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The Experiences of Stress and Resilience on the Allostatic Load of Transgender and Gender Non-Binary Individuals During Secondary School: How Their Experiences Can Inform Best Practices

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THE EXPERIENCES OF STRESS AND RESILIENCE ON THE ALLOSTATIC LOAD OF TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NON-BINARY INDIVIDUALS DURING SECONDARY SCHOOL: HOW THEIR EXPERIENCES CAN INFORM BEST PRACTICES

BY

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The dissertation of **Kimberly S. Ferina** entitled: *The Experiences of Stress and Resilience on the Allostatic Load of Transgender and Gender Non-Binary Individuals During Secondary School: How Their Experiences Can Inform Best Practices,* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the School of Education and Human Services has been read and approved by the Committee:

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ABSTRACT

Transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary (TGNCNB) students face many challenges in secondary school that increase their allostatic load and can lead to allostatic overload. Various aspects of their identity cultivate stress, compounded by variables that impact them throughout the day. TGNCNB youth are at a greater risk of bullying and harassment than their cisgendered peers and are at a greater risk of employing harmful mitigating behaviors and suicidal ideation. TGNCNB youth spend most of their day in the school setting, and there is limited research on this population that identifies what schools can do to support this population better. I conducted this research using a phenomenological, heuristic qualitative research design to understand the lived experiences of TGNCNB individuals while they were in high school through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. A phenomenological design permits the researcher to embed their own experiences with those of their participants. The researcher's positionality as an educator and identifying as transgender benefitted the research by creating a safe environment for TGNCNB to share their experiences. Participants (n=11) were between 18 and 30 years of age, and the study allowed them to reflect on their experiences in high school and have a disc gender identity as it related to the stress they experienced during that time. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for central themes, and I derived findings through data grounded in resiliency theory, transgender theory, and liminality theory. I coded the data through a multi-step analysis process and extracted common themes. The ideas of stress and resiliency permeate all themes and form the central thread throughout this study.

Furthermore, in addition to the findings, the participants' hindsight and recommendations regarding their past selves, other TGNCNB students, and school personnel are discussed. Stressors were placed into three categories: identity, which includes stressors that impact

adolescent students (attending a new school, academic achievement, athletic achievement, home lives, ethnic and religious identities, and romantic relationships), and stress associated with embodying gender identity (transitioning, coming out, and embodiment); school environment (school culture, school policy, safe spaces, and champions of safe spaces); and personal connections (family, peers, and technology). Finally, the participants identified the aspects of a positive school culture and recommended that school personnel support the TGNCNB community better. When synthesizing the findings with other relevant studies, three related ideas emerge: *fear is the underlying emotion among all TGNCNB youth; allostatic load accrues from a multitude of sources and is cumulative; schools must better support the needs of their TGNCNB students; and the education community must act urgently to determine a course of action.*

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to the TGNCNB youth

who succumb to the stress they face and take their own lives,

and to the TGNCNB people whose lives are taken by violence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Randi - I can't express enough my thanks for your sacrifices to help me complete this goal. A great deal of time was spent on assignments for classes, conducting interviews, and writing this dissertation, and you stood by my side the whole time with unwavering support. I love you!

Mom & Dad - Because of you, I have the resilience necessary to live my life. You have taught me kindness, forgiveness, compassion, empathy, and love. You taught me to be the best version of myself that I can be at an early age, and for that, I am grateful and will always continue to push myself. I love you!

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Dr. Honigsfeld - Thank you for saying yes.

The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life - Richard Bach

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I am transgender. I was labeled "male" by the people who birthed me, and I was not given a choice. They saw the parts I came out with and said, "It's a boy." I am not a boy; I never was. A gender was placed upon me by a societal system that is grounded in a gender binary: boys are boys, girls are girls, and everyone is automatically sorted into one group or the other.

This research challenges gender-based norms and asserts that gender non-conforming youth need support from systems around them to reduce their allostatic load, the cumulative burden of chronic stress (Guidi et al., 2021) that results from their experiences with the social construct of gender. The World Health Organization defines gender as "the characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. These characteristics include norms, behaviors, roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, and relationships with each other" (Gender and Health, WHO, para 1). As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time. Gender interacts with but differs from sex, which refers to anatomical and physiological characteristics. The social construct of gender as a binary, including the gender norms associated with the labels of "male" and "female," permeates the ideology of many people. Women and girls are supposed to behave a specific way, dress in certain clothes, play with gender-specific toys, and take on prescribed familial and societal jobs and roles. The same holds for men and boys. Phrases like "boys don't cry" or "you throw like a girl" are familiar and further cement the girl/boy dichotomy.

Outside the dominant societal construct of gender as a binary exists the concept of gender as a spectrum and a potentially fluid state. Many cultures across the globe recognize third-gender or even more gender identities, such as Hijras in India, Muxe in Mexico, and Bakla in the Philippines (Gevisser, 2016). Transgenderism and gender non-conforming identities have existed

throughout time and across geography. Still, it wasn't until the 20th century that "transgender people have been disregarded and deliberately misunderstood to the point where they have become an easy target for abuse" (Picker, C., 2020, para 7). This results from "entrenching gender norms and the subsequent 'othering' of those who do not conform" (Picker, para 8). From my experience, some people are not accepting of those who are different from themselves, and as a result, can be cruel, mentally or physically.[1]

People who identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary (often abbreviated to TGNCNB) want to be able to exist as themselves in society as freely as cisgender individuals—people whose gender identities match the sex assigned to them at birth. This desire for freedom is present in TGNCNB people of all ages, and every TGNCNB person's experience and transition timeline is different. However, technology has opened the doorway for people to transition and "come out" at younger ages than in past decades, and the population of TGNCNB children has been increasing over time (Tanner, 2022). TGNCNB role models are on social media, and young people can see other kids transition on YouTube and TikTok. Additionally, children and their families can now meet with counselors and begin the transition process at a very early age without permanent physiological changes. Current guidelines, as indicated by The World Professional Association for Transgender Health, recently lowered the recommended age for children to start hormone therapy from 18 to 14 (Tanner, 2022). As a result, TGNCNB people are increasingly transitioning while in middle and high school. In a survey conducted from 2017 to 2020, researchers found that 1.4% of 13 to 17-year-olds and 1.3% of 18 to 24-year-olds identify as transgender as compared to .5% of all adults (Ghorashyi,

[1] Throughout this dissertation, I embed personal experiences in order to help readers anchor discourse with a real experience. In addition, my personal narrative can be found as Appendix L

2022). As a result, school personnel must be ready and able to support these students in the school building amid all the complexity this time of life brings.

Homeostasis, Allostasis, and Allostatic Load

Human physiological systems such as heart rate, blood pressure, and core temperature stay within acceptable parameters that the body regulates. Homeostasis is the tendency toward a stable equilibrium maintained through physiological processes (Rodolfo, 2000). When external stimuli or stressors act upon the body, systems within the body react to perceived stressors through receptors and begin a cycle to produce negative feedback to the stimulus to return the body to equilibrium. For example, if you start to feel too hot, you will sweat to reduce your core body temperature, or if you are too cold, you will shiver to increase your core body temperature. Either way, the body responds to the stimuli to return to homeostasis.

Allostasis is how the body responds to stressors to regain homeostasis (Koob 2010). When the body experiences chronic stress, it cannot return to the original state of equilibrium; instead, it will find a "new" hypervigilant point of equilibrium that the body can maintain. The stress the body carries between homeostasis and the new hypervigilant point is called allostatic load (Koob 2012). There are always stressors acting on the body, and there are ways for the body to mitigate those stressors [resilience]. Each person has a maximum allostatic load before reaching an allostatic overload, a "breaking point" in which the stressors acting on the body become too tremendous and systems crash. (Guidi et al., 2020). Diagram 1 shows how stressors acting on the body can accumulate and how allostatic load changes with chronic stress.

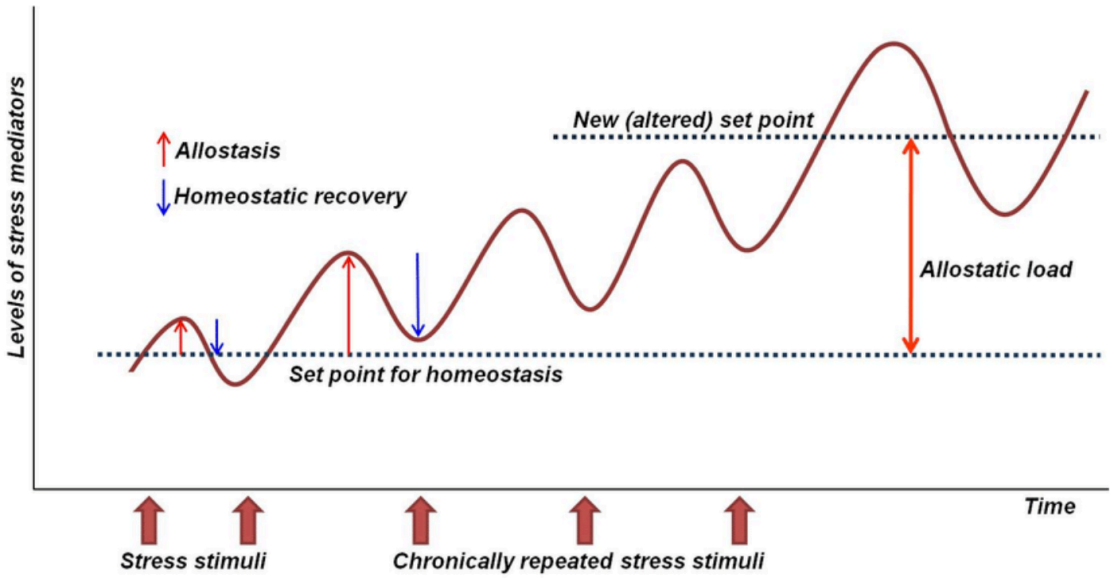


Diagram 1: Homeostasis, allostasis, and allostatic load Lee, Kim, & Choi (2014)

Homeostasis is the baseline that bodily functions perform out without stressors acting upon it. As the body experiences stressors, the body adapts to those stressors and responds to bring the levels back down to baseline levels. If the stressors are chronic or the body can not recover back to homeostasis, the body carries a "load" and a new baseline is created. The load that is carried is the allostatic load and as stressors accumulate, the load on the body continues to increase. Individuals employ resiliency measures to help reduce stress levels and allostatic load. The diagram shows how stress and resilience ebb and flow over time and stress levels try to reduce to the baseline but cannot due to chronic stress.

Problem Statement

TGNCNB youth face many challenges during their adolescent years. They face these challenges daily in their homes, in their communities, and in their schools. The difficulties that TGNCNB students face include but are not limited to bullying (in-person and cyber), discrimination, inequitable access to facilities, and prohibitions on athletic participation. These

adolescents often face these challenges alone, without family or community support, and frequently succumb to the pressure by considering and attempting suicide. According to the 2017 LGBTQIA+ Teen Survey, "these [transgender] teenagers are not only experiencing heartbreaking levels of stress, anxiety, and rejection but also overwhelmingly feel unsafe in their school classrooms" (HRC, 2018). Researchers exploring trends in suicidal ideation and attempts by race and gender from 1991-2017 using data on nearly 200,000 high school students from the nationally representative Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 19% of transgender teens had seriously considered suicide, which is approximately 7.6 times that of their cisgender peers (Jenco, 2019; Pelc, 2022). Furthermore, a significant number of transgender individuals fall victim to violence every year. The Human Rights Campaign reported that "In 2021 and 2022, there were at least 89 TGNCNB people fatally shot or killed by other violent means, the majority of which were Black and Latinx transgender women. Often these stories go unreported" (2022).

Transgender students face different challenges depending on where they are on their journey toward embodying the gender identity they feel in their hearts, minds, and souls. School personnel must know those challenges and what supports TGNCNB students need to foster their social, emotional, and academic growth. Morris, Waldo, and Rothblum (2001) found "an inverse relationship existed between outness and psychological distress, as those more 'out' experienced fewer challenges and symptoms related to overall health and mental health, including decreased levels of suicidal ideation" (As cited in Dentato, M.P. et al. 2014. P. 489). In addition, a student transitioning while in school requires different support than a student that is not yet "out." A student who is "out" and transitioning while in school is highly visible to their peers and faculty, which can lead to being a target. A student who is not yet "out" may not be as noticeable, but

may be struggling more internally. All TGNCNB students at all stages of their journeys can benefit from the support of school community members, but that support may or may not be available. Other supports found to be helpful to TGNCNB youth are friendships and parent support. (Galupo et al. 2014, Johnson, Sikorski, Savage, & Woitaszewski, 2014)

The lack of support in school and the greater community is a significant problem few people understand. Transgender people are usually lumped under the label of LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and others) when discussed in educational settings but have needs that extend beyond that context. Most articles, books, and other publications focus on sexual identity and do a poor job with gender identity, with sometimes only a few pages in the text dedicated to transgender and gender non-conforming students. That is to say that past research has focused on sexual identity rather than gender identity, while LGBTQIA+ as a category includes people who explore their sexual identity, gender identity, or a combination of the two.

Researchers must conduct research with the TGNCNB population to bring to light the issues they face and create safer spaces for them. While an understanding of gender identity and its impact on students who are gender non-conforming has yet to be adequately established (Beemyn. 2013), initial studies indicate that the stakes are very high. Copeland et al. (2013) wrote:

> Although there is not a large amount of research specifically focused on TGNCNB students, available research has demonstrated that identifying as LGBTQIA+ in schools has been linked to several mental health outcomes. These include suicidal ideation and attempts, self-harm behavior, and mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (p. 2).

People within the LGBTQIA+ category face many challenges as a marginalized group, and TGNCNB individuals are an even-less-well understood and non-supported subset. This vulnerable subset's scope and depth of suffering are hard to grasp and painful to contemplate. With a lack of research, we don't know what we don't know. Simply put, we lack an understanding of how to support these individuals best. This research aims to change that.

My research aims to unearth the lived experiences of individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 who have attended or plan to attend college upon graduating high school who are gender non-conforming to help identify the systems and supports schools should implement to help meet the needs of TGNCNB students at various points of transition. With this study, I will answer the following research questions.

Research Questions

There is limited research on transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary (TGNCNB) students in secondary schools. Research on TGNCNB students can help facilitate positive change within the school system and the communities in which they reside. My work intends to answer the following questions:

1. How do TGNCNB individuals describe the culture of their secondary school and its role in their social, emotional, and academic development?
2. According to TGNCNB individuals, in what areas of high school did they feel "safe," and in what areas did they feel "unsafe"? What attributes of those spaces made them feel that way?
3. How did TGNCNB individuals' levels of outness and experiences shape their secondary school experience?

4. According to TGNCNB individuals, what support did they receive or wish they had received from school personnel at various points in their transition? What supports do they believe were needed but were not offered by school personnel?

School personnel should understand the specific needs of TGNCNB students and how their needs differ from other queer youth. “Further, traditional research on gender diverse and sexual minority youth has often treated the experiences of youth who identify as transgender the same as the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth instead of addressing the uniqueness of their needs” (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010. As cited in Goodrich & Barnard, 2018). I hope to add to the limited knowledge about TGNCNB youths through this research.

Background of the Study

My research focuses on the allostatic load of transgender youth. It attempts to identify systems and supports that school districts can implement to reduce these students’ stress levels and increase their resilience. This research will help school districts create a safe learning environment where transgender youth can flourish.

There are many potential solutions that school districts have tried to implement to provide equity for their transgender students (Goodrich & Barnard, 2018). Some districts have tried to shift their school culture to be accepting of all students, create safe spaces, adopt policy changes in efforts to increase equity and diversity and make changes at a granular level, such as adding gender-neutral facilities that all students can use (Goodrich & Barnard, 2018). Schools must create and promote a culture of acceptance regardless of how they integrate solutions to mitigate the stressors on TGNCNB children. Local and federal laws must protect the rights of these individuals, and citizens must vigilantly defend their fellow humans’ rights and create a culture that upholds such laws. Efforts to date have focused on developing a school culture

around the foundational idea that all students have the same rights. However, all students need the same resources, and the needs of TGNCNB students have not been met. (Schiedel, 2016).

Some school districts have attempted to create safe spaces where students can go if they require support (Sadowski, 2016). As in *Figure 1,* stickers that identify safe spaces are placed outside classrooms or offices. These signals usually indicate that the adult staff inside

Figure 4: Safe Space sticker on classroom doors

those rooms are people who LGBTQIA+ students can speak with and trust. Some schools have also created Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs,) which meet after school as a support mechanism for LGBTQIA+ students (Goodrich & Barnard, 2018). These supports are helpful for those students who are "out," though, as mentioned, students who are not "out" may be suffering more acutely. Lastly, many school districts celebrate themed events such as transgender awareness week, Coming Out Day, or a "Day of Silence" to bring awareness to the harassment and discrimination of LGBTQIA+ youth.

Hernandez and Fraynd (2015) reinforced that building administrators are responsible for implementing and maintaining support for TGNCNB youth. They must know and understand their students and be able to "take appropriate action to ensure the protection and care of these individuals" (p. 115). Social justice leaders must explicitly create these environments. Sadowski (2016) suggested that just keeping students safe does not solve the problem and that educators should affirm and celebrate LGBTQIA+ identities.

For LGBTQIA+ students to flourish, however, school cultures must change. Fullan (2011) offered insight into how to bring about the necessary change, stating that “Effective change leaders combine resolute moral purpose with impressive empathy” (p. 29). In practice, school leaders must maintain a strong moral compass and always keep all students' best interests in mind while attending to unique student needs. Many variables affect culture, and school leaders must be cognizant of these variables and consider the intended and unintended consequences of implementing any new system. School leaders must first take inventory of their system's needs before implementing a given strategy and be mindful of how multiple strategies may interact. Gruenert and Whitiker (2017) stated, “If you can discover the right levers and pulleys, you can use one to assist the growth of the other and carefully improve them both so they are synergistic in helping an organization become more successful and collaborative” (p. 5). School leaders must know what to change within their system, have a plan for making changes, and address the intended and unintended consequences of the changes they make.

Gruenart and Whitaker (2017) describe the delicate balance between human relationships and culture and how each impacts the other. Symbiotic relationships exist among school personnel, students, and parents, in which each group’s well-being informs and depends on the others. School staff and parents work together to support students' academic, social, and emotional development and find meaning in these roles. In contrast, students rely on adults for guidance, protection, and meeting their basic needs so they can focus on learning. There are also myriad interpersonal relationships within and among each school community group. Each facet of the community adds to the dynamic of the school’s culture as perceived by each constituent group. Muhammad (2009) added, “The human experience of education plays a major role in how school culture forms and ultimately how well a school operates” (p. 31). The human experience

of education is a powerful tool used to improve school culture, but if not considered, it can foster a negative environment. School leaders create the culture of a school building, and the culture could take on the attributes of those leaders. Students can thrive in school cultures based on kindness, compassion, and empathy, while climates grounded in rigidity, disassociation, and punity are detrimental to student growth. With my research, I hope to find the right levers and pulleys to bring change to current school systems and support structures to reduce the stressors on transgender youth.

In the limited research conducted on TGNCNB youth, specifically in the secondary school setting, a few underlying themes are observed:

- Each transgender experience is unique.
- TGNC educational experiences vary.
- TGNC students face great stress in several areas of their lives.
- Supports need to adapt to individual levels of "outness."
- School leaders must work to educate all stakeholders at the school level.

My research advances the understanding of the stress, allostatic load, and resiliency of TGNCNB youth. I focus on stress and resiliency because I can explicitly remember what I experienced on my journey and how those pressures impacted me. My identity was all that I thought about, and I was terrified. Because the dynamics of my transition point, including my friendships, family relationships, and school community interactions, all impacted my experience at that time, I seek to understand each of these areas and their effects on stress and resilience in school. One aspect that can impact TGNCNB youth while in school is if they are "out" embodying their gender identity or are they struggling with gender identity within.

The act of "coming out" can impact TGNCNB youth differently. The research focused on transgender experiences when coming out to their friends and the reactions of those friends. It found that "Overall findings suggest a broad range of responses from friends. The diversity in participant's experiences confirmed that the experience of transgender identity/status disclosure is unique to each individual and difficult to predict" (Galupo et al. 2014. P. 39). The responses of friends fell into five distinct categories: positive or affirming responses (i.e., supportive), negative responses (i.e., loss of friendship or physical violence), a variation of responses, an impact on the friendship status (loss or gain), and emotional reactions from friends (Galupo et al. 2014).

Friendships are just one of several environmental factors that impact a student's "outness." Research has focused on the relationships that LGBTQIA+ individuals have with other students as well as faculty members. In addition, perceived comfort and seeing others "out" played a significant role in a student coming out.

> Classrooms were identified as hostile when homophobic behaviors, attitudes, and messages came from instructors and students alike, ultimately resulting in a negative impact on the overall learning experience. Conversely, the most supportive LGBTQIA+ student environments included those where LGBTQIA+ issues and perspectives were integral to the curriculum (p. 489).

My personal experience of coming out relates to all these factors. When I started my doctoral program, I was living my life without anyone knowing that I was a transgender person. I am "out" publicly as bisexual, but I hid my gender identity. Through developing friendships with other students and professors, I felt more comfortable telling people my truth and have found love and support from those around me. My most recent educational

experience has been very different from my encounters in academic settings. I had not had this experience in the past. I had many negative experiences in school, so I did not trust my professors and friends. I felt very alone and unsupported, rarely went to office hours for help, and avoided study groups. In addition to the support of friends, support experienced at home from family can significantly impact the mental health of TGNCNB youth.

Research on outness with family from Johnson et al. (2014) indicates that a positive home-school relationship positively impacts TGNCNB students. When a student is "out," there is potential for a standard support structure for these students, whether at home, school-based, or both. Outness or being "out" is exposure to friends, family, a school community, everyone, or any combination of people determined by the TGNCNB individual. It is a highly personal decision to whom to be "out," and only the TGNCNB person can decide which people to tell. Being "out" to one's peers in secondary school can be challenging, comforting, or both. Johnson et al. focused on parents' perceptions of school and home support in the case of students who are "out," specifically their varied experiences with school policies. In some cases where parents perceived problems with inclusion, the issues were attributed to "the lack of specific transgender provisions in the school's anti-bullying policy" (p. 62). When the parents reached out to building administrators, they were met with helpfulness and a positive attitude; however, the initial positive support did not always last:

> Not every participant had lasting success after initial positive meetings with the school administration. Participants who had negative experiences with their respective schools identified administrative resistance and burnout as issues when

dealing with difficulty related to discrimination based on their children's gender expression at school (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 64).

Support from adults at school and home must be available and consistent. Goodrich and Branard (2018) found that school districts can implement large-scale programs to ensure the support of LGBTQIA+/TGNCNB students in schools. An administrative directive regarding non-discrimination based on gender identity and expression was established; however, there is still a long way to go. My research aims to contribute knowledge about the intersection of transitioning and outness in the secondary school setting through the lens of stress and resiliency.

Theoretical Frameworks

Resiliency theory is the primary lens of this research. It is explicitly used as a counterforce to stress and is a critical variable when measuring the allostatic load of TGNCNB students. Resiliency theory developed from research on the impact of trauma and stress on the function and development of individuals and families (Masten, 2001; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; as cited in Masten 2018, p. 13) and has been applied explicitly in school contexts. This research focused on understanding resilience processes, linking the school and community with child function, and how best to leverage those processes to promote healthy individual development (Masten, 2018). Ann Masten stat

> People vary in their capacity. Resilience emerges from multiple processes. It's not one trait; it's not one thing. Many different systems contributed to those that I call "ordinary magic." Many studies point to the same qualities associated with resilience, but one of those, for example, is having close relationships with competent, caring adults. It's

> not in the child. That is in a relationship; unfortunately, not every child has that opportunity (Masten, 2014, para. 15).

Two additional theories that ground my research are liminality theory and transgender theory. Turner's liminality theory, which explores the space between two phases of existence, enables me to analyze the stress of TGNCNB students as they transition from one gender identity to another while, at the same time, peers, family, and school personnel remain static (Dentice & Dietert, 2015). I employ liminality as a conceptual framework to study the disorienting transitions of transgender specifically to "illuminate the tensions and ambiguities that exist and persist in the consideration of transgender and the space between teachers' personal beliefs and their willingness to engage in LGBTQIA+ topics" (Russell & Fish 2016. p. 470).

The third theory I draw upon is transgender theory (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010), an emerging trans-informed theoretical approach to gender that centers the lived experiences of transgender and transsexual individuals and "is distinct in emphasizing the importance of physical embodiment in gender and sexual identity" (p. 435). Transgender theory extends the ideas of queer theory beyond their social constructivist assumptions (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). While feminist and queer theories of gender identity development emphasize the impact of cultural conceptions of gender and external motivation to conform (Johnson et al., 2014), transgender theory focuses on the ability of TGNCNB individuals to embody their gender identity and exist in a space where they can be their true selves.

Embodiment is the physical manifestation of one's internal vision of who they are. Similar to many trans people, I frequently struggled with trying to match my external display of self with my mental self-image. Often, this led to harassment, bullying, mental abuse, and

physical abuse. During the years while I transitioned in my life, I had bouts of depression and suicidal ideation. Students trying to understand their gender identity are going through the same process; they have a vision of who they are and need time to explore and attempt to embody their identity. It is during this liminal phase of transition (trying to manifest their mental self-image) that resiliency is paramount to the mental health of TGNCNB youth.

Resiliency, liminality, and transgender theories join to create a foundation to support a study on key factors of stress and resiliency of TGNCNB students (Figure 2).

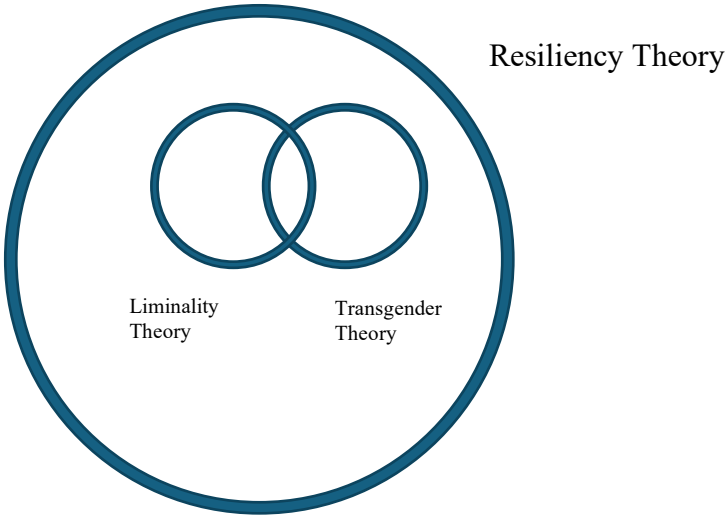


Figure 5: Intersection of Theoretical Frameworks

The intersection of transgender theory and liminality illuminates the time and manner in which TGNCNB individuals transition and embody their gender identity. Gender-fluid individuals may experience long liminal phases, and there can be a single period of liminality or multiple. Resiliency theory encompasses both transgender theory and liminality as stress and resilience permeate liminal phases as well as the embodiment of gender identity. The gaps in past research and limited research on TGNCNB youth generate essential questions to consider. These theories help me construct relevant questions, analyze study data, and form the basis of my work.

Positionality

My research focuses on transgender youth and their experiences in high school. I identify the key factors that transgender youth determine to be critical to their journey while in secondary school. Being transgender makes me a native researcher. I am also an insider education researcher with 26 years of experience in the field and counting.

The need for this research goes beyond the absence of research conducted in the past; it goes beyond individual political or personal feelings people have toward the TGNCNB community, and it goes beyond the social construct of gender. I need to do this research for the TGNCNB students in my school district and all TGNCNB students who face the challenges and successes of being a part of that community.

I must do this work as part of my journey of self-growth and self-discovery. I want to make a positive impact on the TGNCNB community because I see how TGNCNB people are treated in my community, and I have firsthand experience of being transgender while attending secondary school and not having the support necessary to build resiliency to the stress I experienced every day. I struggled with my gender identity through my adolescent years and had to hide my identity until my early twenties; even after transitioning, and to this day, I continue to hide the fact that I am transgender to avoid the stress it causes. I have experienced people who are judgmental, mean, and downright cruel. Marginalized individuals face exposing themselves to abuse in every arena of their lives, and they walk on tiptoes to avoid encountering the landmines that exist all around them. Before I transitioned, avoiding the landmines was the first thing I thought about when I woke up in the morning, the last thing I thought about before falling asleep at night, and something I thought about every minute in between. People whom I thought were my friends weren't. I didn't have support at home because my parents just didn't

understand. There was no one whom I felt comfortable speaking to at school. So, I tucked myself into a shell and closeted my identity.

In my heart, I know that I am doing this work to make a difference for TGNCNB students and myself.

Significance

This research contributes to the scholarly community and society in several ways. By better understanding the lived experiences of TGNCNB students, researchers can design future studies that will support the resiliency of TGNCNB individuals in other arenas outside of secondary schools. Furthermore, researchers may be able to further alleviate stressors on TGNCNB individuals through other means, which may decrease the mortality rate of these individuals.

I hope school districts can utilize the findings from this research to support the TGNCNB students within their communities. Hopefully, strategies derived from the participants' stories can help the schools they attend and the communities in which they reside decrease the stress on these students, build their resiliency, and create a safe, accepting learning environment so they can flourish socially, emotionally, and academically.

Summary

TGNCNB youth face many challenges as they transition through adolescence while attending secondary school. Some have more support than others, increasing the number of resiliency strategies they can employ. These students may be more likely to look to the adults in the school building for support, while others keep their secret bottled up in fear of bullying, harassment, or even possibly assault. This research hopes to generate answers to the questions about how we can best be advocates for TGNCNB students and what systems we can implement to reduce their stress by better understanding their lived experiences.

In the forthcoming chapters, I outline the current research and describe the specific areas where my work stands to contribute to the field. In chapter two, I review the current literature and research conducted to date with the TGNCNB community. In chapter three, I discuss the methods I used for conducting my study. I answer my research questions in chapter four and elaborate on those findings. In the final chapter, I discuss the limitations of the study, my conclusions, and my suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I analyze and synthesize existing research on transgender youth in education. I took a broad approach to my literature search, including terms such as mental health, stress, resiliency, transitioning, and school culture. I have categorized themes from the literature into five key areas: stress and resiliency, school culture, staff development, school and community support, and transitioning. As stress and resiliency are the dominant themes, I will also describe their relationship to the other themes. My review indicates that further research on transgender youth should be conducted, and I will also discuss this finding and its implications for my research.

Introduction

Endocrinologist Henry Benjamin first popularized the term "transexual" in 1966 to refer to individuals whose gender histories cannot be described as simply male or female (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Over time, the term transexual became "transgender" to highlight a connection to gender identity rather than sexual identity. A transgender individual identifies with the gender that differs from the gender that doctors assigned to them at birth. Gender non-conforming and gender non-binary individuals experience gender as a spectrum and express their gender in various forms. "Gender non-binary" is one term people use to describe genders that don't fall into the male or female category. One of the participants in my study offered their story about being gender non-binary. [2]

Transgender students have different levels of stress depending on where they are on their journey. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) identify eight key milestones of transitioning for both male-

[2] Periwinkle, a gender non-binary participant, shares their explanation of gender non-binary in Appendix H

to-female (MTF) and female-to-male (FTM) individuals; where a student is in the transition process can influence the allostatic load they are experiencing at that time. The milestones include feeling gender differences from a young age, seeking to present a gender different from the one assigned to them, representing or hiding their identity, initially misidentifying their gender, learning about and meeting transgender people, changing their outward appearance (embodiment), establishing new relationships, and developing a sense of wholeness in a gender normative society (Beemyn & Rankin 2011, p. 3). While students are reaching these milestones, they face adversity and, with resiliency, can navigate those challenges. The process and journey of recognizing that the societal "label" doesn't fit through embracing and embodying the gender identity represents a liminal phase for a TGNCNB individual.

Theoretical Frameworks

My proposed research is grounded in resilience theory, which I use as a lens to understand the relationship between stress and resilience. Resilience is a counterforce to stress and is critical in understanding the allostatic load of TGNC students. Resilience theory originated after studying, observing, and researching the impact of trauma and stress on the function and development of individuals and families (Masten, 2001; Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; as cited in Masten, 2018). This research focused on understanding the resilience process, linked the school and community with child function, and examined how best to leverage those processes to promote healthy individual development (Masten, 2018). In addition to resiliency theory, my research is grounded in liminality and transgender theories. TGNCNB individuals experience a liminal phase as they transition from a place of embodying the gender placed upon them at birth to a place in which they are living their lives having manifested their true gender identity. Transgender theory seeks to understand this process of embodying mental identity. I will discuss

the stressors of being in a liminal phase, exploring gender identities, and physically "trying them on" through a resiliency lens.

Resilience Theory

People respond to stress differently, with different coping mechanisms, and have varying levels of resilience. Resilience is adapting successfully to significant challenges (Masten, 2018). Resilience study and theory emerged in the 1970s amid concerns about the impact of stress on individuals' mental health (Masten, 2018). Bernard's seminal work (1991) reviews the research that led to the concept of resiliency. Initial research focused on the "negative consequences of adversity" and coined the term "stress resistance," leading to the notion of resilience, which emerges through a combination of internal and external factors. According to Thomsen, "Resiliency theory asserts that there are seeds of resilience within each person; they draw on internal and environmental strengths to overcome challenges" (1996, p.9), developing inherent resiliency, to a greater or lesser extent, as a learned skill. People have resilience tendencies inherited and learned from the people around them and their environment. Resilience is not a fixed attribute. Good teachers can motivate students to foster positive attributes and improve self-esteem; individuals can learn to cope in highly stressful work environments, and people gravitate towards hobbies they enjoy.

There has been much research with resiliency theory as a central framework. Three studies that connect to my research are *Resiliency Theory: A Strengths-Based Approach to Research and Practice for Adolescent Health* by Marc Zimmerman (2013), *Mental Health and Resilience in Transgender Individuals: What Type of Support Makes a Difference* by J. Puckett et al., (2019) and *Coping Strategies and the Development of Psychological Resilience* by Booth, J.W. and Neill, J. T. (2017). The primary goal of these works was to derive proactive measures

to counteract stressors that individuals encounter in their day-to-day lives. Booth and Neill (2017) identified five general strategies to support resiliency (positive reinterpretation, humor, active coping, planning, and seeking help and support) as well as five harmful coping methods (venting emotions, mental and behavioral disengagement, denial, and resignation), and those individuals who indicated no external support reported significantly higher levels of depression. Zimmerman (2013) identified self-esteem and self-efficacy as intrinsic positive factors for adolescents, peer/adult support, mentors, and youth programs as external positive factors. Puckett et al. (2019) found that transgender individuals who had familial and friend support and community connectedness reported the fewest symptoms of anxiety and depression. In addition, "Familial support significantly predicted depression and anxiety and greater resilience above and beyond the variance accounted for by the other forms of support" (Puckett et al. 2019, 961). My study will examine familial and school-system supports and explore their effectiveness as resiliency measures through the lived experiences of study participants in the hope that school systems can implement related policies that better support TGNCNB students as they begin to explore their gender identity and enter a transitional phase.

Theory of Liminality

Arnold van Gennep (1902) defines liminality as the space and phenomenon in human life between separation [from an existing culture] and incorporation [into a new culture]. The Latin' limin' is a boundary, a corridor between two places. Victor Turner extended van Gennep's work to delineate the different stages in life, including ritual passages to adulthood (Turner, 1967), and the concept has since been further expanded to include the possibility of additional dimensions, as "Liminality is not only a form of transitivity but of potential as well" (Spariou 1997, p.133). TGNCNB youth experience a liminality sequence (pre-liminal, liminal, post-liminal) in two

significant, parallel ways: like all young people, they experience pre-childhood, adolescence, and adulthood; as TGNCNB individuals, they also experience pre-transition, transition, and post-transition. These transitions occur in separate timelines but are intertwined, and the various intersections of these timelines can be challenging for young children. While all phases of exploring their gender identity require differing supports, assistance is especially needed during the liminal phase, when stressors can be significantly more significant. Dentice & Dietert (2015) stated that "during the liminal phase, transgender individuals may be relegated to second-class status within social institutions such as schools" (p.71). Experiencing a liminal phase, whether physical, emotional, physiological, or psychological, can be beneficial; stress is experienced before, during, and after the liminal phase. However, stress is reduced as a person embodies their identity. However, if the "liminal space is perceived as dangerous, uncertain, or as a stressor, responses can be anything from anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation" (Wu et al. 2021, p 218, Boland 2022). Boland (2022) identified five coping strategies for dealing with liminal spaces: facing your fear head-on, practicing mindful meditation, being in the moment, not catastrophizing, and getting support. I will use liminality theory while unpacking the lived experiences of TGNCNB youth as they explored their gender identity while in secondary school.

Liminal theory, even as it has evolved, has its limitations. Van Gennup describes the liminal space as the transitional period between two points, a start and an end. However, for individuals exploring their gender identity, there is no concrete beginning or end point. There is a period when an individual recognizes that the societal label of gender placed upon them at birth does not "fit" with their mental image of who they are. After this point, each TGNCNB person's journey is unique. During this time, they are trying to determine who they are and how they will live. The "end" of the transitional phase arrives when they embrace and embody the life they

want, which looks different for different people and will be subject to ongoing societal pressure. In addition to the lack of a distinct start and end, the liminal phase may never end, or there may be several liminal phases. Liminal theory does discuss the stress of being "in" a liminal phase; however, the liminal phase itself may not hew to van Gennup's definition.

My transitional period lasted several years, and I can clearly define the point at which I recognized that I couldn't continue to present myself in society as the gender assigned to me at birth. I must embody my gender identity that I embrace today. I struggled with my gender identity throughout middle school and high school, and it was while I was in college that I began to be depressed and overwhelmed. My life was collapsing around me, and I knew I had to change. I moved far away and began to transition. That journey was challenging and wrought with the stress one holds while trying to physically manifest what one sees in one's heart, mind, and soul. I will incorporate my reflections throughout this dissertation as I reflect upon my own experiences while writing. My experience connects to those of my participants, to the literature, and these theoretical frameworks. I lived a liminal phase while trying to embody my gender identity and carried a tremendous amount of stress. I objectively separate myself from the work even as I remain deeply connected. I re-remember my own experiences as I unearth the participants' lived experiences, and with each remembrance, my understanding deepens. As with my personal, embodied understanding of liminality theory, I have a lived experience of transgender theory and how it intersects with liminality theory to describe the stress of being part of the TGNCNB community.

Transgender Theory

Transgender theory is grounded in the lived experiences of TGNCNB individuals and relates to liminality in a specific way: There is a separation between the social norm of gender

(binary and fixed) and the idea that gender can be fluid and exists on a spectrum, and there exists a transitional (liminal) phase or phases for TGNCNB people during their exploration of the identity territory encompassing both this binary norm and its gender-fluid counterpoint. Roen emphasized that "A theory of transgenderism has to account for gender identities and expressions that range from the heteronormative binary to the rejection of this binary" (as cited in Nagoshi et al., 2022); every TGNCNB person's life experience is unique and personal to the individual having it, and transgender theory allows for the specificity and subjectivity of that experience. Hausman (2001) describes transgender theory as complex and an attempt to understand the individual experience of transgender embodiment. Further, "Transgender theory emphasizes how 'transgressing' narratives of lived experiences integrate and empower those with oppressed intersectional identities" (Nagoshi & Bruzuzy 2010 p. 437), placing various acts and understandings of resistance to gender-binary norms and related socially enforced identities in a context of individual identity development and embodiment. Prior research conducted using grounded theories with transgender individuals has often cited queer theory. It fails to explicitly name "transgender theory," i.e., *A Grounded Theory Study of the Development of Trans Youths' Awareness of Coping with Gender Identity* (Bugde, 2018). My study is unique in its use of transgender theory explicitly (and in combination with other theories) and in its focus on gender identity, independent of sexual identity, to unearth the unique lived experiences of TGNCNB people at the intersection of adolescence and a period of questioning or embodying their gender identity in the educational setting. The intersection of sexual identity and gender identity creates layers of stress, which researchers could explore in the future. Researchers would agree that the basis for transgender theory lies within the lived experiences of TGNCNB individuals and at the

intersections between their gender identity and the other aspects of self (Nagoshi, Elliot, Monro, Roen).

Synthesis of Frameworks

TGNCNB youth experience stress as they explore their gender identity. There is stress from being in a liminal phase and trying to live as a TGNCNB student. There can be added stress for a student transitioning while in school. Through the lived experiences of TGNCNB youth, we can better understand these stressors in the school setting to determine what kind of resiliency measures can be implemented to help these students mitigate stress. The goal is to help educators move students from a place of high stress and low resilience (Figure 3) to a place of low stress (Figure 4) while keeping resiliency high.

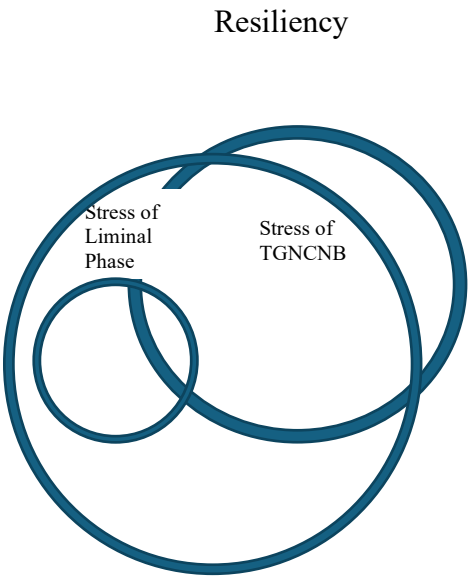


Figure 3: Low Resilience, High Stress

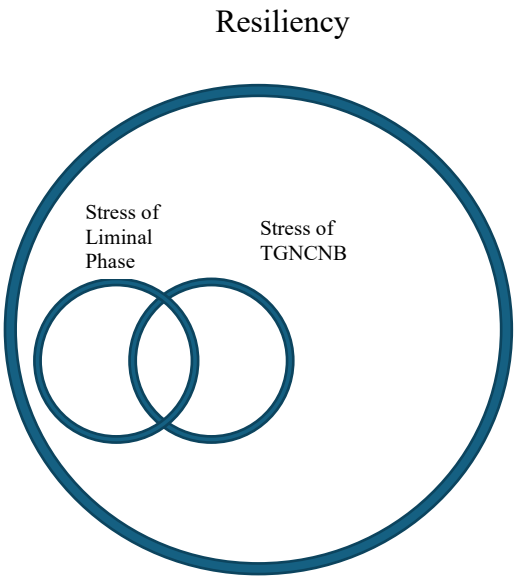


Figure 4: High Resiliency, Low Stress

Themes

I have uncovered several cross-cutting themes of interest throughout the available literature within two broad categories: mental health and school culture. Mental health includes

stress, resiliency, and technology, while aspects of school culture include staff development, ally training, teacher preparation programs, and barriers in schools. I have also noted that the quantity of research is limited, and I have identified several critical gaps.

Transgender youth face stress in many ways, and this can impact their mental health. Their resilience to that stress is a function of many variables—home support, school support, inherent strength, and mental fortitude are just a few. Resilience is fundamental to balancing stress and can differentiate between a student succumbing to and managing stress successfully. The allostatic load of TGNCNB youth can be measured and analyzed to ascertain the support needed to reduce stress, increase resilience, and create a nurturing environment where TGNCNB students can thrive.

Discussions of school culture and staff preparation are prevalent throughout the currently available research, and these two components are vital to systemic change that could create a safe space for TGNCNB students. Related, awareness of the complexity of transitioning from the gender assigned at birth to the gender with which an individual identifies, along with considering an individual's stage on that personal journey, are described in the literature as central components of any effective support. Building staff, i.e., teachers, administrators, and other non-instructional staff, must be aware of individuals in their care who are not yet "out" and are at various points of their transition. Student needs vary, and a one-size-fits-all model does not consider all the possible situations that TGNCNB students may face.

Mental Health

Transgender youth are harassed, bullied, and experience violence at significantly higher rates than their peers in school as well as in their community (Beemyn, 2013; Copeland et al., 2013). Transgender individuals have an increased risk for mental health concerns, such as

depression and substance abuse (Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015; Rivers, 2013; Mason, 2017). Plöderl & Tremblay (2015), Moskowitz (2010), and Jenco (2019) found that 41% of people who are transgender have attempted suicide, and 19% of transgender youth have seriously considered suicide. This rate is significantly higher than the corresponding rate among cisgender peers. Additionally, Bialer and McIntosh (2015) found a direct correlation between discrimination experienced by LGBTQIA+ populations and mental health issues. Transgender youth in our schools should know one adult in the building to whom they can go for support. That person should be appropriately trained in working with this population; Rivers describes it as "crucial to provide training to counseling students to develop counseling competency in working with individuals who are LGBTQIA+" (2013, p. 18). Properly trained adults can have a positive influence on the mental health of TGNCNB students. Stress and inherent resiliency play an integral part in positive mental health. Subramani and Kadhiravan (2017) found a significant correlation between high school students' academic stress and mental health. Furthermore, there was a negative correlation between mental health and a lack of support from family members or school personnel.

Allostatic Load and its Impact on Mental Health

Researchers conducted studies on the effects of allostatic load and its impact on mental health. In addition, allostatic overload, when the cost of chronic exposure to systemic physiological responses exceeds the coping resources (Fava et al., 2019), has been characterized and documented. A higher allostatic load is associated with worse health outcomes (Guidi et al., 2020). It is the long-term result of failed allostasis that results in pathology and chronic stress (Logan & Barksdale, 2008). Logan and Barksdale found: "Strategies to manage stress and increase resilience along with clinical interventions to manage the physiological responses to

chronic stress are necessary to assist in preventing and controlling the detrimental effects of chronic disease on human life (2008, p. 206). The impact of allostatic load has also been studied with pediatric and adolescent children. The findings of Lucente and Guid1 (2023) are consistent with those of Logan and Barksdale in that studies have found an association between allostatic load and demographic characteristics such as perceived discrimination, adverse childhood experiences, and environmental factors as well as the consequences of allostatic load on physical and mental health.

Stress & Resiliency

Limited research has been conducted on TGNCNB youth, specifically in the secondary school setting. My research looks to advance the understanding of the stress, allostatic load, and resilience of TGNCNB youth. Friendships, family support, and outness affect the stress and resiliency of these students (Galupo et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2014; Dentato et al., 2014).

Support from friends and family has been found to increase resiliency in TGNCNB students. The buffer that family and friendships provide counterbalances the stressors that TGNCNB students experience. Galupo et al. (2014) focused on transgender experiences when coming out to their friends and the reactions of those friends, and the results indicated a broad range of responses from friends. “The diversity in participants’ experiences confirmed that the experience of transgender identity/status disclosure is unique to each individual and difficult to predict” (Galupo et al. 2014, p. 39). When transgender individuals come out to their friends, their friends can respond in several different ways. When I shared my gender identity with friends, they reacted in positive and negative ways. I have been assaulted, and I have lost many friends. Galupo et al. (2014) found similar results. Positive friendships were most impactful in the school setting and less impactful in the community, where family support was found to have the most

significant effect on the resiliency of TGNCNB youth. The stressors in the community were identified as harassment, bullying, being misidentified, and lack of acceptance. From personal experience, reactions from family can affect transgender youth. My parents did not understand what I was going through, and they did not do a good job supporting my emotional needs when I was younger.

Johnson et al. (2014) interviewed parents of students in high school who identify as transgender. Their study focused on the parents' perceptions of school and home support. The participants of this study reported to have varied experiences. In some cases, the issues of inclusion pertained to the lack of specific transgender provisions in the school's anti-bullying policy. When the parents reached out to building administrators, they were found to be helpful and had a positive attitude. However, the initial positive support did not always last. Support from adults at school and home must be available and consistent. Transgender youth are more likely than cisgender youth to report health risks related to violence and victimization, such as substance use, mental health, and sexual health. Parental support may help foster resilience and better health outcomes among this population (Andrzejewski, 2021, p. 7). This research did not aim to uncover the possible detrimental effects that the lack of parental support can have on transgender students, another future research direction that should be explored.

Students have different levels of "outness." Outness refers to the circle of people with whom the student has shared their story. The level of "outness" directly correlates to the resiliency of LGBTQIA+ students. Dentato et al. (2014) surveyed students in social work programs across North America to identify environmental factors that impact the students' level of outness. The researchers focused on the relationships that LGBTQIA+ individuals have with other students as well as faculty members. Perceived comfort and seeing others "out" played a

significant role in a student coming out. Findings from this study demonstrate the correlation between a student's level of outness and environmental factors (Dentato, 2014). Students are more comfortable and find it easier to express their true gender when others around them are visibly out. There is a sense of safety in numbers.

School staff needs to keep the level of outness of a student in mind. These students experience stress while protecting their identity by limiting the circle of individuals from whom they find support. While "Administrators and educators must remain attuned to the needs of all diverse student populations, whether by advocating for inclusive policies, monitoring the integration of LGBTQIA+ issues throughout the curriculum, or ensuring a globally welcoming and affirming atmosphere" (Dentato et al., 2014 p. 487), school leaders must also be familiar with the particular population of students under their care to know best how to meet their needs. Dentato et al. (2014) found that faculty offer different levels of support to students with varying levels of outness, with students with higher levels of outness tending to experience more significant support and, therefore, having increased resiliency. The study failed to identify specific supports a student might need as a function of outness. There remains room for continued investigation of the need for such support, specifically regarding transgender and gender non-conforming students (Dentato et al., 2014)

A case study of the Albuquerque Public School District (APS) in New Mexico conducted by Goodrich and Branard (2018) sought to document the planning and implementation of the district's initiative to support LGBTQIA+ and TGNCNB students. They studied the school district over two decades. Findings from this case study support the view that school districts can implement large-scale programs to ensure the support of LGBTQIA+/TGNCNB students in schools (Goodrich & Barnard, 2018). As a result of the planning, an administrative directive

regarding non-discrimination based on gender identity and expression was established. Unfortunately, Goodrich and Barnard admitted, “Despite the progress described in this paper, APS still has a long way to go in ensuring respect and equity for LGBTQIA+ students and staff” (2018, p. 11). Support can be implemented to build the resilience of TGNCNB youth; however, it must be robust, appropriate, and ongoing. Another common theme in the literature is the need to build staff capacity.

Technology

Technology has evolved and has had an increasing influence on adolescent development over the past few decades. In 2000, less than seven percent of the world’s population was on the Internet; today, it’s more than 50% (Hillyer, 2019), with a significant surge in social media use and increased device portability. The number of people using the Internet is even higher in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, 69% of adults and 82% of teens in the U.S. use social media, and 97% of those teens use social media daily (2022).

The advent of technology has had positive and negative impacts on TGNCNB youth. Many recent studies have found a significant negative effect of social media use on mental health, including an increased risk for depression, loneliness, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. (Nesi, 2020; Robinson & Smith, 2024). Even more alarming is the increase in cyber-victimization of marginalized groups, which has been consistently found to be linked to self-harm or suicidal ideations (Nesi 2020). Furthermore, an important consideration is the issue of displacement, which refers to social media or internet use “displacing” time that people could use to do something healthier and more productive. Nesi found that displacement and negative sleep hygiene are detrimental to youth mental health (2020).

In contrast, there are several positive associations between mental health and technology and social media. Technology offers opportunities for youth to access social support from communities with common identities. As Nest et al. note, "Youth identifying as LGBTQIA+ be more likely than non-LGBTQIA+ youth to have online friends and to identify these friends as an important source of emotional support" (2019, p. 637). There may not be anyone else in their school who identifies as gender non-conforming, but students can find others like them by widening their circle via the Internet. Technology gives LGBTIA+ youth opportunities to network with others with similar experiences. Technology allows LGBTQIA+ "to connect beyond geographic and physical boundaries and reduce the feeling of isolation (Last, 2019, para 5). Technology also generally leads to progress and can affect change, with caveats. Through social media, the voices of those who have been marginalized can be heard, but this is a double-edged sword. Everyone has a platform to speak their mind freely and openly, including those with transphobic views, which can lead LGBTQIA+ people to have a sense of fear (Last, 2019). Lastly, the Internet provides access to support and information resources through more official structures, including organizations like GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) and Pride for Youth (PFY), allies of the LGBTQIA+ community.

School Culture and Climate

The culture of a school is created and maintained by all school personnel. Short & Greer define school culture as traditions, beliefs, policies, and norms (1997). Ward (2004) adds that school culture is shaped by the community in which it resides, and school leaders should eradicate disparities for students and put students' best interests at the forefront of the decision-making process. Studies focused on the climate of a school as it connects with TGNCNB youth have found significant harassment, verbal and physical (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). McGuire

et al. found in a review of two studies that "school environments are unsafe for transgender youth, school efforts to promote safety can help, the value of trusting adult relationships was supported" (2010, p. 1187). Several factors can impact school culture: staff capacity, creating allies, preparing teachers, and understanding barriers within a school to create a positive school culture.

One way to change the culture of a culture is to build the capacity of the staff. Staff capacity can be developed in many ways, whether embedded into teacher preparation programs or delivered through professional development opportunities at the district level. Goodrich et al. (2013) found that it is of the utmost importance that teachers are trained to work with the LGBTQIA+ population. Existing research focuses on LGBTQIA+ individuals; however, more research needs to be conducted on transgender youth. There is a significant gap in the research on educating school personnel about the needs of TGNCNB youth (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010). Swanson and Gettinger (2016) found that direct intervention for TGNCNB students is not a focus of the teacher-training curriculum. More work needs to be done to train teachers.

Furthermore, Mason stated, "Assessing and addressing the knowledge of school educators is a systemic, large-scale approach to supporting the transgender community. (2017, p. 305). There are many delivery methods for teacher training; it can be delivered as in teacher preparation courses as professional development during superintendent conference days, or as out-of-district training opportunities to inform educators and increase their ability to support the students in their schools (Darch et al., 2014). The training I have experienced as an educator has been poor and has not been attended by all staff members. It was not mandatory training, and teachers had the choice to attend; they chose not to. School counselors can and should play a role in determining student and staff needs and designing staff training to suit them. ASCA found that

"school counselors are directed to provide information to support the school community and to receive feedback on the emerging needs of students" (2012, p. 43). The curriculum found in teacher training programs needs to address the mental health concerns of transgender youth in schools. Discussions of teacher preparation curricula, ally training, and barriers to participating in professional development are prevalent throughout the literature.

Teacher Preparation Curricula

There is limited time for students in teacher preparation programs to engage in training specific to LGBTQIA+ youth, let alone to the transgender students they may encounter. There is limited information in the literature about this kind of teacher training specifically, and in general, human-services training on how to support TGNCNB students seems to be the exception rather than the rule. For example, "Most undergraduate social work programs cannot devote an entire course to working with the transgender population" (Levy 2013, p. 308), though this may be changing. Regardless, curriculum content on transgender populations is limited, information about the transgender population continues to be neglected, and an emphasis on sexual orientation seems to be more common (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011; McPhail, 2008; Levy, 2013; Duffy, 2012). Schools are not embedding curricula content within their scope and sequences, and in some cases, the curriculum is censored, and topics surrounding transgender individuals are removed from the curriculum. Conversations surrounding sexual identity are more common than those surrounding gender identity. On February 22, 2024, Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman signed an executive order banning transgender athletes from competing in girls' and women's sports at county facilities (Gusoff & Bordonaro, 2024). There are no bans on athletes based on sexual identity.

Research on existing training offers some suggestions on which leaders and curriculum designers could build. Levy (2013) explored the coursework in two classes offered in a social work training program. The class motivated students to advocate for policy change that eliminated discrimination toward TGNCNB youth. Learning experiences for future teachers are necessary for any training program, and it is imperative to have foundational knowledge about the TGNCNB population tied explicitly to support. Kittner-Duffy et al. (2013) suggested that curriculum objectives should meet two priorities; "encourage both preservice and in-service early childhood educators to reflect upon their beliefs and practices regarding LGBTQIA+ families" and "provide information and resources to students so they may be able to recognize and address the needs of LGBTQIA+ families in early education settings" (p. 209). One key finding from the Kittner-Duffy et al. study was the importance of teacher training programs to incorporate ways to integrate LGBTQIA+ issues, specifically those of transgender students, into the taught curriculum and find ways for future teachers to understand the barriers that prohibit teachers from supporting LGBTQIA+ students and families.

Ally Training

Outside of their initial and ongoing training as educators, teachers can attend ally training to improve their understanding of transgender youth and how they can be a supportive influence. The training, which is not unique to teacher preparation, provides information on critical vocabulary, inequities, and misconceptions experienced by TGNCNB youth (GVSU, LGBTQIA+ Resource Center, 2014). Ally training stemmed from the need to support LGBTQIA+ individuals in various contexts, school, workplace, and community. Unfortunately, O'Hara et al., 2013 found that teachers who went through a teacher training program did not

demonstrate improved competency to work with transgender youth. All stakeholders must be allies of TGNCNB students.

Ally training can be pivotal in supporting TGNCNB students in secondary schools. Rivers (2013) found that participants of ally training left with a better knowledge base, more vital empathy for TGNCNB youth, and a desire to seek additional training. One participant in the study stated, "I think it's important for us to be allies with the community" (2013, p. 27). Kittner-Duffy (2012) concurred that [families and teachers] "were called on to be allies with LGBTQIA+ individuals who are often invisible and treated unjustly in many areas of life" (p. 209). I had very few allies while I was transitioning, and the lack of support made life very challenging. Allies are essential and can be developed to a greater or lesser extent depending on the culture within a community about allyship and its role. My research aims to provide answers that can help leaders be better allies and build a network of like-minded individuals to support the needs of transgender youth in their schools.

Barriers to Participating in Professional Development

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethics mandates that "we shall not harm children" (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3). Yet, several significant barriers limit the ability and willingness of school staff to engage in professional development opportunities that would be considered training to protect children. Pre-existing notions, biases, homophobia or transphobia, lack of awareness, and religious beliefs stand in the way of school staff being able to be accepting and supportive of transgender students.

Transphobia, as defined by Hill and Willoughby (2005), is "an emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society's gender expectations" (p. 533). Homophobia and transphobia are contributing factors to mental health concerns, as well as an increase in violence

to TGNCNB youth (Bialer & McIntosh, 2015). If teachers are transphobic, they could find it challenging to provide a nurturing learning environment for transgender students. Maney and Cain (1997) noted that "homophobia is reflected in the classroom in a variety of ways, including lack of sensitivity to alternative family structures or rigid assumptions about the role of gender in students' lives" (p. 237).

Teachers and other building personnel have limited knowledge regarding transgender students. Rivers (2017) found that "similar to other studies, the majority of teachers did not have much knowledge of LGBTQIA+ issues and had not been exposed to professional experiences or materials on homosexuality" (p 27). Several students reported that they knew little about TGNCNB youth and that further training is necessary for teachers to provide support and to "help educators move beyond their own biases" (Rivers 2017).

Religious beliefs also limit the ability of school staff to engage in learning how to support their transgender students. Some of Kittner-Duffy's (2013) participants stated, "I do have pre-existing beliefs that will not be compromised" and "the challenge for me has to do with my religion. It will be a little hard to accept LGBTQIA+ families mainly because of my religion", and "Because of my religious beliefs I will not say being LGBTQIA+ is okay, but when the issue arises, I will say it's not okay for LGBTQIA+ people to be discriminated against" (p.26). This idea strengthens the findings of Maney and Cain (1997), who concluded that students who held strong religious beliefs were more likely to view LGBTQIA+ individuals negatively. I experienced this firsthand when I was asked to leave a church service I was attending. There are religious beliefs that people have that prevent them from fully supporting the transgender population. Twenty-five percent of Robinson's (2002) participants stated that "religious perspectives (either their views or those of parents in the classroom) would hinder them from

incorporating LGBTQIA+ issues in the classroom" (p. 432). This is inherently an issue as not all students are "out," and teachers may not be aware that they have students in front of them who are struggling with their gender identity. In grappling with the complexities of gender identity, teachers in the training program asked a crucial question; "Am I okay with that?" (Kittner-Duffy 2012, p. 217). Training teachers to empower and uplift the students in front of them, regardless of their personal religious beliefs, is paramount to responsible teacher development when it comes to transgender youth.

Current Research

Transgender and gender non-conforming youth face unique challenges that can impact their mental health and well-being. These challenges are often rooted in minority stress, which refers to the increased levels of stress and discrimination that individuals from marginalized groups experience due to their minority status. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments for TGNCNB youth to mitigate the negative impact of minority stress on their mental health. (Sahin & Buyukgok, 2021) This section of the literature review synthesizes the key findings from recent studies on the mental health needs of TGNCNB youth and strategies to support them.

The impact and handling of stressful events depend on how individuals perceive them. TGNCNB youth are at a heightened risk of developing mental health problems compared to cisgender youth due to minority stress. (Johns et al, 2021; Tyni et al., 2024) This stress is often related to identity-based marginalization and discrimination, which can lead to acute and chronic traumatic stressors. It is essential to understand that TGNCNB youth's mental health outcomes are influenced by their perceptions of stressful events, highlighting the need for interventions that address their unique experiences and perspectives.

TGNCNB youth consider others' use of their chosen names and pronouns as vital signs of respect and acceptance. (Tyni et al., 2024) These actions reflect the need for belonging, recognition, representation, visibility, and safe spaces. Nonbinary youth, in particular, face challenges related to inadequate acknowledgment through gendered language, facilities, and gender-affirming care structures. (Tyni et al., 2024) Creating inclusive environments that respect and affirm TGNCNB youth's identities is essential for promoting their mental health and well-being. (Johns et al., 2021; Ramos and Marr, 2023)

Schools play a role in supporting the mental health of TGNCNB youth. School leaders should foster a school climate and culture that is a productive student environment. Discrimination against TGNCNB kids can be addressed by reviewing standard policies and practices to assess the degree to which TGNCNB youth's needs are considered. This includes ensuring that anti-harassment/bullying policies explicitly include protections for them and that there are formal procedures in place to accommodate the needs of their TGNCNB students. Johns et al. (2021) stated,

> By committing to creating more inclusive and welcoming school environments, schools may help ensure that transgender youth feel safe, attend class more often, and feel connected to their peers and teachers. Schools should ensure that there are formal procedures in place to get transgender youth's chosen name and pronouns on all relevant documentation.

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of internalized transphobia and protective factors in the mental health outcomes of TGNCNB individuals exposed to minority stress. Psychological resilience plays a significant role in mitigating the negative impact of minority stress, with depression, anxiety, and stress scores decreasing with increasing resilience. (Sahin & Buyukgok,

2021) Building resilience and addressing internalized transphobia are essential components of interventions aimed at supporting the mental health of TGNCNB students.

In addition to experiences of bullying and harassment by peers, LGBTQ students experience many other forms of school-based discrimination, including exclusion from school spaces and activities, hearing homophobic and transphobic comments from teachers or staff (Ramos and Marr, 2023), Harassment and microaggressions from staff might be mitigated by implementing professional development requirements around building an understanding of transgender issues. Incorporating concepts of gender identity and gender expression into school curricula (Johns et al., 2021)

In conclusion, TGD youth face unique challenges related to minority stress that can impact their mental health and well-being. Creating inclusive and supportive environments that respect and affirm their identities is crucial for promoting their mental health. Schools play a key role in supporting TGD youth, and interventions should focus on addressing structural discrimination, building resilience, and promoting acceptance and respect (Johns et al., 2021; Ramos and Marr, 2023; Tyni et al., 2024).

Summary

In this chapter, I identified key themes in the research about the stress and resiliency of TGNCNB youth. As indicated in the literature, there is a dire need for further research on this population in the context of secondary school and inquiry into the kinds of support that TGNCNB students require to flourish academically, socially, and emotionally in this setting. Mental health and school climate are just two areas where this population can be studied through a stress and resiliency lens. Curriculum in teacher preparation programs should be adapted and implemented at the school district level, and school leaders need to ensure that all staff are

present during the training and are educated on the needs of TGNCNB students while in their care. My research aims to fill some of the gaps in the current literature and build a foundation for these efforts. In the next chapter, I will describe the methods I will utilize to conduct my study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND DESIGN

In this chapter, I describe a phenomenological, heuristic qualitative research design that is well-suited to understanding the lived experiences of TGNCNB individuals while they were in high school through interviews and focus groups. Participants were over 18 years old and either in high school or recent graduates. This study allowed them to reflect on their experiences in high school and have a discourse on gender identity as it relates to the stress they experienced during that time.

Introduction

As evidenced in the previous chapter, there is limited research on the transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary community in general, and especially on their experiences in secondary school. Ongoing research within this community has focused on mental health, as data shows that these individuals are at increased risk for engaging in harmful behaviors such as drinking, doing drugs, or cutting, as well as suicidal ideation (HRC 2022); however, it has not provided strategies to help build resiliency in TGNCNB students to avert these harms potentially. My research will attempt to fill these gaps in the literature by unearthing, through the lived experiences of TGNCNB secondary students, the systems and supports that have successfully mitigated stress and increased these students' resiliency, with specific attention to various points of their transitions and varying levels of "outness."

Qualitative heuristics can be used in human and social sciences research where qualitative data is studied to find structures or patterns (Kleining, 1982). Using a semi-structured interview and focus groups yielded data to answer my research questions. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for central themes. In this chapter, I will elaborate on my methods and how to answer my research questions.

A phenomenological research design enabled me to capture the lived experiences of TGNCNB youth while they were in high school. A phenomenological design permits the researcher to combine their own experiences with those of their participants (Marshall et al., 2022). My positionality as an educator and identifying as transgender benefitted the research by creating a safe environment for TGNCNB to share their experiences. I found participants for my study from among the population that identifies as transgender, gender non-conforming, or gender non-binary and is between the ages of eighteen and thirty through a "snowball" process. A snowball approach relies on connecting with additional participants through the network of current participants. After collecting the data from the entire group, I could draw comparisons among participants.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded using Zoom, and the data was transcribed using Rev. No identifiable data was recorded, and participants chose their pseudonyms to help protect their identity. The data was coded using a theming system and then analyzed for commonalities and variances. Dedoose was used to organize the data. Themes gathered from the literature review, including school support, technology, transitioning, outness, parent support, friend support, stress levels, resiliency techniques, hindsight, and coping mechanisms, all informed the analysis. The themes that emerged from the data were used to answer my research questions.

Research Questions

1. How do TGNCNB individuals describe the culture of their secondary school and its role in their social, emotional, and academic development?

2. According to TGNCNB individuals, in what areas of high school did they feel "safe," and in what areas did they feel "unsafe"? What attributes of those spaces made them feel that way?
3. How did TGNCNB individuals' levels of outness and experiences shape their secondary school experience?
4. According to TGNCNB individuals, what support did they receive or wish they had received from school personnel at various points in their transition? What supports do they believe were needed but were not offered by school personnel?

Worldview and Positionality

My research focused on transgender youth and their experiences in high school. I identified the key factors transgender youth describe as critical to their success while in school. Being transgender makes me a native researcher. I am also a native researcher. I have been an educator for 27 years, during which I have worked as a classroom teacher and a school administrator. My experiences being transgender and being an educator both make me an insider with the population I will be studying.

There are several pros and cons to being a native researcher. I believe being transgender helped me develop rapport with study participants and helped them feel comfortable telling me their stories at a deeper level and with more detail. I could relate to their experiences, and I could connect by sharing similar events from my own life. I have first-hand experience with bullying and harassment, as well as successfully transitioning and living the life I had always imagined for myself; in that way, I represent a stage of the journey that some of my participants have not yet reached. Being transgender, having transitioned, and having lived as long as I have after transitioning provided a sounding board for the participants to ask questions. I believe it

provided me with unique data. Going forward, I hope that my experience as an educator and administrator will enable me to use this unique data to change school systems positively. As an educational leader, I understand systems within school structures and how to facilitate change despite obstacles. I have experienced the politics of change and how difficult it is to create change within educational settings. I also understand the urgency of this work. I plan to use this data to speak directly to other academic leaders who hold the power to make change. I will call on them to do better for the TGNCNB students under their care and give them evidence drawn directly from the lived experiences of TGNCNB students to support the notion of what better leadership looks like. I hope these efforts will guide their paths and strengthen their resolve to do this hard work.

One of the negatives of being a native researcher is that it introduced bias to my study. It is possible that I led participants to the answers I was looking for during the interview process rather than giving them ample space to say something different. It was challenging to separate emotionally from the subjects and remain objective. I had various experiences while growing up: being bullied by other students, losing friends, contemplating suicide, turning inward, turning outward, blossoming, and embodying the strong woman I always knew I was. Being empathetic while listening to their stories was difficult as it caused me to remember and relive my own experiences; however, I did try to remain objective as I met with each participant. It is their voices that matter most. Through this work, I hope to amplify my participants' voices through publication and through previously mentioned efforts to connect directly with school leaders and make a difference for the TGNCNB population.

I am transgender, but I do not live as an “out” transgender individual. I live my life as a female. Until this work began in earnest, very few people knew my past: only my family, my

wife, my one best friend, my doctoral classmates, and a few others. My past has sculpted my life, and I have learned that people are judgmental. I have lost jobs, been thrown out of churches, had a gun pointed at my head, and been left alone in unfamiliar neighborhoods. To this day, I live in fear of what others see when they look at me. I fear they can see how I was born and not who I am. I have had to face that fear to conduct this study and publish these results. Beginning with my study participants, this work has been a process of deliberately "outing" myself to make a difference for the TGNCNB community, specifically for students. Through this work, I am sharing my own story, along with those of my participants, with those who will listen and can make positive changes. I wanted my participants to see me as a caring, empathetic cheerleader fighting to impact educational systems in ways that can support their true selves. I wanted them to see me as transgender and to be able to relate to me so that through our research dialogue, we might get to the crux of possible solutions. Mainly, I wanted to learn from them. Resources available now differ from 25 years ago when I transitioned; technology has been a significant factor, and there is significantly more information and support available for today's youth. Therefore, I want to hear about the similarities and differences between these students' experiences and mine. One thing that has not changed, however, and never will: Transgender people want to be seen for who they are and all the good they bring to the world, not as the gender written on a birth certificate.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Techniques

My study focused on the lived experiences of TGNCNB students while in secondary school. According to a survey conducted by the Williams Institute, "approximately .7% of American 13-17 year-olds identify as transgender; 150,000 individuals" (Blad, 2017, para 4). To collect stories from this group of people, I found ten participants from this population who

identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, or gender non-binary, between the ages of 18 and 30. Eight of the participants identify as trans-men, one identifies as trans-woman, and one identifies as gender non-binary. Seven participants transitioned while they were in secondary school, while four transitioned after graduation. The participants lived in various parts of the country and were not central to one location. Finally, six participants were between 18 and 24 years of age, while five were between 25 and 30 years old. I limited the participant pool to people over 18 years old as they could self-consent to the process. Had I included individuals under 18, I would have had to get parental consent, which is another layer of effort and implies that only TGNCNB students with supportive parents would have been included in the study, potentially leading to biased findings. I initially set the maximum participant age at 24 but could not locate an adequate number of participants under that age cap. As a result, after six months of data collection, I increased the age cap to thirty. Raising the maximum age allowed me to find additional participants. I had initially wanted participants not more than six years from their secondary school experience, as that experience would be fresher in their minds than those of older individuals. Further, a tighter age range would have ensured that the study sample had a more similar experience with technology, which changes rapidly. However, finding participants within the 18-24 age band proved challenging and required me to expand the age range to capture additional data.

I took multiple pathways to find people who met the required criteria: I sent a flyer to the Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) of local colleges and universities and local support groups such as GLSEN and Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI). I networked with professional organizations and academic scholars in the field. Appendix G lists all parties contacted to find participants. The recruitment flyer (Appendix A) describes the study and the research questions. Interested

individuals then contacted me to learn more and continue the process. Interested individuals needed to know the details about anonymity and how important it is to me to keep their information secure. From my own experience, knowing that this population may be at greater risk if their identity is public added to my incentive to take heightened measures to keep data secure.

I also used opportunistic sampling to survey my network to find participants. I provided the recruitment flyer to contacts who knew or potentially knew individuals who met the criteria of my study, and, in turn, those potential participants were able to reach out to me. Once participants signed on, I used snowball sampling among their contacts to find additional participants. This amendment resulted in locating an additional five participants.

Being transgender has not been an easy road, and I have had many negative experiences in my day-to-day life. I live my life as the woman I have always known I was; however, along the journey, I have been "outed" against my wishes and, as a result, have been harassed, bullied, and assaulted. Because I know and value the importance of anonymity, I took extra precautions to protect the identities of my participants. My participants had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym, "often used to de-identify participants and other people, places, or organizations mentioned in interviews and other contextual data collected for research purposes" (Heaton 2021, p. 1), for their contributions to my study.

Furthermore, participants were required to sign a consent form and be able to remove themselves from the study and strike any or all of their data at any time during the process. No one redacted their data. All identifying data, names, email addresses, and phone numbers were encrypted and secured in a lockbox in my home. Finally, all interviews were transcribed by a third-party company (Rev) that incorporates a non-disclosure agreement with all their contracts.

Finally, all participants received a list of mental health services (Appendix C) during their first interview. In addition, I shared it with participants at the beginning of all focus group sessions. Participants were recollecting periods and moments in their lives that were potentially traumatic, and I knew from personal experience how difficult those events might be for them to relive. What was it like for them when they came out? What did they experience in "trying on" a different identity? These are the moments and phases we revisited together.

Research Design & Methods

By utilizing a phenomenological qualitative research design, I was able to capture the lived experiences of TGNCNB youth while they were in high school. A phenomenological design permits the researcher to combine their own experiences with those of their participants (Marshall et al., 2022). This was critical for my research as I used my positionality to create a safe environment for TGNCNB students to share their experiences. To best capture their stories, participants had the option of a single interview or a single interview with a focus group.

The first interview with each participant was semi-structured and lasted approximately 90 minutes. I interviewed each candidate using an interview protocol (Appendix D - Initial Interview Protocol). These in-depth, phenomenological interviews allowed participants to share their experiences relating to their secondary school experience. There is an assumption that there are shared experiences between participants that can be narrated (Marshall et al., 2022). The advantage of this type of interview was that it focused on their experiences, which I can reflect upon in my journal. This phase of my process was designed to build a trustworthy, respectful relationship with my participants so they would want to continue the work.

The questions asked during the first interview prompted participants to recall their experiences in secondary school, specifically to answer the research questions. The interview

protocol separated the questions into groups centered around themes identified in the literature review, such as stress and resiliency, outness, school culture, safe spaces, embodiment, and transitioning. At the culmination of the interview, participants were asked if they wished to continue in the process and be a part of the focus group. Five participants opted into the focus group, of which three participated due to prior commitments. Data from the individual interviews was then analyzed and used to inform the direction of the focus group.

Participants who continued the process participated in a focus group that lasted approximately 60 minutes. The focus-group protocol (Appendix E - Focus Group Protocol) was semi-structured, with questions focused on similarities and differences among participants' experiences as communicated during the interview. In addition to gathering more data, another purpose of the focus group was to generate interplay among the participants to elicit more profound responses to interview questions. My role was facilitator: In a focus group, researchers take on the role of a 'facilitator' or 'moderator.' They facilitate or moderate discussions among participants rather than engaging in direct discussions with them (Nyumba et al., 2018, para 7). Participants were asked to take notes and write thoughts and questions during the focus group. At the end of the focus group, participants could engage in a conversation about their reflections on the focus group experience, and we could ask questions. According to Seidman (2019), the first interview allows participants to share their past experiences at the time of concern for this study, while the focus group seeks to go into greater detail on specific experiences from their past. I found that the two-part process could generate data to a greater depth than the individual interviews because the focus group narrowed the broad range of topics.

Data Collection

After participants had been identified and had signed the consent form (Appendix B - Consent Form), which clearly outlined how the data would be handled, they participated in their first interview. It is crucial to have a systematic procedure to collect, store, and analyze the data (Marshall et al., 2022). I gave participants the option of audio only or audio and video through Zoom or an audio-only phone conversation; all interviews and focus groups were conducted on Zoom. All participants chose the audio/video Zoom option; however, the video capture failed for one of the interviews, and only the audio was recorded. The Zoom platform allowed me to record video and audio together. It generated an audio file used for transcription through Rev. No identifiable data were recorded or shared with Rev, and all digital transcriptions were stored on an external hard drive and placed in a fireproof locked box in my home office.

Throughout the process, I took researcher notes in two categories: observation notes and a reflection journal. Observation notes taken during the interviews focused on non-verbal cues from the participants. These cues included, but were not limited to, body language, evidence of participant emotions, and extended periods of silence. I time-stamped these notes so I could align them with the transcription data. In addition to interview observation notes, I kept a reflection journal to record my thoughts, emotions, and connections to my work.

During the interview, an opportunity was presented to collect artifacts from participants willing to share. These artifacts were drawings or poems they created while exploring their gender identity, and they felt represented their emotions at the time. The artifacts were not incorporated into the data for analysis but were used to visualize their emotions.

Organizing, Coding, and Analyzing the Data

Keeping the data well-organized streamlined the analysis process. Following Marshall et al. admonition that "Researchers should embrace their data, organize it from the start, and constantly have it on their minds" (2022, p 23), after each interview was transcribed, I reviewed it multiple times and noted connections with subsequent interviews. To organize my data, I maintained a log of the entire set: video and audio files, transcriptions, artifacts, interview notes, and reflection journal entries. I implemented organizational and labeling systems to ensure that the proper data was connected to each participant and that each participant's portfolio was complete.

While immersed in the data, I generated anticipatory themes while it was still being collected, then revisited them after data collection was complete. These themes mirrored but were not limited to those discussed in chapter two: mental health, stress, resiliency, technology, school culture, teacher training, professional development, ally training, and understanding barriers.

Once data collection was complete, the coding process began. Coding, or assigning a "word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana 2020, p.3) to mountains of qualitative data, is a time-consuming but essential part of the research process. After I coded the data by hand, I entered it into Dedoose to assist in finding common cross-cutting themes.

There were several steps in analyzing the data, considering the different collected types. Transcripts of interviews and focus groups, interview notes, and reflection journal entries were all reviewed and studied. The first step was generating a snapshot of the big ideas in the

transcriptions. Second, I meticulously reviewed the data and highlighted it using different colors to demarcate key quotes and phrases, and started adding labels, such as fear, stress, resilience, support, and suggestions. Next, I lumped common ideas and selected text into approximately seven to ten groups based on their connections towards each other, such as personal connection to others, i.e., family, friends, or those generated through technology. Highlighted data was entered into Dedoose and aligned to the identified categories, and then, using the labels, the entirety of the data was coded once again. Upon completion of this process, common phenomena were identified among the stories and experiences of the participants as they related to the research questions. Additional themes emerged and were recorded. Clustering, a way to develop diagrams of relationships (Marshall et al., 2022), was implemented to organize the commonalities and differences among identified themes.

Furthermore, themes were assigned to one of three categories, expected, surprising, and unusual, to help ensure findings "represent diverse perspectives" (Cresswell & Cresswell 2018, p. 197). By clustering themes into these three categories, I was able to focus attention on the emerging themes that could add to the gaps found in the literature. Finally, I incorporated the data from my reflection journal and personal experience related to the findings. I was able to relate to the participants' experiences, and I felt empathy for them. In my reflection journal, I could describe the emotions the participant was portraying and my feelings. Hearing their stories brought me back to the experiences I had in my own life. The participants recalled strong emotions of sadness, solitude, fear, and great happiness. I recalled my feelings through my reflection and was able to contribute to the findings.

Trustworthiness

Marshall et al. define trustworthiness as the intersection of ethics, relationships, and transparency (2022). Disclosing positionality and being forthcoming with the intentions of the study can help a study be considered trustworthy. The strengths of this research lie in my positionality as well as the research design and intent to collect reliable data through building relationships with the participants to get the most accurate story possible. Being a native researcher also added to the strength of this work, as I have a shared lived experience that enabled me to relate to my participants. Having insider status and shared experiences with my participants increases my empathetic understanding. Chhabra (2020) encourages researchers to assume the role of an in-betweener to pragmatically utilize the insider status, which enables privileged access and empathic understanding.

Since my sample size was small, getting the greatest depth of data, a quality inherent to qualitative research, was paramount to producing accurate, relevant findings that impact this population in the educational setting. Using a two-phase, semi-structured interview process yielded a wealth of data. Incorporating participant artifacts into this paper also provides a visual aid to help readers connect with the data and, more importantly, the experiences of the TGNCNB participants. However, the submitted artifacts are for illustrative purposes only and were not included in the data set or analysis. Participants also reserved the right to choose whether their visual aid was included in this paper. The participants' experiences and my researcher positionality have helped me retell their stories within a framework that can impact this marginalized group.

Ethics

There are serious and critical ethical considerations within this study. Great care was taken to respect the privacy and ensure the anonymity of my participants by collecting non-identifiable data, a process that was carefully outlined in the consent form. The data is being maintained securely on an external drive that is password-protected. Any printed transcription was shredded upon completion of the analysis to prevent any possibility of identifying the participants.

In addition, before this study commenced, I received approval from the Molloy College Institutional Review Board (IRB) on May 24, 2023, to conduct the research. As part of the IRB approval process, I had to submit the consent forms that all participants were required to complete.

By conducting and completing this research, I openly share my positionality, hoping to transform school and community systems and supports that impact TGNCNB students in secondary schools. This is challenging for me because I do not live my life as an "out" transgender person. I do not identify as transgender, and in the community in which I work, I am perceived as female. Upon publication of this work, I expect my identity to be revealed, and this information will circulate within the community. When being "outed" happened to me in the past, it was traumatic. I am still terrified, even though I am intentionally "outing" myself and doing it to serve a cause greater than myself. I know from personal experience how challenging it can be to have difficult conversations about gender identity, specifically how it relates to individual experiences, and because I continue to feel fear and trepidation about the consequences of this work for me in my personal and professional life, I hope that participants felt themselves in safe, trustworthy company while sharing their stories and revisiting potentially

traumatic experiences. As previously mentioned, I directed my participants to a list of mental health resources should they need additional support while or after participating in this study. It is hoped that participants found the process healing.

Limitations

This study has several limitations; however, they do not detract from the importance of the work. One inherent weakness of qualitative work is its small number of participants. Finding individuals for this study was challenging, and I was limited in finding participants through my network and relied on other organizations to promote my search for participants. Another limitation of this study due to the small sample is the potential for a lack of diversity within the sample in two specific ways.

First, the population for the survey is TGNCNB students, which encompasses a wide array of individuals and how they identify themselves through gender. A small sample size was less likely to yield individuals across the entire gender spectrum, which could impact the results. Indeed, there was a noticeable imbalance in the gender identification of participants. 80% of the participants identify as trans-men, ten percent identify as trans-women, and ten percent identify as gender non-binary. In addition, 90% of the participants identify as transgender, while ten percent identify as gender non-binary. These imbalances may have impacted the findings by underrepresenting one group compared to the others. This limitation resulting from the distribution of participants over the gender spectrum is further discussed in Chapter 5.

Another inherent limitation of this study stems from interviewing a marginalized population. In addition, despite all the measures taken for comfort and safety, participants may not have wanted to share their experiences. The depth of their story depended on how much they trusted me and the degree to which they felt safe and comfortable. I took measures to build a

relationship with the participants in hopes that they would share authentic experiences with me; however, portions of their stories they may have withheld remain unknowable. I know how difficult it is to share stories about my past with others, and I can envision the same being true for my participants. I hope that my attempt to be vulnerable and share with them some of my own experiences and the opportunities I provided them to ask me questions along the way deepened the data collected.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the research methods I used to uncover answers to the proposed research questions. Using an interview and focus group approach, I was able to collect data that will used to present findings in the next chapter. Participants also had the opportunity to contribute artifacts that portray essential moments or times in their lives. By incorporating my reflections throughout the research process, I have aimed to paint a picture that school districts can use to create a safe space for TGNCNB students. In the following chapter, I present my findings and discuss the implications of this work.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

"You can control your resiliency to stress. You can't control the stress." - Yellow

This chapter connects the participants' experiences to paint a picture of the cumulative effect of stressors on the allostatic load of TGNCNB individuals in secondary school. Furthermore, I discuss the participants' strategies to mitigate stress and reduce their allostatic load. In addition, I will report the breaking points that the participants shared when their allostatic load became overload and they sought to return to a homeostatic state while embodying their gender identity. Furthermore, I will discuss the hindsight and recommendations the participants would share with their past selves, other TGNCNB youth, and school personnel. This chapter also contains the findings of the phenomenological qualitative research study conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do TGNCNB students describe their school's culture and its role in their social, emotional, and academic development?
2. According to TGNCNB individuals, in what areas of high school did they feel "safe," and in what areas did they feel "unsafe"? What attributes of those spaces made them feel that way?
3. How did TGNCNB students' levels of outness and experiences shape their secondary school experience?
4. According to TGNCNB students, what support did they receive or wish they had received from school personnel at various points in their transition? What supports do they believe were needed but were not offered by school personnel?

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings derived through data analysis grounded in resiliency theory, transgender theory, and liminality theory. I first coded the data through a multi-step analysis process and then extracted common themes. The ideas of stress and resiliency permeate all themes and form the central thread throughout this dissertation. Furthermore, in addition to the findings, I will discuss participants' hindsight and recommendations to their past selves, other TGNCNB students, and school personnel. It is ultimately a school's responsibility to reduce stressors on TGNCNB students and increase opportunities for these students to mitigate those stressors and build resilience. The participants experienced stress, and the emotion connected with that stress came across during the interviews. To capture the essence of that emotion, I will integrate specific quotes at the beginning of some sections to capture participants' feelings and illustrate how their experiences have impacted their lives.

Demographic Data

A review of the demographic data, Tables 1 and 2, yields several commonalities when analyzing the data set. All the participants attended or will be attending college. The sampling techniques I used made finding participants outside of academic circles difficult. I contacted local support groups to locate individuals who may not have attended college but did not get responses from most organizations. Another commonality is that none of the participants describe themselves as belonging to any of the world's major religions; instead, they choose atheism, agnosticism, or spirituality.

Furthermore, six of the eleven participants were between 18 and 24 at the time of the study, while five fell outside this range; they were all under 30. Finally, most of the participants (8/11) identify as FTM (female-to-male) transgender. The participants also live in different regions of the United States, which provides insight into TGNCNB experiences that are not

limited to one demographic area. These demographic factors contributed to the analysis described in this chapter, and I discuss them in more detail in chapter five. Finally, seven of the eleven participants transitioned while they were in secondary school. Their experiences provide insight into coming "out" while in school, while those who transitioned after high school provide insight into being "closeted."

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	Ethnicity	Religious Belief	Economic Status	State of Residence
Yellow	Haitian/Puerto Rican	Non-Religious	Lower Middle	New York
Lime Green	White	Atheist	Upper Middle	Ohio
Blue	White	Spiritual	Upper Middle	Minnesota
Pink	Chinese	Spiritual	Middle	New York
Dark Green	S. Asian	Spiritual	Middle	Texas
Green	Finnish	Agnostic	Upper Middle	Minnesota
Lavender	White	Agnostic	Lower Middle	Wisconsin
Periwinkle	Chinese	Atheist	Lower Middle	California
Cyan	White	Agnostic	Middle	Minnesota
White	Hispanic	Catholic	Middle	New York
Forest Green	Chinese/American	Buddhist	Wealthy	Florida

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Name	Gender Identity	HS Transition	Year of Graduation
Yellow	FTM	During	2022
Lime Green	FTM	After	2013
Blue	FTM	After	2019
Pink	FTM	During	2018
Dark Green	MTF	During	2024
Green	FTM	During	2019
Lavender	FTM	During	2015
Periwinkle	GNB	After	2017
Cyan	FTM	During	2016
White	FTM	During	2024
Forest Green	GNC	After	2015

Themes

The central thread of stress and resiliency permeates the entire data set. Every participant has faced stressors associated with expressing their gender identity as well as stressors linked to other aspects of identity development and growing up. In addition, every participant identified strategies they had used to mitigate those stressors. Further data analysis reveals other commonalities, trends, and themes, chief among them being that each participant's journey is unique. Some people who question their gender identity face challenges and experience milestones, celebrations, and joys in their unique ways. Individual timelines and decisions are incredibly personal, though it is another common theme that no point on any timetable—such as starting hormone therapy, coming out to their community, and having permanent surgeries if so inclined— is ever taken lightly.

While someone is exploring their gender identity, many factors can produce stress. This project focuses on stressors that have impacted TGNCNB students' lives while attending secondary school. I have organized stressors into three categories. The first category focuses on identity, which includes stressors that impact adolescent students (attending a new school, academic achievement, athletic achievement, home lives, ethnic and religious identities, and romantic relationships) and gender identity (transitioning, coming out, and embodying gender identity). The second category, school environment (school culture, school policy, safe spaces, and champions of safe spaces), focuses on stress and resilience connected with the physical school space. The last category focuses on personal connections (family, peers, and technology).

For my analysis, *identity stressors* include but are not limited to intersectional identities, i.e., stressors associated with gender identity, such as experiencing a transitional or liminal phase, coming out to others, and embodiment. These stressors manifest in myriad ways. A

transitional phase has a beginning but does not have to have a clear end or even a destination. While exploring their identity, trans people may experience multiple transitional periods or undergo steady changes. A male-to-female transwoman may go through a non-binary phase before embodying their identity as a woman. A person who is non-binary may feel like embracing their gender identity differently depending on the day. Sharing one's gender identity with family, friends, and peers can be highly challenging and very stressful. A tremendous fear of the unknown can paralyze many TGNCNB individuals. A TGNCNB person feels fear when trying to embody the gender identity they are exploring. Passing, or being able to exist in society without others questioning your gender, is crucial to improving confidence and self-esteem (Glynn et al., 2016).

A school's culture and staff can significantly impact TGNCNB students, both negatively and positively, and impacts felt at or because of school fall into the category of *school environment stressors*. School Boards implement policies that could impact bathroom and locker room use, student dignity, dress codes, and athletics. In addition, schools may intentionally try to create safe spaces for TGNCNB students and may be unsuccessful due to pressure from the community. School personnel may need training in how to work with the TGNCNB students in their care. All aspects of the school community must be aligned to reduce stress and increase the resiliency of all TGNCNB students (Carter, Andersen, &Abawi, 2023).

Finally, *personal connections stressors* loom large in the data set. Family members and friends can play an integral role in reducing stress for TGNCNB students; however, they can also be a source of anxiety. TGNCNB youth flourish in a supportive environment, but in a non-supportive environment, the stress they experience compounds in the school setting. Lastly, technology is vital in both creating stress and supporting TGNCNB individuals. Technology

used through social media, YouTube, chat rooms, and other websites can help TGNCNB youth develop connections with others in the LGBT community. Still, it opens the door to experiencing hate and bullying, which could add to the allostatic load of TGNCNB students (HRC, 2018).

In summary, stress is everywhere. Many factors can contribute to the allostatic load of a TGNCNB individual. These factors stem from many sources and may equal more than the sum of each stressor. Individuals implement resiliency measures to limit or counteract the stressors in a healthy stress response. My findings explore and illuminate how stress from various avenues affects TGNCNB students in secondary school to uncover what school personnel can do to reduce the allostatic load, prevent allostatic overload, and support these individuals while in their care.

Identity Stressors & Related Resiliency

Teenagers face many challenges while enrolled in secondary school. These challenges can come from many different areas: their homes, their selves, school, and other important places and people that contribute to their daily lives. Often, these external stressors impact TGNCNB youth even before they begin to question their gender identity. In some cases, the stressors are related to gender identity and the stress of exploring and expressing it. In some cases, they are unrelated to gender identity. Whatever the source of stress, it leads young people to develop measures of resiliency, such as grit, perseverance, or patience (Booth & Neill 2017). All study participants identified critical sources of stress from both before and during their gender identity exploration and expression and described how they formulated resiliency measures early on that would be relied upon, to some extent, when their stress compounded over time.

TGNCNB students experience the intersection of stressors related to exploring their gender identity and stressors generally experienced by adolescent youth while in secondary school. Attending a new school, getting good grades, excelling at sports, presenting an image, trying to fit in, religion, home dynamics, and romantic relationships were explicitly named by study participants as sources of stress. Every participant could clearly define stressors that impacted themselves outside of gender identity exploration and embodiment. As I introduce the voices of my student participants, I will interweave them with my own.

Attending a new school

Attending a new school can be difficult. Cyan didn't know anyone when he transitioned from middle to high school. He struggled to make friends and found the differences between the school systems challenging to overcome:

> I went to a different high school than the one I attended in middle school, and many of the students who had gone to the middle school were associated with this high school. It was my first time going to a regular public school. I had spent most of my elementary and middle school at a charter school with a very different style of schooling and curriculum. So, it felt like such a big jump (going to the public school). It's just that people started getting cliquey; social interactions and making friends were difficult. It's like you're so concerned about being seen as weird.

I had this experience, and I recall becoming more introverted and having difficulty making new friends during elementary school. I was also anxious about attending a new middle school. I remember one incident in which I was late getting to band practice and did not want to enter in front of everyone on stage, so I didn't and never went back to playing my instrument. Lime Green also found attending a new school stressful, and that not having friends there was scary:

> The more immediate stressors were, "Oh my God, I'm going to a new school; oh my God, all my friends are going to different schools and do not live near me anymore. I was scared because I didn't know anyone attending this new school.

Green shared that when he attended a new school, instead of presenting himself for who he was, he presented himself for what he wanted other people to see because he wanted to fit in. Moving from one community to another added to the allostatic load of the participants. I had this experience while in elementary school, and it caused me to turn inward and be more introverted. I had difficulty making new friends as the lids had pre-established friend groups.

Academic and Athletic Achievement

Many students put tremendous pressure on themselves to do well in school. Sometimes, this pressure also comes from their parents. Students want to get into good colleges, and they know that to do that, they must get the best grades possible. Cyan took the most advanced courses and tried to earn scholarships to help pay for university:

> I cared so much about school and my grades, and I was taking accelerated classes. My parents wanted me to go to college but were worried about being able to afford it despite having the money to afford it. They wanted me to be an honor student, a star athlete, and get scholarships. It was an unreal amount of stress on me, which was significant. After my junior year of high school, my mental health tanked. I was depressed and suicidal.

There is an expectation that high grades will get students into better colleges, and students must work hard to achieve those grades by taking high-level classes. Like Cyan, Blue was overwhelmed with a rigorous course schedule while playing sports and being involved in school in as many ways as possible:

> I took four AP classes a year in high school, and then I was also enrolled in college in high school, taking double courses. I was captain of two sports teams and always played a sport. No matter what season it was, I was busy doing as much as possible to build my resume and personal experience.

School counselors remind their students that throughout high school, they are building a resume to send to colleges, which will demonstrate that they are involved in many aspects of the school. This pressure can add to a student's allostatic load. Dark Green felt this pressure to over-perform.

> My mom always expected excellent grades; it was not enough to get through school; I had to excel. And so that was, I remember, an enormous stress in my life, constantly worrying about having straight As, honors classes, and AP classes. And that takes up a lot of your time.

In some cases, parents put pressure on their children to do well in school. Yellow stated, "My parents did not understand me, and they put a lot of pressure on me to do well in school, and that was supposed to be my only focus; it was too much pressure." Parents understand the value of education and the importance of doing well in school. Parents expect that their children need to do well because it impacts their future.

Academics and athletics are a big deal in some communities, and sometimes, *not* participating can be just as stressful as having to achieve at a high level. Playing hockey was almost mandatory in Green's community, and he wanted nothing to do with the sport. Not playing was stressful because there was an expectation that Green didn't meet. Green remembered, "I've never liked sports or skating in particular. That was a source of stress because everyone else was like, 'Why aren't you playing hockey?' I don't want to play hockey."

Although sports can be an outlet for students, as discussed later, playing sports is time-consuming and causes stress on students by limiting their time for other areas of their lives. Lime Green had little to no time outside of school and volleyball. He was overwhelmed by the hectic lifestyle and rarely had a reprieve.

> In middle and high school, my whole world also involved volleyball and being on the team. I did travel in the off-season. I would have school from 7:30 to 2:30. I'd be at practice from 2:30 to 5:30, or if it were a match, I'd be at a game from 2:30 to 9:30, and then I'd get home. Then religion just piled on top of that in my middle to late high school through early college. It was overwhelming.

Periwinkle concurred with Green that having a hectic lifestyle was challenging to navigate.

> I had undiagnosed ADHD and anxiety, so that was also a factor. I was swamped and extremely academically focused, playing multiple sports on high school teams and travel soccer at a very competitive level. So, what that meant was that I could not think about many things because I was so busy and exhausted every day. I would spend most of my time doing my homework, which took me a long time because of my ADHD, and not spending a ton of time with friends, not spending too much time in specifically social settings.

Students put tremendous pressure on themselves to do well with their studies and perform well on the sports teams they are a part of. Sometimes, their parents put additional pressure on them to succeed as well. This pressure adds to the allostatic load of these students.

Home Lives

In addition to the pressure to excel at academics and athletes, students can also experience stressors in their home lives, impacting every other area of their lives. These stressors can be larger or smaller and affect people differently, but the stress adds to the allostatic load. Pink grew up with two moms and felt like others scrutinized him. He stated, “What are people thinking of me because I have two moms?” Blue experienced a lack of parenting, homelessness, and having to live up to the expectations of a community.

> My parents were both addicts, so there was inconsistency in parenting, negligence, and homelessness. I was homeless for a couple of months, just living in my car or hopping around at friends' places when I was in high school. I also found out my dad was cheating in high school, and I mean, he blackmailed me, so I had to keep it a secret. I also grew up in a very wealthy white and Christian town. There's a way to present. Reputation is humongous; I'll say not only your reputation but your family's and your athletic and academic performance. Those are big things that people associate with you as a person. So those pressures are there.

Lavender’s parents were getting divorced, so he had to move to a new school with one of his parents. It created deep anger and resentment.

> I was angry that they were going to get a divorce and, worse, that we had to move. I didn't like it. I wasn't angry at my mom. I was just angry at the situation, for sure. That move would be happening soon, at the end of that summer, and having to talk about it and prepare for it. But I didn't want to move.

Changing schools can be challenging. In my childhood, I changed schools many times and found it difficult to make friends with each other. I remember attending middle school for the first time and being late to early morning band practice. The door was locked, and I didn't want to walk in and have everybody look at me. From that moment, I stopped playing that instrument and never returned to the band.

Ethnicity and Religion

Some participants identified stressors related to other identity factors, such as ethnicity. Dark Green had to live up to the stereotype of being Asian. He stated, "I am South Asian, which doesn't mean anything on its own, but my family does kind of live up to some of the stereotypes; I had to get excellent grades." Pink didn't consider his ethnic background as he grew up but remembered micro-aggressive comments from those around him:

> Growing up in a white town was interesting because, like I said, it didn't bother me much as a kid; I didn't feel that different. And then when I got into middle school and high school and stuff, a bunch of the predominantly white kids and things like that, I'd hear jokes from my friends, on TV, and in movies, and these jokes about Asian people and these negative sentiments about us. It felt weird.

In addition to participants identifying stressors related to their ethnicity, they also identified stressors related to their religious beliefs. Lavender experienced a cult-like religious environment that was toxic. He felt constantly policed and under constant pressure to fit in.

> I was an evangelical Baptist, Midwest Christian. In my current life, I would describe it as a cult, but at the time, I didn't see it as such. I was in a very, very fundamentalist environment where people put a lot of pressure on you, trying to

> police sexuality, trying to police the way you dress, the way you talk, what you listen to, who you hang out with. I had this constant pressure from the outside to act godly and emulate Jesus.

Ethnic background and religious beliefs can add to the stress of TGNCNB youth as they must live up to the expectations of the communities to which they belong or with which they are associated. As they get older, they may be able to escape oppressive environments, as was the case for Lavender. However, it can be challenging to do while living under your parent's roof. Blue moved out of his home to escape that environment.

Romantic Relationships

Students at this age also explore romantic relations while in secondary school. These relationships can be healthy or unhealthy. Being involved in an unhealthy relationship can be stressful, as indicated by the participants. Blue was involved in an unhealthy relationship in which his boyfriend was manipulative and controlling:

> I had a boyfriend who was emotionally manipulative, toxic, and threatened. He did all types of emotionally manipulative things where he'd threaten suicide if I didn't stay with him or things like that, so it was stressful.

Lavender had a similar experience; however, in addition to his girlfriend creating stress in the relationship, her parents didn't like him, which made him feel awful:

> I felt a mix of I am so painfully in love with her, and I thought it would never happen. There were weird points that she wouldn't want to talk to me for a while, or it'd feel confusing. It was also painfully apparent that I had such a puppy crush on her, and her family didn't like that because they didn't like me. It just made me feel awful; it was terrible. It was a textbook codependent, toxic, not good

> relationship in general. That whole relationship was stressful. And then my mental health subsequently went into the toilet.

Students in secondary school start to have romantic relationships while in school, and these relationships can lead to “distraction, stress, and low academic performance" (Gouda & D’Mello, 2021, p 78). By implementing resilience measures, participants found ways to mitigate their stress and reduce their allostatic load.

Intersectional Resilience

As evidenced by these findings, students face many identity-related issues while attending secondary schools that create stress and, over time, add to their allostatic load; in some cases, that load leads to overload, and they need help managing the stress Lucente & Guidi, 2023). Whether students receive outside help during this time or not, they can and do draw upon resiliency measures that help them mitigate the impact of stress. In my study, the resiliency measures participants used when stress levels rose began to develop *before* the participants started exploring their gender identity.

Children learn strategies to mitigate stress at an early age. They learn this by building confidence from solving problems, not always getting what they want, managing worry with a parent’s support, and building self-compassion (Masten & Barnes, 2018). As they enter their school years, they discover additional methods that help them foster resilience to stressors as they navigate their experiences. They learn resilience from goal setting, developing problem-solving skills, learning from failure, and building friendships (Chandra, 2021). Every participant in my study developed resiliency strategies before their secondary school experience in response to the external stressors they were experiencing. The most common resiliency measures were involvement in sports, relying on friends and community, enjoying hobbies (alone or with

friends), and engaging in harmful behaviors. However, in every category, there was evidence that no one measure was sufficient; each had drawbacks, benefits, and a point of diminishing returns at which a healthy coping measure looped back on itself and started compounding stress.

Many participants involved themselves in sports: Lavender and Periwinkle experienced pressure to perform at a high level; Green was into boxing; Blue played many sports. Sports can be a mixed blessing, an especially prominent stressor, and a resiliency tool. Lavender stated, "I think sports could have been such a great outlet for me if I were allowed to have just enjoyed playing volleyball." Periwinkle added, "To mitigate stressors, I played sports. I played club soccer at a very high level. Exercise was good for mitigating anxiety." Engagement in physical activity helps alleviate stress (Childs & de Wit, 2014); however, competition can invoke stress as there is an expectation to perform.

A core group of friends can also help mitigate stress (Galupo et al., 2014). Dark Green enjoyed playing video games and listening to music with friends, Lavender played video games and went to anime conventions with a large group of friends, and Yellow went to a chess club and cartooning club with friends. Cyan and Lime Green relied heavily on their friends. Cyan had a mental health crisis around his friends, and they supported him as much as they could until it became too much.

> I was leaning too heavily on some of my friends and had multiple mental health crises around them, and they staged an intervention and were like, we can't be doing this; you need to get a therapist. And they were right.

Lime Green relied on religion and friends. The people around him showed support, but it wasn't enough. He also realized that he needed a therapist to help him navigate his stress.

> I relied on religion. I relied on my friends. The religious group I was around would always be. They were very encouraging, which is an excellent thing about them. They would always encourage me to pray and tell me things would be okay. Then there's always these quippy things like, "Oh, things will work out in God's time," whatever. In some ways, I did find that to be comforting. I have an excellent relationship with my mom, so I can always talk to her about things. I spoke to people about my feelings but didn't go to a therapist; I should have.

Hobbies also played a role. Green took to writing short stories and was involved in the school newspaper. Lavender took to art and music when he was depressed in ninth grade, and Yellow would listen to music and take long walks around his neighborhood.

Self-harm and substance abuse is another strategy that some people employ for dealing with stress. Nock (2009) found that “nonsuicidal self-injury” has its onset during early adolescence and can include cutting or carving of the skin. Lime Green engaged in self-harm at an early age. He learned it from watching television and sadly learned the proper way [ways not to be detected] and the wrong way to hurt himself [ways that are detectible by others]. He did not want to bring attention to himself and wanted to avoid school staff or his parents from knowing what he was doing.

> I hate to admit it, but I was cutting. I was self-harming when I was 13, 14, 15-ish as a means of coping because I was under so much stress from being a professional athlete, being a collegiate athlete, and getting a full-ride scholarship. You’re too young to understand what that means, but you know that’s what you must do, or you’ll disappoint your family. So that was the one coping skill I knew, and I learned it from watching television.

Dark Green described a breakdown between her freshman and sophomore year. She had serious thoughts about ending her life. She stated, “I had already participated in self-harm before, so it was not such a strange concept. Still, something about me was just terrifying, so I started again.” Lavender’s approach to self-harm was more subtle and calculated.

> In high school, there was a little bit of self-harm, not in the sense of taking a razor blade, not punching a brick wall, but wanting to hit a brick wall just to feel the pain. And because to me, that was less incriminating than if you have cut scars on your wrist, or I would use a mechanical pencil with the lead pushed in. So, it’s just that tip scratching my hand and not letting it heal nicely. And I’ve learned not to do those things. Maybe let’s not do those harmful coping skills. Let’s choose different ones.

From the data, only one participant indicated substance abuse to mitigate stress. Sinha (2008) found that “drug use and abuse is a coping strategy for dealing with stress (p.106). Blue illustrated his experience with marijuana with that of other TGNCNB individuals.

> I probably smoke too much weed, if I'm going to be honest. I probably use that as a coping mechanism a little too often, which is also the most cliche trans thing I think I've ever heard of. I don't know a lot of trans people who don't have a substance use issue.

In conclusion, every participant identified sources of stress that are common to all students that are not connected to gender identity while they are in secondary school. Participants also identified strategies they developed to help mitigate those stressors. Most of the participants indicated that the stress they felt significantly impacted their mental health. These stressors, one

component of the allostatic load of TGNCNB students, are joined by the significant stressors associated with exploring gender identity.

Stress and Resilience Associated with Gender Identity

"Will I?" by Cyan

Am I?
Am I what I think,
or am I just unsure and confused?
(Scared if possible?)

Do I?
And if I am,
do I know what to do?
Do I know
if this is what I want?

Could I?
If it is,
could I have the courage to face it?

Can I?
I'm so confused and scared,
because of what it could mean.

It's so easy,
to tell me that I can,
or that I should ... But,
Will I?

All participants identified areas of stress related to exploring their gender identity, including transitioning, coming out to others, and embodiment of their gender identity. The participants spoke about fear, passing, and the importance of hair in addition to specific experiences they faced during their secondary school experiences. Some participants found new ways to mitigate stress as they matured, while others implemented the strategies they learned at younger ages to help alleviate prior stress. Some participants transitioned from the gender assigned to them at birth to the gender with which they identified *during* their secondary school

years, while others transitioned afterward. Each participant had a different experience while transitioning and coming out to their community.

Furthermore, embodying gender identity is a personal journey. My experience of embodying my gender identity was unique to me and influenced by the variables in my life at that time. The environment shaped my transitional phase and the support that I had around me. Each participant had their own experiences that were unique to them. It was evident from the data that eight of the individuals who identified as transgender, in contrast to the nonbinary participant, exist in a binary gender construct, and the participants made distinct efforts to present themselves as the gender opposite from the one assigned to them at birth. One common thread among all participants' stories is the fear they felt and the stress they endured while trying to embody their gender identity.

While all participants described different experiences specifically related to their transition period and coming out to those around them, the common undercurrent of fear paralleled a shared experience of stress associated with embodying their identity publicly. The desire to "pass" or be able to exist in society without being identified as transgender weighed heavily on the participants, both while they transitioned and well beyond that liminal phase and into their later years. All participants mentioned the removal or growth of hair as a way to alleviate stress and build confidence. All participants also articulated a moment in which confidence and self-assuredness overtook the fear, and they could embrace their gender identity and fully commit to embodying it.

Gender-Related Stress

"To be explicit, my gender stressor got me the closest to killing myself" - Blue

Every participant experienced stress related to exploring their gender identity. Cyan described their internal feeling of anxiety as having a constant headache:

> Let's say you have a dull headache. And it's like, once you first notice it, you're like, oh God, I have a headache, okay, whatever. But you push through it, and then it's like, once you do stuff, you can put it out of your brain, but it's always there. And you stop thinking about it actively, but it's always affecting you because it's a dull headache, and it sucks to have a dull headache. That's how I would describe the stress related to gender identity.

White and Purple also described this stress as constant. Purple said, "It was always the first thing I thought about when I woke up, and it was the last thing I thought about when I went to sleep." White added, "The gender piece was just always in the back of my mind. It's hard to feel like you can do well at school when you vaguely feel uncomfortable."

According to most participants, the period in which they were transitioning and coming out to peers was wrought with fear and anxiety. It takes time from the moment a person decides to embody their gender identity until they exist seamlessly in society as the person they want to be. During this time, their bodies are changing through different means, and they face the scrutiny of others and additional expenses related to facilitating these changes. Some friends told Green they should change schools to transition, which would be "easier." Green didn't change schools but faced challenges in their school. School peers asked Green many invasive questions. Some people were rude:

> I think because of that transition, there were a lot of questions, which makes sense. I think it was, for most of my classmates, the first time they ever heard about someone being transgender or having a transgender identity. There were a lot of invasive questions or pronouns, and misgendering was a big point of contention because some people would be like, "Well, I'm not calling you a man until you get surgery, so let me know when you get it, and then I'll switch."

The liminal phase of transitioning is highly visible, and people will see the "before" and "after" identities more easily than the space in between. Transitioning takes time and resources. Lime Green spoke to the financial burden of transitioning as another cause of stress.

> I [Lime Green] didn't have a lot of money. To transition, you need to afford to go to the doctor, have good insurance, and buy a whole new wardrobe because you can't wear the clothes you used to wear, and how your body changes so much in the first several months.

During this transitional time, participants found it challenging to avoid harassment while presenting themselves in society.

Cyan mentioned that you will not always get the desired reaction when you don't "pass," Getting people to unlearn previous perceptions is challenging. For him, that adverse response came from his parents, and their parents turned against him. Cyan felt a domino effect that started with his parents and led to interactions in which other authority figures, such as school building personnel, turned on him. Lavender did not want to be transgender and didn't want to come to terms with his gender identity; he would have instead gone to sleep and not woken up. He chose life and to do something about how he lived:

> I was just so, so afraid, and I was just absolutely depressed, not actively suicidal, but I didn't want to wake up. I didn't want this. I didn't want to have to keep going. I was like, could something just happen? Some excuse for me not to have to keep going. Thankfully, I no longer wanted to live like this around summertime. So, I'm like, okay. I guess I came to terms with it.

For transgender people, "coming out" is a complex process that includes telling their immediate circles that they are going to transition, embracing their gender identity, and embodying in the physical world who they are in their heart, mind, and soul in hopes that society will see the gender of their inner spirit. Coming out is challenging, and Green felt tremendous fear because he did not know how people would respond to him. He was afraid of verbal harassment and physical assault:

> My fears in middle school were different than in high school, as I was just coming out. I think the fear was how people would react to that coming out, new information, name, and presentation. And I think when I got into high school because it was two or three middle schools coming together, the fear was more like who knows and who doesn't and what if someone doesn't know and they find out. How are they going to react act? The fear was of what are people going to say and what if I faced physical violence because my identity threatened people.

Cyan decided not to come out while in high school and was terrified of telling his parents and peers. Cyan stated, "It felt like such a big ordeal to start broadly coming out in broader circles, and I was scared." Blue never came out to his parents; instead, he left his house to find his path, struggled with the social construct of gender, and eventually transitioned after he moved out. Blue understood that gender is a social construct and wanted society to see him as male:

> I want to pass. I want to come off in a male way. But I'm still figuring out how much of it feels true to me and how much of it is an influence from society that I'm inclined to act in a certain way or say certain things.

As with the constant stress of gender identity overall, Purple and Blue both described the stress of being "outed" or "clocked" as a lingering fear that has taken permanent residence in the back of their minds. Being outed is a fear that I continue to have to this day. Each time it happens, it raises a fearful reaction inside me. Purple shared, "Being outed happens. It happens to me maybe once every couple of years, and every time it does, it's just stress," Blue added. "The stressor of being clocked, that was huge." Lavender recognized the relationship between passing and safety and stated, "I think there's a solid relationship [between passibility and safety]. Specifically, the more you pass, the safer you are."

Pink found the stress of being out while in school different at various points of his transition, and it showed itself in multiple forms:

> Everyone had to know in middle school because I came out in middle school, but there were many new people in high school, and I wasn't sure who knew or who didn't. And that was a new kind of scary. It seemed like there was a dehumanization piece (being misgendered) that was very stressful, a lack of understanding and feeling like you need to educate people, which will not only have implications for how other people treat me but also how people treat other trans people. I am responsible for explaining it well enough to defend why we get to be who we are and why.

Yellow went to a Catholic high school and had to navigate the religious beliefs of the community, and described facing fear in this school setting:

> I think what brought me the most stress was a lot of people's religious views on transgender people. Especially in a Catholic school, people who weren't transgender themselves would throw slurs at them (TGNCNB) and be more aggressive and violent towards them. It made me feel very unsafe to be myself in my place of education.

Stress and fear for one's physical safety are associated with transitioning and coming out to the people around you. TCNCNB students speak to the significant challenges of experiencing this stress while in school and grappling with other adolescent and identity-related stressors. According to The Trevor Project, roughly half of TGNCNB youth seriously consider attempting suicide, and about 20% attempted suicide in 2022. (The Trevor Project, 2023). In contrast to experiencing stress, the participants also felt a growing confidence, positive self-esteem, and positive self-body. The participants found ways to build their confidence as they began to embody their gender identity.

Building their Confidence

> "I just stopped caring about the way that people thought about me. And I was just unapologetically me" - Yellow

There came a point in my life in which I knew that I had to do something about the internal struggle I was dealing with around my gender identity; otherwise, I wouldn't be able to continue living. I was fortunate to mitigate the stress I felt by participating in sports, as many study participants did. However, I needed to be able to begin my journey and work toward the full embodiment of the gender identity I envisioned in my heart, mind, and soul. I feel lucky to have been able to transition successfully. I became increasingly more confident as I presented in

public as female. My self-esteem grew with continuous positive reinforcement from people I met in my day-to-day experiences.

The study participants found various ways to build their confidence and self-esteem. Each participant could identify critical points in their journey that fostered resilience towards the stresses they were experiencing as they embodied their gender identity. Transitioning and not constantly fighting the internal battle of "who I am" can be empowering and rejuvenate one's sense of being. Green contemplated how good their life could be:

> I thought, what if there's something to look forward to? What if there's some way that I can feel happy? Ultimately, I concluded that the only way that that would happen that I would have a meaningful life would be if I transitioned.

Blue found that his confidence began to grow as he started hormone replacement therapy (HRT), as well as when he started getting positive feedback from those around him:

> I would say confidence didn't come until I was on hormones. Confidence also came from the social feedback model, where other people perceived me as male without me having to tell them. My voice dropped. I was dressing a certain way, and I stubbled, and things like that. I would say it took probably about a year on hormones for me to finally feel like I am confident in who I am, and nobody can take that from me!

Currently, some states have or are looking to implement laws prohibiting transgender youth from accessing health care and beginning HRT. However, other states protect the rights of transgender youth. As of March 1, 2024, 22 states ban best practice gender-affirming medical care and surgical care for transgender youth under the age of 18, and one state bans gender-affirming surgical care for transgender youth under the age

of 18. There are five states that it is a felony crime to provide gender-affirming care for transgender youth under the age of 18. (Movement Advancement Project. “Equality Maps: Bans on Best Practice Medical Care for Transgender Youth.” www.mapresearch.org/equality-maps/healthcare/youth_medical_care_bans. Accessed [3/1/24]).

Dark Green was a minor when the laws in her state changed, and she experienced a highly stressful period in which she couldn’t be under the care of her doctor:

> I turned 18 on September 22nd. On September 1st, 2023, Texas passed a bill that prohibited minors from receiving gender-affirming care. There were three weeks from September 1st to September 22nd when it was technically illegal for me to be taking hormones. I had my hormones because I got them earlier, but my doctor stopped communicating with me because it was against the law to do that. That was stressful.

Hormone therapy begins the process of physically changing one’s body and can help someone embody their gender identity when presenting themselves in public.

Presenting oneself in public and “passing” goes a long way in building confidence and will be discussed in Chapter 5. The idea of “passing” and not being “outed” plays a crucial role in assimilating into a society in which there are socially constructed gender norms. Lavender found confidence in receiving positive comments from the people around him:

> I always had just good responses from my friends and people around me. They’re like, wow, it (hair) looks excellent, or you look so good. It was never; why did you do that? Or I don’t like it. That’s not okay. It helped me to build the

> confidence that I can do these things, and people support me if I'm explicit about why I'm doing it.

Participants found self-confidence through various means. Dark Green would wear a cute outfit or do her makeup to "just appreciate herself." Pink enjoyed seeing videos of himself to help him realize that he is "just a guy that can walk around in public without harassment." White did not get validation from others, sought strength from within, and found that "being in a place where other people don't externally validate you means that a lot of that validation is going to have to come through yourself to improve your situation." Periwinkle used pictures of himself to instill a euphoric state within himself:

> I think a lot of the times when I felt confident and gender euphoric were in specific pictures that I took of myself to document my transitioning. I found it helpful to take photos of myself. Any image of myself that I felt gender euphoric in, I would save it and put it in a folder. When I came out and started looking back at those, I realized I liked those pictures.

Going through a transitional period and embracing one's gender identity can be a life-changing event that brings tremendous inner peace. Cyan shared, "After I transitioned, I thought to myself, I'm happier now, I am not suicidal anymore. I have amazing friends; I am excited to live. My whole life had unlocked for me."

Hair as Means to Invoke Power and Confidence

Confidence and self-esteem play an integral part in building resiliency. Participants indicated that growing or cutting hair significantly contributes to self-esteem-related resiliency. Every participant discussed hair-related changes or maintenance—whether growing facial hair,

growing their hair long, cutting their hair, or growing or removing hair from other parts of the body—as having a positive effect on self-esteem. Hair changes symbolized life changes, serving as benchmarks while participants were transitioning. Lime Green said cutting off all his hair was "the best thing I ever did." Cyan wanted facial hair. Pink turned cutting off his hair into a party to celebrate the occasion:

> I had a haircutting party; my family was there. A few of my aunts and my cousins were there. I have a huge family, so not all of them, but as many as I could. That was one of the good moments when I realized that I had a tribe with me, a community, a family, that I think deep down I knew would support me, and they all came.

Hair is a very public-facing part of one's appearance. When I grew my hair long, I had a tough time at work as it raised many questions and concerns. (I describe this experience in more detail in Appendix K.) Some participants transitioned into high school and knew that changing their hair would get noticed. Lavender cut their hair at the end of 10th grade and "was excited and scared" because "it was obvious that something was going on." Dark Green started transitioning outside school, experimenting with growing her hair, and people noticed. Periwinkle found strength from visibly transitioning:

> I felt the most visibly trans and affirmed when I shaved my head a couple of times, and that felt transgressive. Even when I wore feminine things, I still felt trans, which was cool. I missed my hair, so I grew it back, but I will cut it again. I'm very excited about that!

For TGNCNB students, transitioning and coming out can be challenging and stressful. All participants discussed the stress associated with this period in their lives. Some participants

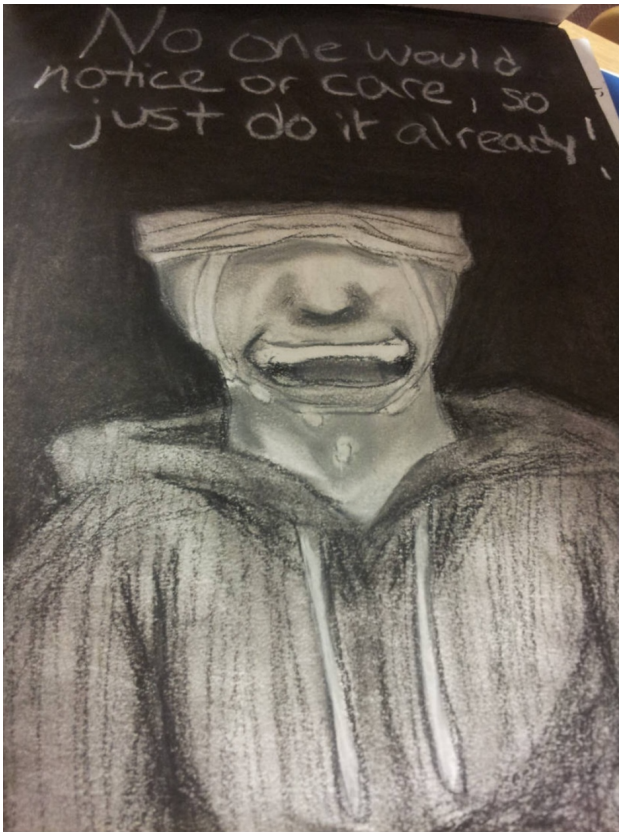
transitioned during high school, while others transitioned after high school. Lime Green and Periwinkle transitioned after high school because they didn't learn about gender identity while in high school or until the end of high school. Blue didn't transition while in high school because he didn't want to deal with the stress of transitioning while in school; instead, he waited. Regardless, the stress they experienced on these personal journeys that stemmed from trying to embody their gender identities compounded the stress associated with other aspects of their identities. The participants used various coping skills to help them navigate their liminal phases. When I conducted the study, many participants were still on their journey to becoming their authentic selves, and they articulated that they were continuing to evolve. All of them endured struggles and challenges and have found happiness, which may not be true of the TGNCNB youth who take their own lives. While the school setting is not without its challenges and can be a very stressful environment for students who are questioning their gender identity, the school environment also can be a wealth of support for students trying to uncover who they are while experiencing the stresses of being an adolescent. The following section describes *school environment stressors* as evidenced by the study data.

School Environment - Stressors

"I didn't want to go to school sometimes, and I was scared to get picked on" - Blue

Cyan created this original artwork while he was in high school. Reflected in the art is the stress he was feeling at that time and the space his mind was in. This was a dark time for him as the stress he felt from the school environment was becoming unmanageable.

Original Artwork by Cyan



I have been an educator for 27 years. I spent seven years in the secondary classroom, and for the last 12 years, I have served as a K-12 school administrator. I have experienced bullying, torment, and mental anguish as a transgender adult in the school buildings as an adult. (See Appendix J for more about this experience). Like me, study participants have had unique experiences while traversing their time in secondary schools. Every person's journey of self-discovery is different, and TGNCNB youth need a safe space to embark on their journeys. They need a space in which they can exist freely and feel accepted. Their school could be that space, even though it is saturated with additional specific stressors that compound the intersectional identity-related stressors, both general and particular to exploring gender identity. The stress

from the school setting adds to the allostatic load of TGNCNB students, and this can lead to poor mental health, as indicated by the participants of my study.

According to the study, participants' stress in school comes from two primary sources: interactions with people and school policies. Arguably, these components arise from and contribute to school climate and culture, though policy may be distinct. School climate and culture are "the feel of the school, the behaviors and points of view exhibited and experienced by students, teachers, and other stakeholders" (AES, 2024), and the environment in which students develop academically, emotionally, and socially. The climate and culture of a school play an essential part in creating a space that fosters positive relationships among all constituents within the school. In addition to the policy developed by Federal and State Education Departments, school district policy created by the board of education guides district and school courses of action. Individual schools within a school district also create and enforce codes of conduct to which students must abide. Policy and culture can work together to create a safe space for students.

School Climate

"We need all teachers to make every kid feel special, but most don't" - White

Building administrators set the tone for the climate and culture of a school, teachers reinforce it, and students manifest it. School leaders are primarily responsible for ensuring all students' safety in their care and creating a safe, nurturing learning environment. They model the behaviors they want their staff to emulate. Teachers are on the front lines with students daily and must foster positive relationships with students. The peers of TGNCNB students mimic the behaviors of their teachers. The resulting school climate can add to a student's allostatic load, help build resiliency, or both. Study participants shared experiences in which the school

environment positively and negatively impacted their well-being and mental health. Many participants did not want to attend school, and a few stayed home.

While Green felt supported by building leadership, Yellow, Lavender, and Lime Green felt the opposite and, as a result, had different experiences. When Green first came out in middle school, his parents met with school administrators who could answer questions and set the tone for Green's teachers by working with them and preparing them for the year ahead. He felt comfortable and supported by his teachers from this meeting throughout the school year because he had the opportunity to meet them beforehand. Neither the principal nor the dean supported Yellow. Instead, they suspended him for not adhering to the dress code:

> I had to stifle the stress of being misgendered in my school. I wasn't allowed to express the feeling that came along with being misgendered. I think the fact that I've had to hold back my emotions when being misgendered has taken a significant toll on my mental health. I got in trouble, mainly when I chose not to hold it back because I was labeled aggressive.

Lavender's coach intentionally misgendered him, and the Athletic Director, who was aware, allowed it to continue. Lime Green had negative experiences with building leadership and was "treated a bit unfairly" by specific administrators; however, it was the traditional conservative school culture itself that caused him the most significant stress:

> The culture was very authoritarian, and the leadership ruled with an iron fist. The school's culture was based on traditional conservative values with respect for authority: don't talk back, question, or speak out of turn. You had to dress very conventionally, and it was generally an environment that was not tolerant of difference.

Although school administrators set the tone of the building, teachers create more independent spheres of climate and culture within their classrooms. Not all these climates are positive. Although administrators supported Green, "some teachers seemed more supportive than others." In high school, Green had one teacher he was uncomfortable with because "he was very vocally conservative [having a traditional gender mindset]." Periwinkle had the same experience with some teachers being traditional and set in their ways but did see a positive change over the time they were in high school:

> I think it's been getting better as more and more people start to know trans folks. Some teachers have been doing what they're doing for a long time, have specific ideas, and don't want to change.

Yellow felt a lack of support from his administrators, but his teachers were supportive. He emailed them the name he wanted them to use at the beginning of the school year when he began to transition, and they used it correctly.

Some teachers try to support TGNCNB students in their classrooms but may not go about it properly. Green's teacher tried to be supportive by calling on him, but it brought too much attention and highlighted him as the "new person" in class, and as a result, the students created a stressful situation:

> I was afraid to go to school, especially on the first day of ninth grade. That was the first day I was using my new name and presenting in a way I had not offered. My teacher wanted to be supportive, and I think he felt he should do that by using my new name immediately and calling attention to it so everyone would know. He called on me to answer a question using my name. Everyone in the class was like, "Who's that?" And they started chanting it. They were like, "Who's that?

> Who's that?" And it felt very stressful to my 14-year-old self. I wanted to run away.

Some teachers have good intentions and try to do right by the students without realizing they are bringing unwanted attention to a situation. Teachers must be mindful of how their actions either create more stress or add to the resilience of a TGNCNB student in their class.

If you want to understand the culture of a school, observe the students and their interactions. Many participants articulated that their stress was predominately rooted in how their peers treated them. Dark Green was afraid to go to school "Not for my physical safety, but for my mental health, knowing that I'm going to have a terrible day." Yellow was also afraid to go to school and sometimes wished to stay home because of the aggressive nature of the school environment:

> I got a very aggressive vibe from the school environment, mainly because that's how many students there were. They were always on each other's backs and getting violent and aggressive towards each other. There was a particular person at my school that made me feel unsafe.

Green and Pink missed a significant amount of school because of the overwhelming stress they encumbered. Green was sick "quite a lot" and "never wanted to be there." Pink was very ill and then transitioned over the summer, went to school the following year, and had renewed strength, but the stress was constant:

> There was so much cognitive dissonance and mental strife. It started causing physical illness; I was getting stomach pain and had other physical problems, and I couldn't keep food down. Because of it, I was out of school for a few months and getting all these tests done. The first day of going back to school was nerve-

> wracking. I didn't make it even through the whole school day. I think I made it to the second or third period, and I went home early because I was too stressed. It was a significant stressor. But I felt like I had to overcome it, and I did!

The school climate can significantly add to the stress of a student. Teachers must be mindful of who is in their classroom, build positive relationships with students, and create spaces where their students can flourish. Most importantly, the collective must engrain the culture, and all constituents must uphold a positive school climate. Cyan articulated this idea best:

> Only a few teachers monitor students' language and actively say something if they hear something inappropriate. There were teachers that students would roll their eyes at because it's like, oh, Ms. So-and-so is on her thing again, which was awesome. But it would've made a more significant difference if *all* teachers had been like that. Because then it would have been like, oh, this teacher is *not* an odd one out; this is the overall environment we are actively trying to cultivate at the school.

Some teachers will stand up for students, while others do not. It is imperative that all students feel that their teachers care about them, not just their academic development but their social and emotional development. When students feel supported, they can thrive. A positive school climate perpetuates an environment where all students can be their best selves.

Creating a Positive School Culture

According to the participants, the following cultural attributes contribute to a positive school climate that includes and accepts not just TGNCNB students but all students:

- Open-mindedness.
- Teaching acceptance over tolerance.
- Using students' chosen names and pronouns.
- Providing easy-to-access resources for TGNCNB students.
- Providing staff with resources about TGNCNB students.
- Widespread education about different gender identities.
- Adopting school policies that support TGNCNB students.
- All students and teachers stand up for each other.
- Creating safe spaces for TGNCNB students.
- Developing positive teacher-student relationships.

Establishing and maintaining a positive school culture is constant, evolving work. Like environmental climate and the weather, it is a potentially variable state that responds and changes depending on different factors, including what's going on in the larger community, and it can occur differently across regions, groups, or pockets, even within one school building. The following section distills the essence of these key cultural attributes expressed by study participants into two clear concepts that can be manifested no matter what's going on with the larger school and community climate and which can make an immediate difference: safe space and the champions who create them. In time, with work, these ideas can permeate and change the school climate.

School Policy

"I felt very unsafe to be myself in my place of education." - YELLOW

Policies developed by the Federal and State Education Departments and local school boards impact schools. School governance structures, most often school boards, write policies by which their district schools must abide. They have guidelines written by a committee that must go through an adoption process. School policies are read several times at public sessions, and the school board votes to adopt the policy. School board members are elected by the school community or appointed by the current members of the school board. The democratic process of electing school board members ensures that the adopted policies reflect the community's desires. In addition to board policies, states enact laws that impact students; in some cases, policies are specifically designed to protect students, and others can hurt TGNCNB youth.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in any educational program that receives federal financial assistance (US Dept of Health). This law prohibits individuals from being treated differently than others or subject them to different rules. Under title IX gender discrimination is defined as harassment upon one's gender, unfair treatment, attitude or behaviors toward an person based on their gender (US Dept of Health).

For example, NYSED passed the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) in New York State and took effect on July 1, 2012. DASA seeks to "provide public school students with a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying on school property" (NYSED, 2024). The New York State Education Department requires schools to have a DASA coordinator that addresses any complaints filed under this act.

Many participants (7/10) in my study indicated that other students bullied them while in school, and they all felt stress from navigating school policies of various kinds. These policies included bathroom and locker room use, dress codes, athletics, and after-school activity organization. All participants found school policy to be a source of stress in one form or another.

School policy can dictate which restroom students must use, and some participants felt that being mandated to use a designated restroom stigmatized them. Lavender and Green were both directed to use specific lavatories. School leaders directed Lavender to use the single-stall bathroom on each school floor, but he was not permitted to use the boys' restroom. School leaders permitted Lavender to use the teachers' lavatory on each floor if he feared questions or harassment in the bathroom. Green's school leaders told him he could use the boys' bathroom but warned him it could be a problem. They also showed him a faculty restroom to use, which caused staff issues.

> Locker rooms and bathrooms were a big thing. When I came out and transitioned in middle school, the principal said, "Yeah, you can use the boys' bathroom until something happens." I said, what does that mean? What's going to happen? Alternatively, he was allowed to use the teacher's bathroom." Everyone was always looking at me as I tried to enter this door. It was also a problem because sometimes teachers wouldn't know the situation and question me. Their effort to make me feel safer or included was stigmatizing. In high school, I just used the boys' bathroom. I tried to work with the school district to create a policy that allows trans students to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity, but that never went anywhere.

In speaking with Green about his high school experience, he said that he didn't ask for permission to use the boys' restroom after he transitioned; he just did. Yellow took the same approach through resistance. His school directed him to use the girls' bathroom, which aligned with his gender assigned at birth:

> I was always very stressed having to use the women's washroom. Sometimes, I would sneak into the male restroom after school as a little treat when fewer people were around. No one was there; no one was watching me. So, I was like, "I'll just go in there anyway."

Yellow tried to get a GSA club approved by the school district to help change the washroom policy, but they ignored his repeated requests. At the beginning of his transition, school counselors placed Pink in the "girls" gym class, and the PE teacher gave Pink a locker in the girls' locker room. Pink didn't feel comfortable in that space and found another place to change and avoided the locker room. It wasn't until Pink's counselor put him in the boys' gym class that he could use the boys' locker room and, surrounded by friends, was more comfortable.

> I was put in the female gym class and had my locker in the female gym locker room. I would go to the private bathroom, change, and go right out. I wouldn't linger or get changed around anyone else. But when I got placed in the boys' gym class, which I felt okay with, I had enough friends where I felt comfortable and used the boy's locker room.

In addition to the challenges that bathroom and locker room use pose for TGNCNB students, dress codes cause stress. Some schools require their students to wear gender-specific uniforms. Graduation attire can also cause stress. While discussing dress codes, Yellow mentioned that there was a single gown that all students wore, which made him feel like he

"belonged." Contrary to Yellow's experience, White's school has two different color gowns, one for boys and the other for girls. White said, "It's not right; they should all be the same. I have a friend who wants to wear one color but can't because he doesn't want people to know that he didn't identify with the gender that the gown represented. The school dean threatened Dark Green with suspension for breaking the school's dress code. The school had a uniform policy for all students. She had some support, but unfortunately, not from all staff members:

> Sometimes, I would break the dress code and just wear the girls' uniform anyway. Some teachers said nothing when they saw that; I was grateful. But some of them did, and I eventually got threatened with suspension if I kept doing it. I ended up having to go back to wearing the boys' uniform, which was very stressful and bad for my mental health.

Lime Green had a similar experience to Dark Green regarding the school's dress code and said, "My school had a policy that said you're not allowed to wear clothes of a different gender." Before he transitioned, Lime Green played on the volleyball team. The team uniform was gender specific, and he requested to wear a variation of that uniform. Still, the athletic director denied the request: "I asked if I could wear the boys' volleyball uniform, and the athletic director told me [presenting as female] that I had to wear what the other girls were wearing."

High school athletics policies, in general, can present issues for TGNCNB students. The table below shows which states have transgender athlete legislation as of February 1, 2024. States that Restrict Transgender Girl's participation (*indicates restriction for TG Boys)

Idaho	Montana	North Dakota	Wyoming	South Dakota
Iowa	Indiana	Utah	Kentucky	West Virginia
Arizona	Kansas	Arkansas	North Carolina	Oklahoma
Louisiana	Mississippi	Florida		
Missouri*	Tennessee*	South Carolina*	Alabama*	Texas*

Transgender Athlete Legislation Tracker, ESPN 2024

Two participants, Dark Green and Lime Green, discontinued playing sports after they transitioned, both by choice. However, Dark Green resided in a state that prohibited her from competing:

> I did not want to go swimming anymore as a girl; I didn't want to put myself out there at the risk of asking which team I was swimming on and trying to make someone uncomfortable. I know they shouldn't be uncomfortable, but I didn't want anyone to be uncomfortable.

Lavender did not quit his sport while he was transitioning. He ran cross country and track and remembered a mortifying experience when other athletes misgendered him at an event. He was not permitted to race against boys while in high school due to the policy that was in place.

> I ran cross country. The year's first race is the only one where they stagger you by gender. The finish line splits: girls go to one side, boys go to the other. I was running down the girl's finish line like I was supposed to be doing, and the refs were just yelling at me, "Wrong way, go the other way." And I was just like, "I'm out of breath. I'm tired. Don't yell at me." One of the refs knew me, so he was able to shut them up, but I was just like, God, " This is mortifying. It was also

mortifying to line up next to people for races and track events, thinking, I know I look like a boy, and I'm running against you. Hi, here I am.

In addition to policies created at the school level, regulations are created at the state and federal levels. NYSED created DASA to protect students from discrimination. Schools should make protocols aligned with DASA regulations for safeguarding students through a coordinated effort by all stakeholders. Students can report a complaint, and the school must follow up on that complaint. Many times, bullying and harassment go unreported, and TGNCNB students carry the stress with them throughout the day. All participants reported experiencing bullying at some point during their secondary school years. Blue hyper-feminized themselves to alleviate the bullying in high school because students bullied him frequently in elementary school and middle school. Blue (FTM) did not want his peers to continue to bully him in high school, so to "hide" his gender identity, he presented himself as feminine as possible. Green recalled harassment by a person in his school who said, "You haven't proven that you're a trans man." It was stressful to him in a unique way because he felt like he had to legitimize his identity. Blue and Green recalled microaggressions from other students in passing but never said anything to an adult. Microaggressions are comments that make someone feel like they don't belong, for example, being judgmental of trans people, assuming trans people have a mental illness, or intentionally misgendering someone. They internalized the comments and remembered the angst it caused. Periwinkle transitioned after high school and kept their gender identity closeted during their secondary school years. They mourned the loss of a peer who took their own life because of constant harassment. Periwinkle recalled, "I remember doing an annual day of silence for another high school boy who was gay, bullied a lot, and ended up committing suicide."

Periwinkle waited until he felt he was in a safer space to transition; high school was not that space.

School climate culture and policy created at various levels of governance work together to shape environments where students can develop academically, socially, and emotionally. These environments can be safe, nurturing spaces; however, they often are not and create stress that adds to the allostatic load of TGNCNB students. These students need a climate conducive to their mental health that is accepting and without judgment, a climate supportive of safe spaces. Safe spaces help build the resiliency of TGNCNB youth and provide them an escape from the stressors they face throughout their school day. Safe spaces must exist in more than a few small corners of a school building; they must be everywhere. The entire school community is responsible for creating these safe spaces and for being champions for the TGNCNB students in their care.

School Environment - Resilience

Safe Spaces

Although participants articulated that there were students, teachers, and administrators they knew to be unsupportive, they all had their champions within the school that created safe spaces for them. What is a safe space? Who creates it? Where is it? How do I find one? How do I make one? The Lesbian, Gay, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) defines a safe space as "a supportive and affirming environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQIA+) students."

According to the participants a safe space is a place where judgment is acknowledged and discussed, not hidden. It's free from stress and allows for vulnerability and confidentiality. In such spaces, you can feel physically safe from harm and harassment, knowing your identity will

be respected and that you belong. People in safe spaces support you even when you're not present, standing up for your identity and well-being. These spaces are created by a community that cares about you, where you're understood and supported without the need for constant education. Safe spaces can be physical or not, depending on the supportive community present. They provide a sense of acceptance and allow you to be yourself without fear. They're about mindset as much as physical location, offering a place where external validation helps you feel safe and comfortable. Lavender defines a safe space as "one where you can be in it and present how you feel most comfortable without feeling like you need to hide something and knowing that you have that support and acceptance from those around you."

A few attributes permeate the participants' definitions of a safe space. Confidentiality, unconditional support, and freedom from judgment can exist beyond physical spaces in the form of people and relationships, and these conditions build resiliency and acceptance. In addition, participants identified specific adults who supported them in secondary school.

Champions that Create Safe Spaces

"She's a very comforting presence" - Dark Green

Safe spaces help build resiliency for TGNCNB students. Sometimes, they are hard to find, and sometimes, they are easily accessible, but in every case, the adults in the building are responsible for cultivating these spaces for students. Teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, and others can be champions for students who need a space where they can just exist as themselves and separate from the stresses they are experiencing. Yellow, Dark Green, Lime Green, Blue, and Pink each identified a teacher who fostered a positive relationship with them. Yellow's teacher, Mr. E., consistently commented positively and was a sounding board. He also went out of his way to learn how to support Yellow:

> Any time I felt out of place because of my gender identity or I felt like I didn't belong, I always went to my teacher, Mr. E., because he always had such positive things to say to me. He always put in the time to listen to what I had to say and did his research on people who felt like me.

Dark Green's English teacher created a safe space for her by creating a judgment-free area, and she was also one of the sponsors of the school's Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA). She extended herself beyond the school day and made herself available to listen whenever Dark Green needed someone to talk to:

> I was never worried about being judged by my English teacher. I was never worried about not being enough or not having all the answers. She is one of the sponsors of the school's GSA. And I had her as a teacher. She's very wise, and she has a lot of good qualities. Whenever I was stressed out, I would talk to her. One time, when I was feeling distraught, I went to her room, and she just let me sit there until 5:00 or 6:00 when she had to leave.

Lime Green found Ms. Bailey through word of mouth. Friends told Lime Green that if he had a problem, "he could talk to Ms. Bailey," sure enough, he had lunch in her classroom for an entire trimester: "She was one of those teachers that I could feel safe around." Blue had two teachers who "intentionally extended themselves" to him. Blue struggled with food insecurities and was not sleeping well. Those two teachers made time for him to go into their classrooms during a free period to take a nap and frequently provided him with energy drinks and granola. Blue stated, "Those teachers showed up for me; they care about me and my basic needs. I would never go to my other teachers; they don't understand." Students just want to feel that someone cares for their well-being and looks out for them. Pink's math teacher filled that role for several

years and was also able to home-school Pink when he was out of school for a few months due to illness caused by anxiety and stress. When Pink returned to school, his math teacher created a safe space in his classroom. Pink said, “He was a good person and really cared about me.”

Other adults in the school can create safe spaces for students. Green found comfort in his guidance counselor. The guidance counselor sponsored the school’s GSA and was “out” as a lesbian in the school. She was extraordinarily helpful to Green for all four years in high school, but most importantly, as he transitioned:

> My guidance counselor was the most supportive, helpful, amazing, wonderful person who helped me through my transition in school. She was proudly out as a lesbian and ran the Gender Sexuality Alliance at the school. She was my guidance counselor for all four years that I was in school and was accommodating and supportive. She walked me around the school and showed me the gender-neutral bathroom I could use. She was there for me when I needed her most. I am so grateful she was there.

White transitioned in middle school and played on the high school boys’ volleyball team. His coach was also a teacher in the school and was always there to “give me a place to get away.” The coach’s classroom became a sanctuary for White when he was stressed.

Potential champions exist for students in schools and the greater communities in which those schools reside. Teachers should attempt to create positive teacher-student relationships with their students. Even if teachers do not know their students’ specific stressors, they can make a space, physical or otherwise, where students can relieve themselves. It might be a place to get away to, it might be a snack or a drink of water, or it might be a non-judgmental ear. It might be

all three. In all cases, teachers and other school personnel must extend themselves to their students as they are the people best poised to reduce students' allostatic loads significantly.

The school climate and culture can have a positive or negative impact on the mental health of students. Safe spaces, created and maintained by champions, can help mitigate stress. At the same time, school policy, which is at least partly informed by school culture but remains separate, dictates what the school must enforce. School policy can be supportive of TGNCNB students or highly detrimental to their mental health.

Safe spaces must exist in more than a few small corners of a school building; they must be everywhere. The entire school community is responsible for creating these safe spaces and for being champions for the TGNCNB students in their care. The personal connections students make with their parents, friends, and people through technology can also contribute to the stress and resiliency of TGNCNB youth.

Personal Connections

> My mom was very clear. Even if she didn't understand it, she still loved me, and that would never change. She wasn't going anywhere. I would never stop being her child, and she would take care of me. - Lavender

TGNCNB students rely on the people around them for support as they explore their gender identities. TGNCNB students rely on family members, friends, or other like-minded people they meet through technology. It is not always the case that those around them are supportive, which can add to their already stressful experience. The participants' responses varied when describing the support they received from their families. In contrast, all participants surrounded themselves with a core group of friends they could rely on, with few negative experiences. Technology was a source of stress for the participants and a resource to help them

navigate their journey. Family, friends, and interactions with people through the internet can help a TGNCNB adolescent feel "less alone" and more empowered to embody the person they know themselves to be in their heart, mind, and soul[3].

Family

As much as we would like our families to be supportive, that is not always the case. Often, some family members may be more supportive of TGNCNB youth than others while they are exploring their gender identity. As discussed earlier in this chapter, coming out to family members can be stressful because there is fear and anxiety created by not knowing how family members will respond. The participants' family members' responses were mixed, with some positive and some negative. Adverse reactions from family added to the stress felt by the participants, while supportive family members contributed to building their resiliency.

Blue never had support from his parents and never formally came out to them. He added, "My resiliency does not come from my parents. They weren't protective, and there wasn't anything lovely about them." When Cyan came out to his parents, they weren't prepared. They weren't familiar with transgender people in general. They didn't know how to handle the situation and didn't take it well. He did find support and love from his sister.

> My sister was great about it; she was an absolute non-issue and probably the chillest one in my family. Before I came out, she was the one who I talked to about being trans. I knew it would be a non-issue for her, and that was a relief. My parents tried and wanted to be supportive, but for some reason, this struck a nerve with my mom; she had a hard time adjusting.

[3] Pink's story has been added, unabridged, as Appendix I

In both cases, their parents never fully embraced them as transgender, which continues to create stress in their lives. Unfortunately, some families create additional stress by creating a hostile environment. The below list captures some participants' recollections of family members' comments about reactions to their transitions:

- "What if you're not sure?" - Dark Green's mother
- "My brother still thinks that being trans is a mental health disorder" - Lavender
- "My uncle disowned me for reportedly, religious reasons" - Green
- "I was going to severely not interact with my dad if he didn't support me" - Dark Green
- "You're going to regret it. This isn't you." - Lime Green's family

Negative comments from his family significantly impacted Lime Green and created self-doubt. He questioned whether he was making the right decision.

> They put a lot of doubt in my head, like, "Is this some kind of delusion? Is this a mental health crisis that I'm having that I think I'm a man?" I feared regretting it or it being a mistake. I think I feared the way people would respond to me, that my life would change in some amorphous negative way by being discriminated against, or I wouldn't be able to get healthcare when I needed it.

Throughout high school, I struggled with this same question about self-delusion several times on my journey. I didn't know if what I felt was a phase and if I would eventually grow out of it. Eventually, I reached the understanding that if I couldn't go on living in the manner that I was. I had to embrace and embody my vision of self wholly and thoroughly. It was the best decision I have ever made for my well-being.

There can be negative experiences with family members as well as positive ones. Green's mother orchestrated communication with extended family and supported him positively from the beginning:

> I came out to my mom first; she was very understanding. She had studied gender and sexuality before, so she had a professional knowledge of what I was experiencing. That was very helpful. Then she told my dad, and we all talked about it as a family maybe a week or two later. And then extended family, I don't think I was ever the one to tell them. I think it was always my mom communicating that.

Lavender's parents supported him; however, his brother did not. Lavender was afraid to come out to his grandmother because he didn't want to lose the special relationship he had with her. He already had the experience of some people being supportive while others weren't. He desperately hoped his grandmother would be someone who stood by his side: His Grammy showed love and compassion.

> I was terrified to tell my Grammy because we were so close. I was her first granddaughter, and we were so close all growing up. I was so afraid of hurting her and so scared of losing that relationship with her or her just not being able to accept it; I felt like I was taking away her grandchild, her granddaughter. I hoped she wouldn't be angry or one who reacted poorly. I was so afraid that I would lose that with her. I had nothing to fear.

The fear of losing a relationship with someone for embodying one's internal identity is paralyzing, and it can be difficult when people do walk out of your life. I have had this experience on multiple occasions with my closest friends, and I still carry the pain of loss with

me 20 years or more after it happened. My best friends, whom I grew up with, didn't want me around their children; they didn't want them to be "confused." Fortunately, when I surrounded myself with friends who loved me unconditionally, my gender identity became a non-issue. The participants surrounded themselves with friends while in high school that were supportive, creating a safe environment for them to be themselves.

Friends

"I don't want to lose my friends." - Pink

Every participant stated that they had a strong friend group that supported them through their secondary school years. A solid friend group builds positive self-esteem and creates strong resiliency towards stress (Galupo et al., 2014). Participants recounted a minimal experience of losing friends along their journey. Pink was worried about losing his friends but realized that the few peers who separated from him weren't a loss in the long run:

> My mom told me one of the first things I said the day I came out, I think, was, "I don't want to lose my friends." Looking back, I realize the friends that I did lose, the very few, over the progression of time as I transitioned was not necessarily a loss, even though it may have felt like it at the time because they weren't people that were good for me. I realized it wasn't a loss; it was just an eye-opener.

Lime Green only had an issue with one person in his friend group. His friend was supportive of his face, but when they had a conflict, the friend started "deadnaming [using the name before transitioning] him and using she/her pronouns to refer to me out of disrespect."

Friends were a significant factor in reducing the stress that all participants felt in high school. The participants relied on their friends and often found circles of like-minded people in the LGBTQIA+ community. Green found this transition happening organically:

> After I came out, I moved away from one group of friends more fully into a different one. I think in the group that I moved away from, no one in that group identified as queer or trans at that time. Then the friend group I moved towards had a couple of people that identified as queer.

The participants also looked to technology to foster relationships with like-minded people. They found technology to be a double-edged sword, rife with hate and a plethora of resources.

Technology

"If it wasn't for social media, I may not have been as empowered to transition when I did."[4]

When I transitioned, I had to write to the local court to receive a 3½ inch floppy disk that provided the forms and steps necessary to change my name. My study participants have had access to social media, YouTube, Reddit, Discord, TikTok, and many other online resources that weren't available 25 years ago. The use of technology has been a source of stress for the participants, as well as providing them with resources and role models.

> It's a double-edged sword. Every time you see something heartening, an amazing trans person making the news, or something like that, you just feel so excited, and there's so much joy. On Twitter, a trans person may share a selfie, and then people just dog pile on them and just feel the need to come in and $#!t on their appearance and make transphobic comments; it's horrific. It's awful. Yeah, definitely stressful

[4] Cyan

The Negative

Bullying and transphobia are rampant across social media platforms. All participants either had firsthand exposure to bullying and transphobia or were witnesses to its constant presence. Blue was bullied on Instagram and observed people making additional accounts to harass trans folk while incognito:

> People bullied me on social media, for sure. Instagram came out when I was in middle school, and immediately, there were comments on posts I made, or people would create fake accounts to bully me or other transgender people intentionally.

Green also had "weird situations on social media" while in middle school.

He remembered it being stressful to see "transphobia and hate directed at trans people." Lime Green had many negative experiences in various online communities.[5] Green took transphobia and hate directed at others personally, and he was afraid to post anything for fear that people would direct their attacks at him. Cyan quit social media due to the amount of stress it was causing him:

> I am not on social media very much anymore because of the sheer amount of stress it was giving me. I have so little energy for being on social media because it's hard to celebrate joy there. Everybody is reactionary and comes on strong. People are rude, or they're making fun of other people, which adds a constant level of stress to my life.

TGNCNB youth are constantly exposed to negativity on social media. They either experience it first-hand or bear witness to it. However, all participants have used

[5] Lime Green's story has been added, unabridged, as Appendix J

social media and the wider internet as a means of support and to connect with other trans youth and role models.

The Positive

I had a lot of online friends, especially in high school
because I didn't feel very comfortable in a lot of in-person spaces - Cyan

There are so many resources available to people today via the internet. You can learn anything from Google and YouTube, including how to transition. The participants used the internet for research, connecting with others, and observing the celebration of TGNCNB people. Blue used multiple websites to access information and found hope in other TGNCNB people being their authentic selves:

> I could access information on Reddit and Instagram or YouTube, Transbucket, and other websites. Having those resources was tremendously helpful. Being able to see people authentically online, celebrating themselves and other people in the comments celebrating them, shows the possibility and hope. I'd say it's beneficial.

Green and Dark Green used the internet to see other trans people thriving and living fulfilling lives. The connection to others helped them mitigate their stress and gave them a sense that everything would be okay. Dark Green stated, "Seeing other trans people online was extremely comforting and affirming." Green found answers online that eluded him in other areas of his life:

> The internet connected me to other people who were like me, and I was able to ask other trans people questions that I couldn't get answered by my classmates was helpful. Being able to see older trans people online thriving and doing what

they want to do was inspiring. They were living fulfilling lives. And that's amazing.

Lavender also used online videos to help him understand transness and to get answers to questions, albeit with complications. In the back of his mind, fear of being hated permeated his thoughts:

> It was the videos that I watched about these people being like, this is how I knew I was trans. They described how they came out and talked about their experiences. Many said they lost friendships or their family wouldn't speak to them. How common it was for when you came out as trans for your family to kick you out. And I was just so afraid that would be me, that I wouldn't be accepted for it, and that people would hate me. It was clear how much people hate gay people. I'm like, Oh God, how much will they hate me?

Family, friends, and technology can all add to the allostatic load of TGNCNB youth and offer support and a means for building resiliency. Some people do not support TGNCNB people and are unafraid to voice their opinions. People can be mean, rude, and insulting. Others, though, have hearts full of love and acceptance, and when friends and family surround TGNCNB youth with love and acceptance, their resiliency increases.

Where Patriarchy Meets Passing

Patriarchy, the gender binary, and the concept of passing are interconnected elements that significantly impact individuals' experiences and perceptions of gender identity. Patriarchy, as a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it, plays a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and expectations related to gender. This

system often reinforces the gender binary, which is the classification of gender into two distinct, opposite, and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine. Blue stated:

> I'll also continue exploring what it's like to be a man in this very patriarchal society and understanding what it's like to hold that privilege and be on that side of oppression and understanding that I hold a lot of power and that I have to find my place as a white man in America.

Blue essentially believes at his core that he is male within the social construct of gender whereas society sees Blue essentially as female, the gender assigned to him at birth. However, presenting in society and passing as male gives him power that society bestows on him for being male. Those that do not pass are not perceived as the gender they are trying to embody and do not have the same power of cisgender males. Blue added:

> I have to find a way to use that power effectively and not fall into traps or be persuaded too much by the ideal man I'm still figuring out how much of it actually feels true to me and how much of it is sort of an influence from society that I'm inclined to act in a certain way or say certain things.

Individuals labeled male at birth often lose socially constructed power bestowed upon men when they transition and embody a female gender identity. Jameson Green (2004) infers that society does not see the women as “real women”. Participants articulated that they hyper-feminized or hyper-masculinized to adhere to the gender binary for mental health and safety reasons.

In a patriarchal society, the gender binary is deeply entrenched, leading to the marginalization and oppression of individuals whose gender identities do not conform to these

rigid categories. For those who identify outside the binary, navigating societal expectations and norms can be challenging and often involves grappling with issues related to gender expression, acceptance, and safety. Green's vision of fluid gender turned into a binary vision.

> I think the fluid understanding of my gender evolved into a more binary understanding of oh, I think I might be a boy. But I think I felt in middle and high school to be seen as a man, as a boy, I had to present in a very binary way, a very rigidly binary way.

Passing, in the context of gender identity, refers to the ability of an individual to be perceived as cisgender, or in alignment with their assigned sex at birth, rather than transgender or non-binary. Passing is often seen as a form of privilege, as it can afford individuals a level of safety and acceptance in a society that may be hostile or discriminatory towards those who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Periwinkle stated "I have the luxury of passing because I think there are certain indicators that cis people look for when they look for trans people, and I don't really have those. That is definitely a privilege." Lavender added "I think there's a very strong linear relationship between passing and safety. Unless of course you are a trans man or masculine, in which case the more you pass, the safer you are because men in this society are privileged."

The experiences shared illustrate the complex and evolving nature of gender identity, particularly within the framework of patriarchal societies. They highlight the pressures individuals face to conform to societal expectations of gender, as well as the personal and societal impacts of these expectations.

It is important to recognize and challenge the patriarchal norms and systems that perpetuate the gender binary and limit the freedom of individuals to express their gender identity

authentically. By promoting inclusivity, acceptance, and understanding, we can create a more equitable and compassionate society for all genders.

Hindsight and Recommendations

I think just there's the ability to wake up and see yourself in the mirror and like the person you're looking at, which is incredible. I'm extremely grateful that I have that - Dark Green

Study participants had a wide variety of high school experiences. As previously stated, every TGNCNB's journey is different; they have other stressors and various ways to mitigate them. I attempted to extract wisdom from their experiences by asking them what suggestions and recommendations they would give their past self, other TGNCNB students, and school personnel.

Advice to Past Self

Participants could reflect on their own lives during the interviews and focus groups. I asked them what learned wisdom they would share with their past selves. Table 1 consolidates responses into three categories: What others think, the high school experience, and positive self-awareness. All of the participants articulated that they would reassure their past selves.

Table 4: Advice to Past Self

What Others Think
• Don't care or worry about what other people think of you. • It doesn't matter how people think about you or your appearance. • I would tell myself that what other people think about you doesn't have to define you; it doesn't have to determine how you present yourself or how you act or feel about yourself. • Other people's opinions probably don't matter. What other people think about you isn't that important, especially after graduating high school. • I felt like there's so much riding on what each person thinks about me. The consensus will determine whether I'm legitimate as a man or as a person. • Take a chill pill, and don't stress about it. Other people's opinions mean nothing.

Regarding the High School Experience
• I would want to tell myself that high school is not where you will peak. • I would reassure myself that high school is not all there is and that this experience was temporary. • You count as a valuable member of the school, and you don't get to be defined by individual people who either will or won't accept you. • I would tell myself; you still have time to grow. Your peak is not in high school, • I would say maybe fight the rules as much as possible. • Find the people that allow you to be you for who you are and just love you.
Positive Self-Assurance
• I'm coming out, and I'm doing this for myself. • Transness exists, queerness exists, and there is a way of being where you don't have to subscribe to the way that everyone else is doing it, and it will be fine. • You're going to be able to find yourself, and you will find yourself. • Happiness is possible. • You'll find a time when you're comfortable in your body one day. • Do not be afraid to take drastic measures. If you don't like something about yourself, just change it. • Spend more time thinking there was a future for you to actively love and cherish yourself and be grateful to exist. • You don't have to do anything until you are ready. Run on your timetable • Get over yourself a little bit, and just focus on finding yourself. • We're all growing all the time. Everything is changing; you're constantly evolving. • Most of all, it will all be okay, and you will love yourself.

Original Artwork by Cyan

This original artwork by Cyan was created while he was in high school. He drew it in his sketch pad, and it depicts what he wanted to tell the people around him at the time. It is neither hindsight, or a recommendation, rather a request to others to have compassion and be more understanding.

Advice to Other TGNCNB Students

In addition to advising their past selves, some participants would make recommendations to other TGNCNB students exploring their gender identities in secondary school. Yellow would advise others about the potential for dangerous situations and to find safe spaces where they can be authentic and embody the gender identity they internalize:

> I'd tell them to be wary of their surroundings. People act aggressively toward gender non-conforming people because they do not understand how other people identify, creating a very unsafe space. Find your space where you belong as quickly as possible so that you have this sense of belonging and this sense of safety.

Being wary of your surroundings is sage advice as I have found myself in unsafe situations and know first-hand the hate and animosity others have towards people different from them. The high school experience is a relatively short period in one's life, and afterward, students have a clean start in a new environment.

The challenges of high school are constrained to four years of a student's life. Lime Green would remind TGNCNB students that they need to look beyond and be their unyielding champions and advocates:

> I would encourage them that high school isn't all there is, and that high school's social hierarchy, politics, and drama will matter much less quickly. I would encourage them to be themselves and their strongest advocates. I would encourage the kids to uplift each other; I think the kids need some kindness.

In addition to being kind, Blue would advise other TGNCNB youth to show grace and forgiveness to others and themselves:

> I would say to practice understanding and forgiveness as much as possible towards yourself and others. Do your best to understand when you don't, try to do your best to forgive yourself when you're being mean to yourself. Do your best to forgive other people when they misstep, knowing that it's hopefully not at the expense of your boundary or comfort, but being able to understand.

The advice I would give to TGNCNB youth while they are in secondary school is to find peace within yourself. You are not broken, and you do not need to be fixed. Find people and spaces where you can be yourself and try not to get wrapped in what others think of you. Be your authentic self, and when you lie in bed at night thinking about what could be, do everything in your power to make it so.

Advice to School Personnel

In addition to the advice they would give their past selves and other TGNCNB students, the study participants have provided recommendations for school staff. The recommendations align with the attributes of a school culture that leads to a positive school environment for TGNCNB youth, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Advice to school staff falls into five categories: school policy, standing up for students, learning about the TGNCNB community, creating safe spaces, and using students' chosen names and pronouns.

Table 5: *Advice to School Personnel*

School Policy
• Do not have double standards. People who are assigned female at birth are allowed to wear uniform pants instead of skirts. But if you're assigned male at birth, you're not allowed to wear the skirt instead of the pants. (Yellow) • You can't teach only certain parts of history because queer history exists, and you just can't go around it. You can't just block it from the students because they will eventually find out whether they're in school. (Yellow) • If you're teaching history or English or any of these things where you could center queer voices if you wanted to, but if you're actively not, that is another thing. (Periwinkle) • In classes like History, Writing, English, or Science, there are ways to include topics on TGNCNB issues to humanize us. I have contributed to history, I have relations to biology, I contribute to language and writing and literature, and all that and my experiences. Have policies that protect trans kids, both from their peers and their families. I know there are schools where if a child comes out as trans to a teacher, they have to tell the family, and that's not right because that's not safe for a lot of folks. (Lavender) • I think the support and resources are incredibly limited for students who don't feel like they can come out yet or don't have parental support in their identities. Students should be able to change their name even if they don't have parental permission." (Green) • There needs to be an individual choice of what bathroom and locker room the student wants to use. I think, especially for gender-nonconforming students, having a neutral option is essential so they don't feel like they need to choose between two categories that don't fit with them (Cyan)
Standing up for Students
• I would tell them if they heard something in class that they didn't think was right, even if they're not standing up at the front of the class teaching, even if it's as class is starting or as class is ending, look out for the kids. Say something if you hear microaggression against ANY student. Speak up and don't continue to perpetuate this space, saying it's a safe space but then letting the bullying continue. Take a little more accountability because if someone in power or has authority stands up and says, "We don't speak that way about other people, at least not in this class," maybe they'll think twice about saying it in another class. (Pink) • If they notice anyone make a nasty remark or something like that, maybe they can intervene and say, "Hey, we don't speak that way in this class." Or they could do that and take the student aside afterward and say, "Hey, if you're feeling uncomfortable in this setting, let me know what we can do." Or they can take the other students aside and personally talk to them or write them up. Sometimes, my teachers at school had the safe space rainbow sticker or magnet and stuff like that, and sometimes I know some of

them just threw it up there, but you could sometimes tell the ones who meant it. (Periwinkle) • stand up for students when other students are being consistently misgendered and misnamed with just a quick, oh, actually, it's this name or this pronoun, and set an example for the class in terms of showing that class that that student is deserving of the same respect as any other student. (Green)
Learning about the TGNCNB community
• Research places that provide gender-affirming services because students go to adults for advice. (Yellow) • If I have to talk my counselor through my problem, I don't want to open up to them about it because I spend more time explaining the issue than trying to resolve it. I think that counselors should be more prepared to know those issues already. I believe they should expect that we hear about many things and deal with many things that we can't say to people. And we're dealing with a lot of background anxiety about the legal climate and anxiety about just people in the community dying at a very high rate and the worry about guilt and stuff like that. I think they should know that without me explaining it to them. And that would make them a lot better at being able to support us because I would feel comfortable and incentivized to go to them. (Dark Green) • I would tell them to learn and to practice, to learn what the trans experience even starts to look like, what the trans experience looks like for kids because that's different than what it is for adults, knowing, and when I say practice, I mean practice using pronouns you're not familiar with. If you don't know how to use they/them pronouns, figure it out. That's not on the kids to teach you. You need to figure that out. Learning, putting in the effort to understand how to support kids (Blue)
Creating Safe Spaces
• Ask questions about someone's identity if you're unsure because I'm sure they would love to tell you about it. It's very fluid. It changes a lot. You must be willing to ask questions so students feel comfortable talking to you. (Yellow) • If someone comes to you confidently and says they identify a certain way, then you openly correct them as if they're not identifying themselves correctly; stop doing that entirely. Because they know how they identify and they came to you with that information and confidence, so they're expecting you to uphold that information (Cyan) • I think that saying things and having things up on your walls goes a long way. (White) • Having a pride flag on the wall or something like that shows you are an ally. That tiny thing can make students feel just a little bit more safe. It shows that you feel comfortable enough to be associated with queer folks. (Periwinkle) • Don't always assume that a trans child is coming to you with something where gender is the focus. It might be, so make space for that. But sometimes, a trans kid might be coming to you for external stress; it's not related to gender. (Lavender)

• I think having some space like a GSA or something else where students can meet and talk about how they're doing and having some communication or interplay between that group and the school is really important (Green) • Being such a strong ally is not just a laugh and a slap on the wrist or something, but a restorative justice conversation happening so that other students can see you can't treat people this way. Treating people this way makes no sense; you're hurting them. I guess teachers being so unapologetically supportive in their allyship that's what needs to happen for kids to feel safe (Blue)
Using Chosen Names and Pronouns
• Introduce yourself and your pronouns, and providing space for people to say their pronouns is significant. Don't pressure people to give pronouns if they don't feel comfortable doing so. (White) • Talk to your students and ask if you have a preferred name. Same thing with pronouns. (Lavender) • I think support and resources are incredibly limited for students who don't feel like they can come out yet or don't have parental support in their identities. Students should be able to change their name even if they don't have parental permission." (Green) • Students get to define themselves. They get to express their name and how others should address them; that should be up to that student. (Lime Green)

Study participants were passionate about discussing what they would tell school staff in the context of what they needed when they were in secondary school. As much as their experiences varied, a common thread of asking for the kindness and support every human deserves wound through all stories. Lime Green's response best reflects the views of the group of participants:

> I would tell them [school staff] that regardless of whatever they may think or feel about queer people, all that matters is that in your classroom are vulnerable children that you've dedicated your career to supporting, and in choosing this career path, you chose to prioritize the wellbeing of the children above your own beliefs. I would encourage staff to give queer kids the same respect that they give the other kids. I would encourage them to affirm their uniqueness and affirm, critical thinking skills, and the ability to think outside the box of norms. Be nice; give compliments like, "Hey, I really love that sweater" or "Cool chain that

you're wearing on your pants. Love that vibe." Be kind to the kids who are a little weird, and create a space where those kids know that they can talk to you and use their goddamn names and pronouns!

When advising others, participants reflected on their experiences and considered what reduced stress and helped build resiliency. This aggregated advice from study participants does just that. School personnel must create safe spaces and foster positive relationships with their students. Sometimes, the adults in the school are the only ones that TGNCNB youth can go to for support; school staff must be knowledgeable about the needs of TGNCNB students. They must advocate and accept them regardless of their own beliefs. They must be the champions that their students need them to be.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the findings from interviews and focus groups designed to gain insight into how school staff can support TGNCNB students during their secondary school experience. This phenomenological analysis was guided by four research questions grounded in resiliency, transgender, and liminality theory. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The first theme was identities, with the subthemes of intersectional identities and gender identity, as well as transitioning, coming out, and embodying gender identity. The second theme was the school environment, which had subthemes of school climate, school policy, safe spaces, and champions that create safe spaces. The third theme was personal connections with subthemes of family, friends, and technology. Finally, specific advice to participants' past selves and other TGNCNB youth and school personnel has been extracted and highlighted. It should be seen as the clearest, most straightforward recommendations available to anyone who is trans or wants to be supportive of a trans person.

The central thread tying all the themes together is how stress and resilience impact allostatic load, the cumulative effect of stress, and allostatic overload. Stress and resilience are interwoven throughout this dissertation. Through an analysis of stress and resilience, a deeper understanding of the allostatic load of TGNCNB youth is attained, as well as the measures of resiliency that impact this population. In better understanding the stress/resiliency interplay on allostatic load, I hope that fewer TGNCNB youth will face levels of stress that overload their system to the point that they either engage in harmful means of coping or suicidal ideation. The schools these youth attend can use findings to implement strategies that will potentially reduce the allostatic load of these students, create safe and nurturing environments, and better support this population.

In the next chapter, I will synthesize findings related to the research questions with previous research while remaining grounded in resiliency theory, transgender theory, and liminality theory. I will explore this study's limitations and provide recommendations for future research related to supporting TGNCNB youth.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The participants in this study shared their experiences in secondary school as they transitioned and came out to the people around them and how their secondary school experience shaped their lives. In this chapter, I present a discussion of the findings, answers to the research questions, and implications for practice. I also note opportunities for future studies and limitations of the study.

Study participants shared what aspects of stress impacted them while they were in school, and the resiliency measures they employed to mitigate the stressors they faced. When the allostatic load becomes too great (allostatic overload), TGNCNB individuals, like all people, experience mental health breakdowns, use harmful resiliency measures, and are more susceptible to suicidal ideation. Guidi et al. described allostatic overload as "when environmental challenges exceed the individual ability to cope … a transition to an extreme state where stress response systems are repeatedly activated, and buffering factors are inadequate" (2021, p. 11). Exposure to frequent or chronic stress, lack of adaptation to repeated stressors, inability to turn off the stress response, and a lack of resiliency response to stress all can lead to allostatic overload. (Guidi et al., 2021)

Furthermore, when people experience allostatic overload, it can negatively affect their physical and mental health. Guidi et al. found that "allostatic load and overload are associated with poorer health outcomes." (2021, p. 19). The "poorer health" outcomes associated with allostatic overload include a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, impaired cognitive functions, digestive issues, sleep disturbances, and mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety (Guidi et al., 2021).

My study participants indicated several ways in which they tried to reduce their allostatic load: through engaging in hobbies, playing sports, or spending time with friends. *Newport*

Healthcare and *The Space Between Counseling* offer strategies for managing and reducing allostatic load:

- **Mindfulness and Meditation:** Regular mindfulness practices can modulate the stress response.
- **Physical Activity:** Regular exercise can counteract many of the adverse effects of stress.
- **A Balanced Diet:** Consuming a nutrient-rich diet supports overall health and helps the body cope better with stress.
- **Adequate Sleep:** Ensuring 7-9 hours of sleep allows the body to recover and handle stress more effectively.
- **Seeking Professional Help:** Don't hesitate to consult professionals or therapists for chronic stress issues.

Resilience is critical in reducing allostatic load and avoiding allostatic overload (Masten, 2018). For TGNCNB individuals, as with LGBTQIA+ individuals, generally, knowledge, affirmation, and safety can aid in building resilience (Johnson, 2016). Moreno-Tucker (2022) adds, "Resilience is essential in combatting adverse experiences; however, it can also be a contributor to stress" (pg104). The cost of having to be constantly resilient is fatigue. The decrease in allostatic load from being resilient is greater than the increase from fatigue, creating a new decrease; however, it can wear on an individual over time.

Three recent studies conducted between 2021 and 2023 focused on the stress and resilience of TGNCNB youth and people. They found that TGNCNB individuals face acute and chronic stressors in myriad ways and identified resilience factors at the individual level as well as at the community level (Guidi et al., 2021; Johns et al., 2021; Ramos &Marr, 2023). Throughout this chapter, I will address how my study results converge with and diverge from these studies and offer a conclusion synthesizing the above.

Summary of Problem

As my findings from this study have shown, TGNCNB students face many challenges in secondary school that increase their allostatic load. Various aspects of their identity cultivate this stress, compounded by variables that impact them throughout the day. TGNCNB youth are at a greater risk of bullying and harassment than their cisgendered peers (HRC, 2018) and are at a greater risk of employing harmful mitigating behaviors and suicidal ideation (Jenco, 2019; Trevor Project, 2022). TGNCNB youth spend most of their day in the school setting, and there is limited research on this population to identify what schools can do to support this population better.

Research Questions

Throughout Chapter Four, I provided the study's findings, which, in various ways, answered my research questions. In this chapter, I explicitly answer the research questions.

- How do TGNCNB individuals describe the culture of their secondary school and its role in their social, emotional, and academic development?

The study participants all describe their school's culture as academically focused with little attention to their emotional needs. The participants found ways to develop a friend group that was supportive of them but did not find many adults in their buildings with whom they could trust to discuss their gender identity. Furthermore, participants who described their school culture as conservative found that school administrators and staff were rigid and "stuck in their ways." A conservative culture that the participants described as authoritarian did not allow rules to be modified to meet the needs of the participants; instead, they were given the consequences based on the school's policy, for example, a school's dress policy. Participants felt the most stress from the interactions with their peers and articulated that their stress was predominately rooted in how

their peers treated them. The way students treat each other is grounded in the school's culture. The participants found that individual staff members created micro-cultures that the participants called "safe spaces" within their classroom more conducive to their social and emotional needs than those of the school building. The participants provided recommendations to school districts that should be integrated to create a climate that is supportive of their development: Open-mindedness; teaching acceptance over tolerance; using students' chosen names and pronouns; providing easy-to-access resources for TGNCNB students; providing staff with resources about TGNCNB students; widespread education about different gender identities; adopting school policies that support TGNCNB students; all students and teachers stand up for each other; creating safe spaces for TGNCNB students; and developing positive teacher-student relationships.

- According to TGNCNB individuals, in what areas of high school did they feel "safe," and in what areas did they feel "unsafe"? What attributes of those spaces made them feel that way?

Participants identified few spaces in which they felt "safe." They felt a sense of belonging and trust in these spaces and weren't judged. As stated in Chapter Four, the participants described a safe space as a place where judgment is acknowledged and discussed, not hidden. It's free from stress and allows for vulnerability and confidentiality. In such spaces, they can feel physically safe from harm and harassment, knowing their identity will be respected and that they belong. People in safe spaces support them even when not present, standing up for their identity and well-being. These spaces are created by a community that cares about them, where they’re understood and supported without needing constant education. Safe spaces can be physical or not, depending on the supportive community present. They provide a sense of acceptance and

allow them to be themselves without fear. They're about mindset as much as physical location, offering a place where external validation helps them feel safe and comfortable.

The participants highlighted the champions who created these oases for them in their classrooms, after-school clubs, and offices [guidance, coach, assistant principal]. The participants expressed sincere gratitude for the people who created these spaces for them and remembered the positive feelings associated with them.

There were hardly any neutral spaces, and the participants continuously navigated unsafe spaces throughout their school day. As discussed previously, interactions with peers caused stress, and most of the school day was spent around peers who were left unchecked. Time spent in unsafe spaces constantly stresses them as they spend most of the school day in these challenging spaces.

- How did TGNCNB individuals' levels of outness and experiences shape their secondary school experience?

The participants [n=7] who transitioned during their secondary school years had harrowing experiences as they transitioned while enrolled in school. Still, despite the challenges, they all found the strength and confidence to be their true, authentic selves. They were transitioning while in school, which is highly visible to those around them and, although stressful, was less of a burden than the internal struggle they faced while questioning their gender identity. They were approaching allostatic overload, and to reduce the load, they began to transition. The resilience value of transitioning outweighed the stress of dealing with the school environment.

The participants [n=3] who did not transition while in high school expressed typical school-age banter; however, one participant hyper-feminized to not “out” themselves. These

participants were not impacted by outness but did share that they witnessed students harassing other students who were.

- According to TGNCNB individuals, what support did they receive or wish they had received from school personnel at various transitions? What supports do they believe were needed but were not offered by school personnel?

The participants identified the support they received from the staff members that created safe spaces for them. The champions provided the participants with a space where they could be themselves without fear or stress; the space was a source of resilience they gravitated toward. Some participants received positive support from school administrators, such as meeting before the start of school with all the participants' teachers to create a dialog of support. Furthermore, building personnel identified restrooms for some participants to use to alleviate concerns for the participants. The participants were adamant that the support they received from very few adults in the building should have been provided by many.

In Table Five: *Advice to School Personnel* (Chapter 4), the participants offered advice to school personnel in five categories: school climate, standing up for students, learning about the TGNCNB community, creating safe spaces, and using chosen names and pronouns.

In education, we must avoid double standards that limit self-expression based on assigned gender. Equality is paramount, whether wearing pants or skirts, teaching inclusive history, or respecting chosen names. Providing safe spaces and policies that protect all students, especially those in the TGNCNB community, is crucial for their well-being and educational experience. In the classroom, fostering a genuinely safe space requires active engagement. Teachers and students should be vigilant against microaggressions and bullying, speaking up to correct harmful behavior. Holding each other accountable and demonstrating respect for all creates an

environment where everyone feels valued and supported. To better support students, adults should actively seek knowledge about gender-affirming services and the unique challenges faced by transgender individuals, including children and adolescents. Counselors should be equipped with understanding and sensitivity preemptively knowledgeable about issues such as legal climates, community challenges, and the diversity of transgender experiences. It's crucial to proactively educate oneself and practice inclusive language and behaviors to create a supportive environment for all students. Being open and willing to ask questions about identity is essential, ensuring that students feel comfortable discussing their experiences. Respecting how individuals identify themselves is paramount; correcting them undermines their confidence and trust. Visible displays of support, like pride flags, can significantly enhance a sense of safety and acceptance. Additionally, providing spaces for students to meet and discuss their experiences, such as a GSA, can be invaluable. Strong allyship involves symbolic gestures and restorative justice practices to demonstrate that harmful behavior is not tolerated, fostering a culture of safety and acceptance for all students. Creating an inclusive environment starts with simple yet powerful actions like introducing yourself with your pronouns and allowing others to do the same. It's important to respect individuals' choices regarding their preferred names and pronouns without pressuring them to disclose if they're uncomfortable. Additionally, ensuring that students have the support and resources they need, including the ability to change their name even without parental permission, is crucial for their well-being and self-expression. Ultimately, students should have the autonomy to define themselves and how they are addressed, fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusions

In addition to answering these research questions, I observed several significant findings—including the impact of allostatic overload and the value of other resiliency factors—that are tangential to the study because they are not directly related to the secondary school setting.

The experience of each TGNCNB young person is unique. Along the participants' journeys, they each came to a tipping point, noted by confidence and an unwillingness to continue life as when they committed to transitioning. They transitioned successfully and, by embracing their identities, have embodied the people they know they are. This is not the case for all TGNCNB individuals, and the findings from this study are not generalizable to all TGNCNB youth. Those who take their own lives succumb to allostatic overload, and researchers do not have the opportunity to uncover what could have been different along their journey to facilitate a different outcome. When the allostatic load of study participants became too great (allostatic overload), they experienced mental health breakdowns, employed harmful resiliency measures, and were more susceptible to suicidal ideation, though they did not succumb. This observation follows the findings from Guidi et al. (2021), who found that adverse physical and mental health effects can be attributed to allostatic overload.

All participants incorporated learned resiliency measures they had developed *before* beginning to question their gender identity. They relied on those resiliency measures to reduce their allostatic load and mitigate the additional stress put upon them when they started to transition or come out to the people around them. Some participants played sports, partook in hobbies, spent time with friends, used technology, or engaged in harmful behaviors. All participants indicated that the impact of friends on mitigating stress was significant. Galupo et al. (2014) found that positive friendships positively affected transgender individuals in the school

setting. Each participant had a core group of friends they counted on during their transition and who stood by them through the process.

Two notable findings from the research that are not directly related to the school setting were that the removal or growth of hair, albeit symbolically or literally, resounded among all participants to alleviate stress and build confidence. The trans-men identified facial hair as a significant step along their journey as it indicated the effectiveness of hormone replacement therapy and helped them "pass." In addition, transgender people tend to a gender binary rather than a non-binary and want to "pass" as the opposite gender to that of their birth.

When synthesizing my findings with other relevant studies, three related conclusions stand out:

1) Fear is the underlying emotion among all TGNCNB youth.
2) Allostatic load accrues from a multitude of sources and is cumulative.
3) Schools must better support the needs of their TGNCNB students, and the education community must act urgently to determine a course of action.

Fear

Fear is a natural emotion and a survival mechanism. When we confront a perceived threat, our bodies respond in specific ways. Physical reactions to fear include sweating, increased heart rate, and high adrenaline levels that alert us (Kozlowska et al., 2015; Karnatovskaia et al., 2020). People respond to fear differently and can have varying physical responses to it. For some people, it triggers a flight response, and they try to avoid situations that provoke fear. When coping with fear, some things one can do include having supportive people, practicing mindfulness, and taking care of your health (Fritscher, 2023). These strategies align with those for coping with stress and those practiced by the study participants.

All the study participants articulated that they felt fear in some capacity and that fear was an emotion underlying the stress they were experiencing. Lavender feared he would be kicked out of his house when he came out to his family. He stated, "I know how common it is when you come out as trans for your family to kick you out. And I was so afraid that that would be me." Periwinkle was afraid for his trans partner being visibly out in the world because she didn't easily pass. He feared for her safety. Pink feared how society would perceive him:

> I was afraid of how society would perceive me. I didn't have a great understanding of transgender people when I knew that I was trans. I was very much afraid of being cast out and feeling discriminated against, oppressed, and unsafe in public.

Fear instigates a natural physical response within the human body that releases stress chemicals. The fear neural circuitry includes amygdala output circuits that activate the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis, thereby including stress hormones in the negative emotional response (Johnson 2016). The stress from internal fear compounds with the response to the external stressors acting on a person, increasing allostatic load and physical response. The type of omnipresent fear participants described when recounting their coming-out and transition experiences would set a baseline allostatic load extremely high.

Allostatic load is Cumulative.

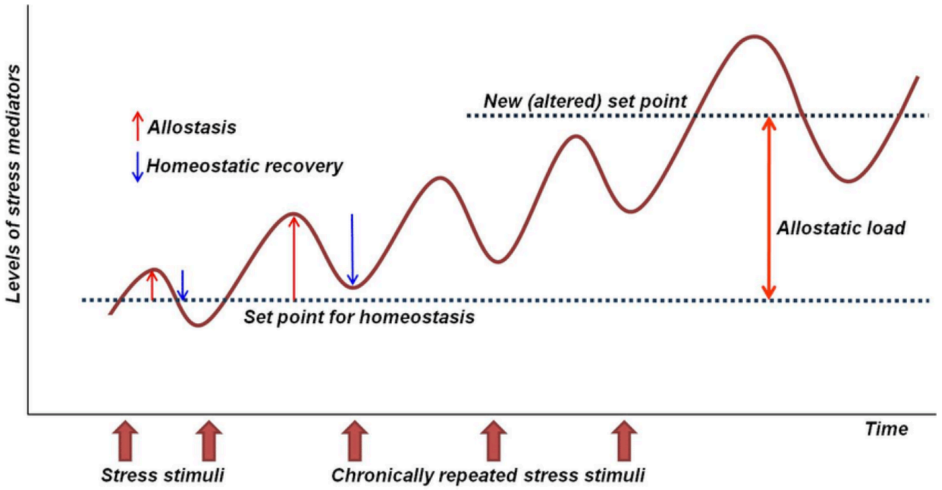
This study placed stress in three primary categories, derived from study data and discussed at length in Chapter Four: Identity stress; intersectional identity (attending a new school, academic achievement, athletic achievement, presenting an image, trying to fit in, religion, ethnic stereotypes, home dynamics, and romantic relationships) and gender identity

(transitioning, coming out, and embodying gender identity), school environment (school culture, school policy, and school personnel), and personal connections (family, peers, and technology). These findings follow the findings of parallel research. Ramos and Marr (2023) found that "Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth often experience acute and chronic traumatic stressors related to identity-based marginalization and discrimination" (p. 668). In addition, LGBTQ students not only face bullying and harassment from their peers but also encounter various other forms of discrimination in school. Discrimination includes being excluded from school spaces and activities, hearing homophobic and transphobic remarks from teachers or staff, and being advised to ignore students or change their behavior to avoid victimization. Over two-thirds of LGBTQ students report feeling unsafe in school due to factors related to their gender or sexual orientation, leading to 32% of them missing at least one day of school in the month prior (Ramos and Marr, 2023).

Cumulative stressors and fear challenged my study participants daily during their secondary school years. Blue was aware of the oppression he faced, causing external stress in addition to the internalized stress from being afraid in school and his community of hate crimes. As the burden of stress builds, it leads to allostatic overload.

Sahin & Buyukgok found that "depression, anxiety, and stress scores decrease with increasing psychological resilience" (2021, p.608). This is consistent with my research findings and my personal experience. School systems must find ways to support TGNCNB students in building this psychological resilience to the inevitable stressors they will face.

This diagram from Chapter One demonstrates how the stressors impacting a TGNCNB adolescent accumulate, and the student may reach allostatic overload.



A review of the data from this study indicates that all ten participants experienced allostatic overload because of the cumulative stressors acting upon them, some from gender identity. Blue had his first panic attack and "mental break" when he was a sophomore in high school due to his situation at home. Cyan's mental health tanked after his junior year; he was depressed and suicidal, mainly from the stress of having to be successful in school. Green and White stayed home during their middle school years. Green was "sick a lot," and White was "fearful of kids that went out of their way to harass him." Dark Green had a "terrible mental health breakdown" after her freshman year and had serious thoughts of ending her life. The stress stemmed from her struggle with her gender identity and prompted her to transition. Lavender was "absolutely depressed, not actively suicidal, but didn't want to wake up" also because he struggled with his gender identity. Lime Green was cutting due to the stress associated with having to compete in sports at a high level. Periwinkle had so much cognitive dissonance and mental strife from their struggle with their gender identity that it started causing physical illness. They were getting stomach pain and problems and couldn't keep food down, and they were out of school for a few months because of it. Finally, Yellow's parents put a lot

of pressure on him to do well in school, and that was supposed to be my only focus, but it was not a good environment. Yellow stated, “I didn't know where to go for help, and I had a very difficult time, and it wasn't until I was later that I made a decision that I had to do something and live as much true identity because the alternate would not have been pleasant for a lot of people.”

Each participant articulated how their cumulative stressors increased their allostatic load to a point in which they experienced illness, mental breakdowns, self-harm, or required them to miss school. The stressors they experienced were related to the liminal spaces of adolescents and transitioning and being in the space leading up to transitioning.

Support for TGNCNB Students

Study participants identified ten aspects of a positive school culture for TGNCNB students. This positive school culture is one of open-mindedness. It teaches acceptance over tolerance. The school uses a student's chosen name and pronouns, provides easy-to-access resources for TGNCNB students, and provides staff with resources about TGNCNB students. This positive school culture implements widespread education about different gender identities and passes school policies that support TGNCNB students. It is a culture in which all students and teachers stand up for everyone and one that creates safe spaces for TGNCNB students while fostering positive teacher-student relationships (champions of safe spaces). This conclusion generally tracks with the findings of Johns et al.:

> By committing to creating more inclusive and welcoming school environments, schools may help ensure that transgender youth feel safe, attend class more often,

and feel connected to their peers and teachers, thus decreasing the likelihood of suicidal ideation and other mental harms. (2021, p. 891)

There are five aspects of a secondary school to which the participants have made recommendations: affirmative and supportive school policy, standing up for students together, creating safe spaces by being a champion, using chosen names and pronouns, and educating school staff. The findings from Johns et al. (2021) and Ramos & Marr (2023) align with these aspects of the secondary school setting. Additionally, the whole school community must be cohesive and collaborative in creating the school climate necessary for TGNCNB youth to thrive and not be marginalized. A few people in a school building may be a beacon of support for TGNCNB students, but it is not enough; all staff members must stand together to create an inclusive, supportive environment that focuses on reducing the allostatic load of TGNCNB students and increasing resiliency factors.

Implications for Practice

As an educator of 27 years, as both classroom teacher and district administrator, I have first-hand experience working with TGNCNB students. These students are in our schools, and each district is responsible for providing a safe, nurturing school environment where all students can develop academically, socially, and emotionally. School staff are responsible for putting their beliefs aside and caring for and protecting the students in front of them. On February 7, 2024, as I was finalizing this dissertation, Nex Benedict, a gender-fluid 16-year-old, committed suicide after being bullied and beaten by three teenage girls while in school (Edmonds, C. & Hassan, A., 2024). My research aims to put knowledge in the hands of school personnel to prevent such tragedies from happening in the future. The information here must be passed to educators and policymakers through literature, presentation, and word-of-mouth. All school staff,

district administrators, and school board members must unite to create a culture that allows TGNCNB students to thrive. School leaders cannot succumb to political pressures from the community that may provoke them to cater to people with a harmful agenda. School personnel must ensure that no student ever approaches allostatic overload and have resources and spaces to help mitigate the stress those students are feeling.

This dissertation is not a culminating project but a step on my journey to make a difference for TGNCNB youth. I desire to publish the findings and recommendations in journal and book form to inform readers about how they can champion safe spaces. In addition, I would like to partner with TGNCNB support groups, go into schools, and present this information to staff. Support organizations that present topics on LGBTQIA+ issues to school personnel can and should independently present these recommendations. I hope all the school leaders in America will use their power to provide opportunities for such support organizations to give schoolwide presentations of these findings to impact school culture nationwide positively.

Lime Green stated, "All that matters is that in your classroom are the vulnerable children that you've dedicated your careers to supporting, and in choosing this career path, you chose to prioritize the well-being of the children above your own beliefs." Teachers can protect and create the spaces necessary for TGNCNB students; I aim to help them know how to do so.

Future Research

There have been a few studies over the past few years that focus on the stress and resiliency of TGNCNB youth in addition to this one. I conducted this research to fill a void in the current knowledge about the TGNCNB secondary school population. While this population is gaining more attention in research, researchers need to conduct studies at a more granular level

to refine the knowledge being unearthed. Four pressing questions emerged during my study, offering future research direction.

In addition to the analysis already conducted on this data set, I have identified two further opportunities for subgroup comparative analysis. In the future, I would like to use this data set to conduct two different comparative analyses, using two distinct subgroups in each case:

1. Group A, ages 18 - 24 (n=6) vs Group B, ages 25 - 30 (n=5). These two subgroups arose from modifying the initial participant age parameters to increase the number of study participants. One preliminary finding from this analysis is how each group used technology; Group A relied on technology to a greater degree.
2. Group C consists of participants who transitioned during HS/MS (n=7); Group D consists of participants who transitioned after HS (n=4). These subgroups arose from a natural divide among participants. Those that transitioned after high school indicated that they didn't know about transgenderism until late in their high school career or didn't know about it until they were in college. A question arises: Why do some youths have knowledge about transgender people earlier in their lives than others, and whose responsibility is it to educate people about TGNCNB experiences—the school or the home?

There are also several possible future research directions beyond the existing data set. First, most of my participants identified as transgender (88%). I believe more research needs to be conducted with gender non-binary individuals to gain better insight into the aspects of stress that impact them and to determine if those stressors are the same as those experienced by transgender individuals. Data from the one non-binary individual in my study indicates that elements of the stress are parallel, but further research is required.

Second, the participants in this study were looking back and sharing their experiences from secondary school, specifically, the stressors they felt and how they mitigated those stressors. They all experienced allostatic overload and could describe how they overcame it. It is impossible to interview TGNCNB individuals who succumb to their stress; however, it may be possible to interview TGNCNB students who are currently facing allostatic overload to ascertain why some individuals can overcome their stress and others cannot.

In addition, future work could explore the power associated with the social construct of gender for transgender individuals as they transition either from female to male [gaining power] or male to female [losing power]. My semi-structured protocol did not focus on the essential notion of gender and the rites and passages that society has placed upon each. Society essentially sees people as the gender labeled upon them at birth. Still, as transgender people transition, they must learn the gender stereotypes to “fit in” and “pass” to be accepted in society.

Finally, three unexpected outcomes from this study warrant further research as it pertains to stress and resiliency for TGNCNB individuals: the impact of "passing" on stress and resilience, the powerful impact of hair as a means of building confidence, and the role of fear in the lives of TGNCNB individuals. The idea of fear intrigues me the most. While I think about presenting my findings and conclusions to impact the TGNCNB community positively, I am afraid. I have a tremendous fear of what people think of me and the hate they may carry toward me just for being me. Fear has never left me; I'm not sure it ever will. Fortunately, the antithesis of fear is love, and I also carry people's love for me. Usually, love wins, but not always. I am fearful of the repercussions of this dissertation on my personal life.

Limitations

There were several limitations while conducting this research. Limitations occur when a study has an inherent weakness that may impact its validity, generalizability, and reliability. I have identified and declared limitations in this study related to my positionality, the sampling techniques, and the demographic composition of the participants.

Being a part of the TGNCNB community allowed me to quickly create relationships with my participants to create a safe space in which they felt comfortable answering the questions during the interview. In turn, I was empathetic to the participants' experiences and the emotions they felt. Separating myself from their stories was challenging, and I was not always successful. I had to "live" their experience with them to be a compassionate listener, and the interviews felt like therapy sessions, with me as the therapist. I created a safe space for my participants by being vulnerable and sharing personal experiences to demonstrate relatability. Being a native researcher made it challenging to be objective during the interview process. This influenced their responses unknowingly and undoubtedly impacted the kind and quality of data my study produced. I was in the trenches with them while extracting their experiences. My experience and knowledge may have influenced the interview process, observations, and conclusions—again, unknowingly.

Furthermore, I employed a convenience sampling of my network of acquaintances to find participants for this study. I reached out to the gay-straight alliances of colleges and universities, local TGNCNB support groups, and academic researchers of the LGBTQIA+ community. Once I found participants, I also relied on a snowball sampling from the participants' network of contacts. As a result, I located 30% of the participants through personal connections, 20% through local support groups, and 50% through academic researchers. Eighty percent of the

participants either were in college or graduated from college. This sampling technique gave me access to TGNCNB individuals who were associated with a college or university and did not yield any participants who didn't attend or plan to attend college. Although the sampling technique provided an opportunity to find non-college attending participants through support groups, none responded, creating a sample of highly educated TGNCNB individuals. This limits the conclusions to college-level transgender individuals who are in or have been through a transitional phase, as it is unclear if TGNCB youth who do not attend college might have different or additional recommendations to others and school staff.

The demographic composition of the participants may also create limitations within the study. The gender identity breakdown of the participants was as follows: 77% identified as trans-male, 11% identified as trans-female, 11% identified as non-binary, and 88% identified as transgender. The unequal distribution of participants yields data primarily applicable to the trans-male experiences in secondary school. Also, I have made general conclusions about the TGNCNB community that may not be indicative of the experiences of non-binary individuals.

There are also limitations inherent to all qualitative research. Qualitative research is dependent on the interaction between the researcher and the participants through an interview process. Interviewing is a skill that improves over time and with each interview. Having conducted very few data-collecting interviews in the past, I recognized my interviewing skills improving with each interview. As a result of working with a susceptible population and having access to very few participants, the stakes felt very high; I didn't feel as confident interviewing during the first few interviews as I did toward the end of the data collection process. A second limitation of qualitative research is having a small sample size. I was able to interview ten participants over eight months. According to Blad (2017), there are approximately 210,000

individuals who identify as gender nonconforming between the ages of 18 and 24. I was able to locate and interview six of them, or roughly .003% of the population. It is challenging to generalize study findings to the larger population, with only .003% of the population represented; however, I feel confident the recommendations of the participants would have a significant positive impact on the mental health of TGNCNB youth while they are in secondary school.

To mitigate these limitations, I implemented several trustworthiness measures to engage with the study objectively. I continuously reviewed the data, and with each subsequent interview, I drew commonalities between the participants' experiences. I maintained a self-reflection journal to account for my own emotions and experiences as they connected to those of the participants. I met regularly with members of my dissertation committee to reflect on my practices and provide guidance on separating what I thought I would find from what I could conclude. I appreciate their wisdom and guidance and could not have done this work without their support.

Conclusion

The findings from this study provided rich data about the lived experiences of TGNCNB individuals while they were in secondary school. While there were many similarities in the participants' experiences with stress and resiliency, each participant had a unique journey. The central stress-related themes and accompanying stress-mitigating recommendations to school personnel were like the findings from three recent studies, reviewed in Chapter 2, that focused on the stress and resilience of TGNCNB youth. Similarities between this study and the findings of Johns et al. (2021), Sahin & Buyukgok (2021), and Ramos & Marr (2023) were reviewed earlier in this chapter.

This study adds to the existing knowledge base of the notion of championing safe spaces, along with specific recommendations on how to do so, in addition to the idea that unremitting fear is a dominant, underlying emotion contributing to TGNCNB students' allostatic load. This study also adds depth to previous findings that school personnel are responsible for being champions of all students under their care.

I am grateful for the participants' willingness to share their experiences. Their courage, forthrightness, and generosity will help educators adopt strategies that better support TGNCNB students in their classrooms.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Share Your Story!!!

Participants Needed!!

Are you a Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, or Gender Non-Binary person between the ages of 18 and 30?
Are you interested in participating in a research study that aims to make a difference for TGNCNB students in secondary schools?

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the stress factors and resiliency measures that transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary students faced during their secondary school years. This study explores - How the experiences of TGNCNB students, through the telling of their stories, shaped their development while in secondary school. Key topics include stress and resiliency, transitioning, embodying one's self identity, school culture, safe spaces, and the impact of technology.

What this study involves:

1. A 90-minute interview
2. Optional Focus Group (60 minutes)

Things to Note!

1. There is continuous consent throughout the process. You can withdraw at any time.
2. All participants' identities will remain anonymous.
3. The duration of the study is 6 months

If you wish to participate:

This study is being conducted with the approval of Molloy University IRB. If you wish to participate or have any questions, please email: kferina@lions.molloy.edu

Molloy University IRB approval date: May 24, 2023

Appendix B: Consent Form

MOLLOY UNIVERSITY
School of Education and Human Services

ORAL AND INTERNET-BASED INFORMED CONSENT SCRIPT

Title of Research Study: Transgender Youth in Secondary Education: How the experiences of TGNCNB students shape their development in 7-12 Schools

Principal Investigator: Kimberly Ferina
Doctoral Candidate, Molloy University

Dissertation Committee Chair: Ryan Coughlan, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Baruch College, CUNY
Adjunct Professor, Molloy University

Thank you for joining us today.

You are being asked to participate in this research study because you have self-identified as a transgender, gender non-conforming, and/or non-binary college student over the age of eighteen who has graduated from high school within the past five years. The purpose of this research study is to better understand how transgender, gender non-conforming, and/or non-binary student's experiences in secondary school have shaped their identity in order to support middle and high school personnel who seek to better serve TGNCNB students.

- If you agree to participate, we will ask you to reflect on your own identity and share your personal experiences with your experiences in middle school and high school. We will ask these questions through a Zoom interview and an optional focus group and closing interview. The interview will take place over a 45 to 75-minute period, which you are free to stop at any moment. The focus group will take place over a 90-minute period, which you are also free to stop at any moment. The closing interview will be approximately 30 minutes. The Zoom interviews (Audio and Video) will be recorded and deleted upon transcription.
- There is a possibility that you will experience discomfort or other emotional risks given the nature of this study. As you reflect upon your transgender, gender non-conforming, and/or non-binary (TGNCNB) identity and the college application, selection, and matriculation processes, you may reencounter traumatic or emotional events. If at any point you wish to stop the interview because of any discomfort you are experiencing, you may do

so. Right now, I am sharing a document in the chat that includes a list of mental health resources and services for TGNCNB people. Please feel free to hold onto this resource list for your personal use at any point. You can remove yourself and your data from this study at any time and will be asked multiple times if you wish to continue.

- Throughout the interviews and optional focus group, you will use your self-selected pseudonym (That is not used on social media or other instances) to protect your privacy. During the interview, you may choose to keep your camera on or off to further protect your privacy. During the optional focus group, we will require all participants to keep their cameras off to protect privacy.
- I will record the interview and optional focus group and maintain the recording in a private, password protected and encrypted folder that only we have access to. Following the interview and focus group, I will make a transcription and remove all identifying information from the transcript. Once we have completed the transcription, we will delete the recording so that I no longer have any of your identifying information in our possession. The information we collect from you as part of this study will be transcribed using a third party under a non-disclosure agreement and will not be used or distributed for future research.
- It is possible that having the opportunity to reflect on your pathway from high school into college could help you better understand yourself. Such reflection could provide you with new personal insights that you did not have prior to engaging in this study.
- There are also a range of benefits to society associated with this study. First, the study will benefit TGNCNB students who are in secondary school by providing them with the guidance of the lived experiences of the study participants. Second, the study will benefit high school guidance counselors and other secondary school personnel who are seeking information about how to best support their TGNCNB students.
- By moving ahead with the interview, I understand what is expected of me and I understand that I am under no obligation to finish the interview and my withdraw at any time without any repercussions.

Consent Statements for Participants:
Do you consent to participate in the research?
___ YES, I AGREE to participate in the research
____ NO, I DO NOT AGREE to participate in the research

If you agree to video recording, please indicate either one of the following:
_____ I agree to video recording
_____ I do NOT agree to video recording

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you have any questions, you can contact Kim Ferina at kferina@lions.molloy.edu If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or if you would like to talk to someone other than the researchers, you can contact: Molloy University IRB at 516-323-3711

Appendix C: List of Mental Health Resources

Mental Health Resources

If you need immediate mental health support, please use the following resources published by the National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network:

- **Trans Lifeline:** 877-565-8860
- **GLBT National Hotline:** 888-843-4564
- **National Coalition Of Anti-Violence Programs:** 212-714-1141 (English And Spanish)
- **GLBT National Youth Talkline:** 800-246-7743
- **DeHQ: LGBTQ Helpline For South Asians:** 908-367-3374
- **Suicide and Crisis Prevention Hotline**: 988
- **Trevor Project 24/hour Support via chat, phone, or text:** https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/

For additional supports, please use the following resources

Center of Excellence (COE) on LGBTQ+ Behavioral Health Equity

Funded by SAMHSA, the COE is designed to support the implementation of change strategies within mental health and substance use disorder treatment systems to address disparities impacting the LGBTQ+ community.
https://lgbtqequity.org/

Human Rights Campaign

The Human Rights Campaign is a civil rights organization dedicated to attaining full equal rights for all LGBTQ+ people.
https://www.hrc.org/

GLSEN

GLSEN is a national network of educators, students, and local chapters working to improve the experience of LGBTQ students through policies, curriculum, and educator training.
https://www.glsen.org/

Trans Lifeline

This resource is a trans-led organization that connects trans people to community, support, and resources.
https://www.translifeline.org/

The Trevor Project

In addition to being a leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ+ people, The Trevor Project also provides education and additional resources on their website.
https://www.thetrevorproject.org/

National Center for Transgender Equality

This website has many different resources for transgender people, and advocates the need for policy change to advance transgender equality.
https://transequality.org/

Trans Student Educational Resources

In this website for transgender students there is information about various workshops and trainings as well as additional resources.
https://transstudent.org/

Appendix D: First Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this study and sharing your story. I have previously discussed the purpose of this research and your involvement while reviewing the oral consent. Do you have any other questions about your participation before we get started?

As a reminder, this Zoom interview, both audio and video will be recorded. No identifying names will be used and the recording will be deleted upon transcription. Do you wish to continue?

If at any point during the interview you wish to take a break or end your participation, please let me know. I am going to start by asking you a few introductory questions.

1. **Introductory Questions (**prefer not to say is acceptable**)**
    a. **Identity/Demographic**
        i. *How do you describe your ethnicity?*
        ii. *How do you describe your religious beliefs, if any?*
        iii. *How would you describe your family's socio-economic status while you attended high school?*
        iv. *What year did you graduate from high school?*
        v. *What Town/State did you attend high school?*
        vi. *What sex was assigned to you at birth?*
        vii. *How do you self-identify in terms of gender?*

    b. **Critical points of transition**

        i. *Please share how you self-identified in terms of gender while attending secondary school?*
        ii. *Please share how your gender identity evolved during your time in high school, into college, and to the present day?*
        iii. *In what ways, if any, do you envision your gender identity continuing to evolve?*
        iv. *What fear, if any, did you have related to embodying your gender identity in our society?*

    c. **Perceived level of outness over time**
        i. *In what ways did you communicate with members of your family about your gender identity while in high school?*
            1. *Were there family members that you did NOT share your gender identity with?*
            2. *Which family members, if any, were most supportive?*

ii. *In what ways did you communicate with friends about your gender identity while in high school?*
    1. *Were there friends that you did NOT share your gender identity with?*
    2. *Which friends, if any, were most supportive?*

iii. *In what ways did you communicate with teachers or other adults in your school about your gender identity while in middle school? High school?*
    1. *Were there adults that you did not feel comfortable communicating with? Why?*

2. **Stress & Resiliency (**The next section of questions center around stress and resilience and may invoke sensitive emotions. Do you wish to continue?)

i. *Liminal/Transitional*
    1. *What stressors have you experienced related to the evolution of your gender identity and gender expression from childhood to today?*
        a. *What factors, external to the evolution of your gender identity and expression, contributed to your feeling of stress?*
        b. *How did your stress shift in relationship to the evolution of your gender identity and gender expression?*
    2. *What did you do for yourself in an attempt to mitigate this stress?*
        a. *In what ways, if any, did other people or activities help mitigate your stress?*

ii. *School Climate/Culture*
    1. *Describe any stress associated with your time in high school as it relates to your gender identity and expression.*
        a. *What aspect of the school environment contributed to your stress? Explain how?*
        b. *Were you ever afraid to go to school? If so, why?*
        c. *Did you ever stay home from school as a result of this fear? If so, how often?*
    2. *How did you mitigate any of this stress associated with your time in high school?*
        a. *In what ways, if any, did other people or activities help mitigate this stress associated with your time in high school?*

iii. *Technology*
    1. *In what ways, if any, have your experiences on social media contributed to stress related to your gender identity and gender expression?*
    2. In what ways, if any, did social media or the wider internet help you navigate the evolution of your gender identity and expression?

iv. *Other*
    1. *Which stressors have had the greatest impact on your mental health?*
    2. *What approaches to mitigating stress have had the greatest impact on your mental health?*

3. School Climate/Culture

a. Environment

i. *In what ways, if any, did you have a sense of belonging in your secondary school?*
    1. *In what ways, if any, did your gender identity and gender expression shape your sense of belonging in secondary school?*
    2. *What accounts for this level of belonging you felt?*

ii. *What factors contribute to a positive secondary school climate for TGNCNB students?*

b. Safe Spaces

i. *How do you define a "safe space"?*
ii. *Were there any spaces in your secondary schools where you felt "safe"?*
    1. *In other places in your community?*
iii. *When you began secondary school, what supports, resources, or safe spaces for transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students, if any, did you find?*
    1. *How did you locate these resources?*
    2. *How have you used these resources?*
    3. *What has been helpful about these resources?*
iv. *Please discuss any supports or resources for transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students you wish your school offered but did not.*

v. *If you have had any negative experiences relating to your gender identity with your peers, teachers, or other school staff, please describe the incidents to whatever degree you are able to do so.*

4. Hindsight

i. *What would you recommend high school teachers and counselors do to best support transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students that are "out" while in high school? What about for students that are not "out"*

ii. *What would you recommend school personnel do to best support transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students during their time in secondary school?*

1. *What would you tell the people at your middle/high school to continue to do to support other TGNCNB students?*
2. *What would you tell the people at your middle/high school that they must do differently to support TGNCNB students?*

iii. *What advice or learned wisdom would you share with your younger self about their time in secondary school?*

iv. *How often have you shared the experiences you discussed with me today with other people?*

Thank you so much for your time and your thoughtful participation in today's interview. I have three final requests for you.

First, please let me know if you would be willing to join a focus group with five to ten other study participants. Participation in the focus group is entirely optional. During the Zoom focus groups, all participants will use pseudonyms and video cameras will remain off to best protect participants anonymity. Is this something you would be interested in being a part of?

Second, I value your story and appreciate the time you have spent with me. Please let me know if you are willing to share with me an image, photograph, art piece, poem, or any other artifact that you feel encapsulates your journey that can add visual representation to who you are. This will not be shared unless specific permission is granted.

Third, please share information about our study with anybody you know who might be willing to participate. I have shared a flyer for the study in the zoom chat [drop the document in the zoom chat].

Do you have any other questions for me? Again, thank you so much for your participation today.

Appendix E: Focus Group Protocol

Semi-Structured Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for joining us today to participate in this focus group (4-6). My name is _____ and my pronouns are _____. We have previously discussed the purpose of this research and your involvement while reviewing the oral consent. Do you have any other questions about your participation before we get started?

As a reminder, this Zoom interview, both audio and video will be recorded. No identifying names will be used and the recording will be deleted upon transcription. Do you wish to continue?

If at any point during the focus group you wish to take a break or end your participation, please let me know.

The purpose of this focus group is different than the previous interview that you took part in. In the interview process, you had the opportunity to answer direct questions, here, you will have the opportunity to engage in a conversation with other people focused on four themes; stress, resilience, school climate, and recommendations. We will spend approximately 15 minutes discussing each theme. You may choose to take notes or jot down any thoughts you may have inthe event that you want to share them in the final interview, if you should choose to take part in that. In order to facilitate this focus group, I am going to ask that you use the raise hand feature when you would like to speak. I encourage you to reflect on, respond to, and build off of thoughts shared by other participants. When doing so, please use each other's Zoom pseudonyms and be mindful of each other's pronouns. The audio and video will be recorded and will be deleted upon transcription. Before we begin the focus group, I would like to share the following norms:

1. *Privacy and confidentiality: Respect the privacy of other focus group attendees and keep all information shared in this space today confidential.*
2. *Make space, take space: Everyone's voice is important in today's focus group. Make sure you are sharing your thoughts and perspectives. Also, make sure that you are being mindful about how much you are speaking and create space for others to share.*
3. *Be respectful: Remember that we each come to this space with our own set of experiences and views. Be respectful of each other and avoid the use of language that may be offensive to other participants.*

Are there any final questions before we get started?

1. **Stress**
    a. *What stressors pertaining to your personal gender identity journey had the greatest impact on you while you were in secondary school?*
    b. *What stressors pertaining to other aspects of your identity had the greatest impact on you while you were in secondary school?*

2. **Resiliency**
    a. *What strategies did you implement to mitigate stress related to your gender identity during your secondary school years?*
    b. *Who are the people in your circles who provided you the greatest support? Were any of them staff members of your school? If so, who?*
    c. *Did you rely on social media or the internet as a source or support? If so, in what ways?*

3. **School Culture**
    a. To what degree and in what ways, if any, have you found peers, school faculty, and staff to be knowledgeable about gender identity and inclusiveness of transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary students?

    b. If you could design a secondary school where TGNCNB students feel safe , what would it look like?

4. **Recommendations**
    a. What advice would you tell the TGNCNB individuals that are currently in middle school? High School?

    b. What would you want school personnel to know about supporting TGNCNB students while in secondary school?

Before we end today, I want to again emphasize our first norm of privacy and confidentiality. At the beginning of our time together, we discussed the following norm: Respect the privacy of other focus group attendees and keep all information shared in this space today confidential. Are there any questions about this norm? Please maintain this norm following today's focus group so that we can best protect all participants.

Finally, If you would like to participate in the third interview, a 30-minute share about your experience in this process, please let me know.

Appendix F: Final Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Final Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this study and sharing your story. I have previously discussed the purpose of this research and your involvement while reviewing the oral consent. Do you have any other questions before we get started?

As a reminder, this Zoom interview, both audio and video will be recorded. No identifying names will be used and the recording will be deleted upon transcription. Do you wish to continue?

As a reminder, if at any point during the interview you wish to take a break or end your participation, please let me know.

Note: Questions will also be informed by the steps of the process that have come before

1. Throughout this process you had the opportunity to tell your story and take part in a focus group. After reflecting on the process, is there anything that you would like to share that you didn't have the opportunity or time to share previously?

2. One of the purposes of this research is to make a difference for TGNCNB students while they are in secondary school. What are the top pieces of advice you would want to give them as they partake in their journey?

3. *If you had the opportunity to sit one-on-one with the superintendent and board of education of a school district, what would you tell them about providing a safe learning environment for TGNCNB students?*

4. *What aspect/s of this study would you suggest be done differently, if any? How would you change it? Would you be amenable to other research studies that focus on TGNCNB youth?*

Thank you so much for your time and your thoughtful participation in today's interview. I have a final request for you.

Do you have any other questions for me? Again, thank you so much for your participation today.

Appendix G: Periwinkle explains gender non-binary

If I were explaining it to a room full of teachers, I would probably say something along the lines of explaining what the gender binary is, the concept of it, and then talking about the difference between gender, sex, gender presentation, and sexuality. Because I know, in high school, I definitely got those mixed up and I'm sure a lot of people do who aren't in the spaces where it's being talked about a lot. And then once I define those, I would probably go along the lines of something like some people don't identify within the gender binary because it's made up, and going at a very basic... Just like you can understand something's being forced on you and that doesn't fit right for you. That's what these people are experiencing. You, I'm sure, experience it in other ways, somewhere else. But when we're born, we're automatically gendered and that has nothing to do with how we feel inside or how we want to present.

And I think that people, I'm not sure... The places that I've worked with, schools, I was in Rhode Island and the schools there were generally supportive, and the issues that people were having were more nuanced, like intersectional issues of some racism mixed in with some homophobia or instances where that person feels like they know enough to be an ally. So if you're calling them out for something that they're doing, they get really defensive, because they're like, "No, I support trans folks." It's that liminal space where you're saying the things you identify as an ally or however you support folks, but they're not feeling supported by you because you're not doing the work or you're not listening or you are not doing something else. LAVENDER

Appendix H: Pink Story

There was so much cognitive dissonance and mental strife. Exactly. And it was started causing physical illness, and I was getting stomach pain and problems and I couldn't keep food down, and I was out of school for a few months because of it, and I was getting all these tests done and things like that. And I finally saw a doctor that had told me, "You've had every single test under the sun for endo, your gastro things, and it can't be something physical. It has to be something going on with you mentally in your mind." And so that clicked it for me and made me realize, and I knew it was true and it scared me and I ran out of the office crying and I was in the bathroom for probably a while, crying and freaking out. And both of my parents were at the... I have two moms and both of them were actually at that appointment with me and they realized, "This is something we need to bring you to a psychologist and talk about this." And they had taken separate cars to go there and I went back with one of them, actually immediately, to this doctor. And on the way home, my mom helped... I think she maybe knew and she helped get it out of me a little bit, not like- And she knew at that time, I think. I don't know how long she had known for, but maybe it was something they had thought about, my two moms had thought about in the past, just between each other, but maybe never obviously said to me and knew it was something for me to maybe figure out on my own if it was that. She, I guess, had put the pieces together and realized, and she led me to that and I didn't even say, "I'm trans." She just helped lead me to that and I just nodded and yes, and I was crying because I was so scared.

And then I went to the psychologist after that and I got on some antianxiety and antidepressant medication and started seeing a therapist and things like that. But yeah, I actually never really officially told my other mom face to face because I was just so emotionally drained that day that I just went home and went to bed. But then, yeah, we talked about it the next day and I said to

them, "I am nervous and I don't know if I even want to do anything about this until college or whatever, even if then," and I was just going to stay female I guess, because I was scared. So scared of what people in school or maybe family or friends or anyone would think, even though I knew they were totally okay with it, and they were. I mean, my parents were totally okay with it. I was worried about everyone else. And they were like, "All right, whatever you want to do in whatever time." They were incredibly supportive, which was so, so, so monumental and helpful for me because I knew they were on my side.

I said to them at that time, "Yeah, maybe we could tell a few people in the family, really close people, whatever, a few ants or whatever." But I didn't really want to have it spreading around the family or whatever until I was ready to transition. And then the next few days, probably within the next two, three days maybe, I was doing, just searching online and just got to know a little bit more about how I was feeling and realized that other people felt this way too and they've been through it and they're on hormone replacement therapy and you could just live a everyday life and be the you always wanted to be, and that was life-changing for me to realize that. And so I literally remember be excited and running out to my moms in the kitchen, I was like, "Watch this video, watch it." I was like, "I could do this." And they were like, "Yeah, you can do that." I was like, "Yeah, can I start?"

Appendix I: Lime Green Story

I would say a lot. I would say it causes me more stress about my gender than anything in my tangible life. From just the process of coming out on social media in itself was a stressful process and trying to vet people and decide if they were going to harass me or not, which when I came out as gay, that did happen. People from my hometown reached out to me, sending me bible verses, calling me a sinner. That thing very much happened, so I was concerned when I came out as trans. So just the process of vetting people was a stressor.

The trans social media influencers I find to be troubling because a lot of them are these traditionally attractive, perfectly passing. You'd never know they were trans. With trans masks, they're always these muscle heads, these chisel bodies that I could work out for 18 years and I would never look like that and it wouldn't matter what I did, I would never look like that. People who have perfect top surgery results and my top surgery was not perfect. I got a revision, it's still not perfect. That expectation that your top surgery results must be perfect and all of that, just the pressure from other trans people, really, of what it means to be trans, what it looks like to be trans, how trans people like three steps to bulk your chest before top surgery and it's like, "Go like this." What the fuck does that mean? There's that.

Then there's the social media of when you're friends with a lot of trans people, trans people post stories that are important to trans people, which are almost inevitably these negative news stories about all these horrible things happening to trans people across the country. So then it's like my feed is just clicking through. It was, what was it, last week that that non-binary person was murdered at a gas station in Brooklyn for vogueing in public, and it's just like, "I don't need to see that." I know it happens. I know it matters, but I can't exhaust myself with all of these

horrible things happening to trans people. It's traumatic and it makes me feel like the world isn't safe and I don't need it.

So a lot of that, and also, I felt a lot of pressure, now that I'm thinking about it, to broadcast my transition because that's something a lot of trans people do is like, "This is my voice five months on T," like, "Oh, this is my top surgery results," like, "Oh, I got my hysterectomy today." Thinking about posting those things and making my transition a performance for other people to witness created inauthenticity in my process because I was trying to make transness look digestible for cis people. I think that that was, if I could go back and do it again, I wouldn't have done that.

It really, really is. I take breaks from social media semi-regularly because every now and again I'll notice my mental health getting worse and be like, "What's going on?" I'll go back and look at my phone and look at my app time and be like, "Oh, I've been spending an hour a day on Instagram, that's why I feel like shit," and I turn off Instagram, I delete the app, and I start feeling better in a few days. It's just like just like that.

Appendix J: Personal Reflection

I transitioned more than 25 years ago and had many experiences before that time and afterward that were stressful, and I had to find ways of coping with that stress. I experienced allostatic overload several times and although there were times that I though that taking my life would solve my problems, I knew in my heart that wasn't the solution. I wanted to live life. The dissertation journey was a life-long goal and I wanted to achieve it before I was fifty years old. I am fifty years old as of this writing and I learned to accept myself for who I am during this process. I discovered a deeper love for myself through having the opportunity to interview other transgender and gender non-conforming people. Their stories were reflective of their difficult times and their celebrations, and they were inspiring. We laughed, we cried, we questioned why the world is the way it is. We were quiet, we were loud and through the connective tissue of shared experiences, we connected through inquiry and discourse.

This process was difficult from the start the Doctoral program. I had to be vulnerable and share my ideas for this work with faculty and peers; they were all tremendously supportive, but I felt fear none-the-less. I indicated throughout this dissertation that to do the work I want to do; to make a difference for the TGNCNB population, I must embody being transgender in a whole new way, being "out". That prospect is terrifying as the last time I experienced that, it was awful. I was harassed and bullied. I was fired from jobs, and I lost my best friends. I am in a different place now and I am inspired to be an agent of change and to do so, I had to change myself.

After each interview with a participant, I sat in a quiet space and reflected upon the conversation, the responses to questions and listened to my inner voice. I found myself grounded in

compassion and empathy thinking about how I can make a difference for the kids that didn't have the same outcome as my participants. How do I reach the kids that exist in a constant state of allostatic overload and do not have resilience measures they can use to cope.

I have been an educator for 27 years. I spent seven years in the secondary classroom, and for the last 12 years, I have served as a K-12 school administrator. I have experienced bullying, torment, and mental anguish as a transgender adult in the school buildings in which I worked. I moved away to transition after two years of teaching. After two years, I moved again to start my life over and suffered for three years in the school system I was in. I experienced hate and transphobic actions and comments while transitioning. I remember the constant beratement from other adults. Students would make comments under their breath; adults would say things to my face. I carried the stress of these interactions with me while I was at work and while I wasn't. Like me, study participants have had unique experiences while traversing their time in secondary schools.

Allostatic overload can happen to anyone. I recall it occurring myself several times during my lifetime, most significantly as I was trying to embody my gender identity. It was during this time that I had thoughts of suicide and not being able to continue living. When I experienced allostatic overload later in life, suicidal thoughts did not cross my mind, but the stress was still significant enough to cause mental breakdown that required me to go to therapy. I experienced setbacks in life goals, had poor eating and sleeping habits, and was depressed. This was not a pleasant experience, but I was not so distraught that I felt I could no longer live. I attribute the difference over time in my ability to handle instances of allostatic load both to maturity and my

understanding that the stressors were temporary, and I would be able to incorporate my personal measures of resilience that would reduce my allostatic load.