

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRANSGENDER YOUTH WITH
DISABILITIES HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: A Phenomenological Study of Transgender Youth with Disabilities High School Experiences

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of transgender youth with disabilities in high school. Utilizing in-depth phenomenological interviews and photography, this study sought to gain insights into how the lived experiences and intersections of transgender and disability identity impact high school experiences. The collection of interview data and photography allowed for a deeper understanding of the essence of the phenomenon under study. The aim was to understand the ways in which the complexities of ‘transgender’ and ‘disability’ identities impact high school experiences.

The analysis of the data lead to six key themes including: gender as fluid, society and identity, conflation of identities, mental health, changes in school and difference as strength. This dissertation offers a more complete picture of the needs and barriers transgender youth with disabilities face to inform future research and practice. Results from this study extend the current research and provide a deeper understanding of the needs and challenges of transgendered youth with disabilities. Findings from this study also support implications for how educators work with transgender youth with disabilities and how schools can be more inclusive in meeting their needs.

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In memory and dedication of my astonishing gram, Ellen Slitts, 1920-2015.

Words cannot illustrate what a phenomenal and inspiring woman she was. She was a person who has touched the hearts of three generations of people and inspired many to be the people we are today. Her influence will last a lifetime and the memories of her will stay alive in the hearts and souls of those who loved her. I am who I am today, because I knew you. I am grateful and lucky to have such beautiful memories with you. You have given me enough encouragement, strength and hope that will last a lifetime. You will be immensely missed but you will stay alive in our daily thoughts.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many adolescents struggle with transition into adulthood during high school. This is especially true for adolescents with disabilities. There are many obstacles faced by high school students with disabilities that make their transition to adulthood even more difficult, which can lead to negative post-school outcomes (Newman et al., 2011; Wehman et al., 2015). Research has shown that adolescents with disabilities have lower rates of vocational and educational attainments when compared to their peers who don't have disabilities (Wagner et al., 2007; Alsaman & Lee, 2017). Adolescents with disabilities also face a higher risk of dropping out of school compared to their peers without disabilities (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012; Stillwell & Sable, 2013; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011). Furthermore, according to The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2012 (NLTS, 2012), adolescents with disabilities face greater risks of being bullied in school, are suspended at higher rates, and face discrimination (Lipscomb et al., 2017). Undoubtedly, these issues and barriers can affect adolescents with disabilities on different levels, including academics, employment, and independent living (Test, Fowler, White, Richter, & Walker, 2009; Newman et al., 2011; Dong, Fabian, & Luecking, 2016).

While adolescents with disabilities are more prone to experience negative post-school outcomes, research has identified numerous subgroups of individuals with disabilities (i.e. race, gender, sexual orientation) that are at even greater risk due to the intersection of marginalized identities (Gil-Kashiwabara, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers, & Powers, 2002; Trainor, Lindstrom, Simon-Burroughs, Martin, & McCray Sorrells, 2008;

Khan & Lindstrom, 2014). Those who associate with multiple marginalized identities, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) with disabilities, often face more difficulties (Khan & Lindstrom, 2014; Duke, 2011). Compared to heterosexual youth with disabilities, LGBTQ adolescents are more likely to face discrimination and negative experiences (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Khan & Lindstrom, 2014). In the limited research that has focused on youth with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ (Robinson & Espelage 2012; Sadowski, 2008; Khan & Lindstrom, 2014; Duke, 2011), findings have revealed compounding negative outcomes including low self-esteem, depression, suicide, harassment, discrimination, rejection, and higher dropout rates (Duke, 2011; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2011; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Morgan et al., 2011).

Duke (2011) conducted a meta-synthesis of literature published between 1995 and 2010 on LGBTQ adolescents with disabilities that addressed the intersection of disability, sexuality and gender expression in K-12 schools, and universities and supportive living programs. Results indicated that LGBTQ identities have been frequently pathologized and that due to living with multiple stigmatized identities, LGBTQ youth with disabilities face issues of discrimination and marginalization across contexts (e.g., high school). Results also indicated LGBTQ youth with disabilities receiving special education services frequently lacked LGBTQ role models and had inadequate opportunities to explore and develop positive gender identities and expression (Duke, 2011).

In addition, Duke (2011) found LGBTQ participants with “hidden” disabilities, such as specific learning disabilities or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were underrepresented in the literature, as well as female and transgender participants.

Duke (2011) concluded that while the research on LGBTQ youth with disabilities is emerging, it is still limited and more research can help address and empower issues around LGBTQ youth with disabilities. Suggestions for practice emphasized that concepts such as diversity and culture need to encompass gender identity and sexual orientation in educational standards.

In addition to Duke's (2011) work, Morgan et al. (2011) reviewed literature on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) students with disabilities in K-12 schools and found when compared to the general student population: (a) students were at risk for both psychological and academic problems because they did not feel safe at school and (b) LGBT students were not often involved in school activities where they could explore their gender or sexual identity (Morgan et al., 2011). Suggestions for practice emphasized that education professionals should be open to addressing the needs of LGBT students with disabilities and foster a gender-inclusive environment including: (a) acknowledging students with disabilities have sexuality, (b) discouraging the use of non inclusive language, (c) creating classroom rules/procedures addressing homophobia and discrimination, (d) including LGBT information in curriculum, and (e) recognizing and addressing personal bias (Morgan et al., 2011). Morgan et al. (2011) concluded that by using these strategies, educators could help create a more positive, safe, and supportive educational environment for LGBT students with disabilities.

In a more recent study, Khan and Lindstrom (2014) used qualitative methods to examine the experiences of adolescents with disabilities who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGTBQI). The uniqueness of this study revealed insights from the perspective of participants regarding how existing with a

disability and identifying as LGBTQI compounded school experiences. This study focused broadly on the participants' external experiences across the four levels of an ecological context (self, home, school, community) and how the participant's internal sense of self and external school experiences impacted his or her identity and beliefs about their future. Findings revealed how the combination of having a disability and identifying as LGBTQI compounded the participants' high school experiences. For example, all participants in the study reported experiencing homophobic language, which they believed was a result of the school's ignorance about gender and sexuality. Participants also reported feelings of fear of being rejected by their peers and teachers because of their identities. Furthermore, participants reported challenges of navigating school spaces due to their disabilities, which limited them in participating in extracurricular activities (Khan & Lindstrom, 2014). These findings confirmed similar negative barriers identified in other research (Kosciw et al., 2011) such as facing stigmas, stereotypes, discrimination, and fear of rejection.

While research is emerging on the experiences of LGBTQ youth with disabilities, findings cannot be generalized to all groups in the LGBTQ continuum, in particular, transgender youth with disabilities. Transgender is a term that refers to people whose gender identity differs from the biological sex assigned to them at birth (Denny, Green, & Cole, 2007). Gender identity is a person's inner sense of being a man or a woman (or boy or girl). For transgender people their biological sex assigned at birth and their own internal gender identity do not match. Hines (2010) explains transgender as:

a range of gender experiences, subjectivities and presentations that fall across, between or beyond stable categories of 'man' and 'woman'... [The term

transgender includes] gender identities that have, more traditionally, been described as ‘transsexual,’ and a diversity of genders that call into question an assumed relationship between gender identity and presentation and the ‘sexed’ body. (p. 1)

The limited research on transgender youth with disabilities has been entangled in the LGBTQ literature and infrequently recognized as a unique group that should be studied outside the LGBTQ continuum (Hill, 2007; Kazyak, 2011; Beemyn, 2005). The “T” in “LGBTQ” assumes that transgender individuals have the same experiences as lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Moreover, studying the LGBTQ community as a whole without specifically studying the transgender community can lead to incorrect understandings about gender and identity (Beemyn, 2005). Placing transgender in the LGBTQ continuum is problematic because it assumes that gender identity and sexual identity are the same (Beemyn, 2005; Paxton, Guentzel, & Trombacco, 2006). While lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities face similar discriminations and negative issues, gender identity and sexual orientation are different (Hill, 2007; Kazyak, 2011).

Sexual orientation describes a person's physical attraction to another person (e.g., straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual), while gender identity describes a person's internal sense of being a man or a woman, or even outside that binary (Paxton et al., 2006). In other words, sexual orientation is about whom you are attracted to and gender identity is about how people define themselves. Because sexual orientation and gender identity are different, there is a clear need and importance of researching and understanding the unique experiences of transgender individuals in isolation from the LGBTQ population.

Hill (2007) identified the need for additional research on transgender populations including understanding the individual experiences of transgender people in different contexts and settings. While it is widely known that transgender people face barriers and discrimination (Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Kazyak, 2011), the nature of this prejudice is inadequately understood and documented (Hill, 2007). Little research has investigated and specifically focused on what sort of experiences transgendered youth with disabilities are having that could impact their educational and career outcomes (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Eliason & Hughes, 2004; Hill, 2007; Kazyak, 2011). To date, no research has specifically examined the lived experiences of transgender youth with disabilities in high school settings outside of the LGBTQ continuum. Research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the unique experiences about the transition to adulthood for transgender youth with disabilities in order for schools, parents, and communities to support them in achieving positive outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Every day, transgender people face barriers due to discrimination based on their gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2011). Frequently, the needs of transgender people have been discounted and muddled with other sexual minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer (i.e. LGBQ). More research is needed to better understand the barriers that transgender people face. It is estimated that about 1.4 million individuals in the United States identify as being transgender. In 2015, The National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) piloted a Transgender Survey (USTS) exploring the experiences of transgender people in the United States, including 27,715 respondents from all 50 States. This study specifically examined the experiences of transgender people across a range of

categories such as: education, employment outcomes, and mental health (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Ana, 2015).

James et al. (2015) reported participants experienced mistreatment while in school, because they were transgender. This included being verbally harassed (54%), physically attacked (24%), and sexually assaulted (13%). Moreover, 17% of the participants faced such intolerable mistreatment that they dropped out of school. These issues of harassment, feeling unsafe, and dropping out of school can lead to other negative outcomes such as higher rates of mental health issues and unemployment (Garibaldi & Pasillas, 2014). The frequency of suicide attempts among transgender youth was 41%, compared to the 4.6% of the overall U.S. population. This is also a higher frequency compared to the 20% of LGBTQ youth (NCTE, 2015).

Analysis of other variables revealed that the occurrences of suicide attempts were highest among transgender individuals who are younger (18 to 24; 45%), multiracial (54%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (56%). These same subgroups also reported lower levels of high school graduation (48-49%), and lower annual household income (less than \$10,000; 54%) when compared to the general U.S. population. Furthermore, results showed economic inequalities between transgender people and the U.S. population. The unemployment rate of transgendered people was 15%, which is nearly three times higher than the general U.S. population. Additionally, 29% of respondents were living in poverty, compared to 14% in the overall U.S. population (NCTE, 2015).

When additional factors such as disabilities were examined, a pattern exposed that transgender people with disabilities experience broader patterns of discrimination and

issues when compared to transgender people without disabilities. Findings revealed that transgender people with disabilities were more likely to experience a higher rate of psychological distress (59%) and more likely to have attempted suicide in their lifetime (54%) when compared to transgender people without disabilities. The NCTE report only provides a preview of the issues faced by transgender individuals. Much remains to be learned about how underlying factors, such as disability, impact and compound issues faced by transgender individuals. Considering findings from prior research conducted with individuals with disabilities and based on the negative findings on transgender individuals, there is a need to examine how the intersection of these two marginalized identities impact this group's high school experience.

Research Paradigms

To gain greater depth in understanding of the barriers transgender youth with disabilities face in high school, this study will employ phenomenological interviews (Creswell, 2005). Utilizing phenomenology, this study aims to understand and uncover how the complexities of 'transgender' and 'disability' identities impact high school experiences. Utilizing phenomenology will allow for a deeper understanding of the essence of the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology. Phenomenology is recognized as the study of a shared experience through first-person narratives (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology was originally introduced by Edmund Husserl and is rooted in the works of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel (Moran, 2000; Guignon, 2006). According to Husserl, while individuals engage in their own unique perception of reality, there are occurrences where common experiences are shared, resulting in a phenomenon (Guignon,

2006). Examining the essence of a phenomenon provides a deeper understanding of realities and uncovers a contextual understanding of the perception of experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological methods stress the importance of personal perspective and interpretation and are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity (Moustakas, 1994). This is powerful for gaining perspectives and challenging conventional truths (Patton, 2002).

In addition to interviews, this study relay on photography as an important data source. Chan-fai (2004) asserts “a kind of photographic seeing is also a way of phenomenological seeing” (p. 261). Moving beyond traditional text-based dissertations, Eisner (1997) stressed the importance for using alternative forms of data representation, such as photographs, to provide a deeper understanding of experiences that text cannot always capture. Using words and images can allow transgender youth with disabilities to better express their feelings and explain their experiences. Alternate forms of data representation surpass traditional text-based dissertations and have the power to deliver new perspectives and shape knowledge in different ways (Finley, 2003). In this dissertation, photography (discussed in more depth in Chapter Three) will be used as a way of communicating experiences and identity.

Theoretical Frameworks

In designing a research study, it is significant to consider which theoretical lens best fits the aim of a study. Ultimately, it is the framework of a study that will not only guide your research questions but also provide a foundation for the study (Creswell, 2005). For the purpose of this study, gender and identity will be discussed and viewed with the theoretical framework of transgender theory which incorporates: (a) fluidity of

gender, (b) importance of embodiment and (c) lived experiences and (d) intersectionality. Emphasizing lived experiences; transgender theory encompasses socially constructed aspects of identity and the embodiment with the self (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). As part of transgender theory and to better understand the consequences of two marginalized identities, this research will address disability and transgender with an intersectional lens. Intersectionality is a lens for understanding how the aspects of identity can be sites for privilege and oppression (Collins, 1999; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). An intersectional approach is intended to provide a richer perspective on experiences and identity. In this study, intersectionality will be used to provide a deeper understanding of youth who identify as transgendered and having a disability.

Purpose of this Study

This research aims to fill a gap in existing literature by exploring the lived experiences of transgendered youth with disabilities. The purpose of utilizing phenomenology in this study is to bring depth to the literature so that the experiences of transgender youth with disabilities can be represented in their own words (Hanson et al., 2005). Specifically, this study looks to gain insights into how the lived experiences and intersections of transgender and disability identity impact high school experiences. The aim is to understand the ways in which marginalized identities influence lived experiences. It is vital to include the voices of transgender youth with disabilities in research because this group of individuals are a unique population who are subjected to discrimination due to their multiple marginalized identities. My goal is to offer a more complete picture of the needs and barriers transgender youth with disabilities face to inform future research and practice.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study include:

1. What are the themes of transgender youth with disabilities lived experiences as they relate to high school education?
2. How do the intersections of transgender and disability impact high school youths' sense of identity?
3. Through their embodied lived experiences, what characteristics enable transgendered youth with disabilities to persist in high school?

Contribution of the Study

The significance of this study is aimed at the need for the education profession to examine and report the perspectives of students with disabilities who identify as transgender. Specifically, by drawing on both phenomenology and art-based inquiry, this study intends to challenge traditional ways of knowing and reveal new and alternative perspectives that traditional research designs cannot deliver. This dissertation study is unique in that the focus is on understanding the experiences transgender youth with disabilities, outside the LGBTQ continuum, have in high school that can impact their post-school outcomes. The standpoint of the students adds a critical perspective that could influence educational policy and practice. Results from this study have the potential to: (a) provide a deeper understanding of the needs and challenges of transgendered youth with disabilities, and (b) inform research and practice.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions as defined by the American Psychiatric Association's 2015 Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People, will be used in this study:

Gender: Complex relationship between physical traits and one's internal sense of self as male, female, both or neither.

Sex: In this dissertation, "sex" is used to convey physical attributes and characteristics that are used to assign someone as "male" or "female" at birth.

Gender Binary: A social system that constructs gender according to male/female categories.

Cisgender: Indicates people whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender-expansive: Refers to a wider range of gender identities than the male/female gender binary.

Transgender: A person whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth.

Gender Nonconforming: Describes a person whose gender expression is outside what is considered typical for their assigned sex at birth.

Gender Spectrum: Gender as encompassing a wide range of identities and expressions.

Gender Expression: How a person expresses their gender through outward presentation and behavior, including a person's name, clothing, hairstyle, body language and mannerisms.

Gender Identity: A personal, deep sense of being male, female, both or neither.

Sexual Orientation: Describes a person's romantic or sexual attraction to people of a specific gender. Sexual orientation and gender identity are separate, distinct parts of our overall identities.

Transphobia: Irrational fear, hatred, harassment or discrimination against transgender people. (American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 832-864).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A theoretical foundation is important in all research studies, particularly in studies that use inductive reasoning (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The conceptual framework of this study will utilize transgendered theory and intersectionality to develop a comprehensive understanding of gender identity and lived experiences. To fully make sense of transgender theory, this chapter starts with an overview of queer theory, then the development of transgender theory, as a more complete understanding of gender and identity, is discussed. Next, a more in-depth review of the literature on youth with disabilities and transgendered individuals is provided. Conclusions regarding implications for studying the experiences of transgendered youth with a disability are discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Binary Discourse. To fully understand queer and transgender theory, it is important to understand the development of binary discourse and how disability and gender have been socially constructed in a Westernized society. Dating back from the 1500s-1600s, Enlightenment philosophers theorized about concepts such as freedom and individualism (Hamilton, 1996). More specifically, the philosophies emphasized the significance of concepts such as “individual rights, freedom of expression, and opposition to feudal and traditional constraints on beliefs, trade, communication, social interaction, sexuality, and the ownership of property” (Hamilton, 1996, p. 23). The results of these essentialist notions led to the middle and upper class men believing their own capabilities to produce knowledge that was free of the Church’s control (Hamilton, 1996).

While this may seem progressive, the impacts of Enlightenment thinking are problematic. Individuals of the lower class were considered by the philosophies as inferior and not worthy of basic rights (Hamilton, 1996). Moreover, the philosophies fixated on empiricism:

The idea that all thought and knowledge about the natural and social world is based on empirical facts, things that all human beings can apprehend through their sense organs. (Hamilton, p. 39)

Applying these ideas created an unanticipated consequence: binary discourse. Binary distinctions can cause unanticipated issues because they are linked to power and the “norm” and the “other” (Hamilton, 1996). In other words, there is always an inferior and superior in binary distinctions. Examples of these binary categories are man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black, abled/disabled. While categorization of knowledge is convenient, it also acts as oppressive, because it narrates and normalizes the way things “should” be. In this sense, anyone who does not fit into these binaries can face issues of oppression and marginalization (Hamilton, 1996), including both transgendered and disabled individuals.

Queer Theory. Queer theory is a framework for understanding nonheteronormative sexuality and identity (Norton, 1997). Queer theory focuses on identity politics and structural differences in order to understand sexuality and identity (Kimmel, 1996; Norton, 1997). Queer refers to:

The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.

(Sedgwick, 1998, p. 208)

Queer theory originated from feminist theories and articulates that “normative” sexual perceptions are social constructs that stem out of “essentialist” ideas (Kimmel, 1996). As previously described, these essentialist ideas link gender roles and sexual orientation to a binary (Kimmel, 1996; Norton, 1997). From birth, our society categorizes humans as male or female based on their biological sex organs. With essentialist notions, these binary distinctions are connected to social constructs. Individuals who were born male are supposed to act masculine and be attracted to women. While individuals who were born female are supposed to act feminine and be attracted to men (Connell, 2002; Hausman, 2001). In a Western society that defines gender by social constructs, people who do not fit in a gendered binary can endure marginalization and misunderstandings. In turn, queer theory aims to deconstruct these binaries, rejects essentialism, and views gender as socially constructed (Norton, 1997; Kimmel, 1996).

As a key figure in queer theory, Judith Butler (1988) explained one is born with a sex and becomes gendered through society from beliefs about gender. Gender beliefs are what “most people” accept as true about “male” and “female” categories (Conway, Pizzamiglio, & Mount 1996; Wagner & Berger, 1997). According to queer theory, this gendered expectation impacts gendered behavior (Foschi, 1996; Steele, 1997). Judith Butler's work has emphasized that social constructs of gender identity are linked to “performativity” of repeated performances of behaviors associated with gender (Butler,

1990). This repetition is a “performativity” that “constitutes” a subject, which creates clashing subjectivities (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 67).

According to Butler (1990), individuals create a gender identity by continually invoking normative ideas of expected gender roles that our society has constructed. Those who do not fit into gender categories are often viewed by society as outcasts and can endure consequences for not fitting into the gender binary (Pascoe, 2005; Butler, 1990). In turn, queer theory seeks to deconstruct the binaries (i.e., man/woman) to understand gender in a new light. Utilizing queer theory provides insights about the relationships among gender, sexuality, identities, and power (Epstein, 1994). Queer theory disrupts assumed social constructs and demands for sexuality to be understood in more distinctive ways free from binary gendered categories (Warner, 1999; Epstein, 1994).

While queer theory has many advances in understanding gender, sexuality, and identity, many transgender individuals have conveyed concerns with social constructivist assumptions about gender (Sullivan, 2003). Queer theory has been critiqued for ethnocentrism (Hennessy, 1995; Goldman, 1996; Lee, 1996; Walters, 1996) and lack of consideration of embodied and lived experiences (Namaste, 1996). Sullivan (2003) explained that queer theory established a collective identity and lacked an understanding of the lived and embodied experiences of people. Moreover, queer theory is embedded with sexual identity and as stated previously, it is problematic to assume that sexual identity and gender identity are the same. As Nagoshi and Brzuzy state:

Although queer theory may accept feminine males and masculine females, as well as a plurality of gender identities, it nevertheless builds on the assumption of the male versus female gender categories. (p. 435)

Butler's explanation of 'performativity' has also been criticized by transgender scholars (Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Rubin, 2003; Salamon, 2010). One major criticism is "performative" considerations of gender neglect the multilayered "ontological" and "corporeal" facets of gender (Namaste, 2009). In other words, queer theory has overlooked the embodied aspects of lived experiences and has given language too much power. Transgender scholar Viviane Namaste (2009) also criticized queer theory for neglecting the lived experiences and barriers transgender people face, as well as the bodily materiality of identifying as transgender. While queer theory provides many useful insights to understanding gender, important considerations of gender relating to embodiment, fluidity, and lived experiences have been left out (Shields, 2008). A theory was needed that would embrace the unique experiences of transgender individuals and incorporate concepts of gender fluidity, embodiment, and socially and self-constructed aspects of identity (Shields, 2008; Monro, 2000; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010).

Transgender Theory. This study will incorporate transgender theory, which is a framework for understanding and empowering individuals with marginalized identities (Monro, 2000). The elements of transgender theory that differ from queer theory include: (a) fluidity of gender, (b) importance of embodiment, (c) the importance of lived experiences, and (d) intersectionality. Transgender theory challenges heteronormative notions of gender in ways that cannot be completely explained with queer theory. Along with understanding characteristics of gender within the narratives of lived experiences

(Roen, 2001), transgender theory goes beyond queer theory and includes concepts of fluidly, embodied and self-constructed aspects of gender (Monro, 2000).

Transgender theory also incorporates intersectionality (which will be discussed in more detail later) and branches from queer theory by understanding gender as fluid and incorporating embodied material experiences (Roen, 2001; Monro, 2000). In particular, transgender theory posits that the lived experiences of individuals and their negotiations of intersectional identities can be empowering to gender diverse individuals (Monro, 2000). Specifically, the theory addresses the significance of the physical embodiment of intersecting identities along with an understanding of how lived experiences impact embodied aspects of identity (Roen, 2001). For the purpose of this study, utilizing transgender theory helps to challenge a categorical way of thinking by embracing a more fluid view of gender (Burdge, 2007; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010) and understanding the embodied experiences of transgender individuals (Roen, 2001).

Gender as Fluid. Like queer theory, transgender theory supports the notion that gender is not binary. However, transgender theory views gender as fluid and on a spectrum. From this perspective, individuals fall based on their inner sense of gender, regardless of their biological sex assigned at birth (Roen, 2001). Viewing gender as more fluid allows for a broader understanding of gender (Lane, 2009) and can help surpass how we view gender in our Westernized society. Broad (2002) proposes that:

Gender categories were destabilized not only through assertions of not fitting either gender, but also through claims to actually being a bit of both. It is the notion of transgender, meaning both man and woman, that drives many in the gender community to hold up intersexuality as perhaps the best way to describe

transgender existence.... The idea is that by being transgender, one really embodies an ‘intersexual’ identity of being both man and woman. (p. 256–257)

Similarly, Tauchert (2002) recognized a ‘fuzzy gender’ or “shades of gray” approach to understanding gender. This concept of ‘fuzzy gender’ emphasizes the relationship between physical and mental characteristics of gender (Tauchert, 2002). With the concept of “fuzzy gender”, variations of gender are acknowledged as well as embodied experiences (Tauchert, 2002). According to Tauchert (2002), the concept of “fuzzy gender” allows categories to be recognized as continuously shifting and never absolute. It also opens up an understanding of gender that is free of constricting categories.

Roen (2001) has also urged for an understanding of gender as fluid along with the lived experiences of transgender individuals. Moreover, understanding lived experiences can empower individuals who have been historically marginalized by social constructs and binary thinking (Roen, 2001). Bornstein (1994) stated:

I’m constructing myself to be fluidly gendered now.... I don’t consider myself a man, and quite frequently I doubt that I’m a woman. And you—you still think gender is the issue! Gender is not the issue. Gender is the battlefield. Or the playground. The issue is us versus them. Any us versus any them. One day we may not need that. (p. 222)

Neurological Fluidity. Transgender identity has commonly been pathologized and associated with poor mental health, specifically with the diagnoses of gender identity disorder and gender dysphoria. Transgender theory helps to see that bodies are formed in a more complicated way and that neurological diversity exists within a category. Lane (2009) argues that if gender is seen as an intra-action of “intertwined biological and

social processes” (p. 150), then gender variance, including nonbinary incorporations are seen as a “healthy part of human variation, not as pathology or disorder” (p. 150).

Therefore, understanding the neurological diversity of brains helps support fluid understandings of gender in our society and opens up new ways of viewing individuals who do not fit into the male/female binary.

Recent research in the neurosciences has indicated gender exists on a spectrum, recognizing gender as fluid. Transgender individuals have brains that are different from males and females, in a distinctive way (Johansen-Berg & Behren, 2009). One neuroscience study identified networks in the brain associated with gender (Johansen-Berg & Behren, 2009). This study used imaging to look at the brains of transgender individuals and compared these images to male and female controls. The study revealed microstructures in the brain that differed significantly between the male and female controls (Johansen-Berg & Behren, 2009). The researchers concluded that the brains of the participants who identified as transgender had a middle position, meaning that their brains did not fully resemble the male or female brains in the control groups.

In another neuroscience study, the researchers found a link between networks in the brain and the amount of testosterone in the bloodstream, suggesting that hormones affect how structures form in the brain (Swaab & Garcia-Falgueras, 2009). The female-to-male participants in the study had thin subcortical areas (i.e., areas which tend to be thinner in men than in women); whereas, male-to-female participants had thinner cortical regions in the right hemisphere, which is a characteristic in a female brain. Researchers concluded that the transgender brain was unique and distinctive (Swaab & Garcia-Falgueras, 2009). In another study, Rametti et al., (2011) used MRI techniques to scan

the brains of 18 people who were assigned female at birth but identified as male and compared the images to 24 male and 19 female heterosexual controls. Researchers found the white matter of transgender female to male individuals closely resembled the male heterosexual brain and called for gender to be understood in a neurodiverse way (Rametti et al., 2011).

Another way for scientists to test if a trait is influenced by genetics is by studying twins. Identical twins have the exact same genetic background whereas fraternal twins share only half their genes (Diamond & Hawk, 2004). Because fraternal twins do not share traits as often as identical twins, this is one indication that traits are influenced by genetics, including gender identity. Many studies have demonstrated that identical twins are more often both transgender than fraternal twins (Diamond & Hawk, 2004), which signifies that there are genetic influences on transgender identity and the fluidity of gender. For example, in a meta-analysis of twin studies, approximately 40% of identical twins identified with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth in comparison with none of the non-identical twins (Heylens, De Cuypere, Zucker, Schelfault, Elaut, Bossche...T'Sjoen, 2012). The non-identical twins and identical twins grew up with the same parents in the same households. The only difference was the identical twins shared the same DNA. Overall, the weight of these studies points toward a fluid basis for understanding gender identity, which in turn supports aspects of transgender theory that recognize gender as more fluid.

Gender Embodiment. Transgender theory leaves space open to consider the embodied aspects and experiences of being transgender. In our society people have typically embodied characteristics that have been attached to the male/female binary. For

example, women may express and embody their gender in more feminine ways. Whereas, men may express and embody their gender in more masculine ways. Transgender theory posits that gender can be experienced, felt and expressed in different ways in relation to one's felt internal sense of gender (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Transgender theory helps to embrace embodied aspects of gender, which can assist in exploring the relationships between identities related to transgender being and knowing. It opens up a space for a theoretical conversation about the ways in which corporeality matters in relation to embodiments of transgender identity. Moreover, understanding gender embodiment in the context of transgender lives and experiences is useful for explorations of transgender lived experiences.

Lived Experiences & Intersectionality. Another major part of transgender theory came from Monro's (2000) argument about the need to understand the lived experiences of transgender individuals. Intersectionality is an important aspect of transgender theory, especially when it comes to understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Raftery & Valiulis, 2008). Hines (2010) expressed that there is a need for transgender scholarship to utilize an intersectional lens:

Much work on transgender [people] has lacked such an intersectional analysis with the effect that 'trans people' are often represented as only that – as only trans. Hence trans people are disconnected from their intimate, material, geographical, and spatial surroundings, and from other significant social signifiers. This problematic is not only (mis)representational, it also acts to homogenise and de-politicise. Thus privileging/de-privileging forces, such as the economic resources to pay privately for surgery, geographical access to 'trans

friendly' social spaces, levels of support from intimate networks, [that] structure transgendered experiences are unaccounted for. (p. 12)

Rooted in black feminism and critical race theory, intersectionality posits a framework that has been beneficial for explaining how an individual can be located within various social categories (i.e. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability) that define their experiences (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Hooks, 1984; King, 1988; Sawyer, Salter, & Thoroughgood, 2013). Intersectionality is a framework for understanding and responding to the ways in which social categories intersect with other identities and how these intersections can impact experiences of oppression and privilege (Sawyer et al., 2013).

An intersectional framework rejects an analysis of a single category (i.e., race, gender, disability) as a main cause of inequities (Schulz & Mullings, 2006). According to an intersectional perspective, inequities are not the result of a single factor, but the outcome of different social categories that are interrelated and merge to produce inequality (Crenshaw, 1991; Schulz & Mullings, 2006). The objective of an intersectional approach is to recognize how diversity that stems from other social categories affects individuals in different ways (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). This communicates the idea that the intersections of categories are exposed to multiple forms of inequities and oppression (Gopaldas, 2013).

Adopting an intersectional perspective could help combat and reduce disparities across different social contexts, because “it considers the examination of the simultaneous interactions among race, class, gender, and disability for any individual, as well as, the interplay between these individual or group characteristics” (Garcia & Ortiz,

2013, p. 34). As seen in *figure 1*, an individual may not be impacted by just one social construct but could be impacted by multiple social constructs. The overlap of each category represents the interplay between multiple social constructs.

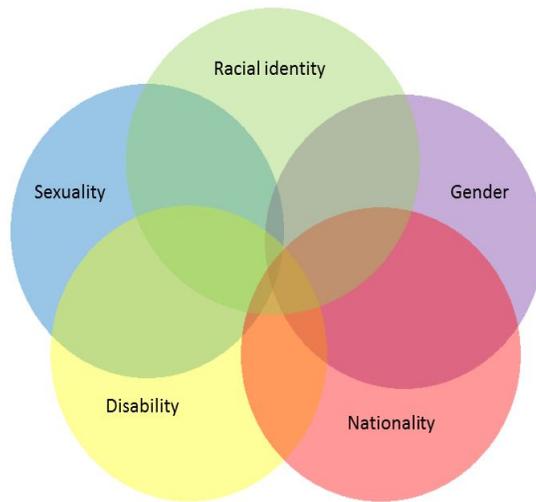


Figure 1. Interplay of Multiple Social Constructs

Intersectionality is a valuable analytical lens for considering transgender youth with disabilities because it helps to address the disconnect between theory and lived experience “by bringing together both the parts and the whole of self as well as the individual in context” (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 585). Incorporating intersectionality can assist in exploring the relationships between transgender identity and school experiences. In the next section, an overview of how gender identity and disability identity overlap and how multiple identities impact students’ experiences is discussed. Transgender theory along with an intersectional lens provides a way to better understand and think about how gender is understood in our society and the relationship between transgender and disability identity and experiences.

Transgender Identity and Experiences.

Identity has often been associated with one's self, expressions of individuality, and groups people belong to (Kidd, 2008). More specifically, identity has been explained as "a condition of being a person and the process by which we become a person, that is, how we are constituted as subjects" (Kidd, 2008, p. 9). In regards to gender, identity is an internal feeling and how you express those feelings (Kidd, 2008). Recognizing one's gender identity occurs early in life. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013), children by the age of four have a stable sense of their gender identity. Moreover, individuals do not choose their gender. Gender is a part of one's identity that comes from within.

High school is a critical time for developing ones' identity, especially for transgender youth. Young adults who identify as transgender face challenges in high school and are more likely to be impacted by discrimination and stereotypes about gender as they develop their identity (Thiede et al. 2003). In turn, this can lead to a variety of issues including: school absences, social problems, and higher levels of depression (Austin et al., 2009; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Thiede et al. 2003). Additionally, students who identify as transgender risk internalizing social stigmas, which can result in low self-esteem and self-hatred (Russell, 2005; Austin et al., 2009).

Self-esteem, Stigma, and Transgender Youth. Self-esteem is an important aspect of ones' identity. Self-esteem is recognized as an internal aspect of a persons' worth in relation to themselves and their peers (Austin et al., 2009). For those who fall outside the gender binary, a person's self-esteem can be negatively impacted, resulting in guilt and shame of their identity. Research on transgender individuals has frequently

focused on the psychopathology of transgender identity. In turn, this has perpetuated a pathologizing view of transgender identity, contributing to the stigmatization of transgender identity (Sánchez & Vilain, 2009). As a result of this narrow view of gender, transgender identities have been viewed as “not natural” and as “mental illnesses” in need of a cure. Ultimately, being perceived in this way can impact one’s overall self-esteem. Many transgender people may deny their gender identity and assume traditional gender roles in order to mask their feelings (Sánchez & Vilain, 2009; Ettner, 2000; Higa, et al. 2014).

Sánchez and Vilain (2009) examined the relationship between self-esteem and fears regarding a transgender identity and psychological distress among 53 self-identified male-to-female transsexuals. The results indicated that internalizing negative feelings and stigma regarding a transgender identity can be damaging to one’s well-being and lead to guilt and self-hatred (Sánchez & Vilain, 2009). Similarly, Ettner (2000) explored the connections between experiences of identity development among participants who identified as transgender. Using a case study of a male-to-female transsexual as an example, Ettner identified three frequent challenges that transgender individuals face in their identity development: hiding, guilt, and shame. In another study examining factors associated with the well-being of sexual minorities, Higa et al., (2014) found the most frequently mentioned negative factor associated with transgender identity was guilt and feeling the need to hide it from others as a consequence of social stigmas (Higa, Darrel & Hoppe, et al. 2014).

Harassment and Transgender Youth. Transgender youth are also at risk for experiencing harassment and discrimination. In a 2009 National School Climate Survey,

the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) surveyed 7,261 middle and high school students, between the ages of 13 and 21, from all 50 States (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Results indicated 61% of students who expressed a transgender identity reported significant abuse due to their identity. Moreover, the survey showed that those who expressed a transgender identity while in grades K-12 reported rates of harassment (78%), physical assault (35%) and sexual violence (12%).

Of the students surveyed, 72.4% reported hearing homophobic comments at school such as “faggot” or “dyke” (Kosciw et al., 2010). Educational staff members also target transgender students. Results from the same survey revealed that teachers and staff members often contributed to harassment and violence towards transgender students. The survey results indicated 31% reported harassment by teachers or staff, 5% reported physical assault, and 3% reported sexual assault by teachers or staff. Experiencing harassment and violence due to a transgender identity was linked with lower levels of educational attainment, lower income, and other negative outcomes such as homelessness and suicide (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Post School Outcomes and Transgender Youth: Lower levels of self-esteem and facing discrimination and harassment can lead to negative outcomes across many areas of life. Of the students surveyed nearly 15% dropped out of school due to the harassment they faced (Kosciw et al., 2010). For the participants who reported dropping out of school, 48% reported having experienced homelessness. Additionally, respondents who said they were assaulted at school due to gender identity, were twice as likely to have engaged in underground sex work and were 50% more likely to be incarcerated (Kosciw et al., 2010). While negative school experiences endured by transgender youth

have been documented, research on transgender youth and their experiences in school should aim to better understand how other identities, such as disability, intersect with gender identity to influence outcomes and experiences in school settings. Like transgender identity, people who identify with a disability are also subjected to harassment, discrimination, negative self-image, and poor academic outcomes.

Disability Identity and Experiences

Disability studies, much like transgender studies, work with the lived bodily experiences of people who fit outside of binary constructs (abled/disabled). Identity is a main focal point in disability studies. Much like transgender identity, disability identity has been pathologized and deemed as "a barrier to participation of people with impairments or chronic illnesses arising from an interaction of the impairment or illness with discriminatory attitudes, cultures, policies or institutional practices" (Booth, 2000 p. 23). Comparable to transgender youth, youth with disabilities also face challenges in high school and are more likely to encounter barriers as they develop their identity (Kortering et al., 2010; Whitney-Thomas & Maloney, 2001).

Self- Esteem, Stigma and Disability. Similar to transgender individuals, disability has also been pathologized in our society and has the potential to negatively affect a person's self-esteem and self-worth (Corbett & Norwich, 2005). The medical model defines disability as a "functional limitation caused by physical or mental impairment" (Altman, 2001; Darling & Heckert, 2010). The medical model assumes that the experience of disability is negative, and that people with disabilities should try to reach normalcy (Smart, 2009). Such negative concepts of disability can impact

perceptions of self and the development of one's identity (LoBianco & Sheppard-Jones, 2007; Smart, 2009; Little, 2010).

Research within the field of self-esteem has demonstrated that individuals with disabilities are more likely to develop negative self-perceptions compared to their peers without disabilities (Veenstra et al., 2007). Lower levels of self-esteem have been linked to depression, emotional disorders, conduct disorders, and suicidal behavior (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2003; Veenstra et al., 2007). During high school, the perceptions of peers can be especially important and being perceived and marked as different by peers can negatively impact one's self-esteem (Schäfer et al., 2004). For example, Taylor, Hume, and Welsh (2009) conducted a survey with high school students to examine the relationship between being labeled as having a disability and how it impacts student self-esteem. The authors found self-esteem scores of those labeled as having a disability were significantly lower compared to those without a disability label (Taylor, Hume & Welsh, 2009).

Similarly, Dagnan and Waring (2004) found a significant relationship between the negative evaluations people with an intellectual disability made about themselves and their scores on a measure of stigma perception. It was concluded that core negative beliefs about the self were related to the extent to which people feel different (i.e., are aware of stigma) and suggested this might be a result of internalizing the stigma (Dagnan & Waring, 2004). In another study, Paterson, McKenzie, and Lindsay (2012), examined how perceived social stigma impacted the psychological wellbeing of 43 adults with intellectual disabilities. Participants were asked to complete three self-report measures of perception of stigma, self-esteem, and social comparison. The authors concluded that

perception of stigma was related to negative social comparisons, which in turn was related to low self-esteem (Paterson, McKenzie, & Lindsay, 2012).

Harassment and disability. Like transgender individuals, people with disabilities also face harassment in school settings. Students with disabilities are more frequently targets of bullying compared to their peers without disabilities (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011). Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok, and Benz (2012) reported students with disabilities are more likely to report harassment compared to their peers without disabilities. This included 34.1% of students with disabilities at the middle level and 26.6% at the high school level. Saylor and Leach (2009) surveyed middle school students about school safety and reported students with disabilities were more likely to be worried about being harassed compared to their peers without disabilities. Furthermore, in 2014, The National Autistic Society (NAS) reported that over 40% of students with autism have experienced some form of bullying from their peers.

In another study, Holzbauer (2008) found special education teachers reported they observed frequent harassment of their students with disabilities. Of the teachers surveyed, 90% reported observed slurs, mockery and staring, among other harassing behaviors (Holzbauer, 2008). Gini and Espelage (2014) found compared to students who do not experience peer harassment, students who experience peer harassment while in school are about twice as likely to have suicidal ideation and 2.6 times more likely to attempt suicide. As a consequence, harassment and feeling unsafe at school can contribute to decreased self-esteem, which can compound educational outcomes (Gini & Espelage, 2014).

Disability and Post-School Outcomes. A person's experiences in school can influence and impact their outcomes in life after school. Like transgender youth, many students with disabilities also struggle with poor post-school outcomes (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005; Wang & Eccles, 2012) and often experience lower rates of employment, receive lower wages (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), and are less likely to attend post-secondary education than students without disabilities (Luftig & Muthert, 2005; Newman et al., 2011). The U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) reported that in the 2015–2016 academic year, 28.3% of students with disabilities dropped out (U.S. DOE, OSEP, 2015) compared to a 10% dropout rate for students without disabilities (U.S. DOE, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

According to the National Longitudinal and Transitional Study 2 (NLTS2), students with disabilities who dropped out of school were more likely to be arrested, receive lower wages, and unemployed compared to their peers without disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey & Shaver, 2010). Students with disabilities who dropped out of high school are also overrepresented in juvenile correctional facilities compared to youth without disabilities (Nadel, Wamhoff, & Wiseman, 2003; U.S. DOE, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Moreover, 9% of students with disabilities attended a 4-year college compared with 70% of their peers without disabilities (NLTS-2; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey & Shaver, 2010).

Conclusion

While there is research on transgender identity and experiences in high school as well as research on youth with disabilities in high school, to date there is little research examining the experiences of transgender youth with disabilities in high school. The patterns of negative issues and beliefs associated with transgender and disability identities support the need for researchers and educators to gain a more in-depth understanding of transgendered youth with disabilities. To have a deeper understanding and possibly help create a more positive school climate, research is needed to gain an in-depth perspective of the lived experiences of this population.

This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of transgendered youth with disabilities. Transgender theory's emphasis on embodiment and lived experiences, along with intersectionality, provide a rich and deeper understanding of this population and also suggests that empowerment from their experiences can help change notions of gender and disability. Transgender theory with a broad understanding of intersectionality has much to offer in terms of understanding how students with multiple marginalized identities are impacted in educational settings. Understanding transgender youth with disabilities' lived experiences opens up new understandings where identities are understood not only as intersectional but embodied and socially embedded (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2014).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the phenomenological research design that was utilized in this study. The everyday realities that people live are multilayered and experiences can be complex. The kinds of methods we use should fit that reality, rather than bending reality into standardized methods that do not get close to reality. While the majority of the students recruited in this study had dropped out of school, the focus of the study was on the high school experiences of transgendered youth with disabilities. This included an examination of the intersection of disability and the issues of gender identity from the participants' perspectives. This study sought to understand how transgender students make sense of their high school experience, while existing as part of two marginalized groups. To best access this information, a phenomenological methodological approach was utilized allowing for a deep understanding of lived experiences. This chapter begins with a description of the phenomenological research method. Then, the participants, data collection, data analysis of the study are described.

Research Questions

The research questions guided this study include:

1. Through their embodied lived experiences, what characteristics enable transgendered youth with disabilities to persist in high school?
2. How do the intersections of transgender and disability impact youths' sense of identity?
3. What are the themes of transgender youth with disabilities lived experiences as they relate to high school education?

Phenomenological Methods

The purpose of a phenomenological analysis was to “reveal and unravel the structures, logic and interrelationships and produce a description of the essential features of an experience” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.50). Langdrige (2007) defines phenomenology as a discipline that "aims to focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live in and what it means to them; a focus on people's lived experience" (p.4).

Phenomenology is concerned with meaning and the way in which meaning occurs in experiences (Langdrige, 2007). The aim is to capture the essence of the experience to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomena (Langdrige, 2007). Creswell (2012) asserts that utilizing a phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the lived experience from the perspective of the participant, because it gives power to individual voices. Utilizing a phenomenological approach also promotes an examination of the totality of an experience (Wertz, 2005). The outcome of the analysis was a synthesis description of the essence of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994).

For this dissertation study, a step-by-step transcendental phenomenological research method was used (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental means “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time.” (Davis, 1991, p. 10). Specifically, transcendental means looking at the phenomenon with a fresh perspective, which will result in gaining knowledge and meaning from the essence of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This approach allows the researcher to uncover the perceptions of individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In order to uncover the essences of a phenomenon, Husserl (1970) proposed the need to bracket particular beliefs about the phenomena in order to see it clearly. This process involves four steps: 1)

epoche, 2) phenomenological reduction, 3) imaginative variation, and 4) synthesis (Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche. In the first step, epoche, a Greek word indicating to avoid one's biases are omitted while conducting research. Epoche is also known as the process of 'bracketing', which lasts from the beginning to the end of data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche is a reflective process that allows the researcher to bracket any biases (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl explained epoche as process of putting aside all biases, which allows things to be seen again as if it were the first time (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure epoche during this dissertation, I engaged in self-reflections, which were recorded in a field journal. First, I pre-reflected on my experiences with transgender youth and youth with disabilities. During data collection, I documented my reflections after interviewing each participant.

Phenomenological Reduction. The second step, phenomenological reduction, was used to describe the essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This step brings precision to research findings and aims to understand how things come to be (Giorgi, 1997). In this step, things should be described with textural language and addressed with an openness (Giorgi, 1997). Moustakas (1994) explained the steps of phenomenological reduction. First, the researcher brackets the focus of the research and sets aside any bias notions. Next, the researcher horizontalizes the data by giving equal value to each statement. After this, the researcher deletes repetitive and irrelevant statements and groups the remaining horizons into themes, which become the basis for a textural description of the phenomenon (Geertz, 1973). The textural-structural description that emerges represents the meaning and essence of the experience (Creswell, 1998;

Moustakas, 1994). In this dissertation, a textural-structural description was generated for each participant in this study, resulting in the themes that emerged from this study.

Imaginative Variation. The third step seeks meanings through different perspectives and is used to understand the structural essence of experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This allows researchers to construct structural themes and descriptions from the textural meanings (Moustakas, 1994). “It is the articulation, based on intuition, of a fundamental meaning without which a phenomenon could not present itself as it is” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 242). Husserl (1931) explains:

The Eidos, the pure essence, can be exemplified intuitively in the data of experiences, data of perception, memory, and so forth, but just as readily...in the play of fancy we bring spatial shapes of one sort or another to birth, melodies, social happenings, and so forth, or live through fictitious acts of everyday life (p. 57).

Synthesis. The last step was the synthesis of meanings and essences (Giorgi, 1997). Synthesis is a process that brings together the important structural and textural descriptions into a statement of the essences derived from the experiences of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). According to Moustakas (1994), the textural-structural syntheses embodies the essences at a certain place and time from the perspective the researcher. This includes drawing from a reflective and imaginative study of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Collection

Recruitment. Participants were recruited through connections with local organizations such as Transponder and Sexual and Gender Minority Resource Center (SMYRC) in the state of Oregon. Transponder is a grassroots, transgender founded non-profit organization in Oregon. Transponder provides support, education and advocacy for the transgender community. Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC) is also a nonprofit organization in the state of Oregon that provides supportive services for sexual and gender minority youth, with the aim of increasing academic and vocational success. The PI also hung recruitment flyers (Appendix A) in local organizations that dedicate trans/gender diverse safe spaces in Lane County, such as: Sweaty Ganesh Yoga.

Informed Consent/Assent. After recruiting participants interested in this study, the PI set up an information session about the study in a location chosen by the participant. Participants were provided with an overview of the study, contact information, and consent form for participants who were interested in participating in the study. The PI asked the interested participants if they felt safe and comfortable before providing an overview of the study. Participants were provided with a copy of the Informed Consent Letter upon making their participation interest known to the researcher (Appendix A). Signed informed consent/assent forms were required prior to the collection of any data. The consent/assent forms indicated who the researcher was, the purpose of the research, and the procedures involved in the research. The consent/assent forms informed participants of any risks they may be taking by participating in this research (i.e. subjects could feel embarrassment or stress talking about themselves). It

also informed participants of their rights, including the right to withdraw from part or all of the study at any time. Once consent/assent forms were returned and the student assented/consented to participate in the study, the PI contacted the participant by their preferred method of contact (i.e. phone, email, or school) to set up the first interview session. The interview sessions were all conducted in a location chosen by the participant where the participant felt safe and comfortable. The PI made sure that the interview space was private and that no other people were around in order to help ensure confidentiality.

Waiver of Parental Consent. For participants who were under 18, a waiver of parental consent was requested and approved. This was requested so the participants would not at risk of harm or unwanted disclosure about their gender identity. Because some participants might not be “out” to their parents about their gender identity, a parental consent form could “out” participants to their parents. Due to the potential of negative consequences of “coming out” to parents as confirmed from previous research (e.g. Klein & Golub, 2016; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007), the PI requested a waiver of parental consent to participate in the research study.

Sample. A purposeful sampling approach to select participants for this study ($n = 9$) was used. Purposeful sampling allowed for the exploration of individual characteristics of significant importance (Creswell, 2007). All of the participants in the study were high school age (16-22), had a diagnosed disability, disclosed their identity as transgender to one of the local non-profit organizations, and had attended a high school in the state of Oregon. This study also attempted to include participants who represent transgender youth who identify as male-to-female and female-to-male.

Instruments. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with nine youth with disabilities who identified as transgender. This study followed a “three interview series” (Seidman, 1998). Seidman recommended this interview method and stated that “people’s behaviors become meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (1998, p. 11). The PI utilized three self-created interview protocols (see Appendix B). Interview 1 was an introductory interview, which was conducted after the consent forms were signed. The first interview was focused on the participant’s life history and allowed the interviewer to put the experience in context. Interview 2 was conducted after the first interview was completed on a separate day. The second interview focused on details of the experience such as: beliefs, barriers, and strategies. Interview 3 was conducted on a separate day after interview two. The questions in this interview focused on disability identity, gender identity, and how these intersect and influenced the participant’s experiences (Seidman, 2006).

Procedures. The interviews were conducted in a private setting of the participants’ choice (e.g., the SMYRC office) to make sure the participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. The participants determined the private setting before the interviews were conducted. Once the location was determined the PI checked that there was privacy before starting the interview. All of the interviews were conducted after school or on the weekend and lasted approximately 40-60 minutes. Individual interviews were all conducted over the span of four weeks.

The three interviews, including the photo reflection were spaced from 3 days to a week apart (Seidman, 2006). At the first interview with each participant, the PI reviewed

a clear description of the consent/assent forms and the PI reminded the participants that their participation is voluntary and they can quit at any time. Participants were provided with their own copy of the informed consent/assent forms. At the end of the entire interview process there was a short debriefing session, which allowed the participants to reflect on the interview process and ask questions. After the completion of each interview, the PI reflected and documented their own thoughts in a separate field journal. No identifying information was included in this field journal. The notes were used during analysis for reflection and in order to help bracket out any biases. The notes were locked up in a file-cabinet at the University of Oregon in the Department of Secondary Special Education and Transition, Clinical Services Building and destroyed at the completion of the study.

At the end of interview one, participants received a disposable camera and a notebook. Instructions for taking the photos were provided (Appendix B). The photograph instruction sheet provided information on what to take (i.e. things in nature) and what not to take (i.e. other people or themselves). The PI verbally reviewed the instructions and asked participant to use the disposable camera to take pictures of things in nature that they associated with their identity or experiences and write down any thoughts in the journal throughout the first two interviews. The participants were asked to return the disposable camera by interview two, so photos could be developed before the third interview. Two sets of photographs were developed, one for the participant to keep and one for the PI. None of developed photographs contained people or anything offensive.

Compensation/Reimbursement. Each participant was provided with small incentives, including snacks and refreshments during the data collection process, as well as a \$20.00 VISA gift for participating in all three interviews. The researcher covered these costs.

Protection of Human Subjects. No physical or legal harm was anticipated in this study. The risk of social and emotional harm was minimal. Participants were informed throughout the study that participation was voluntary and that they could terminate at any time.

Subject Confidentiality. In order to protect confidentiality, each participant was assigned to a number by the PI. For analysis purposes all data contained only participant numbers and not individual names.

Data Confidentiality. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and backed up by a password secured MacBook laptop computer, which was locked up in a file-cabinet at the University of Oregon in the Department of Secondary Special Education and Transition, Clinical Services Building. The PI was the only one who knew the password and had access to the secured file-cabinet. The PI transcribed all of the audio recordings verbatim in to a Microsoft Word document. After the PI completed the transcription of each individual interview, the PI de-identified the transcripts, using pseudonyms and numbers for names, locations, or other identifying information. The key to decipher the pseudonyms/number for all identifying information was uploaded on an external encrypted USB drive, deleted off of the PI's MacBook laptop and also locked up in the secured file-cabinet. The PI was the only one who had access to this information (i.e., the passwords and key). The key to decipher identifying information was deleted once all the

data was analyzed). All paper documents (i.e., consent/ assent forms, field notes) containing any identifying information was kept securely in a locked file-cabinet secured at the University of Oregon. All audio recordings were permanently deleted after transcription was completed. The photographs that were developed were scanned into Dedoose and used as data in the dissertation only. None of the photographs included people or names.

Data Analysis

Interviews. After the individual interviews were conducted, the PI transcribed them verbatim in a Microsoft Word document and uploaded the documents into Dedoose, a qualitative software program, for analysis. Each transcript was read in its entirety beforehand to gain a sense of a complete picture. For this dissertation study, a transcendental phenomenological research method was used (Moustakas, 1994).

As seen below, this method of analysis employed phenomenological reduction (including bracketing, horizontalizing, organizing invariant themes, and constructing textural description) (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing (or epoche) was utilized throughout the study. After epoche, the PI engaged in phenomenological reduction, describing what was internally and externally visible. In this step, horizontalization assigns equal value to each statement, which represents a segment of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Next, the segments were clustered into themes and segments and themes were synthesized into a description of the texture (the what). Then, textural descriptions were examined from different perspectives (imaginative variation) and I arrived at a description of the structure (the how). The final step was synthesis of meaning and essence. In this final step, a textural-structural description that emerged represented the meaning and essence

of the experience (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The descriptions were then integrated into a universal description of group experience (Moustakas, 1994).

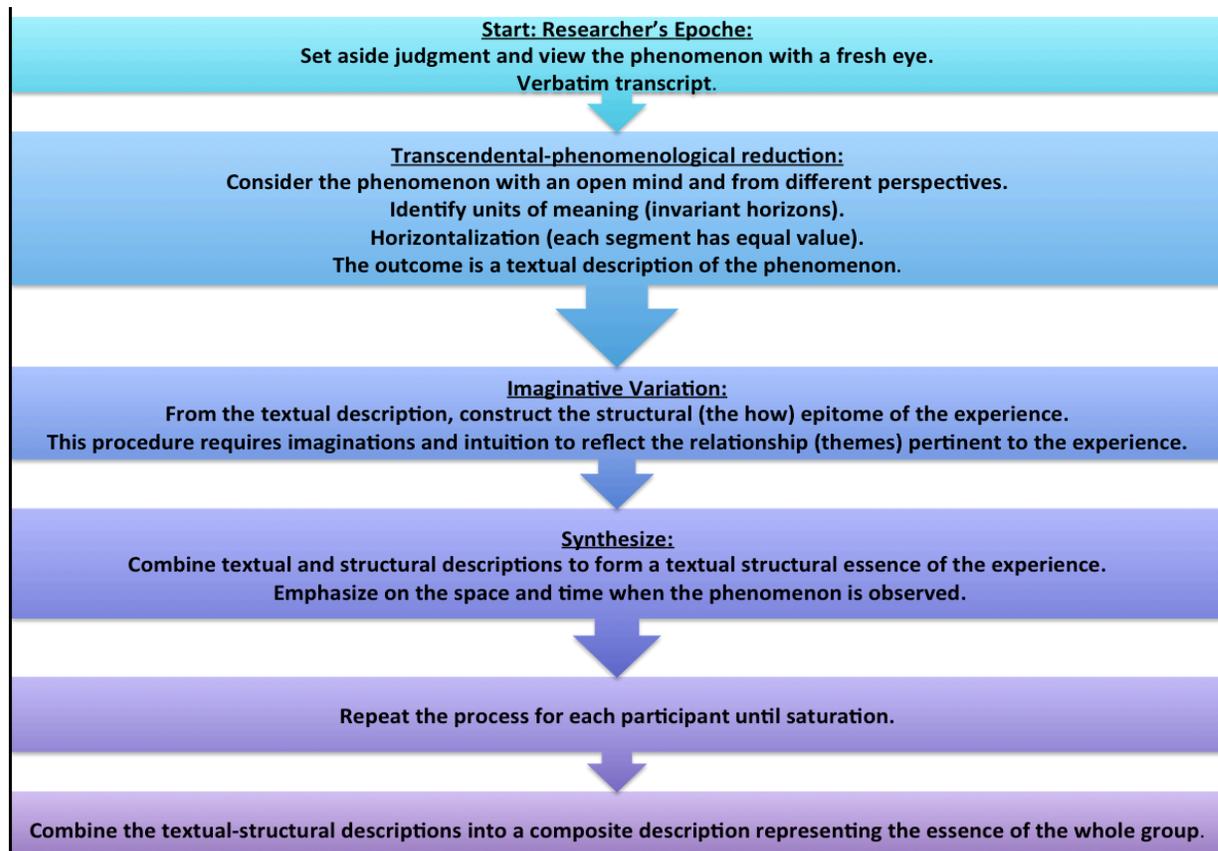


Figure. 2 Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as described by Moustakas (1994)

Analysis of Photographs. Data analysis of the photographs involved a thematic analysis of the visual images themselves in collaboration with the participants' reflection of the photographs. After the photograph reflection, the photographs were electronically scanned and uploaded into Dedoose. First, a coding system was developed based on the participants' description. Second, the PI identified themes that emerged across the photograph reflection including: initial themes and clustering themes. Next, based on the themes that emerge, using Dedoose, a set of descriptive codes was developed and applied to each photograph. In the last phase of analysis, the main themes that emerged from the

photographs were compared with the themes that emerged from the interviews regarding identity and experiences.

Trustworthiness

Validity. In simplest terms, validity refers to the degree to which an instrument measures what it is suppose to measure. The validity of qualitative research has been criticized as being subjective and unreliable (Kvale, 1989). If validity is constrained to quantitative measurement, then qualitative research is automatically invalid (Kvale, 1989). However, if validity is applied in a broader sense, validity can be understood from a qualitative perspective as the extent a method investigates what it is intended to investigate. With this notion, qualitative research can then be regarded as a valid method (Kvale, 1989).

According to Moustakas (1994), when conducting phenomenological research, phenomenological truths revealed via phenomenological methods have universal validity. Phenomenological beliefs emphasize that a research is valid when the information gained emerges through a rich description, because it allows for an understanding of the essences of experience (Moustakas, 1994). With this in mind, carefully following the steps of a phenomenological method is the most important way for establishing validity. As previously described, this dissertation will utilize the steps in transcendental phenomenology. According to Husserl “transcendental subjectivity, always embedded in intersubjectivity, constitutes and bestows sense to the psychological and natural domains... and can be called the primal basis for all legitimacy and validity...” (Gurwitsch, 1966 p. 111).

Crystallization. Crystallization in qualitative research is an alternative to triangulation. In short, triangulation is a method for confirming validity of qualitative information by using multiple data sources. Triangulation has been critiqued as a notion that depends on a fixed explanation where interpretations can be measured (Janesick, 2000). In a sense, triangulation contradicts qualitative research because qualitative research acknowledges multiple perspectives and realities. Richardson (2000) rejects a fixed position of triangulation, suggesting that researchers should not triangulate but instead researchers should crystallize. This recognizes that experiences are ‘far more than three sides’ (Richardson 2000, p. 934). Janesick (2000) and Richardson (1994) explained that crystallization is a more suitable aim of qualitative research, because crystallization provides a shift from seeing something as fixed and two-dimensional, towards an idea of the crystal, which has many sides. The concept of the crystal opens up a variety of multi-dimensionalities and angles of approach towards understanding experiences and realities (Janesick, 2000).

Considering that the participants’ experiences will vary, the aim is not to create one fixed truth, but rather shine light on lived experiences. The concept of crystallization in this dissertation recognizes that the participants’ experiences will be variable and complex. The use of crystallization in this dissertation allowed for thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) and helped to account for variation and complexity of lived experiences. According to Ellingson (2009), researchers should aim for pluralism and balance rather than a to do list of different representational forms. Moreover, Alvesson & Skoldberg (2000) explained:

More important than attempting to include everything, or as much as possible, is to have a well-thought-out pluralism and a balanced multiplicity in the perspectives that the empirical landings offer. (p. 188)

This dissertation not only drew on multiple forms of data collection, but it was influenced by multiple overlapping theoretical frameworks. This not only helped to inform my research questions, but also left a space to understand the participants' lived experiences as not fixed but instead as multifaceted and complex during the data analysis process.

Ethical Considerations

My ethical considerations for working with transgender youth have been influenced by transgender authors (e.g. Griggs, 1998; Cromwell, 1999), who emphasize the importance of avoiding misrepresentation. As a cisgender female researching transgender issues, it is important to follow steps to avoid issues of misrepresentation. With this in mind, I followed steps explained by Hale (1997) for cisgender people working with transgender individuals:

- Explaining the research project to participants and providing them the opportunity to ask questions.
- Being clear in all initial contacts about my 'outsider' position as a non-transgender person.
- Giving participants time to think about their involvement before committing and the opportunity to contact me with any questions.
- Assuring that participants that their participation was voluntary and they could drop out at any time.
- Reassuring participants that all personal details were confidential.

- Adopting a reflexive stance throughout the research process to examine my role as a researcher and non-transgender person researching transgender people.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This study utilized Husserlian transcendental phenomenology (1913/1982) with an application of Moustakas' methods, which aims to understand lived experiences without personal biases and preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994). Specifically, this phenomenological study examined transgender youth with disabilities perspectives of their high school experiences. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain insights into the lived experiences of this unique population. It is important to emphasize that phenomenological work does not seek to prescribe, generalize or predict. Rather, it seeks to understand the lived experiences of a phenomenon. Moreover, transcendental phenomenology provides a systematic approach to analyzing data about lived experiences and offers an understanding of the underlying structure of human thought (Moustakas, 1994).

For this study, the phenomenological analysis led to six major themes based on 131 significant statements in the interviews. These themes included: gender as fluid, societal aspect of identity, conflation of identities, mental health, changes in school, and differences as a strength. In this chapter, participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, and major themes are discussed. Each of the six themes are described followed by supporting quotes from the interviews to illuminate each theme. This chapter concludes with capturing the essence of the phenomenon of the experiences of transgender youth with disabilities in high school, which is the aim of this phenomenological approach.

Participants

The sample was comprised of nine individuals who (a) identified as transgender (b) identified as having a disability (c) were between the ages of 16-22 and (d) had attended a high school in the Northwest Pacific part of the United States. Four participants included in the sample experienced homelessness at the time of the interviews. Six participants attended an alternate form of high school at some point during their high school careers; four participants dropped out of high school. Two participants were enrolled and participating in dual enrollment courses earning credit at the local community college. Regarding their transgender identity, three of the participants identified as being male, but were biologically born female. Three participants were biologically born male but identified as trans non-binary and felt they were more female. Two participants were biologically born female and identified as agender but felt more male. One of the participants identified as female but was biologically born male. Throughout this study, I use the participants preferred pronouns, which include: he/his, she/her, they/their.

In addition, five participants were identified as having autism. One participant stated they were misdiagnosed with autism and was later diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. One participant was deaf/hard of hearing and had a speech impairment. One participant identified as having dyslexia and multiple personality disorder. One participant identified as having an anxiety disorder and an eating disorder. All of the participants mentioned having an IEP and/or a 504 plan at some point during their public education career. All participants reported struggling with mental health issues, such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). All participants also reported

struggling with gender dysphoria at some point in their life. Below is a more detailed description of each participant followed by a table summarizing the demographics of the participants in this study. When describing the participants individually, I used numbers instead of names in order to remain gender neutral.

Participant One. Participant one was married to participant two and preferred the pronouns they/them. They were biologically born male and identified as gender neutral but felt they were female. They were 22 years old at the time of the interviews and indicated they dropped out of high school in their junior year. They were homeless and unemployed at the time of the interviews. They disclosed that they had multiple personality disorder, dyslexia, and color blindness.

Participant Two. Participant two was married to participant one and preferred the pronouns they/them. They were biologically born female but identified as both genders and felt more masculine than feminine. They were 22 years old at the time of the interviews and indicated they dropped out of high school during their junior year. They were homeless and unemployed at the time of the interviews. They disclosed that they were legally deaf.

Participant Three. Participant three was engaged to be married to participant four and preferred the pronouns he/him. He was 20 years old and biologically born female but identified as male. He dropped out of high school during his senior year after attending an alternative high school and was unemployed at the time of the interviews. He identified as having autism but had been misdiagnosed with emotional disorders when he was younger.

Participant Four. Participant four was engaged to be married to participant three and preferred the pronouns he/him. He was 20 years old at the time of the interviews and biologically born female, identified as male. He dropped out of high school after attending an alternate high school and was homeless and unemployed at the time of the interviews. He identified as having autism and bipolar disorder.

Participant Five. Participant five preferred the pronouns they/them. They were biologically born male, identified as trans non-binary and as more female. They were 22 years old at the time of the interviews and indicated they were expelled from high school during their junior year. They were able to enroll in a program that would allow them to finish high school while completing community college courses. They identified as having Asperger's.

Participant Six. Participant six preferred the pronouns they/them. They were biologically born female, identified as non-binary and would choose to be re-born in a male body. They were 18 years old at the time of the interviews and dropped out of high school after attending an alternate high school. They had recently completed their GED and were enrolled in classes at a community college but failing all of their classes. They were homeless and unemployed at the time of the interviews. They identified with having an anxiety disorder and had a misdiagnosis of autism.

Participant Seven. Participant seven preferred the pronouns he/him. He was biologically born female but identified as male. He was 16 years old and currently enrolled in an alternate high school program that allowed him to enroll in some community college classes. He identified as having an anxiety disorder and an eating disorder and was currently receiving IEP and 504 accommodations and services.

Participant Eight. Participant eight preferred the pronouns she/her. She was biologically born male but identified as female. She was 17 years old and currently enrolled in an alternate high school program. She was living with foster parents who both identified as transgender men. She reported having autism and bipolar disorder.

Participant Nine. Participant nine preferred the pronouns they/them. They were biologically born male and identified as trans-non-binary and felt they were female. They were 18 years old at the time of the interviews and taking classes at a community college. They identified as having autism and being first-generation Vietnamese.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

| Participant | Age | Gender Identity | Disability Identity | Ethnicity | Academic Status |
|-------------|-----|------------------|----------------------|------------|-----------------|
| 1 | 22 | Trans non-binary | Dyslexia | White | Drop out |
| 2 | 22 | Trans non-binary | Deaf/hard of hearing | White | Alternative |
| 3 | 20 | Trans male | Autism | White | Drop out |
| 4 | 20 | Trans male | Autism | White | Drop out |
| 5 | 22 | Trans agender | Autism | White | Alternative |
| 6 | 18 | Trans non-binary | Autism | White | Drop out |
| 7 | 16 | Trans male | OHI | White | Alternative |
| 8 | 17 | Trans female | Autism | Multi-race | Alternative |
| 9 | 18 | Trans non-binary | Autism | Vietnamese | Alternative |

Data Collection

Interviews. Data was collected from semi-structured interviews with nine participants who identified as transgender and having a disability. Specifically, each participant completed three interviews over a two-month span. They were also asked to

take photos of things in nature that associated with their identities. At the end of the study, the photos were developed and the participants engaged in a photo reflection of the photos they took. Prior to data collection, approval from the Universities' Institutional Review Board (IRB) was secured (see Appendix D). Following IRB approval, participants who expressed interest in the study were provided with an overview of the study along with the informed consent form. Before the first interview, I went over the consent form with each participant and made sure each participant understood what they were being asked to participate in. Each participant participated in three separate interviews (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to choose a place to have the interviews that was convenient and comfortable for them. A majority of the interviews were conducted in an office space at one of the non-profit organizations participants were recruited from; other interviews were conducted at other locations chosen by the participant. These included a teashop, a bench outside of a doughnut shop, and a fast food restaurant. Some participants requested breaks and small walks during the interviews. Interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 65 minutes, depending on participants' responses. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Member Checking. Thoughtful and purposeful member checking was used to ensure the transcriptions were accurate with the experience of transgender youth with disabilities (Moustakas, 1994). Member checks were done during the interview process as well as post-interview for verification and credibility. During the interviews, I asked participants to clarify any responses that seemed unclear. After the interviews, all transcriptions were emailed to the participants to ensure the validity of the participants' answers. This allowed participants to check for accuracy and added to the credibility of

the experience (Creswell, 2013). The participants were asked to review the transcripts and provide written feedback concerning any changes or clarifications. This provided participants an opportunity to correct or add to statements made during the interviews. There were no changes made to the transcripts by the participants during the member checking process.

Photographs. The photography taken by the participants in this study, allowed for a both photographic seeing and a phenomenological seeing. The photographs helped to have a visual insight into the experiences of transgender youth with disabilities. The visual and the linguistic complemented each other in capturing the lived experiences of transgender youth with disabilities. It also allowed the reader to engage in the lived experiences in multiple ways. Moreover, the photographs provided the participants another platform to express them self in ways that the interviews could not capture.

Each participant was given a pencil bag that contained the following: a photograph instruction sheet, disposable camera, notebook, and pen. Instructions for taking the photographs were explained to each participant. First each participant was shown how to use the disposable camera. Then they were instructed to take photos of things in nature that they could relate with either their gender identity or disability identity. Participants were asked to return the camera by the end of the second interview. Once the participant returned the camera, the photos were developed at a local photo shop. The photographs were used to engage participants in a reflection about their identities. Specifically, the participants were asked open-ended questions about how the photograph related to their identities. The photo reflection occurred after the third interview and lasted 25 minutes to 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were uploaded into a qualitative software program called Dedoose[®] and analyzed with the phenomenological method outlined by Moustakas (1994) as described in chapter three of this dissertation: 1) the epoche, 2) phenomenological reduction, 3) imaginative variation, and 4) synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). The first step, the epoche, involved writing down any predispositions. Initially, all preconceived notions were set aside. For this study, I engaged in epoche by setting aside any biases about gender identity and disabilities. I set aside my personal views of the phenomenon and focused on views expressed by the participants in this study (Moustakas, 1994). From the start to the end of the interview process, I engaged in a reflective journal in order to set aside any biases or preconceptions about transgender youth or youth with disabilities. A segment of my reflection journal can be seen in Appendix (E).

The second step, phenomenological reduction, has several phases. First, transcripts were read multiple times and significant phrases that related directly to the lived experiences of transgender youth with disabilities were identified. To do this, I immersed myself in the data through reading the transcripts several times. After reading the transcripts, equal value was given to each statement and irrelevant statements were deleted. While coding the transcripts, participant comments which were “[significant] for the description of the experience” were labeled (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). For example, *“I think there is so much more than the male and female boxes. I think that... gender is just kinda like a question mark I guess, it is what ever you think of it, you know?”* was coded as “Gender as Fluid” because the participant speaks about gender in a non-binary

way. Following the codes, units/horizons for each transcript were identified. Moustakas (1994) explains units/horizons as finding commonalities among the codes and reducing the code list into a list of meaningful units. Next, themes in each transcript were identified, finding similarities among the meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). For example, the meaning units of: *gender constructs lack of understanding, stereotypes and gender expectations* were grouped as the theme *society and identity* related to *gender identity*.

Creswell (2012) recommended presenting the organization of data in tables. Below in Table 2 includes examples of the significant statements with their formulated meanings and represent non-repetitive, non-overlapping significant statements. Finally, repeating a pattern of looking and describing developed a textural description. The third step, imaginative variation, sought the fundamental meaning of the phenomenon by constructing structural themes. The final step synthesized all of the textural and structural descriptions together into a combined statement of the essences.

Table 2

Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Transgender Youth with Disabilities and Related Formulated Meanings

| Significant Statement | Formulated Meaning |
|---|--|
| Like I said, it is really an extension of your personality. It's always different for every single person. | Gender identity is different across people. |
| I've had people also be like, "You're just saying you're trans, because you are retarded." | People assume that being transgender is a result of disability. Conflation of identities. |
| It can help a lot with relating to other people and helping people that are in the same situation. Like being there for them in a way that other people really can't. | Being transgender and disabled helped have an understanding for others with marginalized identities |
| Honestly, outreach to communities of trans people with disability. Like outside of schools, like bring in the actual community, people in the local community let people have access to people who have lived these stories. And lived these, you know, these truths | Schools need to include the stories and voices of transgender people with disabilities in the community. |
| Societally, gender is a just construct; it comes from society, pretty much the basis of it. Gender doesn't affect society my gender affects society. The more out and open I am about who I am, then more awareness comes to trans people and Hopefully, that leads to less trans death or less trans suicide | Gender has been constructed through society. |
| Um high school was the really only place I was safe. Very very abusive family. Yeah. Summer time and stuff like that, I always felt really scared during the summer because of the fact I didn't have that safe place. | High school as a safe place due to abusive family members. |
| I got a lot of respect from my friends. I have really good friends. They are really nice. They are good people. I would trust them with a lot of things. They genuinely care about me. | Caring and trusting friendships during high school. |

Meaning Units or Themes. After arranging the formulated meanings into clusters, six themes emerged. The identified statements were carefully examined, then clustered into themes/meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). As seen below in Table 3, six themes emerged from this analysis about the experiences of transgender youth with disabilities: gender as fluid, society and identity, changes in school, mental health, family issues, difference as strength.

Table 3

Theme Clusters with Their Associated Formulated Meanings

Gender as Fluid

Complex
An on-going process
Non-binary
Gender as a spectrum
Both genders

Differences as Strength

Friendship alliances/solidarity
Expression of identity
Empathetic and understanding
Diversity points

Society and Identity

Social constructs
Gender expectations
Lack of understanding
Gender as binary
Gender stereotypes
Disability stereotypes

Family

Verbal abuse from family
Rejection from family
Physical abuse from family

Changes in School

Health education
Designated spaces
Teacher education
Access to resources
Access to language/terminology
Gender as a spectrum
Elementary/middle school

Mental Health

Depression
Anxiety
Self harm
Gender dysphoria
Suicidal thoughts

Photography. Following the analysis of the interviews, the photography reflection was also uploaded into Dedoose[©] and was analyzed and coded using the same set of code used for the interviews. Table 4 depicts significant statements made about the photography with their formulated meanings. After arranging the formulated meanings into clusters, 4 themes that overlapped with the interviews emerged including: gender as fluid, mental health, society and identity and difference as a strength (see Table 5).

Table 4

Selected Examples of Significant Photo Statements of Transgender Youth with Disabilities and Related Formulated Meanings

| Significant Statement | Formulated Meaning |
|--|---|
| <p>I feel like a lot of that is just general contrast, I feel like...I was very proud of this, one because I thought about the idea of how... about the contrast it had, was... with the blue sky behind it with like the clouds stuff and the silhouette inn front of it, I felt like a lot of that was actually related to me in a way. I am not certain how to explain that per say, but the contrast of like what is upfront and what is behind, you know, kinda thing. I feel like, it's kinda hard to explain in terms of my disability, but I do feel a connection to it, in regards to my disability. I feel like a lot of that is what people see my disability as, versus like what it actually is. Like basically just the contrast of like how I see the world and how people think I see the world.</p> | <p>Societal view of disability as different</p> |
| <p>Well clouds are like, I don't know. You see the sun peaking through too and that's kinda me. I am trying to like, I am trying to like get better and not get so anxious and stuff. But you know there is still a lot of work to do. And also the clouds, they have so much freedom. I feel like they are kinda like the butterfly, they can float around all day I guess.</p> | <p>Mental health and trying to overcome anxiety</p> |
| <p>This one I saw in and the second I saw it on this, it was very very bright, like in your face. And I guess that kinda represented how everyone was to me about my gender identity and about my disability, was the fact that they were always in my face and "be like this or don't be at all".</p> | <p>Society not accepting of identities.</p> |

Table 5
Photo Theme Clusters with their Associated Formulated Meanings

| | |
|--|---|
| <p><u>Gender as Fluid</u></p> <p>Complex An on-going process Non-binary Gender as a spectrum</p> | <p><u>Differences as a Strength</u></p> <p>Friendship alliances/solidarity Expression of identity Empathetic and understanding Perspective and diversity points</p> |
| <p><u>Society and Identity</u></p> <p>Social constructs Gender expectations Lack of understanding Gender as binary Gender stereotypes Disability stereotypes</p> | <p><u>Mental Health</u></p> <p>Depression Anxiety Gender dysphoria</p> |

Themes

I present the categories identified using selections from the participants' interviews and their photography to answer the three research questions of this study:

1. What are the themes of transgender youth with disabilities lived experiences as they relate to high school education?
2. How do the intersections of transgender and disability impact high school youths' sense of identity?
3. Through their embodied lived experiences, what are the characteristics that transgendered youth with disabilities perceive enabled them to persist in high school?

The themes that emerged in this study included: gender as fluid, societal aspect of identity, conflation of identities, mental health, changes in school, and differences as a strength, which answer research question one. In the following sections the themes listed above are explained and use participant quotations and photography to illustrate the individual participant experiences, to answer research question two and three.

Research Question One: What are the themes of transgender youth with disabilities lived experiences as they relate to high school education? In order to answer research question number one, all of the all of the six themes are listed below.

Theme One: Gender as Fluid. When asked questions about their gender identity, the notion of gender as fluid, complex and process, emerged during the interviews.

Across all of the participants, gender as fluid and non-binary was expressed. Below participants speak about their gender as being more than a binary:

There's a disconnect between your body and your brain as far as your gender. To me it doesn't really mean anything else. It's just the way you were born. I think there is so much more than the male and female boxes. (participant three)

I think that gender is just kinda like a question mark. It is whatever you think of it, you know? Gender is a spectrum. I think everyone shouldn't have a gender. (participant five)

This notion of a more than male and female boxes were echoed across the interviews. Some of the participants expressed how they experience themselves as being both male and female, as being neither male nor female, or as falling completely outside the gender binary. They see the division into “male” and “female” as socially constructed and at odds with their feelings about themselves. Throughout the interviews the comments of gender as non-binary, complex and a bit of both genders were continually expressed:

I am currently kinda questioning my gender identity, but the non- binary piece is pretty solid. Um, I for the most part I guess I identify as gender fluid, all though I'm not sure if that's like an accurate description of my gender identity because like I mean by definition of like society and like gender as a social construct, I am gender fluid. I go between male and female gender roles sometimes a mix of everything and sometimes an absence of everything. But like I don't consciously go around saying "oh right now I'm a boy or right now I'm a girl" I don't really identify like that, so guess in that way, I would be more comfortable as identifying as a-gender. It's really complex I think. (participant four)

Participant four continued to describe their gender identity, explaining, if they could be reborn, they would be reborn in a male body:

I think my gender identity is like really dependent upon on how I would define gender identity versus gender expression. And that's kinda what's leading me to question my gender identity right now because like in terms of gender identity I would identify as a male, because like the way I define my gender identity is like, well if I could choose to be reborn, would I be reborn in a girl's body? A boy's body? A mix of all of that? Or a completely gender neutral body? I would choose to be born in a male body. (participant four)

Participant four continued to speak about their gender identity as being neither or and existing in the in-between places of the male/female binary. They explain how they like to express themselves in a feminine way, yet engage in more masculine activities:

My gender identity, so it's really complex though basically. So, I originally though it was a trans women at an early age basically, so at age six. However, as I grew older and started maturing, I realized that I am more on the non-binary spectrum. I'm neither male or female basically. I more identify as they them, theirs, however, um I know I still like too, I still need to make the transition from male to female just to be 100, 110 percent happy. And it's just, but yea, and that's just how I feel myself and when I say trans-non-binary. I like to express myself femininely and then at the same time, the activities I like to do are more masculine, because I grew up doing those types of activities, when I was younger. And I thought... they are gender neutral, like anybody can do it. (participant four)

Participant three describes gender in relation to ones' personality and how it differs from person to person.

It is really an extension of your personality. It's always different for every single person. Yeah, there are groups that are put together, like male/female, non-binary and gender fluid, those are groups that are put together as a general aspect of it,

but there is always something different with every single person. (participant three)

The photography the participants took, also connected with gender further reflects this notion of gender being non-binary: Participant two, took a photo of a “bush within a bush” and compared it to how gender in an internal sense a being (see Figure 3). When asked to reflect on this photo he said:

The bush within the bush. When I saw that, I thought a lot of it was, you see...the thing is that this pink bush was completely over taking the green bush. They were basically like in the same space, but one seemed to be more present than the other. And I felt like in that in that regard, I saw the bush that was inside the green bush, the pink bush. I saw the pink bush as like my gender in a way. It's internal, it's not like exactly outside of the green bush, but it's inside the green bush and it's a lot more prominent. It's a lot more out there. It's much more just there. (participant two)



Figure 3. Participant two's picture of a bush within a bush.

Another participant shared a photo they took of two trucks (male/female) in the same fence (binary; see figure 4). When asked to reflect on it, they connected it to their gender identity, in a sense that they were still the same person regardless of their gender identity:

I just thought it was funny that they had the same car and they got one for sale. They were literally just like I want to have the same car, but you can have this old version. And that was a trans thing for me, like...kinda giving away trappings of an old life, but still...it's still the same. (participant eight)



Figure 4. Participant eight's picture of trappings of an old life.

Research Question Two: How do the intersections of transgender and disability impact high school youths' sense of identity? The following two themes, conflation of identities and society and identity answer research question number two.

Theme Two: Conflation of Identities. The second theme that emerged was conflation of identities. All participants spoke about their gender identity and disability identity as being conflated. When asked about challenges of identifying as transgender with a disability, they spoke about people blaming their gender identity on their disability. Below the participants speak about how their gender identity and disability have been conflated.

I've had people also be like, "You're just saying you're trans, because you are retarded." (participant two)

Participant Six explained how people do not accept their gender identity because of their disability.

I feel like there is a lot of misconceptions with people who identify as something other than cis and straight, and also have a disability. Because a lot of people assume that they can't be coherently thinking well enough to really look inside themselves and say "I'm not straight and or cis" and then it gets to a point where like...and then like someone who is coherently thinking, they still don't except

that. So it's almost like they don't accept it in general, they are just looking for excuses and one of the things that are frustrating is that they can use the disability as an excuse, to why that can't possibly be they way that you are. To discredit them. (participant six)

Throughout the interviews the participants continued to speak about how their gender identity has been discredited because of their disability.

Just being discredited in regards to our gender identity in regards to our disability. Because of the fact that like we are disabled and we identify as transgender, people often times disregard that we could possibly know that we are transgender or that we can identify as such, because we are not "clear thinking or neuro typical people" and that's not the case a lot of times. I mean as someone who is autistic, I tend to think of things in a very literal sense and I mean I do see the gray area a lot, but it's very, it's kinda difficult in certain ways to see certain things, but I am very literal about things. I notice something was off with me. I noticed I wasn't cis. And so then I identified as something different. It's as simple as that and yet people are often, people like me are often discredited for not knowing what we are talking about, because we couldn't possibly be clear thinking with having our disability. And that's untrue. We can think just fine. It's not like some how we are brain dead or something like that and cant possibly make these decisions for our selves. We can and we do, but we are often discredited for such because of disability. (participant three)

Similarly, participant nine also spoke about how people blame their transgender identity on their disability:

My identity with being trans, I do say that people, sometimes people who are ignorant... people who are aren't understanding, people who aren't understanding, they would blame my autism for being trans. Yeah they would say, "Oh it's a phase, oh your autism made you think that" or "You know your disability makes you think that way?" It's like um excuse me, it's like that has nothing to do with anything in general. So, they try to use my disability as a blame for who I am. And saying that " oh I don't know who I am", and they stereotype um, people with autism, I hate using this word, but they stereotyped me as retarded and that's not really true, that's what they would assume of me. Like "oh you think having this R-word or statement" or like these beliefs about myself I shouldn't be who I am, and it's like nope I've already knew this since I was born. I already knew I was different, I always knew that I was suppose to be "this gender" but ...It doesn't match for me, but I'm going to make it possible for myself. (participant nine)

Theme Three: Society and Identity. The third theme that emerged was society and identity, which also helps to answer research question number two. There were intersectional parallels between how society sees disability and gender. When it came to society and gender identity participants also spoke about being placed in a box, stereotypes and gender as being a social construct emerged. When asked about society and disability, participants also spoke about stereotypes, being pathologized and placed in a box. Participants express their beliefs and frustration about society and their identities.

It's so stupid how they make everyone...they automatically assume two genders and there shouldn't be just two genders. The government should have more opening...not just female and male they should all of them and people who are open and have a right. People who are trans and people who are non-binary. Having rights civil rights. It's what our society is built on just racism and patriarchy and binary and sexism. (participant two)

Other participants went on to describe gender roles and expectations that society places on people.

I think that mostly in the aspect of how society puts different roles on people, and like the norms and that kind of thing. I think that's more on a spectrum. Things shouldn't be gendered. Your interested shouldn't be gendered. I think we have made great advances with you know "the house wife" and that type of thing. There's like men who stay home and watch the kids and the moms go out to work. I think we have made advances, it's just not very far. (participant five)

All participants continually expressed this awareness of gender as a social construct.

Societally, gender is a just construct, it comes from society, pretty much the basis of it. Gender doesn't affect society, my gender affects society. I would say that society doesn't affect my gender, moreover, gender affects society. Like my gender affect society. The more out and open I am about who I am, then more awareness comes to trans people and hopefully that leads to less trans death or less trans suicide. (participant eight)

Along with the associations that people have, like associating a certain gender with a certain thing with certain objects. And if someone happens to have that object or thing or whatever that is, whether that be a dress associated with feminine pronouns or a hoodie associated with masculine pronouns and then suddenly you wear one and you must not actually be this thing, because you're

wearing that or doing that. And its like no, I like sometimes to feel a little pretty and that's not because, and that does not in any was diminish my masculinity. I just like doing that. That does not mean I am not a real man or that I am not a real trans man. And I feel like people should be more informed on that. Gender and presentation do no necessarily go hand in hand. Like if I want to present myself in a more feminine way, then that is fine. (participant four)

Participant seven, also expressed gender as being complex due to prescribed roles our society has constructed.

Gender is complex in the same way people are complex. We build on the base idea that there is sex and there a certain ideas prescribed to that sex, so it has created gender and gender expression. Um, yeah it's a really complicated topic, that has deep meaning for one's self and I would say that um, gender is important to a lot people in a lot of different ways. Say I told you that your parents died just now, and it was absolutely true, the words that I am saying have a lot less meaning that the impact that you receive from them. In the same way that I say gender as a construct, the feelings of gender and the notions around gender don't dissipate because I say so. It is something that is deep seeded due to the pushing and the preconditions around society and how it manages and grooms us to be, whatever... whatever we are not I guess. We are the child of the society that we grew up in. (participant seven)

Participant eight expressed frustration towards how structures of society are only built for cisgender people, which ultimately make it harder for transgender people.

I don't identify as trans I am trans. I am a-gender. Nothing is built for trans people, everything is built for cis people. All things are designed for cis people; all interactions are scripted for cis people. Health care is scripted for cis people and just being trans makes everything harder. Finding a place to live is exceptionally, exponentially harder. (participant eight)

Society and Disability Identity. When it came to society and their disability identity, participants spoke about how their disability has also been pathologized, 'othered' and placed in boxes by society.

Society. I do say so, because...well for someone, I can only speak for myself, but not for everyone else, but like for someone who is aware about society and social justice world and such, um I do say there are boxes that we are placed upon for people who have disabilities. And for me like how they stereotype autistic people, to be like low on the spectrum, when in reality, they can be anywhere on the spectrum. (participant nine)

Like people don't know how to interact with people with autism some times. Just be patient and not like expect to be able to fix someone in my situation and not to expect to have a solution for people. And like accept people for who they are and not like be shit heads where “autism is bad and we need to cure it.” (participant eight)

Participant three spoke about the negative notions attached to disability by society:

I think just the notion of the word disability has a negative connotation. Like I don't even really like calling those things I have a disability, because they, I don't know I don't view them as dis-abling me to do anything really. (participant three)

The photographs participants took, also represent how they feel society views disability in a way that is, negative and stereotypical. In the photo below (see Figure 5) participant nine explains:

I do say I took the photo of the rock, because it looks as though the rock is actually... it's snapped. And “oh it's not pretty, it's not good”. When in reality, I use the term “ don't judge a book by it's cover” and that's with my autism and my gender identity. Like with my autism, people will think about the stereotype of course, about people who have disabilities, and they think that people with disabilities are “ these things or these things” like all these negative ways society has portrayed them, mostly. But in reality, we're more than that. We are filled with content, we're more than what the, what the people who run our country perceive us as. (participant nine)



Figure 5. Participant nine's picture of the rock.

Other participants took photos that they associated with societies conceptions and their disability. Participant three reflected on the photo they took and expressed (see Figure 6):

It is almost like a silhouette kind of picture. I feel like a lot of that is just general contrast. I was very proud of this, one because I thought about the idea of how... about the contrast it had, was... with the blue sky behind it with like the clouds stuff and the silhouette in front of it, I felt like a lot of that was actually related to me in a way. I am not certain how to explain that per say, but the contrast of like what is upfront and what is behind, you know, kinda thing. I feel like, it's kinda hard to explain in terms of my disability, but I do feel a connection to it, in regards to my disability. I feel like a lot of that is what people see my disability as, versus like what it actually is. Like basically just the contrast of like how I see the world and how people think I see the world. (participant three)



Figure 6. Participant three's picture of a silhouette.

The participants in this study were aware of both their identities and articulated explicitly intersectional understandings of their gender/disabled identities.

I do say there's intersectionality with disabilities with regard to social characteristics of our own self and gender, sexual orientation, race in general, like how I mentioned about gender and race. And think that bringing more awareness that people who have disabilities are also minorities too. We need to bring more awareness of them, and I'm even glad that I am doing this research project with you, because I do think that not many voices of people with disabilities are being brought up. Also, I had to teach myself to be way more independent. That's the way I had taught myself when it came to my autism and when I came out, no one would accept me, I did most of the things by myself, honestly. Like, I was a

survivor, I was a lonely person who had no support or anything. (participant eight)

Participant six spoke about how regardless of what society has imposed, their disability, like their gender identity does not make them a bad person.

I feel like a lot of people like I previously mentioned, have this predisposed, uh ideology, that if there is something quote unquote wrong with someone that they have every right to just hurt them and they are completely justified because of the fact, that, that person had something wrong with them. And I feel like people need to stop thinking that a disability means that there is something wrong with you or that there is something wrong with that person, because they might see the world differently than I do. And I feel like in that same sense of being transgender in any regard, disability, my disability does not make me a bad person. My disability does not make me anything, I make me, me. And I feel like people don't understand, I feel like society as a whole doesn't understand and society needs to understand that. That my disability does not make me a bad person. It does not define me as a, as a criminal or anything like that. I am not bad, I'm not. And people automatically assume, that because I have a disability, there is something wrong with me and that they have every right hurt me because of that. (participant six)

Participant one expressed how they feel intersection of both their identities causes people to close their minds.

Well the problem is that people don't really expect to understand you, they just close their mind. In aspects to you disability and then when they learn your gender identity on top of it, they aren't even going to bother with it, they just zone off even more. So it's like everyone dodges you. (participant one)

The photographs the participants took also represented ways in which society views both their identities. Below, Figure 7 represent how participant two felt they had to be and act a certain way regarding the intersection of their disability and gender identity.



Figure 7. Participant two's picture of in your face.

When asked to reflect about this photograph above, participant two expressed:

This one I saw in and the second I saw it on this, it was very very bright, like in your face. And I guess that kinda represented how everyone was to me about my gender identity and about my disability, was the fact that they were always in my face and "be like this or don't be at all". (participant three)

In another photograph taken by participant eight, they relate the cactus to people not knowing how to interact with transgender people with a disability. When asked to reflect on the photo (see Figure 8) they expressed:

I like it because if you touch it the wrong way, it's not good. But it still has the prickly pear fruit. And if you learn how to work it right, it's an excellent... it's an excellent cactus dish if you learn how to make it appropriately, but if you don't, if you don't prepare it exactly right, it's very disgusting and sharp. People not knowing how to interact with me as a disabled person and as a trans person. (participant eight)



Figure 8. Participant eight's picture of cactus.

Participants also spoke about what they would like society to know about their identities.

How their disability doesn't limit them or make them a bad person:

I would say, it doesn't dis-able me to do anything really. I mean like... just because I put autism as a descriptor of myself doesn't mean I can't have social interaction or that I put bipolar, depression on myself doesn't mean that I can't go out in daily life and do things I need to do. I don't know. I'd also say that disability is something that shouldn't be as taboo as it is, because we all have our own struggles and that's just part of who we are. In same way that I don't really...my disability doesn't make up me, I make up my disability. That's just how it is. (participant four)

Disability is not something to laugh at. My experiences are not something to laugh at. None of this is a laughing matter and the thing is, people treat it as such. And they is scary to me, that I can't interact with my peers, I can't do things like my peers, I can't express myself like my peers, because people turn it into a joke. And yes, there are times when I do get overwhelmed and that does not make me a bad person. I think ultimately, if I had to tell someone anything about disabilities, is that it does not inherently make me a bad person. It does not inherently make anyone a bad person. A bad person, does bad things. And I do not do bad things; hence, I am not a bad person. My disability does not make me bad and it does not make me a joke. And I am tried of being the butt of peoples jokes and being the stereotype that people automatically assume, I don't like that. None of us do. I didn't choose this. (participant two)

Another participant emphasized the restrictions of capitalism placed on them because of their disability.

It's hard because, people want to hear, like, people want to hear like, uh, a capitalism version of that, like " what about your disability doesn't hold you back from being a productive member of society". It's like my disability does hold me back from being a productive member of your version of society, because your version of society inherently devalues me. And so I wish people would understand and try to actually understand, is that there is no better version of me, you know, there's no better version of {}. It's...I am who I am and I have value because of who I am and what I contribute to my communities outside of capitalistic endeavors. (participant eight)

Theme Three: Mental Health. In addition to their gender and disability identity, all the participants spoke about struggling with a range of mental health issues. Below the participants shared their own personal struggles with anxiety and depression and how it

impacted their high school experiences:

When I was really depressed, I dropped off, so I just couldn't do their standards and therefore, I failed. Like just miserable. I used to have a 4.0 GPA, kept that up until I got ridiculously depressed. And I tried to commit suicide two times. (participant seven)

I'm in 10th grade. I went to a traditional high school for about month, like regular high school. A local high school. I went there for about a month and I was already sick with an eating disorder, anorexia, and I couldn't hang in. My anxiety got really bad. My depression. I was super depressed in October, which was about a month after school started. We decided I couldn't continue you going to school. So I stopped going to school actually. I just couldn't hang in the days. I would always go to the office and call my mom or someone to pick me up. And so I wasn't at school for about a month. And then we came up with a place, because obviously I couldn't just stay out of school. (participant four)

Participant Five spoke about the how their anxiety impacted their high school experience and how they eventually dropped out and became homeless:

I have anxiety, a lot of anxiety. I experience anxiety attack really often and panic attacks occasional. I think that was a big part of my high school experience. I had a lot of anxiety and the just got more and more and more, until I finally turned 18 and moved out of my mom's place and became homeless and said fuck it and I don't regret it. (participant five)

Other participants spoke how their mental health impacted their interests and hobbies in a negative way:

With having so many things going on and you know, I kinda lost myself to be completely honest. I'm like at the stage where I am trying to discover again who I am. You know the eating disorder, it's been like a year in a half or two. It's taken a big chunk of my life. Before my eating disorder I was a musician. I played the base, the guitar, the drums. I enjoyed that. I kinda stopped doing that, probably because of the eating disorder and I was just, I wasn't enjoying it any more. It kinda gave me anxiety. (participant six)

The photographs that the participants took also connected with this theme. For example, in the photo below (Figure 9), the participant talks about their identities have contributed to their anxiety, yet they would like to be free like a butterfly. When asked to reflect on this photo, the participant explained:

I feel like my disability, my gender it does hold me down, but it shouldn't, because I tell myself it does, but it shouldn't. But yeah I'm kinda like... being transgender I am kinda afraid to do things. Like I have anxiety about them. Um, so I feel like being free like the butterfly, the butterfly can fly wherever it wants. (participant six)



Figure 9. Participant six's picture of a butterfly

Similarly, another participant reflected on a photo of clouds (Figure 10) and explained:

Well clouds are like, I don't know... you see the sun peaking through too and that's kinda me. I am trying to like, I am trying to like get better and not get so anxious and stuff. But you know there is still a lot of work to do. And also the clouds, they have so much freedom. (participant five)



Figure 10. Participant five's picture of clouds.

Other participants connected photographs they took to their mental health. In the photograph below (Figure 11), participant three spoke about the invisible darkness inside that they have to live with everyday. When asked to reflect on the photograph, they expressed:

This one has a lot of it has a lot of darkness to it. Almost like an enticing darkness to it. You see this and you see kinda like the forefront, which is the little pink flower and like some flower buds and then you see the leaves and then they kinda like...they kinda like all kinda like eventually fade into this dark background. Like all of it in that sense, I feel like, again it's kinda like a mystical sense of enticing darkness. Like, it kinda seems nice and flowery on the outside but the further in you go, the worse it gets, like the darker it gets. I feel like a lot of people only see the surface of things and only see the surface of like what I am and what we are as people. And I feel like if they were to dive a little deeper and see that darkness, they would get scared and run, because they only see the surface. And then when they get a little deeper, when they get a little darker, it suddenly scares them and they don't want to learn anymore. But the truth is, that there is dark, it's not just that pink flower. There is stuff that is in there, that you don't want to see and unfortunately people don't see. But we have to experience that on a day-to-day basis. It's like we can't really afford to be afraid of it. (Participant three)



Figure 11. Participant three's picture of flower darkness.

Below in Figure 12, participant Seven also took a photograph that illuminated how people do not see her daily struggled. When asked to reflect on the photo below the stated:

I thought as something spreading on the ground, it was very pretty, and it was sorta like tucked away. It was in a weird part of town that no one is probably going to see, except for the person that you know lives in that house. So I liked that. I think a lot of people see the end product of who I am, but not the amount of work that I have put into it. In the same way, that my daily struggles, what I have to work through everyday, just to get to the places I need to be... a lot of people see the end product of me going to those places, but never how I really get there. (participant seven)



Figure 12. Participant nine's picture of spreading.

Theme Four: Abuse and Rejection from family. While none of the questions in the interviews addressed family, the experience of abuse and rejection from family members emerged, which seem to impact participants mental health. Below, participant Two, shared the frustration of their mom not accepting their transgender identity:

My mom for example is not accepting of me at all. She's not really outwardly attack me but she's not accepting. And she literally works in a field with people who have disabilities and she basically, its one of those things where she needs to be accepting in her field to work but the instant it comes to her own family she cant do it, because that's not her profession any more, that's personal. So when it gets to her profession she's like automatically accepting but when it comes to her own child, she just can't do it. She doesn't believe that stuff unless of course she is getting paid for it. (participant two)

Participant Three spoke about how they experienced rejection from their sister regarding their gender identity:

I mean the big thing was my family was very unaccepting. I made a Facebook post coming out to everyone. My sister her first comment she was like “you know you're just doing this as a slap to the face for everyone in the family” (participant three)

Participant Eight spoke about how they only time being misgender impacted them is when their family did it.

Yeah, like being misgender for me, I don't really anymore honestly. Yeah, the only time that breaks me, is when family use it on purpose, it's kinda awkward, but it's like, “whatever”. Yeah, do it on purpose in front of my peers. Yeah, they kinda like know, I'm used to be called by different gender pronouns, it's kinda awkward. (participant eight)

Participant Four explained how they would avoid their father's living room, because they did not want to encounter being invalidated:

I avoided my dad's living room. Him and his wife did not validate my gender identity. They refused to call me {} if I had gotten an in school suspension. Basically, being called me name was a privilege. He refused to use they/them pronouns because he refused to and I quote “ butcher the English language to satisfy your politically correct non sense” That is a direct quote from him. And then his wife said that she refused to use they/them pronouns because it was

because the only people who really use those are people who have multiple personality, which I don't. Yeah he would get mad at me and call me {dead name} and not care. (participant four)

Some participants spoke about physical abuse they experienced from their families:

Yeah, my dad raped me and molested me as a child. He kinda fucked up my life. I can barely even take care of myself. My brain hasn't fully developed. Because it stopped after what he did. Nine. It started at nine. At a hotel. I was watching Dumbo. (participant five)

His was mostly emotional and mental abuse, mine was mostly physical abuse. We both have had really fucked up lives. People have always thought "how the hell have you survived through all of this?"....I literally I just kinda waited, I laid low I never did anything to provoke anything. I mean it didn't really help that much. It was at least something. I think the biggest thing that happened that really freaks people out. Two things was I literally went through the actual definition of torture. Like tied up. And she basically cut stretch marks into my stomach. I mean with every single cut that she put into my stomach, she had some sort of term, some sort of words to say about it. (participant two)

Some of the participants spoke about school as being a safe place and an escape from their abusive home:

High school was the really only place I was safe. Abusive family basically. Very very abusive family. Yeah. Summer time and stuff like that, I always felt really scared during the summer because of the fact I didn't have that safe place... I mean given that I only got 15 out of 26 credits, because of that whole thing. (participant two)

I also did not have a good home life. So, school is like a bit of an escape from that but it also became like stressful on both accounts. Like school was an escape from the abusive home that I had but it also wasn't any better in a sense that it wasn't stressing me out. It was just so much. (participant three)

Theme Five: Changes in School. The participants spoke about their frustration regarding their school experiences and the need for changes in the public school system including in order to better address transgender and disability needs, including: health education, teacher education, access to resources and language:

Honestly, outreach to communities of trans people with disability, like outside of schools, like bring in the actual community, let people have access to

people who have lived these stories. And lived these, you know, these truths. And like, you know what I mean? And explicitly hiring trans and disabled um, counselors and such. And front desk people. And support people not by legally paying them less, because they have a disability. And demonstrating, physical solidarity with people, rather than taunting it. (participant eight)

Participant three, spoke about how they thought about things in a different way because of their autism. They expressed frustration and a need for educators to recognize that people get to the same place in different ways:

It's also very frustrating, because I constantly thought about things in a different way, and I wasn't the only one who thought in a different way, people who think of things that are not within this narrow, school district based, like program and stuff all the lessons were the exact same, no matter where I went, it was always the same thing over and over and over again and I t would make no sense to me. I was outside of the line and when I would try to go inside the lines, it didn't make any sense to me. So, I was outside the lines doing the exact same thing they were doing, I am going to the same destination. But I am just getting there differently, and it got to a point where like, people like that were left in the dust, people like that were considered to be stupid or considered to be not right. Some thing must be wrong with them if they are not taking this exact path. It's like you got a race track or something like that and...or a jogging track and something decide they want to go into the forest or something like that. Like maybe they are comfortable in that forest maybe they feel more comfortable in that area and they can jog through that much easier. And they get to the same destination as all the other joggers, but because they are not on that same track, they are considered "no since you were not on that track you must have not finished the race" ... "because you didn't follow this exact directive, you're wrong" and so if they would have jogged on the specific track, it would have been a thing where they would have already been falling behind, because that doesn't make any sense to them, that's not their terrain. (participant three)

When asked about what schools could be doing better, participants spoke about health education class being geared towards cisgender and straight people. They expressed the need to incorporate transgender issues in health classes:

It's poor. The education system is poor. I think they should teach it in school more. About gender identity and sexual orientation and all that stuff. (participant one)

I hated all the PE and the health courses. The health courses because they were so inaccurate and so exclusive and weren't inclusive on any like thing

that I like was interested in like trans health and understanding my body in a way that I could actually understand it in a sort of removed binary sense, that wasn't clicking with me or making any sense. (participant three)

Throughout the interview the participants expressed their desire for a change in health education classes:

They mostly just talk about straight things, like in sex ed. They mostly talk about putting condoms on bananas. They didn't even talk about anything about like the other part too. Like how do they work? (participant five)

I think they should teach kids and students like the other ways to do things. Like putting a condom on the banana, like why can't you take a fake vagina and put like a dental gram on it and show how to use it. Yeah, from a female perspective. They don't really show that at all. It's straight orientated and they expect everyone to be that way. (participant four)

As a result of not having access to health education, some participants expressed how they had to learn things from their peers:

I didn't learn any of this from people older than I. I learned this stuff from people the same age as me. And I feel like a lot of that is because the adults were afraid to inform kids that yeah, its ok to be a boy or a girl. (participant two)

Participants also spoke about the need for designated School spaces extending beyond just bathrooms:

The one thing that they should definitely change in school systems, is locker rooms and bathrooms. Yes, bathrooms they have like gender neutral ones and a lot of times they have handicap and stuff like that. But they should actually have a gender-neutral locker room. For those who are you know... even if they have to create a small little room in the corner of the gym, for a locker room. Even if that's all they can do, then it's better than nothing at all. (participant eight)

Making lockers a lot more gender neutral at least have somewhere with in the schools facility where gender, where it's gender neutral. I remember at my school that I went to in um, any school that I went to, I never saw a gender neutral bathroom. I have only seen that they have specifically girl/boy bathrooms and I remember my last year, even at the alternative high school they only had girl/boy bathrooms. I remember my last year there was kinda awkward to me, because I'm like what bathroom do I belong in? And it took me until very recently to actually enter a men's bathroom. Because it go to a point, where I'm like "do I prefer to be uncomfortable in the women's bathroom or... would I prefer to be

uncomfortable in the women's bathroom but not have to deal with legal issues or people freaking out that I shouldn't be in the men's bathroom or do I go into the men's bathroom and be comfortable and risk that. And it got to a point like, yeah gender neutral bathrooms, gender neutral lock rooms. (participant nine)

Another participant expressed their frustration towards bathroom issues and compared it to school gun violence:

Can I be honest though? Men are a lot more chill about the bathrooms than females are. Which is weird. I think part of it, is because women brings their kids into the bathrooms and stuff but it's kind frustrating, because it gets to a point like.. like I think I mentioned this before, when it comes to bathrooms and transgender people using bathrooms its like " we don't want these creeps in here because of the children. " And then it gets to a point where there is a school shooting and no one bats an eye. Because oh, it's like our rights say we can own a gun but we can do this and no one will bat an eye. When it comes to our rights...Everyone is all over it. Like why should this be available? Why should they be allowed to do this? Why should we allow these creeps in the bathroom? Why are you allowing a perfectly "sane" person in a school with a gun shoot up a place? (participant two)

Access to language. Many of the participants expressed that they lacked the language and terminologies to explain their gender identity and they way they were feeling. They did not know it was allowed or possible to simply just identify with another gender.

When I was much younger, I was constantly asking that question, But I'm a girl right?" because I didn't know I could be anything else. I didn't know I was allowed. It wasn't till later when I actually could identify, because I actually had a word for it now. Back then I didn't have a word. I didn't have a way of explaining what I was feeling. I didn't know that it was ok in general. I just thought that there must be something wrong with me. It got to a point where I was like, there is nothing wrong with me, I am just not cis. (participant two)

I didn't start identifying as transgender until even after high school. I was identifying as gender queer. So, I was gender fluid like senior year of high school. But I didn't actually start identifying as anything until high school, but looking back on it, it was very obvious that I knew something was off. That I knew something wasn't right. I just didn't have the word for it. Once I started getting that knowledge, I was like oh I have a word for this now and it made sense to me that this makes sense to me, I associate myself. I think I knew about it

before hand, but I never really had a word for it. (participant seven)

When it came to gender felt like, it kinda felt like as soon as I realized those terminologies and thoughts existed it was like, I finally had an access to myself, a way to reference my self, that I never had before. (participant eight)

Access to Resources and Curriculum. Another desire change in schools reflected the participants desire for resources and inclusive curriculum. Many of the participants spoke about the need and want regarding having access to resources and a comprehensive curriculum that is inclusive and accepting of their identities:

There's no, like intergraded, intersectional education about your community around you and it's all, math and fucking accounting and history, its all... and half of it's bullshit and useless anyways. And instead of letting people choose what they want to study, they just kinda throw everything at you and don't give you any core curriculum on... the don't educate you.... I think when people think about moral education, they think about church and stuff, I think that moral education without conviction and ideology can be really important. Like basic shit you know? It doesn't need to stop in pre-school and kindergarten. Like keep talking about how we can treat people with respect...A route to communicating and finding themselves and you know, facilitation of you know, actual queer spaces and not just like clubs. Helping people understand themselves. (participant eight)

I kinda wish school talked more about... it's ok to like girls, it's ok to like boys. I kinda wish they talked about gender neutral, I kinda wish they talked about being trans, cis male, cis female, you know like female to male and stuff like that. I kinda wish they talked about it more in school. And then also, people would catch on more better, that way they can get the help quicker when they need it, instead of struggling in their adulthood for so long. You know what I mean? Like starting in 5th or 6th grade, I would say teach it, because there are some people...I've watched videos on YouTube, there's this little girl who is 7, she was a trans girl and she came out and she knew who she was at the age of 7. So, I kinda wish they taught it at a younger age, so people can catch on quicker and get help. (participant four)

Participant one expressed how access to information would help prevent trans suicides:

They never taught in school. And they don't know how to get help. Or be clear about who they are. They struggle and like " I don't know what I am, I don't know who I am". They don't have any information about anything. That's my opinion. It would actually stop a lot of the teen suicides. Because a lot of the teen suicides are from the fact that they have disabilities or they are trans and they don't know

how to deal with it. That's about it, the fact that if they taught all of that would stop a lot of suicides and help out society. (participant one)

Participant nine, explained and expressed the importance of learning and understanding intersectionality:

More education on intersectionality in general. And share their experiences with adults. And if adults can help, that's great, if not, they can network to find others, um, health professionals or social workers to even get to understand about, to reflect on their Intersectionality with their disability and their gender identity. But it's... I do say that having an education is really important for that. I'm in a queer studies class at the moment and we're doing intersectionality. I don't want to only talk about race, like of course we need to talk about race but we need to talk about disability in general too or like um, or mental disorders too honestly, cause those have a huge effect on how gender identity plays. Yeah, like my autism has an effect on my interactions with my gender. Like oh I'm masculine/feminine or how to talk and such. It affects everything the way I do. Yeah, but we don't need to make intersectionality bad, like that's only if you make it bad, we don't really need to. But bring more awareness in education with intersectionality is the most important. And plus it would benefit not only disabilities, but everything in general. Everything in general, it can be something about something physical or something about, something about race, external or internal, it can be anything. (participant nine)

Education Professionals. Participants spoke about what changes needed in schools regarding teacher's understandings towards transgender and disability issues:

I think also mandatory staff meetings specifically to inform teachers. Like "hey this is a thing in our school." Specifically, at the staff meeting, this is what our plan is to include these people and make it where the LGBT are accepted in our school. To make it where they feel more welcome. They should have that kind of meeting, not only to come up with plans within the schools, especially when it comes to bullying and harassment of those students, but also informing teachers on procedures like, pronouns and you know like who to probably talk. I don't know exactly, because I have met a lot of people that think they have to talk a certain way to LGBT and almost like they are talking to an alien or someone who doesn't speak the same language or has an accent to them, where you don't know if they will understand what they are saying. (participant three)

Like people in teaching and authority positions or whatever... If they are not gendering people as they are raising people, and there not like instilling that like binary and hetero normative and cis normative and binary normative thinking, then like people won't grow up with the ingrained in them. It's not like... I don't

know I'm not like a child any more, but children need... children need instruction and support that isn't... and guidance that isn't gendered. So they don't grow up with that being an infrastructural aspect of how they look everything in the world. (participant eight)

Participants continued to voice their desire about needed changes in teachers.

I would like to see them ask what are your disabilities, before they actually put you in a classroom and how would that help you. And the on top of it how can we work with you gender identity, how would you feel comfortable. (participant five)

I think there has to be like... again training. Teachers need to be informed. I don't know about... I am just speaking from my experience, but the disability resource center, I think there should be more of those I am not really sure how other schools, if they have that, but if they don't, they should have that. And for people to just be heard. I feel like people are oppressed and they are like "oh" again, "it's just a phase" They need to be like heard as actual people. (participant seven)

I think like dealing with like transgender students, like how to like not make them feel different. In the past, I mean this didn't have to do with anything with me, but I've like seen, not even necessarily people with disabilities, just kids from other countries, where I live, there are a lot of people from different countries. I remember specifically, a teacher almost like babying the kid and making them feel different. And they were like "oh can you hear me?" and the person was like, a native English speaker, even though she was from a different country. So they shouldn't do that kind of thing. Just like hearing out the students and helping them with what they need. (participant six)

I think just all together, there is such a big range. There people who maybe have a kid who is transgender and they do understand and but then here's other people who think transgender kids... the first thing that comes to mind is Katelyn Jenner and they are like "oh it's a choice" you know they are doing it for attention. So I think teachers need to be more informed on what it means to be transgender and just like information training and that kind of stuff. (participant five)

Elementary/Middle. While this study did not ask questions about elementary and middle school experiences, the participants frequently brought up negative stories pertaining to their identities:

Middle school and elementary school. Yeah and it was really bad. And for me, I just... I had to leave it in the past honestly. That's what it was and it was just like... I do say I got isolated, I was kinda like the isolated kid back then, but now a days, it's the opposite, I hang out with whoever I want, I don't really care. And

I'm extroverted. But yeah, it's just, I do say that...that experience of being bullied in middle school and elementary school, that is like one of the biggest disadvantages I can think of at the moment. (participant nine)

I remember going into that padded room at times, because I was just so overwhelmed at times and mind you this is during the time when they weren't sure what was wrong with me and so it got to a point, where I hated it because this was also a point in time when people would like be using the whole comment of insane asylum and I associated the whole thing with a padded room in an asylum and the whole thing of like... I felt like I was insane, I felt like there was something wrong with me. And it got to a point when you get told that you are monster and that you don't belong here long enough, you start to believe it. Like right when I was transferring from elementary school to middle school, that was the point in time when I started to believe in the things I was hearing. I believed it for probably the entirety of middle school, that I was wrong, that I was the wrong thing. I was the stain in this white world. And that when I had been seeing the good in the world, I was just looking at my little stain, I had not actually seen the good in the world. (participant two)

Throughout the interviews participants spoke about their negative experiences of being bullied in middle school.

Um, back when I was in middle school. I came out as gay. I got called a faggot, I got beat up a lot. Yeah. Middle school was rough. This was I think during my last year of middle school. She would bully me very openly and there was a point in time when it happened very very loudly in math class and the math teacher basically just said like, don't do that. And when she continued to do that, she just left it alone. Like I mentioned before its not necessarily that they, the teacher was actively doing anything about it, it was just the in difference. (participant seven)

I would have to say in terms of high school beforehand, like before high school I was very much just alone. I didn't have opportunity. I was just kinda like a face in the crowd and I was bullied a lot in elementary and middle school. Once I got to high school that stuff just kinda like went away. For the most part it went away. (participant five)

Research Question Three: Through their embodied lived experiences, what are the characteristics that transgendered youth with disabilities perceive enabled them to persist in high school?

Theme Six: Difference as Strength. This next theme helps to answer the third research question of this study: *Through their embodied lived experiences, what are the characteristics that transgendered youth with disabilities perceive enabled them to persist in high school?* Through their differences the participants spoke about how their intersecting identities helped them form accepting and supportive friendships. Participants also spoke about how their marginalized identities allowed them to understand people in empathetic ways.

Friendships. Many of the participants spoke about their friends in a positive light, in a way that was supportive and understanding.

It helped me make a lot of friends that were similar, with similar issues. Uh, and a lot of times also, my friend that when I did have friend, they actually really liked how I was. You know having my mental illnesses, because it... whenever I was a lot more open, it made me a very very interesting person to be around and not really in a bad way. To them it was a lot of fun being around me when I was more open about my illness. (participant three)

I am not alone. There are many friends that I have are not cis. I know that I have a lot of people who care about me. Even if they don't quite understand they know. I think that's a big part of my gender identity. (participant six).

Participant Three spoke about how their friends were understating in regard to their disability:

With my friends it was one of those things where like, if I was getting overwhelmed, they knew and they would help me and that was very very... I am grateful for having friends. Um, that my friends understood that I had a disability and were willing to help me with that. Um, teachers on the other hand were aware that I had a disability, but it was more like an indifference. A lot of them didn't really care much, they just taught me the same as everyone else. Which is kinda frustrating because I am not like everyone else Cause that's the thing I'm not like everyone else. I'm not. I can't learn like those who don't have a disability. I learn differently. (participant three)

I got a lot of respect from my friends. I have really good friends. They are really nice. They are good people. I would trust them with a lot of things. They genuinely care about me. (participant seven)

For participant Three, they were able to express themselves without being judged when they were around their friends:

I did have good friends though. Once I went to Cascade, on the very first day of school, I met my best friend, who has been my best friend for almost 3 years now. The fact that I could be like completely weird at any time, that was my big thing. A lot of times I was very self-conscience about how I acted but like the second I was with my friends it was non-existent. (participant three)

For participant two, being able to have friends was an important aspect of their high school experience:

Not just that but like I mean most of it middle and elementary school, I really didn't have any friends. The second I got into high school like, quiet I few friends. That was a really big change for me. In high school I made a bunch of friends and everything and I think one of my most favorite things (participant two)

Empathy. When asked about positive aspects of identifying as transgender with a disability, participants spoke about being different as a positive. They spoke about seeing the world differently and how that difference made them who they are.

Mostly for me, it was just the fact, that it was something about me that made me different. Honestly, my disabilities, especially when I got older, weren't an issue for me. They basically made me who I was and you know people always ask "if you had a chance to not have your disabilities, would you do it?" No, because they literally made me the person I am. I feel like if I didn't have my disabilities when I was younger, I wouldn't be nice, accepting and the loving person that I am. Like I said, if I didn't have my disability, I wouldn't know what it was like to have a disability, I wouldn't know what it would be like to experience things from this side and I would probably be a very mean person. And that sounds terrible when I am saying it, I am not saying that people who don't have disabilities are terrible people or are mean or whatever, but what I am saying is they don't know what it is like to be like this. (participant five)

I'm just a different person, I guess. Yeah, like you get to see the world from a different perspective just naturally. It definitely like, I think there's a part of just having that debilitation, like you have to see the world differently and interact with the world differently. Like, but it also like not all disabilities are immediately seen. So you... at least I get this weird dichotomy of like um, kinda

existing where people expect me to at least act like normatively in every experience, mentally, I don't know. But like I'm obviously not. (participant seven)

The photography the participants took also represented their identities as a strength. In the photograph below (Figure 13), the participants spoke about how even though they are different, they still strive. When asked to reflect on the photograph below, they explained:

I was trying to get a picture of that little white flower. Because I noticed that among all of these purple flowers, there was that little white one that was devoid of color and the thing is that the white ones, were significantly fewer than that of the purple ones. But all together, they thrived. Like all together, the purple and the white all-together thrived. I wasn't trying to single out the white flower. I was trying show that ultimately, the white flowers and the purple flowers... though the white flowers where few, were still among the purple flowers. Were still thriving along side them. Even though they stood out and were different. And I feel like that's a pretty good symbolism for my gender identity and my disability. Because, even though we're different even though we are the white flowers among the purple flowers, we are still beautiful and we can still thrive. (participant two)



Figure 13. Participant two's picture of white flower.

Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed how their identities allowed them to empathize and understand things from different perspectives. When asked about the positive aspects of identifying as transgender with a disability, participants voiced:

It gives me the experience to empathize with people who are in the same situation. Um, because we have gone through a lot. Both in terms of our gender identity and our disability, we can help people and empathize with people who are in those situations as well. (participant three)

My empathy, I would say, just the idea that even though I have been through a lot, I have the ability to relate to people. I have the ability, I have a big heart and I want to share that heart with people. I want people to see that I am not just transgender, I'm not just disabled. (participant nine)

The participants continued to speak about how the intersection of being transgender and disabled helped them to relate to other people and understand different perspectives.

I think the entire thing has made me less judgmental and more open minded towards other people and as a result of that I tend to educate myself with things that I don't identify with but I know are still a problem. I try to educate myself about racism and racial inequality, like black lives matter and that kind of stuff. (participant six)

Just like relating to people. I feel like that is a pretty big one. I'm not sure...well I'm sure there are other positives, um but as of right now, having the experience, allows us to further help other people, further empathize with other people that are like ourselves. It allows us to see the world from a different perspective, which definitely helps, um you can't always view things from one perspective and say this is who the world is. Cause there's all these other different perspectives. (participant one)

Well like I mentioned before, the experience that I had before on this side of the disability, it helped me to understand those who have disabilities better. I feel like it makes me more of an empathetic person, because people who don't have disabilities, can't know about this. Like they can't possibly know what it is like to be me. But because I have this experience, I have the ability to use that experience to my advantage. (participant four)

I'm a person and I have a heart and I want to share that heart with people, I want to show people that I am a human being. You know and I want to care for you sorta thing and just because I am transgender and disabled, that does not mean that I am somehow less than or that I somehow don't care. (participant three)

The photographs also revealed that because of their experiences being transgender and disabled, they were able to see things from a different perspective. When asked to reflect on the photograph below (Figure 14), they participant stated:

The first one I took was this one and the way I took this was I actually laid on the ground and took a picture from the ground up. I feel like in that regard, perspective matters. Because the way that this is, is first off, this tree is bright pink against the blue sky. And the way that I got this picture, the perspective that I got this picture from; people would not be able to see it, had I not taken the picture like that, had I not seen this way. And I feel like that's important, that perspective matters. Not just because of...in fact because of my gender identity and because of my disability, I see the world from a different perspective and it's gorgeous. (participant three)



Figure 14. Participant three's picture of the ground up.

Textural and Structural Description

The textural and structural description involves an account of 'what' the participants experienced and 'how' (Creswell, 2007). In this study, a textural and structural description was developed through highlighting the lived experiences of transgender youth with disabilities in high school. In this study, transgender youth with disabilities experienced high school in several ways as it related to their gender identity and disability identity. Using the above themes, the data revealed the group descriptions of what it was like to identify as transgender with a disability. Participants in this study told stories and shared feelings of their experiences of being transgender with a disability in high school.

All of the participants viewed gender identity as fluid and non-binary, which clashed with societal binary notions of gender. This binary notion of gender subjected the participants to stigmas, misunderstandings and gendered expectations during their time in high school. Participants indicated that their experiences in high school were further compounded due to their disability. Like their gender identity, the participants faced issues of stigma and misunderstandings due to their disability status. As a result of their disability identity participants also experienced their gender identity being discredited from people. Most of the participants experienced people blaming their gender identity on their disability. Participants in this study struggled with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, which in many cases impacted their grades and attendance in high school. All but one participant experienced family abuse or rejection that ultimately contributed to their mental health and overall well-being.

Moreover, all of the participants desired a change in schools in ways that were inclusive and representative of their gender and disability identities. Participants expressed a need for teacher education around transgender issues, inclusive health education classes and access to resources and spaces. The intersection of both their transgender identity and disability identity impacted their accessibility to school spaces, such as locker rooms, bathrooms, hallways and lunchrooms. Participants also experienced bullying and harassment in middle and elementary school due to their gender identity and their disability which contributed to their negative experience of school.

Participants experienced their gender as fluid early on but did not have access to the language to describe how they were feeling. It was not until they reached high school and met other people like them, that they finally had access to a way to describe their

transgender identity. Finally, the participants expressed strengths through their differences regarding strong friendships and the ability to be empathetic and understanding because of their disability and transgender identity. Participants also expressed difference as a strength in way that helped them form strong friendships and expressed being able to understand others through their empathy and open-mindedness towards differences.

The Essence

The final step of phenomenology is the essence, which is a composite look at the textural and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2007). The universal essence is “a grasp of the very nature of the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p. 175). The essence of this phenomenological study was a shared experience of ongoing tenacity, tension, and resistance to dominate discourses in society. The participants’ identities in this study were constituted in heteronormative and able-bodied discourses across their high school and a wider societal landscape. The lived experiences of transgender youth with a disability extended beyond the walls of their high school and spilled into the realities of their everyday life. Their resistance existed, because of their intersecting marginalized identities, which meant a constant negotiation and awareness of how their identities of being disabled and transgender were situated in a society that was made for people to fall into a binary. Ultimately, their existence and experiences complicated the binary logics of male/female embedded in the fabrics of our institutional systems.

Data Analysis Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings from this transcendental phenomenological study. Transcendental phenomenology provides a systematic approach

with procedures clearly identified by Moustakas (1994). The interviews with transgender youth with disabilities were conducted utilizing semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed me to obtain the data necessary for exploring the participants' experiences. Photographs were also used as a source of data in order to provide a more in-depth understanding. The combination of the interviews and the photography led to an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon. I employed Moustakas's (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method for analyzing interview data. As a result of the data analysis process six categories of themes were reported. The themes that emerge capture the essence of the lived experiences of all nine participants. In the next chapter, I will discuss my interpretation of these findings. Furthermore, I will discuss the implications of this study to the research and practice of teaching and learning in higher education.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the lived experiences of transgender youth with disabilities. In this chapter, the findings presented in Chapter IV are discussed to provide deeper understanding of the themes that emerged. The findings discussed in this chapter, help to extend the literature on transgender youth with disabilities. Utilizing transgender theory and intersectionality when applicable, this chapter is structured to discuss each theme that emerged from the findings. As a cisgender White woman, it is important to emphasize that I do not wish to “give” the participants in this study “voice,” because this assumes that they do not have a voice. The participants in this study already have “voice” that speaks to the ways in which hegemonic domains of power functions to oppress them. Participants in this study were bound by similar constraints due to their marginalized identities and described challenges relating to societal factors, family, school, and navigating their own identities. Participants also expressed connection with others through their empathy and open-mindedness towards differences. Discussion of the themes are followed by implications for practice, limitations, and thoughts on future practice and research.

Theme One. Gender as Fluid

Findings in this study suggest it is important to understand gender as fluid instead of binary. All participants in this study understood and embodied their gender identity as fluid opposed to an essentialist, binary notion of gender. Historically, Westernized society has been built on the belief that gender is binary and biological. Similarly, schools have also functioned with the belief that gender is binary (Bauer et al., 2009) through

gender-related beliefs, rituals, rules, and expectations (Thorne, 1993; Pascoe, 2007). As transgender theory highlights, these gender related beliefs in which institutes function, is known as cisgenderism. More specifically, cisgenderism is recognized as a systematic ideology that devalues and pathologizes genders that do not subscribe to the gender binary (Stryker, 2006). Lennon and Mistler (2014) explained, “This ideology endorses and perpetuates the belief that cisgender identities and expression are to be valued more than transgender identities and expression and creates an inherent system of associated power and privilege” (p. 63). This ideology perpetuates a system of power and privilege that suppresses transgender identities and experiences (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012; Lennon & Mistler, 2014).

This study revealed how participants were at odds with cisgenderism in their schools for not fitting into the gender binary. Transgender Theorist Susan Stryker (2006) stressed that the fluid experiences of transgender embodiment fundamentally challenge cisgenderism and the gender binary. Furthermore, Bornstein (1994) asserts gender binary is a class system, which can lead to negation of fluid gender identities. In line with Bornstein and Stryker, the transgender youth in this study unsettled and challenged these oppressive notions of gender, by their fluid statements of not fitting either of the binary genders, as well as, their statements of being a bit of both genders. For example, participant four expressed how sometimes they go between and beyond two genders: “I go between male and female gender roles sometimes a mix of everything and sometimes an absence of everything.” Other research on transgender individuals has highlighted this negotiation between the ‘either/or’ of gender identity (Nagoshi, Bruzy, & Terrell, 2012; Roen, 2001). Similarly, participants in this study expressed at times they felt more

feminine or more masculine but did not want to be placed in a binary box. The participants in this study resisted the gender binary by using pronouns such as “they” or by identifying as “trans-non-binary” or “a-gender”. In line with what participants were expressing, transgender theory emphasizes a conceptualization of gender that is beyond “either/or” and recognizes a “both/neither” understanding of gender identity (Roen, 2001).

Thinking with transgender theory supports the participant’s voices and helps us understand gender as fluid and non-binary. Transgender scholarship has emphasized the limitations the gender binary and the importance of recognizing fluidity and multiplicity within gender (Haritaworn, 2008; Koyama, 2006). This emphasis on gender as fluid, not only helps to move beyond a binary understanding of gender, but it helps to move away from biological understanding of gender (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Recognizing gender as fluid instead of fixed could help challenge cisgenderism in our schools and help support an environment of inclusion that is not tied to a binary. This understanding of gender allows categories to be recognized as continuously shifting and never absolute. It also opens up an understanding of gender that is free of constricting categories.

Theme Two. Society and Identity

Both gender and disability identity can impact the way individuals see themselves and interactions in society. The experiences of transgender youth with disabilities in this study illuminated how societal meanings attached to their identities are rooted in hegemonic expectations. Findings in this study suggest there are many intersectional parallels between transgender and disabled experience. A body with a disability is expected to strive toward able-bodied beliefs (García & Ortiz, 2013) just as a transgender

person is expected to strive toward cisgender expectations (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Findings from this study revealed that transgender youth with disabilities have to navigate society's misconceptions attached to their gender identity and disability identity. Participants in this study continually spoke about societal implications related to their identities. Below this theme is discussed in three parts and addresses (a) gender identity, (b) disability identity, and (c) the intersection of identities.

Gender Identity

Findings in this study, highlighted ways in which society's conception of gender can impact those who identify as transgender. The transgender youth in this study all place themselves outside the conventional gender binary yet live in a society that has recognized only two genders. For example, participant seven expressed how they felt simply existing as a transgender person, was problematic for society: "Society doesn't affect my gender, moreover, gender affects society. Like my gender affects society." The participant's transgender identity disrupted societal gender norms and was problematic for the participants in this study in several ways.

First, participants spoke about how gender is a prescribed social construct attached to fixed expectations of ones' biological sex. As queer theorist Judith Butler (2007) explained, one is born with a sex and becomes gendered through society. Coining the term "performativity," she emphasizes that people perform in ways that are attached to their constructed gender. In line with Butler's notion of gender performativity, the participants expressed frustration with how society places roles and expectations associated with ones' gender and how someone's' interests and expression should not be gendered. For example:

I have friends, they are trans, they are trans women or trans men, they feel they have to be forced into the orient of what boy or girl is. I see many trans women, they have to feel as if they have to be the most feminine person to the point... the best way I can represent is like an action figure, like they embody the Barbie doll or they embody the GI Joe of what a person would look like. I feel like they have destroy themselves more then they're healing themselves. (participant seven)

Participants in this study were all aware of the gender they were supposed to embody according to society and strongly felt as though it was wrong and destructive. Some participants in this study spoke about how they attempted to embody gender expectations attached to their biological sex, by growing their hair out or dressing femininely, but eventually resisted and contested. In line with transgender theory, participants in this study embodied a more self-constructed and fluid identity and challenged gendered expectations and norms by embodying their true gender.

Second, participants in this study expressed the structural consequences of not fitting into a society built for cisgender people. Power structures in our society benefit from maintaining gendered dichotomies, which render invisible transgender youth (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Glenn, 2002). As Transgender Scholar, Susan Stryker (1994) stated:

Bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transforms the flesh into a useful artifact. . . . Gendering is the initial step in this transformation, inseparable from the process of forming an identity by means of which we're fitted to a system of

exchange in a heterosexual economy. (p. 249–250)

People who do not fit into gender categories have been perceived by society as threatening and have been subjected to consequences (Pascoe, 2005). As participant nine expressed: “Nothing is built for trans people, everything is built for cis people. All things are designed for cis people; all interactions are scripted for cis people.” Consistent with the research, participants in this study were subjected to structural discrimination in society for not fitting into dominant gender roles (Mitchell & Howarth, 2009). Examples of structural discrimination include: access to health care, housing, and employment. As a result of structural discrimination towards transgender people, research has shown that transgender people are more likely to experience high rates of unemployment, homelessness, and have limited access to healthcare (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). In this study, four out of nine participants were homeless and unemployed. The other five were dependent on family members for housing and financial support.

Third, participants in this study expressed how their transgender identity was viewed in pathological ways. Pathologizing is known as the labeling and treatment of people's identities as disordered (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Systems of oppression develop in relation to our socio-historical context (Ehrenreich & English, 1973). Western society has a history of the pathologization and the construction of certain groups of people (i.e., women, people of color) rendering them as, unnatural or mentally ill (Ehrenreich & English, 1973; Withers, 2012). Likewise, transgender people have historically been pathologized and treated as if they were mentally ill, resulting in issues of stigma and misconceptions and discrimination (Bockting et al., 2013). The prevalent nature of cisgenderism has contributed to the normalization and manifestation of the

pathologization of transgender identities, because it functions with the belief that those who are not cisgender are deviant and unnatural (Lennon & Mistler, 2014). This pathological belief that there is something wrong and unnatural with transgender identities still lingers in our society. For example, one participant expressed:

I feel like a lot of people have this predisposed, ideology, that if there is something quote unquote wrong with someone that they have every right to just hurt them and they are completely justified because of the fact, that, that person had something wrong with them. (participant two)

This statement further highlights the pervasive nature of cisgenderism in our society, which allows and justifies discrimination against transgender people (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). The participants in this study had a clear understanding of how their gender identity has been perceived as unnatural and wrong, which caused them to live under constant worry and stress about how others might mistreat them and feel justified in doing so.

Disability Identity

Findings in this study also revealed how living with a disability is also impacted by society. Like transgender identity, disability identity has been socially constructed, pathologized, and subjected to oppressive social mindsets (Withers, 2012). Findings in this study revealed that the participants also face challenges due to preconceived and fixed ableist notions in society about their disabilities. Like their gender identity, the participants expressed statements about their disability being placed in boxes. For example, participant eight stated: “I do say there are boxes that we are placed upon for people who have disabilities.” In our society, disability has also been placed in a binary

(i.e. abled/disabled), which can act to reinforce ableist beliefs. Similar to the concept of cisgenderism, ableism perpetuates discrimination and misconceptions against disabled people and deems disabled bodies as less valuable (Longmore, 1995).

Furthermore, these beliefs have been tied to the medical model that seeks to “fix” or “cure” people with disabilities (Longmore, 2003). Many of the participants in this study expressed how people should not try to fix or cure their disability. For example, participant three stated: “Accept people for who they are and not like be shit heads where “autism is bad and we need to cure it.” This abelist notion of disability has the potential to create a misconception that an individual’s disabilities place restrictions on what they can and cannot do. Participants in this study challenged this conception, explaining their disability doesn't disable them, rather its societal misconceptions of disability that are disabling. For example, participant one expressed: “Society just labels us to make sure that we are different. And they don't really care to get to know you...I wish people would get to know me instead of being judgmental.” Similar to what the participants in this study voiced, findings from other research has shown that disabled people have expressed frustration and anger with ableism, because it devalues disability identities and views a disability as a deficit (Keller & Galgay, 2010; Palombi, 2012).

Existing in a capitalistic society can act as an oppressive structure for those who are not able-bodied. Like people who identify as transgender, people with disabilities often face challenges succeeding in a society that often devalues them. When asked to share a positive aspect about their disability, one participant specifically expressed anger towards the way capitalism in society functions to devalue people with disabilities:

It's hard because, people want to hear, like, people want to hear like, uh, a capitalism version of that, like " what about your disability doesn't hold you back from being a productive member of society." It's like my disability does hold me back from being a productive member of your version of society, because your version of society inherently devalues me. (participant eight)

This statement paints an understanding of how the society of which we are a part sustains oppression and places barriers on those who are not capable of competing in a patriarchal and capitalistic society. It underlines how heteronormative discourse is dominant in shaping what certain bodies are permitted to do, especially those who are not cisgender or able-bodied. As Withers (2012) stated:

the necessity of recognizing and relating to [interlocking oppression], that disability is a social construction, that the disability label is imposed as a tactic to retain power and social control and that we have to create space for each other both in terms of acknowledging our lived experiences and ensuring accessibility. (p. 119)

Intersecting Identities and Society

Findings in this study revealed that the participants were aware they existed and positioned with multiple marginalized identities. Many participants spoke about their gender identity and disability in an intersectional way. The similarities between how society sees gender and disability are compounding and can be invalidating to one's experiences, however participants in this study seemed to resist and negotiate these notions. Transgender theory posits that awareness of intersectional identities can allow individuals to respond to the social forces that impact one's identities (Somerville, 2000).

This intersectional approach to marginalized identities helps to consider the accounts of lived experiences through which individuals understand and negotiate these identities (Namaste, 2009). For example, as one participant expressed:

I feel like people need to stop thinking that a disability means that there is something wrong with you...and I feel like in that same sense of being transgender in any regard, disability, my disability does not make me a bad person. (participant two)

This statement highlights how the participant resisted and negotiated the pathologization of both their identities. As a result of the intersectional awareness, other participants communicated their struggle to separate their own beliefs about their identities from what society was perpetuating. Explaining how eventually they realized there was nothing inherently bad about them as a person, rather there was something inherently wrong with how people interact with differences.

In sum, this theme about society and identity highlights the importance of understanding and acknowledging the barriers transgender youth with disabilities face associated with how they are perceived in society. This finding supports and extends the research in disability and transgender studies because it highlights ways identities are socially constructed, pathologized, and subjected to structural inequalities within our society (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Thompson, Bryson, & De Castell, 2001). In this study, participants were subjected to the pathologization of both their identities, as well as, social constructs and structural barriers associated with ableism and cisgenderism. Intersectional theory has been useful to understand transgender experience because it allows for the examination of how multiple categories overlap (Monro and Richardson,

2010; Nagoshi and Brzuzy, 2010). In this study, it helps illuminate how dimensions of inequality are attached to cultural meanings of gender and disabilities.

The consequences of disability and gender categories should not be understood independently from one another because these categories are multiplicative and mutually coexist. For example, disability and transgender gender should not be conceptualized through a mono lens such as “disability+transgender” rather they could be thought of in terms of “gendered ableism.” Understanding this theme with an intersectional lens shifts the focus from the pathological “unnatural” and “abnormal” conceptualizations of transgender and disability identity and provides a lens for considering institutionalized inequalities (Zinn & Dill, 2000). It also helps recognize societal oppressive structures opens up an understanding of how cisgenderism and ableism can affect transgender youth with disabilities in society and in school. Specifically, these findings call attention to the need to understand how transgender youth’s identities are at constant odds with fitting into a society that was not made for them. Overall, this finding can help inform an intersectional approach to understanding transgender youth with disabilities lived experiences, because it makes visible aspects of inequality that have been linked to meanings of gender and disability in our society (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010).

Theme Three: Conflation of Identities

Findings from this study showed how identities are conflated and at odds with society’s misconceptions. Many participants spoke about how people blamed their gender identity on their disability. As expressed by participant seven: “I’ve had people also be like, “you’re just saying you’re trans, because you are retarded.” The participants were adamant that having a disability does not mean that person is less capable of determining

their gender identity and it does not mean their disability caused their gender identity. Many of the participants spoke about their gender identity being discredited because of their disability. People assumed that having autism meant the participants couldn't coherently think straight about their gender identity.

The misconceptions towards disabled people meant that people struggled to understand how they could even identify as transgender. These fallacies acted as a way to invalidate their gender identity. As described previously, societal misconceptions of disabled bodies as being non-normative has influenced how the gender identity of disabled people are seen and understood. Another social misconception relates to the ways in which transgender people and disabled people have been sexualized in our society. On one hand, people with disabilities have been de-sexualized and perceived as not capable of existing as a sexual being, which acts to maintain ablenormativity and the pathology of disabled existence (Smith, 2011). On the other hand, transgender people have been hyper-sexualized (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010).

Many participants in this study also made comments about how their transgender identity is not a fetish and should not be sexualized. In our society, transgender identities have been fetishized, which acts to invalidate and devalue their identity. The American Psychological Association Task Force defined sexualization as:

A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or

sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a is the nonconsensual nature of sexualization that distinguishes it from healthy sexuality. (p.2)

These invalidating views of disabled bodies and transgender bodies are at odds with each other. It is not unreasonable to think that since disabled bodies have been constructed as nonsexual, that transgender identity of disabled people is not accepted and problematic. As Shildrick (2013) asserts, “Both sex and disability threaten to breach certain bodily boundaries that are essential to categorical certainty and, as such, they provoke widespread anxiety” (p. 3).

This conflation of identities participants experienced not only acts to invalidate their identity, but also further highlights intersectional barriers placed on them due to problematic understandings of disability and transgender identities. This finding contributes to expanding our understanding of the unique forms of intersectional oppression that transgender people with disabilities experience. As Smith (2011) asserts “an awareness around the interconnectedness of the construction and pathology of queer and/or disabled people may be the best way to start to transform the harm that has been done and continues to be perpetuated” (p. 126).

This theme shows how ideas about gender identity and disability identity can get re-produced in school. Thinking with intersectionality helps to acknowledge the ways gender identity and disability intersect, which allows for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of how identities can overlap and influence educational experiences. It can also help alleviate multiple and contradictory meanings that society has placed on gender identity and disability identity, because it shows how certain identities can be can be simultaneously positioned. Thinking with transgender theory

allows for the sexualization of transgender identities to be undone, because it understands gender as fluid and a natural occurrence in nature.

Theme Four. Mental Health

The stigma and misconceptions in relation to gender identity and disability can have detrimental effects on one's overall wellbeing. When individuals do not "fit" established gender norms they face stigma and misconceptions, which can affect one's mental health (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). While this study did not ask questions around mental health issues, the participants in this study all expressed struggling with depression and anxiety in ways that impacted their academics, relationships, and attendance in high school. For example:

When I was really depressed, I dropped off, so I just couldn't do their standards and therefore, I failed. Like just miserable. I used to have a 4.0 GPA, kept that up until I got ridiculously depressed. And I tried to commit suicide two times.
(participant six)

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that addressing mental health needs is of critical importance. While the mental health issues participants struggled with impacted their academics and attendance in negative ways, three of the participants specifically spoke about engaging in self-harm and suicidal thoughts because of depression they experienced. Many of the participants spoke about how their depression and anxiety caused them to stop going to school or choose to enroll in an alternative program. Out of the nine participants in this study, five of them dropped out of school completely and six had attended some form of alternative school, because they were unable to manage in a traditional school setting.

Findings from this study are in alignment with current research on mental health of transgender people as earlier in this dissertation (e.g. Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). In another recent study, Reisner et al. (2015) compared the mental wellbeing between non-transgender youth and transgender youth. The study revealed that transgender youth were more likely to be diagnosed with depression (50.6%) compared to non-transgender youth (20.6 %); experience anxiety (26.7 %) compared to non-transgender youth (10%) and engage in self-harming activities (16.7 %) compared to non-transgender youth (4.4%). While many transgender people struggle with mental health issues, it is important to emphasize that transgender identity itself should not be treated as a mental illness. Julia Serano (2007) asserts:

[h]uman beings show a large range of gender and sexual diversity, so there is no legitimate reason for any form of cross-gender behaviour or identity to be categorized as a mental disorder (p.160).

Findings from this study are consistent with the current research on the mental health issues transgender individuals face. The statements from the participants in this study illuminate how mental health issues can compound ones' high school experience. Transgender theory emphasizes and centers the importance of the lived experiences of transgender people, which draws attention to the realities that these youth exist in and how mental health can impact their school experiences. Not acknowledging these lived experiences and attending to the mental health needs of transgender youth could lead to continued high rates of untreated depression, anxiety, and suicide. Centering and recognizing the lived experiences of transgender youth can help challenge and change educational practices.

Family Rejection/Abuse

While this study did not ask questions pertaining to home life and family, participants frequently expressed rejection and abuse from their own family members, which ultimately impacted their emotional wellbeing and high school experience. For example, one participant spoke about how their mother's rejection impacted their wellbeing:

In my home it was less like physical abuse and more like mental emotional abuse and manipulation. There were times I was considering just throwing myself into traffic because it was just so bad. It just got to a point where I felt like a burden, I felt like it would be better if I was just thrown into traffic and nobody would care.
(participant four)

Another participant described the torture their stepmom inflicted on them for being transgender:

I literally went through the actual definition of torture. Like tied up. And she basically cut stretch marks into my stomach. I mean with every single cut that she put into my stomach, she had some sort of term, some sort of words to say about it. (participant two)

In addition to the issues described above, all participants who were experiencing homelessness spoke about rejection or abuse from their family. Participants, who dropped out of high school, also spoke about abuse or rejection from their family. Which suggests that family rejection/abuse is a factor that contributes to negative outcomes. Another interesting insight from this study was how school acted as a safe space. Some of the participants, such as participant three, spoke about how they viewed school as a safe

place away from their abusive families: “High school was the really only place I was safe. Abusive family basically. Very very abusive family...”

Little research has been conducted on the impact of family rejection on mental health outcomes for transgender youth (e.g. Grossman, D’Augelli, & Salter 2006; Varjas et al. 2008; Klein & Golub, 2016). However, findings in this study are consistent with the emerging research that shows family rejection and abuse is common for transgender youth and can lead to negative consequences (Grossman, D’Augelli, & Salter 2006; Varjas et al. 2008). For example, using data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), Klein and Golub (2016) found rejection from family members was a significant factor when predicting mental health outcomes for transgender youth (i.e. depression, anxiety, self-harm). Furthermore, in 2015, the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE), examined the experiences of transgender youth across high schools and found participants who were rejected by their family were more likely to have experienced homelessness (40%) compared to participants who were not rejected (22%) and were more likely to have attempted suicide (49%) compared to participants who were not rejected (33%).

The lived experiences the youth in this study described warrant further investigation. Findings from this study extend previous research on family rejection and abuse that transgender youth face. It also emphasizes the need to strengthen the link between school and home support networks, as well as, to ensure that the school community is providing a safe place for these youth. Findings from this study, as well as findings from previous research, indicate a need to recognize the multitude of rejection and abuse a transgender youth might face from their family. Understanding the atrocities

that these youth face is a step towards supporting their needs. While this study helps to contribute to the current research, a better understanding of the role of family is critical in the development of effective mental health services for this population.

Theme Five: Changes in School

The participants in this study discussed problems related to schools including: (1) health education, (2) designated spaces, (3) teacher education, (4) access to language, (5) lack of supportive and inclusive curriculum about transgender youth and (6) struggles and barriers in elementary and middle school.

Health Education

All participants in this study voiced the need and the want for health education classes to address transgender sexual health issues. They spoke about how sexual health education is geared towards straight people and cisgender people. For example, when asked about changes in school one participant expressed:

I hated all the PE and the health courses. The health courses because they were so inaccurate and so exclusive and weren't inclusive on any like thing that I like was interested in like trans health and understanding my body in a way that I could actually understand it in a sort of removed binary sense, that wasn't clicking with me or making any sense. (participant one)

Research on transgender people shows the majority do not receive sex education that pertains to their health needs (UNESCO, 2016). In line with what the participants expressed in this study, sex education content in high school often focuses on straight and cisgender people and excludes transgender people. In 2013, The GLSEN National School Climate found less than five percent of LGBT students had health classes that

incorporated LGBT-related topics. Similarly, in a study conducted by Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), found LGBT youth either did not receive any sex education or had limited sex education that was focused on heterosexual topics. Other research has emphasized that the omission of gender diverse health needs in schools leaves youth to depend on unreliable sources such as the Internet or their peers (Robinson et al. 2014). Similarly, participants in this study expressed that because they were not taught topics related to transgender health, it left them relying on their peers for information. Ultimately not having correct information about one's body can lead to misunderstandings and negative health outcomes (Bhana, 2016; Robinson, 2012).

The findings in this study are consistent with current research and indicate a need for schools to address the health needs of transgender youth in health education classes. While it did not specifically come up in this study, it is important to recognize that while the sexual health needs of transgender youth is neglected in schools, so have the sexual health needs of people with disabilities. Disabled people have historically been excluded from learning about sexual health (Davis, 2000). Recognizing that the intersection of these two identities have resulted in exclusion from knowledge is concerning. Not attending to the sexuality education needs of transgender youth with disabilities not only constitutes a form of ableism, but also a form of cisgenderism.

Access to Language

Many of the participants spoke about how they did not know they could be transgender, because they did not know that a word existed. They spoke about how it wasn't until they had access to gender diverse terminologies that they finally had a way to describe themselves, in a way that made sense. Through their stories, participants

illuminated how identity is bound up with the discourse and language that is available.

For example, as expressed by participant five:

When I was much younger, I was constantly asking that question, But I'm a girl right? Because, I didn't know I could be anything else. I didn't know I was allowed. It wasn't till later when I actually could identify, because I actually had a word for it now. Back then I didn't have a word. I didn't have a way of explaining what I was feeling. (participant five)

Transgender theory highlights that knowledge seeking is a primary beginning stage in identity development. This is characterized by a person's desire to seek out as much information that can be found about their identity (Middleton, Ergüner-Tekinalp, Williams, Stadler, & Dow, 2011). Participants in this study did not have access to that information, which resulted in a delayed recognition of a way to describe their gender identity. Until they reached high school and met other people like them, participants experienced little to no exposure to transgender terminologies.

Not having access to knowledge can have a negative impact on identity development of people who identify as transgender, resulting in low self-esteem and confusion about their identity (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010; Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012). Findings from this study also revealed that until they had access to language, participants in this study lived in an enigma about who they are. Furthermore, participants in this study also expressed that they thought something wrong with them because they did not have a word to describe themselves: "I just thought that there must be something wrong with me. It got to a point where I was like, there is nothing wrong with me, I am just not cis." (participant three)

Findings from this study highlight the importance and power language has on ones' identity. Language is a vehicle for expressing our ideas, thoughts and feelings. Not having access to a way to express ones' true gender identity compounded by societal gendered expectations, left participants in constant conflict about their identity. Perhaps exposure and knowledge of different gender identities as well as recognition of gender as fluid would allow youth to explore their gender identity in a way that was not restricted by a gender dichotomy.

School Spaces

The importance of accessing school spaces was echoed across participants in this study. The participants in this study were restricted and limited on where they could go in the school. Many participants expressed problems with school facilities that separated students based on gender, such as gym classes, locker rooms, and bathrooms. Furthermore, participants would often avoid these spaces because they were not given any other options or permission to use the bathroom that matched their gender identity. This is aligned with current research and national-level debate of bathroom access, which has brought transgender experiences to the political forefront.

There are three common myths that shape the transgender bathroom debate and much of it is based on fear instead of facts. First, opponents of this debate view transgender people as predators or sex offenders, claiming that they could assault someone. On the contrary, research shows that transgender people are being assaulted in bathrooms that don't match their gender identity. In one of the largest survey of transgender people to date, 70% of respondents reported being denied access, verbally harassed, or physically assaulted in public restrooms (Minter & Daley, 2013). Second,

opponents often invalidate transgender people as needing rights, because they recognize the identity as a mental illness. As explained before, this notion of gender stems from viewing gender as binary and fixed, which perpetuates cisgenderism. Lastly, opponents of this debate have claimed that allowing children to identify as transgender is harmful. Research has shown that children start to know their gender identity by the age of 5 and by not allowing children to express their gender identity can lead to harmful consequences (Zucker, 2005).

Throughout the interviews, participants spoke about how they were impacted in school spaces by not being allowed to use the bathrooms that matched their gender identity. Participants in this study found their rights subjected to this political bathroom debate in ways that impacted their high school experiences. Most of us cisgender people don't think twice about consequences of using public bathrooms. In contrast, participants in this study all spoke about how they are subjected to discomfort and struggle with fear and worry, simply just using a bathroom. For example participant six expressed: "It's scary going into the bathrooms, because I could get punched or someone could say something." Furthermore, participants expressed avoiding other binary aspects of school spaces, such as dances and sporting events.

While transgender people have faced barriers regarding what spaces they are allowed to occupy, people with disabilities also face challenges navigating and simply being in certain spaces. In schools, the accessibility of a space can be problematic for those who are not abled bodied. Participants also spoke about how their disability impacted being in certain school spaces in addition to their transgender identity. For example, one participant with autism expressed:

It has affected various spaces in school, whether that be classes or just socializing, even like things like getting lunch and stuff like that. Like often times I would wait until lunch was uh, I would either get there early so the line wasn't as crowded or I would get there much later when the line would die down a bit, because I didn't want to be smushed around with a lot of people going and getting their lunch. That was because of my disability. I didn't like being like in cramp spaces like that especially surrounded by people. That was one aspect. It would make me feel very overwhelmed. (participant one)

While schools are supposed to be “inclusive”, this finding helps to think about how spaces can act to exclude and segregate those who are not cisgender or abled bodied. Transgender theory helps us to consider the different embodied experiences and social oppressions that are associated with having multiple social identities. In this study, the findings shine light on the intersecting constraints of occupying a space as being transgender and disabled. Transgender theory also helps to understand the lived experiences through which individuals understand and negotiate identities (Namaste, 2009). The youth in this study had to constantly consider and negotiate spaces due to their identity in ways that made them feel scared and segregated. The restrictions the youth faced in this study were a direct consequence of fixed notions of gender. Findings from this study help us consider a broader notion of accessibility by making visible the intersecting ways in which transgender bodies and disabled bodies are impacted.

Teacher Education

The experiences of transgender youth with disabilities in this study revealed, highlights a serious need for re-thinking teacher education on transgender issues.

Participants in this study expressed how on-going training and mandatory staff meetings should be required in order to inform teachers on transgender issues. Participants in this study felt schools should be developing plans to make transgender youth feel more welcome, prevent bullying and harassment, and include procedures on using pronouns.

The concerns participants in this study vocalized are consistent with current research. Teacher education programs and professional development often fail to prepare practitioners to address needs of transgender youth (Goodrich & Luke, 2009). For example, research has shown educators receive limited or no instruction on gender diversity during their preparation programs (Kearns, Mitton-Kükner & Tompkins, 2017), and few have received professional development during their career (Meyer, Taylor & Peter 2015; Marx, Roberts, & Nixon 2017). Furthermore, training programs that include “LGBT” topics, have frequently excluded transgender needs because they conflate gender identity with sexual orientation (Carroll, 2010; Case, Stewart, & Tittsworth, 2009; Green, 2010).

While participants in this study expressed the importance of teacher education around transgender issues, some participants expressed frustration with how teachers gender students. For example:

Like people in teaching and authority positions or whatever.... If they are not gendering people as they are raising people, and there not like instilling that like binary and heteronormative and cisnormative and binary normative thinking, then like people won't grow up with the ingrained in them. Children need instruction and support and guidance that isn't gendered. So, they don't grow up with that being an infrastructural aspect of how they look everything in the world.

(participant five)

Many teachers participate in unconsciously gender-biased actions without realizing it. In 2017, the Global Early Adolescent study examined how gender is learned, enforced and reinforced. The study found students are outfitted with "gender straitjackets" by the age of 10, which can result in negative consequences. These "gender straitjackets" described teacher biases associated with gender, such as which toys boys were encouraged to play with (e.g., G.I Joes) or what activities girls were encouraged to do (e.g., dress up).

Participants also spoke about how many of their teachers were indifferent towards them based on their gender identity, which made them feel ignored and not supported or valued. Other studies on transgender youth have shown teachers appear indifferent toward transgender youth and rarely intervene in harassment (McGuire et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005). Indifference can act to invalidate a person's experiences and communicates a message of approval of harassment (Bagley & D'Augelli, 2000; McGuire et al., 2010). Findings from this study suggest it is important to consider how teachers are being trained to respond to transgender issues and how to be a better ally. When educators are not adequately trained to understand and support transgender youth, they are not equipped to meet their needs. In line with transgender theory, this finding supports the need to stop placing students in a gender box with fixed expectations and helps to center marginalized voices and lived experiences.

Elementary and Middle School

While bullying and harassment among transgender youth is well documented, understanding the manifestations of when bullying emerges in transgender youth's lives

could prevent and reduce these negative experiences. Research has shown that late elementary school and early middle school are when bullying is at its highest peak (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Throughout the interviews in this study, it became clear that many of the participants had experienced bullying early on. Many of the participants spoke about how their experiences in elementary and middle school were worse than high school, in regards to being bullied by their peers. Other participants, such as participant five, spoke about verbal harassment they were subjected to: “Back when I was in middle school. I came out as gay. I got called a faggot, I got beat up a lot. Yeah. Middle school was rough.”

Findings from this study are in line with emerging research on bullying transgender youth face in elementary and in middle school. In 2012, GLSEN conducted a national survey examining elementary students’ experiences around bullying in their school. Findings revealed students who do not conform to traditional gender norms are more likely than other students to experience bullying (56% vs. 33%) and to feel less safe at school (35% vs. 15%). While participants in this study faced issues of harassment early on due to their gender identity, they also faced issues relating to their disability identity. Many of the participants expressed how their disability was the cause of being bullied in elementary school and other participants even spoke about being bullied specifically due to their intersectional identities:

It was really hard for me to make friends for a long time. I got called a lot of names, I got made fun of. I got relentlessly teased, but that was more... that was a mix of me being awful at socially interaction and also having weird things about me, like being gay or being transgender or whatever. (participant six)

Only recently has it been recognized that intersection of identities can contribute to ways, which transgender youth are subject to bullying (Garnett et al., 2014). The term intersectional bullying has been used to describe how people can be victimized for multiple marginalized identities (Daley et al., 2008). Participants in this study experienced layers of bullying because of their transgender identity and their disability identity, thus being bullied for multiple socially constructed identities.

Findings in this study not only contribute to the current research on bullying and transgender identities, but also encompass the intersectional ways in which people can experience bullying. Findings from this study indicate the importance to focus anti-bullying prevention on students in elementary school. Lastly, this finding from this study suggests it is important for schools to address anti-bullying procedures in an accurate and intersectional way. Or as one participant expressed:

When you see all of these things about anti bullying it's the kid that is like white... the heteronormative, it's always the kid that is the normal kid and that because you are bullying that kid you're bad. But if you bully the gay boy or if you bully the boy who wears the dresses or if there's this kid in special education class and you beat him up everyday, that stuff is justified, because something is wrong with "them". (participant four)

Theme Six. Difference as Strength.

Research about transgender youth has focused on negative school experiences (e.g., Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Jones et al., 2016). While this study also confirmed negative experiences, it is also important to understand positive aspects of school experiences. Throughout this study, participants spoke highly of their friendships

and viewed being different as a positive strength.

Friendships

An important theme that emerged was strong friendships.

Participants in this study described friendships as an important aspect of their high school experience. When asked about their relationships in high school, participants expressed having strong bonds with their friends and were part of a closely-knit community due to their shared experiences of being different. Participants in this study valued their friendships and spoke of them in positive ways. For example, participant four expressed: “I got a lot of respect from my friends. I have really good friends. They are really nice. They are good people. I would trust them with a lot of things. They genuinely care about me.”

In line with the research, friendships have increased importance for transgender people (Weeks, 1995) and are one way that individuals can positively experience their transgender identity (Riggle et al., 2011). When asked about the positive aspects of their transgender identity, participants spoke about how they could be themselves around their friends and characterized their friends as being able to understand them.

It helped me make a lot of friends that were similar, with similar issues....They actually really liked how I was. You know having my mental illnesses, because it...whenever I was a lot more open, it made me a very very interesting person to be around and not really in a bad way. To them it was a lot of fun being around me when I was more open about my illness. (participant four)

Research has documented the benefits of friendships for transgender youth. For example, in a qualitative study, Hines (2007) stressed the significance of friendships

between transgender individuals because transgender friends offer support, have similar experiences, and share knowledge with one another. Similarly, the participants in this study were able to find solidarity and a place to belong with people who accepted them and supported them. Participants in this study also referred to their friends as their family.

Muraco (2006) has stressed the ways in which friendships function as “intentional families” for gender and sexual minorities. Other research has documented how friendships act as “families of choice” (Weston, 1991; Hines, 2007) and can reduce social isolation for gender and sexual minorities.

Participants in this study even spoke about how grateful they were for their friends, because they were understanding and accepting of their disability. Friendships are exceptionally important people with disabilities because it helps foster a place of acceptance and belonging. Research on friendships has shown that perceived social and peer support is associated with positive well being for people with disabilities (Salmon, 2013; Müller, Peter, Cieza, & Geyh, 2012). While research has documented the importance of friendships for people with disabilities and people who are transgender, no research has examined friendship experience among transgender youth with disabilities.

The importance of friendships expressed by the participants in this study, can provide a starting point for understanding friendships that exist across transgender youth with disabilities. Findings from this study can inform an intersectional approach to understanding transgender friendship experience, because it helps to show how inequalities are used as a way to build solidarity and acceptance, which ultimately shape both transgender and disabled experience. This theme that emerged supports and extends the research on the importance of friendships, because it highlights the ways friendship

experience can help validate experiences and ones' sense of belonging in intersectional ways.

Empathy Through Difference

Findings from this study revealed participants viewed their differences as a positive strength in a way that allowed them to empathize with other marginalized people. Transgender theory suggests that the lived experiences of individuals and their negotiations of intersectional identities may empower them. When asked about the positives of identifying as transgender with a disability, participants spoke about how both their identities of being transgender and disabled empowered them to be empathetic and understand people from multiple perspectives. Through their adversity and marginalized identities, participants in this study emphasized how they were able to have an intersectional understanding of perspectives.

Research has shown believing one has shared another person's experiences can increase empathy and compassion for others (e.g., Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005; Hodges, Clark, & Myers, 2011). There is evidence the experience of discrimination can lead to increased understandings of other disadvantaged groups (e.g., Broockman & Kalla, 2016). According to Riggle et al. (2011), experiences of marginalization and discrimination can lead to an increased feeling of empathy, especially for those who live with multiple marginalized identities. In a study about LGBT people with intersecting identities, highlighted that their participants has an in-group empathetic understanding to LGBT people, as well as sensitivity to other minorities (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Similarly, participants in this study also spoke about how their intersecting identities have lead them to learn about and empathize with other oppressed populations: "I tend to

educate myself with things that I don't identify with but I know are a still a problem. I try to educate myself about racism and racial inequality, like black lives matter and that kind of stuff.” (participant four)

The findings in this study suggest that the ability to empathize with others was an important aspect of the participant’s high school experiences. Their experiences existing at the intersection of two marginalized identities allowed for a greater understanding and empathy for others with oppressed identities. This theme further highlights how participants were aware of their social positions and were able to use it as a way to understand and relate to others. Another important consideration that this theme brings up relates to the persistent deficit stereotype that people with autism lack empathy and social skills (Mazurek, 2016). As mentioned previously, four of the participants in this study had autism, all of which expressed an empathetic understanding towards differences and valued their friendships. The findings in this study challenge these societal stereotypes attached to pathological beliefs about the nature of autism and warrants further research to understand the intersectional nature of empathy and friendships across gender identity and autism.

Implications for Practice

Public schools throughout the United States should address barriers faced by transgender youth and ensure that they are provided with additional supports to be successful. Findings from this study suggest schools should consider working towards a whole school approach and develop an intersectional understanding of transgender youth needs including: (1) teacher education, (2) parent education, (3) health education, (4) inclusive curriculum, and (5) mental health services.

Teacher Education

This study indicated that it is important to focus on developing teachers who have the knowledge and skills to support youth with disabilities who identify as transgender. For many teachers, it can be a struggle to know how to best support transgender youth. Ongoing professional development in K-12 public schools needs to specifically address the needs of transgender students including those who have disabilities. To help educators build competence in supporting transgender students, several things should be considered.

First, awareness is important to overcome any biased beliefs about transgender individuals. Educators should have an understanding of “gender identity” and “sexual orientation” since these terms are commonly conflated in the LGBTQ continuum (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Hanssmann et al., 2008). Moreover, it is important for educators to understand that there is a difference between biological sex and gender. Transforming these beliefs should include frameworks such as intersectionality and transgender theory, which can allow teachers to reflect on how they view and understand identities.

Intersectionality, as a tenant of transgender theory, helps to understand this multiplicity of gender identity, which shifts the focus from a fixed dichotomy of gender towards a more inclusive understanding of gender identity. Findings in this study suggest it is important to acknowledge that structures and social constructs are not just pre-existent, rather we as a society produce them and we are responsible for how they are played out. Therefore, it is important that educators have an understanding of how cisgenderism and ableism are prevalent in our every day life and schools. Knowledge of this can help influence school

environments that are more inclusive of different types of gender identities and those with intersecting identities.

Second, educators should critically reflect on ways in which gender organizes their lives and be open to challenging their own biases and gender stereotypes. Critical reflection involves questioning and critiquing assumptions about teaching and learning through oneself, schools, and society (Dewey, 1933). Moreover, Dewey (1933) explains “reflective thought” as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). As previously discussed, many scholars have examined ways schools enforce normative notions of gender (e.g. Byron & Hunt 2017; Frohard-Dourlent, 2015). It is important to recognize schools are sites for cisgenderism, where binary gender identities are enforced and reproduced (Pascoe 2007; Payne 2010). With this in mind, it is critical for educators to examine, reflect and challenge their own assumptions and biases regarding people with marginalized identities. By challenging these assumptions educators can help create a learning environment where students are not gendered or stereotyped (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010). Some suggested reflective questions teachers might engage with to understand where their beliefs come from could include:

1. How do my biases and/or stereotypes affect my ability to act as a skilled and ethical educator?
2. How can I work to unlearn any biases/stereotypes I might have about a diverse population?

3. Can I reflect and identifying any stereotypes about transgender individuals that could have been formed from early experiences? (Byrd & Hays, 2012)

Third, it is important to connect educators with transgender organizations through their local communities (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010). Meyer (2010) urged that it is important for schools to identify key allies in their communities that can help to provide professional knowledge. If there are not organizations within the schools' community, there are organizations that schools can connect with online such as: GLSEN, Welcoming Schools, and Teaching Tolerance. These nationally recognized organizations provide resources for staff professional development. While it is important for schools to engage in professional development and build awareness of transgender issues, ultimately it must start in teacher licensure programs. If the field of education is committed to equity and inclusion, then teacher education programs must prepare educators to understand gender in more complex ways. Teacher education programs need to especially address transgender issues in their preparation coursework. While some teacher preparation programs include gender diversity inclusive content, there has been no national effort made to include this content (GLSEN, 2014). Teacher preparation programs rarely acknowledge gender diversity (GLSEN, 2014; Letts, 2002), which can leave educators unprepared to work and support such populations. If universities fail to address these issues in their preparation programs, then the risk of consequences of cisgenderism is a real threat to transgender students in a K-12 public school. When educators are able support transgender students it can improve students' sense of belonging and over all sense of wellbeing, which can lead to increased academic achievement and quality of life (McGuire et al., 2010).

Inclusive Language

Educators should reflect on the language used in classrooms and strive to use inclusive language. The language we use can act to reinforce gender binaries and ableism. Inclusion involves thinking about how language can work to exclude, marginalize and oppress people (Withers, 2012). Acknowledging and including pronouns helps to disrupt cisnormativity and create a more accepting environment. Educational professionals should use the preferred pronoun for a transgender youth. For example, they/them/theirs, his/him/he or her/she/hers. It is important staff consider the language they use and make efforts to use language that does not reinforce the gender binary. Staff could reflect on the use of language when working with students. For example, instead of addressing the class as “boy and girls”, “you guys” or “ladies and gentlemen” the teacher could address the class in a more gender neutral and inclusive way, such as, “students”, “everybody” or “folks”. Additionally, using gender inclusive visuals in the classroom would be another way to help to create a more accepting environment. For example, “All Gender Welcome” or photos of students who do not fit gender norms and stereotypes.

While it is important to recognize the language we use regarding gender, it is also important to recognize ableist language. As mentioned before ableist language refers to any word that acts to devalue a person with a disability (Palombi, 2012). People may not even realize they are using ableist terms, because many of these terms have been ingrained in our everyday language. Examples of these words include but are not limited to: lame, crazy, stupid, insane, retard. Overall, it is important teachers be reflective of the words they use in the classroom to ensure acceptance and inclusion of all identities.

Parent Education

It is important that educators are aware of the risks transgender youth face when their parents are unsupportive. The experiences of the participants in this study revealed a serious need for parent education and awareness around gender identity and transgender issues. While this study did not ask questions relating to the participants family during the interview process, the majority of the participants expressed experiencing abuse and rejection from family members. Considering the findings in past research and in this dissertation study, schools should consider how to assist the process of family acceptance.

A parent's negative reaction to their child's transgender identity could be based on inaccurate information about gender identity. Sharing the consequences rejection has on transgender youth may help encourage parents to be more accepting (World Health Organization, 2014). Also, sharing the research on the positive impact of parent support could be helpful. Research has shown that parent support can help reduce negative outcomes experienced by transgender youth. In a study conducted by TransPlus in 2012, results indicated parents who were supportive of their children who identified as transgender, reported higher self-esteem and better mental health such as, less depression and fewer suicide attempts compared to those without strong parental support.

Furthermore, it is important parents have access to information and training regarding gender identity. Schools can help connect parents with local resources or support groups. Additionally, schools can provide families with referrals to local resources like mental health services and/or local nonprofits. However, it is important to emphasize that the students' safety and confidentiality should ultimately be the priority.

Educators and administrators should only work with families towards acceptance if they have permission from the student.

Mental Health Services

Findings from this study indicate a crucial need to attend to the mental health of transgender youth. It is important that transgender youth have access to a supportive and informed school counselor. School counselors are in a unique position to support transgender students, since they serve a vital role in supporting and advocating for students. School counselors are often the first person a gender minority student comes out to (Byrd & Hays, 2012). Research has shown that often, school counselors feel they are not prepared to support the mental health needs of transgender youth. For example, in a study with 91 transgender students in high school, 71% of the students reported telling a school counselor about their gender identity. However, out of the 71% who disclosed their gender identity, 26% reported being rejected by their high school counselor (Jones & Hillier, 2013). Schools need to assure that counselors receive training to support transgender students and their mental health needs. There are several things school counselors should consider to help ensure that they are creating a safe and welcoming environment for transgender youth.

First, school counselors should help support the mental health needs of transgender youth. One way to provide support is to organize campus support groups to help transgender youth feel connected and have a safe place to express themselves. Also, counselors should help in connecting youth to local services, groups, and resources to provide ongoing support. Gonzalez and McNulty (2010) emphasized school counselors

should research local organizations in the community and be able to connect transgender students to appropriate outside resources and services.

Second, school counselors can help foster a supportive environment across the school. For example, counselors can help sponsor school-based clubs such as the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or Genders & Sexualities Alliance (GSA). Counselors can also play a role in being supportive of transgender national days of recognition including: Day of Silence, Ally Week, and No Name-Calling Week. Third, school counselors should embed transgender issues into their school counseling curricula, which can help cisgender students be more accepting and understand the importance of being allies to transgender individuals (Singh & Burnes, 2009).

Heath Education

Findings from this study suggest schools need to include heath education content that extends beyond the gender binary, inclusive of transgender needs. Inclusive heath education can help youth understand gender identity with age-appropriate and medically accurate information (GLSEN, 2014). A comprehensive sex education from K-12 not only helps to provide an inclusive sex education but also ensures positive sexual health outcomes for all youth. In addition, a comprehensive sex education programs provide medically accurate and age-appropriate information as well as information on sexual orientation and gender identity. Comprehensive and inclusive sex education can also help reduce negative experiences that transgender youth face in school (GLSEN, 2016). For example, in a survey of 1,200 middle and high school students throughout California, students whose health classes expressed support for LGBTQ people were less likely to report bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity (GLSEN, 2016).

Additionally, inclusive sex education can reduce misconceptions that have been tied to transgender identities because it recognizes that transgender identities are a “natural human variation, and not disease or mental illness” (Dickey, James, & Askini, 2009). With considerations from results from this study and past research, schools should move towards addressing the health needs of all students in age appropriate and comprehensive ways that are going to build understandings of themselves as well as other populations.

Inclusive Curriculum

Curricular approaches are critical for ensuring and creating inclusion in schools. Curriculum that only represents cisgender and able bodies can create exclusion and misunderstandings of those who are not cisgender or able bodied. It is important schools are aware of able-bodied/heteronormative assumptions embedded in the curriculum. Transgender students are often absent from curricular materials (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen 2013; Sausa 2005). Research has shown that when transgender identities are included in curriculum, students have reported that they feel safer and experience a more positive school environment (McGuire et al., 2010). Similarly, another study found exposure to gender diverse students through curriculum, increased awareness of oppression and decreased discrimination towards transgender youth (Burdge, 2007). More recently, GLSEN (2016) found that curricular representation of LGBTQ people resulted in more supportive middle and high school environment. Other research has shown that curricular materials that include gender identity beyond the female/male binary contributed to transgender youths’ senses of belonging in school (Bittner, Ingrey, & Stamper 2016; Miller 2015).

Schall and Kauffmann (2003) recommended these topics be addressed throughout K-12. The organizations mentioned before, such as the Welcoming Schools Guide and the Safe School Coalition have also recommended inclusion of LGBTQ curriculum should start in elementary school and last throughout high school. It is also important to highlight, that while transgender identities are absent from the curriculum, so have people with disabilities (Cheng, & Beigi, 2011). Not representing people with disabilities in the curriculum can also perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions about disabilities (Ho, 2007). Overall, it is important that schools carefully select curriculum materials that include a wider representation of diversity.

Implications for Research

Based on the findings of this study, there are multiple suggestions for future research that could help researchers gain an understanding about the needs of transgender youth with disabilities. These suggestions for future research include: (a) studies focusing on diverse samples, (b) studies exploring educators' perspectives, (c) studies exploring family perspectives, (d) studies focusing on certain disabilities, (e) studies exploring family rejection and (e) studies utilizing other frameworks.

Studies Focusing on Diverse Samples

Insights from transgender individuals with disabilities across diverse samples would enable researchers to have a deeper understanding of intersecting impacts. For example, future research on transgender youth with disabilities might consider examining how the intersection of other identities, such as ethnicities (i.e. African Americans, Native Americans) can impact experiences. Furthermore, examining specific geographic locations, such as rural and suburban might offer new perspectives. Many of the

participants in this study reported knowing their gender identity at a young age. While this study focused on high school aged youth, it would be beneficial to understand the perceptions of younger individuals in middle and elementary school. This study did not directly inquire about socioeconomic factors, which could help add to an understanding of the lived experiences of this population. Several participants disclosed economic stressors relating to being in the foster care system. Future research should examine socioeconomic factors, which could help social programs in assisting transgender youth with disabilities.

Studies Exploring Educators' Perspectives

Understanding the perceptions from teachers working with these individuals might have much to offer. Many students in this study mentioned teachers who were indifferent to their needs. Exploring insights from educators to understand their experiences working with transgender youth could help inform teacher professional development trainings. Future research could examine barriers and challenges teachers face and better understand the characteristics of supportive teachers. One particular area of note for future research is in the arena of understanding what could be learned from English teachers. Almost all participants in this study expressed they felt most supported by their English teacher and specifically around being assisted in exploring ways in which to express their feelings and experiences through literature. Researching the factors around different subjects in schools and how teachers of different subjects might respond differently to transgender youth may yield insightful information.

Studies Exploring Family Perspectives

To better understand transgender youth's experiences, studies on non-accepting family members as well as accepting family members would provide beneficial insights. Studies on non-accepting family members could explore factors related to their unaccepting beliefs and attitudes and how it impacts transgender youth. Considering that many of the participants in this study experienced abuse and rejection from family members, research on supportive family members would help shine light on factors related to their accepting beliefs as well as how their support impacts their child. This could include conducting focus groups or interviews with family members of transgender youth with disabilities.

Studies Focusing on Autism

While this study did not specifically recruit participants with autism, the majority of participants in this study expressed that they identified with having autism. A growing number of research has noted a link between autism and transgender identity (e.g. Janssen, Huang & Duncan, 2016; Pasterski, Gilligan & Curtis, 2014; Shumer et al., 2016). One consideration is how individuals on the autism spectrum tend to be less influenced by societal expectations. Those with autism may be less susceptible to believing in binary gender identities and more readily identify as transgender. Some of the participants in this study expressed how their autism helped them accept their gender identity. Future research should explore possible relationships between autism and gender identity. Caution should be made not to conflate or pathologize the two identities.

Studies utilizing other frameworks

It is also important for researchers to consider how studies are designed. While this study utilized a more traditional phenomenological approach, there are other approaches to inquiry that the researcher might consider, such as Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) or a narrative approach, which could help to challenge conventional ways of thinking about research. Some of the most valuable research does not involve the quantification of data and the application of statistical methods to determine casual relationships. Such methods have given us a great deal, but they are far from the whole story. Furthermore, including other theoretical lenses, such as Critical Theory, Standpoint Theory, pragmatism or posthumanism could offer new perspectives, which challenge template forms of knowledge. For example a study utilizing a posthumanism lens, might examine how the materiality of disabled transgender bodies are located in the intra-actions of human and non-human assemblages. Specifically, drawing on assemblage would help map the social-cultural-material influences through which transgender disabled bodies are experienced in high school. Lastly, while this study used photography as a data source, future research could consider other forms of data representation, such as poetry and other art forms that engage readers emotionally (Piercy & Benson, 2005). Other forms of data representation such as art, helps to extend beyond the constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that there wise would be inexpressible.

Limitations

There were limitations in this study that are important to explain. First, all of the interviews were conducted over a two-month time frame, which only provides a glimpse

of the participants' experiences. Second, the majority of the participants were White. As a result, their experiences may be different compared to other ethnicities and cannot be generalized. Third, geographically, this study was also conducted in urban areas that are considerably more liberal, compared to rural parts of the United States. Therefore, these findings may not be comparable to youth living in other areas, especially areas that are considered conservative. Fourth, participants volunteered to participate in this study. The perspective of those willing to share their perspective, excludes accounts from those who may be reluctant to talk about their experiences. It is also important to mention that while conducting the interviews, some of the locations were expectantly noisy, although this did not appear to interfere with any of the participant's responses, it is still possible the environment and noise interfered with their responses. Furthermore, the validity of phenomenological research methods depends on the unbiased analysis and participation of the researcher. Although the researcher engaged in epoche and journaled thoughts and assumptions/biases, it is impossible to completely clear oneself of these influences.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter offered a discussion of the study's key findings, limitation, significance and implications for research and practice. Findings in this dissertation illuminate the lived experiences of transgender youth with disabilities. This dissertation sought to bring attention to the intersection of gender and disability through the lived experiences of nine participants. This study offers an account of how intersecting marginalized identities impact high school experiences. Furthermore, this research offers a possibility for utilizing transgender theory and intersectionality in understanding high school experiences for transgender youth with disabilities. This approach helps to

challenge an ideological view of gender and disability and opens up an understanding of students living with intersecting marginalized identities. Moreover, it points towards how educators can change and challenge their practices in ways that will help support transgender youth with disabilities. In terms of research, this study contributes one of only a few examinations of the intersections of disability and gender identity as experienced by students in high school. The findings in this study support important implications for changes to our schools, professional development, and teacher education programs. This study is just one example of how important gathering a deeper understanding of intersecting identities can be. While more research is needed to better understand how to support transgender youth with disabilities, these lives cannot afford to wait. Immediate attention and action in our school systems is needed.

If you are just looking at the big picture and seeing this big bush, that's all you are going to see, is the bush as a whole. But society is just not one bush. It's all these little individual leaves that all need their different care. And I feel like if you don't give each of those leaves their care, then they will eventually wither out and they will die. People need to understand that. (Participant Three)



Figure 15. Participant three's photo of big bush.

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Recruitment Flyer

WANTED: This study wants to hear your voice, experiences and perspectives in order to inform and empower research and practice.

Express your high school experiences identifying as transgender with a disability

Participant criteria:

- Age: 14-22
- Identify as transgender
- Identify with having a disability or have a diagnosed disability

What would I have to do?

- Participate in 3 audio-recorded interviews with open-ended questions asking about your experiences in high school.
- Photograph things in nature that represent your identity or experiences (camera will be provided).

Confidentiality:

- All information will be kept confidential.
- All identifying information will be changed with a pseudonym.

Voluntary nature of study:

- Taking part in this study is voluntary.
- You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time.

Benefits:

- Your voice and experiences can help inform research and practice.
- You will also be given a \$20 Visa gift certificate.

Where:

- We will decide together to make sure it is a location you are comfortable with.

Interested?

- You can email me at aingram@uoregon.edu or call me at 214-681-8081.

More about this study: This study looks to gain insights into how the lived experiences and intersections of transgender and disability identity impact high school experiences. The aim is to understand the ways in which marginalized identities influence lived experiences. It is vital to include the voices of transgender youth with disabilities in research. My goal is to offer a more complete picture of the barriers transgender youth with disabilities face and how they persist to inform future research and practice.

Informed Consent: Student Interview Form
Phenomenological Study of Transgender Youth with Disabilities
High School Experiences

The purpose of this research study is to gain an in depth understanding of the experiences of transgender youth with disabilities in high school to better understand barriers they might face. You were selected as a possible participant because you have a documented disability and have identified as a transgender to a school personnel or local organization. I would like to interview you to learn about your experiences in high school identifying as transgender and having a disability. The questions I will ask will be about your gender and disability identity and your experiences in high school. Additionally, I will provide you with a disposable camera and asked you to take photos of things in nature the represent your experiences and/or identity.

- Your participation is voluntary. You can choose to participate in this study or not. You are also free to stop your involvement in the project at any time.
- There are minimal risks for participating. Some of the questions we will ask are of a personal nature. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.
- I will interview you in person three times over the time span of three weeks. Expected to last from 45 to 60 minutes but may last as long as 90 minutes for a total time of 270 minutes.
- I will audio record our interview session. You will be asked not to use your name or to use a pseudonym to safeguard confidentiality.
- All records of the interview (i.e., audio recordings, field notes, photographs) will be destroyed after the project is completed. Therefore, there is a minimal risk of a loss of confidentiality.
- When I write up what we learn from talking with you, I will remove your real name to keep your identity private.
- There is always the possibility that information could be lost or stolen and confidentiality could be breached, which could pose social risks (e.g. social stigma, chance of being ostracized or rejected).
- Participation in the study may raise a minimal psychological or emotional risk related to answering questions in the interviews (e.g., you could feel embarrassment, stress talking about yourself, triggering of past emotional experiences).
- Your relationship with the UO and /or organization you were recruited from will not be impacted by your choice to participate or not.
- There are no anticipated costs to participate in this study and no alternatives to participation.
- While you may not benefit individually from participating in this study, it is important that you know you are providing input that will potentially have educational impacts for other youth who also identify as having a disability and being transgender.

- You will be provided with a \$20.00 VISA gift card for participating in the all three interviews. All three interviews must be completed to receive payment.
- You will be provided with a copy of this form.

We will protect your confidentiality to the best of our ability and will not share any information collected with your parents or any organization involved with this research. Access to the records will be limited to the researchers in this study. The only exception to this is if we suspect imminent harm to yourself or others. The research team includes individuals who are mandatory reporters. If the research team has reasonable cause to suspect abuse or neglect of a child or adult, a report may be required under Oregon State Law. In such a case, the research team may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

If you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact Angela Ingram (214) 681-8081 or via email at aingram@uoregon.edu at the University of Oregon. If you have any questions about your rights to participate in the study, call the Human Subjects Compliance Office at the University of Oregon, (541) 346-2510. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

By signing this form you indicate that you (a) have read and understand all of these points, (b) are willing to participate, (c) understand that your participation is voluntary, (d) can choose to stop your participation at any time, (e) have received a copy of this form, and (f) are not giving up any legal rights or claims.

Name (Please print)

Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview Protocol 1:

Thank you for participating in these three interviews with me. Today I want to get to know you and talk about your experiences in high school. To give you some information about me, I am a current PhD student and a former special education teacher. I am interested in your perspectives as a young adult with a disability who identifies as transgender. Remember that your participation in this interview is voluntary. If you do not want to answer any questions, you do not need to give me a reason. Any questions before we start?

1. Please tell me about how you define your gender identity. What words, pronouns or adjectives best represent your gender identity?
2. Tell me a little bit about being in high school.
 - a. What grade are you in?
 - b. What is your favorite class?
 - c. What is your least favorite class?
3. What do you like best about high school?
 - a. What are some of the things that you are good at in school?
4. What do you like least about high school?
 - a. What are some of the things that are difficult for you?
5. Are you part of any clubs in high school?
6. Tell me about your friendships.
 - a. Do you have a group of friends that you enjoy to spend time with?
 - b. What do you like best about your friends?
 - c. Have you had any negative encounters with any of your peers?

Probe: If yes, can you give an example?

Probe: Was there a resolution?

Probe: How did you feel in the end?

7. Tell me about your relationships with your teachers and/or other school staff?
 - a. Is there any one who you feel you could ask for help?

b. Is there anyone you feel more comfortable with?

Probe: If yes, why?

c. Have you had any negative encounters with your teachers or other school staff?

Probe: If yes, can you give an example?

Probe: Was there a resolution?

Probe: How did you feel in the end?

8. Tell me a little more about you.

a. What are some your hobbies?

b. What do you like to do after school?

c. What are some of your goals?

d. If you could pick one word to describe yourself, what would it be?

9. Is there anything else you would like for me to know?

Interview Protocol 2:

In the first interview we talked a lot about your life in school and some of your experiences. Today we are going to talk about your future and identity as a young adult with a disability that identifies as transgender. Remember that your participation in this interview is voluntary. If you do not want to answer any questions, you do not need to give me a reason. Any questions before we start?

1. What do you see yourself doing after high school?
 - a. What made you interested in _____ after high school?
 - b. What supports do you think would be helpful in order to _____?
 - c. What barriers do you think you will face in the future?

Probe: Why do you think _____ might be a barrier?

2. What strategies have been helpful for you to get through a difficult task?
3. Can you give me an example of a difficult situation in school and how you dealt with it?
4. What skills do you think are useful to deal with difficult situations?
 - a. Are there any skills you would like to improve on when dealing with difficult situations?
5. Is there anything about your gender identity that you think educational staff could be better informed on?

Probe: Can you tell me more?

6. Is there anything about your gender identity that you think your peers could be better informed on?

Probe: Can you tell me more?

7. Are there any spaces in your school that you avoid?

Probe: If, so you can tell me more?

I'd like to give you a chance to tell me more about your views of gender.

5. When did you first identify as transgender?
6. What are some important parts of your gender identity?

Probe: Can you tell me more?

7. What have been some of the challenges of identifying as transgender?
8. How has identifying as transgender affected the way you view gender?
9. How do you let other people know what your gender is?
10. How does our society or culture affect your gender?

Probe: Can you give an example?

11. Do you think gender absolute and simple?

Probe: Tell me more.

12. How do you think aspects of your gender identity will impact you after you leave high school?
13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Interview Protocol 3:

Last time, we talked about your identity and where you see yourself after high school. Today I am going to ask you to discuss your identity as young person with a disability who also identified as transgender. Remember, your participation in this interview is voluntary. If you do not want to answer any questions you do not have to. Do you have any questions?

1. Tell me about having disability:
 - a. How has having a disability impacted your identity?
 - b. What are some of the positive aspects having a disability?
 - c. What are some of the barriers you have faced having a disability?
 - d. Do you think society impacts how people see a disability?
2. Do you think there are aspects of having a disability that will impact you after school?
3. How has having a disability impacted your relationships in high school?

Probe: Can you give an example?

3. What would you like for people to understand about your disability?
5. Tell me about your experiences navigating spaces in school, such as access to bathrooms, locker rooms, etc.
 - a. Do you feel your disability has impacted certain spaces?
 - b. Do you feel your gender identity has impacted certain spaces?
6. What are some of the positive aspects of identifying as transgender with a disability?
7. What are difficult aspects of identifying as transgender with a disability?

Probe: Can you give an example?

8. What changes would you like to see in high school for transgender students with disabilities?

Probe: Can you give an example?

9. What do you think schools could be doing better to help transgender youth with disabilities?
10. What parts of your identities are you most proud about?

11. Are there any question(s) I did not ask you that I should have?

Thank you for participating in these interviews. Please keep a copy of the informed consent so you have my contact information. Let me know if you have any more questions or comments.

APPENDIX C

PHOTOGRAPHY PROTOCOLS

Photo Action!

Sometimes, words cannot explain everything. The use of photographs can be helpful in order to have a deeper understanding of experiences.

This activity is loosely structured. You are encouraged to be creative and express yourself.

There is no wrong answer.

What to do:

- Use the provided camera to take pictures of things in nature that you can associate with your indemnities and/or experiences.
- Take as many photographs as you want. Return the camera to me by the end of the third interview.
- Use the notebook to write down any ideas or feels you have when you are taking the photos
- Please do not include people or names in any of the photographs. *Only things in nature.*
- Please know, that if any of the photographs contain people or any inappropriate images, they will be destroyed immediately.
- If you have any questions, please ask.

Photo Reflection

At the start of the interviews I gave you a camera and asked you to take photos of things in nature that represent your experiences and/or identity. Today I would like to look at the photographs you took and ask you to reflect on them. You are encouraged to talk freely and openly about the pictures you took.

Probes (in no specific order):

- Tell me more about this photograph.
- You took a photograph of _____ tell me how this connects to your identity or experiences?
- I am interested to know more about this photograph of _____ can you tell me what you were thinking/feeling when you took this photograph?
- Does this photograph connect with your gender identity?
- Does this photograph connect with your disability identity?

End of photo reflection Debriefing:

Now, I will describe to you what I think I have heard about your photo reflection and perspectives, and I want you to tell me what you think of my interpretation.

1. This is how I heard what you said:
2. What do you think about my interpretation of your experiences and perspectives?
3. Would you like to elaborate on your previous comments?
4. Is there anything that you think I have missed that would be important?

Thank you so much for participating in this photo reflection and the interviews. Your contributions have been very helpful. Please keep a copy of the informed consent so you have my contact information. Let me know if you have any more questions or comments.

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

DATE: March 12, 2018 IRB Protocol Number: 02042018.006
TO: Angela Ingram, Principal Investigator
Department of Special Education
RE: Protocol entitled, "Understanding Transgender Youth with Disabilities High School Experiences"

Notice of IRB Review and Approval Expedited Review as per Title 45 CFR Part 46 # [6,7]

The project identified above has been reviewed and approved by the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS), the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research has been determined to be no greater than minimal risk and qualifies for expedited review procedures.

For this research, the following additional determinations have been made:

- The IRB has waived the requirement to obtain parental permission under 45 CFR 46.408(c). The IRB determined that the research protocol is designed for conditions or for a subject population for which parental or guardian permission is not a reasonable requirement to protect the subjects.
- The study as described satisfies the requirements for additional protections for children involved as subjects in research under 45 CFR Part 46.404

The IRB has approved the research to be conducted as described in the attached materials. As a reminder, it is your responsibility to submit any proposed changes for IRB review and approval prior to implementation.

Approval period: March 12, 2018 - March 11, 2019

If you anticipate the research will continue beyond the IRB approval period, you must submit a request for continuing review approximately 60 days prior to the expiration date. **Without continued approval, the protocol will expire on March 11, 2019 and human subject research activities must cease.** A closure report must be submitted once human subject research activities are complete. Failure to maintain current approval or properly close the protocol constitutes non-compliance.

You are responsible for adhering to the *Investigator Agreement* submitted with the initial application for IRB review. The responsibilities of the agreement are reiterated at the end of this letter below. You are responsible for conduct of the research and must maintain oversight of all research personnel to ensure compliance with the IRB approved protocol.

The University of Oregon and Research Compliance Services appreciate your commitment to the ethical and responsible conduct of research with human subjects.

Sincerely,

COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS • RESEARCH COMPLIANCE SERVICES
877 E. 13th Ave., Suite 500, 5227 University of Oregon, Eugene OR 97401-5227
T 541-340-2510 F 541-340-5120 <http://rcs.uoregon.edu>

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UNIVERSITY OF OREGON



Brandi Fleck
Research Compliance Administrator

APPENDIX E

REFLECTION EXAMPLE

I impatiently awaited IRB approval, checking my email constantly like an eager child. When the approval finally came, I hit the ground running with data collection, good thing I had nice pair of running shoes. I made an announcement to the youth at SMYRC, a non-profit organization for gender diverse youth. Instantly, I had about five participants approach me, who were interested in participating. I followed up with the people who were interested and scheduled the first round of interviews. The first two people I interviewed, Leaf and Tree, were married and wanted to do the interviews side by side. I have to admit, I had to keep assumption at ease right away when I met these two individuals. You know *those* automatic assumptions that creep in your head, like some sort of unwanted trespasser. If I were to see these two individuals with out knowing anything about them, I would assume that Leaf was a male, perhaps gay and I would assume Tree was female. However, this was not the case at all. Leaf identified as that of a woman, but preferred to be considered trans non-binary. Tree identified more on the masculine side, but identified as both genders.

Leaf and Tree

They decided they wanted to meet at Subway. As I waited for them to show up, I started to get a little worried that they would not show. Daylights saving time had happened recently and I was worried that they forgot to set their clocks, typical things a special education teacher would worry about. As I was about to text them to check on things, I saw them coming at the end of the sidewalk. Leaf was pushing Tree in a wheelchair. As they approached, I could see that Tree was also holding a bag of empty cans, beer cans. At that moment, I felt my heart sink, because I had a feeling they were homeless. Tree, immediately made a joke about the cans “ don't worry we don't drink beer, we are just collecting the cans for money”. As we get situated in Subway for the interview, I offer to buy them some food. They modestly wanted to share one sandwich. I tell them, that I am happy to buy them each a sandwich and they could take one to go, if they didn't want to eat all of it now. They agree and we get settled for the interviews. I could tell that Tree was deaf/hard of hearing and also had a speech impairment. I tell them, that they can each take turns answering the interview questions. During the interviews Leaf was explaining a rather shocking story about their gender identity and past. They kept talking about how they were forced into sex work in Europe. At first it all seems believable but as their story went on the less believable it became. For example, they talked about how their dad was in the military and they moved around a lot. They also talked about how they were stolen at birth by the sex traffickers. They explained that the traffickers changed their gender to male in order to make more of a profit. At one point in the interview they explain how everyone thinks that they are male mostly because of their voice. They go on to explain that the only reason their voice sounds like a male is because the Russian mafia poured gasoline diesel down their throat. Now I want to point out that whether or not this story is true or not, Leaf believed it to be true. In a way it seemed like creating a story to explain their gender identity was a way of coping with a society that has rejected them. It was as

if they need justification for why they felt more female. As the interviews continue it comes out the Tree was in the foster care system. As Tree told their story my heart sank with despair and anger. They talked about how their dad raped them at a young age. They talk about the abuse they endured growing up. At some point during the interview they mention that their dad passed away and that's when they got final closure and were able to come out about their gender identity. I honestly felt relief when they mention that their dad was dead.

The next time we met for the next interview was at a Starbucks of their choice in North Portland. As I am driving up to this Starbucks, I have memories of being there before in the past. I had stopped at this same Starbucks on the way to a conference and on the way to something else at one point. I thought about how strange it was and how little I knew at my previous times at this Starbucks that I would be conducting interviews there for my dissertation. As I walk in, I see Leaf and Tree sitting at a table with another person. It happened to be Leaf's birthday, so I wished them a happy birthday. I offer to buy Tree and Leaf a refreshment and they agree. They introduce me to the other person at the table who was also homeless and living at the same shelter. As I am at the counter ordering I'm thinking about all the times I have seen homeless people inside a Starbucks. Many of us have probably seen homeless people in the past sitting inside a Starbucks. As we complete this interview, I tell them that once the photos are developed I will contact them and we will finish things up. They seemed to be excited about the 20 dollars. Tree wanted to use to buy Leaf a birthday gift. I hear them talking about taking them to fine dining at Arby's. Once the photos are developed I contact them. This time we met at SMYRC in an office.

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