren explained, “I think teachers a lot of times, especially in a school like this, while they may have beliefs they do, they leave them at the door.”

There are challenges with the faculty for various reasons. Lauren explained, “Some of our teachers, it’s difficult for them just because of their background, but they make the effort they make. I know it’s more difficult based on your background and experiences.” Peter stated, “Staff culture has been probably our biggest challenge.” Similarly, Ted said, “I think sometimes the adults have more of an issue, so I need actually to be more alert around the adults.” Fred mentioned, “I think there’s still some bias that exists and some misunderstanding even amongst our adults about what our transgender students are going through, and LGBTQ+ students in general.”

Jordan said, “And there’s been some faculty members that have had major issues with that. Why is there quote, unquote, a boy in the girl’s bathroom?” Lynn added, “I think the trickiest one was probably trying to get some of our male PE teachers to be okay with transgender boys who are comfortable being in the locker room to be in the locker room. They just want to change into their clothes, like everybody.”

The challenges are not just with the teachers. Jordan shared, “So I’ve had a clerk, a secretary in the front office, who was adamant that there’s a boy in the girl’s bathroom, and that’s so wrong and, it’s really not her place.” Fred stated, “I think before we had some of the naming pieces that went in, we did have some bad experience with substitutes.” Substitutes would call students by their dead name and not their preferred name.

A challenge is that transgender topics are new for adults. Jordan said, “I think there’s also a reluctance in the sense that teachers and sometimes administrators don’t necessarily know the best way to do that because it’s a new conversation.” Corey shared:

And this experience stuck out to me, and I remember the student, born female but identified as male. Therefore, I would have been the male assistant principal who would need to pat down the male students, and the student is in the male line because that’s how the student identified and soon approached me. This was the first time I had to deal with this type of situation and be like, what will I do here?

Kilgore and Jack said mistakes happen but that they are not done on purpose, and students do not usually get angry. Lauren said, “Five years ago, it was a struggle, not a

struggle, but you would say, she, he, I mean, it was a lot of correcting yourself. It's easier now."

Another challenge is professional development or training for faculty and staff. Peter mentioned, "For new staff or a transgender Resource Center review for staff members is one of our options for professional development." "There has been a little bit of professional development on identifying students by the pronoun that they choose" (Jordan).

Several administrators mentioned that it is essential to have a diverse faculty. Lynn said:

It's really good for people who have different experiences to all be part of the leadership team because then you get feedback about what you might not realize this, but that could be a real trigger for somebody over here because that phrase means something else in my culture or things you don't necessarily think of coming from a place of relative privilege. I just want to continue seeing more representation in our adult population at the schools.

Fred mentioned, "I think also trying to make sure that our teaching population and staffing population mirror our student populations."

A majority of pushback from transgender-inclusive policies occurs from the community and parents. This pushback may come from a lack of understanding of transgender needs. It is challenging for administrators to support transgender students but not out them to their parents. My participants mentioned that their staff is supportive of all students, including transgender students but that the issues of transgender students are

new to adults, and they may not know what the transgender students are going through. Some administrators feel their faculty should mirror their student body, so all students have someone to look up to.

Several administrators felt that their student body is very accepting of transgender students. Kilgore, Corey, and Fred stated that their student bodies are overwhelmingly positive and accepting and are good colleagues. Lynn said, “We’re finally hitting the critical mass of both the student body and the adults that are onsite to make the default more inclusive, instead of the default being hetero normative old school.” Ted shared, “I think, for the most part, the kids understand that, and they don’t want to be victimized, and they certainly don’t want to victimize somebody else.”

Although administrators report a mostly positive climate with the student body, there are exceptions. Fred stated, “I think our students are really accepting of our transgender population, and there are always exceptions. We have some issues occasionally with particularly immature boys.” Connor said, “There’s a subset of students who make not kind choices, and I think that creates a struggle.” Peter shared, “Student culture has also been a challenge with students who, like say, a male is in the restroom, and who they perceive as a female, walks in and uses the restroom as well.”

Bullying and harassment do occur at many of the administrators’ schools. Peter stated, “I think it’s identified this like three out of four students who identify as transgender students have experienced bullying either by an adult, by a family member or by students.” Jennifer explained that transgender students at her school experience “bullying and a lot of harassment.” Jack added, “There was one incident where a student

was mistreated because they're transgender, and it was dealt with very swiftly. And we were clear that we wouldn't tolerate it." Lynn said, "Our school district does some work in the sophomore year talking about being an upstander instead of a bystander. It starts with looking at genocides in World War II, then expands into many other things."

Several administrators offered ways to strengthen the school climate. Jack stated, "You always want to create a more tolerant culture and climate. You think that's important in any school you're in is teaching tolerance, teaching to coexist with people who are different than you." Lauren planned to have her students talk about how they felt about transgender students. "Maybe in the next few months to really talk to kids about it, about how you feel about it, and that kind of thing, because I think that's what we could do is more just a little bit more education with that (Lauren)." Connor said, "I think we still have a lot of work to do to educate our children on how to accept."

The participants were asked about their perceptions about a change in their school environment since implementing inclusive policies. Kilgore stated, "So it's hard. I wouldn't ascribe any climate or cultural changes to transgender policy or anything like that. I think it's too difficult to really quantify with COVID-19." Fred agreed, "I think school climates have been interesting or hard to judge because of the COVID-19 piece." Many administrators agreed with Fred's explanation "We've seen some regression in behavior and people. Our students alike are not as civil with one another as they were." Peter said, "The pandemic has been very trying for many of our students, especially the isolation pieces."

Administrators shared that their student bodies mainly accept transgender students, but there are exceptions that are dealt with swiftly. One of the administrators said they work with students about being an upstander, not a bystander. Several administrators talked about teaching tolerance and living together with those different from themselves. Due to COVID-19, there was a regression in behaviors, and the pandemic has been very hard on many students.

Theme 3: Administrators Expressed Difficulty Developing an All-Encompassing Set of Inclusive Policies That Take the Needs of All Students Into Account

Within Theme 3, there were five subthemes. Most administrators mentioned that they do not have any stand-alone transgender-inclusive policies. The participants shared their experiences with dress code policies, policies in general, and their experiences with names and pronouns with transgender students. Common words from the administrators in Theme 3 included “wide open dress code, binary dress code, equity, treating all the students the same, inclusive policies, anti-discriminate, protection, exclusive, policies, respectful, relationships, pronouns, preferred name, identities, mental health, needs, support, comfort, GSA, inclusion,” and “presentation.” The participants shared. The administrators explained how they determined transgender students’ needs and the student’s involvement in creating inclusive policies.

A participant shared that their dress code is binary. Jordan stated, “So, our dress code is currently super binary.” All the other participants indicated that their dress code policies were inclusive. Ted mentioned, “Pretty much anything else goes, and as long as

it's like, doesn't show or expose your buttocks or something like that would be considered inappropriate." Peter shared:

We really move towards more of the required pants or skirt. If you're going to wear skirts, it must be a certain height above the knee. A tight-fitting shirt that might expose the chest must be covered for any students rather than just for ladies or males.

Lynn, Lauren, Weston, Jennifer, and Fred said their dress code is for both genders. Corey added, "We don't really have a strict dress code, and we don't want students to use hateful language. That's probably the extent of it. We don't want blatant references to drugs and alcohols and other illegal things." Connor agreed, "People are allowed to express themselves as long as they're not spreading hate, or they're not interfering with somebody else's access." It doesn't seem that there are challenges in making dress code policies inclusive. Administrators can easily change dress code policies from binary to inclusive.

The Challenge of General Policies for Transgender Students

Administrators share their definitions of transgender-inclusive policies. Corey stated, "We want everyone to feel inclusive. We want to not discriminate against anyone." Likewise, Jennifer said, "So an inclusive policy would mean the board has put something in all of our documents and rules and procedures that we are supposed not to discriminate and be inclusive and include people and really not make gender or identity or sexuality a part of any of our decision making." Ted mentioned:

I think one is to make first and foremost is to ensure that the student is good and has access to all aspects of school life, they're not excluded in any way or discriminated against, that they are not singled out due to their identity to their how they choose to identify themselves, and that they are most importantly, that they feel welcome and included.

The administrators stressed equity in their schools. Lauren said, "Equity is extremely at the forefront, not just including race. It's very much a common thing to talk about gay talk about transgender, binary, non-binary." Lynn mentioned:

I think that it goes from having a space to do your basic needs, whether it's a restroom, a locker room, being able to play sports with your preferred gender, and having your needs talked about in a health class. We discussed that a safe relationship doesn't necessarily mean just a hetero relationship.

Jack said:

We have always followed the federal guidance and civil rights laws. We've always been very careful to ensure that we're not violating any rights and that the policies we put in place are in line with state and federal guidelines regarding transgender students.

Weston added, "I wish we could just if they're identifying as a male, treated like any other male, if they identify as a female, they're treated like any other female." Fred said, "We've made some real progress in equity and inclusion at all levels."

Most participants shared that their schools do not have stand-alone inclusive policies for transgender students. Corey explained, "So we identify that these are the

groups that are more often than not discriminated against but at the same time, we don't want to say, a standalone policy for trans transgender students." Kilgore said:

I don't think that we necessarily differentiate policies for one particular group or another. It is really what we try to facilitate in our school is inclusiveness across the board, whether it's race or ethnicity or sexual orientation, whatever the case may be.

Ted stated, "We don't really have transgender policies, per se, what we do have is anti-discrimination, anti-bullying policies, which do cover, in my opinion, pretty much all manners of behavior that would be discriminatory towards any particular group." Weston added, "We've never had any policies that excluded them."

Many administrators have tried to incorporate transgender needs into their policies. Fred mentioned:

We're looking at transgender students. We're looking at students in general. We need to make sure that we don't have silly policies in place that impact that student experience. We want to ensure that all are good-intentioned, but do you really need to have them?

Corey said, "So we included that addition of transgender and other gender-related languages into our policies." Jordan shared a different experience, "there really weren't very many of any transgender students included in the conversation."

The participants shared the research that was done to create inclusive policies. Corey stated, "You're examining different policies. You have conversations with different schools, different districts." Similarly, Jack explained, "We consulted with our

school attorneys and then made sure that we were in line for what we're supposed to be doing." Kilgore said, "Our school psychologists really took the lead on doing all the research and the background digging, and she did a fantastic presentation for the school board."

The administrators share how they came up with inclusive policies. Peter explained, "For school handbook policies, we follow the district policy and then look at how does this apply to our school to write our procedural directives and our instructional council input." Similarly, Ted said, "We might take our policies from the state School Board Association or some other entity that's done a lot of research into this area."

Students had some input in creating inclusive policies at some schools. Connor said, "By community focus group, there were student focus groups." Lynn explained, "I had a lot of kid data. We had done stuff with other local schools, who also had some sort of GSA type of organization." Likewise, Peter stated, "The terminology alone was pointed out from students as something that could be exclusive to a certain gender more than the other." Weston mentioned, "Students write my whole student handbook." In Contrast, Jordan did not include student input in creating inclusive policies: "There wasn't much inclusion of the actual students that are being impacted by the policy now."

The participants shared their challenges in creating and implementing transgender-inclusive policies. Jordan said, "I think the biggest challenge is, I'm not the final voice." Connor stated:

I think the other challenge that we have is actually implemented, right? The hard work is there's a reason we need an equity policy. So, the fact that we need it

means that there's work to be done within our system and within our structure. So that's where the hard work really is. Moving forward, there was definitely significant resistance against the implementation of the policy.

Ted explained, "The state has stripped any opportunity local districts would have to try and be inclusive." Weston agreed "Laws that they're passing that prohibit local school boards or local school districts from doing anything to help LGBTQ or trans students."

The administrators share what strategies they used to create or implement inclusive policies. Corey stated, "I think just honest, open dialogue is just the best strategy." Peter added, "Starting with training, starting with conversations, and starting with student conversations." Jordan said, "I think a big thing as a school administrator is modeling." Ted shared, "I don't know if you can really create a policy that's really designed to meet every student's needs."

One administrator said their dress code was binary, and the others said they had nongendered a dress code or a non-strict dress code. Administrators strive to make all of their students feel inclusive and not excluded in any way. Equity is stress from all participants that they follow the federal and state laws. Few administrators mentioned they do not have inclusive policies per se but rather anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies. The needs of transgender students are included in their policies by most administrators.

Several administrators shared that transgender students' preferred names can be used and respected. Peter stated, "Students can list their preferred names, so those names are respected if an administrator, test proctor, or substitute comes in." Jennifer said they

can “put a nickname there or the preferred name in their student information system, but the dead name is still there, but in our graduation program, we will allow students to have their preferred name there.” Fred mentioned, “Policies in terms of student records systems, we’ve definitely made some changes in those in the past several years in terms of giving students the ability to change their name, and to change their, their record.” Corey added, “If a student asks us to use a specific name or a specific pronoun, we’ll do it, and we make notes of it. We have our student information system.” Lynn explained, “We can luckily set our systems up to do that, even if they haven’t a court-ordered name change, we can have it shows up like on the rosters, and things like that get a little trickier when you get to the diploma.”

Using preferred pronouns of transgender students by adults can be a challenge. Fred said, “I do think that there are maybe some intentional, but more so unintentional issues that come up with students so like pronouns would be a big one, I don’t know that we all understand the impact or the importance of that amongst our transgender students.” Jennifer mentioned their guidance counselors “put a little pressure on our district staff to allow them to change pronouns in the student information system that we use” but was not successful. Peter stated, “inclusive policies really begins with identity and pronouns.”

Some administrators shared that supporting students as they explore their identities is essential. Jordan shared:

There’s a lot of philosophy, and I think, generally speaking, administrators and teachers in my district really want to come from a place of supporting students, honoring their identities and giving them the best possible experience that they

can while they're here at our school, I think the more that we see each student open about their identities and who they are, and their fluidity, sometimes that's more prevalent in schools today.

Peter said, "Addressing students as they want to be addressed as their gender support plan does identify inclusion within restroom access within lunch access, within electives with courses with sports in a comprehensive high school." Ted stated:

I think one is to make first and foremost is to ensure that the student is good and has access to all aspects of school life, they're not excluded in any way or discriminated against, that they are not singled out due to their identity to their how they choose to identify themselves, and that they are most importantly, that they feel welcome and included.

Corey added:

I think for some of them, they have very positive experiences and feel that our school is inclusive and feels supported in various ways. I know we have other students who feel differently and feel that they face more struggles and that there are maybe some different things that we could do to support them better.

Jack shared:

I think it's important just to keep a very open mind. You have to be a good listener for a lot of different kinds of people, different groups of people. You got to protect the student, the transgender student. You have to protect their rights.

Corey also said, “It’s interesting how transgender issues and certain phases go through schools, where students are clearly searching for something searching for their identity and who they are.”

Administrators struggle to know the needs of transgender students. Fred mentioned, “One of the things that we really tried to do with all of our students, but particularly our transgender students, or students who are in transition, understand their needs and wants.” Corey said, “We try to do is just like what are the needs, and then try to address those.” Jordan shared, “I think there’s a want to accommodate students. At least I can speak on behalf of my school as a want to accommodate students, but there’s a lack of knowledge on how to accommodate students.”

The administrators shared how they determine the needs of transgender students. Lynn said, “We would take some surveys from the kids and say, hey, what kind of needs are you experiencing? Are there things that you wish the adults here knew? Are there things that you would like to see changed?” Likewise, Corey stated, “I think you have a dialogue with our transgender students and their families, and what are your needs that you’re facing?” Weston said, “So I do meet with those students. Hey, how’s it going? Well, how can we help?” Jennifer shared, “We get a few ideas for being more supportive and inclusive from our gay-straight alliance. We have a lot of really active kids there.” Fred mentioned, “We actually have a questionnaire that we had them fill out, as they were transitioning into the high school from the middle school or from another school. And you can kind of get an idea of what is important.”

Administrators work to share the needs of transgender students with the staff. Lynn shared, “Having kids put together a presentation and say, “Hey, here’s why this policy is important to us. This might not seem like a big deal to you, but it’s a huge deal”.” Jennifer agreed:

This year, the students have developed a presentation that they want to give all staff. They want it to be mandatory, where they tell them strategies that would make them each feel more inclusive and included and how to create better safe spaces.

Students at Kilgore’s school presented to the school board. “They were vocal. They came to the school board meeting, they advocated for themselves, and the school board heard what they had to say and passed the changes to the policies” (Kilgore). Ted explained:

I found that the medical needs of transgender students tend to be higher or more intense, so there is a need to work with the staff to make sure combinations for when they’re absent. We have a policy around students with chronic medical conditions or illnesses. We treat that the same way a transgender student who’s transitioning.

Corey mentioned, “Using the student information system thing that came from our kids, like, hey, is there any way you can let my teachers know, without me having to have ten conversations. So we looked at the student information system and to do that.”

The participants shared different methods of supporting their transgender students. Peter shared, “We have gender support plans for individual students who

request one, or whose family request one.” Jennifer shared that she learned about a gender support plan at a PD. Jennifer said:

She shared a gender support plan. It’s several pages, but basically, it says the purpose of this document is to create shared understandings about how the student’s authentic gender will be accounted for and supported at the school, It feels like a kind of assessment, and I would imagine a counselor doing this to ensure that the counselor does everything that they can do to support that child, like leaving no nothing unturned to make sure that they feel completely protected and safe and all of that. It’s, it’s it is quite extensive. It is down to what name do you want the yearbook? How do we call you on the PA? I mean, it is very intense.

Corey explained, “You want to build that trust with students, so they feel comfortable sharing their needs and their concerns. So, they feel that the school will be responsive and support whatever their needs are.” Similarly, Connor said, “Make sure that the students that we are trying to help most have a say in what we’re writing.” Ted mentioned that he asks the transgender students, “How can we support you? What do you need?”

Several administrators share that their schools have a gender support group. Weston stated, “We have a GSA.” Peter said, “We meet with our students weekly in a gender Support Alliance.” Likewise, Connor mentioned, “We also have some organizations that give some support for our youth.” Kilgore shared, “We have a group called, and it’s an LGBTQ+ group in our school, and they really had a voice and helped shape that policy.”

Another challenge that administrators reported is providing mental health support. Jack stated, "I guess more mental health concerns with those with transgender populations, just because I think there's some there's going to be more bullying." Ted said, "I do feel like mental health probably, I would tell you; mental health is something that I feel like, in the school systems, we need to be able to provide more mental health support." Several participants mentioned COVID -19 highlighted the need for more mental health support. Jennifer said, "I think a lot of COVID -19 brought out a lot of awareness about mental health and lack of awareness about mental health." Lauren stated, "This has blown my mind, the kids' mental health issues need since August, just I mean, we've added counselors, we've added therapists." Lynn said, "I would say it's more trying to provide emotional support at this point."

Administrators are challenged to ensure transgender students feel welcome and comfortable at school. Kilgore stated, "We're making more and more adaptations to help our transgender population feel comfortable and accepted and allow them to be themselves." Similarly, Jack stated, "We want to make sure that the kids feel welcome and respected." Peter said:

Comfort is always a challenge with cultural matters, whether that be race, whether that's gender, whether that's an instructional change in the way things were and our habits that we're used to, especially as adults, become harder to make those mental and cultural shifts.

Lauren mentioned, "We're trying to make it a safe place physically and emotionally." Jennifer explained, "I think transgender students, gay students, any students who are

considered a minority, are starting to feel more comfortable going to counselors or telling a teacher I need to talk to somebody. I'm struggling big time." Ted said, "What we've really done is create an environment where students feel comfortable coming to us, especially transgender students, and explaining their needs."

Administrators strive to include inclusion in their schools. Fred stated, "We're making progress, certainly not where we want to be in terms of inclusion and generally equity for everybody." Lauren mentioned, "This school really tries to be inclusive of lots of things." Likewise, Corey said, "We make sure that our current mechanisms don't unintentionally alienate our students." Lauren said, "And so just nobody has time to be prejudiced. I mean, you just don't have time to do that. That takes too much energy. It takes too much energy to be mean or exclusive."

The administrators mentioned challenges with student information systems and using the transgender student's preferred name. The use of the transgender students' pronouns is challenging. Adults do not always understand how important it is for transgender students to use the correct pronoun. Some participants shared that supporting students as they explore their identities is essential. Administrators struggled to know the needs of transgender students and used surveys, questionnaires, and conversations to learn those needs. Sharing the knowledge of the needs of transgender students with the faculty was done with presentations by transgender students. Mental health support for students was high on the list for several administrators. All administrators wanted all of their students to feel welcome and comfortable at school.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility means that a study's findings are believable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A strategy I used to establish credibility was member checking. Participants were emailed my takeaways of their interview for confirmation. Only proofreading corrections were suggested by the participants, which I made. Another strategy that I used to establish credibility was saturation. Interview data collection continued until saturation was obtained. I determined that I reached saturation during the interview process when participants added no further information. I reached saturation after five interviews but continued to find participants to reach my goal of 12 participants. I kept a journal to maintain a continuous record of my thoughts and ideas of my study and reflected upon them regularly. The journal is kept locked in a desk.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is supported by detailed descriptions of the data and the contexts of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A strategy that I used to establish transferability was purposeful sampling. I used purposeful sampling to seek out my participants. I emailed only principals and assistant principals of high schools that were in the United States. By having a purposive sample of U.S. high school administrators who implemented transgender policies, the study was not restricted to a specific school district, city, or state, and this contributed to transferability. I reached out to administrators from across the United States to ensure that the participants were not just from one area of the country.

Dependability

Dependability in a qualitative study is equivalent to the concept of reliability in qualitative research and indicates the stability of the data in the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A strategy I used to establish dependability was to include the data collection process in the study. The data collection process was detailed and replicable. I audio recorded the interviews and used an interview protocol for each interview. Some of the records included documents about the raw data and notes about the data collection process. I used Excel to organize the raw data.

Confirmability

Confirmability is sought after by qualitative researchers, and it means having findings that can be confirmed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A strategy I used to establish confirmability was keeping detailed records, allowing member checking, and employing reflexivity. I kept audio recordings of the interview, transcriptions of the interview, and copies of the takeaways I sent to the participants. I provided the participants with my takeaways from their interviews for them to verify and provide feedback. A journal was maintained throughout the study to help me reflect as I went through the data collection process.

Summary

This study had one research question: What challenges do U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed? Theme 1 indicated existing school bathrooms and procedures for their use are not developed to address the unique needs of

transgender students. Theme 2 indicated administrators are challenged by the behaviors of adults and students concerning the issues of transgender inclusive policies. Theme 3 indicated administrators expressed difficulty developing an all-encompassing set of inclusive policies that take the needs of all students into account. In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of the findings, the study's limitations, recommendations, and implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed. In this study, I used a basic qualitative design. I conducted the study to explore the challenges of creating transgender-inclusive policies. The key findings of this study include the following three themes: (a) existing school bathrooms and procedures for their use are not developed to address the unique needs of transgender students, (b) administrators are challenged by the behaviors of adults and students concerning the issues of transgender inclusive policies, and (c) administrators expressed difficulty developing an all-encompassing set of inclusive policies that take the needs of all students into account.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of my study are based on the data collected from 12 U.S. high school administrators. Two theories were used in the framework for this study. One of the theories was the empowerment of minority students (Cummins, 1986), and the other was minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003). The framework and the current literature in Chapter 2 were used in the data analysis in this study. The findings are summarized below, organized by themes.

Theme 1

Price-Feeney et al. (2020) suggested offering gender-neutral bathrooms, not having restrictive policies, and a private area to change clothes may improve mental

health and save lives. Kulick et al. (2019) and Wernick et al. (2017) showed disparities in transgender students feeling safe in high school locker rooms. Bathrooms are a source of anxiety for transgender students (Davies & Kessel, 2017).

The key findings from Theme 1 of my study are that administrators are challenged to physically create single-use restrooms in their schools. All the participants shared that transgender students could use the bathroom of their choice. One participant shared that their school had single-use stalls all around the school that anyone could use. Similarly, three administrators shared that single-use restrooms were added during renovations. Lauren shared that any student could use a private area to change for physical education (PE) at her school. Also, if students were uncomfortable taking PE in person, they could take it online.

These findings aligned with current research regarding bathroom use among transgender students (Crissman et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020; McGuire et al., 2021; Omercajic & Martino, 2020; Price-Feeney et al., 2020; Renley et al., 2022; Vanaman & Chapman, 2020; see also Cicero & Wesp, 2017; Davies & Kessel, 2017; Kjaran, 2019; Kulick et al., 2019; Patel, 2017; Porta et al., 2017; Watkins & Moreno, 2017; Wernick et al., 2017). My study expanded on recent research by revealing that, according to several participating administrators, renovations were done to construct single-use restrooms in their schools for anyone to use. The fact that anyone can use the restrooms is vital because these are not transgender restrooms, and transgender students will not be singled out for using those restrooms.

Theme 2

The Challenges with Behaviors of the Adults in Schools

Henderson et al. (2020) mentioned that inclusive policies and educator support benefit transgender students, and faculty need to understand and enforce the policies. Omercajic and Martino (2020) suggested schools should have supportive teachers, student clubs, curricular resources, and antiharassment policies to support transgender students. Kurt and Chenault (2017) found that adults are likelier to push back against inclusive policies than students are.

The key findings in Theme 2 of my study were that most faculty support transgender students, but mistakes in pronoun and name use occur. Challenges have emerged with substitutes and staff. Some substitute staff called transgender students by their dead name (birth name of a transgender individual) and not their preferred name, and a secretary in one school and some faculty in another school said that there was a boy in the girl's restroom. For many adults, experiences with transgender students are new, and they might struggle to know the best way to handle every situation. Several administrators mentioned it is essential to have a diverse faculty.

The Challenges with Behaviors of Outside Adults

Challenges also occurred with adults outside the school building. Several administrators mentioned there has been pushback from the community regarding transgender-inclusive policies. A few administrators said the challenge of walking the fine line of supporting transgender students and being transparent with parents. A couple

of administrators noted the challenge of dealing with parents who are not supportive of transgender students.

My findings are consistent with the current research about the need to have a supportive staff and that pushback often comes from adults (Abreu et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2020; Hillier et al., 2020; McQuillan & Leininger, 2021; Omercajic & Martino, 2020; Persinger et al., 2020; see also Craig et al., 2018; Ullman, 2017). My study expanded on previous research in that some administrators defined the adults pushing back to include members of the community, parents, and some school staff members. My study also expanded previous research with an administrator sharing experiences with substitutes and staff members. Another expansion from the current research is that administrators recommend that faculty members mirror the student population.

The Challenges of the Behaviors of the Student Body

Recent research indicates that transgender students are victimized more than other students and generally do not feel safe at school (McBride, 2021). All of Endo's (2021) participants shared they experienced violence at school. Henderson et al.'s (2020) participants' bullying experiences included verbal harassment, gender policing, physical violence, and the practice of exclusion. McBride and Schubotz (2017) showed in their results that bullying of transgender students occurs, and transgender students do not feel safe at school. Dominguez-Martinez and Robles (2019) and Endo (2021) indicated that bullying of transgender students is not usually reported and is compounded when schools do not have inclusive policies.

Another key finding in Theme 2 was that bullying and harassment occur at four administrators' schools. Almost half of the administrators shared that the student body is accepting of transgender students. Bullying and harassment occasionally happen to a few students. The administrators deal with any bullying or harassment swiftly to send the message that such behavior is not tolerated. Several administrators strive to teach acceptance to their students. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators could not gauge if transgender-inclusive policies affect the school climate.

The findings from this study are consistent with the current research on bullying and harassment of transgender students (Cederved et al., 2021; Endo, 2021; Gower et al., 2021; Henderson et al., 2020; Hillier et al., 2020; Horton, 2020; McBride, 2021; Norris & Orchowski, 2020; Pampati et al., 2020; Park et al., 2022; Persinger et al., 2020; see also Austin et al., 2019; Cicero & Wesp, 2017; Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019; Goodrich & Barnard, 2019; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Weinhardt et al., 2017). A few findings not reported in the research reviewed were administrators strengthening their school climate by teaching tolerance and encouraging students to talk about their feelings about transgender students.

Theme 3

The Challenges of Inclusive Dress Code Policies

When creating dress code policies, administrators should consider students' gender identities (Whitman, 2020). Abreu et al. (2020) mentioned that some schools have policies that discriminate against transgender students. Kosciw et al. (2020) recommend

that the dress code policy not discriminate against LGBTQ students. None of the dress code policies examined mentioned transgender (Reddy-Best & Choi, 2020).

Over half of the administrators in this study mentioned that they have inclusive dress code policies. The dress code policies at their school did not say what each sex could wear but rather any restrictions on the type of clothing worn no matter which gender wore the article of clothing. In contrast, one administrator shared that their dress code is binary.

The Challenge of General Policies for Transgender Students

Trans inclusion was driven only by transgender students at the school and not institutional change (Martino et al., 2020). Kurt and Chenault (2017) mentioned it is essential for school leaders to know the challenges transgender students face so that inclusive and safe policies can be created and implemented. Hillier et al. (2020) stated that the professional development of gender identities is essential to implementing inclusive policies successfully. Persinger et al. (2020) said school administrators seeking to implement inclusive policies should educate the stakeholders about gender identities. This study showed that even if teachers advocate for their students, school administrators need to look at the high schools' policies to make them more inclusive for transgender students (Palkki, 2020).

All of the administrators in this study stressed having equity policies and wanting their policies to be inclusive. Most administrators did not have stand-alone transgender policies but strived to have inclusive policies across the board. Many administrators tried to incorporate transgender needs into their policies. Some challenges administrators have

in creating transgender-inclusive policies include administrators not being the final voice and state laws restricting policies for transgender students. Administrators mentioned the work that needs to be done within their system and structure because there is a need for equity policies. The administrators used strategies to implement transgender-inclusive policies, including open dialogue, training, conversations with faculty and students, and modeling.

These findings in my study aligned with the current research regarding dress codes and the challenges of general policies in creating inclusive policies (Abreu et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020; Palkki, 2020; Reddy-Best & Choi, 2020; Renley et al., 2022; Whitman, 2020; see also Kurt & Chenault, 2017; Philips, 2017). This study expanded the current research with several administrators sharing their challenges and strategies in creating inclusive policies. This study also extended the current research with dress code policies because administrators shared strategies to make dress codes transgender inclusive.

The Challenges of Transgender Identities

Using pronouns is a way to confirm gender identity and commend diversity (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Pacey et al. (2020) had a participant share that their school had policies that would not allow students to change their name to a name they wanted to be called. A participant in Abreu et al. (2020) study mentioned they did not understand transgender students' experiences. The study's findings provided administrators with the benefits of working with students, parents, school board, and GSA supportive community members in creating a safe, inclusive, and nurturing school

climate (Steck & Perry, 2018). Steck and Perry noted administrators should not just rely on GSA as the sole method for change. Omercajic and Martino (2020) suggested schools should have supportive teachers, student clubs, curricular resources, and anti-harassment policies to support transgender students. Ullman (2017) mentioned the need for improved teacher-student relationships for LGBT students by increasing the understanding of these students' needs. Persinger et al. (2020) said school administrators seeking to implement inclusive policies should educate the stakeholders about gender identities.

The findings for Theme 3 of this study were that transgender people's preferred name is used and respected at many of the administrators' schools. Still, current laws and school board policies prevent administrators from making it official on school documents. A few administrators shared that using the pronouns can be challenging because transgender students place such importance on them. Some administrators explained that supporting students as they explore their identities is essential.

The Challenges of Knowing Transgender Needs

School administrators struggle to balance the needs of transgender students, legal requirements, and the comfort of all students (Kurt & Chenault, 2017; Philips, 2017). Ullman (2017) mentioned there needs to be improved teacher-student relationships for LGBT students by increasing the understanding of these students' needs. Dominguez-Martinez and Robles (2019) found in their research that administrators should create conditions and practices that address transgender students' needs.

Administrators work to share the needs of transgender students with the staff. In several administrators' schools, transgender students presented their needs to the staff and

even to the school board. The participants shared different methods of supporting transgender students. Two administrators mentioned a gender support plan, which is like an assessment that lists every way the student can be supported. Several administrators shared that their schools have a gender support group. A few of the administrators mentioned that while they desire to accommodate students, they lack the knowledge of how to accommodate transgender students. Strategies to determine the needs of transgender students included surveys, GSAs, questionnaires, and just asking the students what they needed. Mental health support is another challenge that administrators have to overcome. Administrators are challenged to ensure transgender students feel welcome and comfortable at school.

These findings aligned with the current pronoun use research and included all stakeholders to support transgender students (Dominguez-Martinez & Robles, 2019; Henderson et al., 2020; Omercajic & Martino, 2020; Persinger et al., 2020; see also Craig et al., 2018; Kurt & Chenault, 2017; Philips, 2017; Porta et al., 2017; Steck & Perry, 2018; Ullman, 2017). My study expanded the recent research in that some administrators had transgender students present to their staff to allow them to hear directly from the transgender students about their needs. This study also expanded the previous research in that administrators shared a gender support plan. A few of the administrators mentioned that while they desire to accommodate students, they lack the knowledge of how to accommodate transgender students. Strategies to determine the needs of transgender students included surveys, GSAs, questionnaires, and just asking the students what they needed.

Framework

The empowerment of minority students theory refers to educators and students working collaboratively to challenge educational and social inequities (Cummins, 1986). Schools should empower minority students and not make them powerless like they are reflected in society (Cummins, 1986). The key finding from this study supported the empowerment of minority students theory in that there is a challenge inherent in finding the right balance between bringing in student input into policies and enacting policies that apply fairly to all students. Some input is not enough. Administrators seem to struggle to determine how much is enough. One administrator mentioned students wrote their whole student handbook. Administrators use surveys, questionnaires, and dialogue to work collaboratively with transgender students.

Minority stress theory pertains to the excess pressure individuals from stigmatized social groups are exposed to because of their social position (Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003) said the formulation of minority stress is supported by studies that show social stressors are associated with mental health outcomes. Davies and Kessel (2017) stated minority stress has an impact on transgender people's mental health. The key findings in my study support the minority stress theory in that administrators work hard to prioritize the needs of all marginalized groups, and they are more successful with some groups over others. Administrators want to do better and want to be inclusive to all, but it's not easy to do right by everyone all the time. In those mistakes, the gaps in coverage per se, marginalized students are at risk of suffering more than others. Several administrators mentioned schools need more mental health support for their students.

Limitations of the Study

Participants were self-selecting and may not represent a cross-section of the U.S. Ten out of the 12 participants were recruited by direct contact. A limitation was locating the public email for high school administrators. I used school lists from different state departments of education. If no released list could be downloaded to an excel spreadsheet, I did not reach out to principals in that state. I made the participants as comfortable as possible and let them know there were no wrong answers. I was limited by the time administrators had available for an interview. I made myself as open as possible to interview at a convenient time for the participants. I interviewed over half of my participants during my spring break.

Another limitation was that only public high school administrators were participants. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on how I collected data. Virtual interviews limited observations of body language. I made notes during the interviews to help minimize the impact. The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted the administrators' gauging of the school climate because they were still adjusting to returning to school in person. I was the only interviewer and knew that biases may have been present. I used journaling to reflect and member checking to help control any biases.

Recommendations

The challenges shared by the administrators in this study help fill the gap in practice by helping other administrators know the experiences and challenges they had gone through. It may be easier to create inclusive policies or practices if administrators know what to expect and have some strategies in their toolbox to overcome the

challenges or obstacles they may encounter. I recommend replicating my research post-pandemic to see if the findings are the same because student behavior is not typical pre-pandemic. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges U.S. high school administrators face in creating inclusive policies that could potentially protect transgender students from being bullied or harassed.

It is hard to gauge if inclusive policies are improving the school climate, and future research is recommended. I would also recommend using administrators from other states as study participants in any future studies. Future studies could include both transgender and cisgender students. Although I would recommend using recent high school graduates or students 18 years old because this topic is sensitive, and it might not be easy getting parent permission, or a student could be outed while seeking parental consent. A future study using students as participants could get their perspective on the challenges in creating transgender inclusive policies. I would recommend in the future doing a quantitative study to determine any relationships in the data. An observational study would be beneficial to observe what is happening in the schools.

Implications

The potential positive social change implications of bringing more awareness to administrators' challenges could include more open communication with students, faculty, and staff. This could lead to positive improvement of policies and practices to address transgender students' experiences at school. While some transgender-inclusive policies only apply to transgender students, there does not always need to be separate inclusive policies for transgender students. For example, dress code policies can be made

inclusive by removing binary terms and just making the same rules for all students.

Another example would be single-stall bathrooms and private changing areas for physical education. Any student who would need more privacy would be able to use these changing areas.

Another positive social change that this study could impact is with communications that administrators would be willing to have with students, faculty, and staff about transgender students. Several administrators said mistakes are made but that talking about the challenges, policies, and needs of transgender students can make things easier. Dealing with transgender students and their needs is new to many adults but can get easier over time.

Conclusion

Administrators need to overcome the challenges in creating inclusion policies for transgender students. There is sometimes pushback from the community and parents. One-way administrators can lessen the pushback is to offer question and answer sessions to begin conversations. Professional development is needed to educate faculty and staff, which can be quite effective and more personal if their transgender students share their needs. Focusing on teaching acceptance to their student body can be an excellent strategy to improve the school climate.

Policies need to be checked to ensure no students are excluded from them. The issues and needs of transgender students are new to some adults, and many times administrators do not know the needs that transgender students have. Administrators should ask transgender students what they need and not assume anything. Strategies to

get that information from transgender students include questionnaires, surveys, GSA, asking students what they need, and transgender students presenting to the faculty to share their needs. The most important thing is to communicate and talk about transgender needs. Having conversations may be difficult because it is new, but it gets easier over time, and it is okay to make mistakes.

The positive social change that this study will bring is more awareness of the challenges administrators face. This awareness will hopefully improve interventions to positively address the transgender students' experiences at school. Administrators should not be afraid to make mistakes. Even the most welcoming and supportive administrators in this study shared that they made mistakes. The change will be challenging because the issues of transgender students are relatively new, and educators may be inexperienced in handling transgender students' needs. Overcoming the challenges in creating inclusive policies will become easier if there is trusting, honest communication.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What I will do	What I will say—script
<p>Introduce the interview and set the stage—often over a meal or coffee</p>	<p>Hi, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. Your willingness to assist me in my research is greatly appreciated. I received your consent of informed consent. It gives guidelines for you and me about the purpose of the interview and the rights you have as a participant. To remind you, I will be recording the interview to help me capture your thoughts. With your permission, may I start the recording? Great, thank you.</p> <p>We've already confirmed that you meet the participant requirements. So let's get started! As you know, I'm interviewing U.S. administrators for my study. Now, I am an aspiring administrator, and I know schools are different, students are different, school climate is different, and administrator experiences are different because of those things. So, I'm trying to understand administrators' challenges in creating transgender-inclusive policies. I hope you will be very candid when you describe your thoughts and perceptions. There's no judgment on my part, and I just want to understand the administrator's experiences in creating these policies. Does that sound good?</p> <p>I also want to tell you that my nature is to get involved in a conversation and share things about myself as we talk, maybe agree or disagree about different ideas. But because the purpose of the interview is for a research study, I'm not supposed to do that! I'm supposed to be very much a listener and not a talker. So, as I ask questions, if it seems like I am a little</p>

removed, that's because I am; I'm supposed to be. But be sure, I AM listening and very much interested in your experiences. So, today, I would like to understand more about you and your experiences with transgender-inclusive policies. There are a few questions that I will ask you. There are no wrong answers, and you can end the interview at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential. What pseudonym would you like me to use?

- Watch for non-verbal queues
- Paraphrase as needed
- Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth

1. What is your perception of the transgender students' experience currently at your school?

2. What is your understanding of the meaning of inclusive policies for transgender students?

3. Have you created/implemented inclusive policies for transgender students? If so, when? If not – why not?

4. What are your school's transgender-inclusive policies?

5. What background information did you collect prior to the policy decision? (If no, go to Question 15)

6. What is your perception of transgender experiences prior to the policies?

7. How did you (or your school) come up with the policies?

8. What strategies were taken to create/implement inclusive policies?

9. What strategies were used to include transgender students' needs in the policies?

10. What role, if any, did transgender students have in creating/implementing the inclusive policies?

11. What challenges did you have in creating/implementing inclusive policies?

12. What improvements would you make if you could do it all over again?

13. Discuss any school climate changes after the policies were implemented.

14. What challenges would you anticipate in creating/implementing inclusive policies for transgender students?

15. What role, if any, would transgender students have in creating the inclusive policies?

16. What strategies would be used to include transgender students' needs in the inclusive policies?

17. What additional experiences have you had with transgender safety at school? (physical/emotional/verbal)

18. Is there anything else you can share to provide insight on this issue?

19. Do you have any questions for me?

20. Do you know anyone that I might be able to contact to see if they would be interested in participating in my study?

Wrap up interview thanking participant	This ends our interview. Again, thank you so much for your time and sharing of information.
Schedule follow-up member checking interview	I will email you a summary of your interview for you to be sure of my takeaways. Once the data is analyzed, I will send you a \$25 gift card.
