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Equity and Inclusion for Gender Diverse Middle School Students

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Equity and Inclusion for Gender Diverse Middle School Students

by

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A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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Abstract

About a third of teenagers experience an anxiety disorder, with steadily increasing numbers (McCarthy, 2019). LGBTQ+ students have a history of being a group without a voice because the dominant gender classification was a binary male or female model. They have seldom dared to express and identify their real selves. According to Lewis (2020), this form of oppression could make them feel unwelcome, overlooked, and unsafe, eventually creating tremendous anxiety. This qualitative research focused on understanding what creates an inclusive and safe learning environment for all students, including students who identify as LGBTQ+. Interviews were conducted with students, parents, and educators working with students who identified as LGBTQ+ in Marin County, California. The first finding identified how providing diverse opportunities in school contributed to an inclusive environment. These opportunities fall into several categories, including recognizing a diverse student body, honoring diverse characteristics and personality traits, and providing diverse institutional structures. Another major participant finding was that building relationships is central to LGBTQ+ students, which is demonstrated in the aspects of increasing the sense of being heard, having a relaxed learning and socializing environments, and building community norms together with choice. The third finding is a call for further transformation, and includes four major sub findings. The first argues for adopting a non-binary model for gender diverse students. The second calls for improved leadership, role modeling and curriculum revolution. The third addresses ongoing rejection and stigmatization, and the need for professional education and activities of support to provide the care needed. The last sub finding is a call for funding to endorse these diverse initiatives.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic started in the United States, my child started taking a virtual class to complete the end of her sixth grade. Her whole school learning and social activity occurred through her school iPad screen without any in person interaction. It was a period of her preadolescence when she underwent many physical, mental, and emotional changes. When she went back to school in person in the 7th grade, she had difficulty retaining her friends and making new friends, because of her new gender identity, that she began identifying with in sixth grade. She developed anxiety that affected her academic and social outcomes. In order to understand her and offer her effective support, I decided to work on my thesis on gender-diverse students in middle school. I wanted to know about their experiences in school and family, how school, parents and guardians, and peers reacted to their choices of identity, by talking to parents, students, middle school educators, LGBTQ+ specialists in the local community, and educators in higher education settings so that I can understand this topic easier by their genuine stories and ideas.

Statement of Purpose

While there has been a significant amount of quantitative research based on surveying and analyzing various aspects of the inclusion and equity of gender-diverse middle school students (Robinson & Espelage 2011, Lessard, Watson, & Puhl, 2020), and there has been some qualitative research based on interviewing LGBTQ+ adults about their experience and hope in elementary school (Lewis, 2020), there has been little qualitative research on inclusion and equity of gender-diverse middle school students via the data of interviewing middle school students, which was a gap. The present study aimed to know about the experiences and

expectations of the gender-diverse students in Wonderland Middle School, as well as the perspectives of parent and educator participants on how to create an inclusive and equitable school environment for all students, including the students in marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+.

Overview of the Research Design

The sample consisted of four student participants, three from sixth grade and one from eighth grade, all aged between eleven to fourteen years old, and, therefore, minors. Their parents signed their consent form for them to participate in this study. The group included three gender-diverse students and one non-gender-diverse student exploring their gender identity between sixth and seventh grade. Of the four parent participants, three identified as straight, and one as trans. Five educators participated, with four identifying as straight and one as a member of the LGBTQ+. All adult participants provided their consent to participate by signing the consent form.

This data came from interviews. Twelve of them were one-on-one, and one was conducted with two students. Seven of the interviews were in person, four were via Zoom, and one was by email. The research sites were varied in the WMS, parent and the researcher's home, Zoom, and email, based on participants' preferences. The researcher acknowledged some possible biases as a parent with a former gender-diverse child, a friend of the parent participants from an informal parent support group with gender-diverse children, and a former middle school teacher who wants every student to have a good experience in their school. The purpose of the qualitative data was to answer the research question: How and in what ways can an inclusive school environment be created to support all students, including students who identify as LGBTQ+? Specifically, it is designed to find out the experience and perspectives of LGBTQ+

middle school students, to understand how diverse opportunities contribute to creating an inclusive space for all students, and to seek for ways to create an inclusive and equitable environment for gender-diverse middle school students.

Significance of the Study for Educational Equity and Social Justice

This study revealed three main findings. The first finding shows how different opportunities, like a diverse student body, a diverse range of personality and character qualities, and a diverse range of school structures, play a part in promoting inclusivity in middle schools. The second finding emphasizes the significance of building relationships with students in order to foster a supportive environment where students feel included. This can be accomplished by actively and genuinely listening to students, encouraging a laid-back learning environment, and working together to build community rules and choices. The necessity for transformative methods in middle schools is emphasized by the third finding.

Research Implications

One unexpected finding is that funding initiatives is significant for creating an inclusive culture and environment. Another unexpected finding is that adding content of non-binary gender models into current textbooks for education is a deeper, more sustainable, and effective way as long-term activities for building the inclusive culture for all students, regardless of their gender and sexual identity.

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ adolescents, particularly those in middle school, are more likely to experience bullying, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and unexcused absences from class. These findings, taken together, show that it is important to safeguard these students from harm and to improve the outcomes in psychology and education (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Another study in the literature revealed that because of their stigmatized identities, teenagers

who identify as members of sexual and/or gender minorities are more likely to experience bullying, harassment, and discrimination at school (Lessard, 2020). These findings, nevertheless, lacked approaches to improve and stop the negative outcomes LGBTQ+ kids have been encountering. These two unexpected research findings filled the gap.

This study's findings suggest that teachers should create an inclusive and equitable classroom by providing diverse opportunities, building relationships, and advocating for the needs of their diverse student body. At the School and district levels, teachers and school personnel should be supported to attend professional development related to equity and inclusion for LGBTQ+ students in various forms, such as training in staff meetings, webinars, online courses, or going back to college for a higher degree, to increase their motivation, sense of fulfillment, and to update their knowledge and skills about the non-binary model of gender and sexual orientation. For policy, the school should comply with the newest version of Title IX regulations to ensure that every student is protected and protected against discrimination and sexual harassment, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation. Other policies that respect each student's gender identity should also be implemented to facilitate the adoption of a non-binary model for gender-diverse students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study sought to understand the conditions for creating an inclusive environment for students based on understanding middle school students' stories in a diverse school setting and honoring of diverse gender identities. The literature presented below explores various topics, starting with adolescent development and anxiety. It then looks into social-emotional learning, followed by an examination of theories such as critical theory, critical pedagogy, and queer theory.

Nevertheless, these research lacked approaches to improve and stop the negative outcomes LGBTQ+ kids have been encountering. The goal of this research is to fill this gap. Specifically, this study sought to learn from interviewees how to build an inclusive environment with equal opportunities for all students, including marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ students in middle school.

Adolescent Developmental and Anxiety

This literature review portion examines how anxiety and adolescent development are related topics. In this context, the researcher looks into the connection between anxiety and social media and the influence of anxiety throughout adolescent transitional years. The section aims to illuminate the intricate interactions between adolescent growth, anxiety, and numerous contextual influences.

Adolescence is “a period of time for a young person, beginning between ages 10-12, when he or she experiences profound biological, emotional and intellectual changes.” (Donnelly, 2021). This early adolescence corresponds to the middle school years in the United States (ages 12-15), young people undergo various changes. Sher and Merrick (2013) noted:

Adolescence is a period in which the need for establishing new social and personal relationships, and reaching independence and reproductive success is supported by dramatic hormonal, neural and behavioral changes. Similar to other developmental dynamic processes, changes in brain circuits during adolescence are an integral part of genetically programmed developmental processes. At the same time, those processes allow ample room for plastic changes to adapt to the social and natural environment. The ideal result of those processes is an emotionally balanced young adult. (p.7)

These developmental processes aim to facilitate a seamless transition from adolescence to young adulthood, which is characterized by emotional stability, enhanced cognitive control, and socially acceptable actions. Since the brain is so sensitive to environmental cues and experiences, adolescence can be a challenging developmental stage, but it can also be a time of incredible growth and adaptation potential.

Anxiety

Moran (2016) claims that anxiety has been a widespread mental disorder in middle schoolers for many reasons, such as our society's competitive atmosphere and win-loss model. Such anxiety could harm their social behavior and academics. This article aims to educate middle school teachers about anxiety to provide appropriate support for the students in the classrooms. The author explains different types of anxiety disorders, such as social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and specific phobias that arise in adolescents. Moran (2016) also suggests the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) for teachers to address prevention and intervention efforts for students by highlighting eleven strategies for classroom accommodations to reduce students' anxiety. The strategies include a consistent daily routine, task-focused environment such as well-selected small group activities, classroom pass for a student with

anxiety to leave class for a safe person or safe place for about 5-10 minutes to work through their symptoms, classroom seating they prefer, test accommodation such as extra time or in a quiet location, alternative assignments such as a less stressful way of presenting an assignment, copies of notes made available to them when they are absent from school or class because of their anxiety, creative activities that allow them to express themselves freely, positive coping skills to relax such as using stress balls, listening to soothing music in the background, and accommodating tardies to school and class, thereby making sure not to punish them for their action but to reinforce their ability to make it to school (Moran, 2016). Moran (2016) believes teachers are very important in helping identify students who are showing signs of anxiety and to support them in the classroom, but also notes that teachers are not responsible for diagnoses. The findings suggest that teachers can increase the probability that students will have successful outcomes by intervening as soon as they have concerns and using the systems they have in place within their schools, such as MTSS.

Kessler et al., (2010) showed that anxiety disorders were the most common condition among early adolescents (31.9%), followed by behavior disorders (19.1%), and mood disorders (14.3%). Approximately one in every four to five youth in the U.S. meets criteria for a mental disorder with severe impairment across their lifetime. The likelihood that common mental disorders in adults first emerge in childhood and adolescence. Such chronic anxiety could lead to serious mental health problems, including depression, substance use, and even suicide. It could interfere with the ability to focus and learn, causing school problems that could have a lifelong impact (McCarthy, 2019). McCarthy (2019) further identifies a few treatments for anxiety such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI), and

addresses the critical importance of paying attention to the psycho-social development of students.

Anxiety and Transition

According to Fite, Frazer, DiPierro, and Abel (2019), a great number of literature reviews show that transitional stress in middle schools has been an issue for young adolescents. Previous research has found useful strategies for improving the experiences during the transition. To further contribute to the literature, this study focused on understanding students' perceptions of what is helpful for their transition, evaluating the percentage of students that perceived transition as difficult, and identifying the correlates, such as school attachment and schoolwork difficulty. The findings showed that 71.4% of students perceived teachers as the most helpful in assisting students' transition, whereas parents got 92.9%, and peers got 79.8%. About 29% of students considered the transition difficult. Based on the findings, the research recommended that schools emphasized how important parents, friends, and teachers were in the transition to middle school. Schools might encourage parents to foster strong attachments with their children by holding workshops for parents on ways to emotionally support their children and resolve conflicts in a healthy manner. "It may also be helpful for schools to send information to parents about upcoming challenges and changes during the transition, and emphasize the importance of parental involvement and support during this time" (Fite et al. 2019, p. 61)

Anxiety and Social Media

Antheunis, Schouten, and Krahmer (2016) noted that early adolescents spend much time on social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook because they want to meet new friends after the transition from grade school to middle school. Worries and concerns about the tremendous amount of time in SNS have arisen. The literature review found that early adolescents are less

dependent on their parents and focus on developing more peer relationships to discuss their feelings and worries and build their interpersonal skills. SNSs have become a significant way to surround themselves with their friends for daily interaction. Athenunis et al. (2016) conduct a survey to examine the role of SNSs in early adolescents' social lives and to investigate whether there are differences between SNSs users and nonusers in early adolescents' social lives. They found positive relations between SNS use and friendship quality, bridging social capital, and bonding social capital also found positive effects of SNS membership on these social indicators. They found no evidence of the negative impact of SNSs use on early adolescents' life (Athenunis et al., 2016).

According to McBride (2021), middle schoolers are popularly using smartphones and social media to chat and play video games with their peers for connection and entertainment to escape FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). Many worry that FOMO on social media has too much negative impact on students' learning and health. The research shows these students have a great need for belongingness, supported by Relative Deprivation Theory and self-determination theory. This study, however, revealed that real-time and in-person connections were far more important than social media. (McBride, 2021).

Social-Emotional Learning

Albright, Marsh, Kennedy, Hough, and McKibben (2019) describe social-emotional learning (SEL) as the aspects of student development beyond mastery of academic content, including students' mindsets, beliefs, dispositions, emotions, attitudes, skills, and behaviors. Current literature has suggested that SEL is the basis for student's well-being and academic performance, and "embedding high-quality SEL programs, curricula, and activities into a school may improve academic performance, attendance, behaviors, culture, and climate" (Albright et

al., 2019, p. 35-36). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 requires states to measure at least one indicator of "School Quality or Student Success," which includes measuring school climate and safety. Many states are working with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) through the Collaborating States Initiative. This research found six categories of common SEL practices, such as strategies that promote positive school climate and relationships and support positive behavior and academic performance.

Experience Among LGBTQ+ Adolescents

A study by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that schools nationwide are "hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBTQ+ students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBTQ+ language and experience victimization and discrimination at school. As a result, many LGBTQ+ students avoid school activities or miss school entirely (Kosciw, Clark, & Menard. 2022, p.xv).

Research based on web-based surveys has also shown that adolescents who identify as sexual and/or gender minorities are at a higher risk for experiencing bullying, harassment, and discrimination in school due to their stigmatized identities (Lessard et al., 2020). This can lead to a range of negative outcomes, including lower academic achievement, poorer mental health, and decreased social support (Lessard et al., 2020).

Excluded, Bullied, and Ignored. Lewis (2020) interviewed eight gender-diverse adults who shared gender-related memories of attending K–12 schools. Details covered times where they were excluded from activities based on gender, as well as how these experiences impacted their relationship with the school. One of the major findings was how clearly they remember schools being separated by gender, and how normative forming these identities were expected to be. The gender-diverse students did not feel a sense of belonging, which led to them feeling

excluded from many activities such as P.E., recess, choir, and dancing authentically. Some of them felt unsafe, overlooked, or unwelcome in their schools. Lewis (2020) reflected that educators must learn to listen to gender-diverse students' voices and work toward building gender-inclusive schools by asking questions like who is missing in the conversation of diverse voices, and what kind of school environment diverse perspectives want and need to feel included and safe.

Robinson and Espelage (2011) found that LGBTQ+ students in secondary school maintain higher rates of negative outcomes in psychology and education. Some studies show that LGBTQ+ students are not all the same regarding their educational and psychological experience. Some of them reported few mental and educational concerns. Consequently, Robinson and Espelage (2011) think there is a void in the study about the heterogeneity in this population. Besides, it is also unclear whether the development between LGBTQ+ and straight students is different as risk factors increase. The authors use the quantitative method for this research via anonymous survey responses from a sample of 13,213 students from 7-12 grade among 30 schools in a county in Wisconsin. The topics in the survey included sexual identity, suicide, sexual behavior, drug usage, bullying, and victimization. Students completed the surveys independently during school time. They found that adolescents, especially those in middle school, who identify as LGBTQ+ are at greater risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts, bullying, and increased levels of unexcused absence from class, which, collectively, provides reason to protect these students from harm and to improve the outcome in education and psychology.

Bias, Discrimination, and Systemic Oppression

Nelson (2022) showed an implicit bias, lack of healthcare quality, and stigma disparities due to the lack of cultural incompetence with the LGTBQ+ population. Based on the nursing

theorists Madeleine Leininger's "Transcultural Nursing Theory or Cultural Care Theory," Nelson conducted further research to understand how the increase in cultural competence among nurses and health care providers reduces the disparities and negative health outcomes for these patients. This research has shown that cultural competency training has improved healthcare providers' ability to serve these patients. Moreover, when health professionals have positive experiences around these patients, patients will not feel negative judgment and are likely to seek healthcare. Nelson (2022) found that potentially, disparities would be reduced, and that there might be a change in healthcare for LGBTQ+. Mahowald, Gruberg, and Halpin (2020) demonstrate in their study that over a third of LGBTQ+ individuals still experience prejudice in their private lives, workplace, and public spheres, as well as in their access to essential medical treatment. As a result of discrimination, 46% of LGBTQ+ individuals suffer physically, 66% psychologically, and 47% spiritually.

Teachers play a crucial role in identifying kids exhibiting anxiety symptoms and providing them with support in the classroom. Lewis (2020) states:

Systemic inequality and power structures in education make the inclusion of the youth voice challenging because empowering student's voices means dismantling the hierarchy of dialogic space between teachers and students. It involves building reciprocal relationships emphasizing shared knowledge construction in democratic spaces...

Transforming schools, and, more broadly, society, cannot occur if youth are not viewed as equal stakeholders capable of imagining a world they will soon lead. (p. 1)

It is also important to listen to students' voices. Casalnuovo (2020) shares the story of her deep grief because of losing her first love to suicide in high school. She then relearned to love life by giving voice to her experience and sharing it with others. Casalnuovo (2020) noted how it freed

her from suppressing her grief and complicated emotions that created negative experiences in her life. Naturally, this experience connected to one of the research methods: photovoice. And based in critical pedagogy, Critical Race Theory, and Latinx Critical Theory, all related to empowering students' voices that can be expressed in many ways. Casalnuovo (2020) found a lack of existing studies evaluating grade school students' critical awareness of how social power works. She also found that the previous research on hope and agency's roles is limited. Casalnuovo (2020) concluded that teachers should have professional training to promote dialogic classroom structures to show students' voices.

Theories for Reducing Dominance, Oppression and Exclusion

In the following review of literature, I will discuss critical theory, critical pedagogy, and queer theory, to expand the theoretical framework toward reducing all forms of dominance in race, class, and gender, and increasing all types of freedom by identifying and combating dehumanization.

Critical Theory

Critical Theory is a framework to examine and challenge the dominant or existing power structure, and social norms. It exposes the hidden power dynamics, and advances the interests of oppressed communities for social justice and equality. As Bronner (2011) noted, "Critical theory refuses to identify freedom with any institutional arrangement or fixed system of thought. It questions the hidden assumptions and purposes of competing theories and existing forms of practice." (p.1). It means critical theory is distinguished by its refusal to uphold a certain conception of freedom or a predetermined way of thinking. It promotes a critical examination of current theories and methods with the goal of exposing hidden biases and power structures to bring down oppressive social systems and advance a more diverse conception of freedom.

Bronner (2011) further stated that “Critical theory insists that thought must respond to the new problems and the new possibilities for liberation that arise from changing historical circumstances.” (p.1). According to this argument, thoughts should address new concerns that develop in the context of shifting historical conditions and look into any new chances for emancipation that these circumstances might offer ideas and ways for combating injustice and advancing social justice.

According to Ray, (2015), critical theory is a term used to categorize social philosophy and theory of transformation that countered fascism. It was first connected to the Frankfurt Institute in the 1930s, whose prominent figures were Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, and Marcuse. Bohman, (2005) noted :

Critical Theory has a narrow and a broad meaning in philosophy and in the history of the social sciences. “Critical Theory” in the narrow sense designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. According to these theorists, a “critical” theory may be distinguished from a “traditional” theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human “emancipation from slavery”, acts as a “liberating ... influence”, and works “to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers of” human beings (Horkheimer 1972b [1992, 246]). Because such theories aim to explain and transform *all* the circumstances that enslave human beings, many “critical theories” in the broader sense have been developed. They have emerged in connection with the many social movements that identify varied dimensions of the domination of human beings in modern societies. In both the broad and the narrow senses, however, a

critical theory provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms. (p.1)

Through the narrow and broad meaning, Bohman (2005) concluded that a critical theory offers the normative and descriptive foundations for social research aiming to reduce all forms of dominance, combating dehumanization and increase all types of freedom.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy can be interpreted as a theory that strives to question the status quo and advance equality and justice in society and education. It is an educational theory based on the idea that schools typically serve the interests of those who have power in a society by, usually unintentionally, perpetuating unquestioned norms for relationships, expectations, and behaviors (Billings, 2021). Critical Pedagogy is committed to the transformative power of education for individuals and society as a whole, with the ultimate goal of creating a more equitable and just society for everyone. Teachers and students need to constantly question their world, both inside and outside the classroom. Because of its emphasis on diversity and rethinking the status quo, critical pedagogy has been embraced by advocates of multicultural education.(Billings, 2021) Consequently. Critical pedagogy emphasizes the value of challenging presumptions and advocating for inclusivity and diversity in education. According to Billings (2021), Critical pedagogy first gained popularity in the 1960s through the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Although trained as a lawyer, Freire worked as a young man teaching literacy to poor farm workers, and he later developed a system by which literacy could be taught in as few as forty-five days. A great motivation for his teaching the disadvantaged to read was to secure for them the right to vote, which at the time in Brazil was limited to those who were literate. Based in large part on these experiences working with the downtrodden, Freire began publishing his

theories of education and social justice, the most renowned of which was *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970 (Billing, 2021). Freire (1970) noted:

While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind's central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern. Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality. And as an individual perceives the extent of dehumanization, he or she may ask if humanization is a viable possibility. Within history in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness (p.40).

Freire (1970) also addresses the crucial idea on the nature of humanity and the need of identifying and combating dehumanization:

In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both. This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. (p. 44)

The passage shows an ethical and humane viewpoint that cherishes the liberation of all people and rejects the idea that oppressed people should seek revenge or turn into their oppressors.

Freire argues that it is not only necessary but also a crucial responsibility to restore humanity to both oppressed and oppressors.

Queer Theory

LGBTQ+ middle school students can benefit greatly from the promotion of inclusiveness provided by queer theory. Queer theory helps foster a more accepting and inclusive atmosphere for all students, regardless of their sexual orientations or gender identities, by challenging traditional norms and beliefs about sexuality and gender. What is Queer Theory? Queer Theory is a study methodology that expresses the opinions and experiences of marginalized individuals, and recognizes people for their complex humanity, instead of defining them as stereotypes (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). It began as an interdisciplinary intellectual movement in the late 1980s. During this time, many researchers, particularly those in humanities fields, began to engage in theoretical debates about sex, sexuality, and sexual identities. The goal of these debates was to challenge the prevalent scientific and cultural preconceptions about these topics. Although researchers, including Gloria Anzalda, had used the term "queer theory" prior to 1990, many believe the official birth of queer theory to coincide with the queer theory conference organized by theorist Teresa de Lauretis at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990 (Manning, 2016). "The work of the conference was intended to articulate the terms in which lesbian and gay sexualities may be understood and imaged as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture" (Lauretis, 1991, p.iii). Originally, a person was considered a symbol of perversion, disgust, sickness, and foolishness when they were labeled as queer. Eventually the term "queer" is defined in contrast to what is regarded as normal in social practices, identities, and values (Gadro & Mizzi, 2014, p. 450). Queer theory "conveys a double emphasis—on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silence" (Lauretis, 1991, p.iv). It means

Queer Theory involves studying how language and concepts impact our views of gender, sexuality, and identity. Moreover, it encourages people to question the terminology, narratives, and cultural norms that surround gender and sexuality. It involves challenging the assumptions, bias, and silences hidden in these dialogs. Consequently, Queer Theory helps us realize that there is a reason to challenge the binary model of gender identity and sexual orientation in our society, including in middle school.

Conclusion

The research seeks to understand the conditions necessary for creating an inclusive environment for middle school students, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ+. The literature review highlights the high rates of emotional problems among middle school students in the US and the increased risk of bullying and stigma among early LGBTQ+ adolescents. There has been much research on the inequality and exclusion of LGBTQ+ middle school students using quantitative survey methods. There was also research on this topic using qualitative methods by interviewing adults about gender-diverse elementary school students' experiences. However, there was not much research focused on middle school LGBTQ+ students' perceptions and experiences by interviewing middle school students under qualitative methods, which was a gap. This study was an exploration seeking to contribute to humanizing all middle school students: LGBTQ+ students and non-LGBTQ+ students. The researcher also reviews critical theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Queer Theory to address the importance of humanization and inclusiveness to all kids.

Chapter 3: Methods

There has been considerable research on equity and inclusion in the LGBTQ+ community (Lewis, 2020). However, there needs to be more research with LGBTQ+ middle school students in order that we can listen directly to their stories about their experiences and hope. This study used Freire's critical pedagogy to analyze the experiences and perspectives of middle school LGBTQ+ students, parents and guardians, school professionals, and gender diverse specialists

Research Questions

The study's central research question asked: How and in what ways can an inclusive school environment be created to support all students, including students who identify as LGBTQ+ ? The following are sub-questions associated with the central research question:

- What's the experience and perspective of LGBTQ+ middle school students regarding inclusive school space?
- How do diverse opportunities contribute to creating an inclusive school environment for all students?
- How and what can a school create inclusive environments for gender-diverse students?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

The researcher chose a qualitative research method. It was a single-phase methodology, and the researcher gathered data by using open-ended questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher aimed to understand her child's motivation, experience, and exploration of identity. In contrast, her academic goal was to understand the experience and perspective of gender-diverse students to build an inclusive and equitable environment for them. The method

for collecting data in this study was based on interviews emphasizing the importance of making meaning of experience (Seidman, 2019).

This research approach reflected a transformative worldview. The transformative worldview holds that the postpositivist assumptions imposed structural laws and theories that did not apply to the marginalized members of society or the issues of power, social justice, discrimination, and oppression that needed to be addressed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The transformative worldview has been used by groups of researchers including critical theorists, participatory action researchers, feminists, racial and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, indigenous and postcolonial peoples, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Transformative writers have historically drawn on the works of Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and Freire.(Neuman, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The theoretical frameworks of this study are Critical Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Queer Theory. And the focus of this study is the marginalized community, LGBTQ+ students and their families. Additionally, this study mainly focused on specific concerns that pertain to contemporary social challenges, including empowerment, inequality, exclusion, oppression, dominance, suppression, and alienation, which are also a feature of the worldview of transformative.

Research Design

This research design outlined a few factors, including research site and entry into the field, participants and sampling procedure, methods, data analysis, and validity so that the researcher could conduct rigorous, valid, and impactful studies.

Research Site and Entry into the Field

This research was conducted at multiple sites in northern California. One site was at a middle school, which will be referred to as Wonderland Middle School (WMS); one site was at a

parent's home; one site was at the researcher's home; one site was virtual meeting space via Zoom; and one site was email chosen by a participant who was a DEI trainer in a local non-profit organization because they were too sick to talk at the time of interview. The researcher chose to do the research about gender-diverse students at WMS because she had a child there who once identified as non-binary, and the researcher wanted to know about what had been happening in WMS, and what the educators and parents thought about these students and the school environment. Another reason the researcher chose WMS is that the researcher works in an elementary school in the same school district as WMS. Thus, the researcher had pre-existing trust relationships with the counselor and principal that participated in this research, who also helped solicit student participants. The researcher spoke with parents in a support network with which she was also a member to communicate the nature of the research and invite parents and guardians to participate in it. The rest of the three participants were introduced by friends and the researcher invited them via email to participate in this research. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school name and participant names.

Wonderland Middle School is a high-performance public school in northern California. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), CA Dept. of Education, the percentage of students achieving proficiency in math is 77% (which is higher than the California state average of 40%) for the 2018-19 school year. The percentage of students achieving proficiency in reading/language arts is 84% (higher than the California state average of 51%) for the 2018-19 school year. The student: teacher ratio of 17:1 is lower than the California state level of 22:1.

Participants and sampling procedure

Three student participants were from sixth grade and one from eighth grade from Wonderland Middle School (WMS) in Northern California. Their ages ranged from eleven to fourteen years old, meaning that they were all minors. This sample of students included three gender-diverse students and one non-gender-diverse student who was gender-exploring between sixth and seventh grade. Three of the four parent participants identified as straight, and one is LGBTQ+ individual. Of the five educators, four identified as straight, and one is an individual of LGBTQ+. All adult participants signed the consent form of participation. For the student participants, their parents signed the consent forms for their children to participate in the research before the interviews. The researcher also had the WMS principal sign a letter of permission form to approve interviewing students on the campus.

To better understand the participants' backgrounds, I list three tables to briefly introduce them below. The middle school name and all participants' names in this paper are pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

Table 1 Participating Students at WMS

Name	Pronouns / gender Identity	Grade of students
Alex	they/them, nonbinary	6th
Bella	they/them, questioning, 6th-7th grade. She/her, cisgender since 8th grade	8th
Elsie	she/them; non-binary	6th
Sam	they/them, non-binary	6th

Table 2 Participating Parents of WMS

Name	Pronouns/gender Identity	Occupation
Austin	he/him	University educator
Beth	she/her	Homemaker/ grade school substitute
Max	he/him	Engineer
Thomas	he/him	Physician

Table 3 Educators in the Research

Name	Pronouns	Occupation
Andie	she/her	Counselor at WMS,
Willie	he/him	Principal of WMS
Janie	she/her	University educator
Sydney	they/them	DEI trainer of a nonprofit organization
Sue	she/her	Middle school teacher from the Northeastern region of the country

Methods

Before conducting the interviews, the informed consent forms were sent to and signed by the participants and parents or guardians of student participants who opted to participate in this study. Proxy Consent Forms also included a space for students to give assent. Once consent forms were signed, the individual interviews were scheduled. Some student participants elected

to participate with friends or parents/guardians if preferred. The interviews occurred after school hours, at a location agreed upon by the participant, the participant's parent (when a minor), and the researcher. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. The researcher audio-recorded the interviews on her password-protected phone. The researcher took notes during the interview, and written information did not include participants' identifying information, such as addresses or phone numbers.

Data Analysis

After data collection, the researcher examined the data independently via open and focused coding, concept mapping, finding primary themes and sub-themes. Then the researcher compared the findings to see if they confirmed or disconfirmed one another (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Validity

Firstly, this research topic was motivated by the researcher's early adolescent child's exploration of gender identity. When her child revealed a new gender identity and pronouns, she initially felt lost, having previously raised the child as a girl, and, admittedly, had a hard transition toward understanding her child's choice for the new path of gender identity. However, through literature reviews and interviews with diverse participants, the researcher came to realize that supporting her child the space and time to explore their curiosity, including gender and sexual identity, was crucial, especially during adolescence. The researcher saw firsthand the positive effects of acceptance and support on her child's confidence. The point is not about what identity a child announces; the significance is that they can explore the area they are curious about and express themselves freely without being judged and discriminated against. As a mother having the experience of raising a child exploring her identity during middle school

years, the researcher may have her personal bias regarding how to create an inclusive and supportive environment for gender-diverse middle schoolers.

Secondly, the researcher participated in an informal parent support group for families with gender-diverse or gender-exploring children. Parents in the group often shared their experiences and exchanged information on how to support and raise their children. Despite coming from diverse backgrounds, including differences in religion, political affiliation, and race, parents developed a positive approach towards gender diversity, which was to allow their children to be themselves, free from societal expectations and stereotypes. This meant accepting and supporting their children's gender and sexual identity, as well as expression, regardless of what that might be. Thus, the researcher had pre-existing friendships with the parent participants, which may be a researcher bias. This potential bias may have influenced data collection because the researcher had a personal investment in the interview project to positively affect her child's and the WMS students' lives.

Thirdly, as a former middle school teacher in a different country and a current staff member at an elementary school in the US, the researcher is familiar with the language of the binary model for gender. Even in a liberal school district in Northern California, the researcher frequently hears "Hi, girls and boys" on her campus. Unfortunately, a principal even expressed that the topic of inclusion and equity for gender-diverse middle school students is "weird". Whether intentional or unintentional, there is a significant need for progress in establishing an inclusive and equitable culture for gender-diverse students. The researcher believes that it won't happen without shifting the mindset of school administrators and teachers to embrace the concept of a non-binary model for gender and sexuality. With this viewpoint in mind, it may become a bias that influences data analysis and conclusion.

Maxwell (2013) notes that “The fact that the researcher is part of the world he or she studies—is a powerful and inescapable influence; what the informant says is always influenced by the interviewer and the interview situation” (p. 125). The researcher wanted to have a safe and inclusive school environment where students can confidently express their true selves as a human being, regardless of their background, including gender and sexual identity. The researcher was conscious of her potential biases and took several measures to address validity threats and ensure a reliable study.

Rich Data. Rich data refers to “data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). Maxwell (2013) also noted, “In interview studies, such data generally require verbatim transcripts of the interviews, not just notes on what you felt was significant” (p. 126). In this research, all data were collected with verbatim transcripts. One DEI trainer from a local nonprofit organization participated by email because they were too sick to talk at the scheduled interview appointment. Email is one form of interview. Interviews include face-to-face interview, telephone interview, focus group interview, and E-mail interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 212). All the questions for discussion were open-ended, and that participant responded to all the questions by email with detailed verbatim form. For the other interviews, all data were collected with verbatim transcripts. The researcher recorded the “information by handwriting notes, by audiotaping...” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 214). What’s more, because the interview questions were all open-ended, interviewees could express their thoughts and tell their stories in detailed information that added to the data's richness.

Triangulation. Maxwell (2013) describes triangulation as “collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings...” (p. 128). Creswell and Creswell (2018) further

articulate to “Triangulate different data sources by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes.” (p.222). In this research, the researcher used four sources of data: students from WMS, parents with children in WMD, educators from WMS, retired middle school teachers from other states, educators from a local non-profit organization and a local university. Even the parent participants have different backgrounds, such as homemaker, university professors, engineers, and physicians. Among the fourteen participants, five are LGBTQ+ members, and nine are non-LGBTQ+ members. “This strategy reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). And “ if themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 222).

Peer Debriefing. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest to “Use peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the account.” (p.223). The researcher asked one individual who did not have interest in this research to review and ask questions about the project to improve the validity of the study.

Searching for discrepant evidence. “ Identifying and analyzing discrepant data and negative cases is a key part of the logic of validity testing in qualitative research(Maxwell & Maxwell, 2018,p.127). The researcher examined both the supporting and contradictory data to edit the conclusion. The researcher also asked others for feedback on the conclusion.

Respondent Validation. It is also called member checking, which “is systematically soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying” (Maxwell & Maxwell. 2018, p. 126). During coding and analyzing the data from interviews, the researcher

checked with a few participants to clarify the information she did not understand to ensure the accuracy of the data and interpretation.

Chapter 4: Findings

This research aimed to answer the questions concerning how and in what ways can an inclusive school environment be created to support all students, including individuals who identify as LGBTQ++. The research study was conducted by interviewing parents and guardians, educators, and middle school students, based on Critical Theory (Bohman 2005), Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and Queer Theory (Gamson 2000).

Several themes emerged during the research of this project and data analysis. The first theme was that “diverse” opportunities contributed to an inclusive environment. The researcher further understood the diverse opportunities by recognizing a diverse student body, diverse characteristic and personality traits, and diverse structures. Another major participant finding was that building relationships is central which is shown in the aspects of being heard, having a relaxed learning and socializing environments, and building community norms together with choice. The third finding is a call for further transformation, and includes four major sub findings. The first argues for adopting a non-binary model for gender diverse students. The second calls for improved leadership, role modeling and curriculum revolution. The third addresses ongoing rejection and stigmatization, and the need for professional education and activities of support to provide the care needed. The last sub finding is a call for funding to endorse these diverse initiatives.

The researcher used qualitative method and interviewed thirteen participants, among which ten were adults, including four parents, one school counselor from Wonderland Middle School (WMS) in Northern California, one principal from WMS, one retired middle school teacher from the eastern area of the country who is now a substitute teacher Northern California, one university professor, and one DEI trainer in a non-profit organization. The four students

were all from WMS; three were sixth graders, and one was an eighth grader. All interviews were one on one except for two sixth graders who were interviewed together.

Diverse Opportunities

During the interviews, participants consistently highlighted the significance of diversity. They emphasized that it is impossible to support inclusion without anticipating and providing support for the diverse needs of a diverse student body, their diverse personal characteristics, and through a diverse curriculum structure.

Diverse Student Body

Participants unanimously talked about how important it is to honor and celebrate a diverse student body, which refers to all the student population in a school, and includes students of different backgrounds, identities, orientations, religions, personality, interests, strengths, learning styles, personal characteristics, etc. By broadening the sense of diversity and individuality greater cross-sections of connection become possible.

Participants had commonly stressed how the value of individual sensitivity, experience and interest contributed to inclusion. They thought it was up to educators to take these variations into account and foster environments where everyone could flourish. Max provided a good example of this perspective. He is an engineer, and the father of two children, including Rose who is a student in Wonderland Middle School (WMS) and who identifies as non-binary. In particular, the insensitivity of the boy-girl binary model of gender identity had been a big concern for him. He noted:

People give a choice to their boy, girl. Boy you're blue and you get short hair, and you play baseball. Girl, dance, and you wear pink. Some people are, but most people are somewhere in between. I think that's the way I look at it. Is that the choice? Life gets hard

and if you don't fit that model. One side or the other. You feel bad. It's a challenge if you don't fit one of those models that culture has determined. There will be a difficult struggle. I think this is where the school creates opportunities.

He saw the struggle gender diverse students were experiencing from the binary model. However, he pointed out that it was there that the school could provide opportunities of inclusion for gender diverse students by offering students the freedom to decide their gender identity so that everyone could feel included.

When responding to “What creates an environment where you feel included?” Alex said, “It's different for everyone, honestly.” They recognized that different people feel different to what makes them feel inclusive. Bella, an eighth grader in WMS, said she liked to be surrounded by diverse people, which made her feel included. She noted that she wanted “Just an environment with a bunch of different people can help strengths come out. So, like, more artsy kids, maybe more kids part of the LGBTQ can help bring out some of these strengths.”

Thomas noted, “A diverse student body brings diverse life experience, and the diverse life experience brings to the classroom critical analysis from different perspectives.” He further explained that life experience included experience of geography, family structure, economic resources, and religions. It included the geography where people were from, as well as a person's economic experience, family structure, experiences of things such as religion, among many other things. Thomas provided an example to show the multicultural background in education system:

The child who grew up in a Mormon household in Idaho, is going to have a different experience than a Jewish kid who grew up in Manhattan. And both of them have legitimate understandings and perspectives to offer to the educational environment. And

frankly, in a multicultural society, it's critical that educational institutions benefit from the perspectives of the people of our society.

Thomas's remarks emphasized the value of diverse people's experience in facilitating critical analysis in the educational environment. These diverse perspectives would also help develop solutions for problems in education and a multicultural society. For diverse skill and strength, Thomas noted:

As people have said, if you had a classroom where one student was Albert Einstein, and one student was Beethoven, they both would bring to that environment tremendous strengths. But if the environment doesn't recognize the creativity of Beethoven, and is really only interested in the mathematical abilities, then Beethoven will be disadvantaged. Conversely, if you were not interested in academic performance, you'd overlook Einstein's skills.

Thomas' analysis demonstrated the significance of a focus on a students' strengths instead of their weakness in a diverse student population. Consequently, our educational goals should be diverse instead of always focusing on certain outcomes. Or we may miss the ability of other students to contribute meaningfully based on their own strengths.

Similarly, Sidney, whose pronouns are they/them, noted, "Every student is going to need different things to feel included." They are a queer, non-binary, and multiracial advocate, and a DEI trainer in a local non-profit organization. Sidney's comment made a clear conclusion about how diverse student's need for inclusion.

When parents who were participants in this research were asked what their children's strengths were, their answers varied widely.

Alex: Math, science, and skateboarding. Not History.

Sam: Reading, writing, public speaking, math, and science.

Elsie: Acting

Bella: Leadership and art.

Beth: Music for Jackline, not Social Studies. And art for Jessica

Max: Art and dance for Rose. Not sports, especially ball games.

Among these students, we can see their diversified potentials who could be Alan Turing (a mathematician who was a gay), Alice Walker (a queer African American author), Thorgy Thor (a Brooklyn-based drag performer), Megan Rapinoe (a lesbian soccer player and Olympic gold medalist), and Mauree Turner (a politician and a Muslim nonbinary person), or just themselves with no need to fit in anybody else's model. We have to be very alert to the fact that students have variable strengths and possibly even individual strengths that have to be supported and valued in that environment for thriving. Or we may miss their potential. A diverse student body brings diverse students' sensitivities, strengths, and we want to have an academic environment that supports students strengths with an inclusive and equitable setting.

Diverse Personality Traits

Beth identified the need for differentiated instruction to reflect each student's unique interests, requirements, and abilities. She noted:

Information should be presented in more than one way. Some kids can't just sit down and be still looking at the board all day. Maybe they need to hear it, or they need to move their body to really understand it or they're more visual learners.

Sam (they/them), a sixth-grade student who identified as non-binary, was good at reading and writing. So, their language teacher assigned them different amounts of reading homework,

which made them feel included because the teacher recognized their reading level was different from other students. Sam noted:

My teacher this year in language arts is supportive. A lot of the kids in my class are slow readers. So, they would finish like a book a month where I can finish like probably five books in a month, or even more. So, we had this assignment for a while. That's like we had to log every single book. We read and write like two paragraphs on it. And since people were gonna do that once or twice a month because they didn't read as often as I did. My teacher said that I could do it like one or two of the books I read, instead of all of them, because she didn't want to create extra work for me while everyone else was about doing that much work.

Max felt strongly about the importance of honoring learning diversity as part of gendered diversity. He admitted, "I don't know whether or not my kids felt included. But I would like to sincerely think, it would be having the school to support a variety of students' differences. Hopefully they can find like-minded people." He addressed "students' differences" to inclusion, and added, "Give students an opportunity to explore their interests. If they're interested in dance or they're interested in arts, or they're interested in math, make those opportunities available." He hopes the school would give opportunities to students based on their interests so that they can feel recognized and included to motivate them for learning. Given the fact his child Rose had ADHD, and difficulty in some academic courses, Max emphasized the support for students with learning differences:

Honestly, I don't care about grades. You need to try to support their learning differences to meet our needs, not schools' needs, not the state's needs. Rose needs this certain test support. We fought for that. And because we realized that she was not going to be able to

just do normal school, she was going to need some support. She was just too drowning because of Anxiety and ADHD.

Max addressed the importance of different ways to evaluate and teach neurodiverse students like his child Rose, who has trouble learning because of ADHD. The standard test model makes them feel exclusive because it was hard for her to get good scores in core subjects without meeting her special needs. Schools can offer some courses Rose enjoys with the teaching style matching her learning style instead of using the one standard model that focuses on certain subjects' test scores. Max noted that even standard art class would not be able to draw her attention if the art teacher asked her to draw a tree with many leaves. She liked to draw freely. Based on differentiated instruction, Rose should have the choice to draw the things she was interested in because art is all about creativity. When Rose had little interest in drawing too many leaves in a tree, she might have felt that the activity lacked creativity and felt bored. At this point, teachers could use that context as an opportunity to learn about her interests and bring out her strengths.

Max seemed unhappy with the current high stakes of the test system evaluating districts, schools, teachers, and students by a standardized test instead of a diverse way to evaluate individuals. This standardized test is like a magic wand that makes most schools become the slaves of test results, neglecting creativity and individual students' special needs. Although Rose had an IEP, she still had a hard time learning all the subjects required in the curriculum in the current school. How to address all the special learning needs so that every student feels inclusive remains an area to look at. When talking about one student who was rejected to take an art elective she had signed up, but was placed in a math workshop, Austin, a parent and a university professor noted:

I think what would make more sense would be to look at that kid and say, “Okay, you need some help with math. This is the structure we can offer. For that. Let's look at the places in your curriculum or other skills that are overlapping, so that you can take the art elective that actually will really help you balance the kind of thinking that you need to do in math.” So, for instance, if you are spending a lot of time in your social science class, doing stuff that's largely about synthesizing and summarizing, kind of large world events and getting a sense of timeline, some of it is just about reading and notetaking. These are foundational skills. You're getting a lot of those foundational skills in your English language arts class as well. So maybe there's one trimester , they're like, “Alright, kid, you're gonna go do math workshop, and you're gonna do art. And you're not going to do social studies this term, because it's also really important for you to have an art class that shouldn't come last.”

Austin’s suggestion that schools should highlight the value of a complete strategy in curriculum which considers students' strengths and weaknesses in diverse areas. Max noted that Rose who was good at dancing and drawing freely, and did not like ball games in PE, for which we might be able to offer her dance class instead of chasing ball in PE class, as well as allow her to draw something she likes, instead of requiring her to draw tree leaves she feels boring, which might be a way to create a sense of success by emphasizing her strength and interest, and consequently increase her intrinsic motivation to enjoy learning.

Thomas advocated that his daughter wouldn’t be able to feel included in the school if their personal differences are not recognized and accommodated with proper support:

I think every parent recognizes that their child has individual skills and... has a personality that is unique to them. And anytime they're in an environment in school,

where their individual skills and personality is valued and supported, it feels like a school that's appropriate, and valuable to your child. Any school that creates a set of expectations, but demands performance that has no regard for the individuals who make up the environment, feel unsupported to anybody's individual child.

Thomas believed every child was unique, and if a school used a one standard and one expectation to all students, instead of taking into account the students that make up the class, some students would feel unsupported and excluded. He stressed the importance of valuing individual skills and personality to inclusion. He continued to explain:

So, for my child, I think she has a desire to do well, and she also has the commitment and interest in mastering the material and being successful at it. But she can be frustrated easily and when she's frustrated in the experience of trying to perform well it can create barriers to her continued success in that subject because she's very, very self-critical. And if she runs into any problems with learning, she tends to have such high stress about it, that it obstructs her ability to progress in that field and succeed. So, I think if her teachers recognize her potential for doing very well, her interest in doing well, her desire to learn well, and support her through times where her frustration might cause her to feel obstructed from additional progress, I think she'll do very well in the class. If they take her frustration as a sign of a lack of commitment or a desire not to dedicate themselves to this subject, they may respond in a way that doesn't actually help her, get back on track, and ultimately, defeat her ability to actually succeed and their ability to have a student who succeeds.

Thomas emphasizes the significance of identifying a student's potential, motivation, and willingness to study, as well as the value of giving them the assistance and direction they need to

overcome obstacles and succeed. It also highlights how misconceptions and misunderstandings hinder a student's development and success.

Several participants noted how a lot of academic environments were actually not designed to support students' strengths, but rather to evaluate, to some degree criticize, and otherwise determine who is the most fit under those environments. The participants had shown strong evidence that students' personal need, skill and personality are needed to be evaluated and provide personalizing instruction.

Diverse Structures

Participants all talked about the role of diverse school structure to inclusion. Diverse structure is an umbrella term that includes diverse classes, diverse clubs, facilities and services to promote diversity, equity, and cultural sensitivity. Having a necessary diverse structure would have a positive impact on student social emotional outcomes and academic outcomes. Elsie noted:

Sometimes I go to the Wellness Center for lunch. I feel pretty included because like, sometimes they're working on specific activities, like everyone can be a part of it. That's why sometimes you come there. That's cool. That way you can feel included if you have nothing else to do.

The Wellness Center was created and used in the fall of 2022. Andie, the school counselor, outlined the purpose of the center:

We have a new Wellness Center... that provides a safe space for kids when they can't access their strengths. When they're feeling challenged a little bit with stress, anxiety, sadness, it gives them an opportunity to take a brain break and get ten minutes and hopefully regroup back in their classes.

Andie further explained it's a great place for students to adjust their emotions so that they can go back to their classroom. Again, it is not for everybody. As Sam, a student, noted:

But sometimes I think it's a little too big. It feels awesome, very big at times. I obsess over the fact that anyone there says anything about who they see in the Wellness Center, even though they're not supposed to.

Sam felt that the Wellness Center was too big for them, and it lacked a sense of privacy. Despite this setback, the Wellness Center has been a unique place helping many students cope with their anxiety. The concept of diverse structure does not mean "one size fits all." And the Wellness Center in WMS was not the only way for all students to feel relaxed. Students like Sam needed a safe small quiet and private space to calm down. Sam continued to explain:

Like the other week, I was kind of almost had a panic attack. It was not fun. And so, it was like during lunch or something. So, the Assistant Principal, Julie, just walked me into her office and I spent just like an entire period there. She had to go to a meeting at one point, but she allowed me to sit there. I didn't want to talk. She wanted me to just sit there which was nice. Because the Wellness Center is very big. I needed a smaller, quieter space.

It was a relief that the assistant principal provided Sam with the small private office they needed to cope with their panic attack. And it is an example of a diverse school structure to meet diverse students' needs. Sam also had many interests, and had become a part of two clubs, GSA and Global Connection Club. They were one of the leaders in the school's GSA where they could make good use of their public speaking skills. About Global Connection Club, they noted, "I feel included there because it's just people who know me there. And we're always doing something where, like, everyone's included."

About the diverse school structure, Beth, a parent, noted, "There has to be a wide variety of classes. Kids that learn in different ways have access to classes more aligned with what they're good at, such as a wide variety of art classes aside from just the core classes." Beth continued that this was designed so that "every kid during the day can have at least one class where they feel like they are maybe a little bit better [and so that] they're able to shine." She went on to explain that for one of her kids, Jacqueline [she/her], "she's really musically inclined. And because there's a lot of offerings of music, she's in chorus, in a band, and right now in a musical production. That's all gonna be going on." After taking a sip of tea, she continued, "She is recognized there. She's able to shine there in such a way that she isn't able to shine in like social studies, or English. That's just not her passion." She expanded the breadth of these diverse possibilities by also pointing to how the music program provides opportunities for students, such as Jacqueline, to develop their strengths:

The strength of the music program is really defining and is going to potentially be the thing that most impacts her self-confidence, her inner strength. It's something that she's starting with. This core belief that she's starting to develop is that she's good at music, and that she excels in this area and that she has the strength so that's a beautiful thing to see. Beth's narrative gave a clear idea of what a diverse school structure meant to one of her children.

Max believed that small classes allow for diversity and recognizing individuality. He noted, "In our case, Rose had a really hard time with math. And it was actually undermining her confidence. This school year, the school offered some new classes to support students that have a hard time in certain subjects." Max said, "Rose is in an Academic Support class. It's one of the electives and they feel included in the class, because it's tailored to, and they get individualized support. It's smaller. It's much smaller classes like eight or nine students." He confirmed that

diverse and small sized classes can offer more individualized support to students and make them feel inclusive.

Building Relationships

Participants believe forging close bonds with students is crucial to establishing a welcoming, effective, and inclusive learning atmosphere. They listed a few ways to better know about students toward forming strong relationships that lead to student inclusion.

Listening and Asking

Participants talked a lot about the significance of “listening and asking” contributing to building solid and healthy partnerships with students. By demonstrating to someone that they are cared for and valued for their ideas and feelings, it could be possible to build mutual respect and trust for the path to inclusion. Alex, a student, believed that inclusion happened in “places where people will listen and understand what I'm saying instead of just sort of going on with their [own opinions and ideas]. I feel included when I feel like they are just listening to me.” Alex continued with their opinion of what created inclusion, “So I guess just anywhere where someone's just listening to a conversation, or I'm just listening to someone else's conversation.” Alex also thought that it was equally crucial for them to have the opportunity to listen to others' conversations, because it made them feel like “I am part of something.”

About listening to students, Sam noted, "Well, I have a lot of anxiety and just talking to [the assistant principal Julie] helps with that. We have a lot of the same interests and stuff. So, I can talk to her about that." Julie often listened to Sam with care, making them feel good and inclusive. Sam commented about Julie, "And she's a very nice person. I feel like that's like an understatement." Sam very much appreciated the opportunity that Julie provided by sharing each

other's interests so that Sam could find their common interests and develop trust in her, which was a significant step for building a close relationship and inclusion.

Janie (she/her) was an educator at a university in northern California. She used to be an elementary school teacher in the South-Central Region of the country. She has published scholarship on effective strategies to support transgender and gender-expansive students. In responding to the question about creating an environment that supports students' strengths during our interview, she noted:

The first aspect of answering this question is really deeply understanding the people in the space. The first step is just really taking the time to get to know who people are, their backgrounds, identities, experiences. I don't think you can create an environment built on strength without doing that deep work first.

The researcher found herself agreeing with Janie during the interview and wondered if teachers had enough time to know about their students. To this, Janie added:

It does take extra time to get to know our students and their families very well. In my opinion, it's worth that time. It's sort of connected to the ongoing work of getting to know people. In my experience, sometimes my teacher colleagues would shy away from that because it does take time. If you're doing regular community building and social emotional learning activities, it can easily take ten to fifteen minutes of your class time.

Janie recognized it was time consuming for a teacher to know about every student in their classroom. However, she thought it was important, "I have a positive bias toward those things, because I think that they're so important to the learning process. And that's really based on my educational philosophy, which is that teaching is about building relationships."

Janie's perspectives offered inspiration toward educational philosophy. One of the words she most often said was, "listening," including when she said, "Listen deeply to other people, about their experiences, about their needs." She explained more fully the manner for listening by suggesting, "Don't interrupt someone or say, 'oh, you can't have experienced that. That can't be right.' It's not about questioning someone about their experience, but listening and taking into consideration what their experiences have been. And then adjust accordingly."

Janie further explained how to approach students with a conversation to know about students in detail, with an emphasis of following up with behaviors and activities. She noted that depending on how students' brains were developing, "It's important that we intentionally point out, and tell them, 'These are the things I'm doing to try to create an inclusive space,' and then asking the students themselves, 'what am I missing?'" She concluded, "Just 'tell them', we miss the part of 'asking them.' I think the most important one is actually listening and honoring someone's experience."

Similarly, Austin emphasized the importance of listening to students with patience and kindness. When responding to the question "What do you think creates an environment where students feel included?" Austin answered, "Kindness, and listening." In general, effective communication techniques include active listening which allow educational communities to forge deeper bonds and build a more pleasant and satisfying social life.

Relaxed Space for Easing Anxiety

All participants agree that a relaxed place could reduce anxiety in a school setting and can have a significant positive impact on students' well-being and academic performance. One way to achieve this goal is to create a soft, caring, friendly, comfortable, and humanized school environment. Janie noted:

It's important to try to soften the environment and the space as well as giving people a heads up when something is changing. So that's just one example, but my point is that anxiety interferes with focus and motivation for people. If you're feeling anxious about something that's really important for you, why would you care about learning a math fact? It doesn't make any sense, and so I would say, if we, as leaders, or facilitators intentionally try to create a space where people feel included and like they belong. I think that's one way to provide a calming kind of less anxious environment. Not that they won't show up with other anxieties, but at least were we trying to reduce that for people?

She also said that “Inclusion is sort of like reducing fears and anxieties, so you can actually focus on the topics”.

Austin also noted a few times about how important a relaxed place is for students. He advocated that students needed:

Just some time to relax. Nobody can really be present with themselves if they're always in a hurry. Having a more relaxed pace would be helpful. Students usually complain about how much they have to rush to get from thing to thing to thing to thing. Something as simple as a student lounge where kids can have a 15-minute break, which can be built in sometime during the day, offering some doughnuts or something similar? Students need more rest.

As a parent, Austin noticed that his child was stressed from school life and a relaxed environment would balance them.

Alex, a non-binary (they/them) sixth-grade student at Wonderland Middle School (WMS) in Northern California noted that when there is, “Somewhere calm... everyone's just happy.” Alex had chosen to be interviewed in Andie's office (Andie is a sixth-grade counselor at WMS).

They seemed somewhat nervous when they entered Andie's office. I shared some chocolates and lollipops with them, which made them feel a bit more relaxed. Andie said she could leave her office if they felt uncomfortable. They confirmed that they did not mind if she was there. So, Andie stayed. When responding to the question, "What creates an environment that supports students' strength?" Alex said, "I think a place someone could just be comfortable in. I mean, if it's something that they feel and believe in, they should be able to do it wherever and whenever." In this context, "comfortable" to Alexis meant something, somewhere, or someone they trust. They added that they felt included, "Somewhere calm." Elsie (she/they), a sixth-grade student also described the environment bringing out their strength as "a place not very overwhelming." Both Alex and Elsie believed a calm place where people can trust each other encourages their strength and makes them feel included.

Elsie noted, an inclusive place is "a safe space for everyone to feel how they want to feel, act how they want to act, but not too out of hand." Elsie values kindness. She noted, "It's like having people who you know, care about you, to be around you." She likes to be around people that she knows and cares about. She is known to be a sweet person, and is ready to help her friends at times they need.

And Sam, a sixth-grade student (they/them), expressed themselves in a very straightforward manner: "I guess [an inclusive space] has like zero judgment from other kids." Similarly, Bella, an eighth-grade student, noted, "Inclusion is an environment where judgment isn't such a big thing because in my school, there are a lot of judging people, and that creates a less inclusive environment. And it's harder for people to show their strengths." Bella noted that she had social anxiety, cared a lot about her peers' opinions, and felt worried when receiving

negative feedback. She considered judgment as a factor that prevented her strengths from coming out.

Max, a parent, noted, "How can you teach people empathy is probably really what I always try to do. [I think you need] to put yourself in their experience. Try to understand 'why do you think like that?'" He believed empathy involved having the ability to look at a situation from another person's perspective, which demonstrated genuine care about others. It was the key to helping students learn about inclusion.

In general, everyone who took part in the research agreed that a calm environment could help students feel less anxious in class and improve their academic and overall well-being. And making a soft, loving, friendly, cozy, and humanized learning environment is one technique to create a care and inclusive space physically and emotionally.

Build Community Norms Together with Choices

Participants noted that if we are to make sure that every student, regardless of gender identity, feels safe, welcoming, valued, and accepted, building community norms together with choices is important.

Janie, a university professor in Northern California, believed that it took a full community of committed people to create a community norm. She noted, "We make greater strides when it's not just teachers doing this work. We need all school personnel involved. We need administrators and principals to be on board with this broad goal of creating inclusive environments." Again, she stressed the importance of taking time to get to know students to deeply bring them into building the community and the community norms with each other. From there, she said:

Trying to find ways to build in a lot of student choice, and the agency will naturally lend itself to a more inclusive space because people will have different preferences of learning and that kind of thing. They will feel more like they're included. If we offer them choices to express themselves in different ways, then it's sort of a natural way to open up that space and include more people.

And then Janie gave some examples of how to build norms with students. Again, it requires a lot of listening, informing each step, and then asking for their insights. She noted:

I might tell my students, 'So I'm going to share my pronouns and ask what yours are.'
'I'm going to ask you what name you want to go by. I'm going to create activities where you can participate in different ways so that you have a choice.' I might say, 'We're gonna build our rules together. I'm not gonna give you rules. We're gonna create them as a community.' And then I would tell my students, 'That's the way I want to make sure everybody feels included. What else should I be thinking about?' Just ask them.

Both Max and Janie addressed the significance of who made the norms, how to make the norms and how to execute the norms in school.

A Call for More Transformation

All the student participants noted ways by which they don't feel fully safe or comfortable at school. While acknowledging some elements of the school environment that were supportive, such as diverse opportunities and the value of building relationships, all of the participants, including parents, guardians, and educational professionals, also advocated that significant further changes are needed. These included moving toward a non-binary model for gender identity, improved leadership toward changing curriculum and hiring role models for non-binary students, and providing training to help shift the culture to overcome stigma and harm.

Participants believed that everybody involved—teachers, administrators, students, and parents—must work together to advance gender diverse inclusion in middle school. Here are a few things the participants felt important to do.

Non-Binary Model for Gender Identity

In the interviews, students described the harmful effect they experienced in school. Parents with gender diverse children also addressed this issue, and expressed their voice to stop using this binary model for gender identity.

Max shared that he thought a lot about gender diversity. From his observation of his child Rose, he realized that many middle school students were exploring their gender identity. They didn't feel that the models offered to them fit them. He noted:

They don't feel comfortable with the confined space. So, I feel like you're going to need to create a model where there's room for people to fit in or to not fit in. I think that people are really pushing back on this, this kind of cultural pushback. Kids are using they/them, and using gender neutral pronouns.

Max felt it necessary to combat the binary model so that students could have a free space to be themselves. But he was still reckoning with the hardship that non-binary students are experiencing. He noted, "If you create a curriculum that is like the model of the 'blue boys and pink girls', what happens to people that are purple?" He thought it could be insensitive to some people and could actually be damaging. So, he suggested that "Someone needs to look into the differences of students to include their sensitivity." He was challenging the traditional binary model of gender identity that was making gender diverse students' life difficult.

Max believed that something was happening in the culture, and people, especially the new generation felt that they did not accept the old model. He found that taking different sensitivity

of students into consideration was an important way, and the multi-gendering model was a choice to replace the binary model. Similarly, Janie noted:

We had gendered so much of schooling, where it doesn't really have anything to do with the learning process. For example, we used to write lesson plans, where we said there's this many boys with this many girls. When I was a child, there were boys books and games, and girls books and games, and a lot of boys versus girls competitions. And that was not good for a child like me who was very much a Tomboy. So, I was really into things that were considered boy things. That was not very good for my self-esteem, for sure.

Janie continued with her narrating:

But when I was a teacher, I was thinking, "Well, why are we doing those things? Why are we gendering so many things?" And so, I would say, this is all circling back to the school environment. And I would say when we notice these unnecessary things we're doing to self-segregate and separate people. We could stop doing them. Simply, we've been the ones to create it, and we can change it. So, one of the things I learned in my own research is that we can just change what we're doing so that we're not excluding people from each other and creating little silo groups. I would say, the more open we can make a school environment while we're inviting all different kinds of people to come to the space is best for everyone.

Janie expressed her concern about unnecessarily gendering in school. She then called for a stop to segregating students based on the binary model of gender identity to create a space including everyone.

Leadership: Through Role Models and Curriculum Reform

Participants also strongly believed that it is necessary to have a curriculum reform and leadership role models who promote the inclusion of gender diverse students since doing so can serve to inspire, represent, and advocate for change. Beth, a former social worker in a non-profit organization helping homeless youths in Northern California, is a parent of two middle school students. One of the children is an eighth-grade student who has been exploring and changing pronouns for the last year. Beth believes that the environment of the school has to be rooted in diversity and that diversity is an important thing that everyone benefits from. She noted that, “This is the idea that if one person is suffering, the whole community suffers, or if one one person is excluded, the whole community feels that.” Beth was drawing on Martin Luther King Jr., and applying it to the context of her own experience. The researcher’s child and one of Beth’s children were classmates in a few classes in WMS, and they had become good friends. Beth had been impressed with the principal, for instance, when she had attended the open house at the high school during the period of this research. Beth noted that:

The principal of the school had all of the parents in the room, all of the students in the room—everyone there—and right off the bat, he set the tone for the type of environment that this school should have. He made a statement that we're standing on Native American land, and he acknowledged some of the painful history that came from that. Then he talked about how this school was one that embraced diversity and that no kid was going to be left behind. There were a lot of programs to make sure everyone was able to achieve the goals that they had.

Beth then explained the reasons she liked the idea of inclusion. As a parent of kids that are not white, and having come from a background where her family didn't have a lot of money, she felt

included by the high school principal creating that setting. He set the tone. And she thinks that that's true for gender diversity as well. She noted:

It's like you set the tone for being inclusive to all kinds of people and it also has to be reflected in the staff too. All of this can only go so far if all of the teachers are just heterosexual white people. I think it's important to have a diverse faculty. Another thing that has been important and helpful for feeling included at the middle school is that there's the new principal, who has made it very clear in all of his communications how much he values diversity, how important it is for him, sending out an email, sending out personal stories about his personal difficulties with being different. And that makes it more human, makes other people feel like they can share their own stories and like it's something that is positive to have to be different. Instead of it being something that you need to feel shame about.

Sidney also stated the reason for representation of identities in curriculum. She noted, "All identities must be included in curriculum and be reflected in staffing, programming, etc., because it reflects a diversity of identities and experiences. I don't think learning can happen unless someone feels included and feels like they belong." Sidney also emphasized that "Students have access to books with characters that represent their identities and those that they might not have as much exposure to. They also see staff and other adults around them with diverse representation."

Likewise, Austin believed that one of the things that needed to happen was curricula change. He thought there needed to be a pretty deep overhaul, a commitment to working out a space for more curiosity, about more different kinds of ways of being in the world. He noted:

So, the school environment in which that can take place, maybe have some visibly queer teachers. Maybe have black leadership, maybe have a drag queen story, maybe have modules in your basic social science classes, like what if your assumption was that history classes need to include some mention of really profoundly not normative people, not like, here is a congressman who also happens to be gay, but he's actually a white guy with a tie. Right? What if you had some opportunity in an English language arts class? What if the discussion of something like Hemingway began with the assumption that this is a really misogynistic, really hetero sexist text? And we really need to look at what that means and how it works in the text. Neither get rid of it nor accept it, but study.

As a parent of a middle schooler identified as non-binary, and as a higher education educator who has conducted much research about LGBTQ culture, Austin has his authentic experience and theoretical knowledge on this topic.

Austin also talked about leadership roles in educational reform for inclusion. He suggested that it was “Not only for, but still especially important for gender diverse queer kids, kids with disabilities, and kids whose English isn't very good or whatever, like that broad spectrum of the people who got put on the outside.” He especially pointed out that it was a reform for all the students in marginalized groups, especially for the gender diverse students. He also noted how important it is to provide the foundation for “the assumption that there are people more or less like them in positions of leadership around them all the time, who don't feel the need to perform something else.” Austin looked forward to the day when teachers or school staff identified as an individual of LGBTQ+ don't have to emphasize their gender identity or sexual orientation, just like the heterosexual people don't have to tell their students they are straight. This inclusive diversity of role models is itself a model for honoring the rights to be human.

With reference to role models, Thomas also thought everybody likes to see in the environment and an academic environment role models of people who are like them who have succeeded. Moreover, he believed that if someone just said that they are creating an environment where students are included and students' individuality is supported, valued and included, but there are still no role models to suggest that anybody in that environment can succeed unless they fit into a certain type of success or individual, then the initial suggestion of a place as being inclusive will not effectively be communicated. He noted that the environment must include “examples of people from varied backgrounds, personalities and life experiences succeeding in that environment. If that's not there, no matter what you say, the students recognize that the real success of that environment will not be available to them.”

Overcoming Rejection, Stigma and Harm Through Education, Training and Networks

Participants all talked about the significance of education and training for school educators, staff members and students on anti-discrimination and using proper language to support gender diverse students for an inclusionary environment. They thought that student-led initiatives such as GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance/Gender and Sexuality Alliances) club had a positive effect to promote a diversity and inclusion culture for all students regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation.

Rejection, Stigma, and Harm. The rejection and stigma against LGBTQ+ students was a topic of discussion among all participants. They believed that being mocked and excluded was damaging and could lead to poor academic performance, poor mental health, and a lack of enthusiasm in learning.

Alex (they/them), a GSA member in WMS, described how they felt concerning their identity as nonbinary and inclusion at school and in their personal life:

Well, some of the people I'm close with have accepted that. Some people even start using my pronouns, but some people here just don't have the emotional maturity to accept that. But I feel like it will get better at one point to the pronouns you would prefer to use: they/them.

Alex said they had very low expectations for WMS to improve their experience. They thought WMS was pretty good compared to the previous school they came from. It was a middle school in San Francisco, they described:

There was constant bullying, harassment; they never once identified it, or said anything to mention it. There was a lot of bullying! A lot of kids who got treated terribly. Some of them even developed disabilities [because of being bullied and harassed].

Although this San Francisco school and WMS are both located in the Bay Area of Northern California, Alex had very different experiences with regards to LGBTQ++ students, school efforts, and resources. Alex stated that WMS “does very well to try to emphasize inclusion. I think the best they could do right now is let children figure it out for themselves.” Despite Alex's good impression and comment on their new school WMS, they did mention that some people in WMS did not accept their pronouns as they/them, which could be an area for the school to improve. And that is unfair to the gender-diverse students, which should be a focus of education and training among school employees and students.

Sam (they/them), one of the WMS leaders in GSA noted, “A lot of teachers here use very gendered language. I would try to change the language that people use that might unintentionally exclude people or offend people [if I had been a teacher]. And I felt that [the gendered language] would make people feel not as included.” I asked Sam what specific “gender language” some teacher was using that made them unhappy, they noted:

Instead of referring to people [as] boys and girls, which not many people do, which is good, just say, ‘Hey everyone.’ Or something else they prefer to be called. My preference is ‘people.’ Not like “Hey, girls!” blah, blah, blah.

Sam was sending a very clear and strong message that It's important for schools to provide education and training on inclusive language, and to encourage school employees and students to be mindful of the language they use, which might impact others. This can involve providing resources and guidelines on inclusive language, as well as promoting ongoing discussions and training sessions on the topic.

Elsie (she/they), a sixth grader and GSA member in WMS, noted, “A lot of people make jokes about being gay. I know someone who struggled with this experience, of other people making offensive gay jokes.”

Similarly, Bella also said that LGBTQ+ students “get kind of teased, not really bullied, but more teased.” Even when seemingly hidden in humor, the hurt and harm can be devastating. Earlier it had been noted how Janie recalled that she was very much a tomboy when she was a child and “was into things that were considered boy things. That was not very good for my self-esteem, for sure.”

Likewise, Max noted, “Life gets hard and if you don't fit that [binary] model—one side or the other. There will be a difficult struggle.” But he added, “I think this is where the school creates opportunities.”

Max argued that by fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, schools could open doors for those who do not match the binary model. My interpretation of this quote is that people are expected to fall into one of two gender categories—male or female—and heterosexual partnerships are regarded as the norm in the mainstream culture of many countries. Those who

do not fit within these categories could experience prejudice or exclusion. Middle schools can provide training and education to school employees and students about gender diversity, the preferred language, the pronouns, and preferred names to ensure gender-diverse students do not suffer stigma and harm by bullying and teasing, which is the minimum thing a school should do. Schools can also offer resources like books or organizations specialized in DEI promotion and activities like Pride events to assist students in exploring their identities, finding others with similar experiences through networks like GSA, and questioning social conventions to enable students to be themselves in inclusive school space. It is important to embed such nonbinary gender education in the curriculum as a retaining activity, not just a Pride Day or Month, to make nonbinary gender models attain equitable and inclusive. It is also significant to help gender-diverse students build the strength to overcome the obstacles they may encounter in a society that frequently favors those who fit into the binary.

Andie, the WMS school counselor noted , “ There are a lot of people in the school who can be very rude and mean and can say a lot of things.” She continued with more details:

Sometimes kids, in their discomfort, mock it. I've had students sign other students up for GSA and give GSA an unfriendly nickname. They're joking, but it's not funny. I've had students who feel like they don't necessarily want to attend GSA meetings because they're worried that they might get teased. Even though being a GSA member doesn't mean you identify any, which way or not. There are definitely still kids who live in some fear of joining the club and even talking about how they identify because of fear of being teased.

So that's what I would do, that's my number one thing that I would like to be better at. This is other evidence that diverse students could experience prejudice or exclusion in WMS. School employees like Andie, the counselor, were aware of what happened to the LGBTQ+

students in WMS, and treated it as her number one thing to work on. Besides working as a counselor, Andie also supervised the GSA in WMS, which provided her an opportunity to know about what the gender-diverse students were experiencing and expecting. That is a way to know about them so that school could tailor specific action for the issues.

Education, Training, and Creative Actions. Based on the participant's experience and observations, the key words of rejection, exclusive language, pronouns, teasing, harm, fears, and training appeared to have repeated a lot during the interviews. Participants all saw the need to improve the school culture for a safe environment for gender-diverse students. WMS principal Willie noted that the school district and WMS had partnered with a few non-profit educational and training organizations such as Changing Perspectives, Critical Friends, Facing History, the Spahr Center and Desmond Fambrini from Education & Media Firm Xpressions LLC (Desmond Fambrini) to promote the value of open-mindset, democracy, and DEI. Among these groups, the Spahr Center and Desmond Fambrini specifically focused on facilitating LGBTQ+ Cultural Awareness by offering education and training to school adults and students on gender, sexual identity, language usage, pronouns, and anti-bullying, etc. Counselor Andie noted that Desmond Fambrini is gender-fluid, queer and a learning specialist working with neural-diverse students. They came to WMS as a guest speaker to work with individual clients, families, schools, and districts for academic intervention, inclusivity, curriculum, and diversity.

As to the training from the Spahr Center, Counselor Andie confirmed the training from the Spahr Center:

So, a trainer from the Spahr Center is coming on April 5 to our staff meeting. And it's going to do a whole staff presentation on how to be gender inclusive and covering things like gender usage, how you welcome students to let us know what pronouns they choose.

But if kids don't want to share their pronouns, they don't have to. So how are you district office to make sure that they're also sensitive to those issues, and to how kids want their name to appear, to how they identify their gender, to which name they are using, and issues around notifying parents if their children identify as non-binary. sensitive to both those positions but make sure that you're recognizing if a student wants to be referred to as a certain specific pronoun and name. In the sub plans, if there's a sensitive issue that a substitute teacher even knows, making sure that the staff is educated around those issues.

Andie added:

One of the reasons that we're having this trainer from the Spahr Center is because we did experience some issues. A couple of years ago, we had a parent who was very uncomfortable with a teacher letting the kids know that they can share their pronouns. And this parent really didn't want his child to be asked the pronouns. He felt that was too direct of a question, or whatever too exposing, so and so. We make sure that it's optional, but it's also welcome information for us. So, just being really sensitive, but we did have some teachers who kind of felt like Yikes, I would love more information about how to handle some of these situations because not all kids are comfortable sharing their pronouns. And so how do we know, what are the best practices? Again, that's why we're doing this workshop.

This quote highlights the need for schools to be aware of the sensitivity of LGBTQ+ students. It is important to educate school adults and students to know that asking about pronouns is always optional, and it's also welcome information for teachers to know. So, what else could school do to address the sensitivity of pronouns in school? Andie noted:

There's been great strides in the years that I've been here in creating laws around things, like the gender-neutral bathroom, gender neutral changing rooms, and the no bullying policies. And there's actual laws out there that you have to abide by, which are part of Ed code that have been evolving. There are even things all the way down to trying to figure out. For example, we use our system in our computers called Ares that created a new non-binary tab, where if a student wants to identify as non-binary, you know how to follow that law.

These actions imply a dedication to building a more welcoming and friendly atmosphere for gender-diverse students. Besides following the existing law for supporting gender-diverse students, school administrators and teachers also need to try hard to figure out how to create a safe environment by responding to students' and parents' voices. As Andie noted, "Up until just this week [04/03/2023], we were having kids dress out for PE. We're not doing that now because of a number of issues." Although it is not stated why the change occurred, Andie did mention "a number of issues" that probably contributed, which could be concerns about privacy, body image, or discomfort with getting dressed in public areas like changing rooms that do not fit in their gender identity, or just personal choices not to dress out for PE, as long as not interfere with athletic activities. Allowing students not to dress out for PE is a good practice to respect students personal choice and privacy rights. Using Ares portal to create a non-binary tab for students to identify their gender is also an example of creative way to address the sensitivity of asking pronouns. If we use the wrong pronoun for someone, we can apologize right away and correct it, and move on. As Andie noted:

It's a learning process. So, if you make a mistake and forget to call somebody by their pronoun, just say sorry about that. Sometimes I forget. I'm still learning. Sometimes even

using humor can be helpful. Just let them know that you're trying, and you want to be sensitive and inclusive.

Andie noted that besides offering education and training for school adults and students, WMS also helps educate parents on supporting their gender-diverse children:

It can also be sometimes hard and challenging for families because you may have a mom and a dad, and they have this daughter, and they've always had this vision of what that life would be like. And then, if that person decides or has a different path they're supposed to be on, we also have to be sensitive to the fact that that can be challenging for families. And so sometimes we work with families around how to talk to their kids when they want to use a different name. It can be hard for parents to understand and be sensitive to that. A parent said, "I named Susie after Great Grandma Susie; it's gonna be hard for me not to call Susie because I was chosen for a reason." We understand that it can still be hard. So, it is important to get parents' perspectives and to help educate them on what their child is going through.

The quote illustrates the difficulties that arise when an individual chooses to deviate from the expected path in handling family dynamics. It emphasizes the value of empathy and education when working with families to support LGBTQ+ adolescents' well-being. It should be stressed that school offers education to families of students identified as gender diverse. For Andie's quote, "Sometimes we work with families around how to talk to their kids when they want to use a different name." I am not sure how often the counselors in WMS talked to the parents and guardians of gender-diverse students, and hope parents have access to resources that can help them understand and support their gender-diverse child who are preadolescents or adolescents enduring extra struggles on top of the general anxiety at their age phase.

Another thing we can do to educate parents, students, educators and the local public about inclusion and equity for gender-diverse students is the collaboration of the whole community. Andie noted:

It is great that we're bringing the community together with this Pride event on May 30th. Some of our LGBTQ families are going to be part of the event by talking in the event and co-hosting the event with WMS GSA, DEI department, and PSTA. This event also brings some of the super great organizations and people like Desmond Fambrini, who the kids just flocked to and just are so excited about.

Besides all the training, education, and activities to prompt the support for LGBTQ+ students, Austin suggested that we should create some regular library events. Austin was talking about something that was much more integrated rather than separate events that might be performative. It became evident through this research how every effort to facilitate inclusion for all students, including the gender-diverse students, is crucial. What Austin described about the actual social experience of simply living in it is the final ideal goal. At that time, LGBTQ+ people will live like straight people with no need to fight for their right of their gender and/or sexual identity, because they already have all the rights. When we fight for something, it means we don't have it yet. So, before the long-term ideal goal is reached, short term and separate or special events are necessary. And definitely, it is a great idea to have a regular event that is integrated into our daily life, which we still need to fight for. As Andie, the counselor, explained, "It's also a generational thing, like, in my 60s now, I have to unlearn the language that I grew up learning. So I'm back at school again."

Funding Diversity Initiatives

In many respects, funding is essential for promoting inclusion. Willie, the Principal of WMS, noted how he had come from another school district that “really showed that they valued inclusion and diversity (because) when a school district puts its weight and its money behind initiative.” He said, “we walked the walk... and we do what we actually say.” What Willie shared made clear that diversity for inclusion won't go far without funding to support it.

Thomas is a physician and a resident teacher. He argued that “If you don't have a budget, where spending is devoted to supporting and recognizing and extending gender diverse environments, you're the words and the statements on the website, and the speeches that are given are going to actually ring hollow.” He added, “So there needs to be actual real investment in creating a gender diverse environment where there's practical results that are created by actually dedicating a budget to the values. If there is no budget to create a gender diverse environment, in reality, the words, goals and aims are gonna fall short.” Without sufficient funding, schools won't be able to hire enough high-quality teachers, administrators and counselors to support diverse student body with diverse personality traits or build diverse school structures to meet diverse students' needs, and consequently, the goal to create an inclusive and equitable environment for every student would be more difficult and take a longer time to reach.

Conclusion

So, how and in what ways can an inclusive school environment be created to support all students, including the individuals who identify as LGBTQ+? In more detail,

- What's the experience and perspective of LGBTQ+ middle school students regarding inclusive school space?

- How do diverse opportunities contribute to creating an inclusive school environment for all students?
- How and what can a school create inclusive environments for gender-diverse students?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach?

All participants stated that diversity opportunities were significant to inclusion. Diverse opportunities could be brought out by focusing on a diverse student body, diverse characteristic, and personality traits, as well as diverse school structure. Another finding is that building relationships with students was essential in creating an inclusive environment for students, which could be obtained by listening to students attentively and asking them when we need to clarify. Building a care environment with a relaxed atmosphere that reduces anxiety was another way participants believed crucial to earn trust from students. The third way participants thought was critical to connect teachers with students was to build community norms together with choices, instead giving students rules made by others. The last finding is a call for transformation reflected in non-binary models of gender identity, leadership through role models and curriculum, the importance of education and training, as well as the significance of funding diverse initiatives. Through these approaches, schools can in a way build an inclusive and equitable space for all students, including gender diverse individuals in middle school.

Chapter 5: Discussion

There are three main findings in this research. The first finding shows how diverse opportunities, such as the student body, diverse personality and characteristics traits, and diverse school structures contributed to inclusion in middle school. The second finding was how building relationships with students helped create a caring space that students felt inclusive, which could be demonstrated in listening to and asking students attentively and sincerely, building a relaxed school atmosphere, and building community norms together with choices. The third finding was a call for transformation in middle school. By addressing these three main themes, students in a diverse student body with diverse personality and characteristics traits find their unique needs meet and feel safe and inclusive.

In the following discussion, I describe some similarities and connection between the literature review and this research findings, the implication for literature, for practice and policy, how might a future researcher continue to advance this line of study, and the final resonating thought I want to leave with my readers.

There are a few similarities between the studies of the literature and findings. First, when schools were separated by gender, gender-diverse students did not feel a sense of belonging, which led to them feeling excluded from many activities. Some of them felt unsafe, overlooked, or unwelcome in their schools (Lewis, 2020). The findings in this study also show that gender-diverse students experienced being teased, and some teachers did not use gender inclusive language by saying “boys and girls,” instead of using inclusive language like “ people,” “friends,” or “everyone”.

Another similarity showed that anxiety disorders were the most common condition among early adolescents (31.9%), followed by behavior disorders (19.1%), mood disorders

(14.3%) (McCarthy, 2019). And there are strategies for teachers to use to address prevention and intervention. They include a consistent daily routines, task-focused environment such as classroom pass for a student with anxiety to leave class for a safe person or safe place for about 5-10 minutes to work through their symptoms, classroom seating they prefer, test accommodation such as extra time or quiet location, alternative assignments such as a less stressful way of presentation of assignment, copies of notes available to them when they are absent from school or class because of their anxiety, creative activities that allow them to express themselves freely, positive coping skills to relax such as using stress balls, listening to soothing music in the background, and accommodate tardier to school and class making sure not to punish them for their action but to reinforce their ability to make it to school (Moran, 2016). Likely, WMS also provided a wellness center with a safe and relaxed setting for kids feeling stressed to calm down until they bounced back to their baseline for social and learning. Lastly, the findings about diverse student body, diverse personality and skills, and non-binary model of gender identity are in line with the idea of critical theory, critical pedagogy and queer theory that are related to equity, justice and challenging the dominant norms that oppress the marginalized group's voice.

Implications for the Literature

There have been research finding that adolescents, especially those in middle school, who identify as LGBTQ+ are at greater risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts, bullying, and increased levels of unexcused absence from class, which, collectively, provides reason to protect these students from harm and to improve the outcome in education and psychology (Espelage, 2011). Another study in the literature also showed that adolescents who identify as sexual and/or gender minorities are at a higher risk for experiencing bullying, harassment, and discrimination in

school due to their stigmatized identities (Lessard et al., 2020). However, these studies lacked strategies to improve and prevent the negative outcome that LGBTQ+ students have been experiencing. These study findings filled the gap. The data showed that funding the initiatives for inclusive culture and environment, and adding content of non-binary gender models into current textbooks and libraries are a deeper, more sustainable, and effective way as long-term activities for building the inclusive culture for all students, regardless of their gender and sexual identity.

Implications for Practice and Policy

In classroom

Teachers can create an inclusive and equitable classroom by providing diverse opportunities, building relationships, and advocating for the needs of their diverse student body. Teachers can also create a calm-down corner for students who need a little private space from the rest of the classroom to validate their feelings. Another thing teachers should do is to provide a helpful guide for dealing with pronoun use and the potential of gender misidentification. Teachers could also practice differentiated instruction and multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) Strategy to demonstrate an inclusive teaching and learning culture. If teachers want to embed social justice, anti-bias, and anti-racist principles into their class, they can do some project with their students and apply funds from some organization like Learning for Justice (LFJ), and get \$500-\$2500 for their activities.

For the school or district level

Policies that respect each student's gender identity could be put in place to facilitate the adoption of a non-binary model for gender diverse students. This can involve giving administrators and teachers education and training. Schools and districts can also hire staff and teachers that demonstrate role models in LGBTQ+, implement policies to embed content related to LGBTQ+

in textbooks and provide books and novels containing LGBTQ+ characters in school libraries for students that have interests to read.

Schools or districts can apply funding from LFJ, for \$5000-\$25,000, if they have projects advocating for dismantling oppressive policies and curricula to policies and curricula that are anti-racist or support the safety and self-determination of all students. These funds can invest in different students' social and civil clubs, such as GSA or Pride events.

Schools and districts can use professional development to provide activities and opportunities such as training for teachers and school personnel to learn about gender-inclusive vocabulary and terminology. This involves utilizing preferred pronouns, avoiding judgments based on appearance, and addressing students in a gender-neutral manner. Other forms of professional development could include:

- Encouraging teachers and staff to participate in webinars.
- Taking online courses
- Seeking more advanced degrees or certificates.
- Visiting workshops, seminars, and conferences.
- Joining professional associations to update their knowledge and skills in promoting inclusion and equity for all students, including LGBTQ+ individuals.

By promoting professional development, schools and districts can demonstrate a commitment to help improve teachers and school personnels' personal growth and self-improvement. It can enhance job satisfaction by allowing educators and staff to feel more confident and competent in their roles, leading to increased motivation and a sense of fulfillment, which makes school people working in school feel care. It will in turn make them feel the need to care and respect their students, and create a more inclusive school and classroom culture for their students.

Policy

Schools and districts should compliance with the newest version of Title IX regulations to ensure every student is protected protects against discrimination and sexual harassment based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

Schools and districts could partner with some organizations like LFJ to advocate, create and implement the policy of including LGBTQ+ content into the curriculum and integrate it with subjects like social studies, language art, history, arts, etc. This conveys to LGBTQ+ students that they are appreciated and accepted. Additionally, it helps educate non-LGBTQ+ students about issues affecting LGBTQ+ people and can lessen bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ students. Most importantly, this is a way to form a new norm about gender and sexual identity. Once students understand that it involves respect and honoring individual human rights, it could evolve into a new culture that includes everybody with equality

Limitations of the Study

Participants were not selected randomly, parents were selected because they were in my social support group, and we may have had similar views about LGBTQ+ group. Secondly, all student participants were from GSA club, and they probably had formed similar views with each other.

I am missing the perspectives of participants that may have different opinions. My findings reflected on a research site that most students are white and from well-off families. Teachers of the research site also have higher salaries than those in many school districts in the same county.

Limited geography, in that all participants are from relatively wealthy, progressive and a mostly white county. It does not address the large experience of gender diverse students and

families in more culturally, politically, racially, economically, and religiously diverse communities.

Limited period of time, and lack of experience of the students and families over the course of their adolescent development.

Future Research

To get a deeper knowledge of the experiences of gender-diverse students, as well as if the school's curriculum includes content related to LGBTQ+ community and characters, future researchers might concentrate on broadening the scope and diversity of participants in their studies, which involves including more people, more diversity of communities, longer periods of study, talking with the same families over several years, and district personnel.

Given the fact that this study only had 13 participants, one area to improve the study is to expand the sample size by including a more diverse range of individuals from culturally, politically, racially, economically, and religiously diverse. This would involve conducting research in various schools with diverse populations to examine how the experience of LGBTQ+ students vary. It also involves examining how the different schools include content of LGBTQ+ into the curriculum, including different racial, ethnic, and cultural background so as to ensure the LGBTQ+ education represent inclusion.

Another area of focus could be the duration of study, which is to examine the longitudinal impact of LGBTQ+ curriculum over a few years, or to engage with the same families over a longer period of years. That would be able to offer valuable insights into the long-term effects on LGBTQ+ students' experiences, general students' attitudes, knowledge and acceptance to the concept of non-binary model of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Lastly, the research could also involve district personnel in the implementation and support of LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum by looking into the presence of LGBTQ+ representation in the teachers' and staff's employment, the training and resources to staff, and their attitudes, knowledge, and confidence in addressing LGBTQ+ contents in their classrooms, school, and district.

Conclusion

My practical purpose for this research was to learn about LGBTQ+ students so that I can support my child and have a good relationship with her. My intellectual purpose was to understand LGBTQ+ students to help create an inclusive and equitable policy and environment for them. Everyone is entitled to human rights, regardless of their race, gender, religion, or any other characteristic. The established norms of society should not be considered inherently correct, as they may need to be updated and in need of improvement. Many of these norms were established in the past based on limited scientific and medical knowledge. Therefore, they should be reevaluated and updated to reflect a more humane and inclusive approach. It is crucial to ensure everyone's rights and dignity are respected and that social norms are constantly reviewed and corrected to achieve a fairer and more just society. It is important to avoid demonizing those who oppose the non-binary model of gender identity. It is possible for those who are currently against us to come to the right decision eventually. During this research study, I read many articles about this topic and interviewed participants from different sources, which helped me understand LGBTQ+ individuals. I evolved to accept, support, and try to find ways to improve the environment for my kid, and children like my child. In conclusion, if we can include the knowledge and contents related to non-binary and LGBTQ+ into our educational curriculum and library, students won't have to go through the trouble like me to explore the whole journey by

myself. Instead, they can learn all this information in their daily education, and form their worldview naturally.

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Appendix A
IRB Approval Letter



Feb 6, 2023

Xiaoyan Nadler 50 Acacia Ave.

San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Xiaoyan,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to approve your proposal entitled *Equity and Inclusion for Gender Diverse Middle School Students* (IRBPHP Initial IRB Application #[11079]).

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,

Michaela George, Ph.D.

Chair, IRBPHP

Cc: Matthew E Davis

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants

Office of Academic Affairs · 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, California 94901-2298 · 415-257-1310 www.dominican.edu

Appendix B:
Sample Individual Interview Questions with Students

1. Define what strength is for you...
2. What do you believe creates an environment that supports peoples' strengths?
3. What do you think creates an environment where you feel included?
4. Are there places or times that you feel most included?

What do you like about those environments?

5. What role do your friends play in your life?
6. What role do teachers or educational professionals play in your life?
7. What other people have you thought of as being supportive and inclusive?

What are the qualities they exhibit that you appreciate or admire?

8. What would you do if you could help people who don't feel as included?
9. What are your expectations from your school as a student?
10. What aspect of the community in which you grew up would you like to see changed for the next generation or a younger person?

Appendix C:
Sample Individual Interview Questions with Parents

1. What do you believe creates an environment that supports students' strengths?
2. What do you think creates an environment where students feel included?
3. What does social-emotional learning imply to you?
4. Do you think social-emotional learning experience is important for child(ren)?
 1. If yes, what do you think are the benefits?
 2. If no, what is important for their learning experience?
5. What kind of school environment can benefit all students, including the gender-diverse community?
6. Are there places or times that you recognize your child(ren) being most included?
 1. What do you like about those environments?
7. What role do you think friends play in the lives of your child(ren)?
8. What role do teachers or educational professionals play in their lives?
9. What other people have you thought of as being supportive and inclusive?
 1. What are the qualities they exhibit that you appreciate or admire?
10. What are your expectations from school for students?
11. What do you think schools do well to create equity and inclusion?
12. What do you think could be done to improve the experiences of students?

Appendix D:**Sample Individual Interview Questions with Educational Professional**

1. What do you believe creates an environment that supports peoples' strengths?
2. What is the role of inclusion in learning? If you think inclusion is important, what do you think creates an environment where people feel included?
3. How do you think anxiety impacts learning? If you think it does, what do you think causes anxiety for students especially at the middle school level?
4. What does social-emotional learning imply to you?
5. Do you think social-emotional learning experience is important for middle school students?
 - a. If yes, what do you think are the benefits?
 - b. If no, what is important for their learning experience?
6. What kind of school environment can benefit all students, including the gender-diverse group?
7. Are there places or times that you recognize students being most included? What do you like about those environments?
8. What role do you think friends play in the lives of your students?
9. What role do teachers or educational professionals play in their lives?
10. What other people have you thought of as being supportive and inclusive? What are the qualities they exhibit that you appreciate or admire?
11. What are your expectations from school for students?
12. What do you think schools do well to create equity and inclusion?
13. What do you think could be done to improve the experiences of students?
14. Are there policy initiatives that could support equity and inclusion?