

GENDER AND SCHOOLS: A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

AN ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED ON THE FIFTH DAY OF MARCH 2024

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IN PARTIAL FULLFILMENT FOR THE REQUIREMENT

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

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BY

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Abstract

Presently, a variety of policies are being updated, proposed, and/or passed related to gender in the school system, including anti-LGBTQ+ legislation at the state-level and updated regulations to Title IX at the federal-level. These policy debates are steeped in polarized political issues such as the scope of sexual harassment and the rights of LGBTQ+ students. However, educational policies are often disconnected from the day-to-day experiences of students and rely on the limiting notion that pursuing justice for one group must simultaneously oppress another. Thus, there is a need to holistically describe the lived experiences of students in the school system to understand how school policies and practices impact students across multiple gender groups.

This critical ethnography describes the culture and context of gender in the New Orleans public charter school system by eliciting the lived experiences of cisgender girls, cisgender boys, and students with complex gender identities (e.g., transgender, nonbinary, etc.) in individual and group interviews. In-depth document analysis, interviews with school professionals, and observations further contextualized these student experiences within the structural-level forces that sustain inequality. Grounded in critical social work theory, intersectionality, queer theory, and transgender theories, this study critiques power, investigates the nuanced intersections of multiple axes of oppression, undermines essentialist identity constructions, and honors lived experiences.

Data analysis revealed three major themes: the reproduction of cisheteropatriarchy, formal school regulation, and activism and resistance. Structural

gender oppression was distinct, but interrelated based on the gender identity of students and this oppression was deeply intertwined with race in schools. Further, the culture and context of gender in schools was shaped by students, school staff, and the school as an institution and emerged as a complex and nuanced force in schools, at times conforming to the limiting demands of cisheteropatriarchy and contributing to gender inequity, and at other times, acting as a powerful counter-measure. Building on this complex narrative, implications for policy, practice, and social work education are considered. Despite internal and external threats to gender equity in schools, social workers must be prepared to courageously work towards gender equity and resist perpetuating cisheteropatriarchy.

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This dissertation is dedicated to every student who dares to be themselves at school. Your courage is inspiring and you are changing the world.

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Foreword

Throughout this dissertation, gender will be discussed in depth. Despite the terms *sex* and *gender* often being used interchangeably in popular culture, social scientists have pushed to delineate between sex and gender in recent years. *Sex* is used to describe the biological markers (e.g., genetics, hormones, physical characteristics) used primarily by health professionals to assign people into the categories of male, female, or intersex (people whose biology markers cannot be characterized as distinctly male or female). The term *gender* is used to describe the social, behavioral, and cultural processes often associated with a corresponding sex (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

However, the simplification of sex as biological and gender as cultural has been troubled in recent years (Vaid-Menon, 2020). The “biological markers” used to distinguish between the sexes by health professionals are themselves culturally produced. To illustrate, prior to the 1700s, many experts believed that “humans were inherently both male and female” (Vaid-Menon, 2020, p. 50). While biological markers certainly influence how health professionals assign sex at birth, to simplify sex as *solely* biology is a misnomer. Thus, when this paper uses the term sex, it refers to the sex assigned to an individual at birth based on the cultural production of the concept of sex that associates certain biological markers with sex.

Scholars further distinguish between gender identity and gender expression. *Gender expression* is external - names, appearance, behaviors, pronouns, and outward cues displayed by an individual which are interpreted as masculine or feminine. *Gender*

identity is internal - one's personal experience of one's own gender (GLAAD, 2022). Those whose gender identities match their assigned sex at birth are considered *cisgender*. Therefore, a *cis woman* or *cisgender woman* is a person who was assigned the sex of female at birth and experiences herself as a woman. People whose gender identities do not match their assigned sex at birth fall under the umbrella terms *trans* or *transgender* (Trans Student Educational Resources, n.d.). For instance, a person who was assigned the sex male at birth, but experiences themselves as a woman may identify as a *woman*, *transgender woman*, or *trans woman*.

Some people do not identify within the binary constraints of male/female or masculine/feminine, using terms such as *gender non-conforming* (counter societal expectations of how a man/woman should look), *genderqueer* (outside the binary), *gender fluid* (changing gender identity), *bigender* (two genders), and *two-spirit* (a Native American umbrella term for transgender identities) to describe their own gender identity (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, n.d.; Trans Student Educational Resources, n.d.; Vaid-Menon, 2020). Others, often self-identifying as agender or (a)gender, choose not to identify with any gender at all and reject it as an organizing construct (Miller, 2019). These terms (gender non-conforming, genderqueer, gender fluid, bigender, agender, two-spirit, agender) can all fall under the umbrella term, *nonbinary*, used to describe genders outside of the gender binary. A person may identify as trans, but not nonbinary and vice versa, or as both trans and nonbinary (Trans Student Educational Resources, n.d.).

Some individuals experience their gender identity as fixed (remaining the same over the course of a lifetime), while other experience their gender identity as dynamic, using different terms to describe their gender identity at different points in their life

(McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Further, the specific terminology used to describe gender identity are fluid in societal application (Trans Student Educational Resources, n.d.). Indeed, two individuals who identify as genderqueer may use the term in unique ways. Finally, gender identity and sexuality are distinct concepts. Any person can identify as gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and a myriad of other sexuality terms regardless of their gender identity. Despite the common practice of grouping individuals under the term LGBTQIAPP+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, aromantic, pansexual, polysexual) or the shorter versions LGBT or LGBTQ+, the identities encompassed under this acronym combine gender/gender identities (e.g., trans, intersex) and sexualities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual) (Trans Student Educational Resources, n.d.). While there is a relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality (Youdell, 2005), to be discussed later in this inquiry, it must be emphasized that sexual orientation and gender identity are distinct concepts.

It is beyond the scope of this proposal and indeed, not possible, to delineate and define every possible gender identity. Despite the many limitations in the practice of simplifying the wide range of possible and often dynamic gender identities into broad, static categories, this proposal will primarily rely on the terminology of male, man, men, or boy (to refer to cisgender men/cisgender boys), female, woman, women, or girl (to refer to cisgender women/cisgender girls), and *complex gender identities* to differentiate between groups in a way that meaningfully distinguishes power and privilege in a patriarchal and cisheteronormative society. Complex gender identities are defined as:

The constant integration of new ideas and concepts and the invention of new knowledges – comprised of multitudes, and/or moving-away or sometimes a refusal to accept essentialized constructions of binaries, genders, and bodies. Yet

in simultaneity, gender identity can be some of these, all of these, and none of these. It evades and resists categorization (Miller, 2019, p. 12).

While even the term complex gender identities may not resonant with all individuals who do not fall neatly into the category of cisgender, it captures a range of gender experiences (transgender, nonbinary, agender) that to varying extents complicate the biologically and culturally informed compartmentalization of people into two oversimplified and static sex categories. The terms complex gender identities, students with complex gender identities, and/or gender complex students/individuals will be primarily used in this paper. Although limiting, this dissertation will also use the umbrella term, LGBTQ+, when referring to people with complex gender identities and/or sexual minorities in the aggregate. Finally, unless otherwise specified, when this paper uses the term *gender*, it is meant to encompass all gender identities, including cisgender and complex gender identities.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Prior to the 1970s, sex discrimination severely limited opportunities for female students in schools (Busch & Thro, 2018; Commission on the Status of Women, 1963; Sandler, 2000). In response, legislatures passed Title IX (heretofore TIX) 50 years ago to ban sex discrimination in federally funded schools (Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act, 1972). In recent years, there has been increased debate about what rights are protected under TIX, what gender(s) need protection, and whether sex discrimination even exists in schools (e.g., American Association of University Professors, 2016; Kipnis, 2017; Melnick, 2018). These debates are typically political, values-based, and grounded in abstract theory over experiential data (Melnick, 2018).

The empirical data that does exist is bleak. Nearly half of all students reported experiencing sexual harassment in the previous school year and cisgender girls were disproportionately impacted (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011). Further, over three-fourths of transgender students were sexually harassed over one school year (Greytak et al., 2009). Over half of LGBTQ+ students reported verbal harassment (e.g., threatened, called names) due to their gender and approximately one in five were physically harassed due to their gender (Kosciw et al., 2020). In general, quantitative research on process-related school issues (e.g., sexual harassment, gender-based verbal harassment, school victimization) consistently suggests that cisgender girls, transgender youth, and nonbinary youth are disproportionately impacted at school (Greytak et al., 2009; C. Hill

& Kearl, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2020). However, research emphasizing differences between groups may overlook both differences within groups and how gender inequality impacts students across multiple gender identities. Indeed, students of all gender identities are at times, limited by the above issues, even if some groups experience it at a higher rate.

Today, schools are at the center of a national reckoning with sex, gender, and sexuality. After receiving hundreds of thousands of comments on the proposed regulations for TIX released by the Department of Education (ED) under President Biden over the summer of 2022, after multiple delays, the new regulations are expected to be finalized in March of 2024 (Knott, 2023; Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 2022). These regulations will replace the regulations passed in 2020 under President Trump and indeed, attempt to restore many of the informal regulations enacted under President Obama in the 2010s (Quilantan, 2022). Simultaneously, there has been an alarming rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation nationwide, including bills commonly referred to as “Don’t Say Gay” or “Don’t Say LGBTQ+” laws, which seek to censure, police, and erase the existence of LGBTQ+ members of the school community (Peele, 2023). Given the alarming statistics on school harassment and the increased debate about gender and schools nationally, there is a pressing need to recalibrate discussion of school gender inequality away from group comparisons and/or moralizing and instead reflect on the culture and context of gender for real, embodied students across gender identities.

Background

TIX states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Patsy Mink

Equal Opportunity in Education Act, 1972). Despite the common misnomer that TIX was developed explicitly to address athletics (Kipnis, 2017; Perry, 2021) or that it pertains solely to athletics (Meyer & Quantz, 2021; Sindt, 2020), TIX has influenced a variety of issues in the educational setting, including, but not limited to athletics, sexual harassment, school policy, rights of students with LGBTQ+, and the rights of pregnant/parenting adolescents (Eckes, 2021). TIX applies to all K-12 public schools, as all receive financial assistance from the federal government.

Prior research on TIX has been narrowed to pre-defined and highly politicized key issues, such as sexual harassment (Grant et al., 2019; Lichty et al., 2008; Moore & Rienzo, 1998; Richards et al., 2021), sports (G. M. Hill et al., 2012; Messner & Solomon, 2007; Nilges, 1998; Staurowsky, 1998; The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, 1998; Whisenant, 2003), and single-sex schooling (Billger, 2009; Eckes & McCall, 2014; Friend, 2007; Herr & Arms, 2004; Mansfield, 2013). These studies pre-emptively assumed the form(s) sex discrimination embodies and have not allowed the data to highlight, through inductive methods, how differential treatment related to gender occurs.

Further, federal legislation is only one piece of the puzzle, as policies are refracted and enacted through the interpretations of individual communities, schools, staff members, and students (Fields, 2008). Therefore, it is essential to not only examine policies, but to critically analyze how a school system regulates and challenges hegemonic notions of gender through its formal, hidden, and evaded curricula (Aghasaleh, 2018; Bailey, 1992; Fields, 2008; Jay, 2003; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017). These "lessons" are rarely straightforward or unidirectional, but are instead produced through mutually influencing policies, modes of enforcement, social

interactions, and even silences (Fields, 2008). An analysis of educational policy that is disconnected from specific schools and stakeholders fails to capture this complexity.

Many issues discussed commonly in the educational literature can be reexamined through attention to the intricate interconnections and reinforcements happening between students, schools, and structural forces. For instance, as boys and men are overrepresented in externalizing behaviors and violence when compared to girls and women, a discourse has emerged that schools need to be more responsive to the needs of male students due to the “natural” differences between the sexes (Lahelma, 2014). However, these differences, on closer inspection, create a much more nuanced picture, especially when considering the context of the school environment and the organizing societal structures of race, class, and gender (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017). As an alternative to the “natural” difference discourse, hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Kimmel & Aronson, 2004) may be a more fitting lens for analyzing gender differences in school, although, who can possess masculinity must also be troubled (Pascoe, 2007).

Another form of gender inequality, sexual harassment, has been a major focus of TIX (Cantalupo, 2021; Stromquist, 2013; Tonnesen, 2013). Further, sexual harassment is often conceptualized as a pervasive and harmful phenomenon experienced by cisgender girls; however, sexual harassment is a problem many students face and needs to be examined intersectionally (Espelage et al., 2016; Tonnesen, 2013). In addition, due to the mutual interconnections between sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2005), harassment based on sexual orientation may at times, be more focused on policing gender than sexuality (Pascoe, 2007), and must be incorporated under the larger umbrella of gender-based harassment. While students report disturbingly high rates of gender-

based harassment in schools (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2020), most schools report little to no harassment (Richards et al., 2021), indicating a major disconnect between student experiences and school perceptions that needs addressing.

Sustaining the ubiquity of sexual harassment, students bring with them a myriad of assumptions and stereotypes about (im)proper sexuality for girls, for boys, and for gender complex youth (e.g., Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018; Youdell, 2005). However, due to an intense discomfort with youth sexuality (Hethorn & Kaiser, 1999), schools often refuse to discuss sex (Fields, 2008). When schools do offer sex education, too often the hidden and evaded curricula reinforces gendered stereotypes and assumptions about sexuality and renders the sexual experiences of many students invisible (Fields, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2020; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Rooted in this deep fear of youth sex, dress code policies further communicate these sexualized stereotypes while also disproportionately targeting cisgender girls and gender complex individuals (Aghasaleh, 2018; Knipp & Stevenson, 2022; Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pomerantz, 2007; Raby, 2010). Instead of suppressing and denying youth sexuality and thereby stabilizing these sexual stereotypes, schools should expose their students to the unnamed structural forces that limit their possibilities (Srinivasan, 2021) and autonomy (Fields, 2008) as sexual beings.

Parallel to youth sexuality, schools also respond with immense anxiety and even hostility when youth with complex gender identities become visible in school (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017; Miller, 2019). Very simple acts of humanity, such as calling someone what they want to be called, are denied some youth with complex gender identities, resulting in serious consequences (Kosciw et al., 2020). Further, school-level discrimination can be overt and disturbing with this population (Capous-Desyllas &

Barron, 2017; Kuklin, 2014). However, there is room for hope as schools can take concrete steps to counter the imposition of oppressive values and acknowledge the humanity of all students (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016). Students with complex gender identities should not be misunderstood as passive victims, but instead are social agents whose actions can, at times, help to transform the culture and context of gender in schools (Kuklin, 2014; Miller, 2019).

As illustrated, the culture and context of gender in school is multi-faceted. Unfortunately, gender inequality in schools has too often been reduced to either a narrative where girls are the long-suffering victims of patriarchy or where boys are unforgivably sidelined in a post-gender world. This has created a false and polarizing dichotomy and has been, unsurprisingly, ineffective at fostering sustainable change (Lahelma, 2014). More recently, students with complex gender identities have been incorporated into the discourse of gender inequality; however, these discourses have been overwhelmingly focused on the negative (e.g., bullying, harassment, suicide) and reduce gender complex lives as unilaterally stories of victimhood (Gilbert et al., 2018). Scholars must move away from single-gender discourses and instead uncover the complex ways that the culture and context of gender shapes and is shaped by students.

Many works have thoroughly described the lived experiences of school-aged youth both in and out of school. Some of these works have centered on the lives of cisgender girls and woman (e.g., McRobbie, 1978; Orenstein, 2011, 2017; Youdell, 2005), while others have centered on the lives of cisgender boys and men (e.g., Brown, 2021; Chu, 2014; Orenstein, 2020; Willis, 1978). Much less attention has been shown to the lived experiences of people with complex gender identities exclusively (Capous-

Desyllas & Barron, 2017; Kuklin, 2014; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Additionally, some school-based studies have discussed lived experiences of gender across gender groups (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Fields, 2008; Francis, 1997; Gilbert et al., 2018; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Pascoe, 2007; Quinlivan, 2012); although the majority were mostly or exclusively limited to the stories of cisgender students (Fields, 2008; Francis, 1997; Pascoe, 2007) or the stories of LGBTQ+ students (Gilbert et al., 2018; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017).

Further, some of these works are better characterized as journalistic endeavors and therefore, are limited by the lack of a transparent methodology and analysis (E. Brown, 2021; Kuklin, 2014; Orenstein, 2011, 2017, 2020). Further, others were based in other countries, including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Finland, and may not be as applicable to the school landscape in the United States (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Francis, 1997; Lahelma, 2014; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017, 2018; McRobbie, 1978; Quinlivan, 2012; Willis, 1978; Youdell, 2005). While some have focused on the experiences of very young children (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017; Chu, 2014; Francis, 1997), others have grouped late high school and early college-age youth (Kuklin, 2014; Orenstein, 2017, 2020; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018) and these experiences may have less relevance to students aged 10-18. However, as previous research has demonstrated that gender-based harassment is exceedingly common in middle and high school (Espelage et al., 2016; C. Hill & Kearl, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2020), attention to these pivotal ages is essential. Finally, most of these works were limited to a specific, pre-determined topic including youth sexuality/sexual health (Fields, 2008; Quinlivan,

2012; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018) and masculinity (Chu, 2014; Pascoe, 2007), and therefore, students were not as able to set the direction of the study.

Even the stories of students in the United States (E. Brown, 2021; Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017; Chu, 2014; Fields, 2008; Kuklin, 2014; Orenstein, 2011, 2017, 2020; Pascoe, 2007) may not fully capture the intricacies of life in the New Orleans public school system. Since 2005, New Orleans has systematically replaced the traditional public school system with a privatized, public charter system that emphasizes school choice for students. This city-wide movement to an all-charter system was unprecedented in the United States prior to 2005 and was made possible only by the unique circumstances created by the loss of infrastructure created in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (Buras & Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, 2013). While current research into New Orleans schools typically focuses on the impact of the proliferation of charter schools on academic achievement (Sondel, 2015), no one has yet examined how the culture and context of gender presents in this unique school landscape.

Problem Statement

Taken together, the TIX literature is severely limited by its presupposition of how sex discrimination occurs in schools. Further, the polarized political debate regarding who is harmed and who deserves protection under TIX has further limited its possibilities and results in a harmful either-or discourse where only one group of students deserves attention. Indeed, there is a need to recenter the discourse within the lived experiences of diverse students to understand how gender inequality in schools impacts students in a more complex and nuanced way. While research grounded in lived experiences of students is not new, it is limited when it focuses on a single gender or a single pre-defined

issue. In total, there is a lack of research that discusses how the culture and context of gender in the school system broadly impacts students across varying gender identities. Thus, there is a need to describe the culture and context of gender in the school system and how this culture impacts all gender identities, including cisgender boys, cisgender girls, and students with complex gender identities. Additionally, given the unique challenges of the decentralized, privatized school system in New Orleans, the New Orleans educational landscape specifically needs examination.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this critical ethnography is to describe the culture and context of gender for students in the New Orleans public charter school system. Using a critical ethnography approach, this study examined the culture and context of gender within the localized boundaries of the New Orleans public school system. Data was gathered through qualitative individual and/or group interviews with students and school professionals, organization-level observations, and an intensive examination of publicly available documents, including, but not limited to, student handbooks, school websites, and local news stories. The scope of the study was not be limited to one specific school, but instead data was gathered from students and professionals from a variety of public schools in New Orleans. Additionally, data included interviews from students from a range of unique gender identities (e.g., cisgender boys, cisgender girls, transgender students, nonbinary students) as a way to more cohesively portray the culture and context of gender in the local school system.

Research Questions

This critical ethnography was guided by the overarching research question: *What is the culture and context of gender in the New Orleans public charter school system?*

Within this study, specific theories (critical social work theory, intersectionality, queer theory, and transgender theory) further informed several key sub-questions. These sub-questions worked together to guide the research into a theoretically-aligned approach.

Critical social work theory dictates that domination is produced at the structural level and experienced at the individual level (Fook, 2016). To capture the influence of these macro-level influences on the micro-level, this study asked:

1a) How does gender oppression present in the school system?

1b) To what extent does the federal mandate of TIX inform school policy and/or contribute to sex (in)equity in school?

Further, intersectionality posits that a single axis of oppression, such as gender, cannot be analyzed in isolation (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, to avoid the analytical downfall of defaulting to the most privileged within gender social categories, this study inquired:

2a) How does the culture and context of gender overlap with other systems of oppression in the school system?

Finally, queer theory is grounded in the interconnection between sex, gender, and sexuality and troubles inherent “normative” identities in favor of socially constructed identities (Butler, 1990). Transgender theory cautions against prioritizing anti-normative identities that undermine the binary over the salient, lived experiences of people (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). By interrogating this sex/gender/sexuality connection further within the construct of cisheteropatriarchy (Alim et al., 2020; Bupara, 2019), this study asks:

3a) How is cisheteropatriarchy regulated, promoted, and/or resisted at schools?

See Appendix A, Table A1 for a summary of the theories undergirding this research, their tenets, and the related research questions.

Key Concepts Defined

A hallmark of ethnography is an interest in the culture of a particular group (Creswell & Poth, 2017). However, critical ethnographers have troubled the traditional assumption that a “culture” must be geographically bound (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). In this research, culture is not limited to a narrowly defined group (e.g., one school), but instead culture is conceived more specifically (the culture and context of gender), within a broadly defined group (the New Orleans public charter school system). As the primary research aim is to describe the culture and context of gender within this school system, it is worth delineating what is meant by the term. In this inquiry, I invoke the phrase *culture and context of gender* to refer to the explicit and tacit assumptions and expectations related to sex, gender expression, gender identity, and gender performance. While the unit of analysis focuses at the institutional-level, this culture is also experienced at the individual-level and the interpersonal-level as individuals interact and shape one another. Education informs student ideas about gender and student ideas about gender informs education. Further, the culture and context of gender in the school system is inextricably and reciprocally linked with larger societal ideals about gender.

In particular, this inquiry will examine how education, as an institution, invokes, regulates, challenges, reinforces, and sustains the gender binary and cisheteropatriarchy. The *gender binary* is a “cultural belief that there are only two distinct and opposite genders: man and woman” (p. 5) and that these genders are mutually exclusive and

precisely defined (Vaid-Menon, 2020). The gender binary is a powerful structure that oppresses those who do not fit into this inflexible system through sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and other forms of oppression (Burdge, 2007). Through the gender binary “we are taught that masculinity belongs to men, femininity belongs to women, and that these are the only two options for self-expression” (Vaid-Menon, 2020, p. 27).

Similarly, *cisheteropatriarchy* is the assumption that heterosexual relationships rooted in patriarchy (i.e. male dominance) are natural and normal, elevating straight (white) cisgender men and marginalizing all cisgender women, sexual minorities, and any gender identities that call into question a rigid gender binary (Alim et al., 2020). Further, cisheteropatriarchy was imposed through settler colonialism (Bupara, 2019) and also invokes the rhetoric of White supremacy and colonialization.

By narrowing the focus to the culture and context of gender, these complex interconnections and relationships can be analyzed. Through an analysis of the culture and context of gender, how schools, through public policy, school policy, educator actions, and curriculum, sustain, challenge, and/or promote the gender binary and cisheteropatriarchy can be understood. Further, how students receive and respond to these messages can be uncovered. Appendix B, Figure B1 graphically represents how the culture and context of gender, as framed by critical social work theory, intersectionality, and queer and transgender theories, mutually interacts with state and federal policy, single-gender discourses, school curriculum, and the New Orleans charter school system.

Importance of Research

Too often, social work research on gender has focused on gender differences between only two static and unquestioned groups – males and females, thus reproducing

the gender binary (Markman, 2011; McPhail, 2004, 2008). Further, researchers often miss the structures that (re)produce inequities and thus, erroneously attribute gender gaps to individuals or innate group differences (Hicks, 2015). Similarly, feminist and gender-based research has historically ignored the existence of people with complex gender identities, uncritically grouped them with lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, or focused solely on highly negative outcomes (e.g., harassment, suicide) (Gilbert et al., 2018; Gringeri et al., 2010; Radi, 2019; Stryker, 2004). A critical and attuned analysis of gender in the school system remains an urgent need in the social work literature.

The findings of this study also have implications for social work policy, practice, and education. Scholars (Kopels, 2017; Meyer et al., 2018; Sindt, 2020; Suski, 2020) and advocacy organizations (AAUW, n.d.; Know Your IX, n.d.; Public Justice, n.d.; Stop Sexual Assault in Schools, n.d.) have called on K-12 schools to start fulfilling their TIX obligations. School social workers are well-positioned to lead this charge within their own school systems, in congruence with social work ethics and values. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics describes “attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living” as “fundamental to social work” (National Association of Social Workers, 2021, Preamble). Therefore, understanding how the school contributes to sex discrimination is a key task for school social workers. This research provides an in-depth understanding grounded in student experience of the key issues to prioritize to promote gender equity in schools.

Summary and Organizational Statement

In sum, this research describes the culture and context of gender in the New Orleans public charter school system. Conducting this research fills an important gap in

the current empirical research by avoiding the common pitfalls of only focusing on the experiences of one gender group when conducting research seeking to address gender equity. The findings of this study provide a more nuanced understanding to current policy debates, provide social workers with helpful information for cultivating a supportive school environment for all students, and contribute student-centered empirical research to the literature on gender equity in schools.

Chapter I of this proposal described the study problem, purpose statement, and research questions of this project, defined key terms, and emphasized the importance of the research. Chapter II will contextualize the reader in the key theories informing this project by describing the tenets, origins, and relevance of each theory. The intricacies and contradictions of TIX will then be discussed - how it is manipulated through mechanisms of enforcement, politics, and compliance to achieve certain (shifting) ends and the implications of this dynamism. The remainder of the second chapter describes aspects of the culture and context of gender in school as illuminated from prior research. With an understanding that schools not only impart students with lessons from the formal curriculum, but also from the hidden and evaded curricula, hegemonic masculinity, gender-based harassment, youth sexuality, and issues related to gender complex youth are delineated. By the end of this chapter, readers will understand the need for gender equity research that looks into the culture and context of gender in schools more broadly.

Having established the need for an inquiry into the culture and context of gender in schools, Chapter III will detail the methods used to answer the research questions. After orienting readers to the philosophical assumptions informing the research design and the tenets of the research approach (critical ethnography), I forefront my own

unconscious bias through an exercise in critical reflexivity. The remainder of this chapter will shift to the specificities of this research project and the reader will depart with a full understanding of how the research will progress from recruitment to the dissemination of the findings. The chapter will close by discussing how ethical dilemmas will be approached throughout the research process.

Chapter IV will present the findings of the study. Using illustrative quotes to ground the findings, each theme will be summarized. These major sections will be divided into three sections: Part I) *The Reproduction of Cisheteropatriarchy*, Part II) *Formal School Regulation*, and Part III) *Activism and Resistance*. Part I will cover two themes: a) The Gender Binary and b) Heterosexuality. Part II will consist of four themes: a) Discipline and Academics b) Dress Code Policies c) TIX and d) Gender Diversity. Part III will consist of four themes: a) Identifying Outside of the Cisheteropatriarchal Framework b) Peer Support c) School Support and d) Student Activism. Subthemes will also be described within each section.

The dissertation concludes with Chapter V, the discussion. In the discussion, each specific research question will be analyzed in relation to the study findings, drawing upon past literature for contextualization and interpretation. After, implications for policy, practice, and social work education will be discussed. The strengths and limitations of the research will be delineated as well as directions for future research. Finally, the dissertation then ends with a brief conclusion.

Chapter II

Literature Review

This chapter begins by discussing the theories (critical social work theory, intersectionality, and queer and transgender theories) underpinning this research. Next, TIX, which bans sex discrimination in schools, will be described with particular attention to its relationship to sexual harassment and youth with complex gender identities. Strengths and limitations will be illuminated. Then, this inquiry will analyze how the formal, hidden, and evaded curricula of schools work together to shape the culture and context of gender. Finally, contemporary research on gender and schools will be summarized, with emphasis on hegemonic masculinity, youth sexuality, gender-based harassment, and issues specific to students with complex gender identities.

Theoretical Foundation

This research was guided by critical social work theory, intersectionality, and queer and transgender theories. In the following section, I describe the definition and tenets of each theory, give a brief history, and discuss the relevance of the theory to this work. Although distinct theories, overlap exists between and within each theory.

Critical Social Work Theory

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued in the 19th century that capitalism enabled those who owned the means of production to systematically exploit workers (Hutchison, 2003; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2016). In the early 20th century, a generation of scholars, including Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse,

expanded on this proposition and developed what is now called critical theory (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2016). At first, critical theory stayed close to Marxism, focusing narrowly on capitalism and the economy, but in the 1930s, the ideas of Max Weber were incorporated into critical theory and thus, the role of culture in maintaining power inequities also became an area of interest (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2016). By the 1960s, critical theory gained traction in the United States and the work of Jurgen Habermas furthered solidified the study of culture as a key aspect of critical theory (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2016). Contemporarily, critical theory is not limited to class inequalities, but is instead focused on a variety of social and power inequities (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022).

Critical theorists focus inquiry on those who experience oppression while also proposing that *false consciousness* prohibits a full understanding of the structural dimensions of oppression (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011). False consciousness, although defined in many different ways, is generally agreed to be a misattribution of the causes of inequality to the individual-level and/or an ignorance of the structural causes of oppression (Pines, 1993). In critical theory, culture, produced in education, media, and other institutions, helps create this false consciousness and “plays a central role in the production of hegemony and common-sense interpretations of everyday life” (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011, p. 687). Critical theorists posit that only by overcoming false consciousness through transformative dialogue, with and among the oppressed, can oppression be reversed (Freire, 1970). Critical theory goes beyond describing oppressive systems and instead explicitly aims to enact social change (Carspecken, 1996).

Critical theory has been vastly applied in a range of disciplines and methodological techniques. Almost any research devoted to addressing social inequality

can be subsumed under the banner of critical theory (Carspecken, 1996). As this universal appeal means critical theory is extensively used, focus is narrowed to critical social work theory specifically and the integration of critical theory into social work.

Definition and Tenets. Critical social work theory explicitly seeks to “further a society without domination, exploitation, or oppression” (Fook, 2016, p. 19). There are several tenets underlying critical social work. First, critical social workers commit to the pursuit of social justice (Allan et al., 2003). Critical social workers acknowledge that social workers have often practiced social control under the guise of social justice, and thus, are weary of social work practice and research that fails to upend the status quo (Fook, 2016). Emancipation is the end goal of all critical social work (Fook, 2016).

Critical social workers do not view the world as a static entity waiting to be understood, but instead emphasize the role that people (including social workers) play in creating the social world (Pozzuto, 2000). The world is viewed as fluid and ever-changing, with any analysis of the world being temporally and geographically bound. Knowledge does not independently exist, but is created by the researcher (Agger, 2005). Every system within the world, including critical social work itself, subtly changes and transforms over time, rendering finite explanations or categorizations as inherently flawed (C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012) and positivism is a frequent target of critique in critical social work (Agger, 2005). Positivism “argues that social life can be measured. These measures are independent of context, replicable by different people, and comparable for accuracy and validity” (Abbott, 2004, p. 43). Critical social workers reject positivist inquiry as being overly deterministic and problematize the role of generalization in empirical research (Rossiter, 1997). Critical social workers reject the

existence of one reality, instead turning attention to the multiplicities of reality (C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012). Thus, critical social workers argue for the production of situated and contextualized knowledges over a universal knowledge.

The personal world (micro-level) and the structural world (macro-level) are seen as permanently intertwined (Fook, 2016). Efforts to understand one without the other are considered inept. While the specific implications and manifestations of the micro-macro link change over time, the link itself is unchanging. Domination and oppression are experienced at both the micro-level and macro-level (Agger, 2005). Although domination is produced at the macro-level, oftentimes oppressive experiences are felt at the micro-level. Critical social workers must work at multiple levels of intervention to achieve lasting change and problems must be situated within the larger historical and contemporary contexts of domination and oppression (C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012).

People are often unable to see the structural forces of domination (e.g., capitalism, sexism, racism) due to false consciousness. False consciousness hides the hidden agenda behind certain forms of knowledge and critical social workers must be comfortable questioning their own instincts, with particular attention to privileges and internalized oppressions (Agger, 2005). Critical social workers are concerned with raising critical consciousness as a major part of research and practice and must commit to working *alongside* participants and clients, not on their behalf (Allan et al., 2009). Pitner and Sakamoto (2016) defined critical consciousness as “the process of continuously reflecting upon and examining how our own biases, assumptions, and cultural worldviews affect the ways we perceive difference and power dynamics” (p. 2). Rogowski (2013) described consciousness raising as an ongoing process of “deconstruction, resistance, challenge,

and reconstruction” (p. 32). Critical social workers must be able to compare dominant and counter discourses and examine assumptions which are taken for granted (Allan et al., 2009). Through critique, the hidden structures of oppression are made visible.

Despite false consciousness, individuals have agency (C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012). People are not predestined to experience domination and oppression and can enact real structural changes (Agger, 2005). Although critical social work theorists acknowledge the vital role of social identity in lived experiences, these identities should not be conceptualized as prescriptive or unchanging (Rogowski, 2013). Structural grounding is essential for understanding problems in context; however, an emphasis must also be placed on the concrete experiences of the client or participant in the here and now (C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012). In other words, the voice of the client or participant must remain central (C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012).

Practicing critical social work requires critical self-reflection and an understanding of power dynamics. First, client-social worker and participant-researcher relationships must be problematized (Rogowski, 2013) and the traditional notion of the social worker as an objective expert must be rejected (Rossiter, 1997). Further, relational power dynamics must be acknowledged and examined (Allan et al., 2009). These dynamics cannot be erased; however, reflexive practice can help mitigate the impact of unequal power (Allan et al., 2009).

Finally, critical social workers must be willing to politicize their work and reject objective or neutral stances. This entails the social worker staying committed to congruence, or alignment in their beliefs, values, theoretical underpinnings, and practices, particularly in moments of frustration (C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012). Critical social

workers must stay focused on hope for change, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable structural barriers (Agger, 2005; Pease et al., 2016)

History in Social Work. Contemporary critical social workers are likely to point to Jane Addams as the first critical social worker (Allan et al., 2009). The structurally-focused Settlement House movement approach emphasized changing the system instead of those within the system (Franklin, 1986) and Jane Addams utilized an indisputable critical lens. However, the activism of Addams predates modern conceptualizations of critical theory, and therefore, it is unlikely Addams would have dubbed herself a critical theorist (Antonio, 1981). Nonetheless, the structural approach employed by Addams continued to permeate social work practice until the start of the First World War. Around this time, the psychoanalytic approaches of Freud gained traction, particularly in the United States, shifting social work from structural intervention to individual intervention (Allan et al., 2009) and further away from a critical lens. However, social workers committed to structural change remained. For instance, social worker Bertha Capen Reynolds, a Marxist thinker, was active in the Rank-and-File movement, a left-leaning, activist response to the Great Depression. In fact, when compared to the early reformist efforts of Addams, the Rank-and-File movement was explicitly revolutionary in its alignment with labor movements, anti-racist movements, and left-wing politics (Ablett & Morley, 2016). This radical work should not be misconstrued as an anomaly in social work, as Reynolds was one of the most published social workers of her time (Ablett & Morley, 2016). However, as anti-communist sentiment grew in the United States, Reynolds was eventually ostracized for her beliefs and practices. In this era of

persecution of communist ideas, which continued well into the 1950s, critical forms of social work became increasingly less common (Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

Radical social work emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (Allan et al., 2009; Gray & Webb, 2013; Pease et al., 2016; Rogowski, 2013) and can be seen as the forefather of critical social work. This emergence coincided with the rise of counterculture movements and provided the historical context necessary for the shift in social work (Rogowski, 2013). Radical social work was explicitly influenced by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and Marxism (Ablett & Morley, 2016; Allan et al., 2009; Gray & Webb, 2013; Rogowski, 2013), but by the 1980s, radical social work was criticized for its exclusive focus on capitalism and class (Rogowski, 2013). Social workers were also interested in the structural forces of racism, sexism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression (Allan et al., 2009). Feminist thought became incorporated into what was becoming critical social work to address these shortcomings (Ablett & Morley, 2016). While the early 1980s focused primarily on gender as an important axis of focus, movements toward anti-racism, anti-oppression, and anti-colonialism followed suit in the late 1980s (Allan et al., 2003). Further, structural social work, developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Maurice Moreau, brought power interactions into the realm of critical social work (Allan et al., 2003). The influences of feminism, structural social work, and critical theory can be conceptualized as the foundation to modern critical social work.

Since the 1990s, neoliberalism and a rising move towards privatization across the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom has led to extreme income inequality and has become a central focus of critical social work (Rogowski, 2013). Reisch (2019) argued that neoliberal reform of social programs has significantly altered social work

services and therefore, the focus of critical social work has shifted inward. Critiques of evidence-based practices have emerged, claiming these manualized approaches are a threat to critical practice (Gray & Webb, 2013). Modern critical social work theory has also been applied to a wide range of issues, including human rights (Hugman, 2013; Nipperess & Briskman, 2009), environmental justice (Gray & Coates, 2016), racism (Quinn, 2009; Siddiqui, 2011), sexism (Carrington, 2016; Findley, 2013; Morley, 2009; Orme, 2003), heteronormativity (Irwin, 2016), ageism (Black, 2009; KostECKI, 2016), ableism (K. Johnson, 2009; Shuttleworth, 2016), spirituality (Butot, 2007), mass incarceration (Goldingay, 2016), and child welfare (Weiss-Gal et al., 2014). Critical social work theory remains relevant and evolving in contemporary times.

Application. Critical theory sets the foundation for critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996; Fitzpatrick & May, 2022), the research approach used in this study. Through this methodology, I applied a dual lens to the macro-level (school policy) and the micro-level (lived experience) to see how domination and oppression manifested and interacted in both domains. Critical theory recognizes the intertwined nature of these levels and makes this analysis possible (Fook, 2016). Further, critical theory calls for developing a critical consciousness through dialogue to expose systems of oppression (Freire, 1970). Critical theory provides concrete tools for bringing to light the tacit assumptions that are left unstated (Carspecken, 1996). Finally, critical theory recognizes the role of culture in perpetuating false consciousness (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011). As this study described the culture and context of gender in the school system through dialogue and policy analysis, critical theory was a natural fit. Grounded in critical social work theory, this research sought to answer the following research questions: 1a) How does

gender oppression present in the school system? 1b) To what extent does the federal mandate of TIX inform school policy and/or contribute to sex (in)equity in school?

Despite the many strengths of critical social work, the universality of the approach remains a weak point. When social justice, oppression, and domination are discussed in broad, vague, and universalizing terms, the impact of specific social structures (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) are lost (Fook, 2003), as well as the very real implications for those oppressed across multiple structures (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, critical social work theory can benefit from an explicit incorporation of intersectionality.

Intersectionality

Over the last thirty years, intersectionality has grown tremendously, yet the definitions and conceptualizations of what constitutes an intersectional approach vary dramatically (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Davis, 2008; Mehrotra, 2010; Nash, 2008). Some scholars have questioned whether intersectionality can be considered a theory due to this conceptual ambiguity (Davis, 2008). Indeed, intersectionality has been called an analytic tool (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Nash, 2008), a concept (Lutz et al., 2011), a paradigm (McCall, 2005), and a framework (Collins, 2015). Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011) argued intersectionality does not, nor has it ever attempted to, fit the requirements of a grand theory, but instead acts as a more modest descriptive theory. Mehrotra (2010) acknowledged and embraced this variation in the application of intersectionality, describing intersectionality as “not a singular intersectional framework but, rather, a continuum of different intersectional theories with potentially varying epistemological bases that social work scholars can draw upon” (p. 418). Following Crenshaw, this

inquiry conceptualizes intersectionality as a theory (although not a grand theory) and the applications discussed throughout do fall on an epistemological continuum.

Definition and Tenets. Although defining the scope of intersectionality is contested terrain (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Davis, 2008; Mehrotra, 2010; Nash, 2008); the most basic definitions of the concept are similar. When Crenshaw (1989) famously described the concept of intersectionality, she problematized applying a single frame (e.g., racism OR sexism) to understand social inequality and instead proposed examining how multiple frames (e.g., racism AND sexism) mutually interact to impact those who are “multiply-burdened” (p. 140). The impact of this interaction was explained as greater than simply racism plus sexism. Crenshaw argued that single-axis frameworks elevate the needs of those who are the most privileged within a group: sex discrimination defaults to white women and race discrimination defaults to Black men (Crenshaw, 1989). As this rendered Black women invisible, Crenshaw called for countering single-axis analysis and centering Black women in analysis (Crenshaw, 1989).

Since the writing of this seminal paper, intersectionality has expanded and scholars have attempted to further conceptualize the topic. In an oft-quoted piece, Matsuda (1991) described it as “a method I call ‘ask the other question’” (p. 1189), where when she noticed one type of oppression (e.g., racism), she would ask herself how another form of oppression might operate within that construct (e.g., sexism). Collins (2015) offered another definition:

The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities (p. 2).

The multi-frame approach to understanding inequalities is central to most definitions.

The tenets of intersectionality are further debated. Some scholars have offered simplistic accounts. For instance, Hancock (2016) described intersectionality as having two essential projects: including and making visible individuals overlooked within single-frame analyses and analyzing the relationships between multiple frames. Others have expressed less concern with outlining the key points of intersectionality and instead argued to analyze not what intersectionality is, but what the application of intersectionality offers for those whom it intends to center (Lykke, 2011).

In contrast to these simplistic tenets, Collins and Bilge (2016) outlined six main ideas to the theory which are both broad enough to capture the diversity of intersectional inquiry, yet narrow enough to identify applications of the concept that undermine the goals of intersectionality itself. First, intersectionality examines social *inequality* and understands this inequality as the result of multiple systems of oppression. These systems of *power* are mutually constructed, meaning they cannot be examined as individual entities. As these systems are understood through their *relationality*, intersectionality inherently rejects binary thinking (either/or) in favor of inclusive thinking (both/and). In order to understand these systems, the *social context*, including the historical, intellectual, and political context must be dissected. Intersectionality is complex. Although this *complexity* poses challenges in analytical application, it should not be simplified for ease of use. Finally, intersectionality is rooted in *social justice*, and therefore, intersectional research must be critical of the status quo (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

History. Providing a full history of intersectionality is outside of the scope of this inquiry. However, grounding the theory in its historical context is essential, as is avoiding ineffective genealogies of intersectionality that produce the very social inequalities the

theory intends to disband (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hancock, 2016). Here follows a limited genealogy that is admittedly incomplete, yet provides some context.

Many scholars have traced intersectionality's roots to the 19th century. Notably, Sojourner Truth's 1851 *Ain't I A Woman?* speech is credited as one of the earliest accounts of activists illuminating the intertwined impact of racism and sexism (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2016). However, another contributor, Maria Stewart, who made similar public speeches over a decade prior, is often overlooked (Hancock, 2016). Although it may be impossible to identify the first intersectional argument, intersectional analysis has existed for, minimally, almost two centuries (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2016).

The 1960s and 1970s are considered another key moment in intersectionality's history and the women of color involved in the social movements of the time are credited as early theorists (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hancock, 2016; Mehrotra, 2010). Notably, the Combahee River Collective, formed by Black, radical lesbian feminists, wrote *A Black Feminist Statement* in 1977, which analyzed the multifaceted impacts of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and capitalism. This text was one of the first to put the intersectional arguments used throughout history into a written work and continues to be relevant decades later (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Davis, 2008; Hancock, 2016; Mehrotra, 2010). Intersectionality was not limited to political tracks, as creative leaders, such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, are also credited as early theorists for their analysis of intersectional themes in their novels (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

However, it is inadequate to focus on the contributions of Black feminists alone, as feminists from many diverse racial and ethnic groups have made substantial

contributions to intersectionality. To illustrate, another seminal intersectional text, *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1981, included work from Latina/Chicana, Native American, Asian American, and Black feminists (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hancock, 2016). Further, the intersectionality theory now referred to as Indigenous Feminisms, which illuminates the intersecting impacts of sexism, racism, and colonialism, gained traction in the 1980s with the influential works of Kathryn Shanley, Beatrice Medicine, and Paul Gunn Allen (Anderson, 2020). Indigenous feminisms have been particularly important for illustrating how gender inequality was imposed as a tool of colonization, undermining previously egalitarian gender relations in many Indigenous communities (Guerrero, 2003)

In the late 1980s, Crenshaw's use of the term intersectionality built on this enormous legacy of work (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) and contributed to the embrace of the concept by the academic institution (Collins & Bilge, 2016). In the seminal work, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*, Crenshaw (1989) confronted the tensions within critical legal studies which defaulted to single-frame critiques (race or gender) by presenting intersectionality as a multi-faceted approach. Building on this foundation, intersectionality spread beyond its origins in critical legal studies into many other disciplines. Since the 2000s, undergraduate-level textbooks and a multitude of special editions within academic journals have been published (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality has gained traction internationally, with scholarship on the topic now published globally (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Lutz et al., 2011). Social work has not been immune to the rising interest in intersectionality, as evidenced in part by the

publication of the contemporary academic journal, *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Policy, and Practice* (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Application. Intersectional theory is an essential tool for performing salient and inclusive gender analysis. For this study in particular, using an intersectional approach was nonnegotiable. By contextualizing gender through its mutual relationship with other stratifying structures, the hidden privileges of whiteness, heterosexuality, and cisgender identity could be exposed. To fail to theorize intersectionally would result in implications that favor the most privileged students – likely white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class students – and would be in direct contrast to the study aims. By treating social identity as “a starting point for intersectional inquiry and praxis” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 132), the study implications became relevant for all students, not just those with privilege. Thus, to ensure salience with all students, this study sought to answer the research question: 2a) How does the culture and context of gender overlap with other systems of oppression in the school system?

Effective intersectional theorizing both recognizes the political usefulness of social identities while simultaneously disrupting the idea that these identities are fixed (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 2011; McCall, 2005). Unfortunately, in practice, much intersectional research treats social identity as static and unchanging, reifying oppressive, essentialist understandings of social identity (e.g., male/female, white/non-white) (Lutz et al., 2011; Mehrotra, 2010). Indeed, negotiating the balancing act of relying on essentialist identities for political gain while also acknowledging that the maintenance of the social categories themselves undermine social justice is exceedingly difficult. Hence, intersectionality theory finds strength when paired with anti-essentialist

theories which explicitly undermine binary thinking. This inquiry now turns to the theories which challenge the gender binary – queer and transgender theories.

Queer and Transgender Theories

The gender binary acknowledges two and only two genders: male and female (McPhail, 2004). The existence of this gender binary has laid the groundwork for the ongoing oppression of cisgender women, who are seen as inferior to cisgender men, gender complex individuals, and anyone who fails to perform their gender in line with these rigid categorizations (Burdge, 2007; Butler, 1990). As this gender binary contributes to transphobia, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, scholars have argued social workers have an ethical obligation to actively reject this limited understanding of gender (Burdge, 2007; McPhail, 2004; Trevor & Boddy, 2013). Social workers could fight this oppression by either critiquing the existence of the binary system in its entirety or expanding the binary to include a multitude of gender experiences (Burdge, 2007). To delve more deeply into scholarship which has consistently undermined the gender binary, this section will discuss the definitions, tenets, history, and applications of queer and transgender theories.

Queer Theory: Definitions and Tenets. Eve Sedgwick, often credited as an early scholar in queer theory, described queer theory as “resistance to treating homo/heterosexual categorization – still so very volatile an act – as a done deal, a transparently empirical fact about any person” (Sedgwick, 2008, p. xvi). This resistance expands far beyond questioning binary sexuality categories, as Judith Butler proposed with the introduction of the *heterosexual matrix* (Butler, 1990). The *heterosexual matrix*, the ongoing process where the socially produced system of heterosexuality dictates the

existence of two mutually exclusive and hierarchical genders (male/female), solidifying males as subjects and females as objects of male desire (Butler, 1990), showcased the intertwined relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality. In this context, the term “queer” becomes not a social identity, but an act of resistance to this intertwined system of categorization – a refusal to comply (Butler, 1993). More broadly, queer theory can be defined as a “critique of normative models of sex, gender, and sexuality” (p. xvi) which illuminates the power dynamics undergirding the categorizations (Hall & Jagose, 2013).

Queer theory, while an expansive and evolving field of inquiry, has some major underlying tenets which define the field. First, queer theory is considered anti-identarian as it understands social identities as socially constructed, not inherent (Hall & Jagose, 2013). Specific to this inquiry, gender is understood as performative, meaning individuals are socially rewarded when they comply with behaviors assumed to be appropriate for their perceived gender (Butler, 1990). This *gender performance* is both unconscious and flawed, as the requirements of the gender binary are inherently impossible to fully master, meaning all fall short in performing their gender (Butler, 1993). Second, queer theory is primarily interested in non-normativity, or interrogating who and/or what is perceived as natural and normal (Hall & Jagose, 2013). Using this logic, queer theory not only investigates social identities which challenge normative structures, such as complex gender identities, but also investigates normative structures themselves, such as the institution of marriage (e.g., Butler, 1990; Rubin, 1984). Queer theory also critiques *homonormativity*, or the ways in which some individuals marginalized for their sexuality have gained social status by complying with the normative structures of marriage, neoliberalism, and capitalism (Duggan, 2002). Third, queer theory is intersectional, as it

examines how sexuality and gender are mutually constituted; however, other social identities (e.g., race and ethnicity) are often overlooked, a critical shortcoming which has received internal and external critique (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016).

Queer Theory: History. Queer theory originated as a response to the shortcomings of both feminism and gay and lesbian studies. While feminism offered a strong analysis of gender and gender oppression and gay and lesbian studies offered a strong analysis of sexuality and homophobia, neither recognized the way that gender and sexuality were mutually constructed and intertwined (Hall & Jagose, 2013). As with intersectionality, the origins of queer theory are multi-faceted and sometimes contested, rendering any single narrative of the history of queer theory incomplete (Hall & Jagose, 2013). Despite this shortcoming, a few major contributions should be highlighted.

First, queer theory is deeply entrenched in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978) which acknowledged binaries as a social construction and argued for using discourse to deconstruct and understand (but not necessarily undo) binaries (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). Throughout the 1980s, some key concepts emerged which would later lay the foundation for queer theory including, *compulsory heterosexuality*, which reimagined sexuality as an institution instead of a characteristic (Rich, 1980) and *the charmed circle of sexual intimacy*, which examined how social inequality dictated acceptable sexual relations (G. S. Rubin, 1984).

The early 1990s are often identified as a prolific period for queer theory, both in academic and activist circles (Hall & Jagose, 2013). De Lauretis (1991) offered an early critique of gay and lesbian studies, which spurred much queer theory scholarship (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). Additionally, social movements, including HIV/AIDS activism in

the 1990s was an activist-led manifestation of queer theory (Hall & Jagose, 2013). *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick, 2008) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler, 1990), two seminal queer theory texts, were published in 1990. Finally, *heteronormativity*, or the influential power of normative heterosexuality as a social structure, was described in the late 1990s work, *Sex in Public* (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Parallel to the feminist theory which it sought to critique, queer theory is institutional, focused on power dynamics and social systems.

Since this time, queer theory has received critiques from many angles. However, as queer theory promotes antinormativity and is committed to interrogating assumptions, these critiques often do not necessarily undermine the theory itself, but instead are incorporated into the larger field of study (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). Scholarship known as *queer of color critique* criticized the canon texts of queer theory for overlooking race and ethnicity and its influence on sexuality and gender (e.g., Ferguson, 2003; Hammonds, 1994; Johnson, 2001; Munoz, 1999; Somerville, 2000). Further, Native American scholar Driskill (2010) proposed a *Two-Spirit critique* to queer theory which sought to forefront decolonization, using the term Two-Spirit both as an umbrella term for Native LGBTQ+ people and as a reference to tribal traditions which acknowledged identities outside of the gender binary. Additionally, crip theory later provided a “*crip*” critique by pointing out the way queer theory assumed its subjects as able-bodied (Clare, 2015; McRuer, 2006). Puar (2007) further extended *homonormativity* to *homonationalism*, pointing to the emergence of discourses which juxtaposed the supposed tolerance of the United States to the supposed intolerance of the Middle East towards gay and lesbian populations to justify war and imperialism after September 11th.

However, the primary critique of concern for this inquiry will be *trans critique*, as this is most central to the larger theme of undermining the gender binary.

Trans critiques of queer theory sought not to invalidate queer theory, but instead to expand and deepen the theory to better reflect the experiences of people with complex gender identities (Benavente & Gill-Peterson, 2019). Despite the institutionalization of queer theory, Stryker (2004) argued there has yet to be a “radical restructuring of our understanding of gender” (p. 214), indicating that queer theory falls short of its own pedagogy. This is perhaps because queer theory focuses broadly on the experiences of LGBTQ+ populations, appearing at first glance inclusive of people with complex gender identities, yet on deeper inspection, consistently defaulting to sexuality (Radi, 2019; Stryker, 2004). This results in misrepresenting transgender as a sexual orientation and/or rendering people with complex gender identities invisible, missing a crucial opportunity to undermine limiting gender conceptualizations (Radi, 2019; Stryker, 2004, 2008).

Much queer theory scholarship on complex gender identities was written by cisgender researchers (Radi, 2019). Early writing was critiqued as fetishizing people with complex gender identities as the ultimate queer subjects without accounting for the diverse situated knowledges and lived experiences of this population (Benavente & Gill-Peterson, 2019; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). This proved problematic for transgender people who did not recognize themselves as radical queer subjects, but instead experienced their gender as stable, sometimes identifying strongly within the binary conceptualizations of male/female (Finlay, 2017). This led to the call for more research about gender complexity by individuals with complex gender identities, particularly work that centered lived experiences (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Radi, 2019).

As queer theory began to recognize this variance, another troubling binary emerged, characterized by different scholars as the antinormative vs. normative binary (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016), the anti-binary vs. wrong body paradigm (Radi, 2019), or radical gender transgression vs. liberal transsexual politics (Roen, 2002). Within these conceptualizations, people and policies that embodied and acknowledged gender complexity as dynamic and sought to dismantle binary understandings of gender (e.g., eradicating gender categories) were seen as more valuable, while individuals and/or policies that experienced gender as static and focused on a rights-based agenda (e.g., access to gender-confirming surgeries) were seen as less valuable (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016; Radi, 2019; Roen, 2002). However, as Roen (2002) discovered in qualitative interviews with gender complex individuals, people rarely identified exclusively with anti-essentialist or essentialist labels and gender identities were multi-faceted, contested, and context-specific, undermining this hierarchical distinction. As queer theory failed to capture this complexity, transgender theory gained traction.

Transgender Theory: Definition and Tenets. Transgender theory responded to both the many shortcomings of queer theory described above (i.e., failing to meaningfully undermine the gender binary, fetishizing complex gender identities, devaluing lived experiences) and the shortcomings of feminist theory in reproducing the gender binary while overlooking cisgender privilege (Breux & Thyer, 2021; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Transgender theory can be conceptualized as a systemic critique of the gender binary and cisnormativity in dominant culture that also centers the lived experiences of people with complex gender identities (Breux & Thyer, 2021).

Definitions of transgender theory typically encompass two main goals: undermining limiting binaries while also honoring lived experiences which, at times, find salience in these same binaries (Breux & Thyer, 2021; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Transgender theory responds to the false hierarchy between normative and antinormative identities presented in queer theory by acknowledging essentialist identity categories as politically useful and often personally relatable (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016; Radi, 2019; Roen, 2002). Transgender theory accounts for lived experiences by understanding identity as “fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed” (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 432). Gender is experienced in a variety of ways and individuals are best equipped to define for themselves their own gender experiences (Breux & Thyer, 2021). In addition to prioritizing the complexity of internal gender experiences, Stryker (2008) argued that transgender theory must also be attentive to the external issue of dissecting power along sexuality and gender binaries. Transgender theory accomplishes this by utilizing a “fuzzy gender” approach, which, “does not discard the binary; it puts it into a larger context, and thereby disempowers it” (Tauchert, 2002, p. 37). Transgender theory seeks both to preserve agency for individuals in making sense of their own gender while also dissecting power dynamics created by a rigid gender binary. Analysis is focused at the structural-level, although individual experiences remain central.

Transgender Theory: History. As with other theories, transgender theory boasts both academic and activist origins and has existed alongside queer theory since the 1990s (Radi, 2019). On the academic side, some credit Stryker's (1994) influential piece, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*, an early trans critique of queer theory, as a founding text for transgender theory (Benavente & Gill-Peterson,

2019). The same decade brought the notable publication of “The Transgender Issue” of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Benavente & Gill-Peterson, 2019). On the activism side, Transgender Nation, “the first explicitly queer transgender social change group in the United States” emerged in the early 1990s, which critiqued the transphobia prevalent in prominent queer social movements (Stryker, 2008, p. 146).

Contemporarily, transgender theory remains in a state of “partial institutionalization” (Benavente & Gill-Peterson, 2019, p. 25) where the theory is still largely marginalized and scholars struggle to find recognition for their work. In social work, transgender theory is largely unincorporated, resulting in social work scholars calling for increased recognition of the theory (Breux & Thyer, 2021; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Trevor & Boddy, 2013). One systematic review in Australia problematized the state of social work research with trans individuals for its overreliance on medical models, uncritical acceptance of the gender binary, and lack of attention to lived experiences (Trevor & Boddy, 2013). Despite positive advances in social work, much of social work continues to overlook complex gender identities (Breux & Thyer, 2021). Transgender theory may be the key in addressing these shortcomings.

Application. Queer theory is effective in undermining binary categorizations and the static, essentialist identity labels which they produce. Further, queer theory acknowledges the deep interconnection of sex, gender, and sexuality within the framework of the heterosexual matrix. However, queer theory has sometimes prioritized antinormativity in ways that devalue individuals with complex gender identities – either through fetishizing their existence or devaluing lived experiences which find salience in the binary. For this project, it was essential to prioritize the lived experiences of

participants over a theoretical commitment to antinormativity as students both identified within the structure of the gender binary and sought to undermine it. Therefore, it was essential that I reflected on my own personal biases and allowed students to speak truth to their own experiences without imposing my own values. Transgender theory was useful for illuminating inequalities which emerge from rigid gender categorizations without alienating students who located themselves in binary terms and/or fetishizing students with complex gender identities. Centered in these goals, this study addressed the research question: 3a) How is cisheteropatriarchy regulated, promoted, and/or resisted at schools?

Firmly grounded in the applicability of critical social work theory, intersectionality, and queer and transgender theories, this inquiry now transitions from the general to the specific by narrowing into the factors influencing the culture and context of gender in schools, beginning with TIX.

Title IX

TIX has influenced gender equity in schools for the past 50 years. This section briefly describes the history of TIX, its mechanisms for enforcement, and school-level compliance. Then, two issues with relevance to this inquiry: sexual harassment and the rights of transgender students, are unpacked. Last, the strengths and limitations of TIX in shaping the culture and context of gender in schools are discussed.

History, Enforcement, Compliance

In 1969, Dr. Sandler was passed over for a position because she was perceived as “too strong for a woman” (Sandler, 2000, p. 9). Believing that her situation was not unique, but indicative of a systemic problem, Dr. Sandler partnered with the Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL) to file a class-action lawsuit against the University of

Maryland and other universities for sex discrimination (McClure, 2020; Sandler, 2000; Stimpson, 2022). Building on the data gathered by Dr. Sandler in pursuit of these lawsuits, Representative Edith Green organized the first hearings on sex discrimination in the House of Representatives in July of 1970 (Busch & Thro, 2018; McClure, 2020; Sandler, 2000). Shortly after, Representative Patsy Mink and Senator Birch Bayh co-sponsored TIX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and on June 23, 1972, President Nixon signed TIX into law (Busch & Thro, 2018; McClure, 2020). Appendix C, Table C1 highlights relevant key events in TIX.

In 1975, regulatory guidance was released specifying how the federal government would assess compliance (Busch & Thro, 2018; Stromquist, 2013). The regulations were organized into multiple subparts: introduction, coverage, discrimination in admissions/recruitment, educational programs/activities, and employment, and procedures (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 1975). Importantly, three specific obligations of schools were outlined that persist today: 1) publishing a nondiscrimination policy 2) designating a TIX coordinator and 3) establishing “prompt and equitable” (p. 24139) grievance procedures (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 1975).

Today, TIX is primarily enforced by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the ED. The OCR gives guidance to schools both through formal regulations and through internal policy guidance documents, such as Dear Colleague Letters (DCL). In contrast to formal regulations, guidance documents provide clarifying information on regulations, but do not have the force of the law (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). Because these informal regulations do not have the force of the law, they can be (and often are) easily enacted or rescinded with the arrival of new administrations (Melnick, 2018). Keeping up with the

informal guidance can be daunting, as one review found that in 2012, 270 DCLs and other OCR announcements were released over the course of one year (Task Force on Federal Regulation of Higher Education, 2015). Expectations around the implementation of TIX can change rapidly between federal administrations.

In terms of school-level oversight, the OCR can conduct both compliance reviews holistically and respond to individual complaints with pinpointed investigations. Due to issues of underfunding and understaffing, the OCR primarily responds to individual complaints (Stromquist, 2013). Although the OCR can point out areas of noncompliance and make suggestions for improvements, the main enforcement mechanism – the complete removal of federal funds – is considered a “nuclear option” (Melnick, 2018, p. 48) and has never, in the 50-year history of TIX, been used (Sindt, 2020).

In addition, the court system enforces TIX by hearing cases brought by students against their educational institutions. This “private right of action”, as it’s called, was established by the Supreme Court in 1979 (*Cannon v. University of Chicago*, 1979). Students can sue schools for noncompliance with TIX and the court can award injunctive relief (e.g., change of policy) and/or monetary damages. By adapting this role, the court system solidified its position as not only responsible for enforcing the law by hearing individual lawsuits filed against noncompliant schools, but also for interpreting the law, in particular, through defining the scope of sex discrimination and establishing standards for school liability (Stromquist, 2013).

Despite 50 years of implementation, compliance with TIX in the school system has remained an ongoing issue. An early in-depth examination of a large school district in Alabama concluded the district had widespread issues of noncompliance, despite the

concerted efforts of community volunteers (Post, 1978). Forty years later, a more recent empirical study demonstrated that at the K-12 level, TIX Coordinators were mostly unaware of the scope of their responsibilities, received almost no training, and spent less than 10% of their time on TIX duties (Meyer et al., 2018). The handful of empirical studies on school policy similarly found that schools were unequipped to handle complaints of sexual harassment and out of compliance with TIX (Grant et al., 2019; Lichty et al., 2008; Richards et al., 2021). Contemporary scholars have characterized K-12 schools as too lenient with TIX, unable or unwilling to enforce policies, and severely lacking in well-trained TIX professionals (Stewart, 2020). Whether schools comply with the regulations of TIX or not, the regulations themselves remain subject to debate.

Major Controversies

Gender identity and sexual harassment are not mentioned specifically in the original text of TIX (Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act, 1972). However, these issues are among the most hotly contested issues surrounding TIX today (Busch & Thro, 2018; Melnick, 2018). Current proposed changes to TIX regulations deal with these two issues in depth (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 2022). Next, a brief overview of these issues will establish context for the ongoing debates.

Sexual Harassment. Following the decisions of three Supreme Court cases in the 1990s, sexual harassment became widely understood as a form of sex discrimination protected under TIX (*Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*, 1999; *Franklin v. Gwinnett County Public Schools*, 1992; *Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District*, 1998). In 1992, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that teacher-to-student sexual harassment was considered sex discrimination (*Franklin v. Gwinnett County*

Public Schools, 1992). Several years later, *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999) further defined peer sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination as well. In combination, *Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District* (1998) and *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999), outlined the necessary circumstances that must be present for a school to be held liable for sexual harassment. Despite these monumental court cases, widespread attention to sexual harassment under TIX and enforcement by the OCR was widely neglected until recent years (Melnick, 2018).

In 2009, an investigative journalism piece on sexual assault on college campuses claimed the OCR did not enforce their TIX obligations (K. Jones, 2010). In response, the OCR released a 19-page DCL on sexual harassment in 2011 (Ali, 2011). The letter emphasized the importance of school-wide prevention and articulated how schools must respond to complaints (Ali, 2011). This letter “was nothing less than a new paradigm” (Stimpson, 2022, p. 271) and brought the issue of TIX and sexual harassment national attention. After, the OCR began posting resolution agreements reached with noncompliant schools and publishing the names of schools currently under investigation in the name of increasing transparency (Cantalupo, 2021; Melnick, 2018). With these measures, the numbers of TIX complaints and investigations rose dramatically: in the 2010s there were 10 times more TIX complaints than the prior decade (Laytham, 2020).

By 2016, the resistance to this growth in TIX enforcement of sexual harassment culminated and the newly appointed Trump administration responded in kind. In 2018, the Trump administration released proposed changes to the TIX regulations specifically addressing sexual harassment (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 2020). Critics claimed the new regulations largely reversed the gains achieved from the 2011 DCL

guidance and would make it harder for survivors of sexual harassment to find justice (Cantalupo, 2021). Nonetheless, in August of 2020, the new regulations went into effect; however, these changes may soon be replaced. In the summer of 2022, the Biden administration published their own proposed regulations, which more closely align to the 2011 DCL released under the Obama administration (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 2022). These regulations are, at the time of this writing, set to be finalized in March 2024; however, after the ED pushed back the deadline multiple times (Peele, 2023), it remains to be seen whether this deadline will be met. The issue remains unsettled.

Gender Identity. Gender identity harassment was slowly incorporated into TIX in the 2010s. In 2014, the OCR began to describe gender identity discrimination as a form of sex discrimination and stated that students should be permitted to use the single-sex facilities aligned with their gender identity (Ferg-Cadima, 2015; Lhamon, 2014a, 2014b). On May 13th 2016, the OCR, in conjunction with the Department Of Justice (DOJ) released a DCL which declared that the ED and DOJ would “treat a student’s gender identity as the student’s sex” (Lhamon & Gupta, 2016, p. 2), defining sex for the explicit purpose of extending rights to gender complex students (Busch & Thro, 2018). This document “placed transgender students’ lives in the cross-hairs of a very public culture war” (Meyer & Quantz, 2021, p. 6). The backlash was immediate and intense.

Less than three months after the 2016 DCL was released, 21 states filed a lawsuit against the guidance (Busch & Thro, 2018; Meyer & Quantz, 2021). In August, U.S. District Judge Reed O’Connor issued an injunction, making the guidelines unenforceable (Busch & Thro, 2018; Melnick, 2018; Meyer & Quantz, 2021). By February of 2017, the

ED, under the newly appointed Trump administration, rescinded the 2016 DCL noting that the guidelines had led to “significant litigation” (Battle & Wheeler, 2017, p. 1).

On June 15, 2020, in a 6-3 ruling, the Supreme Court ruled that discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity was a form of sex discrimination in employment under a different federal law (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020). The majority opinion reasoned that sexual orientation and gender identity were inseparable from the sex of the individual (sexual orientation is attraction to people of the opposite and/or same *sex*; gender identity relates to the extent gender expression is congruent with *sex* assigned at birth). Even if an employer is primarily discriminating for another reason, they are *also* discriminating on the basis of sex (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020). However, the Supreme Court explicitly “decline[d] to say anything about other statutes” (p. 40), leaving the interpretation of TIX unresolved (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020).

On President Biden’s first day in office, he signed Executive Order 13988, which explicitly interpreted the *Bostock* ruling as also application to TIX (Exec. Order No. 13988, 2021). Further, the most recent proposed regulations would ban “adopting a policy or engaging in a practice that prevents a person from participating in an education program or activity consistent with the person’s gender identity” (p. 668). The issue of transgender athletes was later addressed in a separate set of proposed regulations released in April of 2023 (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 2023). Although the proposed regulations would provide some very basic protections for transgender athletes, it has been critiqued by advocates for uncritically furthering harmful narratives around transgender athletes in the name of political compromise (Bauer-Wolf, 2023).

Sexual harassment and gender identity under TIX have become key political issues. Explained simply, the Obama administration made the rights of accusers of sexual harassment and congruence with gender identity top priority, while the Trump administration prioritized the rights of students accused of sexual harassment and congruence with biological sex top priority (Busch & Thro, 2018; Melnick, 2018). Although the Biden administration has taken steps to return to some of the priorities of the Obama administration (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 2022), the future of these issues remains unknown and subject to political shifts.

Strengths and Limitations

Despite critiques from all ends of the political spectrum characterizing TIX as either too strong (Melnick, 2018) or too weak (Stromquist, 2013), the historical success of TIX is significant. Early studies reported improvements in more equitable enrollment across multiple levels of schooling and in multiple fields of study (Stromquist, 1993; Wirtenberg et al., 1981), increasing availability of sex-fair career counseling practices (Griffin, 1982), and a markedly increased number of girls and women involved in sports (Wirtenberg et al., 1981). A more recent study on gender inequality in education concluded: “Many of women’s and girls’ historical disadvantages in education have not only disappeared in the United States and other industrialized countries, they reversed” (Buchmann et al., 2008, p. 332). Although TIX may not be the sole (or even primary) reason for this change, these contributions are perhaps the greatest achievement of TIX.

Progress with subtle forms of discrimination, such as sexual harassment, may not be as clear-cut. Even Dr. Sandler, one of the key players in the passage of TIX, predicted addressing subtle forms of sex discrimination would be an uphill battle (Cole, 1976).

Nonetheless, TIX has successfully institutionalized sexual harassment as sex discrimination. Even the most ardent critics of TIX's enforcement of sexual harassment (e.g., Kipnis, 2017) do not deny the premise that sexual harassment is sex discrimination. The embeddedness of sexual harassment in definitions of sex discrimination was unfathomable when TIX passed and this victory cannot be understated.

Despite these strengths, there are many shortcomings to TIX. Empirical research has demonstrated that K-12 schools are out of compliance with TIX (Grant et al., 2019; Lichty et al., 2008; Meyer et al., 2018; Richards et al., 2021). Schools that do comply focus on completing the bare minimum requirements of TIX at the expense of more comprehensive approaches (Sindt, 2020). Further, the OCR, due to underfunding and understaffing, prioritizes individual complaints over broad compliance reviews and the private right of action established in the court system relies exclusively on individual complaints (Stromquist, 2013). The emphasis schools place on mitigating individual acts of sex discrimination to avoid OCR complaints and/or court entanglements (Stromquist, 2013) does a disservice to the overarching goal of eradicating sex discrimination and does not interrupt the status quo. For the average K-12 student, TIX has minimal impact.

This individualistic, compliance-based model does not impact all students equally. Black girls are less often taken seriously when they report harassment, or worse, disciplined for defending themselves against harassment due to deep implicit bias in the school system (Tonnesen, 2013). Further, Black and Latino boys are impacted more by zero-tolerance policies against sexual harassment than their white counterparts (Tonnesen, 2013). Young children are also negatively impacted by these zero-tolerance policies. Sexual acting out (a warning sign of sexual abuse) is punished harshly in these

contexts when instead, students should be screened for abuse and linked with supportive measures (Cyphert, 2017). Further, experimental sexual behavior that is developmentally appropriate can be misinterpreted as harassment and punished with severe consequences such as suspension or expulsion (Cyphert, 2017). The causes of sexual harassment are left unaddressed and other inequities are exacerbated.

TIX makes the mistake of treating gender inequality as a single issue. Gender does not exist by itself, but is inextricably linked with other salient forms of identity including race, ability, sexual orientation, age, and more. As intersectionality posits, when federal mandates address only one form of identity, such as gender, people who are oppressed through the intersections of multiple identities are erased and ignored (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). TIX is not immune. Early TIX research noticed this problem (Shelton & Berndt, 1974), yet it remains unresolved (Meyer et al., 2018; Meyer & Quantz, 2021; Stimpson, 2022; Tonnesen, 2013). Intersectional analysis is crucial.

In all, the mandate to end sex discrimination in school is not simple or straightforward. For one, schools are out of compliance with even the most basic aspects of TIX. Second, how sexual harassment and gender identity is interpreted under TIX is a moving target, vulnerable to political and social changes in the public sphere. Further, TIX and other legislative initiatives are unlikely to be successful in achieving true gender equity, as institutional responses have a powerful incentive to maintain the status quo (Stromquist, 1993, 2013). Despite this, decisions made regarding TIX have very real implications for the K-12 students navigating the school system. Thus, it is essential that the current state of TIX is analyzed so that the issues related to gender equity described by students themselves can be foregrounded within these ongoing debates. However, this

analysis must be critical (focused on power), intersectional (examining overlapping oppressions), and queer (undermining the essentialist category of sex/gender itself).

The Formal, Hidden, and Evaded Curricula in Schools

Just as TIX must be approached critically, so must schools as an institution. As “schools are a primary institution for identity formation, development, and solidification for contemporary American youth” (p. 18), it is essential to analyze the role of schools in regulating and producing gender expectations and norms (Pascoe, 2007). Indeed, recent educational policy proposals regulating how schools can talk about sex, gender, and sexuality have created a “state of emergency” (p. 14) for gender complex students as their personhood is erased and/or vilified (Vaid-Menon, 2020). However, while these policies impact students, they are also mediated at the school-level by the (re)interpretations and actions of educators, and even the students themselves (Fields, 2008).

In addition to analyzing governmental policy, research must examine the formal, hidden, and evaded curricula in schools. In addition to the *formal* curriculum taught and assessed in schools (e.g., explicitly taught lesson plans), schools, often unconsciously, promote a *hidden* curriculum (Aghasaleh, 2018; Jay, 2003). This hidden curriculum includes the “implicit messages given daily to students about socially derived and socially legitimated conceptions of what constitutes valid knowledge, ‘proper’ behavior, acceptable levels of understanding, differential power, and social evaluation” (Jay, 2003, p. 6). Schools further employ an *evaded* curriculum in which “matters central to the lives of students” (p. 3) are superficially glossed over, if addressed at all (Bailey, 1992). These three forms of curricula constitute the gendered lessons taught to students in schools.

These school curricula can be transmitted through many avenues, including school policies (Aghasaleh, 2018), policy enforcement (Tonnesen, 2013), school rituals (Pascoe, 2007), and peer interactions/pressures (Quinlivan, 2012). Congruent with queer theory, sometimes these curricula trouble conventional notions of sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1990). For instance, a participatory action research project in the United Kingdom in primary schools implemented a formal, “trans-ing curriculum” (p. 13) that enabled children to unpack and question their assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality (DePalma, 2013). Further, when students successfully formed a Gay-Straight Alliance by threatening legal action against their school after they were disallowed from founding the club (Pascoe, 2007), they made visible the hidden homophobic curricula.

By adapting a critical, queer, and intersectional lens, it is possible to see how schools as an institution and student actions can uphold the status quo through these curricula. On the institutional-level, school policies that do not explicitly address gender, race, and/or class, but in practice privilege students who are white, cisgender male, and middle-class (such as dress code policies), promote a hidden curriculum that reinforces a raced, gendered, and classed hierarchy (Aghasaleh, 2018). Further, when Black female students are disciplined more frequently for dress code violations despite wearing the same styles as their white female classmates, an implicit message is communicated about the proper race (white) of appropriate femininity (M. Morris, 2018; Tonnesen, 2013). Even school rituals can support the gender binary and the assumption of heterosexuality through traditions, such as electing a homecoming *king* and *queen* (Pascoe, 2007).

Students also uphold the status quo. When students react with anger to a lesson relating to same-sex relationships in sexual health education, they resist a school-wide

effort to undermine cisheteropatriarchy (Quinlivan, 2012). When young children reimagine a classroom story shared about a same-sex relationship as heterosexual (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009), the students promote a hidden curriculum that erases same-sex relationships. When educators observe students resisting counter-narratives and do not address the dissonance, the evaded curriculum upholds the status quo.

Often, the curriculum of a school is more nuanced than either upholding or upending the status quo. For instance, a private school positioned itself as an alternative to the public school system after the abstinence-only movement gained traction in North Carolina by offering pleasure-based, LGBTQ+ inclusive, comprehensive sex education to students (Fields, 2008). However, when the school hosted an LGBTQ+ affirming traveling exhibit after school hours, but limited attendance to members of the private school, it acted to “jealously guard – but still boast about – its actively antihomophobic agenda” (Fields, 2008, p. 47). In this example, the formal curriculum subverted cisheteropatriarchy, while the hidden curriculum sought to reroute public school families into the private school system (and by extension, generate tuition money) - ultimately upholding classed norms regarding who deserves of a progressive education.

To understand the role of the school system in regulating and producing sex, gender, and sexuality, there is a pressing need to unpack the formal, hidden, and evaded curricula in all its complexity and contradictions (Fields, 2008). As the school system and its actors both reflect and produce the power imbalances of society, it is unsurprising that gender inequality persists (Eckes, 2021) despite concrete gains in achievement outcomes of female students (Buchmann et al., 2008) and a positive, albeit modest, cultural shift regarding transvisibility and acceptance (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017). By analyzing the

formal, hidden, and evaded curricula, “what sex-gender-sexuality demands [of students] and is demanded inside school” (p. 268) can be exposed (Youdell, 2005). Grounded in this approach, this inquiry now examines prior research on gender in schools.

Prior Research

Given the volume of related research, it is neither feasible nor advantageous to delineate every study ever conducted on students related to gender. Instead, in alignment with critical social work theory, this section will intentionally demote the traditional variables emphasized in neoliberal research (e.g., academic achievement, graduation rates, truancy) used to judge school effectiveness and instead elevate student lived experiences related to gender in schools. Broad constructs such as hegemonic masculinity, gender-based harassment, and youth sexuality are considered with attention to unique considerations across gender identity groups. Last, key issues identified as applicable to individuals with complex gender identities (e.g., school bathroom access, (a)pronouns) are overviewed as cisheteropatriarchy renders these issues invisible, and therefore, an intentional effort must be made to make these issues visible (Miller, 2019).

Hegemonic Masculinity

As more opportunities were extended to female students in the last fifty years, female students now outperform male students on a number of measures, including course grades (but not standardized tests), social and emotional skills, extracurricular involvement, high school completion, and degree obtainment (Buchmann et al., 2008). The outperformance of female students in school achievement has been partially attributed to the high rate of conduct issues with male students (McElderry & Cheng, 2014). Looking at these differences, the notion that schools are not responsive to the

innate experiences of boyhood has gained traction in popular discourse (Lahelma, 2014). In this section, I review findings on gender differences and then refocus disparities from the assumption of “natural” differences to the impact of hegemonic masculinity.

Behavioral Differences. Males are more likely to be diagnosed with externalizing disorders (e.g., Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder) than females (Bean, 2013; Dowdy-Hazlett & Boel-Studt, 2021; Slaughter & Nagoshi, 2020; Tyson et al., 2010; Whitted et al., 2013). Conversely, females are more likely to exhibit internalizing disorders (e.g., Major Depression Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) than males (Bean, 2013; Dowdy-Hazlett & Boel-Studt, 2021; Tyson et al., 2010). Externalizing behaviors, as compared to internalizing behaviors, can be particularly disruptive to the classroom environment and often result in the exclusionary classroom practices (e.g., suspension, expulsion) associated with many negative outcomes (e.g., school dropout, incarceration) (Bean, 2013). However, male students who exhibit externalizing behaviors can also exhibit internalizing behaviors (Whitted et al., 2013) and externalizing behaviors exhibited by female students are likely overlooked due to inadequate diagnostic criteria (Dowdy-Hazlett & Boel-Studt, 2021), complicating this narrative.

Regardless of the legitimacy of the externalizing/internalizing dichotomy, in practice, male students are more likely to be disciplined, suspended, and/or expelled than their female peers and this is particularly true when male students are from low-income backgrounds, a racial/ethnicity minority, and/or qualify for special education (McElderry & Cheng, 2014; E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017). Adult implicit bias may contribute to this disparity (Bean, 2013; Chu, 2014) as many early childhood teachers have internalized

unexamined assumptions regarding the supposedly “natural” behavioral differences between the sexes that can directly impact classroom management (Chu, 2014).

These gender-based assumptions, when combined with implicit racism, can result in even more disparities, particularly for African American male students (Bean, 2013). One study found that Black male students were referred to the office for discipline issues at twice the rate of white male students (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017). However, the focus on the disparate disciplining of Black male students has been thoroughly critiqued by intersectional feminists as Black female students are similarly subjected to invasive surveillance and control, yet are erased in policy and research (Epstein et al., 2017; E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017; M. Morris, 2018; Wun, 2016a, 2016b). Indeed, this same study showed that Black female students were referred to the office three times as often as white female students, and at a rate relatively *equal* to white male students, thus diminishing the plausibility of gender alone accounting for the discrepancy (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017). The gap in behavioral issues cannot be explained by supposedly “natural” differences in sex alone and needs to be analyzed intersectionally.

Many other school-related gender disparities have been reported in the literature. For instance, male students exhibit lower social and emotional skills (Mogro-Wilson & Tredinnick, 2020) and are less likely to seek help from school officials (De Luca et al., 2019). Male students from low-income backgrounds report less educational aspirations than their female counterparts (Berzin, 2010). Although these gender gaps do require attention, they have been used in the public lexicon to argue that the rough and tumble of boyhood requires a different type of instruction and/or that single-sex schools are the solution, despite lack of empirical support (Bigler & Signorella, 2011; Halpern et al.,

2011; Lahelma, 2014). Ungirding these arguments is the idea that these gender gaps are due to a *natural*, perhaps biological, division of the sexes (Lahelma, 2014). Rather than reify this empirically lacking line of reasoning, these disparities may be better understood as embedded in cisheteropatriarchy and hegemonic notions of masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinity. A whole subfield of feminism, masculinities studies, describes how masculinities emerge and are sustained in childhood and adulthood (see Connell, 1995; Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). Of particular interest is hegemonic masculinity or “...the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, p. 77). Put another way, hegemonic masculinity is the product of and sustains cisheteropatriarchy and the dominance of straight, white, cisgender men.

An ethnographic study of young male students demonstrated the emergence of masculinity in early childhood and its interaction with school discipline. At the start of their schooling experience, male students in the study showed emotional depth and demonstrated loving and affectionate relationships with both men/boys and women/girls in a way that was comparable to their female classmates (Chu, 2014). However, over the course of a school year, every male student in the class (to varying degrees) began to reorient their actions in a way that distanced them from femininity (e.g., rejecting emotions) and highlighted their masculinity (e.g., aggression) to their male peers. Through this process, the male students suppressed the relational and emotional skills as a way to assert their toughness and gain/maintain access into their male peer group (Chu,

2014). Adolescent males have also described this process and expressed frustration at the limitations imposed by hegemonic masculinity (E. Brown, 2021; Orenstein, 2020).

Although hegemonic masculinity may be implicated in the school troubles of male students, it must be decoupled from cisgender men and boys. Masculinity (and its associated privileges) can be embodied by cisgender girls. In a high school critical ethnography, Pascoe (2007) learned that when female students embodied masculinity in a way that reified the gender hierarchy, their status grew. However, when female students embodied masculinity in a way that troubled the gender hierarchy, they were stigmatized (Pascoe, 2007). Transgender men have similarly reported acquiring male privilege as they began to present in a way that was perceived as masculine (Kuklin, 2014).

In contrast to the male privilege gained by some transmen and students perceived as masculine, transwomen and students perceived as feminine are not afforded new privileges but instead, experience increased discrimination, harassment, and even violence (Miller, 2019). This double standard has been described as *transmisogyny* (Miller, 2019). Students assigned male at birth who were perceived as embodying femininity (regardless of actual sexual orientation or gender identity) were exposed to almost constant, vitriolic harassment at one high school (Pascoe, 2007). This double-standard affirms the dominance of masculinity over femininity.

It is time to shift away from the oversimplified discourse that male students are in trouble. Instead, we must examine how cisheteropatriarchy and the gender binary shape hegemonic masculinity and how these systems grant privileges while also limiting the potentiality. Gender equity efforts must not become distracted by the research on gender differences, but instead adopt a critical lens attuned to the structural-level.

Gender-Based Harassment

Sexual harassment in schools has also received significant attention. However, some forms of harassment may be gender-based, but not necessarily overtly sexual (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016). Due to the interconnections between sex, gender, and sexuality proposed by the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2005), it is essential that gender-based harassment be interpreted broadly to include the derogatory use of homophobic and/or transphobic language and any harassment based on gender, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation. In this section I describe the state of sexual harassment in schools, discuss the use of homophobic and transphobic slurs and gender-based harassment, and end by discussing how schools (fail to) respond.

Sexual Harassment. Sexual harassment is often conceptualized as an issue of particular importance to cisgender female students and indeed, the research supports this claim (Bucchianeri et al., 2013; Espelage et al., 2016; C. Hill & Kearl, 2011). The AAUW conducted a nationwide survey of nearly 2,000 middle and high school students to uncover the state of sexual harassment in schools (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011). This report found that nearly half (48%) of students had been sexually harassed in the previous school year and that female students experienced harassment (56%) at a much higher rate than male students (40%) (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011). The harassing students were more often male (66%) than female (19%), although some harassment was perpetrated by mixed gender groups (11%) (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011). Not only were female students more likely to be harassed than male students, they experienced worse outcomes related to the harassment (e.g., school avoidance, somatic symptoms) (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011).

LGBTQ+ youth may also be impacted. The 2019 GLSEN National School Climate Survey analyzed the school experiences of over 15,000 LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw et al., 2020). In this survey, over 58% of the LGBTQ+ youth surveyed reported experiences of sexual harassment in school (Kosciw et al., 2020). An earlier 2007 GLSEN study reported incidence of sexual harassment with transgender youth specifically and discovered that 76% had experienced sexual harassment over the course of the school year and over a quarter (28%) reported this sexual harassment occurred often or frequently (Greytak et al., 2009). Sexual harassment impacts LGBTQ+ youth broadly and perhaps youth with complex gender identities even more.

Race is also relevant to sexual harassment at school. One study found that while white students reported higher levels of sexual harassment overall, Black girls reported higher rates of sexual harassment constituting sexual assault including being made to touch private parts and forced to engage in sexual behavior (Espelage et al., 2016). Further undermining the simplicity of gender as a single-axis frame of analysis, Black male students also reported higher rates of these forms of sexual harassment than white female students, but not Black female students (Espelage et al., 2016). This suggests that Black female students, due to their position at the intersection of race and gender oppression, may be more at risk of sexual assault.

Sexual assault is the subtype of sexual harassment that is typically considered the most severe on the continuum of gender-based aggression (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016). Cisgender women report higher lifetime rates of sexual assault than their male counterparts (K. C. Basile et al., 2022). Further, disproportionately high rates of sexual assault have been documented with transgender (Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016)

and gender nonconforming individuals (Mellins et al., 2017). Although cisgender men may be the least likely to experience sexual assault, due to the common rape myth that men always want sex, when males do report sexual assault, they are often not believed or described as fortunate to have received sex (E. Brown, 2021; Orenstein, 2020). Sexual harassment and sexual assault in schools is not an issue for only female students, but an issue for all students as gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and other social identities intersect with sexual harassment and assault in complex ways.

Predator Myths. Complicating these very real experiences of sexual harassment and assault, uncritical sexual harassment discourses can be harmful for those who are most often criminalized, including Black males and people with complex gender identities. The myth of the hypersexual, hypermasculine Black male preying on innocent white women has deep roots in American history (Feimster, 2009; McGuire, 2011) and remains embedded in the public consciousness. Pascoe (2007) repeatedly observed Black male students being disciplined and policed for engaging in the same behaviors as their white peers, especially when the behavior was directed towards white female students.

People with complex gender identities are similarly vilified as sexual predators. The “transgender predator myth” is a particularly nefarious appropriation of TIX used to justify policies requiring students to use facilities based on their sex assigned at birth. In this myth, proponents argue that this policy is the only way to prevent male students from claiming to be transgender for the explicit purposes of assaulting female students (*G.G. v. Gloucester County School Board*, 2020). However, there is not empirical support for this claim, as gender complex individuals are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators of sexual assault (Klemmer et al., 2021; Norris & Orchowski, 2020). This myth and

others like it, strip people with complex gender identities from the “luxury of being” and reimagines gender complex people as “something that is being done *to them* [cisgender people]” (Vaid-Menon, 2020, p. 16, emphasis added). The gender identity of another person is reimagined as a threat. These predator myths complicate advocacy in the school system by invoking racist tropes and limiting fundamental rights for gender complex individuals in the name of protecting (white) femininity and must be avoided.

Homophobia and Transphobia. Whether discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is sex discrimination under TIX remains contested legally, much to the detriment of students (Bolt, 2013). However, the use of homophobic language in schools illustrates this social binding of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Qualitative research has found that students often enact homophobic language not as a way to regulate sexual orientation, but to police appropriate gender expression (Pascoe, 2007). Male students have admitted to frequently and unapologetically using derogatory terms (e.g., “gay”, “fag”, “pussy”), to insult one another, both in jest and in cruelty (Orenstein, 2020; Pascoe, 2007). Attempting to separate gender-based harassment from anti-gay harassment, including the negative use of homophobic slurs, overlooks the deeply embedded interconnections between sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2005) as homophobia is deeply embedded in ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

The ubiquity of homophobic slurs in schools is backed by quantitative research. Over 98% of LGBTQ+ students heard the term gay used negatively at school, 95% heard other homophobic comments (e.g., “fag”, “dyke”), 53% heard negative comments about gender expression, and 43% heard transphobic comments (e.g., “tranny”, “he/she”) at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). Further, LGBTQ+ youth remain a major target for

harassment including verbal harassment based on sexual orientation (68%), gender expression (56%), and gender (53%) and physical harassment based on sexual orientation (25%), gender expression (21%), and gender (22%) (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Finally, many students with complex gender identities experience school as a dangerous and unsupportive place. Transgender students report high levels of school victimization related to their gender (83%), gender expression (82%) and sexual orientation (72%) and nonbinary students report similarly high rates (gender, 68%; gender expression, 75%; sexual orientation, 76%) (Kosciw et al., 2020). Gender complex youth who attend schools described as open or progressive are often still exposed to an overtly hostile environment (Kuklin, 2014). To avoid harassment and violence, gender complex youth often go to extreme lengths, such as strategically mapping their route to school (Miller, 2019). Focusing on sexual harassment alone in TIX overlooks an overwhelming amount of gender-based harassment experienced by LGBTQ+ youth.

School (In)Action. Students rarely confront harassment in schools directly. Less than a quarter of those reporting sexual harassment asked the harasser to stop (24%) and even less tried to defend themselves (12%) (C. Hill & Kearn, 2011). Black female students may be more likely to directly respond to harassment and defend themselves; however, when this happens they are typically vilified as the instigator and punished (Tonnesen, 2013). Passive responses are common, with students ignoring harassment (51%), while making it a joke (15%) or doing nothing (7%) (C. Hill & Kearn, 2011).

Sexual harassment is underreported. Half of students who experienced sexual harassment told no one, with female students (59%) taking no action more commonly than male students (44%) (C. Hill & Kearn, 2011). Some students reported sexual

harassment to family members (27%) or friends (23%), but few reported to the school directly (9%) (C. Hill & Kearnl, 2011). Only 16% of LGBTQ+ respondents “always” or “most of the time” reported harassment (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Schools’ responses to gender-based harassment are disheartening. When school administrations directly observe sexual harassment in the classroom, they repeatedly fail to intervene or write it off as mere flirting (Fields, 2008; Pascoe, 2007). LGBTQ+ students did not report harassment because they doubted that school staff would respond (72%) or if they did respond, that their response would be effective (65%) (Kosciw et al., 2020). When reports were made by LGBTQ+ students, school staff frequently did nothing (43%) or instructed the student to ignore it (60%). Even more troubling, 20% of students reported that school staff responded by suggesting the student change themselves to avoid harassment (Kosciw et al., 2020). As Vaid-Menon (2020) explained, when adults instruct youth to act differently to avoid bullying, they fail to recognize how that instruction in itself, is another form of victimization. Not only do school staff fail to act, sometimes they directly participate in gender-based harassment (Kuklin, 2014). An overwhelming number of LGBTQ+ reported overhearing homophobic remarks (52%) and/or negative remarks about gender (66%) from school staff (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Despite the widespread incidence of sexual harassment in schools (Espelage et al., 2016; C. Hill & Kearnl, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2020), schools do not recognize sexual harassment as an issue. One study of nearly 100,000 K-12 schools found that the vast majority (85%) claimed to have *zero* allegations of sexual harassment over the course of one school year (Richards et al., 2021). Although it is possible that these schools were unaware of any sexual harassment, this is highly unlikely as some students do report (C.

Hill & Kearn, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2020), and harassment has been observed happening, without intervention, directly in front of school staff members (Fields, 2008; Pascoe, 2007). It is more likely that schools are failing in their duty to respond as there is an enormous gap between what students and schools report about gender-based harassment.

Gender-based harassment is deeply embedded into the hidden curriculum of the school and needs to be addressed. By failing to respond, cisheteropatriarchy and the gender binary go unquestioned and the consequences are shouldered by students – cisgender and gender complex alike. Parallel to gender-based harassment, youth sexuality is in some ways, aggressively ignored and denied by school administrators, while in other ways, obsessively policed. The next section describes how the hidden curriculum behind youth sexuality intersects with the culture and context of gender in schools.

Youth Sexuality

Feminists have suggested that comprehensive sexual health education could be a way to counter harmful gender norms, reduce violence, and reimagine gender relations (e.g., Brown, 2021; Orenstein, 2017, 2020). In general, educators exhibit high levels of reticence in addressing sex in school (Fields, 2008). However, regardless of whether sex education is integrated into the formal school curriculum, schools impart lessons about (in)appropriate sexuality regularly, often through hidden and evaded curricula (Fields, 2008). This section overviews societal expectations around sexuality and examines how school policies reinforce and/or refute these assumptions.

Societal Expectations and Assumptions. Despite American society consistently and aggressively treating youth sexuality as problematic instead of a natural process of development (Fields, 2008), youth receive a myriad of messages about their sexuality.

Feminist researchers have critiqued the virgin/whore dichotomy faced by cisgender girls (Orenstein, 2011; Raby, 2010; Wade, 2017; Youdell, 2005). In this dichotomy, girls are required to strike an arguably impossible balance between being sexy (but not trashy), sexual (but not overly sexual), and the object of desire (but not desiring) (Youdell, 2005). Transgender girls and women observe that the sexier they dress, the more they are acknowledged as a woman (Kuklin, 2014); thus, staying within the margin for acceptable self-presentation while still being validated as female may be even slimmer. Not only does society impart the virgin/whore dichotomy on youth, female students have internalized this construct and are active participants in policing appropriate sexuality with their peers, reinscribing this moral framework (Raby, 2010; Youdell, 2005).

Many adults center yet another dichotomy for girls: victim/virtuous (Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006; Fields, 2008). In this dichotomy the ideal (white) girl expresses no sexual desire or sexual agency, but is seen as an innocent “princess” in no hurry to grow up (Orenstein, 2011). When young women have engaged in sex, and especially when those sexual encounters result in teen pregnancy, they transform into victims (Bay-Cheng & Lewis, 2006; Fields, 2008; Orenstein, 2020). Indeed, a study in North Carolina found that adults highlighted the issue of “children having children” (p. 47) to argue for the need for comprehensive sex education (Fields, 2008). Through this rhetoric, they recast sexually active adolescents as innocent “children”, removing their sexual agency. Further, without explicitly mentioning race, these debates nonetheless positioned Black female students (who were disproportionately represented as school-aged mothers) as victims of Black males who preyed on their innocence and the incompetent Black mothers who failed to properly protect their daughters (Fields, 2008).

While female students actively negotiate their self-presentation, sexual expression, and sexual encounters to avoid being branded a “whore”, male students accrue social capital and solidify their masculinity when they are dubbed a “male whore” (Pascoe, 2007). Male students are expected to want (impersonal) sex in almost all contexts (E. Brown, 2021; Pascoe, 2007; Wade, 2017). Connected to this expectation are two troubling outcomes. First, when society expects males to always want sex – males can feel pressured to establish themselves as highly sexual. Pascoe (2007) observed that in high school, “sex, thinking about sex, and talking about sex were framed repeatedly as masculine concerns” (p. 90); thus, male students went to great lengths to demonstrate their drive for sex. This social pressure directly contributed to the widespread sexual harassment reported by female students observed at this school (Pascoe, 2007).

Second, this expectation also adversely impacts males directly. Two rape myths connected to this supposedly unquenchably thirst for sex – that men cannot be raped and that if they are, it is pleasurable – creates an environment where male sexual assault is minimized and/or denied (E. Brown, 2021; DeJong et al., 2020). When male students are sexually harassed, assaulted, or raped they often underplay its impact and/or struggle to convince others of the validity of their experience (E. Brown, 2021; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Orenstein, 2020). The expectation that males want/need constant sexual stimulation can adversely impact not only the females who are objectified and harassed, but also males themselves, especially when they are survivors of sexual harassment or assault.

Although society certainly limits the sexual possibilities of cisgender individuals, nevertheless their (hetero)sexuality is acknowledged under cisheteropatriarchy. By contrast, the sexual possibilities of people with complex gender identities are stigmatized

and/or silenced (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Perhaps from a well-intentioned attempt to decouple trans experiences and sex work (which receives outsized attention in the literature), discussion of gender complex youth's sexuality generally is almost completely absent (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). The refusal to acknowledge and discuss the sexual experiences of people with complex gender identities means that gender complex youth and their often cisgender partners are often unprepared to practice and fully enjoy their sexual autonomy (Kuklin, 2014; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018).

There are countless more sexual stereotypes not discussed here, including the assumed promiscuity of gay men and bisexual men and women, the fetishization of lesbian sex, the hyper-sexualization of Black men and Black women, the de-sexualization of Asian men and fetishization of Asian women, societal obsession/disgust at gay male sex, the de-sexualization of people with disabilities – the list goes on (Srinivasan, 2021). When considering the hidden curriculum of the school system related to gender and sex, it is essential to keep these intersectional issues at the forefront. Adopting a critical lens, dissecting how power structures become embedded into our sexual scripts is a key task of feminists and an inroad to reimagining a more equitable society (Srinivasan, 2021).

Student Dress. Hidden messages about youth sexuality appear in formal dress code policies. Deeply embedded adult discomfort with youth sexuality influences the creation of strict dress code policies meant primarily to prevent girls from distracting boys in the classroom (Hethorn & Kaiser, 1999; Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pomerantz, 2007). At times, the rhetoric deployed by schools enlists the ideal of (white) female innocence, using benevolence to explain that dress codes are essential from protecting otherwise virginal girls from the leering eyes of the sex-crazed adolescent boy (Neville-

Shepard, 2019). At other times, dress codes function as a highly effective tool of bodily control, used to discipline female bodies, especially Black female bodies who are perceived as more sexually mature (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017; M. Morris, 2018; Wun, 2016a). The formal policies do not state the explicit goal of maintaining the gender binary in the policy; nonetheless this is the impact.

Research with focus groups in Canada found that female students were aware of the undertones of dress code policies and expressed anger towards the school for curtailing their self-expression and treating them differently from their male peers (Raby, 2010). Despite these critiques, the majority of students reinforced the virgin/whore dichotomy and were highly critical of girls who wore “whorish, slutty, disgusting, disturbing, and wrong” (p. 345) clothing (Raby, 2010). Students parroted the rhetoric of the policies they professed to critique by saying girls were aiming for male attention, needing self-respect, and inviting harassment (Raby, 2010).

In another study on the educational experiences of Black female students in America, participants showed an embodied wisdom of intersectionality and the double standards they faced as Black women hypersexualized by society (M. Morris, 2018). The students explained how they were disciplined not so much for their clothing, but for their bodies (M. Morris, 2018). In contrast to the focus groups in Canada, these participants explained that they were subject to constant harassment regardless of the clothes they adorned, and therefore, would dress how they wanted without apology (M. Morris, 2018).

Cisgender female students are not alone in having their bodies controlled and regulated by dress code policies. Some schools explicitly separate clothing expectations by sex in dress code policies, graduation attire, and school uniforms (Knipp & Stevenson,

2022; Kosciw et al., 2020; E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017; Pascoe, 2007). Even when these gendered regulations are not made explicit, any student (including gender complex students) who dress outside of their presumed sex may be disciplined (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017). Approximately 18% of LGBTQ+ students have been required to change for wearing clothing considered improper for their sex at school (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Even when schools allow students to dress in alignment with their gender identity within gendered policies, the mere existence of these policies reifies the gender binary and spotlights students who do not conform (M. Morris, 2018). Outside of schools, people with complex gender identities are often misread as in costume or playing dress up when navigating the world in clothes deemed incompatible with their presumed gender identity. When misread like this, people with complex gender identities' "personhood is reduced to a prop" (Vaid-Menon, 2020, p. 16). When schools enact gender segregated dress code guidelines, they exacerbate the already present public scrutiny experienced by many people with complex gender identities.

Dress code policies seek not only to quell adult anxieties about youth sexuality through formal declarations of creating a classroom free from distractions or reducing harassment (Hethorn & Kaiser, 1999), they also perpetuate the gender binary (Fields, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2020). As a result, students, especially female students and gender complex individuals, are subject to heightened scrutiny (Aghasaleh, 2018; Knipp & Stevenson, 2022; Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pomerantz, 2007; Raby, 2010) and this scrutiny becomes exacerbated when intersected with race (Aghasaleh, 2018; M. Morris, 2018).

Sexual development is a key part of childhood and adolescence, regardless of whether adults want to admit or acknowledge it (Huberman, 2015). Students of all gender

identities are subject to countless stereotypes and assumptions about their sexuality. School environments can produce and sustain these troubling assumptions: positioning boys as sexually ravenous, girls as both at risk and risky, and complex gender identities as nonexistent. To counter the forced invisibility projected onto gender complex youth, I now make visible distinct considerations for students with complex gender identities.

Spotlight on Youth with Gender Complex Identities

There are some issues in the school system that may be more applicable to gender complex youth than cisgender youth. Specifically, school policies and practices around names¹, (a)pronouns, and facility access. Due to the extreme pervasiveness of transphobia, cultivating safe school environments is a major concern. However, the actions that schools (fail to) take can either alleviate or exacerbate inequality and these actions have measurable and substantial impacts. Although schools may have immense power over the lives of students, youth with complex gender identities also influence the school system, often in ways that instill hope for our collective future.

Names and (a)Pronouns. All youth, but especially youth with complex gender identities may go by names and/or (a)pronouns in school that are not reflected on the official record and/or that do not match the names and pronouns they were assigned at birth (Orr et al., 2016). Empirical research has demonstrated that when youth with complex gender identities are permitted to go by their correct name in more contexts (e.g., home, school, friends), they report less symptoms of depression and suicidality

¹ In this inquiry, I forgo the common modifiers “chosen” name or “preferred” name to avoid suggesting that gender identity is a choice or preference. Instead, names students use (or attempt to use) in everyday life that may or may not match the name assigned at birth are referred to as either names or correct names. Names assigned at birth that are no longer used by students are referred to as deadnames.

(Russell et al., 2018); thus schools have an ethical obligation to support the mental health of students through name recognition. However, 44% of transgender and 36% of nonbinary students report being disallowed from using their correct names and/or pronouns (Kosciw et al., 2020), indicating that name recognition remains an issue.

Model school policy for supporting gender complex youth recommends schools explicitly outline that students *must* be referred to by their correct names and (a)pronouns in verbal and written form (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020). Legally changing official documents can be invasive, expensive, time-intensive, and requires a strong understanding of state policy (Miller, 2019). Therefore, schools should not add needless barriers to students by requiring internal recordkeeping systems match official documents and instead, schools should record correct names on internal paperwork and place legally required documents with deadnames (e.g., birth certificate) in a separate file to avoid incidental disclosures (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016). Schools should be proactive in avoiding incidental deadnaming, such as during state standardized testing (Orr et al., 2016).

Schools must collaborate with students to discuss the extent that a gender complex student is “out” in school, at home, and in the community and plan accordingly. Students should be given the option of using a different name in public versus private contexts or in the school versus at home (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Miller, 2019; Orr et al., 2016). Schools have no obligation to inform the entire school staff, classmates, and/or parents/guardians of a student’s stated gender identity and indeed, this information should be guarded as private health information (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016).

Sharing pronouns is often described as a way to support people with complex gender identities (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016; Wofford, 2017). However, this practice has also been troubled (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017, 2018). In a “Rainbow Group” in a New Zealand school, some gender complex youth emphasized the value of this practice in validating their gender identity. However, others who were not yet “out” reported heightened anxiety during this sharing and some with fluid gender identities felt unseen. Cisgender students were most often the initiators of pronoun sharing and appeared “to relish the opportunity to celebrate their congruent sex/gender categories” (p. 246), subtly reinforcing another gender hierarchy (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

In practice, students may identify with a wide range of pronouns. Most commonly, students use some configuration or combination of he/his/him, she/her/hers, or they/them/theirs. However, a wide range of pronouns exists beyond this triad (e.g., ze/zir/zirs; hir/hir/hirs), with, at minimum, over 50 unique pronoun combinations identified to date (Miller, 2019). At times, cisgender people have expressed discomfort with the usage of they/them as grammatically incorrect; however, this has been explained by activists as merely a veiled act of control invested in sustaining the status quo and dismissing people with complex gender identities (Vaid-Menon, 2020).

Pronoun usage is not static, with some students changing pronouns as they reflect more on their gender identity and/or transition and others changing pronouns by the day or even the hour – based on their mood or to undermine static categorizations (Kuklin, 2014; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Miller, 2019). Some people use more than one set of pronouns (e.g., she/her/hers and they/their/theirs) and others may be (a)pronounced,

meaning they use no pronouns and instead go by their name alone (Miller, 2019). Some gender complex youth may use different pronouns in different contexts (Kuklin, 2014). As with gender identity, pronouns can be more complex than many assume.

Although pronoun usage may be complicated, this does not excuse schools of their duty to respect student pronoun use. Scholars have suggested ways to manage these contradictions including asking for *current* pronouns, eliciting (privately) how students want to be referred to in diverse contexts, and making pronoun sharing optional (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017, 2018; Miller, 2019). Further, it is essential that schools write explicit policies that recognizes and protects the usage of names and (a)pronouns as a way to prevent discrimination (Kosciw et al., 2020). While policies are not always followed, policy itself can have real consequences as students with complex gender identities who attended schools without a policy were more than twice as likely to experience being disallowed from using their name and pronoun (44%) compared to those with a policy (18%) (Kosciw et al., 2020). Schools must enact school policies that make space for students to share and be addressed by their name and pronouns.

Gender Identity and Access. Navigating and accessing single-sex facilities is another key issue for gender complex youth. Advocates universally recommend that students should be permitted to access and use single-sex facilities (e.g., bathrooms, locker rooms) in accordance with their gender identity (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017; GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Miller, 2019; Orr et al., 2016). Further, gender-neutral spaces and/or privacy accommodations should be available to any student (regardless of gender identity) who wants them (Gilbert et al., 2018; Orr et al., 2016). Schools should not place any additional barriers on students to

“prove” their need to use a particular facility by requiring invasive documents or letters verifying their gender identity (Orr et al., 2016). School staff should not demand or require a student to use a gender-neutral space, but instead let students determine for themselves which facilities to use (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016). Advocates further recommend that schools consider adapting an “open restroom plan” (p. 9), where all stalls are fully closed and private, during future construction and/or renovation (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020). These designs provide increased privacy and accessibility to students while also efficiently using space, providing a more comfortable experience for all students (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020). Though these best practices have been available for years, many schools have not integrated these practices.

Students generally are not allowed to use facilities compatible with their gender identity. More than half of transgender students (58%) and a third of nonbinary students (35%) have been denied access to a bathroom at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). Locker room access follows suit, with 55% of transgender students and 32% of nonbinary students also reporting being denied admission (Kosciw et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ students broadly have identified that gender-neutral spaces in schools are either nonexistent and/or impractical to use within the allotted passing period time (Gilbert et al., 2018).

Given this context, it is unsurprising that locker room avoidance is prevalent among transgender (69%) and nonbinary (45%) youth. Further, bathrooms may be more fraught as 82% of transgender youth and 59% of nonbinary youth report avoiding these spaces (Kosciw et al., 2020). This avoidance can have serious health impacts on students,

who have acquired urinary tract infections as a result of delaying and/or avoiding bathroom use at school (*G. G. v. Gloucester County School Board*, 2016; Miller, 2019).

Although the school system often reproduces cisheteropatriarchy and denies students with complex gender identities such basic rights as being called by their name, there is also space for hope. Fortunately, many schools can and do provide appropriate facility access for students without incident (Orr et al., 2016). Writing policies to permit students to use facilities in alignment with their gender identity is a relatively low-effort, low-cost intervention that makes a real difference. Further, student's themselves can also transform the culture of the school through their actions.

Summary

In sum, the theoretical foundation of this research is committed to a critique of power and an examination of oppression in society. Critical social work theory has equipped researchers with a dual focus on the connection between the micro-level and macro-level, but its focus on oppression in general terms has neglected to capture the complexities and intersections of specific social structures. Intersectional feminists have avoided generalities by troubling the notion of universality and reflecting on how gender, race, sexuality, and other social identities intersect. However, at times intersectional research has failed to undermine the gender binary in praxis. Queer and transgender theorists have unabashedly questioned the process of social stratification created by the gender binary, yet at times has devalued some lived experiences.

Through the lens of these theories, it becomes apparent that how TIX is interpreted and enforced is a highly charged political issue, particularly related to sexual harassment and gender identity (Busch & Thro, 2018; Melnick, 2018). This, paired with

the low rate of compliance in schools (Grant et al., 2019; Lichty et al., 2008; Richards et al., 2021), means that TIX is unlikely to resolve gender inequity in school (Stromquist, 2013). Nonetheless, TIX has direct and lasting impacts on students and a strong understanding of the current potentialities and limitations is necessary.

Just as TIX both challenges and maintains gender inequality, schools do the same through the contradictory lessons of the formal, hidden, and evaded curricula. Prior research on gender and schools is complex, as issues related to hegemonic masculinity, gender-based harassment, youth sexuality, and youth with complex gender identities do not lend themselves to simple answers. Building on this uncertainty, I now discuss how this research uses critical ethnography to embrace these contradictions and build a more holistic, yet incomplete, understanding of the culture and context of gender in school.

Chapter III

Methods

In this chapter, I introduce the methodology and research approach. After, an overview of the study site situates the research within its sociopolitical context. The specific procedures used in the study, including sampling and recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and data reporting are then described in detail. Finally, I end with an assessment of the study rigor and ethical considerations.

Research Approach

Describing the culture and context of gender in New Orleans schools necessitated centering stories, prioritizing complexity, dissecting contextual information, and attention to power, all major goals of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017); thus qualitative methods were appropriate. Conducting credible research requires acknowledging the key philosophical assumptions underlying the research approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Holmes, 2020). Broadly, qualitative research relies on the assumptions that multiple realities exist (ontology), these realities are subjective and shaped by individual experiences (epistemology), and research can never be purely objective or free of values (axiology) (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Further, the theoretical frameworks undergirding this project further assume that power shapes reality (ontology), studying power is a way to uncover reality (epistemology) and people are positioned within power structures which must be interrogated (axiology). Rather than claim objectivity, I assumed from the

outset that issues of oppression, equity, and justice would permeate the research and unapologetically aimed to disrupt the status quo and imagine a more equitable future.

Critical Ethnography

Methodologically, this project is a critical ethnography. While ethnography is “the work of describing a culture” (Spradley, 1979, p. 3), critical ethnography “examines cultural systems of power, prestige, privilege, and authority in society” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 319). Culture is understood not by itself, but within the context of power.

Critical ethnography is a well-established approach to qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and has been used in a variety of studies, including in the school setting (see Carspecken, 1996) and in examinations of sex/gender/sexuality (see Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). Some of the earliest credited critical ethnographies focus on the gender in school, including *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1978) and *Working Class Girls and the Culture of Femininity* (McRobbie, 1978), which both focused on the school experiences of working class youth in England. More recent school critical ethnographies have commonly focused on youth sexuality/sexual health education (Fields, 2008; Leahy & Gray, 2014; Quinlivan, 2012, 2013) and/or LGBTQ+ youth (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017, 2018; Quinlivan, 2012, 2013; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018).

Social work researchers have also used critical ethnography and have grappled with how to apply this research approach ethically as a social work researcher (Burnette, 2015; Burnette et al., 2014; Hagues, 2017, 2021; Haight et al., 2014). Hagues (2021) argued that ethnography could be “an appealing method for social workers because the motives are to bring helpful change to participants’ lives – a change *they* would like to see” (p. 438). As social workers often work with historically oppressed and/or

marginalized communities, additional considerations are necessary to minimize the risk of harm (Burnette, 2015; Burnette et al., 2014; Hagues, 2021; Haight et al., 2014). Social workers have suggested multiple strategies for conducting ethical critical ethnographies, including practicing critical reflexivity, acknowledging community strengths, spending extended time in the field, collaborating with social workers and other cultural insiders within the local context, and spending extra time orienting participants to the research process (Burnette et al., 2014; Hagues, 2021; Haight et al., 2014).

With ethnography broadly and with critical ethnography specifically, there remains an ongoing tension in whether to standardize research procedures as a way to legitimize ethnography. Research protocol standardization relies on the positivist assumptions of quantitative research and in many ways undermines the philosophical assumptions of qualitative research itself (Carspecken, 1996; Fitzpatrick & May, 2022; Spradley, 1979). Instead, some scholars have conceived of critical ethnography not as a specific method, but as a “a tight methodological theory” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3) or “sequenced tasks” (Spradley, 1979, p. iv). Despite the careful wording, these guides are still largely prescriptive, although, no doubt helpful tools for socializing new researchers.

Critical ethnography “does not need to be bound by specific methods” (p. 13) and processes can arise organically (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). As a novice researcher, my lack of experience indicated the need for a more structured approach and therefore, I followed the first three stages to critical ethnography outlined by Carspecken (1996). However, in an attempt to be responsive, I followed the protocol with flexibility. Further, I situated my research within broader tenets offered by Fitzpatrick and May (2022), as these neither demanded rigid adherence to a specific method nor demanded resistance to

useful techniques on principle. Thus, Carspecken's (1996) stages were applied in the data collection and analysis stages of research (see Appendix D, Table D1) while Fitzpatrick and May's (2022) tenets were incorporated broadly (see Appendix E, Table E1).

Institutional Ethnography

The methodology of institutional ethnography examines how institutions shape everyday behavior (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith & Griffith, 2022). In institutional ethnography, people are central to inquiry and ethnographers are ethically obligated to consider social relations from the perspective of those under the power and control of the institution. Analysis is ultimately focused on analyzing institutions, not individual people (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith & Griffith, 2022). In this study, I invoked institutional ethnography by authentically representing the stories of students while also focusing analysis on how the culture and context of gender in the *institution* of the New Orleans public charter school system mediated these experiences.

In addition, institutional ethnography unpacks the centrality of the written word in organizing people's everyday lives and perpetuating unequal social relations (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith & Griffith, 2022). Texts are understood as reflective of power relations and through "textually mediated social organization" (p. 29) people rely on the written word to justify their actions and as a result, reproduce these texts as valid (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2004). However, texts also serve unacknowledged purposes, such as perpetuating the needs of the institution, and these purposes need to be illuminated (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith & Griffith, 2022). Therefore, in this study, evaluating the way texts sustain and produce power relations was a central goal.

Role of the Researcher

My theoretical commitments in this research required a thoughtful engagement with my own position in the world. As the underlying theories of this study are rooted in the ontological assumption that power shapes reality, my own experiences with privilege and oppression are relevant (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Further, intersectional feminists have suggested that a researcher's imperative to locate themselves within systems of privilege is not only a matter of ontology, but also a matter of ethics (Rice et al., 2019). Inclusion of meaningful reflexivity is an evaluative criteria of high-quality qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and one of the nine key tenets of critical ethnography (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). Critical ethnographers must be cautious that reflexivity does not become a shallow, self-serving confession disconnected from power structures; instead, the practice of *critical* reflexivity is the goal (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022).

Reflexivity requires researchers to “acknowledge and disclose their selves in their research, seeking to understand their part in it, or influence on it” (Holmes, 2020, p. 2). Critical reflexivity grounds this self-examination in structures (e.g., racism, sexism, transphobia) and examines how the researcher's embeddedness within these institutions influences research. Critically reflexive practice “can be disconcerting, and it is always partial and messy” (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022, p. 26). Indeed, what follows is a messy and incomplete examination of my own positionality focused at the structural level.

I first became interested in studying gender due to my own lived experiences with sexism as a cisgender woman in a patriarchal context. As a young adult, I was drawn into anti-rape work as an inroad into processing (or perhaps combatting) this oppression, and in this work my understanding and identity as a feminist emerged. However, as a white

woman, lifelong immersion in the system of whiteness initially rendered me unaware of how my racialized privilege intersected with my identity as a cisgender woman. My formative years as a feminist were deeply rooted in uncritical white feminist thought and by extension, unacknowledged white supremacist thinking. Although no longer as complicit in the system of whiteness, I still have many unconscious racial biases.

In addition to the privilege granted by my race, I experience heterosexual and cisgender privilege. Despite my epistemological commitment to queer and transgender theories, I retain my privilege, yet I am able to benefit from the rich knowledge base created in these traditions, largely thanks to the activists and scholars most oppressed under cisheteropatriarchy (Alim et al., 2020; Bupara, 2019). Scholars have problematized that the majority of research on gender complex identities has been written by cisgender researchers (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010; Radi, 2019). However, excluding students with complex gender identities from a study on gender and schools would only maintain the status quo of cisheteropatriarchy so instead, I imperfectly aimed to represent the views of a marginalized group without experiencing this marginalization myself.

Finally, the privilege afforded by my legal status as an adult must also be examined. While my study sought to “give voice” to youth, this purpose fails to upend the underlying assumption that adults have the power to give a “gift” as fundamental as a voice in the first place. Research with youth invokes a tension between needing to protect young people (paternalism) and regarding them as autonomous despite their minor status (empowerment) (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Although many steps were taken to reduce the power imbalance between the researcher and youth in this project (see Appendix F,

Table F1), these steps did not fully undo the impact of the age privilege I experience as an adult and my analysis undoubtedly reflects youth stories through my adult lens.

Within these limitations, I made an intentional effort to identify and challenge the implicit biases stemming from my many privileges. The unexamined assumptions that accompany these privileges can never be fully resolved (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022; Holmes, 2020; Lin, 2015) and monitoring the influence and impact of my own internalized superiority was essential to this project. My theoretical commitments were indeed helpful, but nonetheless could not fully undo these shortcomings.

By engaging in this practice of critical reflexivity, I attempt to contextualize this research. Examining my privilege proactively helped to uncover structural inequality within my own analysis and my transparency in my own shortcomings aims to increase my accountability to those who read my work. While this reflexive practice often results in discomfort, it is worthwhile as it builds coalitions and undermines the status quo (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022; Rice et al., 2019). Critical reflexivity was ongoing throughout my research, including through reflection (field journaling), ongoing consultation, and engagement with my Community Advisory Board (CAB) (see Appendix G, Table G1). Equipped with this contextualization, attention now turns to the study procedures.

Sampling and Recruitment

This study included 26 participants from two unique participant groups: students ($n=18$) and professionals ($n=8$). To be eligible for the study, participants had to speak English and currently or recently (within the last four months) be enrolled or employed in a public charter school in Orleans Parish. Student participants also had to be at least 10-years-old. These criteria were established to target the students and professionals most

embedded in the study site at the time of the study and most able to directly communicate their experiences to the researcher (e.g., the limitations on age and language).

Additionally, students were required to have parental permission from both their legal guardians to participate, as the Tulane University Institutional Review Board (IRB) deemed this study higher than minimal risk. For students who did not have a second legal guardian or for whom obtaining parental consent from the second legal guardian was unreasonable (e.g., the parent was incarcerated), parental permission from one legal guardian was permitted.

Recruitment began in November of 2022 through multiple methods. Using convenience sampling, I recruited through word of mouth, starting with personal and professional contacts, eventually yielding twelve participants (46.15%). In addition, I partnered with six local, youth-serving organizations to distribute fliers (Appendix H) and brochures (Appendix I). With some organizations, I spoke directly to youth about the study and for others, I advertised in their organizational newsletter. Still others directly referred families they believed were most likely to participate. Nine participants (34.62%) were recruited through community organization contacts. Potential professional participants were also contacted through email. These contacts were based on participant referral and/or expertise (e.g., designated TIX coordinators). Fifty-five professionals were contacted through this method, accounting for four of the total participants (15.38%).

Some recruitment efforts were largely unsuccessful. Throughout the study, efforts to recruit through snowball sampling were also undertaken, but ultimately only yielded one participant (3.85%). Further, at several points in the study, I advertised in online spaces, including social media; however, this yielded no participants. While no interested

participants were turned away from the study who met eligibility criteria, purposive recruitment techniques were used in an attempt to increase the diversity of the sample in relation to gender identity, race/ethnicity, age, and school attended. The distribution of study participants across various recruitment sources is included in Appendix J, Table J1.

Participant Demographics

The study included 26 participants, consisting of student participants ($n=18$, 69.23%) and school professional participants ($n=8$, 30.77%). All participant demographic information was collected using open-ended questions on an intake form (e.g., what is your current gender identity?) and/or information voluntarily shared as part of the interview process. Appendix K, Tables K1 and K2 summarizes the participant demographics for student and school professional participants, respectively.

Although not evenly distributed, there was diversity in participant gender identity, especially with students. Half of the student participants identified as female ($n=9$, 50.00%), with the remaining identifying as male ($n=7$, 38.89%) and/or nonbinary/bigender ($n=3$, 16.67%). One participant identified as both female and nonbinary, hence the total number of gender identities exceeds the number of student participants. The majority of student participants identified as cisgender ($n=14$, 77.78%) with the remainder identifying under the transgender umbrella ($n=4$, 22.22%), including the specific gender identities of transman ($n=1$), bigender ($n=1$), nonbinary ($n=1$), and nonbinary and female ($n=1$). There was less gender diversity with the professional participants, with the vast majority identifying as cisgender female ($n=6$, 75.00%). A cisgender male ($n=1$, 12.50%) and nonbinary participant ($n=1$, 12.50%) also participated.

Half of the total participants ($n=13$, 50.00%) fell under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, related to their sexuality, gender identity, or both. Due to limitations set during the IRB approval process, I was unable to ask students directly about their sexuality and thus, student representation may be higher. However, some students ($n=4$, 22.22%) disclosed, without prompting, that they identified as a minority sexual orientation (e.g., bisexual, pansexual), inclusive of three cisgender youth. The student participant sample included seven students (38.89%) who identified as queer, related to their sexuality ($n=3$), gender identity ($n=3$), or both ($n=1$). By contrast, school professionals were asked as part of the intake process if they identified as LGBTQ+ and the majority did ($n=6$, 75%.00).

Half of the student participants ($n=9$, 50.00%) and the majority of school professional participants ($n=6$, 75.00%) described their race/ethnicity as white only. More than one quarter of student participants ($n=5$, 27.78%) identified as more than one race/ethnicity, as did one school professional ($n=1$, 12.50%). Those who described themselves as more than one race/ethnicity included: Black/Hispanic or Latinx ($n=2$), Black/White/Native American ($n=1$), Black/Native American ($n=1$), Arabic/White ($n=1$), and Cuban/White ($n=1$). Just under one quarter of student participants ($n=4$, 22.22%) identified as Black/African American only, as did one school professional ($n=1$, 12.50%).

Student participant ages ranged from 10-18, with an average of 13.89 years ($SD=2.47$). For consistency, grade-level during the 2022-2023 school year was recorded (even for those interviewed over the summer). Student participants were relatively equally distributed across grade-levels, including 4th through 6th ($n=4$, 22.22%), 7th and 8th ($n=5$, 27.78%), 9th and 10th ($n=5$, 27.78%), and 11th and 12th ($n=4$, 22.22%). School professional participants mostly worked in elementary and/or middle schools at the time

of their interview ($n=5$, 62.50%), but several worked in high schools ($n=3$, 37.50%). Most of the school professional participants were teachers ($n=5$, 62.50%) and on average, school professionals had worked in the school system for 11.38 years ($SD=8.83$), but experience ranged from two to 27 years.

Study Site

Carspecken (1996) described a key task for a critical ethnography as establishing the setting for research, specifically the site, locale, and social system. *Sites* are where the research participants interact and where the research itself occurs (Carspecken, 1996). My study site originally included all public charter schools in New Orleans ($n=79$); however, this was eventually reduced to 17 focal schools based on the information gathered in participant interviews. Further, the site was not limited to the geographic spaces the schools encompassed, but also incorporated digital spaces (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022), such as the vast network of publicly available information on school websites.

Charter School Movement

The *locale*, or the area surrounding and influencing the site (Carspecken, 1996), was the post-Hurricane Katrina educational landscape of New Orleans and a particularly relevant *social system*, or societal influence on the site (Carspecken, 1996), was the national charter school movement. In the months after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, government actors and private interests engaged in many rapid actions that ultimately resulted in the dismissal of over 7,500 teachers and staff in New Orleans schools, the transition of over 100 schools into the Recovery School District (a state-run district for failing schools), and intensive funding into charter schools to replace the failing schools (Buras & Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, 2013). As an end result, New

Orleans now boasts “the highest proportion of charter schools in the nation” (Buras & Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, 2013, p. 130). Today, the New Orleans public school system is a broad, dynamic collection of charter schools (independent schools governed by private, autonomous school boards) where students and their families rank their preferences for school enrollment.

Unsurprisingly, this decentralization and privatization of the public school system has provoked a range of responses reaching both ends of the spectrum. In one extreme, the New Orleans landscape is praised as a model worthy of replication (Osborne, 2012) and in the other, a prime example of predatory “disaster capitalism” (Klein, 2010). In this market choice system, the school landscape is almost always in flux as schools close and re-open under new charter management organizations (CMOs) (Buras & Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, 2013). These constant changes paired with the sometimes drastically different approaches to daily operations, policies, and education philosophies between schools creates real barriers for families dedicated to staying informed and involved in their child’s education (Finn et al., 2017; S. L. Goff, 2009).

The boundaries of the study site were set in such broad terms to mimic the vast educational landscape New Orleans families are expected to understand and navigate. In this market landscape, students do not necessarily attend their neighborhood school for the entirety of their educational career, as one might in a traditional public school district. Instead, the choice system gives the student body a much higher potential for movement: students can switch schools without cause at the start of each new school year, an individual family can send their children to vastly contrasting schools run by different CMOs, and schools can stay in the same building under the same name, but come under

new management in the course of a year. Thus, this contradictory terrain deserved attention and likely resulted in more nuanced insights on the New Orleans public school experience than a study limited to only one or two schools could provide.

Don't Say LGBTQ+

The rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation nationally and at the state-level, including “Don't Say LGBTQ+” bills was a second major relevant social system to the study site. In May of 2023, the Human Rights Campaign estimated that over 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills had been introduced nationwide, with nearly 70 relating to school curriculum in the first five months of the year (Peele, 2023). Louisiana was among this number, with two bills proposed and nearly enacted into law (Given Name Act, 2023; H.B. 466, 2023).

One of these bills, the Given Name Act, would have required signed parental permission to refer to students by names and pronouns not listed on their birth certificates while also permitting school staff to disregard student names and pronouns even after parental permission was given if it was “contrary to the employee’s religious or moral convictions” (Given Name Act, 2023). Put another way, schools would be required to misgender students unless parents gave signed permission and even with this permission, school staff would not be required to correctly gender students.

The other bill, House Bill 466, echoed these same regulations, but went even further also prohibiting K-12 schools from “covering the topics of sexual orientation or gender identity in any classroom discussion or instruction in a manner that deviates from state content standards or curricula developed or approved by public school governing authorities” (H.B. 466, 2023). Moreover, educators would be further prohibited from “discussing his own sexual orientation or gender identity” (H.B. 466, 2023). Following

the letter of the law, this ban would technically extend to discussions of heterosexuality and/or cisgender peoples; however, as cisheteropatriarchy renders dominant sexualities and gender identities invisible (Alim et al., 2020; Bupara, 2019), this law was certainly meant to target LGBTQ+ content and educators specifically.

Both bills were proposed in March of 2023, passed the house and senate over the summer, and were ultimately vetoed by former Governor John Bel Edwards in July of 2023 (Given Name Act, 2023; H.B. 466, 2023). Despite evading enactment in 2023, new versions of the bills were proposed in February of 2024 (Given Name Act, 2024; H.B. 122, 2024) and are expected to pass under the newly elected Governor Jeff Landry (Wall, 2024). Half of the participants ($n=13$, 50.00%) were interviewed between the initial proposal and eventual veto of the 2023 bills and awareness of the Louisiana bills as well as similar versions in nearby states permeated the interviews, even those occurring outside of this window of time. Thus, the onslaught of anti-LGBTQ+ bills directed at schools and educators had a major influence on the study site. This inquiry now transitions to the specific research procedures related to data collection and analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

In contrast to quantitative methods, data collection and data analysis can and often should occur in conjunction (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Fitzpatrick & May, 2022; Spradley, 1979). This section describes the processes of data collection and data analysis together. Carspecken's (1996) first three stages of critical ethnography guided the research process and each stage is discussed individually.

Stage One: Compiling the Primary Record

Carspecken (1996) outlined the first stage of critical ethnography as *compiling the primary record* through “the perspective of an uninvolved observer” (p. 42). In this stage, the researcher attempts to obtain a purely outsider perspective, often through observation. As this inquiry’s unit of analysis was the school system as an institution, observations were limited to events and content influencing the school system broadly as opposed to observations of student behavior. Five total observations occurred. Two observations took place at public meetings and the remaining three involved extensive participant observation of social media content referenced during student interviews. Notes were taken during the observations in short form (jottings) and later expanded upon in more detailed form. These notes were a component of the primary record.

The bulk of the primary record, however, came from an in-depth analysis of the public record through document analysis. Using a similar process from an earlier content analysis of policies in New Orleans charter schools (Knipp & Stevenson, 2022), I systematically collected and analyzed school documents using the following steps:

1. Collected student/family handbook(s), TIX policies/documents, dress code documents, and screenshots from each school website.
2. Consolidated the 2021-2022 Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) demographic, performance, and funding information.
3. Collected miscellaneous documents or records that pertained directly to gender and schools locally, including news stories.

Throughout the primary data collection period, a thorough audit trail was maintained to record when and how each document was gathered.

Stage Two: Preliminary Reconstructive Analysis

In the next stage, an open-ended, iterative data analysis of the observation notes and school documents was undertaken following a process called *preliminary reconstructive analysis*. This analysis sought to identify “those cultural themes and system factors that are not observable and usually unarticulated” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 42). This involved using *initial meaning reconstruction* to identify low-inference meanings, sticking closely to the words used and avoiding abstraction (Carspecken, 1996). *Pragmatic horizon analysis* or the process of gathering “holistic impressions of meaning” (p. 103) was also used to identify the foregrounded meaning (surface meaning) and possible backgrounded meanings (implied assumptions) (Carspecken, 1996).

Further, I examined these foregrounded and backgrounded claims as either objective, subjective, or normative-evaluative. Carspecken (1996) defined objective statements as “the world” (p. 65) or statements most people agree are true; subjective statements as “‘my’, ‘her,’ ‘your’ world” (p. 70) or statements that come from one point of view (opinions, feelings); and normative-evaluative statements as “our world” or statements implying what *should be* considered “proper, appropriate, and conventional” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 83). Backgrounded, subjective, and normative-evaluative truth claims involved a higher level of inference than foregrounded and objective claims, and were written tentatively, as hypotheses and potential meanings.

Given the highly detailed and time-consuming nature of preliminary reconstruction analysis, the full practice was reserved for only the most meaningful excerpts of primary data. Appendix L, Table L1 includes a detailed excerpt of text analyzed using pragmatic horizon analysis from a field journal written after an

observation of an open-house for a school marketed towards male students. In addition to the formal, line-by-line analysis of selected excerpts, the practice of uncovering tentative truth claims continued less formally throughout the entirety of the project.

Stage Three: Dialogical Data Generation

In stage three, *dialogical data generation*, data is generated from interviews with participants and analyzed against the primary record and initial data reconstructions, resulting in a deeper understanding of the culture (Carspecken, 1996). Individual and group interviews with students and professionals in New Orleans public charter schools provided the data for this stage. Although students were the primary participants, the professional perspective helped build a holistic picture for analysis. Other critical ethnographers have included interviews with both the focal group (in this case, students) and the professionals who work closely with them (see Burnette, 2015; Quinlivan, 2013) and the inclusion of the worker perspective within an institution is recommended in institutional ethnography (M. Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith & Griffith, 2022).

The student interview guide was designed to align to age-appropriate guidelines for interviewing children, including using developmentally appropriate language and incorporating creative participation outlets (e.g., drawing) (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Further, following guidance from Carspecken (1996), three to five topic domains were developed, starting with a “lead-off” question to “open up a topic domain” (p. 154) and then creating a list of possible follow-up questions. The majority of interview questions were *descriptive* questions in that they provide participants with “a frame and canvas” to describe their experiences (Spradley, 1979, p. 85), such as *Pretend I am a new student at the school. Tell me about everything I need to know about your school.*

At this stage, interviews and analysis occurred iteratively, as is common in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017), earlier interviews informed later interviews, and the semi-structured interview guides evolved over time. For instance, when I observed that many students used the school cafeteria to describe the social scene of their school (e.g., popular kids sit here), I often asked students to describe or sketch out their cafeteria space explicitly. The field journal was a primary tool used to process this emerging data and after every interview, I listened back to the interview recording in full and wrote a field journal note detailing my impressions. This note included contextual information, feelings, perceptions, and notes on tentative themes and patterns to explore in future interviews. This field journal entry was another form of data that was analyzed.

All in-person interviews ($n=33$) took place in private locations. Participants were allowed to preference their preferred location for the interview and many student participants elected to meet in-person ($n=10$). Other students and all professional participants participated via video-conferencing hosted on Tulane University's Zoom account ($n=21$). All participants received a \$20 gift card to Wal-Mart or Amazon for their participation, although one participant declined the gift card. Interviews were audio-recorded (in-person) and/or video-recorded (online). Interviews were transcribed without identifying information and then deleted. In total, 33 interviews were conducted, totaling over 40 hours of recorded interview data. Interviews averaged 72 minutes in length. Initial individual interviews ranged from 38 minutes to 125 minutes. Ten students participated in more than one interview, with four participating in two individual interviews and the remaining six participating in one group and one individual interview.

Individual interviews were designed to be descriptive and meant to uncover as many lines of inquiry as possible; therefore, the interview guides were broad. The professional interviews contained slightly more directed questions than the student interviews and professionals who were also TIX coordinators were asked additional questions regarding their roles specifically. Appendices M and N lists the main questions from the individual interview guides for student and professional interviews, respectively.

In the proposal for this project, I specified that group student interviews would be separated by age and gender identity so participants could find common ground in their experiences. Unfortunately, given the wide differences in ages and gender identity between students who identified under the transgender umbrella, I was unable to create a group that would have authentically honored the gender experiences of students, as it would be inappropriate to partner a transman with a nonbinary student, for example. Some cisgender students were also unable to participate in a group due to gaps in ages. All other students were invited to participate in a group interview.

In group, students were directed to participate in a drawing activity and guided reflection to artistically depict their gendered experiences in schools. This activity was designed to create an outlet for all student voices to contribute and then create an inroad for participants to build on the ideas presented by their peers. However, interest in this activity was limited, with some participants opting out and others expressing uneasiness with the medium of expression. Due to the low participation, this data was excluded.

Second, I shared tentative themes specific to the experiences of the gender identity of the group and asked group participants to respond. Thus, the group interviews generated new data and served as a member check. This form of member check was

appropriate for the setting, as the adult-student power dynamic was partially offset by the collective power students may have felt being surrounded by their peers (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Appendix O summarizes the main activities from the group interview.

All recorded interviews were listened to at least twice and the written transcripts were read many times as a strategy of data immersion. Reflective and detailed journals were written after every interview. In addition to using pragmatic horizon analysis on select samples of text, all interview transcripts were coded line-by-line using NVivo, ultimately resulting in 18 major themes and 247 subthemes. See Appendix P, Table P1 for a list of the 18 major themes and their associated number of references.

Creating School Profiles

Although the study site initially encompassed all 79 public charter schools in Orleans Parish, as the study went on, it became essential to focus on the schools that were most relevant to the dialogical data generation stage, or student and professional interviews. The 26 participants were currently affiliated with 14 distinct schools and several participants had previously been affiliated with another school within the study parameters. In a few cases, participants shared extensively about their prior affiliations, and therefore, it was essential to include these schools as well. Combining current affiliations with retrospective accounts yielded a sample of 17 distinct schools. Each school was assigned a pseudonym (Schools A-Q). Appendix Q1, Table Q1 depicts how many participants were associated with each school.

Variables related to the school structure, performance, and offerings were compiled for each focal school. Using school documents, I noted the grades served and school governance structure. In addition, using LDOE data, I included information on

school performance, suspension rate, and student demographics. All numerical variables were recoded into categorical variables to protect the identity of the school and facilitate comparison. See Appendix R, Table R1 for a side-by-side comparison of these variables.

Title IX and Dress Code Policies

Given the relevance of TIX to the present inquiry, it was important to compare TIX policies across schools. As a way to synthesize and compare this information, I iteratively created a coding guide measuring items in four distinct subcategories: nondiscrimination protections, TIX coordinator information, grievance procedures, and training. All but one item was scored using publicly available school documents including, but not limited to, school handbooks, school websites, and/or TIX policies. The remaining item was scored based on phone call inquiries made directly to each school asking for the name and contact information for the designated TIX coordinator. Each school was rated as very low, low, moderate, or high robustness of TIX information. Appendix S includes the full codebook and scoring guide.

Dress code was identified as a major issue relating to gender in nearly all the student interviews, warranting a deeper look into the policy content. As a way to synthesize and compare these policies, policy information was converted into three distinct variables: policy type (i.e., uniform or no uniform), gender regulation (i.e., gender-neutral or gendered), and level of regulation. The level of regulation variable was rated as either low, moderate, or high, using an iteratively created coding guide measuring items such as clothing regulations, limitations on visibility of body parts, and non-clothing regulations. See Appendix T for the full codebook and scoring guide.

Reporting the Data

After data collection ceased, ongoing data analysis continued using many of the techniques described in stage two, and also transitioned into writing the report. Writing is a form of dialogue with the reader and thus, another form of data analysis (Smith & Griffith, 2022). In the write-up, it was imperative to refrain from turning deep and nuanced data into neat categories and over-simplifying complex findings. Further, it was essential to identify the many inroads that were not traveled and the implications of the directions (not) taken (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). Critical reflexivity was practiced through field journaling and consultation throughout this stage.

Research findings were also shared with the participants. First, as a member check, I summarized study results into a brief report including anonymized example quotes (see Appendix U). This information was emailed to all participants and/or their caregivers in February 2024 in draft form. For youth participants who shared their personal email addresses, results were also sent directly. Participants were given two weeks to respond with feedback. All participants were reached and no changes were suggested. A finalized summary was sent to participants in March 2024.

A list of implications based on study findings was developed and shared with study participants, community partners, and other interested stakeholders (see Appendix V). Participants and community partners were given the option to receive a copy of the completed dissertation and/or any subsequent publications on the research. Study findings will continue to be distributed through public avenues including through peer-reviewed journal articles and conference presentations.

Rigor and Ethics

Although qualitative researchers challenge assertions that research can ever truly be valid, objective, and/or generalizable (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022), nonetheless practices were implemented to increase study rigor. Carspecken (1996) detailed criterion for increasing rigor in critical ethnography. Some strategies can be implemented through all stages of research (e.g., peer debriefing) while others are limited to specific stages (e.g., negative case analysis) (Carspecken, 1996). See Appendix W, Table W1 for how Carspecken's criteria was implemented throughout various stages of this study.

As with all research, this study had many ethical issues to consider. In the United States, children are considered a vulnerable research population and research with children is subject to additional scrutiny from IRBs (Subpart D — Additional Protections for Children Involved as Subjects in Research, 2021). Some scholars suggest that this additional scrutiny is paternalistic and in conflict with the aims of child-centered research (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Nevertheless, this study gained IRB approval from Tulane University (Study # 2022-1500). However, this IRB approval did not fully address the myriad of ethical considerations researchers working with children must consider.

The vast disparity in power and privilege between adult researchers and child participants requires specific attention. O'Reilly and Dogra (2017) suggest that it may be difficult for children to advocate for themselves in an interview setting. Researchers who interview children should role-play important self-advocacy skills prior to the start of an interview, such as asking for a break (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). As an introduction to my own student interviews, students practiced these self-advocacy skills (See Appendix X).

Attending to student distress was another ethical concern. Aware of my legal mandates to report suspicions of child abuse and ethical mandates to connect students with supportive services if they experienced suicidal ideation or intent, I wrote in extensive explanations of the limits to confidentiality within my interview guides and consent forms. No mandated reports were necessary over the course of interviewing; however, sensitive subjects, including sexual harassment were discussed in many interviews. To attend to the distress students may have experienced from discussing emotional topics, all student participants were given a list of national and community resources at the close of each interview (Appendix Y).

Guardians were informed from the outset that I would not share specific information from the interview(s) with them (barring limitations regarding child abuse and suicidality). As I knew students may disclose sensitive information that they did not want shared, it was important that I did not betray their trust by disclosing unwanted information to their guardian. All guardians agreed to this stipulation without incident. However, I did encourage students to share freely what was discussed in the interview with their guardian if they desired and many reported that they did.

While anticipating and proactively planning for certain ethical issues, such as those described above, is an important task of all researchers, equally important is setting up systems to respond to issues that emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In preparation for the many unanticipated ethical issues that would arise throughout the course of this project, I set up multiple systems to support my commitment to ethical research.

Primarily I relied on field journaling, peer consultation, and consultations with the CAB to address ethical dilemmas as they arose. By systematically and regularly writing

in a field journal, I was able to first, notice, and second, grapple with ethical concerns. Further, I consulted throughout the project with my peers (other students), my mentors (established researchers), and twice, a group of current high school students. The CAB was another helpful support and consisted of three members: a student, a professional, and a parent representative. I strategically designed my CAB to include individuals from diverse backgrounds who may be attuned to issues that my privilege obscured at times (e.g., racism, transphobia). Committing to these practices was an invaluable support.

Summary

Using a critical ethnography approach, this study attended simultaneously to individual experiences and the school as a structure. After building a primary record consisting of observations and school documents, data analysis techniques were used to expose the explicit and implicit meanings embedded within. Further, using a broad, non-directive strategy for interviewing, students and professionals illuminated the issues most pressing to them and spotlighted discrepancies between the primary record and lived experiences. Throughout, I remained committed to practicing critical reflexivity, considering ethical dilemmas as they arose, and practicing analytical rigor. Using these techniques, an in-depth and complex explanation of the culture and context of gender in the New Orleans school system emerged.

Chapter IV

Results

A multitude of themes related to gender in the school system emerged from the data. These themes have been organized into three major sections: reproduction of cisheteropatriarchy, formal school regulation, and activism and resistance. Part I describes the ways that the culture and context of gender at schools reproduced cisheteropatriarchy, by first outlining how the gender binary was reinforced in schools and then describing the intertwined nature of heterosexuality and the gender binary. Part II describes the ways cisheteropatriarchy manifested in formal school policy, with attention to discipline and academics, dress code policies, TIX, and gender diversity. To end, Part III describes how cisheteropatriarchy was challenged and resisted in schools, with subthemes related to identities outside of the cisheteropatriarchal framework, peer support, school support, and student activism discussed.

In reality, the narratives that emerged weaved and intersected between and across categorizations – refusing to stay within the artificial bounds imposed by language. Like the gender binary itself, these themes are overlapping and mutually connected, defying and upending the limitations imposed upon them. This chapter, nonetheless, attempts to describe and organize these themes in relation to the research questions. Appendix Z, Table Z1 includes the full list of themes and subthemes with example quotes.

To protect the confidentiality of the participants in the study and their respective schools, pseudonyms were assigned using a random name generator. Further, names of

other people mentioned in participant interviews are also pseudonyms. Specific information, such as club or program names, have been omitted or changed to reduce the chance of identification of the schools and/or participants involved. As participant stories are shaped by social context, Appendix AA, Tables AA1 and Table AA2 includes relevant demographic information about student and professional participants, respectively.

Part I: Reproduction of Cisheteropatriarchy

The gender binary was sustained in schools in a multitude of ways, with heterosexuality acting as a major embedded and sometimes invisible force within the binary. The binary gendered and hierarchical relationship between males and females reified cisheteropatriarchy in schools. In this section, results are primarily attuned to the interpersonal level (e.g., peer interactions, student-staff interactions), as formal school regulation will be the focus of the second section.

The Gender Binary

In schools, an idealized and binary notion of the masculine and feminine emerged. In their idealized form, masculinity and femininity were characterized as mutually exclusive. Indeed, the opposition of these terms was most apparent when students were asked to define or explain what they meant by one term, but then responded by comparing it to the other. As Avery described, "...masculine to me means, like ... [*long pause*]. Okay, I have to use ... feminine versus masculine, like feminine ... physically, it's the breasts and your hips and all that." When Kaitlyn was asked what masculine meant, she responded succinctly, "I feel like, in some ways, it's [masculinity is], like, not being a woman." In both cases, masculinity was the absence of femininity. Participants described expectations of masculinity and femininity related to strength and athleticism,

physical appearance, emotions, and self-confidence. These expectations and the gender binary further created a barrier in building authentic relationships across gender.

Strength and Athleticism. Masculinity was associated with strength. Repeatedly and across contexts, participants talked about the assumption that males must be strong. Avery described, "...they [male students] want to be tough on the inside and outside, like they got to look a certain way, they have to act a certain way. Like, they have to be strong physically and mentally." One way this physical strength was demonstrated was through sports. Participants equated masculinity with sports, and specifically contact team sports (e.g., football, basketball). Tyler described how people expected him to be interested in sports because of his gender, "Sometimes people just expect I know how to play things like football." George also connected masculinity and contact sports, "...if you're a boy, for example, you might be more likely to like sports than ... gymnastics." George did not fit this expectation himself, however, explaining, "I don't like football and I don't think that there would be any alternate reality where I would like football." George was both aware of the expectation and also unwilling to conform to it. Further, George was able to find other friends whom he could connect with over other hobbies. He shared, "I have my friend group and they all like the same things as me." Nonetheless, the expectation of athleticism was closely associated with masculinity.

Status. Male students who excelled in athletics attained a high level of status in school. Hope described how a particularly talented basketball player at her school was "revered" by the school, explaining, "...they hyped him up, they always had videos of them on the Instagram and stuff like that." However, despite the fact that her school typically was strict on discipline, when this athlete cursed out a teacher, his coach had a

talk with him, but otherwise, he went unpunished. Hope explained, “I could tell immediately ... even if he [the male athlete] was to ... not care that he did it, he still gonna [*sic*] play in that game.” This status was not limited to star athletes, but also could be attributed to any male students who played sports. Avery described, “When the boys play sports, it’s like they [are] so valued, they [are] like the kings of the school.” She further explained, “A lot of the boys who do play sports, I feel like that’s the easiest thing for them because ... they just get a slap on the wrist [when they misbehave].” Avery and Hope perceived that male athletes were not held to the same standards as their peers.

Female students certainly participated in contact sports, such as basketball, as well as non-contact sports, such as dance. However, their sports were perceived as lower value. Avery, a female athlete herself, described the double-standard:

...us girls [on the volleyball team] ... nobody came to our games, none of the school, none of that. ... Even the girls’ basketball team, nobody came to our games, none of that. But soon as the boys’ basketball team and the boys’ soccer team had games and stuff, everybody was there, everybody was cheering them on.

Sporting events featuring female students did not attract the same crowds of supporters.

Ms. Haley also commented on the differential valuing of female athletics. She shared, “...Clearly, the boys' sports are taken more seriously than the girls' sports ... in middle school.” She continued, “The boys’ [sports] being ... very serious, very tough ... work very hard ... intense. And then the girls' sports often, if not always, seen as kind of like an afterthought.” Although sports teams were available for female athletes, Ms. Haley perceived that female athletes were not challenged.

Non-contact sport involvement, such as cheer or dance was also sidelined. Avery, who performed with her auxiliary team during football games, shared a concrete example of this differential valuing, “...after the games, the boys [football players] ... they get

food ... they get drinks, they get snacks, they get everything. But we [auxiliary members] ... just got to go straight home. I feel like that's not fair." Sports were available to female athletes, but did not attract the same crowds, encouragement, or awards.

Exclusion. Sometimes students were excluded, formally or informally, from playing sports perceived as either masculine or feminine based on their sex assigned at birth. Ms. Angela described one example of this exclusion. She explained, "...girls will try to go play football at recess and they'll [school staff members will] be like, 'Oh ... that's not for you to play or that's not a girl sport.'" In this account, school staff members regulated participation in football based on gender. This could also occur amongst peers. Ms. Haley recalled intervening at recess to help a female student join a basketball game:

...I remember specifically being [telling a female student who wanted to play basketball] like, "No, if you want to play, they [male students] need to let you play." ... I would say ... "Give her the ball." And then she ... joined for a little bit. ... It's striking how defined the gender rules are already playing out ... because it's clear that ... she doesn't think she can get involved in the game and ... these, like, little boys are already being ... condescending about her ... basketball ability or whatever.

Although this exclusion was not explicit, Ms. Haley perceived how the unwritten "gender rules" and negative comments prevented the female student from playing.

Male students were also excluded from activities and sports that were considered too feminine, such as dance. Ms. Janelle remembered, "...I had a teacher [colleague] who would get on her boys if they were jumping rope ... or playing with the hula-hoops because it was seen as a girly thing to do." In addition to school staff members regulating male students' participation in cheer and dance, parents also intervened. Ms. Tracy recalled an example involving one of her former middle school students. She explained, "I ... had another [male] student who wanted to join my cheerleading team, and his mama told me, 'No' because she just was not comfortable with it." Ms. Tracy continued

that she most often observed this type of parental concern from "...boy parents [parents of boys] whose boys are blatantly gay." However, Ms. Tracy had friends that worked at high schools and perceived this type of exclusion based on perceived sexual orientation to be less common in older grades. She elaborated, "...they'll [high schools will] let a boy be on their dance team and things of that nature. ... I just think it's different in high school, the approach to gay boys." Even when schools allowed male students to join, the assumption that this was something that needed permission went unstated.

Strength was an expected trait for male students under hegemonic masculinity and this strength could be demonstrated through sports. Although female students participated in sports, their participation was not as highly valued. The prevailing assumption that male students should participate in football (or other contact sports) and female students should participate in dance (or other non-contact sports) influenced how deviations from this pattern were perceived by students, school staff, and parents.

Physical Appearance. Unlike the way that participants easily associated masculinity with strength, many participants, especially male students, struggled to articulate the character traits or interests associated with femininity. For example, Martin tried to list the interests of his female peers, ultimately landing on talking. He shared: "...they're [female students are] kind of not into the sports or instruments. Their instrument ... is kind of just talking, because that's what they mostly do at recess." Although Martin described female students as interested in talking, more frequently, femininity was discussed in terms of outward appearances instead of interests or traits.

The expected or idealized physical appearance for female students was discussed. A white student, Kaitlyn, described the expected look as, "...the longer hair, like the

nails, the shaved [body hair] ... that kind of look.” A Black student, Avery, described a slightly different look, “...the long weave and the braids, twists, stuff like that ... you know the little braids everyone's wearing? And, like, the long 30-inch hair and then the shoes.” Kaitlyn and Avery described a similar, but distinct look associated with femininity, as mediated through their own racial identities.

Femininity was not necessarily associated with one particular physical look, but instead was often understood in relation to the practices and routines of cultivating appearance. Sandy described femininity as wearing “makeup and cute outfits and stuff like that.” Engaging in these practices of femininity, such as applying makeup, were often supported by peers. Ms. Lauren explained how this culture was affirmed at school:

It's really popular for girls who express themselves ... as feminine ... they have nails, they get their hair done, they're doing makeup at school, this is something that's like affirming. ... Girls are doing their hair, or they're doing their makeup in class, they're like talking about getting their hair done, getting their nails done.

Attending to physical appearance was common for female students at school, as was discussing future plans to attend to appearance. In an illustration of the focus on physical appearance, Corinne described her desire to focus on herself after a recent break-up. When asked what this would involve, she replied, “...getting my braces, trying a new ... proper skincare routine like the people on TikTok.” For Corinne, cultivating her physical appearance was an act of self-care after a break-up. In these examples, femininity was intertwined with beauty practices, such as make-up, hair, nails, and even skincare.

Clothing, accessories, and beauty practices were understood by students not so much as either masculine or feminine, but instead as feminine (e.g., dresses, skirts, floral patterns) or not (e.g., everything else). In one example, Sandy, who repeatedly described herself as “not considered one of the girly girls” noticed my floral blouse during the

interview and explained that she would not personally wear my top. She described my outfit as something “most people would've assumed is like a pretty feminine work outfit.” Instead, Sandy was more likely to wear “jeans and a t-shirt, like my normal everyday outfit.” Wearing jeans and a t-shirt was not masculine, but generic.

Students assigned female at birth were allowed a greater diversity in acceptable clothing items compared to students assigned male at birth. As an example, Ms. Haley recalled witnessing a student assigned male at birth being chastised for wearing a feminine clothing item. She explained, “[a male student was wearing a] ...girl's scarf or something and then [was] being told by whoever ... they couldn't do that, or like, ‘Why are you doing that?’” By contrast, there were no examples of students assigned female at birth being explicitly told not to wear clothing that would be perceived as too masculine.

Even with more flexibility to dress feminine or not, the idealized image of femininity impacted students' self-image nonetheless. Sandy recalled how even though she largely rejected the idealized version of femininity, she was not immune to the insecurities the expectation roused. She shared, “...with how our world is now, it's like women have to care a lot about their weight. And I'm self-conscious about my weight too, even though I'm probably just, like, normal sized for a kid my age.” Similarly, Kaitlyn reported how even though she believed “there's beauty in everything and every person” she sometimes still felt self-conscious of her looks. She explained, “...every now and then, though, I'll be like, oh, I don't match with ... the natural, stereotypical thing of what it means to be, like, an attractive woman. So, like, I must be worthless.” Despite explicitly rejecting these expectations, female students sometimes felt the emotional impact of falling short of the expectation nonetheless.

Masculinity and femininity were deeply intertwined with expectations around physical appearance. Femininity involved cultivating a certain appearance and involved practices and rituals of upkeep. By contrast, masculinity only involved the expectation to avoid looking feminine. Although female students were given more leeway in the range of clothing items they were permitted to wear in comparison to male students, the expectations associated with femininity could impact the self-image of female students.

Emotions. Another important distinction between masculinity and femininity described by participants related to emotional expression and regulation. Jenna perceived that there was less emotional openness from her male peers compared to her female peers. She explained, “I don’t usually see ... as much vulnerability with men.” Jenna saw this lack of vulnerability as negatively impacting male students. She speculated, “...if you’re not vulnerable ... [it] probably ... creates feelings of shame about what you’re experiencing, if you think that it’s [your emotions are] negative.” Jenna wondered about the repercussions of her male peers holding back their emotions. Corinne recalled experiencing difficulty getting an ex-boyfriend to share about his emotions during their relationship. She recounted “...my ex-boyfriend, he's not very openly [*sic*] with his ... [feelings], [be]cause I'm like, ‘What's wrong?’ He's like, ‘Man, don't worry about it.’ And I'm like, ‘I'm trying to help you out.’” Similar to Jenna, Corinne wondered about the side effects of keeping these emotions internal. She cautioned, “... [when people] keep that [feelings] compact, it usually breaks down your energy and your mood and stuff.” Jenna and Corinne perceived that being emotionally closed did not benefit their male peers.

Despite its value, emotional openness could be discouraged in male students. Ms. Janelle recalled witnessing male students being disciplined for showing emotion. She

shared, "...I even saw this in kindergarten, which is so frustrating. Like, [teachers saying] boys shouldn't cry and getting on them or putting them in timeout or punishing them ... because they had an emotional response." From a young age, male students received messages from some teachers that showing emotions was not acceptable. Ms. Haley also recalled witnessing her coworkers, "...bringing in stereotypes ... boys needing to be tough and boys ... not crying and not being baby-ish [*sic*]." School staff reinforced this expectation of male stoicism.

In contrast to the expectation of stoicism, male students sometimes struggled to regulate their emotions. Hope observed that male students expressed anger freely, even when they were in the wrong. She explained, "I just feel like men are so irrational. Like, they call us emotional so we can't go off ... But like, they're the ones that flash [lose their temper] when a girl cheats back on them. Not cheats on them, cheats back!" Hope further expressed confusion that emotionality was associated with femininity, yet male students were the ones she observed having these "irrational" outbursts. Corinne held a similarly negative view, describing her male peers as "stupid as fuck." She explained, "... [male students do not] know how to control their feelings." Corinne perceived the stupidity of her male peers as related to emotional dysregulation. Storm also made this connection, explaining, "...they [male students] just don't know how to control their emotions and then they get in trouble." Participants associated behavioral concerns with a deficit in coping skills for male students.

Emotional dysregulation may have been enhanced in highly masculine contexts, such as sports. Ms. Lauren recalled ending a sports game after a rule violation:

[when I ended the game] I was swarmed by boys in my personal space. They were trying to take the ball out of my hands ... I was walking away and I was being

cussed at, yelled at, my personal space was violated. I literally stood still, closed my eyes, and said [*calm, measured tone*], “Please get out of my personal space. This is not safe for me. You need to take three steps back.” And I was just repeating that over and over again in this tone. And I was being yelled at with the students' face this close to me [*holds hand an estimated four inches from face*]. ... It was awful. ... They were like, “You don't know anything about football. You're not my coach. You can't fucking take this fucking football, you fucking bitch.”

She continued that this behavior was jarring as these were her own students:

...these are students who ... I know care for me and I care for them, right? In the classroom environment, I know their parents, they've grown as readers because of me. ... In this particular setting, which is super masculine ... they are performing every day, this masculinity, this, like, tough guy, this, like, shit talking, every day.

Ms. Lauren perceived that the competitive, masculine atmosphere resulted in her students acting out of character and in extremely aggressive ways.

Masculinity required closing off emotions and cultivating a stoicism. School staff members sometimes disciplined male students for showing emotion, further cementing this expectation. However, outbursts of anger were more accepted with male students than other displays of emotions and could lead to disciplinary issues.

Self-Confidence. The final distinction raised by participants between masculinity and femininity was self-confidence, particularly related to academics. Jenna juxtaposed her experience working with a female partner on a school assignment versus a male partner, noting how confident the male student appeared in his responses. She explained:

...at first, I got paired with a girl and we were like ... “Oh, I don't know, these could all be wrong.” ... And then I got paired with a guy and it [he] was like “I think it's B” and then I would say what I thought and he'd be like, “Yeah.” And ... it was just like yes, no.

In this example, Jenna perceived that her and her female classmate were less assured in the correctness of their own responses. Kaitlyn perceived that there was an expectation that she had to prove herself in the classroom because of her gender. She described:

...people already assume this [competency] is true about a man but they wouldn't assume it about me, [it is] like that kind of feeling of ... the whole like gender thing of, like, having to prove that ... you're as good and almost like doubting yourself almost.

Kaitlyn noted the intertwined relationship between trying to prove her worth in and her own self-doubt and attributed both, at least in part, to gendered expectations.

Further, confidence from female students in the classroom was not always expected or embraced. Macy described her drive, explaining, "...I was smart and I was trying to go for the goals that I wanted. ... I was always very blunt, very to the point."

She also noted that these qualities were surprising to her teachers, sharing:

...I think that [being smart, going for goals, and being blunt] was always a very male perspective on the world. ... People were always very shocked, and they were always very like, "Is she disrespectful or is she just not acting how we expect women to act?"

Macy linked the reaction of her teachers with binary gender expectations that dictated that female students were not meant to show this type of confidence in class.

However, the expectation that female students should not be confident and/or competent in the classroom may have enabled female students to be open to asking for and receiving help. Christian shared that male students might be teased by their peers for asking for help. He explained, "...Like a guy [would not ask for help]. Like ... I guess a female student [asking for help] ... wouldn't be ... as embarrassing." Christian perceived a gender differential in how asking for help would be perceived by peers and acknowledged that this differential kept him from speaking up at times. Refraining from asking for help was not always a bad thing. Jesse explained that sometimes he avoided asking for help so he could have more time to figure it out independently. He described, "...sometimes it's like, I think I can probably figure it out on my own...for various like

scenarios. ... I feel like, oh, I don't really need to ask for help [be]cause I'll figure it out along the way." By forgoing seeking help, Jesse demonstrated independence.

Independence in the classroom could be helpful, but also had drawbacks. Macy worried that not seeking help kept her male peers from learning new content:

...they [male students] don't ask for help as much [as female students] and ... they're very much like, "Oh, I'll just do it." ... But it's like, can you just do it? Like you're learning, the whole point is that you're not supposed to understand it at first.

Learning to Macy required support. Ms. Haley connected the desire to be perceived as competent and independent with behavior issues in the classroom for some male students. She explained, "...I think it [struggling academically] seems like it affects their [male students'] self-confidence ... and can more readily transmit into ... a behavior issue. ... More trying to save face." Ms. Haley gave an example of how this transpired in class:

...rather than ... allow for the possibility that somebody will see that they [male students] don't know how to do the work, they'll instead be like, "I'm not doing this." ... "This is stupid. I don't want to do this." Or, you know, distract everybody with behavior things ... so that others can't see that they don't know the answer.

To avoid risking looking incompetent in front of peers, some male students misbehaved.

Female students were not expected to be confident in the classroom and when they were, it could take teachers by surprise. By contrast, male students were expected to be confident and competent under the expectations of masculinity. Some male students took steps to disguise any lack of knowledge by avoiding asking for help or acting out.

Gender Segregation. In addition to the expectations around strength, physical appearance, emotions, and self-confidence, the gender binary also influenced social groups. Social groups within the school were often, although not exclusively, organized by the gender binary, especially in middle school. Christian described it succinctly, "girls are friends with girls and boys are friends with boys." This was not a rigidly enforced

system. George explained, "...there isn't really ... an assigned, like, 'Oh you're a boy, so you should hang out with the boys.'" George perceived the gender segregation as spontaneous and based more on shared interests.

However, there were examples of school professionals initiating this segregation, either through formal and informal means. Ms. Janelle recalled "unnecessary gender segregating" as integrated into formal school policy and organization. She shared, "...they [the school] would separate kids by girl, boy for their ... electives. So, like, girls go to PE at one time, boys go to PE at another time." Ms. Haley's school similarly segregated students for recess in the past. She explained, "I think in years past, we've tried to sometimes separate the boys and girls at recess, mostly because the boys were playing ... a lot rougher and the girls felt ... unsafe." This segregation was justified as an attempt to keep female students safe. Ms. Janelle also observed teachers redirecting cross-gender play, especially for male students. She shared, "If a little boy was playing with too many girls, you'd have some teachers who would literally go grab him and make him go play with boys." Whether enforced and/or encouraged by school staff members or not, single-sex friendships were commonly reported across interviews.

Segregation under the gender binary could make building relationships across genders difficult. Renee recalled how after spending time with their boyfriend's friends, they realized how much his male friends struggled to talk to female students. They explained, "...they [male students] approach us [female students] in general with like ... caution and I don't know how to explain it. It's like we're foreign creatures ... like we are scary almost." From Renee's perspective, male students were unequipped to talk to female students. Macy described her own difficulty in making conversation with her male

peers, "... [when I see male peers in the hall] we'll just be like, "Oh, hi." "Oh, hi." And then ... nothing. Like, "Oh, we're walking to the same class. Okay, let's walk together." But we'll walk in silence." Macy struggled to find something to discuss with male peers in the short time it took to walk to class. The prevalence of gender segregation in social groupings created strain for many participants in cultivating friendship across genders.

As students grew older, intergender friend groups became more common, particularly in heterosexual dating and romantic contexts. Jesse, a middle school student, explained that most intermingling across genders occurred in the context of dating, "...A lot of people are growing up ... at our school and getting boyfriends and girlfriends, but other than that ... boys and girls don't really hang out at our school." Jenna described a similar dynamic in high school, explaining that close intergender relationships were mostly limited to dating. She explained, "...relationships between men and women that are close very rarely happen when they're not romantic." In addition to conforming to binary gender expectations around strength, appearance, emotions, and self-confidence, as students aged, there was an additional expectation of participation in heterosexuality, connecting the theme of the gender binary to the next theme, heterosexuality.

Heterosexuality

Masculinity and femininity were deeply intertwined with sexuality and specifically, the expectation of heterosexuality, with important implications for social power in schools. Hegemonic masculinity was sustained and regulated through public performances of homophobia and overt sexual comments. Dating and sexual activity within the school system further regulated cisheteropatriarchy through gossip and rumors,

expectations for acceptable sexual activity, and objectification. Those who identified as or were perceived as LGBTQ+ faced distinct issues under cisheteropatriarchy.

Social Power. Participants described many different social categorizations and/or hierarchies within their schools, often consisting of a popular boy group and a popular girl group on the top of the social hierarchy, with other groups below. As an example, Storm described their school as having four distinct groups: “popular boys”, “popular girls”, “nerdy boys”, and their own friend group (consisting of mostly cisgender girls and gender complex youth). In general, students who failed to meet the expectations of cisheteropatriarchy were lower on the hierarchy, or less popular. Ms. Lauren explained:

There is a division of, like, students who have a lot of power and, like, are socially, like, really competent ... And then there are students who have less power and many of them are different. ... They may not be openly gay, but they are called gay.

From Ms. Lauren’s perception, regardless of whether a student identified as gay, those who were “different” were lumped together under the term and held less social status.

As part of this social hierarchy, masculine traits were held in higher esteem. Kaitlyn described this differential, saying, “...I feel like a lot of the ideas of like wanting to be masculine stems from this idea ... [that] women who ... do less stereotypically feminine things, like, they're a badass, they're superior.” Kaitlyn perceived that when people took on masculine traits, they moved up in the hierarchy. However, male transgender students were not considered equal to cisgender male students, even when these masculine traits were embodied. Ezra, a transman, described this distinction:

...I would realize that, oh, all these dudes who are raised dudes don't really see me as a man, they just see me as, like, a girl who can sometimes associate with ... masculinity and like boyish stuff. Which is super unfortunate because I'm totally a dude and like, that's kind of my whole thing.

Although masculinity was associated with hierarchical power, the true extent of this power was limited to cisgender, straight male students.

On the other side, when people who were assigned male at birth did not meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity, they moved down in social hierarchies.

Heterosexuality was such an integral part of this masculinity that male students risked losing status for being gay, even if they otherwise embodied the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Sandy explained, using the hypothetical name of Justin:

...and they're [students are] like, "Justin's the best at football. He's so tough. He dates all the best girls ... he's the most popular guy. Everyone wants to go out with him." And then one day they're like, "Did you hear that Justin's gay?" [Be]cause like, I think for them sexualities and ... identities are ... their downfall for some reason. ... And then everything falls apart behind him and he's considered like a feminine guy ... or too upsetting.

From Sandy's perspective, even rumors of being gay could be the "downfall" of otherwise popular male students. Ms. Tracy also noted stigma around gay male students specifically. She explained, "I feel like the boys are more discriminated against for their ... [sexual] preference versus the girls. It's way more accepted [to be gay] for girls than boys." Identifying or being perceived as gay as a male student went against the sexuality norms of hegemonic masculinity and impacted social status.

For students assigned male at birth, being transgender also impacted social standing, perhaps more than being gay. Ezra described peers he knew who were assigned male at birth and "out" about their sexuality, but not their gender identity. He explained:

... gay dudes here [at my school] ... they're so assimilated into the cis-guy, dude culture that they just don't want to ... transition. They know it would have a detrimental effect on their social standing, but ... they're actively like, "Yeah, I'm very transgender. Like, I want to be a girl. I want to be a pretty girl." But ... they'll lose connections if they come out. So, they're ... like, "Yeah, I'll just pretend I'm a gay guy until I can leave."

These students perceived their gender identity as such a threat to their social standing that they would rather “just pretend” until after school.

In cisheteropatriarchy, masculinity dominates the social hierarchy. When students assigned male at birth rejected any part of hegemonic masculinity, especially by demonstrating sexual interest in male students, their social standing was impacted. By contrast, when students assigned female at birth demonstrated masculine traits, including showing sexual interest in female students, their social standing was comparatively less impacted. As a way to maintain this social standing, homophobia and overt sexual humor were used by some male students to publicly declare their masculinity.

Regulating Hegemonic Masculinity. Male students could maintain popularity by publicly displaying hegemonic masculinity. Students commonly made these public displays through homophobia, homophobic slurs and overt sexual humor. Using these tools, students distancing themselves from homosexuality while also establishing their own sexual interest in female students.

Homophobia. Popular male students were described across interviews as homophobic. Colby shared a perception that the group of popular boys that they called the “rebels” were all homophobic. They explained, “...they [the rebels] all hate queers. They all are homophobic. Not one queer is ... among them. Like they all think being gay is a sin from the lord, wait no, the devil.” Ezra also associated homophobia with popular male students. As Ezra explained: “...for the most part, I would say the only people [at school] who are actually mean are the, like, kind of homophobic, popular guys.”

According to Colby and Ezra, homophobia was embedded in male popularity.

Homophobia was expressed in different ways. In one example, Hope noted how male peers would react negatively to anything that might be considered gay. She explained, "...it'll be the most random things that they'll [male students will] call gay and I think it's [be]cause they're too hyper-masculinized." She elaborated with a concrete example, "...if we watch a movie and two dudes in the movie say, 'I love you, bro' they'll [male students will] start getting weird about it." Even a fictional depiction of two men showing emotional intimacy could be indicative of homosexuality and in response, male students would publicly disapprove as a way to preserve their masculine image.

Gay as an Insult. Another way male students expressed homophobia was through the frequent use of statements such as, "that's gay" or "you're gay", especially in middle school. Ms. Tracy characterized this phenomenon as "...such a middle school thing." Although female students also made these comments, participants described it as a phrase most often used by and directed at male students. Colby observed, "I forgot to mention the cis girls do that [call people gay] too, but not nearly as much [as cisgender boys]." Further, "ew" often accompanied statements declaring someone gay. Ms. Lauren shared, "...it's [comments about people being gay are] always paired with 'ew.' 'Ew, you're being gay. Ew, you're acting fruity.' Or like, 'Ew, you're zesty.'" Being or "acting" gay conjured disgust. Further, maleness was often underscored within these remarks. As examples, Storm, Jesse, and Ms. Tracy respectively mentioned overhearing comments such as, "Oh *bro*, you're gay", "*Boy*, you gay", and "*Man*, you gay" [emphasis added]. There were no converse examples evoking female descriptors within the study.

Any physical touch between male students could result in a homophobic statement being said. George shared, "...sometimes people just say it [you're gay] like as

a joke randomly and sometimes ... because ... I don't know ... a boy gives another boy a hug or something.” George further explained the difference in how peers would react to hugging based on gender, sharing, “...someone is less likely to say ‘you’re gay’ to a girl if a girl hugs another girl than if a boy hugs a boy.” Homophobic language regulated hugs between male students, but not female students.

Sometimes the physical touches preceding a homophobic statement were accidental. Ms. Haley gave an example: “...if a boy like bumps another boy in line, [he will say] ‘Oh, stop,’ you know, ‘you’re gay.’ ... You know, like, that kind of thing. But I guess ... [they’re] not wanting to be perceived as gay.” Ms. Haley connected the use of the statement with a fear of being perceived as gay. Jesse recalled a firsthand experience being called gay that matched closely to Ms. Haley’s account. He shared:

...some kid ... ran into me, and then ... said, like “Move!” ... I’m not really sure exactly what they said but something about that [being gay] and I was just like, “Oh come on, man.” He was trying to, like, catch a football or something and it’s just like, this is a field, it’s meant for running around, what are you talking about?

Notably, this occurred in an athletic space after an unintentional touch. In these examples, male students used the statements to distance themselves from homosexuality.

Two school professionals further connected the use of homophobic slurs with possible discomfort with students’ own sexuality. Ms. Darcy shared a hypothetical situation based on her own experiences handling these behaviors in the past, where a male student who was not out might use the f-slur as a way to deflect rumors of his own sexuality. She explained, “...maybe a kid will say to me, ‘I am gay and I don’t know how to talk about it and I don’t want people thinking this about me ... so I have to like put down someone else.’” Ms. Tracy similarly suspected this to be the case with at least one of her students. She shared, “... [when one male student] always used to say, ‘Man, you

gay! Man, that's gay!' ... Me and my coworker be like *[sic]*, 'You gay. You just won't admit it.'" Although unconfirmed, these participants held the perception that students who used these terms might be grappling with their own sexuality.

In other examples, participants perceived these comments as explicitly expressing disapproval for the LGBTQ+ community broadly. For example, Hope observed that the male classmates who frequently used the phrase "Oh that's gay" also described themselves as "not with all them LGBTQ people." These students were explicit in their disapproval. In another example, Ms. Angela recalled an incident where a few male students were repeatedly calling another male student gay. She shared, "...I felt like it was intentional that they [male students] were calling him gay, because he had two moms." As this student was the child of openly LGBTQ+ parents, Ms. Angela perceived this behavior as targeted. In these examples, students went beyond distancing themselves from being perceived as gay and instead explicitly an anti-LGBTQ+ stance.

The F-Slur. There were also reports of the f-slur being used in schools, although much less often. Storm, who reported overhearing the phrase, "that's gay" daily, overheard the f-slur much less. They shared, "... [the f-slur is said] surprisingly less than I thought. Like maybe once a week or something." While "that's gay" was used in teasing contexts, often among friends, the f-slur was not. Jesse noticed "...mostly it's [the f-slur is said] like when somebody's mad at somebody." Ms. Lauren also associated the f-slur with escalating conflict. She compared, "... [the f-slur] is used in heightened situations ... from students who are ... very much upset." Students used the f-slur in moments of anger. Ms. Lauren also noticed the f-slur was used in bullying situations. She shared:

...I'm seeing this like targeted big kid, scrawny kid targeting, like, "You're weaker than me. And because you're weaker than me, I see you as gay. Like I'm going to

use homophobic slurs against you, because that means you're weak." ... I'm seeing targeted use to like exert power in like a toxic masculine way.

Ms. Lauren connected using the f-slur with asserting masculine power.

There were also reports of the f-slur being used against male teachers. Jesse recalled one incident, "...I think he [male teacher] was wearing that [religious garment] when it [being called the f-slur] actually happened. ... He talked about it [the religious garment] a lot [before the incident] and he was like, 'It's not a dress.'" In Jesse's recollection, the perceived femininity of the teacher's clothing was directly related to the comment. In these examples, the f-slur was used to express dominance and demean those seen as not meeting the standards of hegemonic masculinity.

Overt Sexual Humor. Overt sexual humor was another way male students could assert their masculinity. Often, this sexual humor poked fun at gay sex. Kaitlyn described how a male student mimed performing a sex act in front of the entire class. She shared, "I remember one of them [a male student] ... doing the thing of ... pretending to ... you know, like, jerk [someone else's] ... dick off." Kaitlyn noted incongruence, as she perceived that this student would not want to be perceived as gay, yet he had mimed engaging in gay sex. She explained, "...they [male students] don't want to be seen as gay, but like also at the same time ... I guess it's just like, wanting to ... be funny." Kaitlyn thought that this student was ultimately making a joke about gay sex. Renee similarly observed that their boyfriend's friends, "pretend to be gay with each other" as a joke. Due to this tendency, Renee, who identified as bisexual themselves, noted, "It's the straight guys that do the gayest shit, and it's crazy. Like, my boyfriend ... I've like had to fend more guys off of my boyfriend ... cause he's pretty!" Pretending to be gay was a joke.

Overt sexual humor also often referenced sex acts more broadly. Sandy shared about a male student joking about masturbation in a way that made her uncomfortable. She shared, "...we [my friends and I] were playing a game and this boy was telling us, like 'ew, my masturbation hand.'" Renee and Corinne recalled that in middle school, their male classmates would moan during class, imitating a "loud hentai [Japanese anime porn] girl moan". They described the context:

Renee: ...they [male students] would just scream, moan.

Corinne: Then everybody's turning their head like...

Renee: "Are you okay?" All the guys in the corner, chuckling, with their, like, testosterone just oozing off of them. It's gross.

Jokes about masturbation and pornography were a way some male students asserted their sexual drive and thereby, their masculinity.

Dark humor about taboo topics, such as pedophilia, were also reported. Renee shared, "There's guys around my school who ... joke about being pedophiles, like, saying that they're a pedophile. ... I hate to say joking, they're just telling [people] they're a pedophile, boasting about it and ... bragging." Renee was taken aback by these jokes and in conversation with Corinne, tried to make sense of what was happening:

Renee: [I asked my boyfriend] "Why would you [male students] joke about something like that?" And well he [my boyfriend] said, "No, they're dead serious." I'm like, "Okay, why would you go around saying something like that ... in school?"

Corinne: Because that can cause somebody trauma, like a trigger.

Renee: I'm like, "Why? What is the mindset you have to be in to just go around..."

Corinne: Weed!

Renee: "... saying something like that?"

Corinne: Cocaine!

Renee: No!

Corinne: Alcohol!

Renee: It's not even those people!

Renee and Corinne were not confident whether the comments were jokes or serious. Although they were shocked by the comments, this behavior was not an isolated incident, as it was also reported at a different school. Kaitlyn shared, "...I remember just being ... astonished that they [male students] were talking about ... young children ... basically just being assaulted. I was like, 'What? Why would you ever say that?'" Jokes regarding such a taboo topic elicited disgust and shock from the participants who heard them.

Taken together, expressing homophobia and using overt and sometimes disturbing sexual humor served as a public assertion of hegemonic masculinity, as it both distanced male students from homosexuality and established their (hetero)sexual drive. As those who most embody hegemonic masculinity under cisheteropatriarchy are rewarded, these displays functioned to maintain social power in school. Closely related, dating and sexual activity among students was another way that cisheteropatriarchy emerged in schools, affirming norms around masculinity and femininity in heterosexual relationships.

Dating and Sexual Activity. Norms around dating and sexual activity in schools were embedded in cisheteropatriarchy. Engaging in dating and sexual activity could afford (and remove) social status and make students the subject of gossip and rumors. This gossip was particularly vicious when female students were perceived as straying from the acceptable standard for appropriate sexual behavior under cisheteropatriarchy. Although female students and especially Black female students were criticized for being too sexual, they were often treated by male students as objects of sexual desire.

Social Status and Gossip. Just as those who embodied hegemonic masculinity in schools gained social status, so did students who engaged in (heterosexual) dating. Jesse, a middle school student, explained, "...mostly the people who are dating are jocks and

popular kids.” Sandy, also in middle school, reported that female students who were dating were afforded more social status. She explained, “...I think they [female students] feel like older than everyone else. I think they feel more mature because like they're, like, with boyfriends.” Perhaps because of this elevation in social status, Corinne, a high school student, described her perception that some students date simply for the experience of dating, even without an attraction. She shared, “...sometimes [male and female students are] not always attracted with each other [*sic*], but just dating just for dating.” Dating in school was a source of social power.

However, this social power was accompanied by gossip and rumors. Storm shared that their peers talked about dating frequently, “...you constantly hear like ‘oh this person has a crush on this person’, ‘oh this person’s dating this person’, or ‘oh hey, I’m dating this person.’ ... It’s a lot.” Ezra heard similar gossip at the high school level. He shared:

... [popular students] talk loudly about other people's lives. Like, the popular thing where they talk about parties or, like, who's having sex with who and stuff like that. It's just - I don't get it. Like, why would you talk about other people who aren't even that interesting?

Both these students reported hearing this sort of gossip as commonplace, despite neither expressing any interest in engaging in these discussions.

Renee shared a first-hand account of experiencing rumors relating to their dating life at school. They explained, “we’ll [my boyfriend and I will] be, like, hugging or we’ll share a kiss ... and like other students ...will start calling you disgusting and stuff and make up rumors and everything.” Renee continued that these rumors were particularly directed at female students and impacted social standing. They explained:

Rumors, especially when they're about the girls at school, they spread like wildfire and everybody's hearing it and everybody's spreading it. And it really can just ruin your, like - I don't want to say life – like your social status at school. And I've seen people, like, who I've thought were like untouchable ... fall down the

ranks and like, lose a bunch of friends and ... just become, like, sadder people overall. ... You can't be... in relationships like that or people gonna [*sic*] talk about you, you can't not be in anything [relationships], people gonna [*sic*] talk about you.

For Renee, dating someone brought on rumors, but also foregoing dating similarly created gossip, leaving female students vulnerable to gossip and rumors no matter what.

Indeed, female students sometimes could face accusations about their sexual activity just for being in proximity to males. For example, although Avery found it easier to relate to male students, she avoided male friendships. She explained, "... if I'm friends with boys, oh, I'm a ho automatically. That's why I prefer just to not talk to nobody [*sic*]." Rather than risk being the subject of rumors, Avery kept to herself. Further, the possibility of rumors was not limited to friendly behavior with students. Avery explained:

... [I stay away from male teachers because] I don't want people to start talking ... they'll [students will] be like, "Oh ... she's having sex with her teacher" and that's not the case. So, I just rather distance myself already before people start even assuming that.

Maintaining distance from both male students and male teachers was a strategy that Avery used to avoid being called names and gossiped about at her school. Rumors and gossip were an integral part of the social aspect of dating and relationships in school and functioned to both underscore the expectation of engaging in heterosexuality and to regulate appropriate sexuality under cisheteropatriarchy, particularly for female students.

Acceptable Sexual Activity. Indeed, gossip and rumors often enforced stringent expectations regarding appropriate sexual behavior, which varied by gender. This was most apparent in reactions to a student's "body count", or as Hope defined, "how many people you've had sex with." At Hope's school, she perceived that an acceptable body count was much higher for male students than female students. She explained, "...they'll [male students will] talk about how their body count can be as high as 10. But a girl, if

she got too many bodies, she a hoe.” Male students strived to have sex with multiple partners, yet diminished female students who exhibited the same behaviors. Avery also observed this dynamic. She explained, “...If I have sex with one person, I'm a whore, but boys can have sex with 20 people and it's cool. ... That give them a cool standard.” In addition to noticing the discrepancy in acceptability, Avery further noted that male students saw a rise in their social status for having many sexual partners.

Hope perceived this discrepancy as connected to “Black culture” explaining, “...they [males] can ... go out at night, do partying But in the same breath, like his sister ... she's not supposed to have nobody [*sic*], she can't go out because she's a girl.” She continued that Black girls were expected to act “ladylike” meaning “...she don't talk about sex [*sic*] ... she does her work, go home. ... Like legs crossed.” Female students and especially Black female students were often judged harshly for having sex.

Despite the expectation of chastity, female students, and especially Black female students, were also seen as hyper-sexual as a default. This hyper-sexualization presented itself in the assumptions made and expressed by teachers. In one example, Hope recalled overhearing teachers talking about a female student in a derogatory manner:

...she [a female student] was just walking in the hallway at the wrong time, because her teacher had let her go to the bathroom. They [the teachers] start talking ... about how she was just pretending to have to use the bathroom ... when the girl actually was ... begging to [use] the bathroom. [They were] Just saying unnecessary things about how she probably just wanted to go meet some little boy.

Not only did the teachers assume sexual intentions in this anecdote, but by using the language of a “little boy” to refer to male students of the same age, implications of predatory behavior on the part of the female student were invoked. Female students were expected to be sexually conservative, but assumed to be promiscuous.

Objectification. Related to this presumed promiscuity, female students were often evaluated, publicly and privately, for their sexual appeal. Renee's boyfriend shared about how this dynamic occurred among groups of male students. As Renee explained, "...my boyfriend has heard the girl talk [among male students]. ... It's ... centered around sex rather than the person themselves. ... They base ... the desirability of ... the female off of her body." In all-male groups, talk of female peers could center around sex.

Public comments on the attractiveness of female bodies were also reported. Kaitlyn shared that one particular group of male students at her former school frequently commented on the attractiveness of their female peers. She explained, "... [there was] this one group of guys who were, like, always ... commenting on girls' bodies ... all the time and ... saying ... if they thought they were attractive or not, like, loudly." Avery also described the way that male students would comment on her body and the bodies of her classmates, using the term "gyat", slang for, as she defined, "you got a big booty." She shared, "...a boy, he'll see the girl going into the bathroom and he'll be like, 'Gyat!' Like if you got big booty. ... I see that happen a lot." Renee recalled a similar experience when the term, "breedable", referring to sexual attractiveness, was popularized online and then spread to their school. They shared, "... [male students were] like, 'Who's breedable? Who's not?' And I was just like, 'It's so disgusting.' They were just like sexualizing all ... the girls, and it was just so gross." In these examples, male students publicly discussed the bodies of their female classmates, reducing their existence to their sexual appeal.

Male students' sexual appeal was also scrutinized by their female peers. Macy perceived that it was likely difficult for male students to meet their peers' expectations. She shared, "...Guys are expected to be, like, a lot. Like, they got to be manly. Like, you

got to be cute ... you can't be ugly.” Macy wondered if this pressure resulted in male students changing themselves to attract female students. She explained:

Sometimes they [male students] conform to ... the female gaze, you know? It's like, “Oh, is the girl going to like me?” ... Girls do that a lot and it's more common for girls to change themselves to meet guys' interests, but I would say ... that's also something that guys sometimes do.

Although Macy did not perceive this pressure as equivalent to the pressure faced by female students, she still acknowledged its possible impact. Other factors beyond physical appearance were taken into consideration when assessing a male student's desirability among female students. Corinne shared that female students would date a male student they were not attracted to under certain circumstances. She listed these circumstances: “...they're [male students are] rich, they have a lot of money, or ... they got a big dick, or whatever.” Objectifying comments or treatment as described were reported for both male and female students in school, albeit in differing forms.

Regardless of whether students dated, their bodies could be assessed for their sexual desirability under the system of cisheteropatriarchy. When students did date, it could bring social power, but at times, was also accompanied by a slew of rumors. This gossip reinforced ideals around acceptable sexual activity especially for female students.

Distinct Issues Facing LGBTQ+ Youth. Youth who did not conform to expected gender and sexuality roles under cisheteropatriarchy, either as an openly LGBTQ+ student or as a student perceived to be LGBTQ+, encountered distinct issues. Specifically, there were many reports of LGBTQ+ youth experiencing unwanted attention, hyper-sexualization, intentional misgendering, homophobia, and transphobia. Although most of these anecdotes were peer to peer, there were a few examples of school staff reinforcing cisheteropatriarchy and contributing to this ostracization.

Unwanted Attention. Sexual minority students or students perceived to be sexual minority students received unwanted attention in schools. Invasive questions about students' sexuality were reported. Kaitlyn described how students used to ask her about her sexuality because of her gender presentation. She explained:

... [students] would randomly come up to me, cause like the way my hair was ... they would just ... think it was their right to ask me like, "Are you gay? Are you this?" ... Just because they're like, ... "We have good gaydar, can we ask you this?"

When this occurred, she would answer no; however, looking back, she realized she did not owe these students a response. She explained, "...it's not always for bad intentions but ... people think ... that you owe them information and you really don't." Although not in itself a critical question, Kaitlyn perceived this type of questioning as invasive.

Many LGBTQ+ students were discussed by their peers, often in critical ways. Jesse described how his male friend, who identified as pansexual, was the subject of gossip. He explained, "...somebody asked if he [my friend] was gay ... and he said he was pansexual. And now everybody ... starts, like, calling him gay and like whispering about him." Other students talked about the increased attention their sexuality drew from peers, even if not exclusively negative. Corinne, who identified as bisexual, explained, "...if you're ... one of those queers [*sic*], you usually get talked [about] in a bad way, or in a good way, or really being made fun of." Simply existing brought attention.

Hyper-Sexualization. Often this unwanted attention had a hyper-sexual component. Storm, who was primarily friends with LGBTQ+ youth at school, described how their peers would assume they and their friends must be interested in dating one another. They explained, "...they'll [students will] be like ... 'Hey ... do you like this person in your group if you're gay?' And then we're ... like, 'No.' ... They ... assume

that ... you automatically like every girl or every boy.” Students assumed friendship between LGBTQ+ students must be romantic or sexual. Ms. Lauren similarly shared about two friends who used they/them pronouns and were close friends:

...the rumors about them being gay are horrible. ... They [other students] say horrible things about them touching each other. They will ... run away from them. They'll make rumors about them kissing at recess and ... report it falsely. ... They aren't dating. ... They are friends.

Not only were these two students avoided by their peers, they were potentially subjected to discipline from school staff members who might believe the false reports. Renee described a serious and baseless rumor about a male student at their high school. They shared, “...they [students] said he was, like, sucking dick in the bathroom. ... Apparently, he wasn't even in the bathroom.” Students who identified as or were perceived as gay could be subjected to these highly sexualized assumptions and rumors.

Sexualization also included fetishizing lesbians. When Storm was looking at a book with a female couple, they experienced unwanted comments from a male peer:

... [a male student] came up to me and my friend one time and we had a ... woman couple ... manga [Japanese comic book] in front of us and ... he was like, “Oh hey, can I read that?” And we were like, “No.” And then he was like, “Oh that's too bad because I really like girls who like girls.” And it was just gross.

This male student, without being asked, did not hesitate to express his sexual interest in lesbian content. Operating outside of the expectations of cisheteropatriarchy, LGBTQ+ students were hyper-sexualized.

Peer Misgendering. Also intertwined with cisheteropatriarchy, misgendering from peers, specifically through using the wrong pronouns or name (i.e. deadnaming) in school was a common occurrence for many students. Colby reported that they were misgendered at school, on average, “three times a day, at least.” Ezra similarly shared his bleak expectation that “you just got to get over it when people misgender you, because

they're going to do that every day of your life, basically.” Although the experience was common, the perceived intention behind the comments ranged in the anecdotes shared.

Both Storm and Colby described some misgendering as originating from a lack of understanding. Colby described how students who did not identify as LGBTQ+ frequently misgendered them. They shared, “...they just always get your pronouns wrong. They don't understand how it means to be gender non-affirming.” Similarly, Storm shared about their transgender friend who had primarily cisgender male friends and was frequently misgendered. They explained, “...I don't think they're [her cisgender male friends are] like bad people ... they just ... don't understand. So they're not gonna [*sic*] do something they don't understand.” Gendering correctly required understanding.

In other cases, misgendering was described as related to apathy, lack of experience, and even hostility. Renee perceived there was a lack of effort put in by some male students at their school. They explained, “It might go, for example, being like, ‘Hey, my pronouns are he.’ ... They'll [cisgender male students will] be like, ‘Oh, okay.’ And they'll continue to say she ... while they're standing there.” Anton did not perceive his peers as apathic, but instead as “annoyed” when people used they/them pronouns because it was not something they were used to. He shared, “It [using they/them pronouns] doesn't feel normal to them [students], so it might take them a while to ... get it.” In the most severe example, misgendering was perceived as an overt act of hostility. Colby described their peers as misgendering them for entertainment. They described, “Some kids in my school purposely ... deadname me for their own enjoyment, because they know it pisses me off.” Although the perceived intentions varied, every transgender or

nonbinary participant in the sample directly experienced or witnessed misgendering, suggesting the commonality of the experience under the system of cisheteropatriarchy.

Other Homophobia and Transphobia. In addition to the homophobic slurs, unwanted attention, misgendering, and hyper-sexualization faced by LGBTQ+ students already discussed, other instances of homophobia and transphobia perpetuated cisheteropatriarchy in schools. Witnessing explicitly homophobic and/or transphobic remarks by peers was reported. Renee, who despite being nonbinary, female, and bisexual, was often mistaken for a straight, cisgender woman by peers. Because of this misconception, peers frequently exhibited blatant homophobia or transphobia in front of them. Renee explained, "...so they [students] all ... make transphobic comments or like, homophobic comments. And they'll like talk to me about their negative views ... and [I am] just, like, 'I think you forgot something!'" Negative remarks were stated freely in Renee's presence, in part due to peer assumptions around their identity.

Students recounted stories of transphobia at school, ranging from overt to subtle.

Ezra described transphobia at his school as more underhanded than depicted in the media:

...there isn't a lot of bullying [in my school] to the ... point of what is portrayed in the high school movies. ... like the pushing you down the stairs and stealing your lunch money ... that doesn't happen. That's not real. ... it's just jokes told in class that are loud enough that you can hear them and ... it's very clear they're about you. Like, people have said to me, looking me in the eyes, across a few tables across the classroom ..., "Men can't have periods." And I'm like, "Well, ... that's not necessary to say to me."

Rather than physical violence, Ezra faced demeaning and unnecessary commentary.

Colby, in middle school, recalled a direct incident of transphobia at their school:

...me and him [male student] got in like a really ... heated and intense argument as he tried to convince me that I was not nonbinary. And then tried to convince me that ... my name was my deadname. ... he says stuff like "Oh are you a boy? Do you have boy genitals? No?" Like ... it's so annoying

By contrast, Storm noticed a more subtle form of transphobia in their observation of how transgender students became known only for their gender identity. They explained, “...sometimes people will ... attach, like, trans or something to someone’s name. ... that’s how they think of them. Just ... that and nothing else. ... they’re like only knowing the person for that.” Transphobia from students was expressed in a litany of ways.

There were also reports of homophobia and transphobia towards students among school staff. Ms. Janelle recalled when a colleague called a student a “bulldagger”:

...we had a student ... I don't know how they identified ... she...got called a bulldagger by a teacher. ... which is a term that used to be accepted in the Black community ... but is kind of used by older Black lesbians, like butchier [*sic*] lesbians and is not accepted for straight people to say at all. ... for her to say that in the hallway, ‘Just a bulldagger!’ ... loud and proud and ... get no reprimand...

In another incident, Ms. Janelle heard a different staff member make a comment towards a student who used they/them pronouns. She explained, “...she [the staff member] said, ‘I told *her* [student] ... that *she* was too pretty to be a lesbian.’” In this example, Ms. Janelle noted that the staff member not only invalidated their gender identity by using incorrect pronouns, but also perpetuated stereotypes about the appropriate appearance of lesbians.

Intersections with Race and Religion. The intersection of race and religion was noted by participants in relation to homophobia. Ms. Haley recalled overhearing a student discussing how homosexuality was against their religion. She shared, “I remember ... somebody [a student] clearly parroting something that they heard at home about, like, being gay is bad because God doesn't like it ... referring to a religious ... reasoning.” Hope, a Black and Latina student, also observed this intersection. She explained, “...other kids [at school], they’re like, really in the Christian mindset, and it’s like, ‘Mm [negative], you shouldn’t be gay.’” She further connected these religious beliefs to race,

explaining that her school was “a very Black environment” and was less accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals, in part due to the influence of Christianity.

Race and transphobia also intersected. Although Hope was unaware of any openly transgender students at her school, she perceived that they would not be accepted, explaining, “...my school is full of Black students and Black teachers that don’t understand things like that [gender diversity]. None of the students had that [being transgender] going on.” Ms. Janelle, a queer Black and Latina teacher connected transphobia within the Black community to the strains of racism. She described:

...it was honestly mostly Black teachers who were the ones being transphobic ... which I don't want to speak for all Black folks, but sometimes with the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, sometimes like queer identities can be picked on or ... like that's not something they want to do. Like, we're already struggling with this, why would you do that too?

However, Ms. Janelle also emphasized that this was not a universal experience, but instead a personal one. She continued, “Not saying that's everyone. ... it's my experience growing up in the family that I'm in.” Participants noticed how race and religion complicated transphobia and homophobia in a complex way.

Cisheteropatriarchy was a powerful force within the school system. Within this system, expectations of masculinity and femininity as well as heterosexuality resulted in a range of detrimental experiences for students who strayed from the norm, ranging from becoming subject to harmful rumors to homophobic name-calling to misgendering. This regulation often occurred at the interpersonal level. However, reinforcing these expectations around gender and sexuality were not limited to the interpersonal level, but also impacted students at the school-level, specifically through formal school regulation.

Part II: Formal School Regulation

Formal school regulations and enforcement were an avenue for regulating and/or resisting cisheteropatriarchy within schools. More specifically, formal regulation and enforcement through discipline and academics, dress code policies, TIX, and gender diversity policy and practices emerged. These topics are described in this section.

Discipline and Academics

Perhaps more than any other theme, there was a lack of consensus on whether students were treated differently based on gender in school, specifically as it relates to discipline and academic expectations. There were participants who did not perceive a gender disparity in school treatment. Jesse explained, "...they [the school] don't really treat girls and boys any differently, like, in how they talk to them." Tyler, from the same school, described a similar perception, "...mainly the same treatment is dealt [*sic*] to everyone." Sandy, at a different school, also perceived equal treatment from teachers. She shared, "They [teachers] treat them [female students] like anyone else. They expect them, just like anyone else, to ... be in class and sit ... good ... and boys too." In comparison to Jesse, Tyler, and Sandy, who described gender-neutral treatment, Kaitlyn described her treatment as not only equal, but affirming. She explained, "I don't ever feel like I'm being, like, torn down for my gender [at school], if anything, I feel like ... I'm being acknowledged ... like gender things are acknowledged from my experience." These participants perceived relatively equal treatment at school; however, others perceived that treatment of students differed based on student gender and/or context.

Disciplining Female Students. Some students reported that male students were disciplined less than female students. Anton described his perception of the varying

expectations, explaining, "...as a boy it'll [school will] be fine, I guess. But as a girl, you have to watch what you do, watch what you say, et cetera." Anton believed the behavior of female students was closely monitored. Renee similarly reported a double standard in the level of surveillance female students experienced in the bathroom. They explained:

I feel like the teachers don't really monitor the guys as much. Like, the girls' bathroom, they're always checking it. ... But I don't really see them doing that with the guys' bathrooms ... or like, really saying anything about it. ... They'll [teachers will] always be checking the girls' bathroom to see if they're smoking [marijuana or vaping] But it's the guys that have the stuff.

This differential was particularly salient as Renee reported that male students were more often the ones breaking this rule. In addition to general monitoring, Hope believed the behavior of female students was corrected much quicker. She explained, "... [teachers give] multiple chances for the dudes that's being loud and disruptive, but if a girl's having a conversation with her friend, it was ... immediately, 'Hey you need to stop talking!'" As an example, Avery recalled putting her head down in class and the teacher response that followed. She shared, "... [when I put my head down] the teacher told me to pick my head up, but he didn't tell none of the boys that." Despite many male students also putting their head down in class, Avery was singled out due to her gender.

When behavior took on a sexual element, however slight, some participants perceived that female students were even more likely to be punished. Hope recounted an experience from middle school where a male student hugged her (initially with consent), but then would not let go despite her asking him to stop. The teacher noticed and immediately criticized Hope, but not her male classmate. She recalled, "...in that situation he [the male student] got off scot-free, nobody told him nothing [*sic*]. But she [the teacher] brought me outside of the classroom in the hallway and basically told me I had no respect for myself." The teacher then called home to report the behavior, leading

to more criticism. Hope continued, "...he [mom's boyfriend] ... ended up telling me ... 'I'm getting told that you in [*sic*] school hugging on little boys.' Mind you, this whole situation came from him [the male student] not letting me go." Not only did the male student violate Hope's boundaries, she was then blamed for this situation both at school and at home. In many situations, female students were closely monitored and treated more harshly, especially when behaviors had a sexual component.

Disciplining Male Students. By contrast, many participants perceived that male students were disciplined more than their female peers. Jenna described a differential in how teachers spoke to students. She explained, "...when teachers are talking to someone [students] individually ... there's sometimes a different tone ... more like sweet sounding if it's a girl and more ... aggressive if it's a guy, but I don't think that's always true." In general, Jenna perceived female students to be spoken to with more kindness by teachers. Christian, who attended the same school, described how his female peers would receive more leeway. He explained, "They'll [teachers will] just ... give out detentions [to male students] way more ... like straight to the detention ... no warnings, just straight to detention, and they, like, favor the girls." For Christian, the immediate escalation to detention with male students was evidence of teacher favoritism towards female students.

The disproportionate number of male students being punished was backed by concrete data in some schools. Christian, who was frequently punished at school, recalled noticing the gender differential during detention. He shared about his most recent detention, explaining, "Like one [of the 10 students in detention] was a girl but ... she just had work to make up." He continued to explain that the remaining nine students were all male and that this gender make-up was typical. Tyler, who rarely was punished at

school, also noticed this discrepancy. He shared, “They're mostly boys [who are sent out of class] ...but there are some girls that go [out of class] as well.” Christian and Tyler observed that male students received more consequences than their female counterparts.

Participants sometimes attributed this differential in discipline not to teacher enforcement, but the type and severity of behaviors exhibited by students. Sandy contrasted this difference, “...most teachers ... do not accept this behavior [misbehaving] and the boys are less subtle about it than the girls are, so they ... are always the ones getting in trouble.” Sandy gave an example, sharing, “... [female students] talk during class a lot, but ... it's not like they're like standing up, yelling, screaming, shouting [like their male peers].” Common misbehaviors by female students were less disruptive; therefore, they did not elicit the same level of enforcement from teachers.

A combination of teacher bias and more misbehavior may also have contributed. For example, Martin described how a few male students were responsible for the vast majority of behavioral issues in class, resulting in teachers expecting misbehavior from all male students. Martin explained, “...sometimes the boys do badder things [*sic*], but when the girls do badder things [*sic*], they're [teachers are] used to them [female students] just being better. So they don't go as hard ... on them.” He perceived that male students were grouped together by teachers related to behavior, leading to an individual male student being judged more harshly for a minor misbehavior. He continued:

...when another one [male student] gets in trouble that rarely gets in trouble, they're [teachers are] more mad [*sic*] at them, because the other boys already got in trouble a lot. And it's like having to talk to them again, if it was another boy that already got in trouble several times. So, it's easier on the girls than us...

When teachers inadvertently generalized on gender lines, the frequent misbehavior of a few male students led to less patience for all male students. Indeed, many participants

reported male students were disciplined more at school, although the reasons for the discrepancy (e.g., bias, worse behavior) varied.

Intersections with Race. Gender was deeply intertwined with race when it came to discipline. A white male student, Christian, commented on his observation that Black students were treated more harshly than white students in class. He shared an example:

Like, if like a white person talks and says like something, like she'll [the teacher will] say "Ope [*sic*] ... don't talk next time." But if ... a Black person says something in our class, they'll be like ... "Ope [*sic*], lunch detention. Don't do that again or else I'll send you to the office."

Christian consistently described how male students were punished more than female students in the aggregate, but he was careful to point out that female students of color were also targeted. He shared, "...sometimes ... female students of a different race get in trouble." White female students specifically were favored at Christian's school.

The intersection of race and gender contributed to teachers' perceptions of students. Avery described her experiences as a Black woman at school:

...the first time I mess up, it's like, "Oh, I told you." Like, say I mess up in school They're [teachers are] going to tell my mom, "I ... told you. Oh, you should have been getting on her." This, this, and that. ... As soon as I mess up, it's a problem. But when I do good [*sic*], nobody congratulates me. ... Nobody supports me. But soon as I do bad, ... it's a big deal.

Teachers watched closely for mistakes, while ignoring successes. A Black male participant, Anton, shared that "boys are kind of seen as ticking bombs" and aggressive at his school. He shared, "...as Black men, you're seen as aggressive and violent And they [teachers] think that the talking back and arguing is going to escalate." Anton elaborated on how this expectation of aggression was expressed by teachers:

Like, they're [teachers are] waiting for you to get in a fight, they're waiting for you to say something disrespectful, and they're just so quick to give you a punishment for it. They're so quick to suspend you or give you a detention ... or send you to ISS ... just to get you out of the classroom. ... They automatically

kind of see you as a deterrent to the class or to the education. *[long pause]* So like, they're very quick to get you out of the way.

Anton experienced teachers as watching him closely, specifically for signs of aggression.

A Black and Hispanic female student, Hope, also noticed this dynamic of assumed aggression on the part of male students. She explained, "...if they [male students] say something, it was automatically, like, sounded aggressive to the teacher or something. ...

But the same thing could've been said for girls, so I can't really say it's a boy thing."

Although Hope noticed this dynamic, she described female students as also perceived as aggressive by teachers, possibly negating any gender differential.

These observations were not limited to students. Ms. Janelle, who worked at a predominantly Black school, perceived that some teachers assumed the worst of male students while simultaneously overlooking the needs of female students. She explained:

... [I've noticed] teachers getting really excited when they had a classroom that had more girls than boys. Boys were going to have behavior issues. Girls weren't, even though that was not necessarily true. ... Believing in the inherent ... intelligence of a lot of the girls easier than they did in some of the boys. There's also ... assumptions of, "This boy has ADHD, he moves too much." And they're just a seven-year-old boy. Not paying attention to girls who ... are showing ADHD signs ... because it shows up differently in them, but it's not as disruptive.

From Ms. Janelle's perspective, teacher assumptions contributed to underestimating male students. This disparity in behavior was reflected in statistics at one school. A white school professional, Ms. Angela, shared that Black male students were more likely to be suspended and sent out of class. She shared:

...the cliché we know in many schools is that ... our Black boys are over ... penalized or over ... punished ... they're in trouble more than our other [students], either white girls, white boys, Black girls. ... We've seen it [the overrepresentation of Black boys in discipline actions] in our [school's] data. Like if you pull our suspension data ... or ... [the in-school punishment] room where ... they're pulled out of class. ... The data reflects that it's mostly Black boys who go there.

Internal school data confirmed the disproportionate discipline of Black male students.

The intersection of race and gender of the teacher also impacted discipline practices. A Black female student, Avery, gave an example:

...male teachers' going to discipline those ... Black male students. [Be]cause a Black man ... not always, but those Black [male] teachers at my school, they always want to see those young Black men excel in life. So they're [Black male teachers are] going to be harder on them [male students] than female teachers who think everything they do is funny and cute.

Female teachers were lenient, but Black male teachers held Black male students to higher standards, as perceived by Avery.

This drive to uplift Black male students was related to the threat of gun violence in the community, gun violence that especially impacted male students. A Black female teacher, Ms. Tracy, shared about several middle school male students at her school who all suffered gun wounds within a brief timespan, with one student dying. She shared:

...once a child is so far gone, it's only so much that we [teachers] can do. ... They [the school] have teachers ... who used to be in the streets, but then they changed their life and they went to college and graduated and now they're doing good for themselves. And even when we have ... people on our [school staff] who could reach them at that level, because they knew the type of things that they were doing, and they was [*sic*] like, "Been there, done that," even they still couldn't even reach them.

Ms. Tracy's account of this tragedy gives context to the looming potential for community violence particularly impacting Black male students and the extreme difficulty teachers face in helping students succeed.

Disciplining LGBTQ+ Youth. In addition to sex and race disparities in school discipline, there were also disparities related to sexuality and gender identity. Participants recounted examples where students with complex gender identities were treated differently than their cisgender peers. Avery observed, "...some of the teachers are very homophobic ... they'll, like, be mean to the child just because they're transgender, or just because they identify as they/them." She elaborated with a concrete example:

They'll [teachers will] talk to you [students] about your grade ... if you're failing. They'll be like, "Okay, why are you failing? Let's do this to help you." [But with] a transgender child ... a teacher that's homophobic, ... they won't even care. They'll just be like, "Okay, they're failing my class, they're just gonna [*sic*] fail."

Avery perceived that some teachers who were normally willing to help students would not put the same effort in with transgender students. By contrast, Colby perceived there was a handful of teachers who actually treated them better because they were nonbinary. They shared, "People [teachers] are just kind of nicer to me a little bit. That's ... outside of the other teachers that, like, don't take my gender ... seriously. So, I just get a little better treatment than other people." Aside from the teachers who misgendered them, other teachers at Colby's school were not only fair, but kind.

At some schools, no discrepancy in how students with complex gender identities were treated was observed. Corinne shared, "They [teachers] don't really care. They'll just treat them [transgender and nonbinary students] as equally [*sic*]." Tyler echoed this thought, although this surprised him, given the historical context. He explained, "It seems like they're [transgender and nonbinary students are] treated kind of equally, which definitely has not seemed the case for a very long time." Notably, these sentiments were based on observations from cisgender students, not firsthand accounts.

Student sexuality was also relevant. Ms. Lauren noticed that some teachers reacted differently to public displays of affection (PDA) based on the perceived sexuality of the students. She recalled how when one teacher witnessed PDA between a male and female student, she dismissed it, but when two female students played together, this same teacher expressed discomfort:

...that same older teacher [who dismissed the PDA from a male and female student] saw two girls who were ... playing at recess and she was like, "Ooh, they're a little too close for me." And made, like, an uncomfortable face. And for me, I'm like, "I know what you mean by that." ... And like why is that really

perverse to you, but ... a girl sitting in a boy's lap at recess where you can't see her hands, isn't?"

Ms. Lauren perceived her colleague's comments as homophobic. By contrast, Ms. Darcy shared how her school equally enforced PDA rules with all students:

...we have kids that come to middle school ... coming out, openly identifying in all sorts of ways fluidity, we have all of that. And we're like, "Great. No PDA." ... At the end of the day ... I don't care who you're kissing. Just don't kiss them in [school].

PDA was against school rules, regardless of the students' sexuality. Although accounts varied, sexuality and gender identity impacted discipline practices in some schools.

Academic Expectations. Classroom expectations around academic performance were similarly impacted by gender. Anton also noticed a gender differential on available academic opportunities at his school. He shared, "...getting into programs seems to be easy as a boy. ... Even when it's not sports, when it's ... academic, I feel like those opportunities are given to boys first." Kaitlyn offered a concrete example:

...there's [*sic*] more assumptions that ... [male students] automatically ... have the ability to do something. ... I've heard ... math teachers say that like, "He wasn't really originally doing that great," but they would just put him in math honors ... because of the perception ... "Oh, he's a white guy, we'll put him in here, he should be doing well."

In this example, a male student was given an opportunity to join a more challenging class despite poor past performance. This gender differential presented itself not necessarily by holding female students back, but instead by pushing male students forward.

There was also discussion of career opportunities. Ms. Darcy recalled a time when female students were actively discouraged from pursuing certain fields. She shared:

...when I went to school, I had actual teachers who were telling me, "Don't worry. You don't ... need to take math. You're a girl, you're going to get married." Like literally ... I'm not that old, but I'm old enough where like, that was normative. ... Like that's a non-issue [now].

Ms. Darcy perceived this type of discouragement as uncommon in contemporary times, describing it as a “non-issue.” Contradicting this claim, Anton shared a recent account of this exact behavior, stating, “...they [teachers] really believe in gender roles. ... A lot of the students at the school feel discouraged from following certain paths because of what teachers at the school told them.” Anton illustrated with an example:

...they [teachers] told them [female students] to take the [statistics] class and pay attention because they needed to pass the class in order to graduate, but not to worry about ... the AP tests ... because ... that's ... a male's work ... math and engineering.

Although perhaps more subtle than Ms. Darcy's own experience in school, Anton had personally witnessed female students being discouraged away from certain fields.

Overall, gender discrepancies were described in academic expectations, school discipline, or both. These discrepancies intertwined in complicated ways with race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The contexts in which discrepancies arose were varied and sometimes contradictory. Nonetheless, participants illuminated the power held by the school in supporting or resisting cisheteropatriarchy through these practices.

Dress Code Policies

Another form of formal school regulation that directly related to gender was dress code policies and enforcement. Although the interview guide did not explicitly ask about dress code, over half of the student participants ($n=11$, 61.11%) nonetheless reported at least one aspect of their school policy and/or enforcement was biased against female students. Meanwhile, only three students (16.67%) perceived their school's policy and/or enforcement as fair and the remaining students ($n=4$, 22.22%) did not discuss dress code.

Not only was dress code frequently discussed, it was considered by some to be a key issue. Jesse shared, “...the things that are most noticeable ... in discrimination

between genders is ... the dress code.” Jenna, a student at a different school, shared a similar sentiment, explaining, “...I think that’s [the dress code is] the only issue that I have that is ... directly related to gender.” Given the clear perception of the impact of dress code policies, it is imperative to examine the written policies around this issue.

Formal School Policy. Every focal school regulated student appearance through a written dress code policy. The focal schools were almost evenly spread regarding dress code policy type, although slightly more required a uniform ($n=10$, 55.56%) than not ($n=8$, 44.44%). Macy described how her previous school professed to be less restrictive by not requiring a uniform, but in actuality, having extensive restrictions. She shared, “... [the school] was like, ‘We only have a dress code. There's no uniform.’ But ... the dress code was ... really strict.” Requiring a uniform or not did not necessarily prescribe the level of scrutiny a student may encounter in their dress.

Most written school policies were gender-neutral; however, about a quarter ($n=5$, 27.78%) either split their policy entirely by gender or had at least one gendered rule. These gendered rules were binary with one exception. School F, a high school with a uniform, included separate stipulations about what male students could wear and what female students could wear, and then the clause “Transgender [*sic*]: are required to wear the uniform in accordance with their gender identity.” After, the policy continued, in all caps, “ALL STUDENTS, REGARDLESS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION...”, suggesting a misconception that identifying as transgender was a sexual orientation. Nonetheless, Corinne, a student from this school, referenced the rule in the interview. She explained, “...if you're a guy, you can wear a girl's uniform, or if you're a girl, you can wear the

guy's uniform.” Although this policy was organized using the binary distinction of boy or girl, students were not required to dress according to their sex assigned at birth.

Only half of the schools that required a uniform were gender-neutral ($n=5$, 50.00%), compared to all of the schools without uniforms ($n=8$, 100.00%). Several participants discussed the gender-neutral policies as an intentional effort to be inclusive. Ms. Darcy shared how the school purposefully sorted their dress code by tops and bottoms instead of male and female, “...in our [school] documents ... we don't talk about girls' uniforms, boys' uniforms. We're just like, ‘These are the bottoms. These are the tops.’ Right? If you want to be gender-normative, rock on. If you don't, rock on.” This school made an intentional effort to avoid gendered language within their policy.

Although many policies were written in gender-neutral terms, several clothing items that are often associated with femininity were explicitly disallowed or restricted including make-up ($n=5$, 29.41%), nail décor ($n=3$, 17.65%), and jewelry ($n=10$, 58.82%). Further, several school policies only permitted pants and banned skirts ($n=5$, 29.41%), including one school without a uniform. Hope, a recent graduate, believed only permitting pants was a direct response to student dress. She shared, “I just found out this year, they're [current students are] not allowed to have their skirts anymore because of us, I guess?” Following her graduation, the school had banned wearing skirts.

One school banned purses and bags, leading to issues for students who menstruate. Storm explained the difficult position this put certain students in:

...if you're an assigned female you have to carry feminine products around with you in your binder. And then those can fall out and it's embarrassing. And you can either put them in your locker and then just go to your locker ... and hope no one sees you. ... Or you can hope it doesn't fall out your binder.

Storm perceived that students who menstruate either had to risk embarrassment in front of their peers or risk being disciplined for breaking a school rule and visiting their locker.

Many schools also had regulations intended to regulate the amount of skin shown. Sometimes schools accomplished this through specific rules. For example, School I specified, “Skirts must be worn no higher than two inches above the knee.” Other schools used more vague language in their regulation of exposed skin. For example, School M banned “Clothing that is see-through or exposes an excessive amount of skin (examples include but are not limited to too-short shorts, midriffs, too-low cut tops).” Phrases like excessive, too-short, and low-cut indicated a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate dress, but offered little guidance on where this boundary fell.

Differences Between Schools. To account for school differences, each school was rated on their level of regulation in dress code (low, moderate, high) using the iteratively created codebook described in the methodology. The level of regulation within the policies was nearly evenly divided between low ($n=5$, 27.78%), moderate ($n=6$, 33.33%), and high ($n=7$, 38.89%). Appendix AB, Table AB1 displays how each school policy was categorized related to the three variables: policy type, gender regulation, and level of regulation. Several differences emerged between schools.

The three dress code variables were related in complex ways. For example, nearly all of the gendered schools ($n=4$, 80.00%) were categorized as high regulation, with the remaining policy categorized as moderate ($n=1$, 20.00%). Further, uniform policies were proportionately more often also policies with high levels of regulation ($n=5$, 50.00%) and less often policies with low levels of regulation ($n=1$, 10.00%) compared to policies that did not require a uniform ($n=2$, 25.00% and $n=4$, 50.00%, respectively).

Additionally, the student body in uniform schools differed compared to the student body in schools without a uniform. The majority of schools requiring uniforms ($n=7$, 70.00%) composed of a majority Black student body¹, compared to approximately one-third of schools without a uniform ($n=3$, 37.50%). Even more stark, the majority of schools requiring uniforms ($n=8$, 80.00%) had a high proportion of low-income students², compared to only one quarter of schools without a uniform ($n=2$, 25.00%).

Differences related to the school environment also emerged. Nearly all of the schools without a uniform ($n=7$, 87.50%) reported a low suspension rate³ compared to schools that required a uniform ($n=3$, 30.00%). Furthermore, although I was unable to confirm the presence of a Genders and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) or a gender-neutral bathroom at any of the schools with a uniform, half of the schools without a uniform had a confirmed GSA ($n=4$, 50.00%) and a confirmed gender-neutral bathroom ($n=4$, 50.00%). See Appendix AB, Table AB2 for a summary of the proportion of uniform policies and non-uniform policies across measures.

Distractions. Schools justified their dress code policies in a myriad of ways. One of the most common ways that schools justified their policies was as a way to reduce distractions ($n=8$, 44.44%). Policies that referenced distractions did not use gendered language in the clause; nonetheless, students experienced the clause as highly gendered. Hope described how her school banned clothing to prevent distractions for male students. She shared, "...the surface reason for it [dress codes] is always, you know, for little boys

¹ Over 50% of students identified as Black or African American in the 2021-2022 school year.

² Over 75% of students were classified as "economically disadvantaged" in the 2021-2022 school year.

³ Less than 5% of the student body was suspended in the 2021-2022 school year.

and stuff like that.” Using the language of “little boys”, the presumed innocence of male students is emphasized. Anton overheard teachers talking about his female peers and their dress. He shared, “... [the teachers were talking about how] they [female students] want to show off or how they can't be wearing things like that because ... they're distracting.” Not only did these teachers consider clothing distracting, they further assumed that students used their dress to “show off.” Students described a highly gendered ban on female students distracting male students through clothing, not a gender-neutral ban.

Hope described this language of distraction as teaching a gendered lesson about responsibility and self-control. She shared:

They [teachers] feel like boys are just animals that can't control themselves and that's just what boys do. And that girls need to cover themselves up so that they don't have to deal with it. But it's like ... first off why are you teaching us that we should have to cover up for a boy to control himself? How about you teach the boy to control himself? It's so fucking weird. ... The boys don't even mention it. You're the first person to tell me this. Why are you in my face?

Despite the outrage expressed by Hope about the implication that female students are responsible for male behavior, this was commonly reported, with one exception. One high school, School H, flipped the onus of responsibility, stating, “We believe all students and staff should understand that they are responsible for managing their own personal ‘distractions’ without regulating individual students’ clothing/self-expression.” This school required individuals to take responsibility for their own ability to focus.

Targeting Female Students in Enforcement. Despite policy stipulations using gender-neutral language, enforcement differentially impacted female students. Jesse observed this difference. He explained, “...to be honest, this year I feel like the dress code has been much more strict for girls.” Jesse perceived dress code enforcement to be directed at female students. Renee, who attended a uniform school, provided an example:

...I've seen guys ... they'll just take it off [their uniform shirt] and they'll just go about their day. ... With ... females ... you could just be wearing the wrong shirt and they'll be like, "Hey, we see that!" But then ... there's a guy that just ran past you wearing a T-shirt.

Teachers were more apt to notice and respond to dress violations by female students.

Schools could be explicit in the focus on female students. Sandy recalled a time when all female students were called into an assembly to discuss appropriate dress prior to an upcoming school event. She shared, "... [the school] called the girls before [a school event] to an assembly to be like, 'During [the school event], we don't want to see any inappropriate [clothing].'" Sandy noted that a similar assembly was not called for male students. She continued, "...you [the school] just brought the girls in and then didn't bring the boys in.... You obviously just didn't care enough about trying to enforce this on everybody, but more enforce it on the girls." The message received by Sandy was that the dress guidelines were for female students alone.

Personal recollections of being disciplined for dress at school were shared. In one example, Macy recalled being disciplined for wearing a shirt she outgrew. She explained:

... I was sitting down and so the back of my shirt was riding up a lot. ... When I stood up ... my teacher ... saw me and he was like, "Why is your shirt ... so short?" And I was like, "Oh, it's...I don't know." I didn't have a clear answer for him at that time. And he was like, "Well, I might have to give you a dress code."

This teacher then wrote up Macy for the violation. Jenna, from the same school, was disciplined once for having rips in her pants. She recalled:

...the [administrator] kind of had a big reaction [to the dress code violation] ... I remember her saying like, "In what world do you think you can wear ripped jeans?" ... Like, "I can't believe you made it this far in a day without getting dress coded!"

In both examples, school professionals asked questions of these students that were largely rhetorical and instead were perceived by students as a judgement on their dress.

Sometimes dress code compliance was systematically checked at a school-wide level, resulting in a large number of violations. Kaitlyn, who previously attended a school that did not permit “skinny” pants, recalled, “...one of the teachers ... went by and started kicking out [of line] ... so many girls specifically, ... like, ‘You have skinny khakis, you have skinny khakis.’ She did that to, like, a bunch of girls.” Ultimately, none of the students were disciplined as an administrator later realized that students were not actually violating the rule, but instead, some students’ pants simply fit tighter due to their body types. With or without punishment, this public inspection singled out female students and brought significant attention to the fit of clothing on their body.

In some examples, school professionals were perceived as inappropriate in their enforcement. Anton described how when the students took a field trip that necessitated wearing swimsuits, teachers were blatant in their disapproval. He explained, “...when the girls showed up out of dress code, the teachers really made it a show. ... They didn't hide what they were feeling. ... They were calling girls ‘hoes’ or ‘fast’. ... It was ... really aggressive and venomous.” Anton found this name-calling highly inappropriate. Anton similarly recalled seeing a male teacher physically tuck in a female student’s shirt. He explained, “I remember one time there was a girl who didn't have her shirt tucked in and a teacher, like, physically tucked it in for her and it felt kind of weird.” Anton continued:

...they [the female student] didn't say anything, I guess they were kind of shocked. You could kind of see it on their face. ... It happened, like, so quick and he [the teacher] did it [tucked in her shirt] while he was talking, like, so smoothly ... You couldn't really say anything because he made it seem so normal, I guess.

Anton was disturbed by the male teacher touching his female classmate in this way. The sexualized name-calling (e.g., ho, fast) and physical boundary violation by teachers were enacted as a practice of enforcing the school’s dress code policy.

Intersections and Sexualization. Participants pointed out differential treatment in dress code enforcement not only related to gender, but also related to race, age, and body type. Hope talked about the difficulty of finding appropriate clothes for a school event that required business casual dress. She explained:

...mind you as a Black student, most Black girls are very early developed. So a lot of them do have big boobs or big butts and thick thighs. ... They can't control that, there's not many clothes that are business casual for us these days, that could cover that up.

Further, dress code violations were administered primarily by Black female teachers:

...the female teachers are heavy on it [enforcing the dress code]. And it's the female, Black teachers at that And it's weird because like, you're the main people that's supposed to be on our [Black female students] side, but you're sexualizing us. No one else is sexualizing us but y'all.

Hope situated her Black female teachers as potential allies at school, but instead of providing this support, they further contributed to her sexualization.

Age was also discussed. Jenna was uncomfortable with banning leggings for young children. She explained, "...telling a 5-year-old girl that she can't wear leggings ... seems a little weirder to me." However, waiting to ban leggings until a certain grade came with another set of implications. Macy shared her reaction to her former school's policy of banning leggings after a certain grade-level. She explained, "It was also weird to me that it [banning leggings] just started ... in middle school as if ... everyone had ... a flip in their brain and everyone's like, 'Oh my god! Leggings are so sexy!'" These examples situate certain clothing, such as leggings, as only provocative when the wearer reaches a certain age. Determining that age was fraught with uncomfortable implications.

Body size was also a major element of dress code enforcement. Hope recalled how fuller-bodied girls were singled out by teachers:

...the thick girls, they [teachers] were just on them, like hard ... in my opinion ... basically shaming. ... Instead of pulling them to the side ... like, “Hey your skirt is a little too short for me. Can you pull it down?” They’ll stop them in the hallway that’s full of people and pull it down for them and ... embarrass them or they’ll like, say very loudly, “Oh, fix your skirt.”

According to Hope, not only did “thick” girls draw more attention, their enforcement included public shaming and physical adjustments. Female students with large breasts were especially targeted. Jenna explained, “...people who ... have more...sexualized bodies, in that maybe they have like bigger boobs. It’s usually those people [that] are more on their [teachers] radar and experience it [being disciplined for dress] more.” Student body type impacted both level of surveillance and teacher response.

The sexualization of female students’ bodies combined with the impetus to reduce distractions for male students not only stigmatized female students, but also male students. Anton explained, “...it also feels horrible as a male student because it kind of feels like the teachers don't trust us.” He elaborated, “I don't want to be labeled. Like, they [teachers] think we won't be able to control ourselves And I feel like they're kind of labeling me as a predator ... and that kind of hurts.” Although Anton did not fully equate his own experience to that of his female classmates, he also perceived male students as villainized as a byproduct of his school’s dress code policy and enforcement.

Self-Regulation of Dress. Self-regulation of dress occurred outside of the policy regulations. Renee shared how a female peer with large breasts stopped participating in dress down days after experiencing repeated disciplinary violations. They recalled:

...and she [female student with large breasts] would get dress coded literally every dress down day we had. And she ... stopped dressing down because, like, no matter what [she was disciplined for her clothing] ... she literally wore sweatpants and a ... T-shirt and a jacket one day and ... still got dress coded.

Dress down days, a common incentive and celebration in schools with uniform policies, were not worth the risk of being disciplined for this student.

Self-regulation of dress was also used to avoid unwanted attention. Avery shared about her choice to regulate her dress during practice for a non-contact sport. She shared:

...I don't like when people talk about my body. So ... I cover up [during practice]. Like I don't feel comfortable wearing it [leggings]. But, like, that's standard workout clothes. ... I don't wear workout clothes to practice anymore, because I feel uncomfortable [be]cause we be [*sic*] around boys.

Forgoing standard workout attire was a strategy Avery used to minimize harassment.

Even school staff self-regulated dress. Ms. Angela shared that she regulated her own clothing choices as a way to avoid judgement from her colleagues. She explained:

...tomorrow I'm going on [an outdoor] field trip. It is going to be hot ... my internal dialogue is going, "Can I wear shorts tomorrow or is that inappropriate to wear on the field trip?" So that gendered existence still happens, right? ... I'm worried because I'm a woman that, God forbid, I wore shorts that are too short, someone's going to look at me sideways for wearing that outfit.

This fear of being looked at "sideways" was based on past experiences, as Ms. Angela had personally overheard school staff discussing the attire of her female colleagues. She shared, "...I have heard people [school professionals] be like, 'I can't believe they're [female colleague] wearing that', or 'That's inappropriate', or 'That's very revealing.'" In these examples, students and staff did not regulate their clothing to conform to school policy, but instead to avoid experiencing discipline, sexual harassment and gossip.

Consequences. When students violated dress code policies, consequences varied by school. Although not all written policies included information on consequences for violations, half included clauses that required students to fix or repair the infraction ($n=9$, 50.00%). Ms. Angela shared that at her school, "there's ... not really consequences for dress." Instead, school staff members directed students to cover themselves. She shared:

...a teacher or an admin will say [to a student out of dress code] like, “Hey ... your belly can't be showing ... fix this.” And they'll either give them a shirt or put a sweatshirt around them or something to address ... the belly hanging out or ... their shorts being too short or whatever is happening that they don't agree with.

Although there was no actual disciplinary action, Ms. Angela critiqued the implications of what these corrections communicated to students, explaining, “I think that obviously the issue is ... we see fault in ... what the little girls are wearing.” For Ms. Angela, the issue was not being disciplined, but instead, criticizing female students.

At some schools, the process of being disciplined resulted in missed instructional time. Jenna recalled being disciplined in middle school, “...it was scary ... very anxiety-inducing. ... They [school staff] take you out of class and ... they made me call my parents and have them bring ... pants and I couldn't go back to class until I got those.” In addition to the emotional toll, instruction was missed as Jenna sat out of class, waiting.

Only two of the focal schools explicitly protected instructional time within their written policies. School D, an elementary school, specified, “Administrators and staff must not remove the student from the instructional process or send a student home for inappropriate attire.” However, this policy undermined itself in a different document when it stated, “These [free dress] guidelines must be followed or a student will be *sent home* and lose the privilege to participate in free dress [emphasis added].” As sending a student home would certainly involve missing instructional time, it is difficult to decipher whether this school actually safeguards instructional time.

Suspensions were also invoked. Three schools included suspensions as a possible consequence in their policies. School J, a high school with a uniform, specified that “students out of uniform will be retained in ISS [in-school suspension]” and “will not be allowed to enter class.” At School G, another high school with a uniform, if students

were unable to fix their uniform infraction, they would be "...escorted to the [office] for [in-school suspension] until a parent or guardian brings a school uniform for the student." School A, a school without a uniform, specified, "Repeated dress code violations will result in disciplinary action ranging from after-school detentions to a suspension (for willful disobedience and intentional disrespect for the rules)." Notably, suspensions were formally mentioned in schools with ($n=2$) and without ($n=1$) a uniform.

Only one student, Corinne, personally shared that she had ever been threatened with suspension for a uniform violation. This threat occurred when she arrived at school with shoes that were not the correct color, as specified in the uniform policy. She shared, "One of the coaches is like, 'You better have them shoes [*sic*] on tomorrow or else you going to ... have detention or be suspended for two days.'" However, Corinne's school did not list suspension as a possible consequence for uniform violations in their policy documents, underscoring the possibility that other focal schools in the sample may also threaten and/or implement consequences not explicitly written in their policy.

Consequences for dress code violations could inconvenience families. Half of the focal school policies included a clause involving parental notification ($n=9$, 50.00%). Renee reported that if a student came out of uniform, "...they'll [the school will] make you change or they'll send you home or they'll ... try to call your parent and they have to come bring you clothes." Parents were responsible for delivering and/or purchasing replacement items for otherwise functional clothing. When Corinne, the student threatened with suspension for her shoes, informed her mother about the violation, her mom expressed annoyance at having to replace the shoes. The student recalled, "She's [student's mother] like, 'That's some bullshit because you already got some good shoes

that you wore at school and they're comfortable enough.” Corinne perceived her mother as more upset by the policy than the behavior. The range of consequences across schools varied, with many requiring a significant amount of time and effort from students, school staff, or even parents, in attempting to comply with the rules.

Exceptions. Although there were many examples of the school enforcing unfair dress code policies, there were many counter-examples. Two male students from the same school (School B: no uniform, low regulation, gender-neutral) perceived their school dress code as lenient. Martin shared that the only rule involved closed-toed shoes, but that school staff was not likely to enforce it. He explained, “...if you don't wear closed-toed shoes to our school, it's mostly just on you. ... They [the school] won't tell you to, like, go back and get different shoes.” George listed a few more “basic” rules, as he referred to them, such as bans on midriffs and hats, but clarified that “it [dress code enforcement] isn't super strict in that way.” However, other students from School B did find the rules to be biased, including Jesse, who suspected his male peers were either ignorant or apathetic to the discrepancy, sharing, “...if I brought it up [the dress code] with my [male] friends, they'd be like “Oh yeah, that's true!” But ... none of my friends would do anything ... [or] would ever bring it up to me.” According to Jesse, students' gender likely influenced their awareness of and interest in possible discrimination in dress code policies.

Kaitlyn described her current school (School E: no uniform, low regulation, gender-neutral) as less strict in policy and enforcement, especially compared to her prior school (School O: uniform, high regulation, gendered). She shared, “...I've never seen anyone get dress coded, I think the teachers are pretty ... chill about it.” However, she still critiqued the dress code policy itself, which banned midriffs, as discriminatory.

Kaitlyn shared, "...I think that's [the dress code policy is] pretty targeted towards girls, I'd say. That's another thing [about my school] as well that's not my favorite." Although her new school had fewer regulations and more lax enforcement, she still opposed the policy.

Many students identified school dress code as a site of differential treatment within their schools, most often related to gender, but further intersected with race, body size, and age. Dress code policies were often justified as reducing distractions, but according to some participants, actually caused distractions and furthermore, sexualized female students. Despite the many examples of inequitable policies and enforcement, there were also school policies that resisted this inequity.

Title IX and Nondiscrimination

In contrast to most school policies, which were typically gender-neutral, one type of policy addressed gender specifically: TIX, the federal law banning sex discrimination in schools. Every focal school was at least in partial compliance with TIX; however, one school (School M) only referenced employees, failing to explicitly name that the law also applied to students. Every school had the name and contact information of their designated TIX coordinator available; however, when schools were contacted by phone, only three schools (17.65%) provided information consistent with the written policy.

In addition, when TIX coordinators were contacted for study recruitment, one school profession was unaware she was the designated TIX coordinator for her school. She declined to participate, but referred Ms. Angela to the study. Ms. Angela discussed the incident, "... [she] didn't even know she was the TIX person [until contacted for the study]. ... Clearly, we do not do a very good job of recognizing that is a thing and that

there is someone you can go to.” Even though all focal schools listed a designated TIX coordinator, this may not be indicative of true compliance with the law.

The extent that nondiscrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation was explicitly barred in schools was more varied. Nearly half of the schools ($n=8$, 47.06%) barred discrimination based on both, with an additional three schools (17.65%) barring discrimination of either sexual orientation or gender identity. The remaining six schools (35.29%) did not address sexual orientation or gender identity discrimination. Further, discrimination based on sex stereotyping was listed as prohibited under TIX in less than half of the schools ($n=7$, 41.18%) and a specific statement that LGBTQ+ students were also protected under TIX was included in six schools (35.29%).

Other relevant TIX topics addressed within the school documents were mixed. The majority of schools ($n=14$, 82.35%) barred and comprehensively defined sexual harassment under TIX. One additional school (5.88%) noted that sexual harassment was prohibited without including a detailed definition of the term. The remaining two schools (11.76%) did not address sexual harassment. Most schools mentioned dating violence as a form of sexual harassment under TIX ($n=14$, 82.35%); however, only four schools (23.53%) included a detailed dating violence policy within their documents. Three schools (17.65%) included a full policy protecting pregnant and parenting students under TIX and the remaining schools ($n=14$, 82.35%) did not address the topic.

Differences Between Schools. There were many differences between schools relating to TIX. For example, the schools with a dating violence policy ($n=4$, 23.53%) all served students in upper grades (9-12 or K-12). However, the schools with a pregnant or parenting student policy ($n=3$, 17.65%) included two elementary schools (K-8) and a

combined school (K-12), but no high schools. As the depth of information relating to TIX varied significantly between schools, each school was assigned a level of robustness of TIX information (very low, low, moderate, high) using the iteratively created codebook described in the methodology. Schools were most commonly classified as moderate robustness ($n=7$, 41.18%). The remaining schools were spread fairly evenly between very low ($n=3$, 17.65%), low ($n=3$, 17.65%), and high ($n=4$, 23.53%) robustness.

The schools that were rated as very low/low robustness ($n=6$, 35.29%) had several notable differences compared to the schools that were rated as moderate/high robustness ($n=11$, 64.71%). First, differences related to school structure emerged. Elementary schools were proportionately more represented in very low/low policies ($n=4$, 66.67%) compared to moderate/high policies ($n=2$, 18.18%). In addition, schools that were governed at the state-level were proportionately more represented in moderate/high policies ($n=4$, 36.36%) than very low/low policies ($n=1$, 16.67%).

Differences related to school performance and discipline were also observed. Schools with very low/low robustness had a higher proportion of D-rated or F-rated schools ($n=3$, 50.00%) compared to schools with moderate/high robustness ($n=1$, 9.09%). Further, the majority of the very low/low robustness schools ($n=5$, 83.33%) reported a low suspension rate⁴ compared to just under half of the moderate/high robustness schools ($n=5$, 45.45%). Put differently, proportionately, moderate/high robustness schools performed better academically, but also suspended more students, in the aggregate.

⁴ Less than 5% of the student body was suspended in the 2021-2022 school year.

There were also differences related to the make-up of the student body. Most of the schools rated as very low/low robustness ($n=5$, 83.33%) had a majority Black/African American student body⁵, compared to just under half of the schools rated as moderate/high robustness ($n=5$, 45.45%). Further, the majority of schools rated as very low/low robustness ($n=4$, 66.67%) had a student body with a high disability population⁶, compared to approximately a quarter of schools rated as moderate/high robustness ($n=3$, 27.27%). Schools with very low/low robustness ratings were more often majority Black and had a high proportion of students with disabilities, in the aggregate.

Finally, dress code policies also differed. Schools with moderate/high robustness ratings more often required a school uniform ($n=7$, 63.64%) compared to schools with very low/low ratings ($n=2$, 33.33%). In addition, the dress code policies more often had a high level of regulation at the moderate/high robustness schools ($n=6$, 54.55%) compared to the very low/low robustness schools ($n=1$, 16.67%). In this small subset, very low/low robustness schools more often did not require a uniform and had more lenient dress regulations overall, in the aggregate. See Appendix AC, Table AC1 for a comparison of schools with very low/low and moderate/high robustness across variables.

Awareness of TIX. Approximately half of the school policies included information on staff training on TIX ($n=9$, 52.94%). One of the two TIX coordinators in the study, Mr. Ricky, described how school professionals at his school were trained. He shared, "...we do a special one [training] for staff as well in their ... [professional development]. And that is ... multi-time a year. It's not just the beginning of the year."

⁵ Over 50% of students identified as Black/African American in the 2021-2022 school year.

⁶ Over 15% of the student body was classified as having a disability in the 2021-2022 school year.

Ms. Darcy, the other TIX coordinator, described her own training as the coordinator and the training school employees received. She explained, "...I have to sit through a mandatory training ... and lawyers talk to us and ... everyone on [staff] gets to see the same mandatory training." In both cases, staff TIX training occurred at least annually.

Most of the school professionals who were not TIX coordinators ($n=4$, 66.67%); however, did not recall learning about or attending trainings at their respective schools. Ms. Janelle only recently learned of TIX when she started teaching at a new school outside of the city. She explained, "...you know what's funny? This is my first year hearing about Title IX." Despite working for nearly a decade in New Orleans, Ms. Janelle was only taught about TIX when she entered a new district. By contrast, two professionals (33.33%) recalled learning about the law in the school handbook. Teacher Rachel shared, "...I mean, we talk about [TIX], like, it's part of our ... handbook and ... agreement that ... students are not discriminated on." No additional trainings outside of the handbook were mentioned by the school professionals. As Ms. Tracy explained, "...it's [TIX is] just kind of in the handbook. ... We had never gotten like no extra training and stuff on it." Collectively, the participating school professionals who were not TIX coordinators had received little or no training on TIX.

Seven school policies (41.18%) also included information relating to how students would be trained on TIX. However, the vast majority of student participants ($n=14$, 77.78%) reported no knowledge of TIX and did not recall receiving any training on the topic at school. Kendra responded that she had not heard of TIX. After being told about the law in the interview, she answered uncertainly, "...maybe [we talked about TIX] in health class? But I'm not- I don't think so." The remaining four students

(22.22%) had at least some knowledge of TIX, but only one learned about the law from school officials. Kaitlyn recalled a training on sexual harassment that she believed related to TIX. She shared, "...I think it [the training] was ... like who you go to [with a harassment concern] or what the process is and like how it works." Her account confirmed Mr. Ricky's account of student training at the school:

...we [school staff members] go through the whole TIX process of what it is, the definitions ... who the actual team is on campus, and then talk to them really earnestly about ... sexual harassment and sexual assault, and the implications of what could actually ... happen from those charges.

TIX trainings were not often reported by students and the trainings that did occur focused on sexual harassment and assault.

When asked, three students (16.67%) were able to describe TIX without assistance, but their understandings varied. Jenna tentatively suggested, "...I wanna say [TIX is] based in ... discrimination based on gender but maybe more ... in a work place or school environment?" Ezra was also tentative, stating in questioning tone, "TIX is ... I don't want to say outlawing, but basically you cannot discriminate based on ... sexual identity and gender identity? I think. In schools specifically. Right? Is that correct?"

Macy shared her understanding, which demonstrated awareness of lawsuits. explaining:

...it's [TIX is] normally ... a lawsuit that involves ... sexual assault and it also involves ... anything that happened within school. ... That's like the lawsuit you file if you're ... in school and you want to file some sort of lawsuit ... against your school or ... against somebody who you go to school with.

Despite their knowledge, none of these three students learned about TIX from the school, but instead from peers and family members.

In addition to training for school staff members and students, some schools noted their procedures for training parents on the law. Seven school policies (41.18%) included information on how parents and guardians would receive information on TIX. Ms. Darcy

described how she kept parents informed. In addition to the policy being “posted on the website”, she brought it up explicitly when it might apply to a situation. She explained:

...I always say to parents, like ... “You are welcome to do this [file a TIX complaint]. ... You are welcome to pursue this. ... Please let me know. ... Right now, we're dealing with it [the reported issue] this way, but if you would like to do this specific thing and file this kind of complaint ... you have a right to do so.

Ms. Darcy explained that although parents were often concerned about behavior that could be considered sexual harassment, because of the age of the students involved, “...parents don't want to do that [file a complaint under TIX] and so we just deal with it ... as a discipline thing.” Regardless of low interest, Ms. Darcy perceived it was her “responsibility” as the coordinator to inform families of their rights under the law.

TIX Cases.

There were several stories shared about actual or potential TIX violations. Both TIX coordinators interviewed offered some insight into the frequency and types of cases that they encountered. Ms. Darcy shared that investigations were infrequent:

...there was one [TIX] complaint ... in two years. ... The parent did go through and fill out the paper, we did, like, the whole official investigation. Oh my gosh, yes, we did. But it was found to be not sexual harassment. ... Without going into detail ... it was generally not a good thing, but it ... did not meet the bar ... of being a violation.

By contrast, Mr. Ricky reported closer to four or five cases per year, typically involving peer sexual harassment. He encouraged mediation when all parties were willing, as past mediations were successful. He shared, “...almost 100% of it [TIX complaints] does resolve itself [through mediation], even in the ... time that we see them.” Mediation was a time efficient way to resolve complaints, as perceived by Mr. Ricky.

Both coordinators described how TIX cases could be hard to navigate given the developmental ages of their students. Ms. Darcy described how students’ ages, the impact

of culture, and the difficulty in discerning sexual harassment from bullying complicated investigations. She explained, "...the children's age and where we are ... it's complicated. ... We are products of our environments and our culture, and we're all learning. ... Is it bullying, or is it a TIX violation?" Mr. Ricky shared a similar perspective, explaining:

...I don't want to degrade ... what's actually happening ... there have been some serious [TIX] cases where it's just been bad news ... for a lot of people. But the majority of the TIX cases [at our school] ... are boundary issues where it [students] just needs to reeducate.

Both Mr. Ricky and Ms. Darcy emphasized their role in helping students learn from their violations and change the problematic behavior.

Only Macy was able to provide a firsthand account of the TIX process from the student perspective, as she had recently been involved in a sexual harassment complaint involving two female students who were her friends. She described the incident:

... [the complainant] was always ... low key being molested by her [the respondent]. ... She would grab [the complainant's] boobs and she would ... look down her shirt and ... slap her ass. And she thought it was really funny and it wasn't. ... She [the respondent] looked down my shirt once and she would constantly sit on my lap, which normally is not a bad thing. I don't really care ... it doesn't really super bother me, but it was like, very sexual, in a weird way.

Despite Macy also experiencing this harassment personally, she was only a witness in the case. As part of the investigation, she was interviewed. She described her interview:

...they [the investigators] basically just asked me a couple questions about her [the respondent] and ... who was involved with her and ... how she would do things They were very focused on ... the physical aspect of it and ... where she would grab us, how she would speak about our bodies.

Macy was uncertain about the final outcome of the investigation, but she believed that the respondent was suspended for two days as a result of this case.

Despite being involved in the TIX process, Macy reported that no school administrator ever talked to her about TIX explicitly. She explained, "I never have been

spoken to the school [*sic*] about TIX. Even when I've given interviews for TIX cases, they've never told me it was TIX.” Macy reported how she found out the investigation involved TIX. She shared, “...my mom knew it was TIX ... because they [the school] called her and they were like, ‘Do you want to sue TIX? ... Do you want to sue this girl over TIX?’” However, this narrative reflects a misunderstanding of TIX from the school, the parent, and/or Macy, as the school does not have the authority to sue a student over TIX, but instead, is responsible for investigating and responding to student complaints.

After the TIX case, Macy described being “totally suffocated” at her school and ultimately decided to transfer to a new school the next year. From her perspective, one of the most difficult parts of the situation was the realization that she did not fully recognize the severity of the situation until the investigation occurred. She explained, “...I was so mad at myself about not realizing this [the severity of the issue] and ... that was a moment where ... something happened to me ... and ... I didn't fully recognize that at that moment.” Even when the school investigated the incident under TIX, Macy ultimately made the decision to leave her school due in part to the emotional impact.

Peer Sexual Harassment. In addition to Macy’s TIX complaint, there were other examples of peer sexual harassment that were not addressed through TIX. Corinne detailed several examples of unwanted sexual touching from the same male student. She shared about one incident on a bus:

...we [male student and I] got on the bus together, I was sitting down, minding my business, texting my mom [that] I'm on my way home and then ... he put his hand on my thigh and ... I moved his hand back to his side and he kept on manhandling me! I'm like... [*mimes physically removing a hand from her lap*] and then he put his hand under my butt and started pinching it.

After this encounter, Corinne reported this and other incidents to a female security guard at her school. She recalled that the security guard said she would handle the situation,

explaining, "...she's [the security guard is] like, 'All right, let me get him [male student], we'll talk, and ... we'll most likely have to call your mom.' They didn't call my mom!" Nearly two months later, the school still had not contacted Corinne's mom as they said they would and Corinne did not believe that the male student faced any consequences. Although the touching incidents were no longer occurring at the time of the interview, Corinne continued to report leering behavior from this student. She shared, "...he keeps on watching me. Let's get the Holy Spirit on him." Corinne attempted to report the behavior to the school and while there was a response, it was inadequate.

Sexual harassment was also reported in online spaces. Kaitlyn recalled a comment a male student directed at her in the chat box of a breakout room during online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kaitlyn could not remember the exact comment, but recalled, "... [it was] about, like, sucking his dick or ... like giving someone ... a burger to suck their dick." Given the highly graphic nature of the comment, she did not tell her mother until "a long time" after. She vividly recalled the moment when she told her mom:

...it [the sexual harassment incident] came up kind of casually [be]cause we're having a really good conversation and I said like, "Oh, I don't really like the boys [at my school] [be]cause they, like, say weird things." ... And my mom was like, "Wait, what happened?" And ... it became so intense and I was like, "I don't want to say it, I don't want to say it." ... And she's like, "You have to tell me, you have to tell me." And I'm like, "I don't want to, I'm not saying it." And then, finally ... I said it ... I feel, like, so embarrassed to say those words.

Kaitlyn did not report the incident to the school, but she believed that another student in the class may have reported his behavior to the teacher, as he was held back after class. However, the school never followed up with her about the incident.

No male students in the study described firsthand experiences of sexual harassment at school. However, Renee detailed several examples of harassment reported to them by their boyfriend. In one of these incidents, Renee's boyfriend had his picture

taken without consent while dressing in the locker room. They explained, "...somebody took a picture of my boyfriend while he was changing, and ... he was telling them, like, 'Hey, I'm changing, or whatever.' And my boyfriend was naked but he was ... was covering himself." Renee expressed that even though their boyfriend was uncomfortable, it was treated as a joke by his friends. They shared, "...it was funny to them [my boyfriend's friends]. I don't know why violating each other and pushing boundaries is funny to them, but it really is. ... He [my boyfriend] said [to me] he was really uncomfortable and stuff." Renee was unsure if their boyfriend also told his friends that the incident made him uncomfortable; however, from their perception, requests to stop had not stopped this type of behavior in the past. They explained, "...they're [my boyfriend's friends are] pushing boundaries and even like when they tell each other, like, 'Hey, bro. Too far, uncomfortable,' they don't stop." To Renee's knowledge, the picture was never deleted nor was the incident reported.

Students at times minimized or downplayed the sexual harassment that they experienced in schools. When Corinne confided in a friend about the unwanted sexual touching from the male classmate described earlier, her friend suggested the incident might have been traumatizing. However, Corinne clarified, laughing, "No, not really [it was not traumatizing] because... True Crime (laughs)!" Compared to the violations Corinne had seen depicted in the media, she perceived her experience as manageable. Similarly, after Renee extensively described the impact of sexual rumors and ongoing sexual harassment facing students, some of which they had been personally impacted by, they concluded that it could be worse:

It's [school is] not very bad compared to what could happen or like what has happened ... nobody's been raped ... inside of the school ... you're not having

people killing themselves left and right, and it's not super horrible and it's not like we're oppressed.

Even when peer sexual harassment was experienced firsthand by students, the knowledge of the potential for more severe acts of sexual violation minimized the perceived impact.

Staff-Student Harassment. Sexual harassment of students by staff members must also be addressed under TIX. No participant personally reported sexual harassment from school staff firsthand; however, many participants provided secondhand accounts. Ezra described learning through a classmate that one of his former teachers had “groomed” a girl after the story was covered in the news. He explained, “... [in class, a female classmate] goes, ‘Oh my God guys, Mr. whatever his name is in the news. He ... groomed a girl!’ And we all ... collectively, like, ‘What the fuck – like what happened?’” In this highly publicized news story, the allegation was that the school allowed the staff member to remain employed, even after a police report was filed by the student. Ezra continued to explain that despite the rumor of the school’s negligence circulating the school, the school did not address the situation with students directly. He explained, “...the school never addressed it [the incident] ... I don't know how they would ... But also, it seems kind of weird that they just let it circulate around the student body.” Ezra shared that there were other teachers who had a reputation for boundary violations. He explained, “...there's ... other teachers who've done creepy things, and then nothing ever gets done about it.” These “creepy” behaviors included one teacher being “weird about girls’ clothing” and another who “asks girls out” after graduation. Given these past anecdotes, ultimately, Ezra was unsurprised by the school response.

At other schools, students shared accounts of school staff they heard had been fired for inappropriate sexual contact with students. Avery recounted, “...a rumor started

that he [the coach] had sex with one of us [a female athlete] ... not me, but he had sex with this one girl that he was extremely close to.” This coach was fired. Renee shared a similar account of a female student and a male staff member who had “...some secret relationship” or “...something not family friendly.” This staff member was also fired. Inappropriate behavior was not limited to male school staff members and female students. At one school, Corinne shared about a female teacher who was “...being nasty towards this little boy [male student].” Corinne was aware of the story as it was covered by the news. In these accounts, students believed that the staff member was fired.

Ms. Darcy knew that sexual harassment from school staff members was an issue facing schools in general and suspected that TIX was not the best approach to stopping these behaviors. She explained, “...are there still adults that are being inappropriate with their ... colleagues? Yes. Are there still adults being inappropriate with children? Yes. ... I don't know that we fixed all those things [with TIX].” Despite her apprehension about the power of TIX to stop these behaviors, she also described how her school took proactive measures to reduce the risk. She explained, “...groomers know how to deal with those [TIX] trainings. ... All we [the school] can do is try to do our best to ... not hire them, observe, be aware, have rules and procedures.” Even with the federal mandate to protect students from adult sexual misconduct, these behaviors continued to occur.

Although many schools were in at least partial compliance with TIX in written policy, students were nonetheless navigating emotionally challenging sex discrimination in school, especially sexual harassment. The extent that schools were implementing the spirit of the law in prevention and intervention through these incredibly complex issues

was less clear. Further, the effectiveness of leveraging TIX as a way to prevent and respond to sexual harassment was also unsettled.

Gender Diversity

Youth with complex gender identities are impacted by a litany of school policies and procedures, both written and unwritten. However, the recognition of names and pronouns and access to facilities were issues that were particularly salient to participants in this study. Although formal school policy on these issues was extremely sparse, participants provided insight into the unwritten policies governing their schools.

Using Correct Names and Pronouns. Names and pronouns emerged as a key issue in the sample, in part, due to their functionality. For example, Ezra described how his friend came out, noting the change in his pronouns and names without an explicit discussion of his gender. He shared, "... [my friend] came out ... just by saying, 'You know how my name has been Cody ... on my [social media] username for ... a month? Yeah, it's my name now. ... Can you he/him me?'" Students often discussed the names and pronouns of their peers more than gender identity. George described one of his peers, saying, "...my friends [*sic*] in class, they go by Taylor. They used to go by Victoria, that was their assigned name, but they switched it to Taylor. They now go by they/them pronouns." Across interviews, students were often referred to by their pronouns.

Recognizing a student's specific gender identity was not necessarily a priority in comparison to names and pronouns. Ms. Lauren noticed this dynamic:

...I find that students more often than not in middle school at [my school] will ask for a name recognition instead of like, "I am a boy," or, "I am a girl." ... I can think ... [of a student] who identifies as trans and says, 'I am a boy' But most of the time I'm seeing more they/them. And I'm seeing name changes.

Storm, who goes by a chosen name and uses they/them pronouns, did not discuss their gender identity with people outside of their friend group. They shared, "...it's [sharing my gender identity is] not really necessary. ... I don't talk to them, they're not my friends. ... I'm not going to ... be like 'Hey, I'm bigender.' ... They're gonna [*sic*] be like, 'What's that?'" Names and pronouns were a more practical priority than gender.

Policies and Practices. Despite the importance of pronouns, none of the focal schools had a written policy on pronoun usage. Further, only two schools (11.76%) had policies on student names. School D and School J specified that registration forms must be completed using the name written on a student's birth certificate. Both schools explained how to register in the case of a legal name change: "In the event that a birth name has been legally changed, a copy of the court order certifying the change must accompany the copy of the child's birth certificate." School D also specified that students may have a name added to their record, explaining, "Students who use a different name in daily life can have that name added to their student record by informing [school staff]." School J did not include this specification. The remaining focal schools had no policy.

Informal Practices. Despite a near absence of policy on names and pronouns, participants described a range of experiences in how schools handled names and pronouns in practice. Some participants described school-wide practices that impacted students consistently across contexts. More frequently, participants reported variation on how the issue was handled within the school itself.

School-Wide Approaches. Participants at some schools described approaches to gathering student names and pronouns that were implemented school-wide. Two schools

described tracking changes to names and pronouns. Ms. Angela shared that the mental health department kept a record of students who used different names or pronouns:

...we [the school] want to make sure we're using ... the correct name or the correct pronoun when ... talking to students. ... For the most part, kids who have ... expressed that [changed name or pronouns] openly, we have awareness to who those kids are.

Collecting this information allowed Ms. Angela to proactively inform staff members who worked with the students. Ms. Darcy's school used to track this information also:

...five years ago, the first time we had a student want to use a different name ... it was more like, "Ooh, how are we going to deal with this?" ... If they [students] want to use different pronouns, we just keep it on a spreadsheet, and then they have to ... talk to the social worker. And we just need to know if it's something they're just doing in school or they're doing at home Now it's a non-issue.

As shown, five years ago, the response was more involved, but in present day, Ms. Darcy reported using a simpler approach. She shared, "... [when students] want to just use a different name, we're like, 'Cool. You're using a different name.'" As the school grew more comfortable addressing the issue, tracking became less necessary.

Schools took other approaches as well. Renee described their school, explaining, "...they'll [teachers will] give you [students] this poll ... they need ... your name for ... taking rolls and then they have your preferred name. Then they have ... your pronouns ... how you identify." Their school asked all students to share this information, not just students with complex gender identities. Further, when a teacher at Renee's school was calling a student by their deadname, the administration stepped in. They recalled, "...there was only one incident I heard of where ... a teacher ... was calling a kid by their ... deadname. ... It was brought to ... administration's attention, and they ... took care of it." The administration worked with the teacher until the misgendering stopped.

Kaitlyn’s school also employed a systemic approach to student names and pronouns. In addition to asking students to share their names and pronouns within the classroom, there was also an effort to inform non-classroom staff. She described:

...on the first day of school ... we [students] walk in and there's like a [white]board. And they [school staff] ... take these pictures of you with your preferred name and your pronouns [written] on it. ... it's a small school so all the administration is trying to remember who the students are and what they go by.

Kaitlyn further reported that her school protects student anonymity related to their names and pronouns. She shared, "...you [students] can ... go by a different name there [at the school] and like they won't tell your parents ... to keep people safe or a school [*sic*] can be a nice place for them." Although these schools had a universal approach that permeated the entire school, other schools were less universal.

Within School Variations. At many schools, the classroom teacher highly influenced the approach to names and pronouns. Colby perceived teachers at their school as “half good, half bad” on the issue. They shared, “...some people [teachers] just don’t really care about pronouns, they try, but they don’t really put in that much effort. And then others are super progress, super amazing, always trying, always helping.” Across schools, older teachers were described as more likely to misgender students. Jenna explained, “...they [older teachers] just don’t ask about pronouns.” Macy expressed a similar sentiment, although more crassly, “...you just got to get our old ass teachers to get their [transgender and nonbinary students’] names right, bro.” Older teachers were perceived as more often misgendering students.

Ezra did not wait for teachers to ask, but instead proactively informed teachers of his name through email prior to the first day. He described his process:

...the beginning of this year, I got my schedule and it ... listed all my teachers. And I was like, "Cool", opened up an email, put them [my teachers] all on there

[and wrote], "My name is Ezra. I know it says something different in [the system]. This is how you should refer to me. Um. Thanks...? I hope I do well in your classes this year."

Teacher responses varied. He explained:

And then some of them [the teachers] were like, "Yeah, I'll mess up." And it was ... the two people who ... never can get it right. But everyone else was ... like, "Okay, cool." And some people didn't respond, but it was ... fine because they gendered me correctly.

Ezra noticed that the two teachers who responded to say they would "mess up" were indeed the two who misgendered him most frequently. In this example, even a proactive, student-led initiative to assimilate teachers to names and pronouns yielded varied results.

Ms. Angela perceived that a small group of her colleagues who frequently misgendered students were not open to learning. She explained:

I think that when we [myself and some teachers] have conversations [about using pronouns], it doesn't come outright as ... saying I'm uncomfortable with it. ... the conversation sounds like, for example ... "Do I have to make [other] kids use it [they/them pronouns]?" ... I could feel the [teacher's] discomfort in it. ... It was like, is it because you don't understand it or is it because you don't agree with it?

Ms. Angela had not heard outright opposition to correctly gendering students with complex gender identities; however, she perceived discomfort from some teachers. By contrast, Ms. Janelle shared about a male teacher who was forthcoming in his opposition:

... [when the teacher] was lining his class up, girl, boy, or separating them for activities ... someone asked ... "What about your LGBTQ students?" He said, "That stuff's not allowed in my classroom. ... You're either a girl or a boy, there's nothing else."

This teacher went so far as to bar students from expressing complex gender identities within his classroom. With these diverse teacher perceptions of gender diversity, the varied experiences of students both between and within schools is unsurprising.

Barriers. Even when schools and teachers attempted to use correct names and pronouns with students, there was a perception that barriers inhibited their progress. For

instance, when schools made efforts to use student names and pronouns, if these changes were not universally reflected on written systems, such as school rosters, the possibility of misgendering loomed. Renee was the only participant to report that their school was willing to change students' names on rosters and other documentation without any barriers. They explained, "...if they [students] have ... a deadname, they'll [the school will] ... change it in the system, or you can change your name yourself actually on your [school account]." However, this report was secondhand, as Renee did not personally have a deadname and had not gone through this process themselves.

By contrast, multiple participants reported that schools were unable to change the name of a student on the official school roster without a documented legal name change due to state law. When Ezra's teacher, who was typically conscientious of using his correct name misgendered him, he was told of this limitation. He explained:

And she [the teacher] was ... reading off of [the school roster] to assign people partners, and she read me and my friend, Patrick's deadnames. And we were like, "Yo, Dr. Rojas, why does it say that on there?" And she's like, "Oh shoot! I was getting it off of [the school roster], I'm so sorry." And I was like, "So they can't change ... my name on that?" She's like, "Yeah, it's the state thing."

Colby also experienced this issue during state-testing, when they were often supervised by unfamiliar teachers. They shared, "...on [testing days] I have to constantly tell all the teachers that come in, 'This is my deadname, it's only on there because I don't have my name legally changed.'" Incorrect rosters facilitated deadnaming.

Ms. Lauren identified an additional barrier: parental permission. She explained, "... the only way to really control that all adults are aligned [in using correct names] is if we change it on the roster. ... We have to have parental consent for that." However, Ms. Lauren shared that she was unsure if changing a student's name and email address did require parental permission by law. She continued, "I don't know [if permission is

required] and I've never looked into it. I've just asked permission [to change a name] ... and had it denied [by the school] essentially. Now I'm like, 'Oh, dang, I should really look into this.'" Ms. Lauren accepted the school's explanation that this was a legal limitation, but upon reflection wondered if this was even the case.

In contrast to Ms. Lauren's difficulty in helping students change their emails, Ezra, a transman, was able to change his school email address without any issues. He explained, "...she [teacher] puts me and the IT guy in a group email, and she's like, 'Hey, can Ezra get his name changed on his email?' ... And he's [IT guy is] like, 'Boom, you're done. Here's your new email.'" However, when Ezra's friend, a transwoman, made the same request, it was not granted. Ezra criticized this uneven response saying, "... [not changing my friend's name is] just transphobia. ... you can't justify that. ... the IT guy changed mine in, like, two days. Is it because she's a transwoman? ... What is your problem there?" Ezra perceived that the technology department at his school was more willing to work with him as a transman than his friend. A multitude of barriers arose when students attempted to change their name at school.

The Impact of Being (Mis)gendered. For some participants, being misgendered in school was a top issue. When asked what was hard about being nonbinary at school, Colby shared, "Pronouns. ... literally all the questions are going to be pronouns. Everything is pronouns." Like Colby, being gendered correctly was key for Ezra. He connected being misgendered in class with his academic performance. He shared, "...I only noticed this recently, but this year my worst grades have been in the classes where the teachers do not consistently gender me correctly or make me feel uncomfortable in class because of my gender presentation or identity." Specifically, Ezra, normally an

outspoken student, was less inclined to participate when misgendering was commonplace. He explained, “Ms. Tate misgenders me every day. ... I don't answer questions in her class because then she'll misgender me. ... That's how bad it is ... I just don't want to participate in class.” For Ezra and Colby, being gendered correctly was a top priority for improving their school experience.

On the flip side, openly talking about pronouns could be affirming. Renee described this experience as a source of joy. They shared, “I get like really happy when people ask me ... ‘What are your pronouns?’ I'm like, ‘Oh, yeah! She/they.’ ... The acknowledgement feels good. ... It validates me in a way.” Teacher Rachel, who identified as nonbinary, described how openly talking about their own gender identity and pronouns could affirm students:

... [a student] told me in private ... they really identified with me because they're nonbinary too, but they... don't ... tell people. ... The fact that that student was able to open up to me ... and felt welcomed because I had made the choice to ... insist on making space for myself ... it means a lot to see that positively impacting our students.

Just as misgendering could negatively impact a student’s school experience, discussing gender identities and pronouns could positively impact a student’s school experience.

Bathroom and Facilities Policy. Another issue of utmost importance to youth with complex gender identities was facilities (e.g., bathrooms, locker rooms) policy and access. None of the focal schools had a written policy on facility access and/or gender-neutral facilities in their school documentation. Some participants were unaware how their school handled the issue. Jenna explained, “...I don’t know what the bathroom policies are ... I mean there’s not any policies that I know.” This lack of knowledge was not limited to student participants. Teacher Rachel, who identified as nonbinary themselves, was unaware of their school policy. They explained, “...I don't know about

bathrooms. I don't know about like what bathroom ... our trans student [used]. I'm not really sure about that.” However, across interviews, four schools (23.53%) were described as having a gender-neutral bathroom available for students (Schools A, B, E, and H). Notably, these were also the only schools to have a confirmed GSA. Participants from the remaining schools did not discuss gender-neutral bathrooms.

Selecting A Bathroom. Storm, Colby, and Ezra shared about their complex experiences trying to determine which bathroom to use. After Storm and their friends petitioned the school board, their school designated a gender-neutral bathroom, which Storm used most often. However, due to time constraints, on occasion, Storm used the single-stall women’s restroom. They shared:

...sometimes it [gender-neutral bathroom] would be ... locked because someone would be in there and then I would be like “Well I can’t take too much time trying to go back to class because then I would get into trouble.” So then, I would just go into the regular [women’s] bathroom and that wasn’t that big of a deal.

However, at the time of the interview, the gender-neutral bathroom had just been relocated, resulting in students having easier access, but at the cost of a loss of privacy. Storm explained, “...it’s [the gender-neutral bathroom is] closer, but I would rather it be farther away because than nobody knows about it and nobody that doesn’t need it is going to use it.” Since the relocation, Storm had noticed cisgender students using the bathroom as well as making jokes about the bathroom, negating the benefit of saved time.

Colby’s school did not have a gender-neutral bathroom, so they exclusively used the girls’ restroom. They explained their reasoning:

Well since I present more female, not everybody in the school knows that I’m nonbinary. If I go into the boys’ bathroom, even if they do know ... they’re not going to let me. Because they’re probably gonna [*sic*] make up some excuse like “Well ... you look too female, so if a boy comes in here and sees you, he’ll get really scared or mad and he’ll tell the teacher.” Or something like that.

On the one hand, Colby was not too uncomfortable in the girls' restroom because they were used to it, explaining, "It [the girls' restroom] just feels normal because I've been using the girls' bathroom my whole life. ... I don't really think about it too much."

However, they also expressed frustration at what this communicated to their peers. They shared, "I don't like going in there [the girls' bathroom] [be]cause then everybody assumes I'm a girl." Colby did not foresee their school adding a gender-neutral option:

I haven't brought it [adding a gender-neutral bathroom] up, but I really, really, really doubt that anybody's gonna *[sic]* care. Like, they're not gonna want to pay for a whole 'nother *[sic]* bathroom, so there's not really a point. Like I can't just say, "Could you make a ... third bathroom, just for me and my friends?"

Although Colby wanted a gender-neutral bathroom at their school, they did not believe this was something their school would accommodate.

Ezra also spoke extensively about facility usage as a transman. At the beginning of the year, he used the men's locker room. He shared:

...in the beginning of the year ... I didn't even bring it up to anyone, honestly. ... I started using the men's locker room. And then they [the coaches] were like ... "My friend We've got a gender-neutral changing room." ... They were like, "You need to use the gender-neutral changing room." I was like, "But I don't really want to use that." Just [be]cause ... there's one stall, so we have to wait, and it's annoying. And it's just like, I can use the men's. ... I don't know why you want to restrict me from that.

Similar to Colby, Ezra doubted his teachers would hear out his concerns, so he did not oppose the decision. He explained, "I just went along with it [using the gender-neutral locker room] [be]cause I usually don't like conflict with my teachers [be]cause I'm just like, 'You're not gonna *[sic]* even listen to me, so I don't know why I'm gonna *[sic]* try.'"

The unwritten policy at Ezra's school was that he was not permitted in male spaces.

However, even without the school-level gatekeeping, Ezra expressed concerns about using men's facilities. He explained his concern:

...if I go into the men's and someone thinks I'm a girl, they're probably gonna [*sic*] be like [*trails off*] ... I like live in like fear of going into the men's restroom and getting my head bashed in against a urinal because they know I'm a dude – like a trans dude.

Due to this fear, Ezra advocated for more single-stall bathrooms for all genders. He elaborated, "...I think there just should just be more single stall bathrooms available to, like, all genders and not just ... gender-neutral bathrooms, I mean like have single stall boys' bathrooms too." However, he clarified that this was his own preference based on his self-assessment of his ability to "pass". He explained, "...I feel like it's just a me problem because I don't pass well, so I don't want to use the men's. Like my other friends don't really have trouble. So, I don't know, it could just be me." For Ezra, a single-stall men's option would be congruent with his gender identity and minimize safety concerns.

Single-sex spaces could also be a source of tension for cisgender students. When Sandy was younger, her peers teased her that she should use the boys' bathroom because of her physical appearance. She explained, "...they [students] were like, 'You're a boy, you should use the boy bathroom.'" However, in retrospect, she realized the double-bind this would have put her in, had she actually used the boys' restroom. She continued, "...now I'm thinking about, well that was a really dumb thing to say because if I came in the boy bathroom, you would all get upset." In Sandy's opinion, students would have teased her regardless. Although not firsthand, Renee shared about their male friend who was openly gay and afraid of the male locker room, a single-sex space. They explained, "...this dude was terrified to go in the locker room. I asked him, like, 'What happened in the locker room?' ... His eyes got wide and he just shut down." The exact source of the fear was not disclosed; however, Renee perceived their friend as afraid of the space

because of their sexuality. As shown, navigating single-sex facilities could be a fraught process for many students, but especially, those with complex gender identities.

Behavior and Safety Concerns. Participants shared about issues with gender-neutral bathrooms, particularly related to drug use and sexual activity. Kendra relayed a rumor that one of the gender-neutral bathrooms at her school had been shut down due to inappropriate usage by students. She explained: “they [the school] didn't say it [why the bathroom was closed] directly, but it was kind of word of mouth from other students, where it was like, drugs being done in the bathroom, and also maybe sexual acts.” Ms. Lauren confirmed that at her school, students of all gender identities, including cisgender students, had misused the space. She shared. “...we also had students who don't identify as nonbinary or gender-nonconforming ... using the bathroom to hide. Students have vaped in that bathroom, for example, like hiding to do things ... it's easier to not get caught.” The privacy afforded in these facilities also contributed to misuse of the space.

However, participants also reported drug use and sexual contact as occurring in single-sex facilities, suggesting that these concerns were not a problem of gender-neutral bathrooms alone. Three high school students, Renee, Corinne, and Ezra, reported witnessing vaping in the girls' bathroom, with Renee and Corinne also witnessing marijuana use. Ezra explained, “...[the] girls' bathrooms are full of eighth grade vapers, so it smells like strawberries and peach and artificial flavors all the time.” Further, Ms. Darcy, critiqued the perceived sexual risk of transgender students accessing bathrooms, explaining that sexual contact in the bathroom was already an issue at her school with cisgender students. She shared, “...I've got girls in the bathroom making out. ... They're both supposed to be going to the girls' bathroom. ... That's [transgender bathroom access

is] not my issue.” Similar to Ms. Darcy’s report, Corinne shared that she had overheard two female students having sex in the girls’ bathroom. She described, “You can find lesbians having sex right there, in the bathroom stall. It happened one morning with these two lesbians, I was in there, then they're making out, and then they went into a stall *[trails off]* ...” However, Corinne clarified this was an uncommon occurrence.

In addition to behavioral concerns, safety concerns were discussed, especially for LGBTQ+ youth. Ms. Lauren, who helped advocate for the addition of her school’s gender-neutral bathroom, worried about the safety implications:

...I don't think [the gender-neutral bathroom was] created with the intention of the safety of all students because ... it's a single stall that locks, so it's actually super unsafe. And I've done a ton of research on this ... the percentage of students at risk for suicide and self-harm is much greater in the LGBTQIA community, and so to make a locking single stall bathroom is actually not in the best interest of queer students.

Although to her knowledge, no students had used the bathroom for self-harm at the time of the interview, Ms. Lauren perceived there to be a serious risk. Ms. Darcy also alluded to students self-harming in bathrooms, although it was not clear if this self-harm occurred in gender-neutral or single sex facilities. She described, “...you [students] can't learn if you're not mentally healthy, and if you're ... in a state of gender dysphoria like, how are you learning? You're not. ... [Be]cause you're going to the bathroom, trying to cut yourself.” However, she did not focus on bathroom policy as the solution, but instead on mental health. She continued, “[Our school has] three mental health professionals ... But like, why? Because I think kids have to be mentally healthy. You can't learn if you're not mentally healthy.” Ms. Darcy prioritized mental health support for all students at her school as a way to reduce these safety concerns and also keep students in class.

Policy on bathroom access and student names and pronouns was largely undocumented in the focal schools. In actuality, schools were handling these two topics in a wide variety of ways, as reported by participants. There were many examples of school staff misgendering students or restricting bathroom access; however, there were also many counter-examples of schools and school staff proactively supporting students with varying levels of success. As demonstrated throughout this theme, formal school regulation, particularly related to dress code policy, TIX, and gender diversity issues could both perpetuate and resist cisheteropatriarchy. Building on the examples of the resistance already discussed, attention now turns to activism and resistance in schools.

Part III: Activism and Resistance

Students resisted the gender binary through their own personal gender identities and self-expression. The perception of a growing number of open LGBTQ+ students and school staff normalized identities that did not conform to the expectations of cisheteropatriarchy. Peer support among LGBTQ+ students and allies neutralized some of the impact of hostile behavior. Schools demonstrated resistance through supporting GSAs planning proactive lessons and school events. Students demonstrated resistance through their attunement to social issues and concrete activist efforts. Finally, looking to the future, students made recommendations for school-level change.

Identifying Outside the Cisheteropatriarchal Framework

Cisgender and youth with complex gender identities alike demonstrated resistance to gender identities fixated in a binary framework. Renee explained, "...It's [gender is] something we made up. ... Yeah ... there is ... female parts, male parts, like genitalia, obviously. But ... this ... gender roles thing, we came up with that ... we take it too

seriously.” Renee perceived gender roles as overly emphasized and not based in truth.

They shared about their own personal gender identity and pronouns, explaining:

... I usually introduce my pronouns as they/she because, in a way, I do prefer they, but ... I still associate myself as she and I refer [to] myself as a she. ... That's why it's both. It's just like, I am a woman, but ... I don't know how to explain.

Renee, through their embodied identity as both a woman and nonbinary, not only resisted the constraints of male/female, but also resisted the dichotomy of cisgender/transgender.

Ezra, who identified as a transman, described a similar critique of the gender system as a whole. He shared:

And I went through this phase [during my transition] where, first, I was like, I don't need to be a man. I can be a cool gender-fucker kind of person. ... Like, I can ... use these cool neo pronouns, and I can be all over the place, because gender's a lie.

However, Ezra's embodied experiences did not fully align to this fluid experience of gender, ultimately resulting in him identifying as a transman and using he/him pronouns.

He described, “I used he/they for a while, but then it was ... too much for me ... because my parents only used "they" for me. And I was like, ‘That sucks.’ ... [Be]cause they didn't think I was a dude.” Although Ezra maintained his critical stance about the gender binary, when he tried to embody the “cool gender-fucker” identity, it produced gender dysphoria. He described his own personal experience of gender dysphoria:

[Gender dysphoria is like] I'm between two, like, rocks and I'm holding one up and ... I'm being pushed down into one. And one of them is men and one of them is women. ... I desperately would need to break into the men. But people always see me as between them or ... outside of that for some reason. ... Because people always say like trans first ... when they say transmen or transwomen. ... I am a man, I just happen to be transgender.

Ezra did not want to be seen as on the outside of gender, but wanted to be accepted as the man that he was, despite his own critique of the gender binary. Both students expressed discomfort with the gender system; although their embodied experiences were distinct.

Cisgender students also expressed resistance to binary gender identities through their own pronoun usage. Ezra described these students as not necessarily transgender, despite their flexibility with pronoun usage. He shared:

...There's a distinction that should be made about people who use all pronouns and people who are trans. Because you can definitely use all pronouns and not be ... trans and not have dysphoria about your gender or internal gender. You can just ... be comfortable with pronouns

George and Sandy likely matched Ezra's description. George, a cisgender male student, described his openness to being called they/them pronouns. He shared, "I'm he/they ... I don't mind if someone refers to me as they. ... I am comfortable with the pronouns he/him, not she/her though." George did not mind being referred to as they/them even though he personally identified as a cisgender male.

Sandy currently used she/they pronouns and identified as cisgender at the time of the interview, but was considering trying out they/them pronouns exclusively, sharing:

...I never mind having someone use they/them pronouns for me. ...People can call me by they/them, and I just want to see how I feel about it. ... Maybe I won't like it and maybe I'll just go by she/her. Maybe I would like it. Maybe I'll just go by they/them.

She continued to describe her identity:

...I'm a girl- or mostly a girl. But I'm not a boy, that's the biggest thing. ... In some other way, I'd probably be gender fluid. ... I don't really care what my gender is, but I've just decided ... from all ... the boy role models I've seen and met ... I just don't really want to be a boy. So that's why I just do she/they because it's like ... I don't want to be a boy, but, like, I'm also fine just being a little bit masculine for ... a girl.

For Sandy and George, the emphasis was more focused on separation from the gender identity they did *not* identify with (male and female, respectively) than the gender identity they did identify with. Attempting to categorize participants into the binary category of cisgender/transgender proved difficult due to these nuanced experiences.

Outward Appearance. In addition to resisting cisheteropatriarchy through personal gender identity, students also resisted through their own physical appearance. Several cisgender participants shared stories of being misgendered due to their appearance. George described how he was often misgendered by strangers, due to his long hair. At a young age he cut his hair, but was unhappy with the result. He explained, "...there was this one period where I cut my hair, when I was six and I immediately said, 'Nope, I don't like it' so I grew it out again." For George, wearing his hair long was an important part of his personal expression, even if it contributed to misgendering. In another example, Kaitlyn refuted the expectation of shaving body hair as a feminine practice. In fact, she viewed her choice not to shave as a demonstration of her femininity, "...I almost see it [body hair] as being ... a feminine thing for me. ... I don't have to have it [not shaving] be ... an unfeminine thing I do." Kaitlyn's choice countered dominant ideals about femininity while also affirming her own internal gender identity as a woman.

Students with complex gender identities also sought to undermine gender binaries in their own appearance, although, this could be more complicated. Ezra explained:

...I've made the ... claim that gender's a social construct. It is. It's also really hard to unlearn it, especially when you are a trans person who wants to conform ... to a certain identity. ... That's impossible. You're not going to be able to completely unlearn everything ... about gender if you want to present as a certain gender, if you want to be perceived as a certain gender.

Undermining traditional conventions of masculine dress while also wanting others to recognize you as a man was difficult. However, Ezra was figuring out how to strike this

balance. He explained, "...my perception of myself in relation to gender is changing, not in like a, I'm not a boy kind of way, but ... there's more than one way to be a boy. Even though most people never realize that." In an example of navigating this terrain, during the interview, Ezra sported a small pink accessory with his otherwise masculine clothing. He described his decision to wear the accessory, explaining, "it's so cute, pink, and it's girly, and I don't care because it's cool as hell." Students were cognizant of appearance norms under the system of cisheteropatriarchy, but many challenged these limitations.

Increasing Visibility. People who identified outside of the expectations of cisheteropatriarchy, whether through their gender identity, sexuality, or both, were perceived as becoming more visible in schools. Ms. Darcy, in her late 40s, contrasted the level of acceptance among LGBTQ+ students from when she was in school to now. She shared, "...when [I was] in high school, my friend came out as gay, it was like, 'Woo!' Wow, that's really exciting, just to be a gay man. Forget, like, queer. Forget ... trans. Forget fluid." From Ms. Darcy's perspective, identifying as gay used to elicit more of a reaction than it does now. Mr. Ricky, a gay man who has been in education for over 20 years, also noticed a change since his time in school. He explained, "...I never thought that I would be able to get married [as a gay man] in my lifetime ever, growing up. Ever. And here, that is a possibility. ... Students talk about it [gay marriage] now like it's ... commonplace." Mr. Ricky noted that gay marriage, which seemed unattainable in his youth was now a societal norm. The increasing number of openly LGBTQ+ youth was even observed among new educators. Ms. Tracy, in her early 20s, recalled:

I taught a sixth grader that was pansexual. I taught a sixth grader that was transgender. I taught ... multiple sixth graders that identified as bisexual or gay. ... That's definitely a really prominent thing ... in schools now, that was not the same when I was in school.

Although Ms. Tracy was in high school less than a decade ago, she also noticed a change.

Many participants discussed their perception of the prevalence of LGBTQ+ youth in their schools. Importantly, participants based these estimates on the number of students they knew who were “out”, or open with their sexuality and/or gender identity. Thus, the estimates given by participants are not inclusive of LGBTQ+ youth who were not out. Among participants, estimates were varied.

On one end of the spectrum, Christian reported knowing no gay youth. He shared, “I don't think there's anybody that's gay in my school.” On the other end of the spectrum, Colby estimated that the majority of students at their school identified as queer. They shared, “...60% [of the student body is queer] ... there's a lot of queer people in [my school].” Other estimates fell between these ends. Renee explained that nearly all of the cisgender girls at their school were gay. They stated, “Everybody's [all the female students are] gay! ... I don't know any straight girls. Like completely straight? No. None of them.” However, Renee's estimate of the overall population of LGBTQ+ youth at their school was less prominent, at an estimated “40%.” Ezra estimated that around half of his school identified as queer. He explained, “I think the population of queer kids is at least, like, 50%, -ish.” As youth with complex gender identities, Renee, Ezra, and Colby may have had more awareness of other LGBTQ+ youth accounting for some of the difference.

Other participants did not provide a numeric estimate of LGBTQ+ youth at their schools, but provided general comments. Ms. Haley acknowledged that several of her former students had since come out. She explained, “I definitely have had ... a few kids ... who later identified as queer in middle school, come through my grade.” Kaitlyn perceived that most, or at least many, of her school identified as LGBTQ+. She

explained, “Most people [at my school] are [LGBTQ+] ... they’re not necessarily, like, a cisgendered, heterosexual person. They're in some way, like, in the LGBTQ+ community. ... Maybe not most, but ... so many of them are.” Although total estimates varied, only one student (Christian) reported no out, LGBTQ+ youth at his school.

In contrast to LGBTQ+ youth broadly, students with complex gender identities were less visible in some schools. Anton knew many LGBTQ+ students, but he did not know any students with complex gender identities. He shared, “I've never heard [of] anyone or haven't known anyone who identified as nonbinary or gender-fluid [at my school]. But there are plenty of ... other students who are LGBT who go to my school.” Christian and Martin also reported knowing no youth with complex gender identities at their schools. However, Martin clarified that he believed his school likely had students that he did not know. Martin explained, “... [there are not transgender students] that I know of, but there probably is some people.” Hope initially responded that her school did not have any students with complex gender identities to her knowledge, but then amended that she did know of one person who may have identified as nonbinary. She explained, “...well actually, now that I think about it, there was this one girl that said ... something in passing about being nonbinary.” The number of students with complex gender identities at school was perceived as low or non-existent by these students.

Other participants reported more visibility of youth with complex gender identities. Jenna estimated that her school had a “pretty good amount” of transgender and nonbinary students, possibly “five to 10 [percent].” Renee produced an identical estimate, stating “five, [or] 10 percent [of students are transgender or nonbinary], it’s not really that big.” Ezra estimated the number of students with complex gender identities in his grade

as, “Oh God, like, less than 10%. ... Out of the whole class ... there is not more than 10 people.” He preceded to list out his peers, eventually clarifying that he knew of eight students in his grade, including himself. Ms. Angela also produced an exact number of elementary school students who were nonbinary. She explained, “I can tell you definitively in elementary school ... we have ... eight children who openly identify as ... nonbinary ... those students typically are using they/them pronouns.” She was unaware of any elementary school students who were transgender.

Colby and Corinne estimated a comparatively higher representation of transgender and nonbinary students in their schools. Colby thought “20%” of their school were nonbinary specifically and Corinne thought “...probably about 20%, or 10 [percent]” of her school were transgender or nonbinary. Macy also described knowing many nonbinary students, “...there's a lot of nonbinary people [at my school]. ... I'm friends with a lot of nonbinary people.” However, she did notice a discrepancy between the number of transwomen and transmen at her school. She described, “...male to female people, like I don't know that many of them, first of all, they're way rarer. ... Whereas I know a hoard of people who are ... female to male.” In all, reported estimates of youth with complex gender identities in each school ranged from zero to 20% and the breakdown of specific identities (e.g., transwoman, nonbinary) was nuanced.

Peer Support

Perhaps related to this increased visibility, participants gave examples of positive peer support for youth with identities outside of the norms of cisheteropatriarchy. Many participants described a student climate of acceptance for LGBTQ+ students. Further, LGBTQ+ peer groups were commonly described as a source of support and strength.

General Peer Support. Although there were many accounts of students acting dismissively, demonstrating disapproval, or even bullying students with complex gender identities, there were many counter-examples of students respecting and supporting their peers. Sandy spoke to a culture of tolerance among students at her current school for transgender and nonbinary students. She shared, "...the school doesn't have ... a hateful culture to them, like they [transgender and nonbinary students] can ... be who they are ... and ... tell people who they care ... about it [their identity]." Kendra similarly noted the absence of hate, but also went further, describing a culture of acceptance. She explained, "... [the school is] very open, because ... [they have an] open-door policy to be yourself. ... Especially the ... student body ... they're kind of accepting to everybody." In these schools, the student body, in the aggregate, was supportive.

One way peer support was demonstrated was through efforts to correctly gender peers with complex gender identities at school. Jenna, a cisgender student, described the student climate at her school, "...in the student body [at my school] ... people will use the right pronouns and there won't really be ... disrespect based on that [gender identity], as far as I've seen." Ms. Lauren described prior middle school students she worked with who would encourage correct gendering with their peers. She shared:

...my first group of [middle school] kids, and even more so last year ... I don't want to use the word police, but they, like, check each other when people are misgendered ... in a way, that's really cool. ... It doesn't become a thing, right? ... Last year, for example, a student would, by accident, say the wrong pronouns, ... and someone would say, "Actually, they go by they/them." And they go, "Oh, I'm sorry." And then it'd be over.

In these examples, students showed respect to their peers with complex gender identities through being attentive to their own pronoun usage and respectfully correcting mistakes.

Renee noticed and appreciated this effort from their boyfriend, who was straight and cisgender. They explained:

When we first met [my boyfriend and I], I told him what my pronouns were [she/they], and he was like, "Okay, but, which one do you prefer I use?" And I was just like, "Either is fine." ... We had a later conversation about it and I expressed to him how people don't really use they ... and he started using it.

Although either pronoun could have been used, Renee's boyfriend understood that using they/them pronouns with Renee would validate a part of their identity that was not seen.

This effort was part of a larger shift within their boyfriend throughout their relationship:

... We've [my boyfriend and I have] both changed a lot throughout our relationship. He's ... started to ... think about it [LGBTQ+ experiences] more and be more ... inclusive and more respectful towards people in the LGBTQ+ community because, like, he's dating one!

Renee observed this increasing awareness and support for LGBTQ+ students from their boyfriend and described being in relationship with them as an impetus for this change.

Ezra described a story of receiving validation from a few cisgender peers who were "the spitting image of what masculinity is supposed to look like." He explained:

... At one point [during PE class] ... he [cisgender male classmate] says, "You know, we're just four dudes playing Foursquare ... four brothers in the circle." ... It just kind of stuck with me that he said that because he knew I was trans. ... Not only is he clearly supportive of this [my gender identity], he goes out of his way to include me in a way that isn't, like, outing me. ... He wasn't, like, especially you, Ezra, because you're transgender and you're performing to my ... level of masculinity. He was just like, "We're four dudes." ... I really appreciated ... that he said that. ... It's a rare occurrence when that happens.

For Ezra, this subtle acknowledgement of his gender from peers he perceived as embodying hegemonic masculinity was uncommon, but appreciated.

LGBTQ+ Peer Support. In school contexts without widespread student climates of support and acceptance, social groups that consisted primarily of LGBTQ+ youth offered support. Sandy, who identified as pansexual, described her own friend group of

LGBTQ+ students and allies. She shared “My friends are really cool. ... They're also very into the ... LGBTQIA community.” Within her group, her and her friends could be themselves without judgement. She explained concisely, “We're just us.” Macy, a cisgender student, perceived that there was a strong community amongst transgender students at her school. She shared, “...they [transgender students] have a really good built-in community. ... I think trans people ... they've built a community that is just really strong and like, if you're trans, you're immediately accepted.” Macy perceived the peer support system for transgender students to be strong at her school; however, as a cisgender woman, this was not based on her perception, not her own experiences.

LGBTQ+ friend groups could be a source of strength for students in an otherwise hostile environment. Ezra talked about how his friend group, which consisted of mostly transgender students, could relate to one another about difficulties at school:

...we're [my friends and I are] like, “Damn, school sucks about this kind of stuff [issues important to transgender students]. They didn't even tell us what condoms were in class. And also, everyone hates me.” And we're like, “Yeah, dude, being trans sucks.” And then we're ... happy two minutes later because obviously teenage emotions are temporary.

Hearing friends navigating through similar issues was validating. The quality of friendships was also noted. Storm suggested that their friend group, which was primarily LGBTQ+ youth, had more substance compared to other friend groups at their school:

...Out of all the [friend] groups in the school, my group has the best actual friendship because ... the popular kids are really fake to each other and ... they're not ... friends, they're just [there] to boost their own popularity. But that's not how it works in my group.

Storm perceived their friendships as more authentic than others. Finally, Colby's mostly LGBTQ+ friend group at school could be a source of unbridled laughter and joy:

...we [my friends and I] ... laugh a lot [at lunch] and then I laugh so hard that I fall on the ground and I can't breathe. ... Then I get up and then I start laughing

again. There's just a part in ... our time together ... just dedicated to like absolute cracking up.

For Ezra, Storm, and Colby, friend groups were a primary source of support at school.

However, strong friend groups were not always accessible. Avery, a heterosexual, cisgender student described her perception of these friend groups: "... they [transgender and nonbinary students] keep it in their friend group. ... They'll talk only to their friend group ... they're very nice, but it's just like, they stay to themselves." LGBTQ+ friend groups could be closed-off. Ezra perceived that a new student might struggle to find friends at his school, which had clearly defined friend groups. He explained:

...we [me and my friends] don't try to be cliquey, it's just that we see ourselves as outcasts, anyway. So, we all just kind of hang out in a group together. ... We integrate people, but ... it's never like a lot of people at once, or we're not as open about ourselves as we are with ... each other.

For Ezra, this closedness was considered a necessary precaution due to his group's status as outsiders. Further, interpersonal drama sometimes broke up existing friendships among LGBTQ+ youth. Renee explained how they had lost touch with some of their friends after a break-up with an ex-girlfriend, explaining, "I don't really talk to a lot of people who are trans or nonbinary anymore ... [we] drifted away ... something happened ... with mess [drama following the break-up]." Renee now primarily spent time with their boyfriend and his cisgender, straight friends. Despite these barriers, LGBTQ+ friend groups, when accessed, could provide a safety net and joy in school.

School Support

In addition to peer-level support, schools also provided support for LGBTQ+ students, even when it elicited criticism. Specifically, some focal schools ($n=4$, 23.53%) reported having a GSA within their schools, although more schools may have had GSAs

that were not disclosed. In addition, there were examples of schools proactively addressing LGBTQ+ topics and proactively supporting students more broadly.

Gender and Sexuality Alliances. There was a confirmed GSA (although the clubs used a diversity of names) at four schools: School A, School B, School E, and School H. Ms. Lauren, who was involved in the founding of her school’s GSA, described the barriers she faced in starting the club, including around parental permission:

...There was some *[sic]* issues [with the GSA] at the beginning because ... there was parent backlash. And it was upsetting that we needed consent [for students to participate in the GSA] because in the State of Louisiana ... to talk about “sexuality” or “gender”, you do legally need consent from parents.

In compliance with Louisiana law, Ms. Lauren’s school required all student clubs to obtain parental permission, not just the GSA. She explained, “it was designed so that everyone needed permission to be in the club that they were in.” Making the permission requirement universal avoided singling out GSA student participants; however, requiring parental permission still barred some students from participating. Ms. Lauren shared, “...We had students who were wanting to join and mom said, ‘Yes,’ dad says, ‘No.’ Right? And they were unable to come to our club.” At Ms. Lauren’s school, if just one parent denied permission, the school defaulted to not allowing the student to participate.

Students who participated in GSAs reported support, safety, and joy within the clubs. Storm described their GSA as, “a safe space for people to just be whoever they are, and share whatever they want.” Sandy similarly noted, “...it [the GSA] gets fun ... we do karaoke, and like different projects, and we talk, and we just kind of, like, sit and do things together.” Despite their acknowledgement of the general support, both Sandy and Storm noted their desire for their clubs to be more involved in activism. Sandy remarked, “I don't think it [the GSA] brings enough attention to issues.” Storm described a similar

perception, explaining, “They’re [the GSA is] not doing anything to the actual meaning of the club, they’re kind of just doing crafts and watching movies and stuff.” Storm ultimately joined a new club partly due to this dynamic, although they still stopped by occasionally to greet the other students and faculty sponsors.

Although Storm was dissatisfied with current lack of activism, in past school years, the GSA was involved in activist efforts that led to change. For example, Storm explained how their club’s letter-writing campaign to the school board ultimately resulted in the addition of a gender-neutral bathroom. They shared about this effort, “...all of us in the club sent letters [to the school board], so they got like 20 something letters. So, I’m sure they had no way to refuse that [adding a gender-neutral bathroom].” After “a week or two” the board agreed to the request and a staff bathroom was transformed into a gender-neutral bathroom. This addition was the direct result of GSA action.

Although there was variation in the amount of explicit activism coming out of the focal schools’ GSA groups, GSAs remained an organized, school-level support for LGBTQ+ youth. The commitment by schools to create this space was notable given the potential for parental pushback and difficulty in navigating legal restrictions. However, this was not the only way that focal schools supported LGBTQ+ students.

Other Proactive Supports. Participants also shared examples of their school resisting cisheteropatriarchy in their lessons, programming, and general support. Ms. Darcy described a subtle example of acknowledging gender diversity in the curriculum:

...And every day, there's ... a grammar [lesson] ... And Donald is a he and Alicia is a she and ... Alex is a they. And we're not going to spend a lot of time talking [about it]. We're just going to say like, “That is an option for pronouns. Some people use it. You should be aware of it.” ... It’s not a conversation, I don’t go into why ... it’s not [a] debate.

Ms. Darcy did not believe this lesson required parent permission under Louisiana law and had not received any parent complaints about the curricular content thus far.

By contrast, Ms. Lauren did encounter parent complaints when she taught a lesson for LGBTQ+ History Month. She described the lesson, which was taught online:

...it [the lesson] was an informational slide deck that just literally said what the month [LGBTQ+ History Month] was about and ... gave examples of famous queer people. That was it. It didn't have imagery. ... Literally, it just was like, "This is what this month recognizes. Here are some important people in history who identify as LGBTQIA."

Ms. Lauren's school did not interpret this lesson as requiring parental permission under the law, but a parent made a complaint anyway. Ms. Lauren recalled the conversation:

...This parent basically said they weren't comfortable with me teaching sexuality in class and ... they said, "You should have had written consent before you taught this lesson." I said, "Actually, according to the state of Louisiana, I don't need consent unless it is a lesson on sexuality. This is not a lesson on sexuality. This is a statement of fact about what this month is."

After this clarification, Ms. Lauren offered to provide the parent a copy of the lesson and referred them to the principal. She anticipated receiving complaints after this lesson:

...as a queer person teaching this for the first time...I spent a lot of time building it [the lesson]. It was a simple slide deck, but ... I was so anxious ... I just was ... waiting for the ball to drop because people are just uncomfortable with queer people existing, right? ... I was talking to so many other LGBTQIA identifying staff members who were looking at it, I was talking with staff members and admin who I see as ... allies. ... I felt supported in making the slide deck, but I wish that we had made a plan for ... parental response.

Ms. Lauren wished for additional support with handling concerns after the lesson, especially as a queer staff member fielding homophobic responses. Even given the possibility of backlash, nonetheless, Ms. Lauren persisted in teaching inclusive content.

Resistance to cisheteropatriarchy also arose in school programming. Teacher Rachel described how their school supported a transgender student in leading an educational event for his peers. They explained, "... [the transgender male student] also

led a [educational event on transgender issues] where we had several different ... seminars or little workshops about different like LGBTQIA+ kind of issues and themes.” As with earlier examples, Louisiana law was considered. Teacher Rachel explained, “...I think, per the state of Louisiana law ... students can't be required to participate in these sessions, but students can be offered ... and ... supported in ... sharing about that if they want to.” In compliance with this law, Teacher Rachel’s school made sure the event was voluntary. Kendra also noticed that her school considered the needs of LGBTQ+ students in their programming. She explained, “They [our school] also have ... different events ... one of the events was LGBTQ+ ... prom. So yeah, they also cater events ... for those [LGBTQ+] students.” Unlike school curriculum, these events were not universal or mandatory, but still resisted the limits imposed under cisheteropatriarchy.

Finally, schools found other ways to signal their support to LGBTQ+ students. In one example, Ms. Janelle described how she decorated her classroom:

...I have a wall that says ... Disrupt. ... There's like a lot of ... Audre Lorde and James Baldwin ... There's a couple different posters that say like, “Trans lives are sacred” ... they're made by trans artists. ... the LGBTQIA flag [is] up there ... Black Lives Matter.

Despite explicit references to race and gender, to date, no parent had complained, although a few older teachers had commented. She shared, “...old teachers, I don't want to be ageist, but ... that older generations, they don't change like we'd like them to and ...sometimes they're like, ‘That doesn't belong in the classroom!’” Others responded positively. Ms. Janelle continued, “...some teachers get really excited when they see it [the classroom decorations], especially teachers who may fall under that [LGBTQ+] umbrella. ...I've seen students get really excited ... especially students who know ... what it means.” For Ms. Janelle, this décor was an explicit statement of support to her

students. She explained, "...for them [my students] to see [these] images and ... messaging ... [they] know that they can come to me." As a queer woman of color, Ms. Janelle knew this display could invite criticism; however, she signaled herself as a supportive person for those students who might need it the most, so she continued.

In contrast to the many accounts of the ways that schools contributed to the system of cisheteropatriarchy, there were many examples of individuals within schools and even school-level supports that refused to perpetuate this system. These acts emerged through GSAs, formal lessons, school programming, and even classroom decorations. Just as schools could resist dominant norms, so could students.

Student Resistance

Within the study, there were many examples of students resisting the system of cisheteropatriarchy through their awareness of social issues, activism, and calls for change. Students were cognizant of pressing social issues, especially related to gender equity and LGBTQ+ rights, and often incorporated this awareness into their schoolwork. In addition, students led activist efforts both within and beyond their school. Finally, students offered concrete suggestions for ways schools could improve in the future.

Awareness. Students were interested in and passionate about social issues related to gender and sexuality. Mr. Ricky noted how his students had both additional (e.g., marriage equality) and fewer (e.g., abortion) rights than prior generations. He shared:

...there is the exact opposite [of marriage equality] that's happening right now with female reproductive rights ... many of our young women are really struggling with [the Dobbs decision]. Again, they grew up with a choice, and now that's been taken away, and could be even more impacted by legislature that's going on right now.

Mr. Ricky continued to explain how students were not passively accepting these restrictions to their rights, but educating themselves. He continued, "These kids ... they

have feelings about all of this [social issues], and they are educated about all of this. They're not the standby generation that just ... lets it all go. They are activists." His students educated themselves and voiced their opinions on important social issues.

Direct examples of this social awareness emerged during the interviews. For example, although Hope was cisgender and did not personally know any transgender students at her school, she made efforts to stay educated. She explained:

I ... stay up to date on all of that [gender diversity]. ... I know about nonbinary people ... who want to be called they/them or any other neo pronouns. ... I also know about gender fluid people, who feel like they're this one day and then that the other. And then I know about people that just don't want to be referred to as anything, if that makes sense. They don't want pronouns and they're okay with you calling them anything because it doesn't really offend them.

In addition to educating themselves on appropriate language, students were also aware of contemporary issues impacting the LGBTQ+ community. Corinne shared, "...the government's trying to mess up the LGBTQ community, like, with the books, or having medical care." She shared her own opinion on both issues, explaining:

The books [banning books] are stupid as hell. ... [and if] you're trying to get some ...[breast] implants, or, like, have your dick be a pussy. What you [the government] going to do about it!? It's their bodies, their choice. They want to do what they want to do.

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed interest in social issues and concerns about government actions taken to restrict rights.

In other examples, students used school projects as a way to learn more about social issues. Jesse described how he and some classmates chose to do a group project on the "Don't Say Gay" bill in Florida. He described his reactions while doing the background research, "It was kind of hard to learn about the Don't Say Gay bill. ... [be]cause just like how ... stupid it is and ... annoying that this is a thing and people are being treated badly." Even though it was difficult to learn this information, Jesse and his

group voluntarily elected to study this legislation as a way to educate themselves on a topic that impacted students directly. Sandy also elected to do a school project covering an important social issue, wage inequality. She shared, “I did a really in-depth thing about it [wage inequality]. ... I researched it. ... I raised about \$115 for a [domestic work] organization ... so ... they could receive more money.” Upon completion of the project, both Sandy and Jesse presented their culminated work to their peers, ultimately contributing to their classmates’ social awareness of the issues. As with Sandy’s monetary donation, students could transform social awareness into action through activism.

Activism. Student activism occurred at the school policy level and beyond. At the school-level, students were not passive recipients of oppressive dress code policies. Jenna reported that students at her school had been fighting the dress code policy for years. She explained, “...there’s been a lot of, like, efforts to change it [the dress code] since middle school ... I remember a bunch of [middle school] girls were ... making slideshows and sending it to ... the administration.” Indeed, a new version of the dress code policy was eventually released several months after her interview, in part in response to these efforts. In addition, Storm shared that they and their classmates had plans to email administration about their grievances with the school dress code policy, although they had not yet had the opportunity. They explained, “...we [they and their friends] ... talk about it [sending an email about the dress code] at recess and we’re like ‘We’re gonna do this’ and then it doesn’t happen. ... But we’ll make progress eventually.” At another school, Hope reported that by the end of the year, students had resisted complying with the dress policies for so long that the school staff let up, at least unofficially, “But towards the end of the year ... I guess they [school staff] gave up because the students weren’t listening.”.

Although the teachers would still “give ... little judgmental looks”, the students prevailed in their resistance, at least temporarily. Students fought back against unfair school-level policies and in some cases, prevailed.

At the state policy level, students responded through activism to the “Don’t Say LGBTQ+” bills that were proposed in many states, including Louisiana. Storm recalled their activism with their school’s GSA. They shared, “We [GSA members] just went on some websites and we researched it [Don’t Say LGBTQ+] and we signed some petitions and we were like ‘God this sounds horrible. I hope it doesn’t happen.’” Kendra similarly reported that students at her school organized a walkout protesting the bill. She shared:

...At the end of the school [year] There was a huge walkout because I think there was a law that was being changed ... I think kids might've felt threatened by it. And since our school is really big on things dealing with gender ... I wouldn't say that they encouraged it because if a kid did participate in the walkout, they would've been marked absent. But our school didn't stop the kids from protesting ... their beliefs as well.

School staff limited penalization for participation in the walkout to an absence over more serious disciplinary action, an action that Kendra viewed as at least partially supportive of the protest. Regardless, students engaged in activism with or without school support.

Change. Just as students had opinions on the social issues impacting schools and the nation as a whole, they also had ideas and suggestions about how to improve schools. School assemblies, a commonly reported format for addressing drug use, sexual activity, and other issues in schools, were warned against by participants. Ezra perceived that school assemblies were not the right format for combatting transphobia. He explained, “

Like, they've [the school has] done assemblies. ... I had ... an assembly on vaping, and it literally ... made me want to vape. ... I'm so serious. They're so bad at assemblies. They have no authority over those kids. They're like, “And if you vape, you'll hurt our feelings!” ... I don't think an assembly is the way to go [to improve school experiences for transgender youth], because then you'll just ostracize trans-people even more. That is not a good idea.

Renee held a similar opinion. "...I would say I would like to have some people come in and talk [to students about transphobia] ... but they did that with, like, drugs and sex, and it was funny. It did not help us." According to Ezra and Renee, at best, a school assembly would be dismissed as a joke and at worst, it could promote transphobia.

In addition to suggestions about what schools should *not* do, students suggested what schools could do. Many suggestions focused on teacher response and intervention. Jesse suggested that consistently enforcing respectful behavior amongst peers was essential. He explained, "... [schools should have] more ... enforcement of, like, respectfulness to kids. ... If teachers ... tried to ... listen in and like, give punishment ... if somebody is ... making fun of somebody and calling them gay." Improved teacher training was also suggested. Anton explained:

...there's a lot of things that could be done [to improve schools]. ... Teaching ... teachers how to get rid of their bias and ... trying to ... hire teachers that are more diverse in their beliefs. ... Teach the teachers to ... keep their opinions to themselves [*sic*] because a lot of them [opinions] aren't helpful and are more detrimental...and just training them on how to be decent people would be helpful.

Anton was not alone in suggesting schools hire better teachers. Kaitlyn expressed that a lot of student behaviors contributing to gender inequality, such as homophobic teasing and sexual harassment, could be curbed with retaining effective teachers. She shared:

... [at my old school] teachers [were] quitting ... so they [the school] were ... hiring random people to go sit in the class while students do ... an online course. ... the substitute would just sit there and like people would just be very ... obnoxious and loud and say ... odd, odd things.

Students perceived that teachers could positively influence the classroom environment, through their own values and through intervening with inappropriate student behaviors.

Students also made broader school-level suggestions. Jenna described the absence of formal school policies on transgender and nonbinary rights at her school as an issue.

She explained that by “...having [school] policies that protect them [transgender and nonbinary students] or at least define, like their necessities”, students would no longer be required to “advocate for themselves.” Jenna expressed that the impetus should not be on students to address these issues on their own. Anton recommended the addition of a school-level support for LGBTQ+ students specifically, such as a GSA. He explained, “There could be LGBT ... organizations at the school.” Avery expressed a need for the school to more broadly celebrate LGBTQ+ students. She explained:

... We [the school] should have a actual [*sic*] festival for that [the LGBTQ+ community] ... If we would've had that festival, I feel like it [LGBTQ+ students] would've felt more welcome. Because we have these festivals for all the other cultures, I feel like that's a culture too.

Avery's school already celebrated cultures based on race and ethnicity (e.g., Latinx, Black), and she expressed that also celebrating LGBTQ+ communities would be a way to improve the school environment.

Students stayed abreast of social issues related to gender and sexuality. This awareness was extended into activism – sometimes at the school-level and sometimes more broadly. Avoiding didactic assemblies, hiring and training more effective teachers, creating policies, and building more supports and celebrations for LGBTQ+ youth were just a sampling of the many suggestions students had to improve schools.

Summary

No single narrative of gender in schools emerged within the study. In many cases, participants discussed the constraints of the gender binary within their schools, particularly in its expectations around strength, physical appearance, emotions, self-confidence, and peer interactions. Norms around heterosexuality were deeply intertwined with these expectations, with clear implications for the overall classroom climate,

especially related to homophobic teasing, sexual harassment, and other harmful interpersonal aggressions. Further, the system of cisheteropatriarchy was not only reinforced at the interpersonal level, but through the school as an institution. Policies, written and unwritten, and the enforcement of policies related to discipline, academics, dress code, TIX, and gender diversity were of particular relevance, with examples of schools both reinforcing and resisting cisheteropatriarchy through their formal actions.

However, despite the many pressures internal and external to the school encouraging strict reinforcement of the system of cisheteropatriarchy, resistance was widespread at both the student-level and school-level. Students who articulated gender identities and sexualities that undermined this system were perceived as becoming more visible in the school setting. Further, many students accepted and supported LGBTQ+ students at school, as allies, or as part of the community. Even in the face of criticism, schools organized GSAs, taught lessons that undermined the dominance of cisheteropatriarchy, and showed support to queer students. Students were not passive recipients of gender oppression, but instead were aware of the social issues impacting gender and courageously voiced their opposition.

Chapter V

Discussion

This chapter begins by contextualizing and analyzing the findings in relation to the research questions and prior literature. After, implications for policy, practice, and social work education are considered. The chapter concludes by weighing the strengths and limitations of the dissertation and suggesting recommendations for future research.

Structural Gender Oppression

Critical social work, which attends to the interconnections between the micro-level and macro-level when considering power and domination (Fook, 2016), was one of the theories underlying this inquiry and lead to the development of two research questions. This section considers the first research question: *How does gender oppression present in the school system?* Gender oppression, and specifically gender oppression that was imposed and supported at the structural-level, through school policy and/or teacher enforcement emerged through the formal, hidden, and evaded curricula of the focal schools. Female students experienced gender oppression through dress code enforcement, male students experienced gender oppression through discipline enforcement, and youth with complex gender identities experienced gender oppression through attempted erasure.

Female Students and Dress

The most identified site of gender oppression for female students at the structural-level was school dress code policies. Dress code policies were technically gender-neutral in the majority of schools. Further, even those policies that were gendered were either

equivalent in their restrictiveness (e.g., female students must wear plaid, male students must wear blue) or granted more options to female students (e.g., female students may wear pants or a skirt, male students must wear pants). However, the supposed neutrality of dress code policies has been unveiled and critiqued in prior research (Pomerantz, 2007), raising questions about the potentially gendered impact of the codes.

On closer inspection, certain rules in the dress code applied more to female students. For example, when school dress code policies applied blanket bans on purses and backpacks without any consideration or accommodations for students in need of menstrual products, the unique needs of students who menstruate (often, but not exclusively, female students) were ignored. Further, given the many accounts of participants associating make-up and nail décor with femininity, the extensive bans on these items certainly communicated a gendered target to these policies. Taken together, these policies implied an incompatibility between femininity and the school environment.

Gender oppression primarily manifested itself not in formal policy; however, but through the hidden curriculum of school dress codes. Congruent with prior research (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017; Wun, 2016a), students overwhelmingly reported extraordinarily disproportionate monitoring and surveillance of female students' dress, often in public spaces and with highly judgmental undertones. Although the commonly-used justification that dress code policies were meant to "reduce distractions" was technically gender-neutral, the hidden curriculum was overwhelmingly interpreted as *female* students should not distract *male* students. Scholars have heavily critiqued this gendered distraction imperative as tacitly supporting harmful rape myths including that female survivors invite harassment/rape through provocative dress (Neville-Shepard,

2019; Pomerantz, 2007; Raby, 2010). However, only one focal school flipped this imperative, putting the impetus on students to manage their own distractions.

Further, the majority of schools did not express consideration for the potential distraction from learning experienced by a student who was disciplined for their dress. Indeed, common consequences for dress code violations, such as removal from class and suspension, directly resulted in missed instructional time. This uneven concern with preventing distractions at school clearly communicated to students another hidden message identified within the dress code literature: the education of male students takes priority over the education of female students (Pomerantz, 2007).

On the surface, school dress code policies attempted to desexualize the school environment, likely arising out of adult anxiety about expressions of youth sexuality (Hethorn & Kaiser, 1999; Neville-Shepard, 2019). However, dress code policies actually *emphasized sex* by assigning sexual meaning to clothing and bodies (Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pomerantz, 2007). For example, when Macy's school permitted leggings up until a certain grade, they communicated that once (female) students reached a certain age, leggings transformed from harmless clothing into a sexual provocation. Similarly, the hyper-regulation of students with large breasts reported by many participants further communicated that some bodies were so inherently sexual that they required additional restraint (Aghasaleh, 2018; M. Morris, 2018; Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pomerantz, 2007). These sexualized messages became integrated into participants' "internal dialogue", to borrow Ms. Angela's words, and resulted in some participants self-regulating their own dress in compliance with these norms. Indeed, Avery reported self-regulating her dress as a way to reduce sexual harassment, precisely because of her embodied experience living

in a body that was deemed too sexual. This ongoing tension between recognizing gender oppression in dress code policies while also internalizing some of the messages undergirding the policies supports prior research on the subject (Raby, 2010).

School dress code policies directly contributed to gender inequality in schools, particularly for female students. In the study, schools implemented targeted rules that were thinly veiled as gender-neutral, needlessly disrupted the learning of female students who were out of dress code under the guise of protecting the focus of male students, and prescribed sexualized meanings to female students' clothing and bodies. This inequitable treatment not only had academic and behavioral implications for female students in the here and now, but more troubling, socialized students into a context where female students bear responsibility for the sexual restraint of their male peers.

Male Students and Discipline

Gender oppression towards male students was most evident in discipline enforcement at schools. Although there were no formal school differentiated rules or expectations for male students specifically, participants generally observed that male students were disciplined more often and more harshly at school (except in dress code policies). This perception was supported by anecdotal observations and in some cases, based on measurable trends in school behavior documentation.

Actual differences in the behavioral manifestations between students may have impacted some of this discrepancy. As Sandy noted, while both male and female students were likely to misbehave in class, the behaviors exhibited by male students were more disruptive, hence leading to more extensive teacher responses. Externalizing disorders, such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder are more commonly diagnosed in males compared

to females (Bean, 2013; Dowdy-Hazlett & Boel-Studt, 2021; Slaughter & Nagoshi, 2020; Tyson et al., 2010; Whitted et al., 2013) and these disorders are often accompanied by a litany of behaviors that could disrupt the classroom environment, perhaps supporting Sandy's observation. Further, even within these externalizing disorders, female students often exhibit symptoms in less disruptive ways, resulting in under-detection (Dowdy-Hazlett & Boel-Studt, 2021), as noted in Ms. Janelle's observation about the underdiagnosis of female students with Attention Deficit Disorder.

Teacher bias and/or belief in supposed natural differences in the behavior between male and female students may also have played a role in this discrepancy. There was an expectation that male students would misbehave in class and therefore, when a misbehavior did occur, teachers responded swiftly and sometimes harshly. Further, as Martin's example illustrated, teachers sometimes grouped the behavior of male students together, responding to a one-time misbehavior by a single male student as if it were a blatant continuation of a coordinated pattern of conduct issues emanating from male students in the aggregate. By contrast, the misbehavior of female students was perceived as individual, isolated incidents and these students were given the benefit of the doubt. This double-standard suggests adult implicit bias is a contributor, consistent with prior literature (Bean, 2013; Chu, 2014). Despite gender-neutral policies, the hidden curriculum communicated a belief that male students needed to be closely monitored.

Even dress code policies, which largely favored male students in enforcement, perpetuated an expectation of problematic behavior, as male students were positioned as unable or unwilling to control their sexual impulses. Indeed, Anton best described this phenomenon when he shared his perspective that his teachers viewed him as a "predator."

This incorrect assumption furthers yet another harmful rape myth, that males are unable to control their sexual desires (Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pomerantz, 2007; Raby, 2010). Other rape myths were also invoked through this assumption of male hypersexuality, including that men cannot be raped, contributing to cascading consequences, including the denial, minimization, and silencing of sexual harassment of male students (E. Brown, 2021; DeJong et al., 2020; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Orenstein, 2020), perhaps partially explaining the absence of male sexual harassment stories in this study. Although the dress code policy on the surface favors male students, in actuality, it contributes to a hidden curriculum vilifying male students into hypersexual beings.

Socialization into hegemonic masculinity may also have contributed to the discipline disparity. Male students were overwhelmingly described as emotionally closed-off and quick-tempered by participants, contributing to some of the behaviors in class that led to disciplinary action. In addition, behavior concerns were sometimes displayed as an avoidance response to academic challenges, as asking for help was seen as incompatible with the norms of masculinity. Indeed, prior research has found that male students, in the aggregate, have less developed social and emotional skills than their female counterparts and are less likely to seek help at school (Buchmann et al., 2008; De Luca et al., 2019; Mogro-Wilson & Tredinnick, 2020). However, given the multiple anecdotes about witnessing young male students being chastised for crying and/or expected to perform to a certain academic standard in class, this difference demonstrates how the hidden curriculum at school actively discouraged the development of these skills, ultimately undermining the supposed natural differences discourse (Lahelma, 2014).

Male students faced disciplinary challenges at school in a way that their female counterparts, in the aggregate, did not. These disciplinary challenges often arose in response to externalizing behaviors that were viewed as more severe than other misbehaviors. Further, teachers' negative expectations about male students' behavior, including their sexual behavior, contributed to this disparity as well as furthered problematic rape myths. However, attributing differences in behaviors to "natural differences" overlooks how society and the school system as a whole take an active role in suppressing the social and emotional development of male students.

Students with Complex Gender Identities and Erasure

Gender oppression towards students with complex gender identities most often emerged as part of the evaded curriculum, or the school's avoidance and refusal to discuss matters of great importance (e.g., gender identity) to the lives of students (Bailey, 1992). The complete lack of formal written policy on facility access in conjunction with the very few policies on student names and pronouns ($n=2$), despite the availability of cohesive model policies publicly available at no cost (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016), were very clear examples of this evasion. Dress code policies that distinguished their rules along binary gender lines ($n=5$) further demonstrated this evasion and denial of genders outside of the binary. This gendered separation has been observed and critiqued as a reification of the gender binary that brings unnecessary attention to anyone who does not conform (Knipp & Stevenson, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2020; E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017; M. Morris, 2018; Pascoe, 2007). By evading the topic of gender diversity, schools in actuality brought more (often negative) attention to youth with complex gender identities.

The existence of youth with complex gender identities was erased in other ways, including through teacher actions. When Avery noted that a typically helpful teacher refused to help a transgender student struggling in class, the existence of youth with complex gender identities was quite literally ignored. Even more extreme, when Ms. Janelle heard a teacher openly expressing his belief in the existence of only two genders, youth with complex gender identities were denied. Research has found school staff members culpable in supporting a transphobic climate at schools (Greytak et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2020; Kuklin, 2014) and certainly, the dismissive actions of these staff members contributed to a climate of intolerance and disapproval.

Even when students with complex gender identities were not actively erased, gender identity remained part of the evaded curriculum at school. For example, schools communicated apathy and disinterest about an issue of central importance to youth with complex gender identities, names and pronouns, when they repeatedly failed to take proactive measures to prevent student misgendering. This lack of motivation to build in school-wide systems and policies addressing student names and pronouns downplayed the importance of correctly gendering students. Many model school policies provide concrete and relatively simple solutions to the many potential problem areas identified within the study (e.g., state testing, birth certificates) (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016), yet, schools did not enact these solutions, communicating that the issue was simply not worth prioritizing.

In an extension of this apathy, meeting the needs of youth with complex gender identities was conceptualized as a *privilege* that benevolent schools could bestow upon their students, not a fundamental obligation of schools. When Ezra was told by a coach,

“My friend We've got a gender-neutral changing room,” after he was found using the male locker room, the school situated itself as his “friend” or ally while also curtailing his access and undermining his identity as a man. Ezra’s experience is not uncommon as transgender male students reported high rates of being denied bathroom access (68.7%) and locker room access (75%) consistent with their gender identity in a 2021 survey (Kosciw et al., 2022). While a single-stall, gender-neutral locker room was a relatively low-stakes demonstration of inclusion, permitting a transgender man to use the male locker room could open the school up to complaints from parents and the community at large (*G. G. v. Gloucester County School Board*, 2016; *G.G. v. Gloucester County School Board*, 2020). Thus, the school foregrounded its benevolence through the inclusion of gender-neutral facilities while simultaneously avoiding higher-stakes policies, in direct contradiction to best practices that suggest that students with complex gender identities should not be limited to gender-neutral facilities (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016). Students with complex gender identities were not necessarily erased, but their rights were subordinated into privileges.

In another example of inclusive bathroom access being seen as a privilege, Kendra shared how her school permanently closed one of the gender-neutral bathrooms in response to (rumored) sexual acts occurring in the space, although other gender-neutral bathrooms remained available. Several participants in this study shared about sexual acts and other problematic behaviors occurring in single-sex facilities, yet it is hard to imagine that permanently closing a single-sex bathroom, even if others remained open, would be considered a viable solution by the school. Prior literature has consistently identified single-sex bathrooms and locker rooms as “hot spots” for bullying and other troubling

behaviors at school (Migliaccio et al., 2017; Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2004), yet closing these facilities has not been suggested as a solution. For many schools, single-sex facilities were integral to daily functioning while gender-neutral facilities were non-essential.

Rumored sex acts acting as the impetus for the closing of Kendra's school's gender-neutral bathroom was not surprising as schools, at times, furthered a hidden curriculum in support of the "transgender predator myth" through their bathroom policies (*G.G. v. Gloucester County School Board*, 2020). Although, the transgender predator myth is most often weaponized against transwomen, who are characterized as cisgender males pretending to be female to gain access to female spaces for nefarious purposes, in this study, the myth was subtly extended to other complex gender identities. For instance, when Colby, a nonbinary student, described their perception that a boy would be "really scared" if they entered the male bathroom because they "look too female", they alluded to the transgender predator myth, but in reverse. Despite the finding that people with complex gender identities are at much greater risk of being *victims* of sexual assault than perpetrators (Klemmer et al., 2021; Norris & Orchowski, 2020), protecting cisgender youth in single-sex facilities continues to be prioritized in schools.

Youth with complex gender identities primarily experienced gender oppression through having their gender identity erased, invalidated, and/or trivialized at school. When schools did acknowledge their existence, their rights and needs were relegated compared to the rights and needs of cisgender youth, particularly when meeting their was perceived as an extra burden or a risk to the school. Ignoring youth with complex gender identities and/or minimizing the importance of respecting student gender identity at

school revealed a hidden curriculum that at best, imagined gender equity practices as an optional add-on, and at worst, supported an explicitly transphobic agenda.

Title IX

TIX acts as a potential tool for mitigating the types of structural-level gender oppression previously described. However, critical social work theory requires attunement to the possibility that institutionalized attempts at social change can quickly become tools of social control (Fook, 2016). Attention now turns to the second research question posed under critical social work theory: *To what extent does the federal mandate of TIX inform school policy and/or contribute to sex (in)equity in school?* To answer this question, compliance with TIX is first considered, followed by a consideration of the many examples of sex discrimination that went under/undetected.

Compliance

Prior literature has troubled how TIX has increasingly become a complaints-based model focused on school compliance as opposed to a more robust directive to support gender equity in schools broadly (Sindt, 2020; Tonnesen, 2013). However, despite the focus on compliance, empirical research has shown that many K-12 schools are failing to meet the basic requirements of the law (Grant et al., 2019; Lichty et al., 2008; Richards et al., 2021). By analyzing written policy and speaking with participants, the metrics of compliance of TIX within schools, specifically related to nondiscrimination statements, designation of a TIX coordinator, and investigations were analyzed.

Nondiscrimination Statements. By law, all schools receiving federal funding are required to comply with TIX by issuing a public nondiscrimination notice (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 1975). In the sample, a nondiscrimination

statement was available for every focal school; however, there was variance in the amount of detail included within the broader TIX policies, with the majority of schools including in-depth policies on sexual harassment ($n=14$, 82.35%). Although OCR guidance on defining and responding to sexual harassment has varied over the years (Busch & Thro, 2018; Melnick, 2018), there remains a clear precedence established by the Supreme Court that sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination under TIX (*Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education*, 1999; *Franklin v. Gwinnett County Public Schools*, 1992; *Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District*, 1998). Given this legacy, it is unsurprising that most schools specifically addressed sexual harassment.

By contrast, approximately one-third ($n=6$, 35.29%) of schools did not address protections for students based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity within their school policies. This likely reflects the less established and contradicting guidance released by the OCR over the last 25 years on whether sex discrimination includes sexual orientation and/or gender identity protections (Busch & Thro, 2018; Melnick, 2018). The more established aspects of TIX (e.g., sexual harassment) were better addressed in the policies than the aspects that have experienced greater flux (e.g., sexual orientation and gender identity), underscoring the need to more firmly establish LGBTQ+ rights in schools, whether through TIX or other means.

Dating violence and the rights of pregnant and/or parenting students are also covered under TIX; however, the OCR does not explicitly require a separate or detailed policy on these issues. Only four schools (23.53%) included a dating violence policy and none of these schools were K-8 only schools. This absence raises concerns as the extant literature suggests that for many students, dating violence victimization and perpetration

begins prior to high school (Carter-Snell, 2015). Additionally, only three schools (17.65%) included policies on pregnant and/or parenting students and confusingly, only one of these three schools served high school students. As of 2021 in the United States, there were nearly 19 times more births to 15-17-year-olds compared to those under 15 years of age (Kids Count Data Center, n.d.), raising concerns about the lack of policies on pregnant and parenting students in high school. Dating violence and pregnant and parenting students were largely part of the evaded curriculum at schools.

Trends among schools with more detailed TIX policies were notable. Elementary schools were, in the aggregate, less detailed in their TIX policies, mirroring the literature suggesting that TIX has less relevance for young children (Cyphert, 2017). State-run schools, many of which operated prior to Hurricane Katrina, had more robust TIX policies, indicating that the overhaul of the local public school system could have contributed to a loss of institutional TIX knowledge (Buras & Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, 2013). Schools with robust TIX policies were more likely to have high suspension rates, a high level of dress regulation, and require school uniforms, suggesting an inter-relationship between discipline and TIX compliance – an overlap that has been problematized by advocates (Cyphert, 2017; Sindt, 2020; Tonnesen, 2013). Compliance with the nondiscrimination mandate of TIX looked different across contexts.

TIX Coordinators. A second required metric of compliance for TIX is the designation of a TIX coordinator for every school (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 1975). Every focal school had a TIX coordinator listed in their written materials. Further, all listed TIX coordinators were contacted for every focal school, yet only two agreed to be in the study. These two TIX coordinators were knowledgeable about their

roles, understood the law, and trained students and colleagues on the policy. Notably, the only student who had received training on TIX attended the school where one of the participating coordinators was employed, triangulating their claims that student-level training on TIX did indeed occur at their school. This demonstrated competence contradicts findings by Meyer et al. (2018) that TIX coordinators in K-12 schools were mostly unaware of their responsibilities and had very little training.

However, it is possible that the two participating coordinators were exceptional in their performance of their role compared to their counterparts at other focal schools. For example, only three schools (17.65%) provided a name for the TIX coordinator when contacted by phone that matched the name written in policy documents, suggesting that general school staff were not trained in TIX and thus, unable to correctly identify the appropriate contact person. Supporting this theory, Ms. Angela disclosed that her schools' own TIX coordinator was unaware of her role until contacted for participation in the study. These contradicting examples lend more credence to the claims of prior literature (Meyer et al., 2018) and illustrate that simply designating a TIX coordinator in writing may not be the most effective metric of overall school compliance with TIX.

In general, there was a noticeable lack of knowledge about TIX in the focal schools. Despite 10 years working in Orleans parish, Ms. Janelle was unaware of the existence of TIX until she transferred to a neighboring traditional public school district, at which time she was trained as part of that district's annual orientation training. This juxtaposition between the traditional school district's embedded training on TIX as part of their orientation program compared to the lack of any training from the focal school district brings to question whether institutional knowledge regarding TIX was lost as part

of the traditional public school overhaul post-Hurricane Katrina (Buras & Urban South Grassroots Research Collective, 2013). The lack of awareness in most, but not all of the focal schools, supports claims that K-12 schools are largely unequipped at this time to handle TIX complaints (Grant et al., 2019; Lichty et al., 2008; Richards et al., 2021).

TIX Investigations. The final required metric of compliance for TIX is the implementation of fair procedures during TIX investigations (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 1975). According to the two participating TIX coordinators, actual complaints were rare at the K-8 school and a bit more common at the high school (although still relatively low). This low-level of complaints fits with prior literature that has found the majority (nearly 85%) of K-12 schools report *zero* instances of sex-based harassment in schools, likely due to a lack of reporting and/or school compliance, not an actual absence of harassment (Richards et al., 2021).

The coordinators reported that the complaints that did arise were almost always related to sexual harassment and proved challenging due to the age of students and what they perceived as developmentally appropriate boundary testing. Sexual behavior exhibited by young children in particular can be a warning sign of sexual abuse or a developmentally appropriate example of experimental sexual behavior, further complicating matters (Cyphert, 2017). Although the coordinators were diligent in complying with TIX throughout the complaint process, both also expressed their interest in supporting the social and emotional growth of their students through the complaints as opposed to solely focusing on disciplinary outcomes. As the entanglement of TIX with zero-tolerance discipline policies has been critiqued (Tonnesen, 2013), this focus on

learning and student growth communicated these coordinators' attention to utilizing TIX not only as a responsive tool, but as a prevention tool.

Macy was the only student who went through the TIX process personally. Two aspects of her narrative have implications for the research question. First, Macy believed that the school asked if she wanted to “sue this girl [the respondent] over TIX”, which is not how TIX operates. In actuality, the school is responsible for investigating TIX complaints. If the school fails in this duty, then students can report the school to the OCR and/or bring a lawsuit *against the school*. Schools do not file lawsuits against students under TIX. As the OCR is underfunded and understaffed (Stromquist, 2013) and limited in the actions it can take (Melnick, 2018), students do turn to the court system for justice, perhaps illuminating some of Macy's misconception. Without training on TIX, Macy was left with an erroneous understanding, emphasizing the need for student training.

Second, the emotional impact of the ordeal led to Macy making the choice to change schools, a response also observed in similar research (Pascoe, 2023). While understudied at the K-12 level, a report by *Know Your IX*, a TIX advocacy organization, found that over 60% of college students who reported TIX sexual harassment complaints either dropped out, transferred, or took a leave of absence (Know Your IX, 2021), indicating that Macy's response was not unusual. In New Orleans, school assignment is not based on geography and students can change schools through the OneApp system with comparative ease (Babineau et al., 2020), perhaps uncovering an unanticipated benefit of the system. However, supporting a school transfer could also be offered as a supportive measure under TIX (National Women's Law Center, 2021), including in a traditional public school district. Although the needs of students must be centered, this

raises questions about whether transferring students out of schools where sexual harassment occurred is in line with the larger aims of TIX and gender equity.

Undetected Cases

Although Macy's was the only official TIX complaint discussed within the study, there were other stories of peer sexual harassment and gender-based harassment that would likely meet the criteria for sex discrimination under TIX that were not reported. Further, the threat of staff-student sexual harassment also loomed in interviews. Focusing on sex discrimination that falls under TIX, but was not addressed as such, illuminates potential shortcomings of the legislation and future directions.

Peer Sexual Harassment. Sexual harassment is under-reported in schools nationwide (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011; Richards et al., 2021) and the narratives shared offered insights into some of the barriers to reporting, both at school and at home. For Kaitlyn, despite having a close relationship with her mother, the mere experience of having to repeat the vulgar and graphic comments made to her in class kept her from telling her mom. The uneasiness experienced by Kaitlyn potentially provides insight into the factors leading to only a quarter of students (27%) reporting sexual harassment to family members (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011). Further, from Corinne and Renee's perspectives, their own experiences with unwanted sexual comments and/or touching paled in comparison to more serious sexual violations, contributing to their disinterest in reporting. Female students sometimes conceptualize these types of behaviors as "weird" or "gross" instead of harassment, perhaps as a coping mechanism (Pascoe, 2023).

However, lack of reporting cannot fully explain the disconnect between the number of official school complaints and personal experiences, as there were also

examples of school staff being made aware of sexual harassment. When Hope's teacher directly witnessed her boundaries being violated by a male student, Hope was the one punished both at school and at home, supporting prior literature suggesting that Black girls in particular are blamed and disciplined when they are victims of harassment, chilling future reporting (Tonnesen, 2013). Similarly, Corinne reported her harassment to the school security guard, but the school response was unclear, as Corinne's mother was not contacted (contrary to what was communicated) and the behavior continued. As less than 10% of students report sexual harassment at school (C. Hill & Kearn, 2011), when these rare reports are made, schools have an opportunity to respond and prevent future incidents. Thus, the failure of the schools to respond effectively was unsettling.

Within the study, there was an absence of firsthand narratives about sexual harassment towards male students. However, this was expected as male students do experience a lower rate of sexual harassment comparatively (C. Hill & Kearn, 2011). Furthermore, deeply-embedded stigma about sexual harassment experiences of male students (E. Brown, 2021; Orenstein, 2020) may have prevented them from reporting their experiences during the interview process. One of the few secondhand accounts of sexual harassment of a male student involved an openly gay male student, consistent with prior findings suggesting approximately 60% of LGBTQ+ youth experience sexual harassment at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, in this particular study, LGBTQ+ youth shared more accounts of gender-based harassment than sexual harassment.

Gender-Based Harassment. Students directly experiencing and/or witnessing students being teased related to their actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity was another theme that emerged, in congruence with prior quantitative research

(Kosciw et al., 2020). However, sex discrimination under TIX has not always been interpreted to include these types of harassment (Busch & Thro, 2018; Melnick, 2018). Under the new proposed TIX regulations, gender identity and sexual orientation will soon be explicitly protected in schools (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 2022). However, the matter remains unsettled (Busch & Thro, 2018; Melnick, 2018).

Regardless of what the future holds for TIX, the findings of this study concretely demonstrate the difficulty of disentangling sex discrimination from sexual orientation discrimination. As reported in the study, “you’re gay” was consistently paired with a male descriptor (e.g., bro), connected to acts of male intimacy (e.g., hugging), and/or used in highly masculine contexts (e.g., sports game). As George reported, if two female students hugged, they were unlikely to be called gay, a clear differential based on *sex*. Pascoe's (2007) critical ethnography remains relevant, a full two decades later, and homophobia was used not only as a weapon for regulating homosexuality, but also for regulating masculinity in male students. The connection between sex, sexuality, and gender (Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2005) was undeniable, rendering attempts to definitively categorize this behavior as only sexual orientation discrimination as futile.

Further, the inability to distinguish sex discrimination from discrimination based on gender identity was also evident. Colby and Ezra both shared stories about being subjected to pointed comments and questions about periods and genitalia that were intended to invalidate their gender identities by focusing on the *sex* they were assigned at birth. Put another way, had Ezra been assigned male at birth, his classmates simply would not make pointed comments towards him about men not having periods. He was subjected to these comments due to the incongruence between his sex assigned at birth

and his gender identity, again supporting the mutual construction of sex, sexuality, and gender (Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2005). To address the spirit of TIX in schools, schools do not have to rely on regulatory guidance to conceptualize these types of discrimination for what they are: *sex* discrimination. Indeed, failing to address these types of harassment as outside the scope of TIX is a salient example of what critical social work theory critiques, becoming an uncritical cog in the machine of systemic oppression, focused more on compliance to the institution than real systemic change (Fook, 2016).

Staff-Student Sexual Harassment. In contrast to gender-based harassment and peer sexual harassment, there was an absence of firsthand accounts of staff-student sexual misconduct. However, there were many secondhand accounts on the subject, including awareness and/or rumors of staff members who had been fired for alleged violations. A recent study estimated approximately one in 10 students experienced sexual misconduct from at least one adult in school (Jeglic et al., 2023), suggesting that despite the absence of firsthand accounts, this was an issue students faced. Further, lower-severity boundary violations were reported throughout the study, such as Ezra's report of the teacher who was "weird" about the clothing of female students and Anton's recollection of the teacher who physically tucked in a high school student's shirt, presumably by putting his hands into her pants. Best practices recommends writing clear policy to address these types of behaviors as a way to help prevent sexual misconduct in schools (Robertson et al., 2023).

Linking back to the original research question, in many ways, TIX was certainly addressed in written policy, but the extent that this translated into promoting gender equity in school was less clear. As problematized in the literature, the schools that did attend to TIX focused primarily on bare minimum compliance, such as designating a

coordinator, over more comprehensive prevention (Sindt, 2020). By contrast, the two coordinators included in the study did interpret their role as at least partially focused on prevention, as evident from their focus on addressing the social and emotional needs of students undergirding the harassing behavior. This prevention focus may be key as schools are often unaware of the sexual harassment and gender-based harassment occurring within their walls. By reconceiving TIX as primarily a prevention tool, schools could take steps to more proactively prevent gender-based harassment in schools.

Intersectionality

A key flaw in TIX is its framing of oppression through a single frame, sex discrimination (Meyer et al., 2018; Meyer & Quantz, 2021; Stimpson, 2022; Tonnesen, 2013). Intersectionality critiques the way that approaching oppression from a single-frame analysis, such as gender, marginalizes and ignores the needs of those experiencing overlapping forms of oppression, including Black women (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Thus, this section examines these interwoven oppressive structures with the research question: *How does the culture and context of gender overlap with other systems of oppression in the school system?* Specifically, given the emergence of the topic within the data and the predominance of Black youth in New Orleans schools, this section focuses on the overlap between gender and race in schools specifically, with attention to differential discipline, implicit bias, and the role of respectability politics.

Differential Discipline

Prior literature has quantitatively demonstrated how Black students are disproportionately punished and disciplined in schools compared to white students (Bean, 2013; Gopalan & Nelson, 2019; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Indeed, this

study qualitatively supported this prior literature, as even a young, white, male student, Christian, noticed and commented on this racial disparity. Oppressive and discriminatory discipline practices facing Black male students in school has received considerate attention in the literature (e.g., V. Basile et al., 2022; Bryan, 2020; Grace & Nelson, 2019; Marsh & Walker, 2022) and participants demonstrated awareness of the disproportionate disciplining of Black male students. For example, Ms. Angela referred to the uneven discipline practices as a “cliché” and acknowledged how it manifested in her own school, citing internal data supporting her claim. However, just as examining gender disparities from a single-frame defaults to the experiences of those with the most privilege within a group (e.g., white female students), examining racial disparities from a single-frame also defaults to the experiences of Black male students (Crenshaw, 1989).

Exclusively focusing on Black male students has been critiqued by intersectional feminist scholars, who note that Black female students also experience disproportionate discipline, but are often overlooked (Epstein et al., 2017; E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017; M. Morris, 2018; Wun, 2016a, 2016b). Hope’s comments mirrored this tendency to center the experiences of Black male students when she initially shared that male students were perceived as “aggressive” at her school. However, when Hope quickly added that “the same thing could’ve been said for girls”, she countered the dominant narrative, inviting a more nuanced gender-race analysis. Avery further described this intersectional experience when she expressed her perception that due to her identity as a Black female student, school staff expected her to “mess up” and watched her closely. Utilizing an intersectional perspective, a complicated and nuanced story emerged in the study of how

racial discipline discrepancies were filtered through gendered expectations and manifested through distinct and parallel pathways.

Implicit Bias and Racist Stereotypes

One explanation for raced and gendered discipline disparities might be explained through an examination of how certain racist stereotypes and/or tropes shaped the implicit biases of school professionals. Prior literature has consistently supported that the racial disciplinary differential between Black and white students can be explained at least in part by implicit bias, or a racial bias that remains outside of the awareness of school professionals (Bean, 2013; A. L. Brown, 2018; P. A. Goff et al., 2014; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; Todd et al., 2016; Tonnesen, 2013). Although both male and female Black students faced distinct and intersectional disciplinary challenges in schools, how these challenges emerged was varied and likely impacted by racist and gendered stereotypes. For Black male students, stereotypes related to danger, aggression, and sexual threat emerged and for Black female students, the Jezebel trope, or a stereotypical characterization of a sexually promiscuous Black woman (M. Morris, 2018) emerged.

The Perceived Deviance of Black Male Students. Although the specific iterations of the Black male deviance stereotype have varied in name throughout time and context (e.g., savage, super-predator, etc.), the stereotype and casting of Black males as criminal, dangerous, and/or otherwise threatening remains a powerful influence on the schooling experience of Black male students (A. L. Brown, 2018; Grace & Nelson, 2019; Linde, 2011). As A. L. Brown (2018) explains, “Black males’ subjectivities in school are not just informed by teachers’ explicit and implicit racial bias, but are held in place by a durable historical discourse on black male deviance” (p. 53). Anton’s description that

Black male students at his school were seen as “ticking bombs” as well as “aggressive and violent” reflects this longstanding coupling of Black masculinity with deviance (A. L. Brown, 2018; Grace & Nelson, 2019; Linde, 2011). Further, this perception of deviance extended into stereotypes of sexual deviance, where Black males are cast as hypersexual and/or sexually threatening (Feimster, 2009; McGuire, 2011), as illustrated by Anton’s perception that the restrictive dress code policies at his school contributed to the harmful expectation of sexually predatory behavior from Black male students.

The perceived threat *of* Black male students was inverted at times as a threat *to* Black male students. In this inversion, school professionals positioned Black male students not as inherently dangerous or criminal, but as particularly at-risk or vulnerable to falling *victim* to a dangerous lifestyle, such as community gun violence. When Avery noted how some Black male teachers went “harder” in disciplining Black male students so they would “excel”, the unstated implication was that without harsh disciplinary intervention, Black male students would fail to excel or perhaps default to deviance. A recent study also in New Orleans with Black male students described how when teachers treated Black male students as in need of extra help or attention, even with good intentions, this view nonetheless contributed to a harmful “deficit way of thinking” (p. 674) about Black male students (Grace & Nelson, 2019).

Mirroring Avery’s observations on the social identities of the disciplinarian, Brockenbrough (2015) described how Black male educators often became “the discipline stop” (p. 512) at schools and were expected by their colleagues to take a harsh, authoritarian approach to discipline as a way to keep Black male students on track, even when authoritarianism was incongruent with their own preferred approach to discipline.

School staff members who, in the words of Ms. Tracy, “used to be in the streets” were considered particularly poised as positive role models to help divert Black male students from community gun violence outcomes. Certainly Black educators, including Black male educators, have been instrumental in facilitating culturally-relevant pedagogies in schools and issues of teacher diversity and representation are of central importance to school systems (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, the hidden implication behind these specific anecdotes was that without a specific type of discipline, ideally enforced by a specific type of person, Black male students risked falling into a dangerous lifestyle, continuing the unconscious pairing of Black masculinity and deviance.

The Jezebel Trope. Prior research has shown that Black female students are hypersexualized, or viewed as more sexual, compared to their white counterparts (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017; M. Morris, 2018; Wun, 2016a), in line with the Jezebel trope that casts Black women as promiscuous and lewd. In M. Morris' (2018) influential book, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, an entire chapter, “Jezebel in the Classroom” was devoted to describing the ways the trope presented itself in school through sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, and dress code enforcement.

In many ways, there was a very narrow margin for avoiding the Jezebel trope, as Avery noted that having even sex with one person could result in being labeled a “whore.” Indeed, this ongoing threat of being cast into the Jezebel trope has contributed to a long legacy of depicting Black women’s “sexuality through its absence – through silence, secrecy, and invisibility” (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 266); although emerging inquiry into Black women’s pleasure and sexual agency has gained momentum over the years (Higginbotham, 2017). Further, as demonstrated by Hope’s recollection of the

female student who was accused of going to “meet some little boy” when on her way to the restroom, even the most benign of behaviors could be interpreted as lecherous, undermining suggestions that Black female students could fully avoid this type of negative stereotyping through exhibiting chaste behaviors.

Dress code enforcement was perhaps the most salient site of the Jezebel trope in the present study. There were numerous examples of dress code enforcement supporting a hidden curriculum that portrayed the bodies of Black female students as licentious, congruent with prior research (E. W. Morris & Perry, 2017; M. Morris, 2018; Wun, 2016a). In perhaps the most disturbing example of this trope, at Anton’s predominantly Black school, school staff made this connection between dress and perceived promiscuity explicit when they referred to female students as “hoes” and/or “fast” related to their clothing choices. Congruent with prior research, Black female teachers were often responsible for the critiques on Black female students’ bodies and sexualities (Nyachae & Ohito, 2023). For students like Hope, this was disillusioning as she believed that Black female teachers should have been on her “side” at school, but instead were the ones “sexualizing” her body through dress code enforcement. Much of the rigid enforcement of appropriate behavior experienced by participants from Black teachers towards Black students might be explained through an understanding of respectability politics.

Respectability Politics

The concept of respectability politics emerged from research on the ways that Black women in the Black Baptist Church leveraged civil and political power in the late 19th and early 20th century (Higginbotham, 1993) by linking Black women’s “mainstream domestic duties, codes of dress, sexual conduct, and public etiquette with both individual

success and group progress” (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 271). Put another way, respectability politics acts as an assimilationist strategy for gaining civil and political rights by adhering to white, middle-class, cisheteropatriarchal; Conversely, deviations from this norm are characterized as inhibiting Black progress (Higginbotham, 1992). Respectability politics often has more to do with “what one is *not* to do or say and with whom they are *not* [emphasis added] to do it” (Kerrison et al., 2018, p. 9) than with active directives for behavior. This approach has been critiqued as further ostracizing those already on the margins, reifying dominant and oppressive power structures, and promoting carceral social policies that ultimately harm Black Americans (Bunyasi & Smith, 2019; Jefferson, 2023; Nyachae & Ohito, 2023).

Examples of respectability politics were ample in the study. When Black female students talked about how being “lady-like” meant abstaining from sexual activity and/or covering their bodies, the emphasis on conformity to cisheteropatriarchal norms was underscored. Further, the finding that schools with a majority Black student population more often had uniform requirements reflected the attention to appropriate dress within respectability politics. Respectability politics also explained some the intersections between race, religion, gender, and sexuality. Hope perceived that some of the exclusionary behavior towards LGBTQ+ students could be explained by the intertwined nature of her school as “a very Black environment” and highly religious. Indeed, respectability politics gained momentum in the Black Baptist Church (Higginbotham, 1993) and continues in various iterations in Black churches today (Jefferson, 2023; Tobin & Moon, 2020), lending credence to Hope’s observation.

Despite the commonality of these anecdotes, participants did not explicitly discuss respectability politics within the study. However, aspects of respectability politics may help explain some of the more nuanced findings of the study, including the strict, gendered, discipline enforcement participants reported from some Black educators. By holding Black students to narrow and binary conceptions of appropriate behavior based on gender, educators were likely seeking to counter stereotypes facing Black men and women, although with harmful consequences (Nyachae & Ohito, 2023). In addition, when Ms. Janelle described a perception held by some in the Black community that “we're already struggling with this [race], why would you do that [be LGBTQ+] too”, she alluded to the perception held by some that any deviations from cisheteropatriarchal norms around gender and sexuality inhibited and/or complicated Black progress.

By contextualizing the less inclusive behaviors of some Black educators through the lens of respectability politics, these anecdotes can be understood as a strategic, although flawed, response to the structural forces of racial oppression (Bunyasi & Smith, 2019; Jefferson, 2023; Nyachae & Ohito, 2023). Many Black individuals explicitly reject respectability politics and there is tremendous diversity and variance within the Black community in regards to views on gender and sexuality (Bunyasi & Smith, 2019; Jefferson, 2023). Many Black participants within the study expressed discomfort and disapproval of this limiting mindset. Further, recent research has asserted that Black youth in particular are increasingly critical of the premise of respectability politics and contemporary social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, are focused on centering systemic and intersecting oppressions, not policing individual behavior (Bunyasi & Smith, 2019; Kerrison et al., 2018). Although the philosophy of respectability politics

was certainly a present force, resistance was likewise readily documented and respectability politics should not be generalized to the entire Black community.

School disparities could not be fully understood by employing a race-based analysis or a gender-based analysis, but instead, an intersectional analysis was necessary. The long history of coupling Black masculinity with deviance impacted perceptions about Black male students' behavior and educators' roles in cultivating appropriate behavior. Likewise, contextualizing the differential treatment experienced by Black female students within the legacy of the Jezebel trope further illuminated the heightened surveillance and discipline of the sexuality of Black female students. Anecdotes related to harsher and/or less inclusive disciplinary practices from some Black educators can be contextualized as a response to systemic oppression; however, participants overwhelmingly critiqued this approach, advocating for a more inclusive future.

Cisheteropatriarchy

As described, part of the respectability politics experienced by participants demanded conformity to certain norms around gender and sexuality. These cisheteropatriarchal norms were imposed through settler colonialism (Bupara, 2019) and invoked rigid expectations around normativity, ultimately elevating straight, white, cisgender men to the top of the hierarchy and relegating all others who do not fit the model (Alim et al., 2020). Together, queer and transgender theories challenge these normative expectations while also honoring lived experiences (Benavente & Gill-Peterson, 2019; Butler, 1990; Stryker, 2004). Attention now turns to the final research question: *How is cisheteropatriarchy regulated, promoted, and/or resisted at schools?*

How cisheteropatriarchy was promoted and resisted by various stakeholders, including students, staff members, and the school as an institution, are outlined.

Students

Students had tremendous agency in supporting and refuting cisheteropatriarchy. At times, students reified cisheteropatriarchal values including by positioning female students as objects, elevating hegemonic masculinity, and erasing and/or degrading students with complex gender identities. By contrast, students also resisted cisheteropatriarchy by embodying identities outside of the normative framework, accepting and celebrating LGBTQ+ students, and actively working towards change.

Reifying. A central tenet of queer theory, the heterosexual matrix, is the process of creating two rigid and hierarchical genders, with males as subjects and females as objects of male desire (Butler, 1990). Throughout the study this positioning was reified by students. In one example, when the male classmate of Storm, without prompting, shared about his sexual interest in “girls who like girls”, he attempted to transform the subjective female experience of sexual desire (in this case, the depiction of a lesbian couple in manga) into a passive object of male desire (Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2005).

This objectification was explicit when female students walked the hall to a backdrop of “gyat”, “breedable”, and other objectifying comments. In contrast to suggestions that contemporary sexual harassment has transformed into “quiet, more subtle, more personal” harassment as opposed to historically “rampant, loud, joking harassment” (Pascoe, 2023, pp. 138–139), this suggests that some female students still face ubiquitous, demeaning comments in their everyday life. The heterosexual matrix’s imposition of female-as-object-of-male-desire was reinforced through these actions.

The power and prestige accompanying hegemonic masculinity under cisheteropatriarchy was also supported by students in schools. Male students were, consistent with extant literature on hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000; Kimmel, 2018; Kimmel & Messner, 2004), expected to be strong and athletic. Although there was a general acceptance reported for male students who were not athletic, conformity to this expectation was celebrated and came with high social reward. At the college-level, a proliferation of high profile sexual assault cases involving top performing male athletes suggests that they may be held less accountable for sexual violations than non-athletes (Krakauer, 2015), calling to question the value of continuing an uncritical celebration of male athleticism in K-12 schools.

Further, this study described how hegemonic masculinity required a distancing from homosexuality, which was often accomplished through homophobic comments, treating homosexuality as a joke, and/or casual use of “gay” as an insult. Students and staff alike noticed it was particularly socially unacceptable for male students to be gay, compared to female students. Although a recent ethnography in Oregon (Pascoe, 2023) noted a decline in outright homophobic behavior among male students compared to a similar study from nearly two decades prior (Pascoe, 2007), this study suggests that outright homophobia, especially towards male students, still impacts students in Louisiana. Indeed, a comparison of the Louisiana-specific data from the 2019 and 2021 GLSEN survey on experiences of LGBTQ+ youth indicated that homophobic behavior might be increasing, as shown by the percentage of students reporting hearing “gay” used negatively (from 93% in 2019 to 99% in 2021) and other homophobic remarks (from

79% in 2019 to 94% in 2021) (GLSEN, 2021, 2023). The masculine performance of homophobia remains a major organizing feature of cisheteropatriarchy in local schools.

A final way that students reified cisheteropatriarchy was through the refusal to acknowledge gender identities outside of the male/female binary. Students with complex gender identities recounted numerous incidents of teasing and/or harassment related to their gender identity at school, consistent with quantitative and qualitative reports (GLSEN, 2023; Kuklin, 2014). Further, peer misgendering was commonly reported. While the degree of malice behind the misgendering ranged from apathy to explicit hatred, despite the intentions, the persistent denial of genders outside of the two binary categories of male and female were perpetuated through these actions.

Resisting. In contrast to these accounts, students also resisted the imposition of cisheteropatriarchy. For one, there was an overwhelming perception among students and staff that LGBTQ+ students were more visible and “out” in schools than had been the case historically. This finding supports national research, as recent studies have found that LGBTQ+ youth are coming out at younger ages (The Trevor Project, 2022). Further, the number of self-identified LGBTQ+ Americans has nearly doubled in the past decade (from 3.50% in 2012 to 7.10% in 2021) (J. M. Jones, 2022), with younger generations more likely to report identifying as LGBTQ+ than older generations (A. Brown, 2022; J. M. Jones, 2022). Although solely identifying as LGBTQ+ should not be misconstrued as a radical rejection of cisheteropatriarchy (Duggan, 2002; Puar, 2007), LGBTQ+ youth defy the expectation that cisgender, heterosexuality is the *only* accepted standard, showing at least partial resistance to the organizing structure of cisheteropatriarchy.

Further, through their own embodied experiences, some students also challenged the binary critiqued by transgender theories between supposedly normative and anti-normative identities (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016; Radi, 2019; Roen, 2002). For example, Ezra and Renee refused to wholeheartedly reject or accept the gender binary, as Ezra believed gender to be a social construct, yet experienced himself as a man and Renee strongly identified as both a woman and nonbinary. These experiences complimented prior research in adult populations finding that individuals with complex gender identities were not easily divisible into binary, reductionist categories of normative or non-normative (Roen, 2002). In addition, the diversity that some cisgender students exhibited in relation to their own pronoun usage and/or conceptualizations of gender further undermined a rigid binary between cisgender and transgender identities.

Second, students accepted and supported behavior within themselves and among one another that was contrary to the idealized versions of masculinity and femininity embedded in cisheteropatriarchy. Whether it was Sandy and Kaitlyn unapologetically dressing outside of the norms of stereotypically feminine clothing or George finding acceptance among fellow non-athletic male students, cisgender students did not passively accept the gendered scripts they inherited. Although George, Sandy, and Kaitlyn may not have reaped the full benefits of those who more fully conformed to expected gender roles, they also reported a myriad of positive school experiences and friendships.

Despite the accounts of teasing and misgendering, many students were accepting and even celebratory of sexualities and genders outside of the cisheteropatriarchal norm. This finding is further supported by research reporting that more than half (55%) of LGBTQ+ students considered their school an affirming place (The Trevor Project, 2022).

Despite legislative attempts to institutionalize homophobia and transphobia, schools remain a source of support, and even joy for many LGBTQ+ students.

Finally, many students were actively working to subvert cisheteropatriarchal systems, including by fighting against misogyny embedded in dress code policies, organizing walkouts against anti-LGBTQ+ legislature, and/or educating themselves and peers on important social issues. Students were, as Mr. Ricky described, “not the standby generation” but instead active social agents working to foster a more liberatory school environment and society. This finding is not surprising, as student social activism on issues of gender and sexuality is well-documented (Keller et al., 2018; Kuklin, 2014; Pascoe, 2023; Quinlivan, 2013; Wagaman, 2016) and can range from youth participation in consciousness raising (Wagaman, 2016) to critically considering the challenges in gaining identity-based rights without reifying differences (Quinlivan, 2013). Despite the vast limitations on their autonomy and rights as minors (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2017), students were using their voices to challenge systems built on cisheteropatriarchy.

School Staff

Students were not the only stakeholders at school who supported and refuted cisheteropatriarchy through their actions, as school staff also shaped the culture and context of gender at school. When school staff segregated students by gender and/or demonstrated overt disapproval for LGBTQ+ students, cisheteropatriarchy was affirmed. However, when school staff acted as LGBTQ+ role models and took steps to normalize gender diversity within their classroom settings, cisheteropatriarchy was interrupted.

Reifying. When teachers segregated students by gender in school, they reified the existence of only two genders: male or female. At times, these segregations appeared on

the surface level as intended to be proactive supports for female students. For instance, when Ms. Haley discussed how teachers attempted to separate students by gender at recess in years past because the male students were playing “a lot rougher”, a benevolent sexism was invoked. Pascoe (2023) defines benevolent sexism as “a type of sexism that involves both praising and patronizing women for traditionally feminine traits” (p. 108). In this example, female students were praised for being less rough while also patronized as needing protection. Furthermore, the root of the problem, play that left some students feeling “unsafe” was not corrected. Other times, educators discouraged male students from playing with female peers, supporting previous research on the (likely unconscious) role of educators in encouraging male students to reject femininity as a way to establish masculinity (Chu, 2014). Not only did this explicit segregation reify the binary, it also perpetuated benevolent sexism and hegemonic masculinity.

Blatant and overt homophobic and transphobic comments from school staff further communicated strong disapproval for identities that did not fit neatly into cisheteropatriarchal norms. Unfortunately, overt comments by school staff members were reported by study participants, ranging from cryptic comments about students being “too pretty” to be a lesbian to calling students highly offensive slurs. While disturbing, these anecdotes may be common, at least regionally. In 2021, the vast majority of LGBTQ+ students in Louisiana sometimes, often, or frequently heard homophobic remarks (70%) and negative remarks about gender expression (80%) from school staff members (GLSEN, 2023; Kosciw et al., 2022). This is particularly troubling, as the nationwide results found only 20% (homophobic remarks) and 41% (negative remarks about gender expression) of LGBTQ+ students reported this same behavior (GLSEN, 2023; Kosciw et

al., 2022). The elevated percentages in Louisiana compared to national rates raise concerns about the potential impact of the political climate in the area on local schools.

Resisting Cisheteropatriarchy. By contrast, there were also counter-examples where individual teachers and school staff resisted cisheteropatriarchy. Although LGBTQ+ school staff, like students, can still support the ideals of cisheteropatriarchy (Duggan, 2002; Puar, 2007), LGBTQ+ staff members can provide necessary support for students who identify outside of the expectations of cisheteropatriarchy and signal a more supportive school climate overall (Kosciw et al., 2022). When Teacher Rachel's student described how much learning of Teacher Rachel's nonbinary identity meant to them, this underscored the value of role models for LGBTQ+ students, particularly those who may not have support in other settings. Teachers who are "out" at school challenge at last some aspects of cisheteropatriarchy through their embodied experiences.

As with students, visibility of LGBTQ+ teachers may be increasing as only 25.7% of LGBTQ+ students surveyed in 2001 reported knowing at least one "out" school staff at their school, compared to 42.4% in 2021 (Kosciw, 2001; Kosciw et al., 2022). Nearly one in five students (19.70%) in 2021 reported having two or more "out" school staff, indicating potential for more widespread support within some schools (Kosciw et al., 2022). For LGBTQ+ teachers, like Ms. Lauren, who go beyond just being "out", but also bear much of the burden in working towards systemic changes, a high representation of LGBTQ+ staff members and staff members willing to engage in systemic change work at school certainly has an impact in unsettling the norm of cisheteropatriarchy.

A second way school staff members resisted cisheteropatriarchy was through demonstrated sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of youth with complex gender

identities. In the absence of school policies, many of the explicitly inclusive efforts seen at school were teacher-initiated. These ranged from responsive measures, such as Ezra's teacher connecting him with IT to update his email, to proactive measures, such as Ms. Janelle's extensive classroom décor communicating support for transgender students. All students, especially those whose lived experiences do not fit neatly into the expectations of cisheteropatriarchy, need connections with supportive adults and students outcomes improve when these connections are made (Gorse, 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020).

Fortunately, in Louisiana, most LGBTQ+ students (91%) have access to at least one supportive educator (GLSEN, 2023). However, until these supports are systemically integrated into schools as an institution, cisheteropatriarchy continues to thrive.

School as an Institution

Schools as an institution, at times, supported and at other times, refuted cisheteropatriarchy. Specifically, schools promoted cisheteropatriarchy through the uncritical privileging of cisgender and heterosexual identities as the norm, including through a lack of proactive policy and the creation of additional barriers for LGBTQ+ youth. However, when schools made intentional efforts to “neutralize” gender, this uncritical reproduction was troubled, although not fully overturned. Further, at times schools more explicitly resisted cisheteropatriarchy with proactive attempts to build in systemic and inclusive supports for students.

Reifying. The noticeable absence of written school policies related to youth with complex gender identities reified the dominant structure of cisheteropatriarchy through this glaring omission. Unfortunately, this is a deeply troubling nationwide trend, as only 8% of LGBTQ+ public school students reported that their school had a student policy on

transgender and nonbinary students, and in Louisiana specifically, an abysmal 1% of students reported that their school had a policy (GLSEN, 2023; Kosciw et al., 2022). Given that youth with complex gender identities who attended schools with a written policy experienced less school discrimination, more school belonging, and less truancy, this oversight is disconcerting (Kosciw et al., 2020, 2022).

Certainly, the legal and political climate of Louisiana may have contributed to the mismatch between written policies and enacted practices. Interviewees described many examples of institutional efforts to support students with complex gender identities, including the elaborate name and pronoun procedures described by Kaitlyn. Had Louisiana's governor not vetoed two anti-LGBTQ+ bills directed at schools last year, this practice would be illegal, at least not without signed parental permission (Given Name Act, 2023; H.B. 466, 2023). Further, groups such as *Parents Defending Education*, explicitly seek to "expose" schools that are supporting LGBTQ+ students (Parents Defending Education, 2023). As of this writing, the website's interactive "IndoctriNation Map" already lists one school in New Orleans as an offender, simply for creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ students at school (Parents Defending Education, 2023). Thus, it is possible that schools intentionally avoided writing publicly available policies given the political climate and potential for targeting from anti-LGBTQ+ groups.

Although perhaps a strategic decision, during interviews, several laws, such as requiring parental consent to discuss gender and/or sexuality and an inability to update school-generated internal records without parental consent were described. Indeed, had the proposed laws been enacted into law (Given Name Act, 2023; H.B. 466, 2023), these

limitations and even more severe restrictions would be the reality. However, when I attempted to confirm the legal basis for these restrictions, ambiguity emerged.

I was able to locate two definitive pieces of enacted law in Louisiana that may have relevance. First, the *Parents' Bill of Rights for Public Schools* (2018), gives parents the right to “receive written notice and the option to opt their child out of any surveys” related to “the student's sexual experiences or attractions.” It also includes the right to “receive written notice and have the option to opt their child out of instruction on topics associated with sexual activity.” Second, the law, *Instruction in Sex Education* (1993), bans sex education courses from using “...any *sexually explicit* [emphasis added] materials depicting male or female homosexual activity.” In other words, parents must be informed of sexual health education occurring at schools and/or surveys asking students to disclose their sexual history and/or sexuality. Further, parents must be given the option to opt-out their child from these activities. Finally, sexual health education cannot include “sexually explicit” depictions of “homosexual activity”.

It is certainly possible that schools, many of whom work with lawyers, may be aware of additional laws, district policies that are not publicly available, and/or case law precedent informing their decisions. However, analyzing the existing laws for which I was able to locate, I could not identify any legal reason why a school would need parental permission to change a student's email address internally. Further, assuming GSAs are not showing “sexually explicit materials depicting male or female homosexual activity” (*Instruction in Sex Education*, 1993) and/or are not surveying students about their sexuality, the law as written should not require signed parental permission for participation beyond what is required of any other school club. Even if the GSA was

surveying students about their sexuality, parents would be required to be informed and have the option to *opt-out*, but signed parental permission would not be necessary.

Undoubtedly, given the ambiguity of the laws, a critic might claim that if a GSA showed a video clip that included two men holding hands, that it was “sexually explicit” or that by allowing students’ space to voluntarily talk with one another about their sexuality in the presence of a school staff member, the school was conducting a “survey”. As comprehensive sexual health education does indeed include discussion of sexuality and/or gender identity (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2020), critics could also argue that any references to the LGBTQ+ community qualifies as sexual health education and therefore, requires parental notification and the option to opt-out, as Ms. Lauren encountered after her lesson on LGBTQ+ history. However, by that logic, all content related to heterosexuality, which is, of course, a sexuality, and/or cisgender people, who of course, also have a gender identity, would be considered sexual health education as well. Given the ambiguous nature of the current law, schools could certainly be critiqued as out of compliance for any number of lessons; however, the merit of these arguments is flimsy. When schools create extra barriers for LGBTQ+ students, citing these ambiguous laws as justification, schools continue to reify that the expected norm is cisgender heterosexuality and anything outside of that norm requires additional gatekeeping.

Resisting. Several examples emerged in the study of schools taking beginning steps away from a rigid gender binary system and neutralizing, for lack of a better term, gender. For example, when Ms. Darcy spoke about the intentionality of her school’s uniform policy in using the gender-neutral language of tops and bottoms, a step away from this binary can be observed. Although even gender-neutral dress policies can and

often do perpetuate cisheteropatriarchy (Aghasaleh, 2018; Knipp & Stevenson, 2022; Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pomerantz, 2007), considering that 40% of LGBTQ+ students in Louisiana were banned from wearing certain clothing at schools because of its perceived inappropriateness based on their gender (GLSEN, 2023), this small step away from the gender binary is significant. In another example, the existence of gender-neutral bathrooms in at least four schools was also an example of this small step away from the gender binary. Although, as previously discussed, some of these same schools treated the gender-neutral bathroom as a privilege to bestow upon youth, given that nearly 73% of transgender students and 44% of nonbinary students surveyed reported avoiding the bathroom at school (Kosciw et al., 2022), creating a facility not solely based on binary gender categories is an important step towards disrupting cisheteropatriarchy.

Schools also resisted cisheteropatriarchy through more proactive supports, including a commitment to creating spaces for LGBTQ+ youth in schools. At least four schools (23.50%) in the sample had an active, confirmed GSA on campus, although the actual number may have been higher. Given that only 10% of LGBTQ+ youth in Louisiana reported having access to a GSA at school (GLSEN, 2023) compared to approximately one in three (34.8%) nationwide (Kosciw et al., 2022), schools providing GSAs in Louisiana is notable. GSAs can provide a place of affirmation and community at school (Kosciw et al., 2022; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017). Participants confirmed this function of the GSA in their own experiences, but also critiqued the apolitical nature of their own clubs, advocating for more comprehensive, systemic change efforts. Hesitancy from schools to go beyond shallow demonstrations of support into more systemic changes has been critiqued (Pascoe, 2023); however, given that nearly 18% of LGBTQ+

students were explicitly barred from created a GSA in Louisiana as recently as 2019 (GLSEN, 2021), simply permitting the club to exist remains an important contribution.

In addition, explicit challenges to the system were embedded in the school curriculum. For example, when Ms. Darcy's school incorporated the use of they/them pronouns into grammar lessons, the school explicitly affirmed through the formal curriculum the existence of more than two genders. Similarly, when Ms. Lauren taught about LGBTQ+ history, she not only acknowledged the existence of people who do not fit neatly into cisheteropatriarchal roles, but also highlighted their agency and activism in shaping history. These lessons were not the prerogative of one teacher who acted without school knowledge or approval, but instead were pre-planned, vetted (at least in Ms. Lauren's case), and supported at the school-level. In both examples, the schools were undermining the assumptions of cisheteropatriarchy, acting as exemplars for how the formal curriculum in schools can challenge oppression. Considering the pushback Ms. Lauren encountered after teaching this lesson and that only 8% of LGBTQ+ students in Louisiana (compared to 16% nationwide) reported receiving instruction on LGBTQ+ people, history, or events (GLSEN, 2023; Kosciw et al., 2022), these direct challenges to cisheteropatriarchy in the current political climate are truly exceptional.

A variety of stakeholders actively reinscribed and/or resisted cisheteropatriarchy at school, including students, school staff, and schools as an institution. When students were divided into binary groups, female students were positioned as objects, hegemonic masculinity was rewarded, LGBTQ+ students were erased and/or degraded, and cisgender, heterosexual identities were considered the standard, cisheteropatriarchy in schools thrived. However, when students and staff embodied identities outside of the

cisheteropatriarchal framework, LGBTQ+ identities were accepted, normalized, and celebrated, traditionally binary organizing structures took steps towards gender-neutrality, and real efforts at institutional change were undertaken, the dominance of cisheteropatriarchy destabilized. Having highlighted the pushes and pulls in school that sustained and/or challenged cisheteropatriarchy, implications are now considered.

Implications

Given the nuanced and extensive findings of this research, a litany of diverse implications emerged. Specifically, implications related to policy (both public policy and school-level policy), practice, and social work education. Given the extensive breadth of the study, the following is not an exhaustive list of all implications, but instead delineates some of the most pressing implications, with a particular focus on policy. Appendix AD, Table AD1 includes a summary of study implications, in table form.

Policy

Federal legislation, including TIX, and state-level legislation, including “Don’t Say LGBTQ+” bills, certainly have an impact on students. Further, these federal and state policies are enacted and interpreted by individual schools and districts, further shaping student experiences through school-level policy (Fields, 2008). Given the distinct, but interconnected impact of both public policy and school-level policy on the culture and context of gender in schools, implications for both are discussed.

Public Policy. Despite the many limitations and valid critiques of TIX (Meyer et al., 2018; Meyer & Quantz, 2021; Stimpson, 2022; Stromquist, 2013; Tonnesen, 2013), it remains the most established legislative tool for promoting gender equity in schools. As TIX is unlikely to be amended to address these shortcomings, social workers should

support the spirit of the law, through centering gender equity prevention efforts and interpreting LGBTQ+ students as protected under the sex discrimination clause. The executive branch not only sets the agenda for the OCR, but appoints the federal judges (district, appeals, and Supreme Court judges) who will interpret how TIX is applied in the lives of real students. Given this tremendous power, social workers must support political candidates who understand the deep interconnections between sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1990; Youdell, 2005) and are committed to protecting LGBTQ+ youth under TIX. In addition, social workers should stay abreast of TIX cases circulating the judicial system and write amicus briefs advocating for broad and inclusive interpretations of TIX.

Simultaneously, social workers must also support efforts to pass federal legislation aimed at explicitly and comprehensively protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ students. The Equality Act was reintroduced to both the House and Senate in the summer of 2023 and would ban discrimination against sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation explicitly, including in education (H.R. 15 - Equality Act, 2023; S. 5 - Equality Act, 2023). NASW endorsed the Equality Act back in 2021 (*Equality Act Sign On Letter*, 2021) and social workers must mobilize and organize to help the act pass this cycle. Although if passed, the Equality Act would encounter many of the same limitations as TIX (e.g., difficulty in addressing subtle forms of discrimination, single-frame lens), passing the Equality Act remains an essential and long overdue federal protection, especially given the many state-level anti-LGBTQ+ bills impacting education today.

Finally, social workers must advocate at the state-level to stop these anti-LGBTQ+ bills. As of February 23, 2024, two anti-LGBTQ+ education bills that were previously vetoed by Governor Bel Edwards (Given Name Act, 2023; H.B. 466, 2023)

have been proposed once again (Given Name Act, 2024; H.B. 122, 2024). However, unlike last legislative cycle, the newly elected Governor Landry is “widely expected” to support these bills, meaning in the coming year, Louisiana may join the ranks of the growing number of “Don’t Say LGBTQ+” states (Wall, 2024). NASW has voiced its opposition to these bills and the findings of this study only underscore the ethical directive for social workers, committed to our core value of “social justice”, to take an unyielding stance against these blatantly homophobic and transphobic laws (National Association of Social Workers, 2021a, 2023a; Project Thrive, 2022). Social workers must join efforts to defeat these bills in Louisiana and repeal similar bills already enacted in other states. Social workers should also work to enact proactive state legislation, including nondiscrimination laws and requirements for LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.

Creative Solutions and Resistance. Despite advocacy efforts, under current and future restrictive laws, an unanswered question remains: *How can schools promote gender equity through their policies and practices without breaking the law?* I propose creative solutions and resistance as potential solutions, particularly if restrictive laws are passed in Louisiana in the future.

First, schools can promote gender equity and protect the rights of students with complex gender identities by looking for loopholes, workarounds, and ways to push to the boundaries of the law. This will involve creative solutions. For example, while educators may soon be limited on how they can address students, students are not yet limited in how they can address one another. Small modifications, such as having students introduce themselves to their class instead of calling names from a roster, would prevent the class from hearing a students’ deadname and promote students calling one

another by their names and pronouns in class. Under the proposed laws, teachers have no obligation to counteract or interfere in students affirming one another's identity.

Schools should also consider ways to minimize student misgendering by educators, such as shifting an emphasis to last names. Schools could adopt policies requiring educators to refer to students by a non-gendered title and their surname, such as Student Knipp or Scholar Knipp and justify the policy under the same vague reasoning that uniform policies are currently justified: promoting professionalism. Although more formal than perhaps comfortable and certainly not gender-affirming, this practice could act as a harm reduction approach to avoiding deadnaming a student. Student last names or even school identification numbers could be used on written paperwork instead of first names. As an example, students could have an option to create their own email addresses and/or select from a variety of possible email addresses, with at least some options excluding the inclusion of a students' deadname (e.g., knipp12@schoolname.org instead of hannah.knipp@schoolname.org). Finally, if a students' pronouns cannot legally be used in schools, educators can stop using pronouns altogether.

Regarding the potential for curriculum bans, it will be imperative to interpret the law, which is written using incredibly vague terms, as narrowly as possible, not broadly. Schools should be exceedingly careful not to attribute all LGBTQ+ related content as "covering the topics of sexual orientation and/or gender identity." For instance, assigning books with LGBTQ+ characters should not be considered a violation any more than assigning books featuring heterosexual and/or cisgender characters, as heterosexuality is just as much a sexual orientation as any other. Further, designing open-ended projects where students can select their own topics should be encouraged and nothing in the

proposed laws should be construed as disallowing students from voluntarily covering certain topics (recall Jesse's project on anti-LGBTQ+ legislation). Open-ended projects could offer another avenue for students to forefront issues that educators may be unable to discuss themselves. GSAs, which are student-initiated and student-run (GSA Network, n.d.), should likewise not be considered barred under the proposed legislation.

Although these workarounds and harm reduction strategies are useful, a more direct approach is intentional noncompliance with the law. The current U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona has spoken out about the discriminatory nature of the Florida Don't Say LGBTQ+ bill (U.S. Department of Education, 2022) and certainly there is a legal argument that the Louisiana bills violate TIX by creating a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ students. Although TIX challenges to the Florida law in court have not yet been successful (Saunders, 2023), schools in Louisiana could continue this challenge and make the conscious choice not to comply. Indeed, there are numerous stories of schools, educators, school social workers, students, and others explicitly refusing to comply from neighboring states (White, 2023) and schools must be courageous in joining these efforts.

School Policy. Outside of federal and/or state law, schools have tremendous power to shape student experiences through their own policies. Schools should evaluate their current nondiscrimination clauses and make explicit their commitment to supporting all members of the school community, both at the student and staff-level. Further, developing policies addressing the needs of youth with complex gender identities has been consistently identified as a way to support youth (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017; GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016).

Research supports that youth with complex gender identities who attend schools with protective policies are more often permitted to use their names and pronouns, access bathrooms and locker rooms congruent with their gender identity, and wear clothing of their choice than gender complex youth attending schools without policies (Kosciw et al., 2020). Schools that focus on proactively creating a positive and welcoming environment for all students instead of scrambling to respond after a student discloses a complex gender identity are often more successful in these efforts (Miller, 2019; Orr et al., 2016). Multiple comprehensive guides exist for schools interested in cultivating a supportive environment and include easily transferable information (e.g., model policies) to assist school administrators in the beginning steps of making these changes (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Miller, 2019; Orr et al., 2016). These guides offer concrete and easy to implement recommendations related to sports, dress code, names/pronouns, nondiscrimination clauses, student privacy, facility access, staff training, and other topics (GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020; Orr et al., 2016). Schools should access and implement the policies suggested by these guides as a first-step towards supporting youth with complex gender identities.

Dress code policies also emerged as a major conduit of gender discrimination in schools. Although multiple model policies supporting progressive and inclusive dress code policies have been written by advocacy organizations (Dignity In Schools, 2019; Oregon NOW, 2016), the question remains whether a dress code policy is necessary. Although hard-pressed to find advocacy organizations and/or academic writing advocating for the full elimination of dress code policies, high school students themselves have advocated for this more radical and simple solution in local, student-centered outlets

(e.g., Crewse, 2022; Hodge, 2022; Mount, 2023). Certainly, the most concerning forms of inappropriate student dress (e.g., visible genitals, hate speech), are already covered under other aspects of the discipline policy (e.g., indecent exposure, bullying), raising questions about the need for a full policy. However, if schools are unwilling to take this more radical stance, school policies should center equity concerns, affirm students' cultures and identities, limit restrictions to only items with "a clear and evidence-based rationale" (Dignity In Schools, 2019, p. 86), and train school staff in equitable enforcement (Dignity In Schools, 2019; Oregon NOW, 2016).

Strong school policy directed at adult behavior can also help prevent adult sexual misconduct, including developing clear guidelines and protocols on expected behavior and boundaries (Robertson et al., 2023). Recalling once more Anton's anecdote about the teacher who tucked in the shirt of a high school student, had the focal school included within their policy a statement that staff members were *not* permitted to physically tuck in the clothing of students, this interaction may never have occurred. Although refraining from tucking in the clothing of students might seem obvious, Robertson et al. (2023) explained that elucidating clear guidelines reduces opportunities for adults to claim ignorance when violating the boundaries of students. Therefore, when a violation does occur, schools can swiftly intervene without first having to establish whether the staff member was aware that their behavior constituted a boundary violation.

Finally, written TIX policies should be updated and revised to be as current, comprehensive, and accurate as possible. Policies related to sexual harassment, protections for LGBTQ+ students, dating violence, pregnancy/parenting, and training efforts should be addressed thoroughly. Certainly, TIX coordinators should first, be

aware of their designation, and second, be knowledgeable in the policies that they are responsible for implementing. Unfortunately, high-quality model policies for TIX are harder to access, as highly professionalized organizations, such as the Association for Title IX Administrators (ATIXA), package these resources into extraordinarily expensive training programs that focus on compliance and institutional protection from litigation over the actual spirit of TIX (Association of Title IX Administrators, n.d.). The OCR and advocacy organizations should step in to help provide more robust training materials and resources for schools to help promote not only compliance, but also prevention.

Indeed, social workers and educators alike must advocate for important policy changes at the federal, state, and school levels. Formal written policies across all levels must prioritize the rights and needs of all students, regardless of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. When legal limitations restrict the ability of schools to meet the needs of their students, creative solutions and/or resistance are warranted.

Practice

In addition to formal policy, there are related implications for practice. The culture and context of gender in schools is not only shaped by written policy, but by members of the school community who alternatively support and/or resist cisheteropatriarchy through their actions. Therefore, a primary way social workers can support gender equity in school is through educating and skill-building within the school.

School staff members who work with gender complex youth need explicit and ongoing training to expand their ability to support students (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017; Gorse, 2020; Kopels & Pacey, 2012; Wofford, 2017). School staff members are embedded in cisheteropatriarchy and need guidance in learning how to identify

unexamined assumptions that are rooted in the gender binary (Markman, 2011; McPhail, 2004, 2008; Miller, 2019). Social workers are well-positioned to organize and/or lead training efforts in their schools to help school staff more effectively support students.

General training on TIX compliance is needed in schools. Schools put themselves at risk by not providing this training, especially to school staff, as a lack of training on TIX does not prevent a school from being held liable for failing to uphold the law. For instance, if a school is shown to have “actual knowledge” of sexual harassment and then proceeds to respond with deliberate indifference, the school can be held responsible in court for violating TIX (Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex, 2022). If *any* K-12 staff member learns of sexual harassment from a student, this qualifies as “actual knowledge” under current TIX law, regardless of whether the staff member is trained. Therefore, it is in the school’s best interest to train all school staff in the law, including how, when, and to whom to report concerns. Social workers should support these efforts.

Beyond simple compliance to TIX, social workers can also take the lead in TIX prevention efforts, specifically related to sexual harassment prevention. School social workers can facilitate school-wide prevention programming such as the no-cost curriculum, *Shifting Boundaries*, which seeks to reduce peer sexual harassment and dating violence in middle school (National Institute of Justice, 2012) or *Safe Dates*, which focuses on dating violence and sexual abuse in middle and high school (National Institute of Justice, 2011). In addition, bystander training on recognizing and reporting concerning behaviors is another recommended prevention strategy for adult sexual misconduct against children (Robertson et al., 2023). *Stewards of Children* is one example of an evidence-informed training on preventing sexual abuse at school that can

be given directly to school staff (Darkness to Light, n.d.). Social workers can be leaders in bringing these types of prevention programs to school.

In this same regard, social workers could also use creative approaches to address not only sexual harassment specifically, but attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors underlying gender inequality more broadly. For example, effective and comprehensive sexual health education should address child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2020). The comprehensive, no-cost curriculum released by Advocates for Youth, *Rights, Respect, and Responsibility*, covers all the National Sex Education Standards in a planned, sequential, multi-lesson, K-12 curriculum (Schroeder et al., 2015). Similarly, social workers could support the development of more robust social and emotional learning program in schools, specifically those curriculums that engage with issues of structural oppression. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning maintains a detailed list of programs that could be used as a starting point (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.). Social workers should encourage efforts to bring inclusive and comprehensive curriculum to schools as yet another way to support gender equity.

Although another recent ethnography in schools advocated for structural solutions over interpersonal solutions in today's schools explaining, "we cannot bias-train our way out of inequality" (Pascoe, 2023, p. 23), given the findings of this study, the need for bias training remains. In contrast to Pascoe's (2023) work in a predominantly white, middle-class, politically liberal area, this study unveiled much more overt discrimination and blatant intolerance, suggesting that anti-bias work should certainly remain a priority. Specifically, gendered and raced discipline disparities, unchallenged misogynist,

homophobic, and/or transphobic comments made by educators, and school ignorance of very basic LGBTQ+ concepts (e.g., misunderstanding transgender as a sexual orientation) underscore the need for training. Instead, in line with critical social work theory, social workers should address cisheteropatriarchy at both the micro-level and macro-level simultaneously, adjusting and adapting interventions in response to the distinct manifestations of cisheteropatriarchy within their own settings (Agger, 2005; C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012; Fook, 2016).

Finally, social workers should work with school community members and most especially students to assess where the needs are related to gender equity in their own schools and then respond accordingly. Social workers should support resistance work that is already occurring, standing in firm solidarity with the school staff members who risk receiving pushback from school, parents, and/or students in their attempts to advocate for and with students. Further, social workers should mobilize heterosexual and cisgender allies to lead efforts against explicitly anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, as LGBTQ+ school staff members are particularly targeted in bills such as the Given Name Act and should not be left to carry this burden alone. Overall, social workers must remain steadfast in our core values and commitments to students and show courage in fighting against the status quo, even in the face of the overwhelming and immense challenges in schools today.

Social Work Education

For social workers to effectively implement these policy and practice implications, social work education needs to adequately prepare social workers for these actions. First, social work education must equip new social workers with strong and effective policy intervention tools. Critical social work theorists have repeatedly

emphasized the connection between the micro-level and macro-level (Agger, 2005; C. Campbell & Baikie, 2012; Fook, 2016) and given the deluge of explicitly discriminatory legislation being proposed and passed around the nation (Peele, 2023), social workers must develop the tools necessary to address these policy-level concerns.

Second, given the rising number of individuals openly expressing LGBTQ+ identities (A. Brown, 2022; J. M. Jones, 2022; The Trevor Project, 2022), schools of social work must evaluate their current course offerings and ensure that social workers are leaving their programs knowledgeable about issues facing the LGBTQ+ community and cisheteropatriarchy as an organizing structure. The Council for Social Work Education should also consider integrating more explicit standards relating to gender diversity and sexual orientation than currently required (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). As curriculum bans in K-12 schools gain traction (Peele, 2023), new social work students may arrive in post-secondary education with deficits of knowledge on gender and sexual diversity that must be addressed.

Finally, critical social work has long recognized how social workers can maintain and perpetuate inequality (Fook, 2016). The first step to redressing this harm is through integrating critical pedagogy into social work training programs. Schools of social work must teach critical reflexivity, with emphasis on examining taken for granted assumptions, privileges, and biases (Agger, 2005; Allan et al., 2009; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2016; Rogowski, 2013). Relevant to this study, social workers must learn to examine and challenge the ways they unconsciously promote cisheteropatriarchy in order for real counter-efforts to be successful.

By analyzing the culture and context of gender in schools, implications for policy, practice, and social work education were unveiled. There is a pressing need to formalize policies that promote gender equity at the federal, state, and school-level while simultaneously combating policies which inhibit gender equity, including through noncompliance. At the practice level, social workers can be most helpful by helping school staff members and students develop knowledge, skills, and competencies through prevention programming and training. Finally, social work education must prepare social workers to be successful in these efforts through prioritizing content on policy analysis, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and critical reflexivity within their training programs.

Strengths of Dissertation

This dissertation has many strengths. When research and policy involves students, paternalism and the desire to keep children safe is almost always an ever-present influence (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Thus, there is almost always dialogue about what schools should be doing to keep students safe without actually involving students in these conversations. This singular focus on safety often has gendered, classed, and racialized implications, using the potential for individualized harm as a way to avoid challenging systemic inequality (Fields, 2008; Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pascoe, 2023). For instance, protecting the innocence of students (particularly white, middle-class, female students) has been used to justify abstinence-only education (Fields, 2008) and protecting female students from sexual harassment and assault has been used to justify restrictive dress code policies (Neville-Shepard, 2019). This insistence on working *for* the betterment of an oppressed group without being in dialogue *with* the group only seeks to maintain the status quo and has been problematized within critical theory (Freire, 1970). By engaging

in non-directive dialogue with students about their perspectives on how gender emerged in the school system, the issues with the most salience for students were highlighted.

Therefore, this study countered these paternalistic practices by empowering students to share their own perceptions of how their gender impacted their school experience and in some cases, offer their own insights in how to improve school.

Second, by examining how school experiences varied across and within various gender groups, a more nuanced and detailed account of how cisheteropatriarchy presents in the school system was portrayed. To illustrate, in addition to the extant literature that centers how female students are sexualized within school dress code policies (Neville-Shepard, 2019; Pomerantz, 2007; Raby, 2010), this dissertation described how male students are likewise positioned as predatory within this same policy articulation. Had the focus of this study been limited to female students only, this important implication could have been missed. Likewise, complementing the literature on the impacts of being denied access to appropriate bathrooms and/or facilities for youth with complex gender identities (Gilbert et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2020; Miller, 2019), this research also noted how some cisgender students might experience these spaces as uncomfortable and/or hostile, albeit often to a lesser degree. By also eliciting cisgender perspectives on the topic, the important issue of access and safety in single-sex facilities becomes an issue of relevance for all youth, not just a subset of youth in schools.

Although gendered assumptions and policies should not be misconstrued as having an equal impact on all students, by highlighting the ways that even those most privileged under cisheteropatriarchy (i.e., white, straight, cisgender male students) are harmed under these imposed limitations, all students can find an incentive to support

gender equity for their own self-interests. When cisheteropatriarchy is recognized as a burden (again, albeit, of differing impacts) on all students, the important and challenging work of creating liberatory alternatives can be brought from the periphery to the center. With this more nuanced understanding, single-sex facilities become a relevance issue not only for youth with complex gender identities, but for all students. In this reconceptualization, schools have an obligation to create and sustain safe and inclusive private spaces for students to change and/or use the restroom regardless of whether the school has any students with complex gender identities currently in attendance.

Finally, this dissertation provides relevant and rigorous empirical data to back a number of open letters and policy statements released by NASW in recent years explicitly supporting LGBTQ+ youth in schools (National Association of Social Workers, 2021b, 2022b, 2023a; Project Thrive, 2022; The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2022) and addressing sex discrimination in schools broadly (National Association of Social Workers, 2022a, 2023b). Grounded in critical social work theory (Fook, 2003; Rogowski, 2013) and using the highly rigorous methodology of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996; Fitzpatrick & May, 2022), social workers' situation within cisheteropatriarchal structures was acknowledged. For social workers invested in truly supporting gender equity efforts in school, this research provides the rigorous, empirical, student-generated perspectives needed to work towards this goal and not, perhaps inadvertently, towards maintaining the status quo.

Limitations

Despite the many strengths of this dissertation, there are also limitations. The hallmark data collection tool of critical ethnography is observational data (Carspecken,

1996; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). However, given the broad scope of the study site, additional school visitation limitations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a drive to maintain the boundaries between the goals of the research study and the interests of individual schools, I made the decision to limit study observations to organization-level public meetings and online content. As Fitzpatrick and May (2022) discussed, even the most well-resourced and funded projects cannot capture every aspect of a culture, and thus, the choices the researcher makes in what information to collect and what information to exclude has major implications for the findings. Most crucially, the absence of observational data of the behavior of students in their individual schools meant that study findings were based almost entirely on participant self-report and written policy, limiting opportunities for more meaningful triangulation.

The reliance on participant self-report was a limitation because of the potential of social desirability bias (A. Rubin & Babbie, 2016). Students and school staff members likely did not share information that they believed could be used to portray them in a negative light and as a researcher studying gender and schools, many participants (correctly) perceived that I valued gender equity. In many interviews, participants stated that their responses might not be “right” or emphasized what they were *not* trying to communicate, especially when what they were sharing could be interpreted as transphobic, misogynistic, homophobic, or otherwise. When this occurred, I reiterated to participants that they were the experts in their own lives and I was not there to judge their responses; however, it would be naïve to assume that participants were not to some extent cognizant of how I would judge their responses, either consciously or unconsciously. This self-censoring of participant responses certainly limited study findings.

Another important limitation of the study was selection bias, in that students who opted to participate in this study likely had vastly different experiences than those who did not. For one, all participating students with complex gender identities were “out” to their families and at school. Their experiences were likely very different than youth with complex gender identities who were not “out” at either home or school or who would have been unable to convince their guardian(s) to grant them permission to participate in this study. Further, the majority of participants were either self-identified feminists and/or LGBTQ+, or being raised by feminist parents and/or LGBTQ+ parents and were highly interested in gender equity in schools. Youth who did not have these same experiences and/or interests likely would have told a very different story about gender and schools.

This research is also limited by its absence of some key perspectives. Most notably, there were no youth with complex gender identities who were assigned male at birth in the study, despite intentional efforts to purposefully recruit these individuals. In some ways this lack of representation supports the nascent findings of this study that suggests that transmisogyny contributes to youth with complex gender identities who were assigned male at birth being less visible and accepted in their communities. However, secondhand accounts from participants confirm that these students do openly attend schools and without their firsthand accounts, findings on transmisogyny are tentative and incomplete. The lack of representation of this crucial subgroup is a significant limitation.

Researcher bias also impacted the study (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). Although I proactively and regularly consulted with mentors, colleagues, research assistants, and the CAB throughout the project, ultimately the bulk of the analysis is my own and certainly

reflective of my own biases. Although I engaged in critical reflexivity both with others and through my field journals to illuminate the things I may not have understood or the directions I may not have taken as a way to subconsciously (or even consciously) protect my position within the status quo, this work was imperfect. To address this shortcoming, I utilized member-checking to allow participants to give feedback on the (in)accuracy of the findings (Carspecken, 1996). However, this member check was far from perfect, as highly complex and detailed themes were reduced into simple, student-friendly language. This reduction was necessary to make the information accessible to the participants (students as young as 10) so that meaningful feedback could be generated; however, obtaining feedback on the unreduced themes would have been more rigorous.

Additionally, member checks cannot account for the roads untaken or the information gathered in the study that did not eventually transform into a cohesive theme (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022) and researcher bias has significantly impacted these absences. In one very concrete example, during an interview, a participant with a complex gender identity shared about having multiple significant others. At the time, I failed to ask follow-up questions about the romantic life of this student, a choice I later critiqued within myself (using field journals) and processed with a colleague. I initially rationalized my own failure to follow this line of inquiry as the manifestation of my own fear as a cisgender researcher of inadvertently releasing findings that could be twisted by anti-LGBTQ+ interests and weaponized against those with complex gender identities. However, after consultation, I realized I could have attended to this real threat during the analysis and write-up part of the study, but by failing to ask the questions, I evaded the topic. While I know my own fear of causing harm through unthoughtful reporting of

participant stories was a factor, it would be disingenuous to ignore that my own internalized acceptance of (monogamous) cisheteropatriarchy likely produced under-examined discomfort with polyamory that clouded my judgement. Although this brief anecdote showcases one example of how my own bias impacted the study, there are certainly countless examples of researcher bias that remain outside of my awareness.

Finally, this critical ethnography was bounded geographically to the public charter schools in Orleans parish and the findings are not generalizable to other states, other parishes, private-schools, home-schools, early-childhood centers, or postsecondary education. Further, this ethnography was not only be geographically bound, but also time-bound, as the results uncovered patterns and themes in only one limited time range (2022-2023 school year). Although qualitative research does not purport to create generalizable data (Creswell & Poth, 2017), it remains imperative to underscore this limitation due to the highly contextualized and specific findings of the study.

Future Research

Even with these limitations, one benefit of the broad, descriptive approach used in this research was that many potential avenues of further inquiry emerged from the findings. This research identified the topic areas related to gender and schools that were the most salient to the study's participants (e.g., discipline, dress codes, misgendering). Given these findings, researchers can design complementary research studies that provide more depth into these identified topics individually. In designing this research in a non-directive manner, with the exception of TIX, no single issue was systematically discussed during participant interviews. Therefore, future qualitative studies could inquire about the

identified topics in all interviews, possibly illuminating counter perspectives from participants who would be unlikely to bring up certain topics on their own.

Further, there were specific claims within the study that were raised in some interviews that warrant more targeted research. For instance, the reports about the commonality of students claiming to be pedophiles (whether as a joke or serious), is highly concerning. Quantitative research could examine the prevalence of these comments and qualitative research could discover the intentions behind the words. In addition, the suggestion that being misgendered in school may not only contribute to a negative school environment, but also poor academic performance should be investigated quantitatively. If this claim is supported empirically, this could prove a key incentive for motivating schools to gender students correctly, particularly as performance on standardized tests is the expected benchmark for school quality and performance.

As this research is highly contextualized and specific, the findings are not generalizable. Therefore, replicating aspects of this study in different contexts could help distinguish which issues may be most applicable across contexts. Specifically, as this research was conducted in a state that passed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that did not, at the time of this writing, become law (due to the governor's veto), it would be worthwhile to compare these findings with a region where similar legislation is currently in effect. It is possible that the mere threat of these laws may be nearly as effective in silencing conversations about gender and sexuality as enacted law and this warrants further study. Similarly, comparing these findings to states with enacted law that does not ban, but requires the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in their curriculum would also be informative.

Related to the variation in geographical context, another nascent finding from this study was the variation in school-specific context and how the transience afforded by the school choice system influenced student enrollment. For instance, when Macy (with the explicit support of her caregivers) decided to transfer schools rather than stay at a school with a peer who had sexually harassed her, the school choice context became highly relevant. Although New Orleans is distinct in its school structure, students across the country do have a degree of this “school choice” in differing forms, through charter schools, private schools (for those who can afford the tuition), home school options, voucher programs, or even intentional residential relocation. Thus, future research should examine how the gendered context of schools impacts school choice, as well as how this “choice” might be mediated by privilege and wealth. Given the lack of autonomy in decision-making awarded to minors, future research will need to include the voices of those who have the authority to make these decisions, parents and guardians.

Finally, the emergent findings of this study suggested that social media played a significant role in the culture and context of gender at school. For example, social media was certainly relevant in Renee’s account of how the word “breedable” went from an online trend to a real, embodied tool of sexual harassment at their school. Although a selection of participant observations of this online content occurred as part of this study, there is a dire need for more targeted research examining how the internet and social media impacts the lived experiences of students at school as it pertains to gender.

This is not an exhaustive list of all the possible lines of inquiry that could emerge related to this project, but instead, a starting point. A great advantage of the broad structure of this research methodology was that it empowered students to emphasize the

topics most important to their lives, setting the stage for future student-informed research. Indeed, this research has inspired my own research agenda, which consists of three discrete, but related projects spanning a five-year period (Appendix AE, Table AE1).

Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to contribute to the pressing ongoing debates about gender equity around the nation. By centering the voices of students from a variety of gender identities while also attending to the forces of structural oppression, as informed by critical social work, intersectionality, and queer and transgender theories, a nuanced description of how cisheteropatriarchy is promoted and/or interrupted in schools emerged. Given the ongoing threat of regressive and silencing policies facing schools in contemporary times, this dissertation contributes to the literature by daring to advocate for a future divorced from the restraints of cisheteropatriarchy, where students can show up at school as authentically themselves, free from the imposition of gendered expectations.

Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1

Theory, Tenets, and Associated Research Question(s)

Theory	Tenets	Research Question(s)
Critical Social Work Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social change not social control • Situated knowledge; multiple realities • Personal and structural intertwined • Domination produced at the macro-level, experienced at the micro-level • False consciousness • People have agency • Critical self-reflection • Congruence in values, theory, practice 	<p>1a) How does gender oppression present in the school system?</p> <p>1b) To what extent does the federal mandate of TIX inform school policy and/or contribute to sex (in)equity in school?</p>
Intersectionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple systems of oppression • Relationality (no binary) • Power (mutually constructed) • Social context (historical, political) • Complexity (avoid simplifying) • Social Justice (critique of status quo) 	<p>2a) How does the culture and context of gender overlap with other systems of oppression in the school system?</p>
Queer and Transgender Theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex/gender/sexuality intertwined • Interrogates what is natural/normal • Undermines false hierarchy between normativity and non-normativity • Honors lived experiences 	<p>3a) How is cisheteropatriarchy regulated, promoted, and/or resisted at schools?</p>

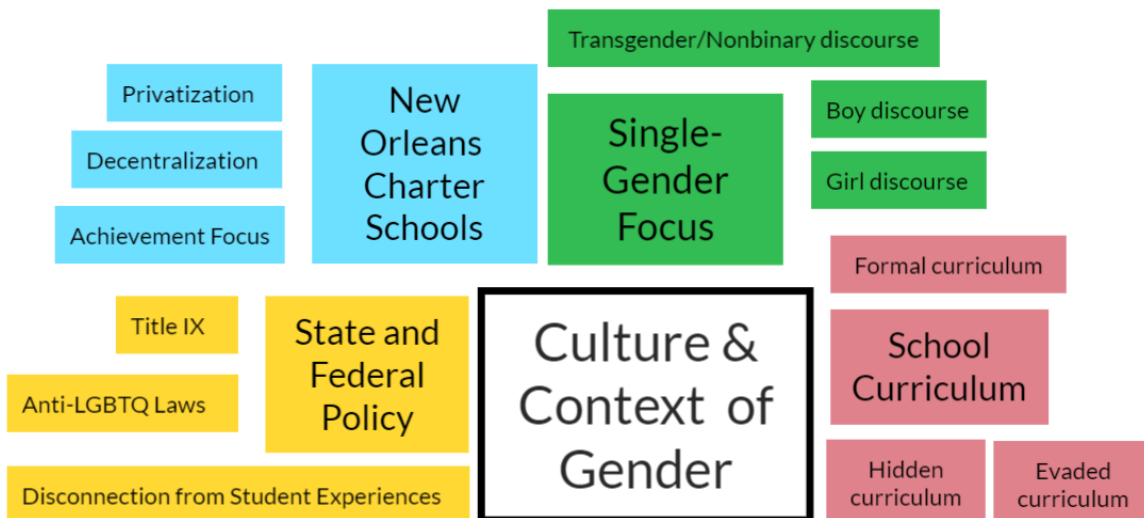
Note. The tenets to intersectionality are taken from *Intersectionality* (Collins & Bilge,

2016).

Appendix B

Figure B1

Concept Map: The Culture and Context of Gender



Made with  visme

Note. The culture and context of gender, interpreted through the frames of critical social work theory, intersectionality, and queer and transgender theories, influences and is influenced by a) state and federal policies b) the formal, hidden, and evaded curricula c) single-gender discourses that situate one gender as the true “victim” of sex discrimination, and d) the decentralized and privatized local charter school system. All systems included in this map are mutually influencing and interdependent.

Appendix C

Table C1

Title IX Timeline

Date	Description
1970 – January 31	Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL) and Dr. Sandler file class action lawsuit
1970 – July	House Subcommittee on Education holds hearings on sex discrimination in higher education (Rep. Edith Green chairs)
1972 – June 23	TIX (co-sponsored by Rep. Patsy Mink and Senator Birch Bayh) becomes public law
1975 – June 4	The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) released TIX regulations
1979 – May 14	<i>Cannon v. University of Chicago</i> – individuals can sue educational institutions for TIX violations (private right of action)
Sexual Harassment	
1992 – February 26	<i>Franklin v. Gwinnett County Public Schools</i> – TIX covers teacher-student sexual harassment
1998 – June 22	<i>Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District</i> – guidelines for school liability for teacher-student sexual harassment
1999 – May 24	<i>Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education</i> – TIX covers peer sexual harassment; refines school liability standard set in <i>Gebser</i>
2009 – February	CPI partnered with NPR to produce a multi-article and multi-part radio series on sexual violence on college campuses
2011 – April 4	OCR released DCL detailing sexual harassment policies and informing educational institutions of their obligation to comply
2018 – November 29	ED published NPRM in Federal Register for new TIX regulations pertaining to sexual harassment
2020 – August 14	Effective date for new TIX regulations released in May 2020

2022 – June 23	Biden administration proposes new proposed regulations to TIX reversing many of the regulations passed under the 2020 update
	Gender Identity
2014-2015	OCR begins releasing documents that describe gender identity discrimination as a form of sex discrimination
2016 – May 13	OCR released DCL on compliance with TIX for transgender students under Obama administration
2017 – February 22	OCR rescinded the 2016 DCL on transgender students under Trump administration
2020 – June 15	<i>Bostock v. Clayton County</i> – discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is sex discrimination under Title VII
2021 – January 20	President Biden signed Executive Order 13988 banning discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation as a form of sex discrimination
2023 – April 13	Biden administration proposes new proposed regulations to TIX related to transgender athletes

Appendix D

Table D1

Application of Carspecken's Stages for Critical Ethnography

Stage	In Application
Stage 1: Compile the primary record through the collection of monological data	Collected relevant policy documents Completed observations
Stage 2: Preliminary reconstruction analysis	Initial meaning reconstruction Pragmatic horizon analysis Objective, subjective, and normative-evaluative truth claims
Stage 3: Dialogical data generation	Individual Student Interviews Group Student Interviews Professional Interviews

Note. The stages are taken from Critical Ethnography in Educational Research

(Carspecken, 1996, pp. 41–43).

Appendix E

Table E1

An Application of the Key Tenets of Critical Ethnography

Key Tenets	Description	In My Study
Orienting to power, in/justice, and in/equity	-Analyze power -No rigid categories	-Centered power -Analyzed truth-claims
(Social) theory and ontology	-Acknowledge assumptions -Grounded in theory	-Grounded in critical social work, intersectionality, and queer/transgender theories
Troubling the questions, being curious	-Consider study use -Interrogate researcher role	-Interrogated in field journal, critical reflexivity
Relationalities, relationships, and reciprocity	-Work with participants -Build relationships	-Built rapport -Conducted member checks
Positionality, reflection, reflexivity	-Engage in critical reflexivity -Embrace discomfort	-Wrote field journals -Sought consultation
Time, “deep hanging out”	-Immersion in culture -Can be digital	-Long engagement -Online and face-to-face
An attempt to understand and communicate cultures, happening, and their ethico-onto-epistemologies	-Interactions between power, lived experiences, ethics, and positionality	-Grounded in theory -Critical reflexivity -Sought consultation
Writing, fieldwork, and other modes of production	-Diverse methods used -Rigidity is not required	-Multiple methods of data collection
Change: wondering about change, creating change, troubling change, challenging inequities	-Change should be cautious, avoid reifying the status quo	-Consulted with CAB -Conducted member checks

Note. The Key Tenets to Critical Ethnography are taken from *Critical Ethnography and*

Education: Theory, Methodology, and Ethics (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022, p. 16).

Appendix F

Table F1

Techniques for Addressing Power Asymmetry

Techniques	In Application
Create opportunities for choice	Students shared preferences for type of interview, modality of interview, and location of interview as part of intake.
Gain and continue to gauge child assent	Written assent was obtained. Students were told they leave the study at any time multiple times throughout the study.
Involve children in research activities	Students gave feedback on emerging findings during group interviews. Member-checks were conducted.
Incorporate agenda of the child	At the end of each interview, students were asked if there was something they wanted to discuss that was not covered.
Practice with children speaking up	Before each interview, students practiced asking for a break, saying “pass” and other self-advocacy skills.
Autonomy over recording	Students were asked prior to the start of an interview if they were okay with being recorded.

Note. These recommendations are summarized from *Interviewing Children and Young*

People for Research (O’Reilly & Dogra, 2017, pp. 106–107).

Appendix G

Table G1

Frequency of Field Journaling, Consultation, Community Advisory Board (CAB)

Activity	Recruitment	Data Collection	Data Analysis	Total
Field Journaling	Weekly	Post-Collection*	Twice per month	62
Consultation	Monthly	Twice per month	Monthly	17
CAB	Once per semester	Once per semester	Once per semester	4

Note. *Post-collection refers to field journaling after a data collection activity, including interviews and observations. During weeks without any data collection activities, field journaling continued once weekly.

Appendix H

Student Recruitment Flyer

Research Study on Gender and School



- ❖ Are you a student?
- ❖ Do you attend a public school or public charter school in Orleans Parish?
- ❖ Would you like to share about your experiences in schools?

You may be eligible to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to describe the culture of gender for students in the New Orleans public charter school system. If you participate in this study, you will be asked to share stories about your school and your gender identity. You will be asked questions such as: *What is your gender identity? What is it like to be [your gender identity] at school? Have you ever been treated differently because you are [your gender identity] at school?* You will also be asked about your experiences with other students who are girls, boys, transgender, or other gender identities.

We are looking for students (ages 10+) who are willing to share their stories about school. Students of all gender identities (girls, boys, transgender students, nonbinary students, etc.) are invited to participate. The information collected from this study will be used to create recommendations on how to support students of all gender identities in the school system. Participants will receive a gift card for their participation.

Contact Hannah Knipp hknipp@tulane.edu for more information or to participate in this study.

Appendix I

Recruitment Brochure

Meet the Researcher

Hannah Knipp is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and PhD Student at Tulane University in the City, Culture, and Community Program (Social Work). Hannah has experience working with children and youth of all ages and has worked in the New Orleans school system as both a teacher and a social worker.

Contact Information

Please contact Hannah Knipp if you have questions, if you are interested in learning more about the study or if you would like to participate.

Email: hknipp@tulane.edu

Phone: 504-281-0528

Research Study on Gender and School



Hannah Knipp

Tulane University

School of Social Work

About the Study

The purpose of the study is to describe the culture of gender for students in the New Orleans public charter school system. We are looking for current public (or public charter) school students and employees in Orleans Parish who are willing to share their stories about gender in school. Students of all gender identities (girls, boys, transgender students, nonbinary students, etc.) and school professionals from all disciplines (teachers, mental health professionals, Title IX Coordinators, school leaders, etc.) are invited to participate. The information collected from this study will be used to create recommendations on how to support students of all gender identities in the school system.

Who can participate?

This research study includes both student participants and school professionals.

Students are eligible to participate if they are enrolled in a public or public charter school in Orleans parish and are at least 10 years of age. Students of all gender identities (girls, boys, transgender students, nonbinary students, etc.) are invited to participate.

School professionals are eligible to participate if they are employed in a public or public charter school in Orleans parish. School professionals of all disciplines are invited to participate including teachers, mental health professionals, Title IX Coordinators, school leaders, and more.

What will I do?

Participation in the study will include individual interviews and/or small group interviews with the researcher. Interviews will take place during the 2023 calendar year. All participants will receive a gift card for participation in the research.

In interviews, participants will share about their experiences in the school system and discuss their gender identity. Students will answer questions such as: *What is your gender identity? What is it like to be [your gender identity] at school? Have you ever been treated differently because you are [your gender identity] at school?* Students will also discuss their experiences with other students across gender groups, including those who identify as male, female, transgender, and other gender identities.

Professionals will be asked to discuss their experiences in school with students who identify as female, male, transgender, and other gender identities. They will be asked questions such as: *What has come up lately related to gender at your school? What kinds of stereotypes do you hear or notice at your school related to gender? How do you understand sex discrimination?*

Participation is voluntary. Study participants can leave the study at any time. Confidentiality will be protected.

Appendix J**Table J1***Recruitment Source for Study Participants (n=26)*

Recruitment Source	<i>n, %</i>
Word of Mouth	12 (46.15%)
Community Partner	9 (34.62%)
Direct Contact	4 (15.38%)
Snowball Sampling	1 (3.85%)

Appendix K

Table K1

Summary of Student Participant Demographics (n=18)

Student Demographics	<i>n, %</i>
Gender Identity	
<i>Female</i>	9 (50.00%)
<i>Male</i>	7 (38.89%)
<i>Nonbinary or Bigender</i>	3 (16.67%)
Cisgender	
<i>Yes</i>	14 (77.78%)
<i>No</i>	4 (22.22%)
Race/Ethnicity	
<i>White</i>	9 (50.00%)
<i>Multiple Races</i>	5 (27.78%)
<i>Black/African American</i>	4 (22.22%)
Grade	
<i>4th-6th</i>	4 (22.22%)
<i>7th-8th</i>	5 (27.78%)
<i>9th-10th</i>	5 (27.78%)
<i>11th-12th</i>	4 (22.22%)
Age (Range 10-18)	13.89 (SD=2.47)

Note. Summation of gender identities exceeds 100% as one participant identified as both female and nonbinary.

Table K2*Summary of School Professional Participant Demographics (n=8)*

School Professional Demographics	<i>n, %</i>
Gender	
<i>Cisgender Female</i>	6 (75.00%)
<i>Cisgender Male</i>	1 (12.50%)
<i>Nonbinary</i>	1 (12.50%)
LGBTQ+	
<i>Yes</i>	6 (75.00%)
<i>No</i>	2 (25.00%)
Race/Ethnicity	
<i>White</i>	6 (75.00%)
<i>Black and/or More Than One Race</i>	2 (25.00%)
School Type	
<i>Elementary/Middle</i>	5 (62.50%)
<i>High</i>	3 (37.50%)
Position	
<i>Teacher</i>	5 (62.50%)
<i>Administration/Other</i>	3 (37.50%)
Years in Education (Range 2-27)	11.38 (SD=8.83)

Appendix L

Table L1

Sample of Pragmatic Horizon Analysis: Excerpt

Observation Note, Observer Comments (OC), and Meaning Fields (MF)	Objective (OTC), Subjective (STC), and Normative Evaluative Truth Claims (NTC), Foregrounded (F), Intermediate (I), and Backgrounded (B)
<p>[22] I went back downstairs and passed a classroom with music playing loudly</p> <p><i>[OC: I think it was a classic piece.]</i></p>	<p>OTC: Time has been put into setting up the space and collecting materials (F)</p> <p>STC: I am a good teacher because I personalized the space (F) AND I am also not too serious (F) AND/OR I should not have had to put in the extra work to personalize the space (B) AND/OR this school has come a long way (I)</p>
<p>[23] I had passed this classroom earlier and noted the music and the older white man with a long white beard and hair</p> <p><i>[OC: I recognized him from the website pictures - he had an eccentric look, like a cartoon Santa.]</i></p>	<p>NTC: The school has not received the funding/support it needs to operate (B)</p>
<p>[24] He is more assertive in his greeting this time, asking me directly to come into his classroom and look around.</p>	
<p>[25] He asked me about my son, and I say he's actually quite young and that I'm just kind of getting ahead of things.</p> <p><i>[OC: He didn't ask more at the time, but later in the conversation he asked what grade my son was in and I said preschool.]</i></p>	
<p>[26] He spoke about how when he first got the classroom, it was all green chairs, and he had added everything else.</p> <p><i>[OC: I looked around. It wasn't particularly nicely decorated in there, but there was a big shelf built into the wall with a decent collection of instruments and it was clear some care had been put into the space.]</i></p>	

[MF: The teacher put effort in to personalize the space.]

[27] I made some polite remark about it looking nice and he mumbled something about how he owed people a lot of favors

[OC: I got the impression he was attempting a joke.]

[28] He told me that there were about thirty kids in the school when they started, but when they later added an eighth and tenth grade, they were closer to 80.

[MF: The school is growing.]

[29] He said the class sizes were small.

[MF: Small class sizes is a good thing.]

[30] I asked if there were plans to build out into younger grades as well as into older grades

[31] He said probably not – noting that most high schools are now starting with eighth grade, and then listed a whole bunch of other high schools where this was the case.

[OC: I immediately noticed that all the listed schools were private, not public.]

[MF: Our school is comparable to other private schools.]

[32] I asked him if he had taught at an all-boys school before and he responded that

[28-29]

OTC: Enrollment is increasing (F) AND class sizes are still small (F).

STC: More people are enrolling in this school because it is desirable (I) AND/OR future growth should be expected (B).

NTC: Small class sizes are a good thing (I).

[30-31]

OTC: Local private schools start in 8th grade (F).

STC: Even though this school is public, it provides a similar education as a private school (F).

NTC: Private schools are superior to public schools (B).

[32-34]

he attended an all-boys school in Jefferson Parish.

[33] He offhandedly mentioned that when integration happened, they went co-ed and that his senior class was co-ed.

[OC: It was a little hard to follow his timeline, but it seemed like he had gone to school in both co-ed and all-boy contexts.]

[MF: Integration as he used it means combining males and females without reference to race.]

[34] He also shared that he ended up going back to that same school to teach and in the first year he was there, it was separate, but later it was co-ed.

[35] I said something like I've never really heard about an all-boys model and I was curious about it.

[36] He said it was interesting and sometimes the boys – the older boys, not the younger ones - don't like it and they say, where are the girls?

[MF: Older boys comment on the absence of girls.]

[37] He said he tells them you don't want the girls to be here because they're going to “leave you in the dust” (long pause) “academically.”

[MF: Girls perform better academically than boys.]

[38] He continued that the boys just wanted “something to flirt with”

[MF: Boys want to flirt with girls.]

OTC: The teacher has attended co-ed and single-sex schools and taught in co-ed and single-sex schools (F).

STC: He is more experienced because he has taught in both settings and attended schools in both settings (I) AND/OR the teacher can teach well in any setting (I) AND/OR he (or his parents) selected a single-sex school and he later chose to work at a single-sex school, but “integration” happened while he attended through no action of his own (B).

NTC: Integrated schools are less desirable than co-ed schools (B) AND/OR integration does not relate to race (B).

[37]

OTC: Girls perform better academically compared to boys (F) AND/OR while girls leave boys “in the dust” in academics, they do not outperform in other areas (B).

STC: This school will provide an environment where boys do not have to compete with girls (F) AND/OR boys do not want to be outperformed by girls (B).

NTC: Co-ed schools are harmful to boys (I).

[36, 38]

OTC: Older boys are curious about why girls do not attend their school (F).

[39] I think I smiled and maybe even chuckled politely

STC: This school will provide an environment free of flirting/romantic interests (I).

NTC: Girls are objects (“something to flirt with”) (B) AND/OR all students are heterosexual and cisgender (B) AND/OR co-ed relationships must center around romance (I) AND/OR flirting does not belong at school (I).

Appendix M

Main Questions from Student Individual Interview Guide

- Pretend I am a new student at the school. Tell me about everything I need to know about your school.
- What is it like to be a [insert gender identity of student] at school?
- What do you think it's like be a [another gender identity] at school? Why do you think that? (Repeat for multiple gender identities, e.g., female, male, transgender)
- Have you ever been treated differently because of you are a [gender identity] OR witnessed someone being treated differently because of their gender at school?
- Have you heard of TIX?
 - [If yes] – What do you know about it?
- Was there anything you were hoping we would talk about today that we did not get a chance to cover?
- Do you have anything else you want me to know?
- What did it feel like today talking with me?

Appendix N

Main Questions from School Professional Individual Interview Guide

- What are some common challenges and difficulties that you encounter at your school? How does [challenge described by participant] impact students based on their gender?
- What has come up lately related to gender at your school?
- What kinds of stereotypes do you hear or notice at your school related to gender?
- How have things changed related to gender since you started working in the school system?
- How do you understand sex discrimination?
- There are students who identify as neither a boy or girl, but instead use terms like transgender, nonbinary, agender, and more. How has this come up at your school?

For TIX Coordinators Only

- How would you describe your role as a TIX Coordinator to an outsider?
- What do you see as your ultimate goal or purpose as a TIX Coordinator?
- What do you wish you could change about your role?
- What do you wish more people knew about your job and TIX?

For Other School Professionals Only

- What do you know about TIX?
- What is said about TIX (trainings, policies, informally) at school?

Appendix O

Overview of Main Activities from Student Group Interview Guide

- Drawing Activity
 - Draw what is it like to be your gender identity at school.
 - Draw what is it like to be a different gender identity at school
 - Discussion
 - How were your drawings alike? Different?
 - What did it feel like to do this activity?
 - Did someone else draw or write something that you related to?
- Member-Check
 - Present emerging findings
 - Discuss
 - Do you agree with this finding?
 - Why or why not?
 - Do you have a story from your own life at school about [data finding] that you want to share?
- Wrap-Up
 - Was there anything you were hoping we would talk about today that we did not get a chance to cover?
 - Do you have anything else you want me to know?
 - What did it feel like today talking in this group?

Appendix P

Table P1

List of Major Themes

Major Theme	# of Files	# of References
Daily School Life	33	763
Social Life	33	1007
Gender	32	457
Gender Differences	30	302
LGBTQ+ Experiences	31	348
Teasing, Bullying, Sexual Harassment	29	578
Dating/Sex	25	224
Technology, Phones, Social-Media	28	132
School Staff	33	300
Discipline (Excluding Dress Code)	33	520
Dress Code	21	276
Bathrooms and Facilities	26	107
(Mis)Gendering	27	230
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Discrimination	33	302
Issues in Education	25	147
Social Awareness and Activism	30	140
Title IX	28	101
Other	32	120

Appendix Q

Table Q1

Number of Participants Affiliated with Focal Schools

School Name	Student - Primary	Professional - Primary	Retrospective	Total
School A	4	0	1	5
School B	5	2	0	7
School C	1	0	0	1
School D	0	1	0	1
School E	1	1	0	2
School F	1	0	0	1
School G	1	0	0	1
School H	2	0	0	2
School I	2	0	0	2
School J	1	0	0	1
School K	0	1	0	1
School L	0	1	0	1
School M	0	1	0	1
School N	0	1	1	2
School O	0	0	1	1
School P	0	0	1	1
School Q	0	0	1	1

Note. Primary indicates interviewee was affiliated with the school at the time of the interview and retrospective indicates the interviewee had a prior affiliation.

Appendix R

Table R1

Side-by-Side Comparison of Focal Schools

School	Level	Gov.	Grade	Suspen.	Race	SES	Dis.
A	Both	City	A	Low	Majority White	Low	Low
B	PK-8	City	C	Low	Majority Black	Moderate	Very High
C	PK-8	City	C	Low	No Majority	High	Moderate
D	PK-8	State	B	Low	No Majority	Moderate	Low
E	High	State	A	Low	No Majority	Low	Very Low
F	High	City	C	High	Predom Black	High	Moderate
G	High	City	B	Moderate	Majority Black	Very High	Moderate
H	High	City	A	Low	No Majority	Low	Very Low
I	High	City	C	Low	Predom Black	Very High	High
J	High	State	F	High	Majority Black	High	Low
K	High	City	C	Low	Majority Black	High	High
L	PK-8	City	F	Low	Predom Black	Very High	High
M	High	State	D	Low	Majority Black	Moderate	High
N	PK-8	City	C	Moderate	Majority Black	High	High
O	High	State	B	High	No Majority	High	Low
P	PK-8	City	D	High	Predom Black	Very High	Moderate
Q	Both	City	C	Moderate	No Majority	Moderate	High

Note. For the purposes of maintaining school anonymity, many variables were recoded using broad ranges. Level: Schools were recoded into PK-8, High (9-12), Both (PK-12) based on which best aligned to the student population. Gov (Governance): City indicates school is governed by Orleans Parish School Board. Suspen. (Suspensions): Percentage

of student body who had *not* received an out-of-school suspension: High (Less than 90%), Moderate (90%-95%), and Low (Greater than 95%). Race: Predominately Black (90% or more of the student body identify as Black/African American), Majority Black (Between 50% and 89% of the student body identify as Black/African American), Majority White (Between 50% and 89% of the student body identify as White), and No Majority (No single racial/ethnicity category encompasses 50% or more of the student body). SES: Percentage of student body classified as “economically disadvantaged”: Very High (Greater than 95%), High (Between 75%-94%), Moderate (Between 50%-74%), and Low (Less than 50%). Dis. (Disabilities): Percentage of student body classified as having a disability: Very high (20% or more), High (Between 15%-19%), Moderate (Between 10%-14%), Low, (Between 5%-9%), and Very Low, (Less than 5%).

Appendix S

Robustness of Title IX Information Coding Scheme

Directions: To calculate level of compliance in TIX policies, score all items and sum. Scores range from 0-41. Scores of 0-10 indicates very low robustness, 11-20 indicates low robustness, 21-30 indicates moderate robustness, and 31-41 indicates high robustness. Subscale scores can also be calculated, including Nondiscrimination Protections (range 0-15), TIX Coordinator (range 0-7), Grievance Procedures (range 0-13), and Training (range 0-6).

Section I: Items 1-10 (Scores range from 0-15): Nondiscrimination Protections

Item 1: Sex: Non-Discrimination (Scores range from 0-1)

- Included (1 Point): School documents include statement that TIX protects against discrimination on the basis of sex.
- Not Included (0 Points): Schools documents do not include this statement.

Item 2: Sexual Orientation: Non-Discrimination (Scores range from 0-1)

- Included (1 Point): School documents include statement school will not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, whether or not related to TIX specifically.
- Not Included (0 Points): Schools documents do not include this statement.

Item 3: Gender Identity: Non-Discrimination (Scores range from 0-1)

- Included (1 Point): School documents include statement school will not discriminate on the basis of gender identity, whether or not related to TIX specifically.
- Not Included (0 Points): Schools documents do not include this statement.

Item 4: Sexual Harassment (Scores range from 0-2).

- Policy (2 Points): School documents include a detailed policy within the TIX policy and/or a stand-alone policy prohibiting sexual harassment, including a detailed definition.
- Statement (1 Point): School documents include only a statement and/or clause that sexual harassment is prohibited under TIX.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not include information on sexual harassment.

Item 5: Types of Sexual Harassment (Scores range from 0-2).

- Students and Staff (2 Points): School documents specify that both student to student and staff to student sexual harassment is prohibited under TIX.
- Staff Only (1 Point): School documents specify that staff to student sexual harassment is prohibited under TIX, but does not address student to student sexual harassment.
- Student Only (1 Point): School documents specify that student to student sexual harassment is prohibited under TIX, but does not address staff to student sexual harassment.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents either do not address sexual harassment OR do not specify which types of sexual harassment (student to student and/or staff to student) sexual harassment are prohibited under TIX.

Item 6: Dating Violence (Scores range from 0-2).

- Policy (2 Points): School documents include a detailed policy within the TIX policy and/or a stand-alone policy prohibiting dating violence, including a detailed definition.
- Statement (1 Point): School documents include only a statement and/or clause that dating violence is prohibited under TIX.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not include information on dating violence.

Item 7: Pregnant and/or Parenting Students (Scores range from 0-2).

- Policy (2 Points): School documents include a detailed policy within the TIX policy and/or a stand-alone policy describing protections for pregnant and/or parenting students.
- Statement (1 Point): School documents include only a statement and/or clause that pregnant and/or parenting students are protected under TIX.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not include information on pregnant and/or parenting students.

Item 8: Protected Genders (Scores range from 0-2).

- All Genders (2 Points): School documents include a statement that students of any gender identity are protected under TIX.
- Male and Female Students (1 Point): School documents include a statement that both male and female students are protected under TIX.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not specify which gender(s) are protected under TIX.

Item 9: LGBT Students (Scores range from 0-1).

- Protected (1 Point): School documents include a statement that LGBT students are protected under TIX.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not specify whether LGBT students are protected under TIX.

Item 10: Sex Stereotyping (Scores range from 0-1).

- Prohibited (1 Point): School documents include a statement that discrimination based on sex stereotyping is prohibited under TIX.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address sex stereotyping.

Section II: Items 11-15 (Scores range from 0-7): TIX Coordinators

Item 11: TIX Coordinator (Scores range from 0-2)

- TIX Team (2 Points): School documents include name of TIX Coordinator and at least one more affiliated TIX staff (e.g., investigator)
- TIX Coordinator Only (1 Point): School documents include name of TIX Coordinator only.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not include name of TIX Coordinator.

Item 12: Contact Information (Scores range from 0-2)

- Multiple Contact Methods (2 Points): School documents include phone number and email for TIX Coordinator.

- One Contact Method (1 Point): School documents include either a phone number OR an email for the TIX Coordinator.
 - No Contact Method (0 Points): School documents do not include any contact information for the TIX Coordinator.
 - N/A (0 Points): School documents did not include a TIX Coordinator designation.
- Item 13: Name Given on Phone (Scores range from 0-1)
- Name Given (1 Point): School gave name of TIX Coordinator (may or may not be correct name) when called.
 - No Name Given (0 Points): School either did not answer, did not return call, and/or did not give the name of the TIX Coordinator when called.
- Item 14: Consistency (Scores range from 0-1)
- Consistent (1 Point): TIX Coordinator listed in the school policy was consistent with the information given by the school when called.
 - Inconsistent (0 Points): TIX Coordinator listed in the school policy was inconsistent with the information given by the school when called.
 - N/A (0 Points): TIX Coordinator name not available in the school policy, the phone call, or both.
- Item 15: Confirmation (Scores range from 0-1)
- Confirmed (1 Point): Accurate name for the TIX Coordinator for the school was confirmed.
 - Unconfirmed (0 Points): Accurate name for the TIX Coordinator for the school was unable to be confirmed.

Section III: Items 16-22 (Scores range from 0-13): Grievance Procedures

Item 16: Reporting (Scores range from 0-2)

- Specific (2 Points): School documents include detailed and specific information regarding reporting procedures (e.g., who, what, when, where, how).
- Vague (1 Point): School documents include vague information regarding reporting procedures (e.g., report violations to the TIX coordinator)
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address reporting procedures.

Item 17: Investigations (Scores range from 0-2)

- Specific (2 Points): School documents include detailed and specific information regarding investigation procedures (e.g., who, what, when, where, how).
- Vague (1 Point): School documents include vague information regarding investigation procedures (e.g., the TIX Coordinator will investigate reports)
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address investigation procedures.

Item 18: Consequences (Scores range from 0-2)

- Specific (2 Points): School documents include detailed and specific information regarding the possible consequences that may be given for violations of TIX (e.g., suspension, termination).
- Vague (1 Point): School documents include vague information regarding possible consequences for violations of TIX (e.g., anyone found in violation of TIX will receive a consequence).

- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address possible consequences for violations of TIX.

Item 19: Complainant Supports and/or Rights (Scores range from 0-2)

- Specific (2 Points): School documents include detailed and specific information regarding the rights of complainants and/or available supports (e.g., complainants may request to change classes).
- Vague (1 Point): School documents include vague information regarding the rights of complainants and/or available supports (e.g., supports are available).
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address complainant rights and/or available supports.

Item 20: Respondent Supports and/or Rights (Scores range from 0-2)

- Specific (2 Points): School documents include detailed and specific information regarding the rights of respondents and/or available supports (e.g., respondents may request to change classes).
- Vague (1 Point): School documents include vague information regarding the rights of respondents and/or available supports (e.g., supports are available).
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address respondent rights and/or available supports.

Item 21: Confidentiality (Scores range from 0-2)

- Protections and Limits (2 Points): School documents include information on both limits and protections to confidentiality during TIX process.
- Protections Only (1 Point): School documents include information on protections to confidentiality during TIX process, but not limits to confidentiality.
- Limits Only (1 Point): School documents include information on limits to confidentiality during TIX process, but not protections to confidentiality.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address limits or protections to confidentiality.

Item 22: Retaliation (Scores range from 0-1)

- Prohibited (1 Point): School documents include statement or clause that retaliation is prohibited under TIX.
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address retaliation.

Section IV: Items 23-25 (Scores range from 0-6): Training

Item 23: Teachers and School Staff: Policy Dissemination and Training (Scores range from 0-2)

- Specific (2 Points): School documents include detailed and specific information on how TIX policies are disseminated to teachers and/or school staff, including relevant training (e.g., policies are disseminated bi-annually and available on the school website).
- Vague (1 Point): School documents include vague information on how TIX policies are disseminated to teachers and/or school staff, including relevant training (e.g., teachers will be notified).
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address policy dissemination and/or training for teachers and/or school staff.

Item 24: Students: Policy Dissemination and Training (Scores range from 0-2)

- Specific (2 Points): School documents include detailed and specific information on how TIX policies are disseminated to students, including relevant training (e.g., policies are disseminated bi-annually and available on the school website).
- Vague (1 Point): School documents include vague information on how TIX policies are disseminated to students, including relevant training (e.g., students will be notified).
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address policy dissemination and/or training for students.

Item 25: Parent/Guardians: Policy Dissemination and Training (Scores range from 0-2)

- Specific (2 Points): School documents include detailed and specific information on how TIX policies are disseminated to parents/guardians, including relevant training (e.g., policies are disseminated bi-annually and available on the school website).
- Vague (1 Point): School documents include vague information on how TIX policies are disseminated to parents/guardians, including relevant training (e.g., parents/guardians will be notified).
- Not Included (0 Points): School documents do not address policy dissemination and/or training for parents/guardians.

Appendix T

Dress Code Policies Coding Scheme

Variable 1: Policy Type

- Uniform Only: Students must wear a uniform (dress down days may or may not be permitted)
- No Uniform: Students may wear a uniform, but uniforms are not required OR school does not have a school uniform

Variable 2: Gender Regulation

- Gendered: Some rules specify gender (e.g., ladies may wear a head wrap) OR separate headings are used for uniform/clothing options for female and male students.
 - There may be significant overlap in the rules within the separate headings; however, if separate headings are used, the policy should be coded as gendered.
- Gender-Neutral: No indication of rules that differ by gender within the entire policy.
 - If gendered pronouns are used within the policy (e.g., If a student is out of uniform, his or her parent will be contacted), but the rules and regulations are not gender specific, this should be coded as gender-neutral.

Variable 3: Level of Regulation

Directions: Directions differ based on policy type variable.

- Uniform Only: To calculate level of regulation in uniform policies, score items 1-18 (sections 1 and 2) and sum. Scores range from 0-23. Scores of 0-1 indicate low control, scores 2-8 indicate moderate control, and scores 9 and above indicate high control.
- No Uniform: To calculate level of regulation in uniform policies, score items 1-13 and 19-23 (sections 1 and 3) and sum. Scores range from 0-25. 0-3 indicate low control, scores 4-10 indicate moderate control, and scores 11 and above indicate high control.

Section I: Items 1-13 (Scores range from 0-18): Score for all policies

Item 1: Legs (Scores range from 0-2)

- Pants Only (2 Points): Dress code policy does not permit wearing any bottoms that would expose the legs (e.g., shorts, skirts).
- Knee-Length (1 Point): Policy permits clothing that would expose the legs (e.g., shorts, skirts) and requires that clothing must be knee-length or longer.
- Above Knee (0 Points): Policy permits clothing that would expose the legs (e.g., shorts, skirts). Policy requires that clothing reaches somewhere above the knee (e.g., end of the fingertips).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy permits clothing that would expose the legs (e.g., shorts, skirts), but does not include a specific regulation regarding length of clothing.

Item 2: Visible Undergarments (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly bans visible undergarments AND/OR specifies that clothing must be worn at the waist.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy does not specify where waistline must fall and/or whether undergarments may be visible.

Item 3: Excessively Tight (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly specifies that clothing may not fit too tightly.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits tight clothing OR does not specify how clothing must be worn.

Item 4: Excessively Baggy (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly specifies that clothing may not fit too loosely.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits loose clothing OR does not specify how clothing must be worn.

Item 5: Holes, Rips, Frays (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly specifies that clothing may not have holes and/or be ripped or frayed
- Partial Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly specifies that clothing may not have holes and/or be ripped or frayed on certain parts of the body (e.g., above the knee).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits holes, rips, and frays OR does not specify whether clothing may have holes and/or be ripped or frayed.

Item 6: Hygiene and Cleanliness (Scores range from 0-1)

- Some Regulations (1 Point): Policy explicitly specifies that students must be well-groomed, practice good hygiene, and/or attend school looking neat.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy does not specify whether students must be well-groomed, practice good hygiene, and/or attend school looking neat.

Item 7: Hair Regulations (Scores range from 0-2)

- Major Regulations (2 Points): Policy explicitly specifies how hair may or may not be worn at school with extensive details (e.g., hair must be kept short or worn in a bun).
- Minor Regulations (1 Point): Policy explicitly specifies certain hair colors and/or styles that may not be worn at school, although rules are not extensive (e.g., no extreme colors).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits any hairstyle and/or color OR does not specify how hair must be worn.

Item 8: Hoods/Hoodies (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly specifies that clothing with a hood and/or hoodies may not be worn and/or brought onto school campus.
- Permitted, Hood Down in Class (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits clothing with a hood and/or hoodies, but specifies that hoods must be worn down in class and/or in the building.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits OR does not specify whether clothing with a hood and/or hoodies are permitted.

Item 9: Hats (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly specifies that hats may not be worn and/or brought onto school campus.
- Permitted Outside (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits hats, but specifies that hats may only be worn outside.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits OR does not specify whether hats are permitted.

Item 10: Hair Accessories and/or Hair Wraps (Scores range from 0-2)

- Explicit Ban (2 Points): Policy explicitly bans hair accessories and/or hair wraps.
- Some Regulations (1 Point): Policy includes some regulations regarding the type, color, and/or number of hair accessories and/or color of head wraps that may be worn (e.g., hair accessories must be blue or green).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits OR does not specify whether hair accessories and/or hair wraps are permitted.

Item 11: Make-Up (Scores range from 0-2)

- Explicit Ban (2 Points): Policy explicitly bans make-up.
- Some Regulations (1 Point): Policy includes some regulations regarding the type, color, and/or amount of make-up permitted to be worn (e.g., may wear light, naturally-colored make-up).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits OR does not specify whether make-up is permitted.

Item 12: Nail Décor (Scores range from 0-1)

- Some Regulations (1 Point): Policy includes regulations regarding the type and/or color of nail décor that may be worn (e.g., no artificial nails).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits OR does not specify what types of nail décor are permitted.

Item 13: Jewelry (Scores range from 0-2)

- Detailed Regulations (2 Points): Policy includes specific regulations regarding the type, size, and/or amount of jewelry permitted to be worn (e.g., may wear one small necklace tucked under uniform shirt).
- Vague Regulations (1 Point): Policy includes vague regulations regarding the type of jewelry permitted to be worn (e.g., may not wear ornate or expensive jewelry).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits OR does not specify whether jewelry is permitted.

Section II: Items 14-18 (Scores range from 0-5): Score for uniform policies ONLY

Item 14: Distance-Learning (Scores range from 0-1)

- Included (1 Point): Policy includes rules for permitted attire during distance-learning.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy does not include rules for permitted attire during distance-learning.

Item 15: Shoes (Scores range from 0-1)

- Some Regulations (1 Point): Policy includes regulations regarding the brand, type, and/or color of shoes that may be worn (e.g., shoes must be black with black shoelaces).

- Closed-Toed Shoes Required (0 Points): Policy requires students to wear closed-toed shoes and/or shoes without an open back, but does not regulate the brand, type, and/or color(s) of the shoes.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits any type of shoes OR does not specify which shoes are permitted.

Item 16: Socks (Scores range from 0-1)

- Some Regulations (1 Point): Policy includes regulations regarding the brand, type, and/or color of socks that may be worn (e.g., socks must be black or white).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits any type of socks OR does not specify which socks are permitted.

Item 17: Outerwear (Scores range from 0-1)

- Indoor and Outdoor Regulations (1 Point): Policy includes regulations regarding the type, school branding, and/or color of outerwear that may be worn both inside and outside.
- Indoor Regulations Only (0 Points): Policy includes regulations regarding the type, school branding, and/or color of outerwear that may be worn inside, but permits any outerwear when outside when weather permits.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits any type of outerwear OR does not specify what type of outerwear is permitted.

Item 18: Tucked Shirts (Scores range from 0-1)

- Required (1 Point): Policy includes specification that shirts must be tucked in.
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits untucked shirts OR does not specify whether shirts must be tucked in.

Section III: Items 19-23 (Scores range from 0-7): Score for policies without a uniform ONLY

Item 19: Shoulders (Scores range from 0-2)

- Explicit Ban (2 Points): Policy does not permit wearing tops that would expose the shoulders (e.g., tank tops) OR only allows shirts that cover the shoulder (e.g., students must wear tops with sleeves).
- Some Regulations (1 Point): Policy permits clothing that would expose a portion, but not all of the shoulders (e.g., tank tops must be two inches wide).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits without regulation clothing that would expose the shoulders (e.g., tank tops, sleeveless tops) OR does not specify whether shoulders may be visible.

Item 20: Cleavage (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy bans showing cleavage OR clothing that may expose cleavage (e.g., low-cut tops).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits OR does not specify whether cleavage may be visible.

Item 21: Midriff (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy bans showing mid-riff OR clothing that may expose mid-riff (e.g., crop tops).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits OR does not specify whether midriff may be visible.

Item 22: Leggings (Scores range from 0-2)

- Explicit Ban (2 Points): Policy does not permit wearing leggings.
- Permitted Under (1 Point): Policy permits wearing leggings, but only when under tops of a certain length (e.g., tops that reach fingertip length).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits without regulation leggings OR does not specify whether leggings are permitted.

Item 23: See-Through Material (Scores range from 0-1)

- Explicit Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly bans see-through and/or sheer clothing.
- Partial Ban (1 Point): Policy explicitly bans see-through and/or sheer clothing on certain parts of the body (e.g., above the knee).
- No Regulation (0 Points): Policy explicitly permits see-through and/or sheer clothing OR does not specify whether clothing may be see-through or sheer.

Appendix U

Summary of Findings for Member-Check

Boys and Girls (The Gender Binary): Many students reported that they were expectations around being a boy (masculine) and being a girl (feminine) at school.

- Looks
 - As a girl, students were expected to dress and look a certain way, with attention to clothes, nails, hair, and make-up. As a boy, students were expected to *not* look feminine. Even though girls did not *have* to dress feminine, many girls still felt some expectation to look a certain way.
 - Example Quote: "...every now and then ... I'll be like, oh, I don't match with ... the natural, stereotypical thing of what it means to be, like, an attractive woman. So, like, I must be worthless." – Female high school student
- Strength
 - As a boy, students were expected to be strong and participate in sports, like football and basketball. Even though boys did not *have* to be athletic, they were more popular when they were. Girls could also participate in sports, but it was not as valued. Sometimes girls were discouraged from playing contact sports, like football, and sometimes boys were discouraged from participating in dance, cheer, or other sports viewed as too feminine. But this was not always true.
 - Example Quote: "...they [boys] want to be tough on the inside and outside, like they got to look a certain way, they have to act a certain way. Like, they have to be strong physically and mentally." -Female high school student
- Emotions
 - Boys were reported as less likely to talk about their feelings compared to girls. When boys did cry at school or show emotions, sometimes they got in trouble with teachers or teased. Some boys had trouble managing their anger in school, especially during sports games and this anger could get students in trouble. However, the anger did not last long.
 - Example Quote: "...I even saw this in kindergarten, which is so frustrating. Like, [teachers saying] boys shouldn't cry and getting on them or putting them in timeout or punishing them, making them move their clip down because they had an emotional response." -Female middle school teacher
- Self-Confidence
 - Boys were expected to be more confident in the classroom and girls often felt that they had to prove their abilities in the classroom. Some boys acted out rather than answer a question incorrectly in class. Some boys avoiding asking for help in class so they would not be teased.
 - Example Quote: "...they [boys] don't ask for help as much [as girls] and ... they're very much like, 'Oh, I'll just do it.'" – Female high school student

- Gender Segregation
 - Students were often friends with students of the same gender, especially in younger grades. Sometimes schools did not allow boys to play with girls or separated boys and girls for some activities, but this was not too common. Sometimes boys and girls had a hard time finding something to talk about with one another. As students got older, boys and girls interacted more, often through dating.
 - Example Quote: “Girls are friends with girls and boys are friends with boys.” -Male middle school student

Dating, Sexuality, and Gender: Many students also reported that they were expectations around dating and sexuality (gay, straight, bisexual, etc.) that were related to gender.

- Popularity
 - Students who dated were more popular than students who did not. Students talked a lot at school about who was dating who. Being gay could hurt a student’s popularity, especially for boys.
 - Example Quote: “There is a division of ... students who have a lot of power and ... are socially ... really competent ... And then there are students who have less power and many of them are different. And so, they may not be openly gay, but they are called gay.” -Female middle school teacher
- Popular Boys and Homophobia
 - Popular boys, especially in middle school, used phrases like, “you’re gay” and joked about being gay, usually with other boys who were *not* gay. This was a way that boys distanced themselves from being seen as gay and protected their popularity. The f-slur was also said at school, but not as often. Popular boys were also reported making “gross” and sexual jokes and comments in schools.
 - Example Quote: “...sometimes people just say it [you’re gay] like as a joke randomly and sometimes ... because ... I don’t know ... a boy gives another boy a hug or something.” -Male middle school student
- Dating
 - Students who dated were often talked about at school, especially girls. Girls and especially Black girls were criticized when they dated many boys while boys were celebrated for dating many girls. Students sometimes publicly commented on the attractiveness of other students, especially girls.
 - Example Quote: “We’ll [my boyfriend and I will] be, like, hugging or we’ll share a kiss ... and like other students ... will start calling [us] disgusting and stuff and make up rumors and everything.” -Nonbinary and female high school student
- LGBTQ+ Youth
 - Students who identified as LGBTQ+ received unwanted attention in school because of their gender identity and/or sexuality. Negative assumptions were made about LGBTQ+ youth. Some students (and

teachers) purposely misgendered (used the wrong name and/or pronouns) or teased transgender and nonbinary youth for their gender.

- Example Quote: “Some kids in my school purposely ... deadname me for their own enjoyment, because they know it pisses me off.” -Nonbinary middle school student

School Rules: Students reported that certain school rules were more often related to gender identity than others.

- Discipline and Academics
 - Students had different opinions about whether schools treated students fairly, favored boys, or favored girls, but most often participants described boys as most often getting in trouble. Black students were also reported as getting in trouble more often than white students. There were also reports of teachers getting LGBTQ+ students in trouble more than other students.
 - Example Quote: “...sometimes the boys do badder things, but when the girls do badder things, they're [teachers] used to them [girls] just being better. So they don't go as hard ... on them.” -Male middle school student
- Dress Code
 - Most dress code rules were not gendered, but several schools did require boys and girls to wear different uniforms, creating challenges for transgender and nonbinary students. Many students believed dress code were meant to keep boys from being “distracted” by girls at school. Girls, and especially Black girls and girls with “thick” bodies, got in trouble for their clothing more often at school. Sometimes teachers made hurtful comments about the clothing items worn by girls.
 - Example Quote: “They [teachers] feel like boys are just animals that can’t control themselves and that’s just what boys do. And that girls need to cover themselves up so that they don’t have to deal with it.” -Female high school student
- Title IX
 - Most students had not heard of Title IX, the federal law banning sex discrimination in school. Some teachers knew about Title IX, but most knew very little. There was only a small number of official Title IX reports discussed, even though many students, especially girls, told personal stories with sexual harassment (unwanted sexual comments or touching) that went unreported. Title IX coordinators who participated in the study described a range of challenges with the law and focused their work on teaching students about boundaries.
 - Example Quote: “He [a male student] put his hand on my thigh and ... I moved his hand back to his side and he kept on manhandling me! ... And then he put his hand under my butt and started pinching it.” – Female high school student
- Names and Pronouns
 - Very few schools had official rules on student names and pronouns, although many schools did talk about names and pronouns in class. A few schools had school-wide rules to help teachers correctly gender students

(use the name and pronouns they go by), but in most schools, it depended on the teacher. Laws about changing a student's name in their school file and requirements for getting parent permission were reported as challenges to correctly gendering students at school.

- Example Quote: "...I only noticed this recently, but this year my worst grades have been in the classes where the teachers do not consistently gender me correctly or make me feel uncomfortable in class because of my gender presentation or identity." -Male, transgender high school student
- Bathroom Access
 - I was unable to find written rules on bathroom access for any of the schools, although several schools did have a gender-neutral bathroom available. Gender-neutral bathrooms were often not easy to use as they were far from classes, had a long wait, or required a pass. Transgender and nonbinary students told stories of being banned from using certain bathrooms at school. Safety issues in the bathroom were shared for both gender-neutral and single-sex (boys' or girls') bathrooms.
 - Example Quote: "I haven't brought it [adding a gender-neutral bathroom] up [to the school], but I really, really, really doubt that anybody's gonna care. Like, they're not gonna want to pay for a whole 'nother bathroom, so there's not really a point." -Nonbinary middle school student

Activism and Resistance: Despite the many problems and challenges shared, there were many, many examples of students, teachers, and schools supporting students from all gender identities in schools.

- More LGBTQ+ Visibility
 - Many students identified with gender identities beyond the categories of boy or girl. Also, many students reported that their school had a large number of LGBTQ+ students who were "out" (open with others about their gender identity and/or sexuality) at school. Teachers noticed that there were more out students than when they were in school. In some schools, it was more common for there to be out lesbians than gay male students. Many schools had a small number of out transgender or nonbinary students, but a few schools had none.
 - Example Quote: "I taught a sixth grader that was pansexual. I taught a sixth grader that was transgender. I taught ... multiple sixth graders that identified as bisexual or gay. ... That's definitely a really prominent thing ... in schools now, that was not the same when I was in school." -Female teacher
- Student Support
 - LGBTQ+ students who were out at school were accepted by many, but not all of their classmates. Some students were good about gendering students correctly (using the right names and pronouns). Friend groups made up of mostly LGBTQ+ students were also commonly reported and these groups were often supportive, real, and joyful.

- Example Quote: “...Out of all the [friend] groups in the school, my group [of mostly LGBTQ+ students] has the best actual friendship because ... the popular kids are really fake to each other and ... they’re not ... friends, they’re just [there] to boost their own popularity.” -Bigender middle school student
- School Support
 - Schools taught lessons related to gender and sexuality at school, including lessons on LGBTQ+ History and inclusive grammar lessons on pronouns. Sometimes parents were upset about these lessons. A few schools had genders and sexualities alliances (GSAs) that were supportive for LGBTQ+ students. Other schools organized supportive events, such as an LGBTQ+ prom.
 - Example Quote: “...And every day, there's ... a grammar [lesson] ... And Donald is a he and Alicia is a she and ... Alex is a they. And we're not going to spend a lot of time talking [about it]. We're just going to say like, ‘That is an option for pronouns. Some people use it. You should be aware of it.’” -Female middle school administrator
- Activism
 - Students shared their opinions on social issues, including books bans, Don’t Say Gay laws, and gender equality. Sometimes students were activists at school, through presenting school projects on important issues, organizing walk-outs, and/or writing letters to the school board. Other times students were activists in the community. Students had many ideas about how schools could improve, including hiring and training supportive teachers, writing supportive rules about gender issues (such as names/pronouns), adding a GSA, and creating more LGBTQ+ inclusive school events. However, students did not think school assemblies would work.
 - Example Quote: “These kids ... they have feelings about all of this [social issues], and they are educated about all of this. They're not the standby generation that just ... lets it all go. They are activists.” -Male high school administrator

Appendix V

Support Youth Through Advocacy

- Oppose Louisiana proposed bills [H.B. 121](#) and [H.B. 81](#) (“Don’t Say Gay” bills)
 - These bills target LGBTQ+ students and would limit discussions of sexuality and gender identity in schools, create major barriers to correctly gendering students, and permit misgendering students for “religious or moral convictions”
- Support efforts to [overturn](#) Louisiana [H.B. 648](#), effective since January 1, 2024
 - This law bars access to gender-affirming healthcare for transgender youth. This [F.A.Q.](#) and [fact sheet](#) provides useful information on the topic. Although not school-related, professionals should be aware of how the legislation impacts youth’s physical and emotional health
- Support federal proposed bills [H.R. 15](#) and [S. 5](#), also known as the [Equality Act](#).
 - This legislation would extend nondiscrimination protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity and would help overturn Don’t Say Gay bills

Educate Yourself

- Learn LGBTQ+ [terminology](#) including [terms to avoid](#)
- Learn the basics on being an [ally](#) to transgender and nonbinary youth
 - Review common myths [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#) about transgender people
- Learn how to respond to [common questions and concerns](#) about discussing gender
- Learn how to intervene when youth make [anti-gay comments](#) (‘That’s so gay’)
- Learn how to intervene with [sexual harassment](#)

Implications for Organizations (Schools and Other Youth-Serving Organizations)

Update Organizational Policy and Practices

- [Self-assess](#) the level of gender inclusiveness in your organization and make a plan to address areas of improvement
- Adapt the [GLSENs Model Policy for Transgender and Nonbinary Students](#) to fit the needs of your organization
- Make it easy for youth to report bullying, harassment, and other concerning behaviors. This [resource](#) may be useful for preventing bullying and harassment.
- If you have a dress code, make sure it is gender-neutral, all rules are necessary and justified, and train staff on equitable enforcement. This [model policy](#) may be a helpful.
- Take steps to proactively prevent adult sexual misconduct with youth. [Darkness to Light](#) offers online and in-person trainings.

General Tips

- Ask about youth names and pronouns
 - Here is a helpful and easy to use [pronoun form from GLSEN](#)
 - Not everyone uses pronouns
 - Pronouns can change. Ask for *current* pronouns
 - Never *require* youth to share their pronouns
 - Do NOT disclose youth's gender identity without permission
- Proactively avoid misgendering
 - Avoid reading names from rosters and let youth introduce themselves
 - If you cannot use someone's pronouns in a situation, do not use any pronouns
 - If you cannot use someone's name in a situation, do not use their deadname (*referring to youth by their last name may be an appropriate alternative in limited situations*)
 - Remove deadnames from internal written documents
- What should I do if I misgender someone?
 - It happens. Say sorry and fix it. Do not over-apologize or try to explain
- What should I do if someone else misgenders someone?
 - Immediately and directly correct them (*e.g., Jane uses they/them pronouns*)
- Bathrooms and facilities
 - Make a gender-neutral space available to *all* youth
 - Allow youth to select the best bathroom/facility for themselves
 - Do not tell youth which facilities they must or must not use
 - Do not create barriers to accessing facilities (doctors note, permission slip)
- Miscellaneous tips
 - Disrupt stereotypes about gender ("boys don't cry")
 - Give youth space to talk about gender and gender issues
 - Take advantage of "[teachable](#)" moments to address bias and inequality
 - Do not use gender to organize activities
 - Instead of boys versus girls, try A-M versus N-Z names
 - Use inclusive language verbally
 - Instead of boys and girls or ladies and gentleman, try everyone, folks
 - Use inclusive language on all written documents
 - Replace "he or she" and "his or her" language
- Schools: If your school does NOT already have a [genders and sexualities alliance](#), support students in starting one. If your school does have one, talk to the faculty sponsor about how to get involved

Additional Implications for Educators and School Staff Members

Know the Current Educational Law

- Familiarize yourself with state education laws, especially the [Parents' Bill of Rights for Public Schools](#) and [Instruction in Sex Education](#)
 - Collectively, these laws require schools to give parents notice of and the option to opt-out students from sex education courses and also surveys related to “the student's sexual experiences or attractions.” They also ban teaching “...any *sexually explicit* materials depicting male or female homosexual activity.”
 - These laws are often interpreted broadly by schools to ban even minor references to homosexuality and/or teaching content that might fall under sex education. Advocate against broad interpretations of the law. If administrators communicate that certain practices/lessons/activities are illegal, seek clarification on what laws they are referencing and encourage the least restrictive interpretations of the law
- Familiar yourself with [Title IX](#), a federal law banning sex discrimination in school
 - Under the Biden administration’s interpretation of the law, sex discrimination includes gender identity and sexual orientation discrimination in schools
 - Find out who the designated Title IX coordinator is at your school
 - If you have not received training in Title IX from your school, ask for it
 - Learn how to report sex discrimination and sexual harassment in your school

The Elephant in the Room

- What if [H.B. 121](#) and [H.B. 81](#) (“Don’t Say Gay” bills) passes? Then what?
 - **RESIST.** Outright refuse to comply with proposed rules or policies that would harm LGBTQ+ students. Title IX may be a useful tool in justifying your actions. Organize with other educators willing to resist hateful legislation and if your school has a union, seek their support. As in Florida, these laws certainly will be contested in court, they are not set in stone.
 - **KNOW THE LAW.** The law bans “discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity” generally, not discussion of LGBTQ+ people specifically. Everyone has a sexual orientation and a gender identity, not just LGBTQ+ people. Reading a book featuring a cisgender, heterosexual character is no more in violation of this law than reading a book with an LGBTQ+ character. Do not interpret the law so broadly to remove any curricular content that refers to LGBTQ+ people
 - **STEP UP.** Do not depend on LGBTQ+ school staff to take the lead in opposing these bills. LGBTQ+ staff members are particularly targeted under these bills and need support from cisgender and heterosexual allies. All school staff members are responsible for providing a safe space for youth in schools

- Even when you cannot correctly gender students, **REFUSE TO MISGENDER STUDENTS.** If you cannot use a student's pronouns in a situation, do not use any pronouns. If you cannot use a student's name in a situation, do not use their deadname. Referring to youth by their last name (without a gendered signifier) may be an appropriate temporary alternative. Last names, student IDs, and/or class numbers might be a practical alternative for report cards and/or written correspondence. Think outside the box and consult with colleagues about how they are handling similar situations
- **BE COURAGEOUS:** Standing up for the needs of all youth requires tremendous bravery, especially in the face of explicit hatred. Find strength in knowing you are doing the right thing and seek support from others invested in supporting gender equity in schools. You are not alone

Appendix W

Table W1

Application of Carspecken's Requirements for Rigor

Technique	Stages	In Application
Multiple observers	1	Research assistants reviewed data and wrote analytical notes
Prolonged engagement	1, 2	Data collection occurred over many months
Low-inference vocabulary	1	Field journal privileged verbatim record
Peer-debriefing	1, 2, 3	Consultation occurred on regular schedule
Member checks	1, 2, 3	Member check initiated in February 2024
Use stage-three techniques	2	School policies compared to interviews
Strip analysis	2	Segments of the primary record were compared
Negative case analysis	2	Analyzed cases that did not support themes
Multiple interviews with same participants	3	Participation in group and individual interviews and/or follow-up interviews
Nonleading interview techniques	3	Interview guide questions were nondirective
Encourage participants to explain terms being used	3	Participants were asked to explain the terminology they used

Note. The stages are taken from *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research*

(Carspecken, 1996, pp. 88-89, 141-142, 165-166).

Appendix X

Introduction To Student Interviews

Today I am going to ask you some questions to try to learn about your school experiences. I have not been in [elementary, middle, high] school in a very long time and a lot has changed! I want you to help me learn about what it is like for you and your peers at school. I will also ask you a lot of questions about boys, girls, and other gender identities at your school. In the interview, I am going to ask you mostly to tell me stories about your life at school. At other times, I will ask you to tell stories about being a [gender identity of student] at school. There are no right or wrong answers to any of my questions. You know a lot more than I do about what it is like to be a kid at school so just answer from your own experiences. If at any point you are uncomfortable or don't want to answer a question, you can say pass or ask to skip it. Let's practice quickly. Let's pretend I just asked you a question you really did not want to answer. What do you say? [Pause for response].

If at any point I ask you a question and you don't know or want more time to think you can ask me to come back to it. Let's practice quickly. Let's pretend I just asked you a question you want to come back to later. What do you say? [Pause for response].

If we are talking later and you start to get sad or upset, you have a few options. You can tell me you don't want to answer the question (like we practiced). You could tell me you want to come back to the question later (also like we practiced). Finally, you could ask me for a break. Let's pretend you are getting a little upset and want to take a break. What do you say? [Pause for response].

Finally, if at any point you change your mind for any reason and decide you don't want to talk anymore, you can tell me so. Let's practice. Pretend that you changed your mind and you don't want to do the interview at all anymore. What do you say? [Pause for response].

Also, before we get started, I should let you know about a big word called confidentiality. We already talked about this a little when you and your [parent/guardian] filled out forms with me. Confidentiality means that what you say here stays with me. I won't tell people what you tell me, but later I will write about all the interviews I am doing with all sorts of kids. When I write about this, I won't use your name and your stories will be mixed up with the stories of other kids so that people who read what I write won't know that it was you who said it. However, if I think that you may hurt yourself or others, we may have to tell someone other than your parents, so that you and others will remain safe. If we learn that someone is hurting you or has hurt you before, we may have to tell someone other than your parents, so that you can be safe. Do you have any questions about this? [Pause for response].

Okay, great. We are almost ready to get started. Before we start, is it okay if I record this? I will keep this recording and listen to it after we finish here. I will write

down everything you say by listening to the recording so that I can remember and learn from what you taught me. When I write it all down, I will take out your name and anything else that identifies you. After I am done writing it down, I will delete this recording. Is this okay with you? [Pause for response].

Do you have any questions before we begin? No question is too silly or embarrassing to ask and it is really important to me that you understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. [Pause for response].

Appendix Y

Resources for Students

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: *Crisis resources and suicide prevention*

<https://988lifeline.org/>

Dial 988 OR 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

Metro Crisis Response Team: *Mental health support for residents of Orleans, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard Parishes*

<https://www.mhsdla.org/>

504-826-2675

The Trevor Project: *Suicide prevention and crisis intervention for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) young people*

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

1-866-488-7386 (or text START to 678-678)

24/7 Crisis Counselor available through phone call, text, and chat

RAINN: *National Sexual Assault Hotline*

<https://www.rainn.org/>

1-800-656-4673

Crisis Chat Line: <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>

Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services: *Report child abuse in Louisiana*

<https://www.dcfslouisiana.gov/>

1-855-4LA-KIDS (1-855-452-5437)

Appendix Z

Table Z1

Hierarchy of Themes and Example Quotes

Section and Theme	Subtheme	Quote
Reproduction of Cisheteropatriarchy: The Gender Binary (3a)	Strength & Athleticism	“...they [boys] want to be tough on the inside and outside, like they got to look a certain way, they have to act a certain way. Like, they have to be strong physically and mentally.”
	Physical Appearance	“...every now and then ... I'll be like, oh, I don't match with ... the natural, stereotypical thing of what it means to be, like, an attractive woman. So, like, I must be worthless.”
	Emotions	“...I even saw this in kindergarten, which is so frustrating. Like, [teachers saying] boys shouldn't cry and getting on them or putting them in timeout or punishing them, making them move their clip down because they had an emotional response.”
	Self-Confidence	“...they [boys] don't ask for help as much [as girls] and ... they're very much like, ‘Oh, I'll just do it.’”
	Gender Segregation	“Girls are friends with girls and boys are friends with boys.”
Reproduction of Cisheteropatriarchy: Heterosexuality (3a)	Social Power	“There is a division of ... students who have a lot of power and ... are socially ... really competent ... And then there are students who have less power and many of them are different. And so, they may not be openly gay, but they are called gay.”

	Regulating Cisheteropatriarchal Masculinity	“...sometimes people just say it [you’re gay] like as a joke randomly and sometimes ... because ... I don’t know ... a boy gives another boy a hug or something.”
	Dating and Sexual Activity (2a)	“We’ll [my boyfriend and I will] be, like, hugging or we’ll share a kiss ... and like other students ...will start calling [us] disgusting and stuff and make up rumors and everything.”
	Distinct Issues Facing LGBTQ+ Youth (2a)	“Some kids in my school purposely ... deadname me for their own enjoyment, because they know it pisses me off.”
Formal School Regulation: Discipline and Academics (1a)	Disciplining Female Students	“...as a boy it’ll [school will] be fine, I guess. But as a girl, you have to watch what you do, watch what you say, et cetera.”
	Disciplining Male Students	“...sometimes the boys do badder things, but when the girls do badder things, they’re [teachers] used to them [girls] just being better. So they don’t go as hard ... on them.”
	Intersections with Race (2a)	“...as Black men, you’re seen as aggressive and violent And they [teachers] think that the talking back and arguing is going to escalate.”
	Disciplining LGBTQ+ Youth	“...some of the teachers are very homophobic ... they’ll, like, be mean to the child just because they’re transgender, or just because they identify as they/them.”
	Academic Expectations	“...getting into programs seems to be easy as a boy. ... Even when it’s not sports, when it’s ... academic, I feel like those opportunities are given to boys first.”

Formal School Regulation: Dress Code Policies (1a)	Formal School Policy	“...in our [school] documents ... we don't talk about girls' uniforms, boys' uniforms. We're just like, 'These are the bottoms. These are the tops.' Right? If you want to be gender-normative, rock on. If you don't, rock on.”
	Targeting Female Students in Enforcement	“They [teachers] feel like boys are just animals that can't control themselves and that's just what boys do. And that girls need to cover themselves up so that they don't have to deal with it.”
	Self-Regulation	“...I don't like when people talk about my body. So ... I cover up [during practice]. Like I don't feel comfortable wearing it [leggings]. But, like, that's standard workout clothes. ... I don't wear workout clothes to practice anymore, because I feel uncomfortable [be]cause we be [<i>sic</i>] around boys.”
	Consequences	“...it was scary ... very anxiety-inducing. ... They [school staff] take you out of class and ... they made me call my parents and have them bring ... pants and I couldn't go back to class until I got those.”
	Exceptions	“...I've never seen anyone get dress coded, I think the teachers are pretty ... chill about it.”
Formal School Regulation: Title IX and Nondiscrimination (1b)	Awareness of TIX	“...it's [TIX is] just kind of in the handbook. ... We had never gotten like no extra training and stuff on it.”
	TIX Cases	“...the children's age and where we are ... it's complicated. ... We are products of our environments and our culture, and we're all learning.

		... Is it bullying, or is it a TIX violation?"
	Peer Sexual Harassment	"He [a male student] put his hand on my thigh and ... I moved his hand back to his side and he kept on manhandling me! ... And then he put his hand under my butt and started pinching it."
	Staff-Student Sexual Harassment	"...there's ... other teachers who've done creepy things, and then nothing ever gets done about it."
Formal School Regulation: Gender Diversity (1a)	Using Correct Names and Pronouns	"...I find that students more often than not in middle school at [my school] will ask for a name recognition instead of like, "I am a boy," or, "I am a girl." ... I can think of one example ... [of a student] who identifies as trans and says, 'I am a boy' But most of the time I'm seeing more they/them. And I'm seeing name changes."
	Policies and Practices	"...some people [teachers] just don't really care about pronouns, they try, but they don't really put in that much effort. And then others are super progress, super amazing, always trying, always helping."
	The Impact of Being (Mis)gendered	"...I only noticed this recently, but this year my worst grades have been in the classes where the teachers do not consistently gender me correctly or make me feel uncomfortable in class because of my gender presentation or identity."
	Bathrooms and Facilities	"I haven't brought it [adding a gender-neutral bathroom] up [to the school], but I really, really, really doubt that anybody's gonna care. Like, they're not gonna want to pay

		for a whole ‘nother bathroom, so there’s not really a point.”
Activism and Resistance: Identifying Outside Cisheteropatriarchal Frameworks (3a)	Outward Appearance	“...I almost see it [body hair] as being ... a feminine thing for me. ... I don't have to have it [not shaving] be ... an unfeminine thing I do.”
	Increased Visibility	“I taught a sixth grader that was pansexual. I taught a sixth grader that was transgender. I taught ... multiple sixth graders that identified as bisexual or gay. ... That’s definitely a really prominent thing ... in schools now, that was not the same when I was in school.”
Activism and Resistance: Peer Support (3a)	General Peer Support	“... [the school is] very open, because ... [they have an] open-door policy to be yourself. ... Especially the ... student body ... they're kind of accepting to everybody.”
	LGBTQ+ Peer Support	“...Out of all the [friend] groups in the school, my group [of mostly LGBTQ+ students] has the best actual friendship because ... the popular kids are really fake to each other and ... they’re not ... friends, they’re just [there] to boost their own popularity.”
Activism and Resistance: School Support (3a)	Genders and Sexualities Alliances	“[the GSA is] ...a safe space for people to just be whoever they are, and share whatever they want.”
	Other Proactive Support	“...And every day, there's ... a grammar [lesson] ... And Donald is a he and Alicia is a she and ... Alex is a they. And we're not going to spend a lot of time talking [about it]. We're just going to say like, ‘That is an option for pronouns.

		Some people use it. You should be aware of it.”
Activism and Resistance: Student Activism (3a)	Awareness	“These kids ... they have feelings about all of this [social issues], and they are educated about all of this. They're not the standby generation that just ... lets it all go. They are activists.”
	Activism	“We [GSA members] just went on some websites and we researched it [Don't Say LGBTQ+] and we signed some petitions and we were like ‘God this sounds horrible. I hope it doesn't happen.’”
	Change	“... [schools should have] more ... enforcement of, like, respectfulness to kids. ... If teachers ... tried to ... listen in and like, give punishment ... if somebody is ... making fun of somebody and calling them gay.”

Note. Research question addressed by the theme/subtheme noted in parentheses. Research questions addressed included: 1a) How does gender oppression present in the school system? 1b) To what extent does the federal mandate of TIX inform school policy and/or contribute to sex (in)equity in school? 2a) How does the culture and context of gender overlap with other systems of oppression in the school system? 3a) How is cisheteropatriarchy regulated, promoted, and/or resisted at schools?

Appendix AA

Table AA1

Student Demographic Information by Participant (n=18)

Name	Gender Identity	Race	LGB	Age	Grade	School
Anton	Male	Black	ND	16-18	High	I
Avery	Female	Black	N	13-15	High	J
Christian	Male	White	ND	10-12	Middle	A
Colby	Transgender	White	ND	10-12	Middle	C
Corinne	Female	Multiple	Y	13-15	High	F
Ezra	Transgender	White	ND	13-15	High	A
George	Male	White	ND	10-12	Middle	B
Hope	Female	Multiple	Y	16-18	High	I
Jenna	Female	White	ND	16-18	High	A
Jesse	Male	White	ND	13-15	Middle	B
Kaitlyn	Female	White	N	16-18	High	E*, O
Kendra	Female	Black	ND	13-15	High	H
Macy	Female	Multiple	ND	13-15	Middle	H*, A
Martin	Male	White	ND	10-12	Middle	B
Renee	Transgender	Multiple	Y	13-15	High	G
Sandy	Female	Multiple	Y	10-12	Middle	A*, Q
Storm	Transgender	White	ND	13-15	Middle	B
Tyler	Male	Black	ND	10-12	Middle	B

Note. All names are pseudonyms. Transgender is to encompass all gender identities that are not cisgender. For LGB, Y indicates student is bisexual, pansexual, or another sexual minority; N indicates student is heterosexual/straight and ND indicates that sexual

orientation was not disclosed. For students who reported on multiple schools, the school they attended at the time of the interview is indicated with an asterisk.

Table AA2*School Professional Demographic Information by Participant (n=8).*

Name	Gender	Race	LGBTQ	Years in Schools	Grades	School
Ms. Angela	Female	White	N	9	K-8	B
Ms. Darcy	Female	White	N	27	K-8	D
Ms. Haley	Female	White	Y	8	K-8	N
Ms. Janelle	Female	Multiple	Y	7	K-8	L*, N
Ms. Lauren	Female	White	Y	5	K-8	B
Tr. Rachel	Nonbinary	White	Y	10	High	K
Mr. Ricky	Male	White	Y	23	High	E
Ms. Tracy	Female	Black	Y	2	High	M*, P

Note. All names are pseudonyms. For LGBTQ, Y indicates professional is LGBTQ+ and N indicates professional is not. Years in schools encompasses number of years working in the field of education broadly. For professionals who reported on multiple school experiences, the school they were most recently employed at during the time of the interview is indicated with an asterisk.

Appendix AB

Table AB1

Dress Code Policies for Focal Schools (n=18)*

School	Policy Type	Gender Regulation	Level of Regulation
A	No Uniform	Gender-Neutral	High
B	No Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Low
C	No Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Low
D	Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Moderate
E	No Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Low
F	Uniform	Gendered	Moderate
G	Uniform	Gender-Neutral	High
H	No Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Low
I	Uniform	Gendered	High
J	Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Moderate
K	No Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Moderate
L	Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Moderate
M	No Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Moderate
N	Uniform	Gendered	High
O	Uniform	Gendered	High
P	Uniform	Gendered	High
Qa	Uniform	Gender-Neutral	Low
Qb	No Uniform	Gender-Neutral	High

Note. *School Q is divided into School Qa and School Qb to distinguish policies.

Table AB2*Comparison of Schools With (n=10) and Without (n=8) Uniforms*

Category	Uniform (n=10)	No Uniform (n=8)
Gendered Regulation	5 (50.00%)	0 (0.00%)
High Level of Regulation in Dress Policy	5 (50.00%)	2 (25.00%)
Low Level of Regulation in Dress Policy	1 (10.00%)	4 (50.00%)
Majority Black/African American ¹	7 (70.00%)	3 (37.50%)
High Number of Low-Income Students ²	8 (80.00%)	2 (25.00%)
Low Suspension Rate ³	3 (30.00%)	7 (87.50%)
Confirmed Genders and Sexualities Alliance	0 (0.00%)	4 (50.00%)
Confirmed Gender-Neutral Bathroom	0 (0.00%)	4 (50.00%)

Note. Percentage calculated out of 10 for uniform policies and out of eight for policies

that do not require a uniform. ¹Over 50% of students identified as Black/African

American in the 2021-2022 school year. ²Over 75% of students were classified as

“economically disadvantaged” in the 2021-2022 school year. ³Less than 5% of the

student body was suspended in the 2021-2022 school year.

Appendix AC

Table AC1

Comparison of Schools by TIX Robustness (n=17)

Category	Very Low or Low (n=6)	Moderate and High (n=11)
Elementary School	4 (66.67%)	2 (18.18%)
State-level Governance	1 (16.67%)	4 (36.36%)
D or F Grade	3 (50.00%)	1 (9.09%)
Low Suspension Rate ¹	5 (83.33%)	5 (45.45%)
Majority Black/African American ²	5 (83.33%)	5 (45.45%)
High Number of Disabilities ³	4 (66.67%)	3 (27.27%)
School Uniform Required	2 (33.33%)	7 (63.64%)
High Level of Regulation ⁴	1 (16.67%)	6 (54.55%)

Note. Percentage calculated out of six for very low and low robustness and out of 11 for moderate and high robustness. ¹Less than 5% of the student body was suspended in the 2021-2022 school year. ²Over 50% of students identified as Black/African American in the 2021-2022 school year. ³Over 15% of the student body was classified as having a disability in the 2021-2022 school year. ⁴High level of regulation in dress code policy

Appendix AD

Table AD1

Summary of Study Implications

Study Implications
Public Policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support broad and inclusive interpretations of Title IX • Pass nondiscrimination legislation for sexual orientation and gender identity • Oppose state-level anti-LGBTQ+ bills
School Policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update policies to include sexual orientation and gender identity • Implement model policies for transgender and nonbinary students • Eliminate dress code and uniform policies or update using model policies • Develop school policy aimed at preventing adult sexual misconduct • Review TIX policies for comprehensiveness and accuracy
Creative Solutions if anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation is Enacted
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find loopholes and workarounds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use open-ended introductions instead of calling names from a roster ○ Use student ID and/or last name on written paperwork ○ Use no pronouns rather than misgender a student ○ Interpret curriculum bans as narrowly as possible ○ Assign open-ended, student-directed assignments • Intentionally resist compliance
Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support education and skill-building on the following topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gender diversity ○ TIX compliance ○ Diversity and implicit bias • Support prevention programs in the following areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Peer sexual harassment and child abuse prevention ○ Sexual health and social and emotional learning • Conduct needs assessments with significant student input • Stand in solidarity with educators resisting cisheteropatriarchy; mobilize allies
Social Work Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase focus on macro-level social work, policy • Integrate more explicit focus on LGBTQ+ issues in social work training • Teach students critical reflexivity skills

Appendix AE

Table AE1

Future Research Projects

Title	Research Question	Description	Timeline
Gender and Social-Media	How does online content, including social media, influence the culture and context of gender?	This state-wide study will qualitatively interview students to understand how social media content impacts the culture and context of gender in their lives. After, using content analysis, relevant online content will be analyzed in-depth.	Fall 2024 through Spring 2026
The Caregivers Project	How do caregivers of students with complex gender identities navigate the school system?	This national study will qualitatively examine how the parents/guardians of minors with complex gender identities support their children in navigating the school system.	Fall 2025 through Spring 2027
Comparing Gender in Schools Across the Nation	What is the culture and context of gender in the Missoula public school system?	This local study will closely replicate my methodology in <i>Gender and Schools: A Critical Ethnography</i> , but instead with a new focus on Missoula, MT. Findings will be compared and contrasted to findings from this dissertation.	Fall 2026 through Spring 2028

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Biography

Hannah is a Doctoral Candidate and Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Originally from Texas, Hannah graduated from Texas Christian University with her Bachelors of Science in Social Work in 2011. After, Hannah moved to New Orleans and worked as a Pre-K teacher for four years before obtaining her Masters of Social Work from Louisiana State University in 2016. Upon graduation, Hannah combined her love of teaching and social work by working as a school social worker for three years. Inspired by her clinical work in the school system, Hannah started the City, Culture, and Community PhD program at Tulane University in 2019 to study gender and schools. To date, she has published research related to school dress codes policies, school social work, and Title IX implementation. Hannah will join the University of Montana as an Assistant Professor of Social Work in the fall of 2024.