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Cultivating Resilience in Adolescence: How Educational Environments Can Support Positive Youth Development During Identity Exploration

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CULTIVATING RESILIENCE IN ADOLESCENCE

Cultivating Resilience in Adolescence: How Educational Environments Can Support Positive Youth Development During Identity Exploration

by

Heather I. Arndt, Genesis G. Larin, Gladis Abigail Munguia,
Henry William Perez, & Dianne Preciado

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Abstract

Adolescence is a critical stage of human development, one that can be especially challenging for teens that are navigating certain vulnerabilities in their identity formation. With the World Health Organization stating that 14% of 10–19 year-olds experience mental health conditions, educational environments are increasingly needed to address mental concerns in their curriculums. This qualitative research project used a combination of art based inquiry and narrative analysis to answer the following question, “How can educational environments promote resilience and positive youth development during adolescent identity exploration?” Findings illuminated several emergent themes that culminated in the following four recommendations for educational environments; 1) Integrate opportunities for creative self-expression in general education spaces, 2) Professional development for educators to integrate Social Emotional Learning (SEL), 3) Create opportunities for social interactions between students and educators, 4) Create and support opportunities for social interactions between students, and 5) Ensure educational spaces include mental health support for students.

Keywords: Adolescent Development, Identity Formation, Resilience, Positive Youth Development, Educational Environments, LGBTQ+, First Generation College Students, Transgender, Suicidal Ideation, and Unhoused Youth.

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Introduction

The Study Topic

As the role of education has expanded, educational environments have recognized the importance and necessity of adjusting and incorporating mental health education into their curriculum. According to the World Health Organization, "Globally, it is estimated that 1 in 7 (14%) 10–19 year-olds experience mental health conditions, yet these remain largely unrecognized and untreated" (2021). Given the prevalence of mental health concerns among adolescent populations, this study aims to answer the question: "How can educational environments promote resilience and positive youth development during adolescent identity exploration?"

In our research, we will focus on four specific adolescent populations that may benefit from further exploration and support in the process of identity formation. These four populations include unhoused individuals, transgender youth, first-generation college students, and adolescents at risk of suicide. With this in mind, our research aims to understand how educational environments can be optimally utilized to promote resilience and positive youth development for ALL young people but with a focus on particular vulnerabilities that might be experienced in adolescent identity exploration.

This study employs a qualitative narrative-based methodology, incorporating semi-structured interviews that use arts-based inquiry and storytelling to capture the lived experiences of adolescents. The culmination of this research will be presented as recommendations for educational environments and as well as in an anthology and distributed to educational communities working with adolescents.

Significance of the Study

Current literature acknowledges the impact of educational environments on identity formation among adolescents (Riekie et al., 2016). Considering that, “past research suggests that student wellbeing not only has an immediate effect on child and adolescents but also long-term effects into adulthood” (Aldridge et al., 2015 p.5), our goal is to understand how school settings can be optimally utilized to promote well-being among adolescent populations, particularly those often overlooked and under-resourced (e.g. unhoused individuals, transgender youth, first-generation college students, and adolescents at risk of suicide). This research aims to understand the additional challenges these groups face and explore potential supports that can be provided by the school environment. By investigating the relationship between educational environments, identity formation, and overall well-being within these four populations, we aim to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role schools can play in shaping adolescent development. Additionally, this research aims to explore how the education system can be better utilized to respond to the diverse experiences and vulnerabilities of students.

For this research, we will be utilizing a qualitative narrative-based methodology informed by a strength-based lens, which recognizes and understands "the capacities and capabilities" of individuals within our four designated populations (Bryant et al., 2021, p. 1405). Unlike the deficit discourse, which centers on the "problem," this approach emphasizes identifying and building on the inherent strengths and potential for resilience within these populations. Our research will begin this process by gathering first-hand accounts through interviews with participants from each of the four aforementioned populations. Through these findings, we aim to synthesize the experiences of each population in order to better understand how educational environments can effectively address the unique needs of adolescents and contribute to overall

well-being and development.

Background of the Study Topic

As the world of education is transforming, educational settings have increasingly found the necessity to integrate and address mental health concerns in their curriculum. Recent literature recognizes the pivotal role that educational environments can play in shaping the identity of adolescents (Riekie et al., 2016). Acknowledging the research that indicates the impact an individual's experience in adolescence will have on their trajectory into adulthood (Aldridge et al., 2015), our objective is to explore how school settings can be effectively utilized to enhance the well-being of adolescent populations. In doing so, we seek to understand the impact of concepts such as resiliency and positive youth development on the development of identity.

The research delineates adolescence as a developmental phase spanning the ages of 12 to 24, which aligns in part with the high school age range. According to the influential work of psychologist Erik Erikson, adolescence is a critical period for identity formation, as Erikson posited, "the primary psychosocial task of adolescence is the formation of identity" (Erickson in Sokol, 2009 p.142). Sokol (2009) further states that the transitional nature of roles during adolescence may lead to heightened uncertainty regarding one's purpose and existence. Notably, the involvement of role models, particularly parental figures, holds paramount significance in fostering successful psychosocial development during adolescence.

Of particular interest to this study are four specific adolescent populations that may benefit from further exploration and support in the process of identity formation. These four populations include unhoused individuals, transgender youth, first-generation college students,

and adolescents at risk of suicide. In the case of transgender adolescents, the literature highlights the complex experiences and stressors that can be encountered, including heightened discrimination, limited access to medical assistance, and elevated rates of depression and suicide (Erentaite et al., 2018; Rieke et al., 2017; Ungar et al., 2017). Their struggles in school and healthcare settings often stem from the lack of awareness and education among caregivers (Aldridge et al., 2015). To address these challenges, educational environments can play a pivotal role by creating affirming and supportive spaces, promoting gender-affirming care, and offering resources for self-expression and advocacy. Schools can greatly enhance the well-being and resilience of transgender adolescents by educating staff, peers, and administration about the unique needs and experiences of trans youth is an essential element in fostering inclusiveness and reducing feelings of isolation (Davis, 2020). Additionally, art therapy interventions can be utilized to develop coping skills, foster self-compassion, and empower transgender adolescents on their journey of identity exploration (Davis, 2020). This research underscores the importance of leveraging the educational setting to promote equity, inclusion, and well-being among transgender adolescents, acknowledging that schools can provide a crucial resource for this population's development.

Some of these resources have also been documented to be used to prevent youth suicide ideation. Youth suicide rates have been steadily increasing worldwide, making it a major cause of preventable deaths, with adolescence being a particularly vulnerable period for suicidal ideation. Several factors such as traumatic life events, including domestic violence, brain injuries, and bereavement, contribute to suicidal ideation among adolescents (Shahram et al., 2021). The research explores the connection between specific stressors experienced by youth and suicidal ideation and examines how educational environments can play a supportive role in mitigating

these symptoms. Academic and social pressures in high schools are on the rise, with academic pressure significantly influencing the mental health of students (Stear et al., 2023). There's also a concerning link between bullying, both traditional and cyberbullying, and suicidal ideation among adolescents (Hinduja et al, 2010). To address these challenges, one of the top priorities for public health and policy is the development of school-based interventions that can effectively improve mental health, with a focus on understanding and addressing the risk factors that contribute to adolescent suicide ideation. This research underscores the urgency of implementing strategies to prevent adolescent suicide and promote mental well-being within educational settings (Stear et al., 2023).

Housing could be a blessing or a burden for youth exploring resilience during their adolescent stages of life. The literature explores various adolescent populations that have experienced being unhoused, emphasizing the significance of adopting more descriptive language such as "unhoused" instead of "homeless" to address the associated stigmatization and stereotypes (Slayton, 2021). These populations include unhoused LGBTQ+ adolescents, whose disproportionately high representation among those seeking housing services underlines the need for specified interventions (DeChants, 2022). Additionally, literature indicates the impact of violence on unhoused youth and the importance of community-based strategies to address root causes of violence (Bronwyn et al., 2021). One study highlights the vital role of resilience in the context of housing insecurity and identity exploration, emphasizing the need for further research and targeted interventions to empower young people (Maat et al., 2022). It also underscores the role of school-based programs in supporting unhoused adolescents and promoting their identity exploration and resilience. These findings stress the critical role of educational environments in fostering resilience during the formative years of identity exploration (Cutuli et al., 2020). Future

research should focus on effective strategies and interventions within educational settings to further support adolescents in building resilience.

First-generation college students have been becoming more and more of a part of the culture in the Western world. Literature that examines the experiences of first-generation college students, defines the term and highlights its complexity across different institutions, which influences eligibility for services and program offerings (Whitley et al., 2018). Exploration of this term highlights the intersectional identities within the first-generation experience, focusing on "first-gen plus" identities, such as historically minoritized ethnicities and demographic groups (Whitley, 2018). Findings emphasize the challenges faced by first-generation students, particularly those belonging to multiple marginalized groups, and the coping strategies they employ.

Lastly, literature explores the concept of positive youth development and how institutions play a role in supporting the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Williams, 2022). Factors like transparency and permeability in educational and career contexts are discussed as key concepts for facilitating this transition (Lerner et al., 2011). Moreover, researchers highlight the potential of art-based interventions to reframe academic marginalization, celebrate students' unique assets, and foster resilience. These interventions can contribute to positive youth development and help first-generation students navigate their journey of identity exploration during their academic years and into adulthood (Aguilera & Lopez, 2020).

Literature Review

Introduction

As the role of education has evolved, educational environments have increasingly needed to incorporate and address mental concerns in their curriculum. According to the World Health Organization, "Globally, it is estimated that 1 in 7 (14%) 10–19 year-olds experience mental health conditions, yet these remain largely unrecognized and untreated"(2021). Current literature acknowledges the role that educational environments can play in fostering identity formation among adolescents (Riekie et al., 2016). Considering that, "past research suggests that student wellbeing not only has an immediate effect on child and adolescents but also long-term effects into adulthood" (Aldridge et al., 2015 p.7), we aim to understand how school settings can be optimally utilized to promote well-being amongst adolescent populations. With this in mind, we hope to understand the role concepts like resiliency and positive youth development can play in identity achievement. With this in mind, we hope to understand the role concepts like resiliency and positive youth development can play in identity achievement. Identity Achievement is defined as a "cognitive process that refers to exploring an identity and developing an understanding of the meaning of that identity in one's own life."(Ghavami et al., 2011, p.2)

This literature review will begin the exploration by first defining adolescent development according to existing literature and Western Psychological Tradition. Next, the analysis will address how resilience and positive youth development can be utilized to promote identity achievement amongst adolescent vulnerable populations. The literature review will then concentrate on four adolescent populations that may benefit from exploring identity

achievement, exploring challenges, and providing potential solutions. These four populations include unhoused individuals, transgender youth, first-generation college students, and adolescents at risk of suicide. Lastly, this literature review will conclude with an exploration of how educational environments can best support positive identity achievement amongst their students.

Adolescent Development

This first section will focus on the adolescent stage of development, particularly identity formation and achievement and a stable and coherent sense of self. Through a combination of traditional theoretical frameworks (Erik Erikson) and contemporary literature (Positive Youth Development and model's on resiliency), this section will provide foundational knowledge focused on understanding adolescent development.

Eriksonian

We begin by briefly reviewing Erik Erikson's theories regarding adolescent identity development. Erikson, a student of Sigmund Freud, presented seminal research in his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, published in 1968. Erikson's conceptualization of identity, which has become a central theory in Western Psychological Tradition, describes identity development.

Through Erickson's conceptualization of identity, we are able to understand the developmental milestones that can be achieved in typical psychosocial development. Erikson's theory stresses the importance of creating a strong sense of identity, which is identified as foundational for positive outcomes. According to Erikson, identity achievement is described as a "stable and coherent sense of self" (Erikson in Watanabe, 2017 p.15). In alignment with Erikson's development theories, Watanabe confirms that identity achievement can increase

mental well-being, and decrease feelings of depression and isolation, whilst promoting positive coping strategies (Watanabe, 2017).

Erikson's developmental theory is referred to as the epigenetic principle, which presents a developmental life cycle of stages. According to the epigenetic principle, each stage of development depends on the successful progression of preceding phases and must, therefore, occur in the correct sequence (Peedicayil, 2012). According to the theory, failure to achieve a developmental milestone can, therefore, consequently impact subsequent stages of development. Erikson's theory, which is highly respected in Western culture, therefore emphasizes the importance of creating a strong sense of identity, which serves as the foundation for positive outcomes. In understanding Erikson's developmental framework, we gain insight into typical developmental achievements, which are crucial for researchers and medical professionals alike. This understanding helps address the problems and stressors related to identity achievement throughout one's life. Erikson's theory offers a valuable framework for creating solutions and interventions that promote positive outcomes, such as identity achievement, which is the fundamental aspect of healthy human development.

Positive Youth Development

For the purposes of this research, in conjunction with Erikson's theories on identity development, we incorporate a more contemporary theory known as Positive Youth Development (PYD) as a means to understand adolescent development. PYD advocates a strengths-based approach rather than a deficit-oriented perspective on adolescent development, focusing on the attributes and positive qualities we aspire for our youth to cultivate and embody (Lerner et al., 2009). Positive Youth Development theory shifts from the negative or problem-focused view of adolescents that many fields have historically attributed to this stage of

development. The shift towards recognizing the strengths of adolescents is rooted in an appreciation for “the plasticity of human development” and “the importance of relations between individuals and their real-world ecological settings as the bases of variation in the course of human development” (Lerner et al., 2009 p.20).

Existing literature indicates that, “PYD occurs in the context of relational development through reciprocal, bidirectional relationships between individual strengths and environmental resources, e.g., opportunities for mentorship, caring relationships with family members” (Milot Travers & Mahalik, 2021 p.324). Lerner (2005, 2021) proposes a developmental model of PYD known as the Five C’s model, which includes Character, Confidence, Caring, Competence, and Connection. The 5 C’s model hypothesizes that when there are high levels of the 5 C’s, youth thrive and in turn engage in activities that are beneficial to themselves and their families and communities (Johnson & Ettekal, 2023, Lerner et al., 2005). Research demonstrates that elevated levels of the 5 C’s of PYD during adolescence correlate with reduced depression, diminished risky behaviors, and the establishment of protective factors (Lerner et al., 2005, Milot Travers & Mahalik, 2021).

According to the literature, PYD provides an avenue for fostering a culture of strength-based approaches to stressors in school settings. This approach individualizes students’ strengths, which creates equity among students. This approach individualizes students’ strengths, promoting equity among students. Such equity fosters a connection to school and school engagement, crucial for enhancing outcomes for students (Debnam et al., 2014). As we identify the stressors that may affect the populations we are discussing later in this review, we seek strengths-based solutions offered in the literature that create connection, equity, and resiliency among adolescent students.

Resiliency

The theory of resilience shifts its focus from deficits to strengths, thus aligning with PYD, aiming to comprehend the promotion of well-being despite exposure to risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). The term resilience summarizes various protective processes aiding youth in navigating through adversities throughout their lives (Ungar, 2011). Resilience is commonly defined as the capacity to bounce back from life's challenges, emphasizing adaptability, and is often likened to the concept of hardiness (Shahram et al., 2021). With regards to adolescent development, rather than being a fixed trait, resilience is influenced by various factors such as context, population, risks, protective factors, and potential outcomes associated with the specific risk exposure.

According to Halloran (2011), there are four concrete steps which emphasize the significance of resilience through four distinct actions: 1) Minimize risk by providing opportunities for resilient children to mitigate potential negative outcomes; 2) Break the cycle by offering opportunities for resilient children to interrupt downward consequences; 3) Enhance self-esteem through consistent positive experiences, fostering an internal locus of control and improved self-esteem, with the understanding that optimism and positivity are context-dependent; 4) Recognize pivotal moments, as many resilient individuals attribute a turning point in their lives as instrumental in setting them on a more successful path.

For our research, we examine resilience in adolescents and how their school environments can support their outcomes. Eisenberg and colleagues have shown in a series of studies, that the development of the capacity for emotional and behavioral regulation is related to the broader development of both prosocial behavior and behavior problems in young children (Eisenberg et al., 2000, Eisenberg et al., 1997, Eisenberg et al., 1996). These researchers have

used parent, teacher, and peer reports in combination with direct observations of children's behavior to assess emotional regulation (e.g., processes of attentional shifting and focus) and behavioral regulation (e.g., ego control and resiliency). Children who were rated as higher in regulation skills were also higher in peer-rated social status, engaged in more socially appropriate behavior, were higher in the capacity for empathy, had fewer behavior problems, and exhibited less negative emotions. These literature findings indicate that emotional and behavioral regulation skills involved in children's daily interactions in their social environment provide an important set of resources on which children can draw in attempting to cope with stress (Compas et al., 2001).

School Environments and Identity Achievement

According to the literature, educational settings can play a crucial role in developing resilience and positive identity development throughout adolescence. With students spending up to 15,000 hours in school throughout their lifetime, the school environment can be utilized as an appropriate platform for promoting resiliency, well-being, positive youth development, and identity achievement (Aldridge et al., 2015). School environments can promote these qualities through the development of positive school culture and the use of positive identity frameworks/curriculum. Kaplan et al., 2014; Rieke et al., 2017; Ungar et al. 2017 confirm the importance of school environments, as research has indicated that a child's ability to thrive in stressful situations is largely influenced by a supportive environment rather than the child's innate ability to cope. The importance of fostering resiliency and positive identity development becomes exceedingly evident during adolescence. As adolescents encounter "externalizing and internalizing difficulties," they may struggle to "develop a coherent set of goals, values, and beliefs or may even avoid engaging in identity exploration entirely" (Erentaite et al., 2018, p.

761). With the assistance and support of the school environment, adolescents can be better equipped to handle the challenges and environmental difficulties they encounter during this period of development (Erentaite et al., 2018; Rieke et al., 2017; Ungar et al., 2017).

School Culture and Identity Formation

According to Aldridge et al. (2015), school culture is defined as the student's perception of the quality of their relationships with teachers, staff, and fellow students, the quality of their education, and the physical, social, and emotional safety provided within the school environment. Read et al. (2015) confirm that a positive school culture can increase student engagement while improving their ability to achieve academically. In terms of practice, Rieki et al. (2017) identified six key aspects of school climate that could significantly influence identity formation and resilience: teacher support, peer connections, school connectedness, diversity affirmation, clarity of rules, and understanding of reporting procedures and support resources. Students primarily learn and develop their identities through the influences of their community, which includes peers, teachers, and school staff (Rieki et al., 2016). Given the impact these influences have on identity formation, there is a significant connection between identity and school culture. Consequently, the school climate can have both negative and positive effects on adolescent identity formation. With this in mind, it is crucial for schools to adopt a holistic approach when implementing positive identity formation frameworks within education. This process begins by addressing the school's culture.

Schools and Identity Formation Frameworks/Curriculum

Beyond school culture, the educational environment can support adolescents by providing curriculum or frameworks that encourage and facilitate identity achievement. According to a framework presented by Kaplan et al., schools can promote identity formation by

implementing an educational curriculum that addresses four key components for identity exploration: "promoting relevance, triggering identity exploration, facilitating a sense of safety, and scaffolding exploratory actions" (2014, p. 249). The aforementioned article explains that, despite their unique contributions to identity formation, each component is interdependent, thus calling for an approach that encompasses and addresses all four components. Ungar et al. (2017) argue that identity formation within school settings begins with the construction of positive self-esteem. While school culture undeniably plays a role in promoting this self-esteem, the curriculum and academic achievement can also contribute to building a positive self-esteem which, in turn, facilitates both resiliency and identity formation. For adolescents of color, this begins by promoting strong ties to their racial and ethnic identities (Ungar et al., 2017).

Identified Vulnerable Populations

Given the additional challenges adolescents with marginalized identities face throughout identity formation, this research aims to address four specific marginalized groups that may benefit from additional education support throughout adolescence. Considering that these populations are often overlooked and under-resourced, this research aims to address the additional challenges these populations face while presenting the potential benefits they may gain from educational support. The following sections will focus on addressing the needs of the following groups: trans youth, adolescents at risk of suicide, unhoused individuals, and first-generation college students.

Trans Adolescent Populations

One of the vulnerable populations we have identified are transgender adolescents. Our objective in this research is to explore solutions within educational environments that may provide positive outcomes for trans adolescents exploring identity development. For the purposes

of this research, we will use the term "trans" to encompass the variety of identities within the trans umbrella. This may include but is not limited to, transgender, genderqueer, gender fluid, gender non-conforming, gender expansive, agender, non-binary, transfeminine, and transmasculine individuals (Hillier, 2020). The literature recognizes that gender can be an ever-evolving identity or form of expression (Zeeman, 2017). At this time, trans is the most current umbrella term used to refer to people who do not identify with the sex assigned to them at birth. (The Trevor Project, 2023). This section aims to review existing literature that identifies and describes the experiences and potential stressors trans adolescents may encounter (Saltis, 2023; Zeeman, 2017). This research will also identify the internal strengths that many trans adolescents may call upon, which are inherent aspects of their experience (Hillier, 2020).

Current research shows that the adolescent trans population often faces significant challenges, including heightened discrimination and oppression, reduced access to or comfort with seeking medical assistance, and elevated rates of suicide and depression (Saltis, 2023). Additionally, trans adolescents often face adversity in school, community settings, and healthcare due to a lack of training and education among caregivers (Hillier, 2020). Research has shown there is a lack of awareness among teachers and health practitioners in identifying distress in trans youth (Zeeman, 2017). This same author states that, trans adolescents may also grapple with internalized stigmatization and shame due to their identity (Zeeman, 2017). In addition, research shows unsupported trans adolescents are more likely to drop out of school, have suicidal ideation, and experience violence and challenges of being unhoused (Saltis, 2023). "When compared with their cisgender peers, trans youth present with increased incidence of suicide, depression, anxiety, addiction, self-harm, substance misuse, eating disorders, HIV infection and

other illnesses, homelessness, survival sex work, school refusal, and school dropout” (Davis, 2020, p. 403).

In addition to environmental stressors, the socio-economic, geographic, and cultural aspects of a trans adolescent’s life can affect their ability to access assessment, treatment, and appropriate gender-affirming care (Davis, 2020). According to recent research, it is first important to address feelings of isolation and access to gender-affirming care in order to promote positive outcomes for this adolescent population (Davis, 2020).

When addressing the needs of trans populations, the literature emphasizes the role intersectionality plays in understanding gender identity. According to Davis (2020):

Transgender youth are particularly vulnerable when they are members of other disempowered populations. Undocumented transgender immigrants may lack access to lifesaving medical care; others may be unable to alter documents to reflect their lived name and gender, exposing them to complex legal difficulties and increased threats to their safety. A gender expansive young person from a multi stressed family may not have the psychosocial support or family education necessary to move toward acceptance, nor adequate time to devote to support groups and community gatherings, leaving them isolated and with significant unmet needs (p. 403).

According to multiple studies, trans adolescents have articulated the need for educators, staff, and administration to be more aware and proactive in addressing the specific stressors encountered by transgender youth in educational settings (Saltis, 2023; Zeeman, 2017). Trans

adolescents have reported a lack of affirmation as a significant stressor, which includes the use of the appropriate gender, name, and pronouns when addressing the student (Saltis, 2023; Kosciw, 2014; Zeeman, 2017). Additionally, trans adolescents have identified various other stressors, such as the lack of access to a supportive community due to being closeted, the absence of a designated safe space to take a break, and the absence of gender-neutral facilities like restrooms, as well as gender-segregated sports (Saltis, 2023; Zeeman, 2017). In addition, victimization related to outedness, which included hostile school environments, was reported; however, the benefits of outedness at school and among peers outweighed the stressors in these cases (Kosciw 2015). Most importantly, trans adolescents reported a lack of understanding and education among administration, educators, and peers as a key stressor. (Davis, 2020; Kosciw, 2015; Rosentel et al., 2020; Zeeman et al., 2017).

Given that trans adolescents, like many adolescents, “spend up to 15,000 hours in school by the time they complete their education”(Aldrige et al., 2016, p.6) the educational setting can be utilized as an appropriate resource for this population. School settings are conducive to promoting well-being, as research shows that students who feel more connected to their school experience a higher overall well-being (Zeeman, 2017). Support and gender-affirming care within the school is pivotal in fostering this sense of connection for trans adolescents (Saltis, 2023; Zeeman, 2017). Across multiple studies, researchers have identified that trans adolescents reported improved well-being when they received access to a safe space for breaks, the ability to self-define at their school, the support of trained and gender-affirming staff, and the opportunity to engage in trans youth clubs (Hillier, 2020; Zeema, 2017). Due to this, school settings can be uniquely positioned to promote a sense of equity and inclusion, (Zeeman et al., 2017).

Research shows that providing access to safe space with creative resources, such as art, meditation, dance, and other forms of self-expression, has been helpful in navigating challenges and developing coping strategies (Saltis, 2023; Zeeman, 2017). In addition to coping strategies, these creative and meaning-making activities also create opportunities for activism and advocacy, which further promote resiliency (Hillier, 2020; Saltis, 2023). These opportunities shift the focus from victimhood to strengths-based experiences and thus redirecting attention from the trans adolescent to the systemic challenges they face (Davis B., 2020; Hillier, 2020; Kosciw, 2017; Rosentel et al., 2021; Zeeman et al., 2017).

The current literature shows the importance of creating a safe, affirming environment with access to resources that create opportunities for self-expression, advocacy, and meaning-making, which can significantly benefit trans adolescents (Hillier, 2020; Saltis, 2023). Additionally, educating staff, peers, and administration is also an essential element in promoting inclusiveness and reducing feelings of isolation among trans youth (Hillier, 2020; Kosciw, 2017; Saltis, 2023). To increase coping strategies and resilience, art therapy interventions can be utilized. As Davis (2020) notes, "For transgender youth who are asked to fit themselves into bodies, schools, and social systems not fully set up for the expansivity of their experiences, art therapy serves as a culturally attuned modality, offering young people a unique space free from the pressure of definition"(p. 420). Davis (2020) presents how group art therapy can be used to foster connection, share experiences, and explore identity. In addition to this, art therapy can aid in developing self-compassion, resiliency, and coping strategies, such as mindfulness and tools for self-soothing. This research has demonstrated that art therapy can facilitate empowerment and while helping individuals develop a more authentic self-identity (Davis, 2020).

Depression/Suicidal Ideation among Adolescent Youth

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth globally with rates steadily increasing in recent years, as well as a major cause of preventable death for all ages (Shahram et al., 2021). Adolescence is a particularly critical period of identity development and one of the most vulnerable age groups to Suicidal Ideation (SI) (Rodway et al., 2020). Factors such as domestic violence, brain injury, bereavement, bullying, and academic pressures are all proven to increase SI in adolescents (Splete, 2003; Ilie et al., 2023; Schönfelder et al., 2020). For the purposes of this research, we delve into the recent upsurge in adolescent suicides specifically, by examining literature elucidating possible motives behind adolescent suicides, the impact on family systems, and potential strategies, such as PYD, for preventing adolescent suicide in the future.

Stressful and Traumatic Life Events in relation to Depression/SI among Adolescent Youth

According to Splete (2003), findings show that adolescents experiencing SI demonstrated an average of 7.84 stressful life events in the 12 months prior to their suicide attempts. These findings suggest evidence that can aid researchers in exploring the distinct types of stressors adolescents may experience that lead to SI and how educational environments can be supportive environments that can mitigate symptoms. In this section specifically, researchers focus on subsets of trauma that could lead to (SI) that are unique to the adolescent experience: bullying, anxiety, depression, pressure, bereavement, and lack of confidence.

One established trauma life event for SI (Schönfelder et al., 2020) is the experience of child abuse. It is a rather broad term consisting of several subdimensions. Most frequently investigated (Schönfelder et al., 2020) and relevant for the analyses presented here are sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Although emotional abuse may be less physically painful, this type of abuse can have negative impacts on mental health (Schönfelder et al., 2020). The

literature by Van Orden et al. (2010) found emotional abuse to be connected to SI, which aligns with findings by Schönfelder et al., (2020) who explains that emotional abuse may be strongly associated with suicidal behavior. According to Shneidman (1973), each suicide impacts six people directly, and research is showing that the resulting emotional turmoil itself can act as a risk factor for future suicidal behavior and needs proper professional treatment (Schönfelder et al., 2020). Thus this research suggests that youth in an educational environment could be at risk of both emotional and physical abuse that staff or school administrators may not be aware of.

Academic and Social Pressures in relation to Depression/SI among Adolescent Youth

In this section, we will explore the academic and social pressures placed on high school students, and how according to literature, pressure to the point of SI can be avoided. In two large surveys, adolescents cited academic pressure as one of the top influences on their mental health (Stearse et al., 2023). There is also evidence that teachers, parents, and caregivers are concerned about rising levels of academic pressure and the potential association with adolescent mental health problems (Stearse et al., 2023). In a large study of adolescent suicides in the UK, academic pressure was one of the most reported antecedents in coroner investigations (Rodway et al., 2020). There is evidence that levels of academic pressure have risen among adolescents (Löfstedt et al., 2020), over a similar time period to the increases in depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide (Stearse et al., 2023).

Empirical studies and some high-profile anecdotal cases (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) have demonstrated a link between suicidal ideation and experiences with bullying victimization or offending. The current study by Hinduja and Patchin examines the extent to which a nontraditional form of peer aggression—*cyberbullying*—is also related to suicidal ideation

among adolescents. In 2007, a random sample of 1,963 middle-schoolers from one of the largest school districts in the United States completed a survey of internet use and experiences. Youth who experienced traditional bullying or cyberbullying, as either an offender or a victim, had more suicidal thoughts and were more likely to attempt suicide than those who had not experienced such forms of peer aggression (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Solutions according to Existing Literature

Stress from bullying is a leading cause for depression and SI in adolescents (Aldridge et al., 2015). "For example, students victimized through bullying have been reported to be generally lonely and unhappy which, in turn, has been associated with developmental psychopathology and anxiety and depression" (Aldridge et al., 2015, p.7).

A top priority for policy and public health is to develop mental health and PYD interventions that can be delivered in schools (Lerner et al., 2009). There is some evidence that school-based interventions improve mental health, but many are unsuccessful and according to the literature, we need a better understanding of which risk factors to target (Stearé et al., 2023). Improving our understanding of whether academic pressure is a potential causal risk for mental health problems could inform the development of school-based public health interventions (Stearé et al., 2023).

Unhoused Adolescents and Strength-Based Terminology

This section explores the experiences of adolescents facing housing insecurity. Slayton (2021) proposes replacing the word "homeless" with "unhoused" to mitigate potential societal biases affecting those without permanent housing. The concern is that the term "homeless" may contribute to stigmatization, perpetuating misconceptions about personal failure rather than acknowledging the complex social issue (Robbins, 2022). To address this, Abrams (2023)

recommends using "unhoused" in political materials and speeches for a more empathetic approach. This shift in language could shape public perception and contribute to more inclusive policies. The study recognizes the impact of terminology on addressing the challenges of the unhoused, opting to use the term "unhoused" throughout.

Unhoused LGBTQ+ Adolescents

A study by DeChants et al. (2022) centers around LGBTQ+ young adults who experience rejection from their families, leading to housing insecurity. These findings underscore the need for tailored support for LGBTQ+ youth facing housing challenges. Several studies provide crucial insights into the challenges faced by adolescents and those being unhoused who identify as LGBTQ+. Nonetheless, youth who identify as LGBTQ+ comprise approximately 7% - 9% of the general population, but out of that population, 29% are seeking housing services. Similarly, estimates suggest transgender youth make up 3% of the general population and 4% - 7% of youth seeking housing services (DeChants et al., 2022). They pose the urgent need for tailored interventions and support services to address the specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth, who are disproportionately represented among those seeking housing services. In addition, these statistics shed light on the limitations of current methods used to identify unhoused youth, such as those used by the Department of Education, are necessary to accurately capture the extent of the issue. Risk monitoring surveys, such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), an anonymous self-report survey capable of estimating population rates for several circumstances among public high school students in a city or state. Investigators have documented rates of being unhoused using previous administrations of the YRBS, including in Massachusetts (e.g. 7.6% in 1992), Philadelphia (5.9% in 2011; 4.8% in 2013), Connecticut (5.4% in 2011), and Delaware (3.9% in 2011) (Cutuli, et al. 2019).

Unhoused Adolescents and Impacts of Violence

The trauma of being unhoused can lead to other issues such as violence. Data mentions the devastating impact of violence on youth, particularly in economically disadvantaged and racially segregated neighborhoods, emphasizing the importance of community-based strategies to address the root causes of violence and provide support to vulnerable youth in these areas (DeVries, 2022). These findings underscore the importance of creating a more equitable and supportive environment for youth facing violence or the challenges being unhoused. Additionally, the impact of non-violent trauma on the development of leadership skills, DeVries (2022) offers indirect insights into the effects of trauma of being unhoused during identity development. While not directly related to education, this research sheds light on the potential need for support from educational environments, recognizing the far-reaching consequences of early trauma.

School-Based Support and Unhoused Adolescents

The literature emphasizes the crucial role of school and community programs in supporting youth who are currently or have experienced being unhoused, particularly in shaping their identity during the exploration stage. Bronwyn et al. (2021) examined the implications of human capital and linked inequality perspectives on child well-being within a Head Start program, highlighting the positive impact of school-based programs on unhoused adolescents. Maat et al. (2022) explored the role of child temperament and executive functions in fostering resilience in early childhood, emphasizing the importance of early support in educational environments for all children. Cutuli et al. (2019) focused on unhoused students, stressing the significance of developing self-regulation, positive self-esteem, and positive relationships with

parents, peers, and mentors. While most adolescents develop under environments conducive to positive self-resilience, this part of the study questions how this occurs when one is unhoused. These factors are crucial for predicting outcomes and clinical applications, emphasizing the necessity for additional support. This study directly establishes the importance of educational environments in helping young people explore their identity and cultivate resilience.

Resilience and Unhoused Youth

As discussed earlier, resilience is a fundamental aspect of youth development, in particular for those facing housing insecurity and identity exploration. This study delves into the relationship between resilience, housing insecurity, and the significance of educational environments in fostering this trait. By examining both the challenges and the available resource supports, this review underlines the need for further research and targeted interventions to empower young people to navigate their unique journey of self-discovery. Further, Zinn et al. (2020) explore the relationship between early-life adversity and the ability to externalize problems during adolescence. This study delves into the role of resilience and its adverse effects on children who have experienced maltreatment. This topic bears relevance to identity exploration during the formative educational years, emphasizing the significance of resilience as the protective factor, for without this factor there is a higher risk of suicide. Cleverly and Kidd (2010) delve into resilience and suicide ideology among unhoused youth.

First-Generation College Students

This section of the literature review aides in understanding how first-generation college students view their intersectional identity(ies) in relation to their academic experiences, the emphasis of Positive Youth Development in relation to the adolescence-to-adult transition, as

well as the challenges that come with identifying as a first-generation student within the educational system. The section also focuses on literature that seeks to offer preventative strategies and solutions that institutions, administrators, and faculty can integrate in support of adolescent students who will be identifying as first-generation college students.

Understanding generational college status in students can be a significant factor in understanding the challenges and strengths students may experience. In a class lecture, Dr. Huynh stated that continuing-generation students emphasize independence “learn to be a leader, influence others, express oneself” whereas first-generation students emphasize interdependence “learn to work together, support others, adjust to others” (personal communication, December 4, 2021). Furthermore, in an article by Covarrubias et al., explain how U.S universities often reflect middle-class norms and values that emphasize the pursuit of individual paths, separation from families, and to focus solely on their academic and life goals (2018). However, this article explores how there is a cultural mismatch for first-generation college students, specifically those of low-income background, who may be influenced by the cultural focus of interdependence, and maintaining relationships and obligations to family, “although FG students model some forms of independence from their exposure to middle-class American norms in everyday life, they experience a mismatch when universities fail to recognize interdependence as a valuable way of being” (Covarrubias et al., 2018).

Intersectional Identities within the First-Generation College Experience

In defining first-generation identity, research supports evidence that a vast majority of students who identify with the first-gen status also represent historically minoritized identities (Wingrove-Haugland and McLeodand, 2021). Additionally, Bettencourt et al. (2020) state that first-generation status is better understood as an organizational identity rather than a social

identity for students. Thus, the research in this literature review focuses on the intersectional identities that first-gen identify with socially. The intersectional identities of a first-gen college student are referred to as “first-gen plus” in some educational institutions. Although first-generation plus identities can help guide programs and services, Whitley (2018) cautions that this may also drive assumptions and misconceptions of first-generation students which could therefore create gaps in services.

In an article by Williams et al. (2022), a narrative inquiry focuses on Black women who identify as first-generation college students in predominantly white institutions (PWI), and how their first-generation status impacts the development of self. Through the participant's discussion, Williams et al. (2022) highlights self-protective coping strategies that first-gen students often use in facing challenges including discrimination and microaggressions (Williams et al. 2022). This narrative inquiry highlights that such a process of identity development can contribute to “hypervigilance, which can lead to anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, other mental health issues, and physical manifestations” (Williams et al. 2022). This focus on narrative-based strategies can be useful to research for the purposes of gathering data through participant interviews.

Further, in a class lecture Dr. Huynh explains how the concept of cultural mismatch between continuing-generation students and first-generation students may explain specific consequences, for instance Dr. Huynh provides the example that first-generation college students reported elevated levels of cortisol when seeing a college welcome letter that focused on independence vs interdependence (personal communication, December 4, 2021).

Positive Youth Development and Resiliency in First-Gen College Students

In the article by Lerner et al. (2011), positive youth development is explored within the transition between adolescence and adulthood, with a particular focus on school-to-work transition and the roles that adults, programs, and institutions play in supporting these transitions (pg.7) In regards to connecting the adolescent educational context and adult career context, Lerner (2011) suggests that the key concepts of 1) transparency and 2) permeability be considered, in that these concepts can aid in being able to understand the “intricacies of the stated and the unstated rules of the educational system” and be able to navigate from one career plan to the other (pg.8). Ultimately, this article can be helpful in complementing literature focused on academic marginalization and first-gen college students.

Despite the cultural mismatch that exists in various American educational institutions, the study by Covarrubias et al which explored students’ interdependent familial roles and the ways in which they enact either soft (e.g., self-expression) or hard (e.g., self-reliance) forms of independence, provides findings that support ways in which first-generation students develop their identities from adolescence to adulthood (2018). From this study, it was found that the first-generation students enacted four types of soft independence through the transition into college which includes gaining freedom, becoming self-expressive, pursuing their individual interests, as well as enacting five types of hard independence, which included being resilient, being self-reliant, and breaking tradition (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Although these forms of independence were present in first-generation, interdependence was intricately tied to their resiliency development, “Students remained resilient by reminding themselves of their goals to support their family in the future” (Covarrubias et al., 2018). This study is meaningful to our research project, in that it provides context regarding cultural mismatches in educational settings,

the implications between interdependence and independence, as well as how resiliency developed and cultivated within this population of students.

Interestingly, in a different study looking at self-esteem among first-generation American (FGA) students and non-first-generation American students (NFGA), findings demonstrate that FGA students scored significantly higher in self-esteem than NFGA students. Alessandria and Nelson (2005) provide possible reasons for the high self-esteem scores, such as the consideration that parents/caregivers of FGAs have higher self-esteem than the general population in order to have been able to successfully immigrate to the United States, learn a new language, whilst being seen as a minority. Additionally, Alessandria and Nelson state “developing an identity that allows individuals to feel that they are a part of both cultures promotes a sense of pride in one's cultural heritage both as an ethnic minority and as a U.S. citizen” (2005).

In regards to resiliency development, Portnoi and Kwong consider the intersection of resistance and resiliency in discussing educational resiliency among first-generation college students of color. Their study found that students “displayed internal transformational resistance because they recognized the injustices they had experienced and sought to change the circumstances for others like them” as well as resistance strategies that included “proving them wrong” and resistance through achievement (2015).

Supporting First-Generation students in Educational Environments

In a study by Portnoi and Kwong, they state that factors impacting first-generation college students centers on five main areas: academic preparation, familial support, counselor guidance, caring adults, and college-going culture/college knowledge (2015). According to an executive summary (Whitley et al., 2018), defining the first-generation identity can be complex and often specific to each college or university, which ultimately impacts eligibility to services,

and the types of programs available, and informs decisions at the institution. Furthermore, as explained previously, intersectional identities can present added challenges for first-generation students, including but not limited to cultural mismatch between generational college status and the culture and practices of the educational environment. As a response to overcome the cultural mismatch present between continuing-education and first-generation college students as noted earlier, Dr. Huyhn detailed data where researchers provided first-generation students with welcome letters that framed the letter collectivistic “let’s work together” (personal communication, December 4, 2021). Moreover, Harper et al. (2021) explores participatory culture-specific interventions within the framework of Positive Youth Development in the development and planning of support services, which considers youth’s unique contextual and culturally diverse experiences. This information on cultural mismatch can be useful in conceptualizing supports and strategies for nurturing positive youth development and how language and messaging can be impactful.

In parallel, this literature review supports research that focuses on factors that contribute to academic marginalization such as challenges with understanding norms, rules, and attitudes within the context of institutions (Williams et al., 2020). For example, Delgado (2023) discusses how decoding the hidden curriculum can positively influence the educational trajectory of younger siblings of Latino/a first-generation college students. This literature can further research in understanding the intersections of identity and academic performance.

Strengths-Based Strategies

According to Whitley (2018), shifting from a deficit to an asset-based lens can be instrumental for understanding the experiences, such as challenges and strengths of first-gen students. Rather than viewing the challenges first-gen students face as shortcomings, Whitley

(2018) suggests aiding students in understanding the unique assets they bring to academia that can be celebrated and uplifted. In considering the Five C's Model explained earlier in regards to promoting positive youth development, a specific program known as the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) implemented by some institutions across the United states, supports demonstration initiatives that trial inventive methods for fostering healthy lifestyles among minority youth 10-18. Through various initiatives, the aim is to mitigate high-risk behaviors, enhancing resilience among youth, bolstering protective factors, cultivating essential life skills, and fostering a consistent practice of behaviors conducive to making healthy choices and achieving lifelong success (2012). In alignment with earlier literature that explains the adolescence-to-adult transition (Lerner, 2011), as well as with the understanding that many first-generation college students have intersectional identities often categorized as minority, the YEP offers promising solutions that educational environments can implement.

Student-Centered Approaches

According to Aguilera and Lopez (2020) centering first-generation students' stories of resilience through digital storytelling can reframe academic marginalization and focus on assets, and strengths. Moreover, the article by Jehangir (2019), suggests integrating creative strategies, as evidenced by the utilization of photo-voice and narrative text to explore how first-generation college students make meaning and conceptualize diversity and their lived experiences as they make career choices. Additionally, through the aforementioned articles, it can be determined that art-based interventions can potentially offer effective solutions that align with positive youth development, resiliency, and identity exploration during adolescence and into adulthood.

Conclusion

As education continues to adapt to meet the needs of students, existing literature recognizes the importance of addressing mental health concerns within education environments. By incorporating opportunities to promote resilience and positive youth development, educational environments can play a crucial role in supporting identity achievement amongst adolescents. This literature review has reviewed the challenges and vulnerabilities students within marginalized groups may face specifically, transgender youth, unhoused or housing insecure individuals, first-generation college students, and adolescents at risk of suicide. Considering their potential risk for added challenges, this literature review acknowledges the importance of interventions aimed at promoting identity achievement amongst these populations. By addressing these challenges and providing appropriate solutions and resources, educational environments can better support the holistic and individual development of adolescents.

Research Approach

This research aims to comprehensively explore and understand participants' experiences and responses to identified stressors during adolescent identity formation in educational settings. In order to deeply engage with and understand these experiences, researchers will use a qualitative research approach, integrating arts-based inquiry and narrative methodology. The qualitative approach is instrumental in discerning the "how and why" behind participants' experiences and responses. Through qualitative research our "goal is to understand the phenomenon and the meaning (the story or art) has for participants" (Merriam, 2009, p.34). Researchers will additionally ask questions to empower the participants through critical analysis, encouraging them to critique and challenge, and transform the educational settings in which these stories are based (Merriam 2009).

Additionally, researchers will employ a combination of narrative inquiry and arts-based inquiry in interviews to elicit stories and images pertaining to individuals' identity development during adolescence. Researchers will use interviewing questions based on narrative inquiry to collect these oral or written stories to act as our data. As Merriam writes "First person accounts experience constitute the narrative 'text' of this research approach" (Merriam, 2009, p.32). Participants will be asked questions designed to evoke their experiences centering themselves as the protagonist or main character (Van Lith, 2019) and sharing the story of their experience as an adolescent in an educational setting and their reflections on their experiences with the stressors in their participant group.

Moreover, art-based inquiry in interviews will seek to extract stories and facilitate meaning-making through symbols, metaphor, and imagery (Elliot, 2011). The resultant art serves as a visual text, externalizing the narrative shared by the participant and providing a

nonlinear representation of their experiences for further contextualization and ways of knowing (Elliot, 2011).

Consequently, both oral and written narratives and artistic expressions become part of the data, which is then analyzed to discern meaning for the participants (Merriam, 2009). Comparison and contrast of words and imagery across participants will be conducted. Furthermore, researchers may engage in art making as a form of analysis to enhance their understanding of the stories shared by participants (Kapitan, 2018).

It is important to acknowledge the researchers' role as interpreters and analysts in retelling participants' stories through analysis. The awareness of the potential impact of retelling these stories is recognized within the research process.

Methods

Definition of Terms

This section will be a guide to understanding the terms used within this study. The below terms are defined in a way that is relevant to the study and are indicative of how we understand these terms as related to the research. The following terms are derived from the American Psychological Association Dictionary, The World Health Organization's Website, and peer-reviewed literature used in our research.

Anthology

A collection of selected literary pieces of passages, works of art, or music (merriam-webster.com, 2013).

Educational Environments

For purposes of our study, we define educational environments as any school the adolescent attends.

First-Generation College Students

According to the Center for First-Generation Student Success (NASPA, 2020), a first-generation college student is defined as a student who is the first in their immediate family to attend college, meaning both parents or caregivers have no-prior experience in higher education. In contrast, a continuing-generation college student is defined as an undergraduate who has at least one parent with a bachelor's or higher degree.

Adolescent Populations

The World Health Organization (2021) defines adolescence as the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, from ages 10 to 19. Adolescents experience rapid physical, cognitive and psychosocial growth.

Positive Youth Development

Lerner et al. defines Positive Youth Development as a strengths-based approach as opposed to a deficit approach to adolescent development, focusing on the “strengths of youth and the positive qualities and outcomes we wish our youth to develop” (Lerner et al., 2009). Positive Youth Development theory shifts from the negative or problem-focused view of adolescents that many fields have historically attributed to this stage of development.

Resilience

Resilience is commonly defined as the capacity to bounce back from life's challenges, emphasizing adaptability, and is often likened to the concept of hardiness (Shahram et al., 2021).

School Culture and Identity Formation

According to Aldridge et al. (2015), school culture is defined as the student's perception of the quality of their relationships with teachers, staff, and fellow students, the quality of their education, and the physical, social, and emotional safety provided within the school environment.

Trans Populations

This may include but is not limited to, transgender, genderqueer, gender fluid, gender non-conforming, gender expansive, agender, non-binary, transfeminine, and transmasculine individuals (Hillier, 2020).

Suicidal Ideation

The American Psychological Association Dictionary defines suicidal ideation (SI) as thoughts about or preoccupation with killing oneself, often as a symptom of a major depressive episode.

Unhoused/ Housing Insecure

For the purpose of this proposal we are using the term “unhoused” (Slayton, 2021) and “housing insecure” to define those who face challenges securing permanent housing. Previously also known as “homeless.”

Art Therapy

The American Art Therapy Association (2017) defines Art Therapy as “an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.”

Design of Study

This following section will describe the methods researchers will be using for their qualitative study. Researchers will use an arts-based inquiry and narrative methodology integrating image-making as part of the participant interviews in order to support in recalling personal experiences pertaining to their adolescence. Additionally through an art-based inquiry, the study aims to capture and represent the diverse narratives and unique experiences of individuals. Throughout this study, researchers will explore reoccurring themes within the data to address the research question, by determining challenges, strengths, and supportive solutions for adolescents who identify with the vulnerabilities the research is studying.

Sampling

The sample of subjects includes young adults between the ages of 18-25 years of age from the Los Angeles area. Specifically, subjects must meet criteria for identifying in at least one or more of the following: transgender, unhoused, first-generation college student, and/or

has experienced Suicidal Ideation in the past and is not currently presenting safety or crisis concerns. At least one representative from each criteria (4 total) is expected to voluntarily show interest through outreach communications methods with the following; personal relationship, professional relationships, and at least four individuals will voluntarily participate in the individual interviews.

Subjects will be informed about the purpose of the study and invited to complete a consent form on Qualtrics, as well as asked to complete a brief initial screening survey also on Qualtrics. The purpose of the screener is to gather initial identifying information, educational experience, preferred contact information, as well as scheduling options for participant interviews, offered either in-person at the LMU campus or virtually via Zoom. After the screener, participants will participate in a one time 90-minute interview for the purpose of understanding experiences of challenges faced in identity exploration and how educational environments play a role in this process.

Gathering of Data

Researchers will gather data through the following steps:

1. Email communication will be distributed to personal and professional relationships within educational environments in the LA area who can refer to subjects that meet one or more of the four criteria. Subjects will be informed about the purpose of the study and invited to complete the consent and initial screener survey.
2. Researchers will reach out to self selecting subjects to coordinate a time to conduct a 90 minute individual interview. Interviews will employ a semi-structured art-based and narrative inquiry approach. The sessions can occur either in person at Loyola

Marymount University or virtually via Zoom.

3. Verbal responses from subjects will be collected with permission to audio record as well as notes taken by researchers during the interview.
4. Physical and digital art pieces produced during the interview will also be collected and stored by the researchers. All identifying information on the art piece must be digitally excluded when presented in the research project in order to adhere to confidentiality and privacy of the subject.
5. If an art piece was produced in-person, art pieces may be returned to the subject if the subject desires, once the researcher has photographed and documented the piece.

Beginning with the research question, researchers will first collect data from participant audio recorder interviews and their produced artworks. Researchers will interpret qualitative data derived from each researcher's interview which will include transcription of the recorded audio interviews and analyzing of the produced artworks. Next, researchers will identify themes from each data set by coding and organizing recurring themes under categories: challenges and supports. After themes have been identified, researchers will further develop these themes by summarizing participants' narratives. After the data has been analyzed, researchers will synthesize the data to determine factors that can aid in understanding how educational environments can support identity exploration during adolescence, and offer concrete suggestions to educators and school administrators.

Results

Presentation of Data

The study aims to understand the experiences of adolescents, particularly those who face vulnerabilities such as being unhoused, transgender, first-generation college students, or at risk of suicide, within educational environments. To gather data, semi-structured interviews were conducted, incorporating artmaking and storytelling techniques. These interviews were conducted in a welcoming environment, ensuring participants understood the purpose and provided consent.

The data collection process involved asking participants two key questions:

1. Prompting reflection on adolescent experiences in school, focusing on challenges related to transgender identity exploration, suicidal ideation, housing insecurity, and being a first-generation college student.
2. Exploring the support received or needed in addressing specific challenges faced at school, aiming to identify potential areas for improvement within the educational environment during adolescence.

Five participants were selected from a pool of young individuals aged 18 to 30, all hailing from Southern California. The data is presented in chronological order based on the time of the interview, with participants referred to as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on. This research aims to explore ways in which schools can better support the development of these individuals. See Table 1: Participant Demographics 1 and Table 2: Participant demographics 2 for a visual analysis of participants identified challenges experienced during adolescence.

<i>Populations of interest:</i>	<i>Identified Participants:</i>
Explored a transgender identity	2 of 5
Experienced suicidal ideation	4 of 5
Experienced housing insecurity or being unhoused	2 of 5
Identifying as first generation college students	4 of 5

Table 1: Participant Demographics 1

<i>Participant:</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
Explored a transgender identity			X		X
Experienced Suicidal Ideation	X		X	X	X
Experienced housing insecurity or being unhoused		X			X
Identified as first gen college students	X	X	X	X	

Table 2: Participant Demographics 2

Participant 1

Question 1: Think back to when you were an adolescent, particularly in your school environment. What challenges were you facing with regards to our research focus:

- ***Youth exploring a transgender identity***
- ***Youth experiencing SI***

- *Youth experiencing housing insecurity or being unhoused*
- *Youth who identify as first gen college students.*

What did this look like for you? How did you feel? What else was happening at this time?

Participant 1 was welcomed by the interviewer, who outlined the interview process, presented the prompt, and invited Participant 1 to create her art. When completed, Participant 1 described their drawing in detail as a conveyor belt pumping out “As” for grades on their assignments. In their drawing there was an illustration of a person described as “stressed out” because that person was also managing the conveyor belt, representing images of college applications and acceptances, as stated by the participant. When referring to the image, Participant 1 stated, “I wanted it to show that it’s just me” and continued that they realized that this time in their life, “Was a burden on my mental health.” Participant 1 described taking all AP classes and anything under an “A” was “not accepted”. Participant 1 commented that they wanted the conveyor belt to “look dark, like bleak.” Participant 1 continued to explain that in high school, “I just ... overworked myself in high school and yeah, I think that’s what I wanted to portray in the drawing.” Commenting that they felt their family had no experience with what it takes to get into college, Participant 1 explained that expectations in high school grades were high. Participant 1 described that the conveyor belt slowed down when she got into college, “the conveyor belt slowed down and they’re not “As” anymore. I think because my only goal was to get in. And so, once I was there [in college], I was [like well what] am I doing [it] now.” Once in college Participant 1 stated that they were able to have the fun that they didn’t have in high school, “I think that’s where everything went wrong,” Participant 1 stated that the added stress in high school caused mental health issues. “I was [like] having issues with mental health in high school, I think. It started there. And if I could finish the drawing, if I had the skills to do it, it would show that it’s also taking a toll doing this conveyor belt thing,” explained Participant 1.

Participant 1 explained that in high school, they didn't know how to balance and take care of the stress in a healthy way, "I didn't know how to balance it or take care of myself yet." When commenting about their social life, Participant 1 explained, "I don't think it impacted my social life in that way, but I think it impacted my mental health which then leads to how I interact with people, I guess it's all connected," concluding the first portion of the interview.

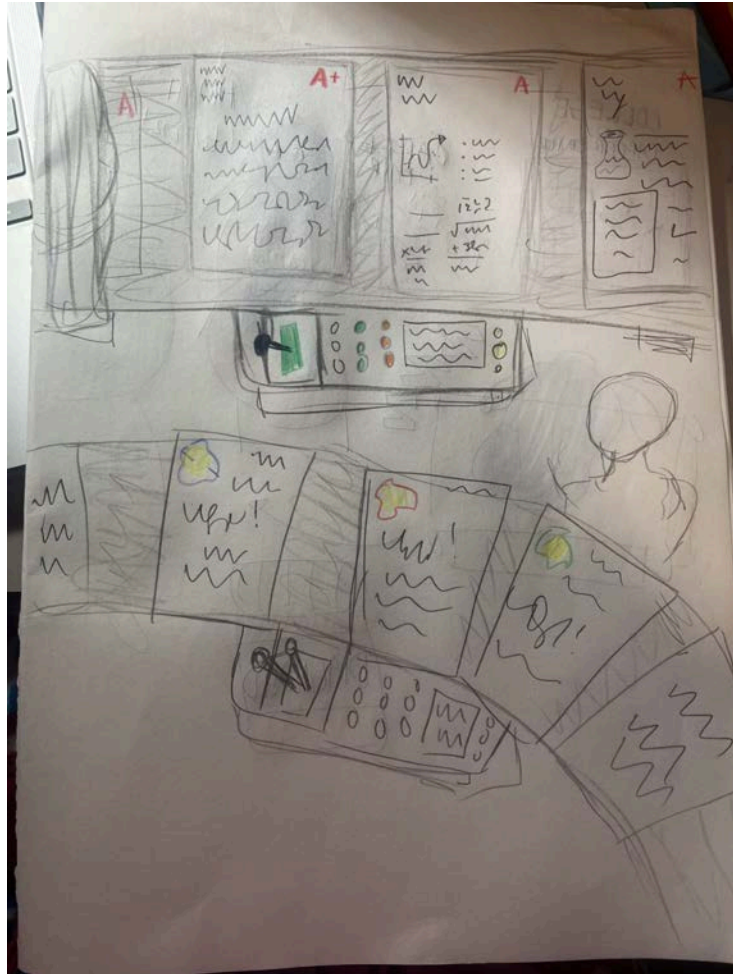


Figure 1: Participant 1 Art 1

Question 2: *This next question explores ways that you felt you were supported at school with this specific challenge and or ways that your school could have been more supportive. Please use the materials to add to your image or create an additional image that represents what was helpful and supportive for you in your education environment in adolescence and/or what would have been more helpful.*

Participant 1 drew an office with two people in chairs. The image appears to depict a figure at a desk with “Zs” floating up that seemingly represented someone sleeping. There is a book-like symbol or sign that shows text “diagnosed” and also a representation of a career fair with a banner that floats over an image of Participant 1’s head. This represented the times Participant 1 would go to therapy at the school’s health center. Participant 1 stated that her high school was supportive. The Participant explained, “I think when my mental health started being affected, I started falling asleep in class a lot.” At one point a concerned teacher suggested Participant 1 should see the school therapist. The sessions were scheduled during school hours and Participant 1 was able to speak with someone about her feelings, “There was someone I could talk to about stuff like that, about how I was feeling.” Participant 1 felt supported by staff and faculty of her school, “I think I just got lucky with a teacher that cared about me.” Participant 1 mentioned other events her school held for student support such as career fairs, college support, and career center. Participant 1 mentioned that she wouldn’t know what additional services would be available so she was thankful for what she had at her high school.

Participant 1 identified as a first-generation college student. Her family did not attend college upon graduation from high school. When asked if her high school was considerate for their situation as a first-generation college student, Participant 1 responded, “...so, I think my school, maybe just the school district in general, [in regards to resources for first-generation college students] having these resources and opportunities [available] for people to discover things and I think through that I found what I was passionate about... but I think they were really good at that stuff when I was in high school.”

When asked if the school understood the demographic of this Participant, Participant 1 responded, “I just remember my senior year, the career center was in the library and people were

there every day...so it became like a hangout spot because people wanted to be in that place. Yeah, people would work on their applications together like essays and stuff. I think we did a good job at having that for people.” The support provided proved useful. Participant 1 stated that they had a teacher in 11th grade that had the students start writing their university applications. This was not part of the curriculum, but the teacher knew that the students needed additional assistance. Participant 1 stated, “You have to have a family member who knows about this stuff to help you. Or an older sibling. And I don’t. I don’t have an older sibling or parents who went to college. So having that at school was really helpful. Participant 1 stated, “I think there were a good number of teachers who actually cared about us and our future, so I feel like that was a good source of support.”

Participant 1 reflected on her interview and the image of her first drawing, “I mean it [the support at school] did help. The college and career center helped me find what I was interested in. It helped me on my college applications, I did have support. So, I guess if I were to redraw the first drawing, I’d add more people in the factory, to the conveyor belts.” Participant 1 reflected on this art interview experience and expressed it was a helpful experience and was able to communicate completely in the drawings and in her words. “I liked it. I think even if it’s not the best drawing, you’re thinking about it in a different way. In a way to tell a story. So yeah, I think this was a great exercise.” .

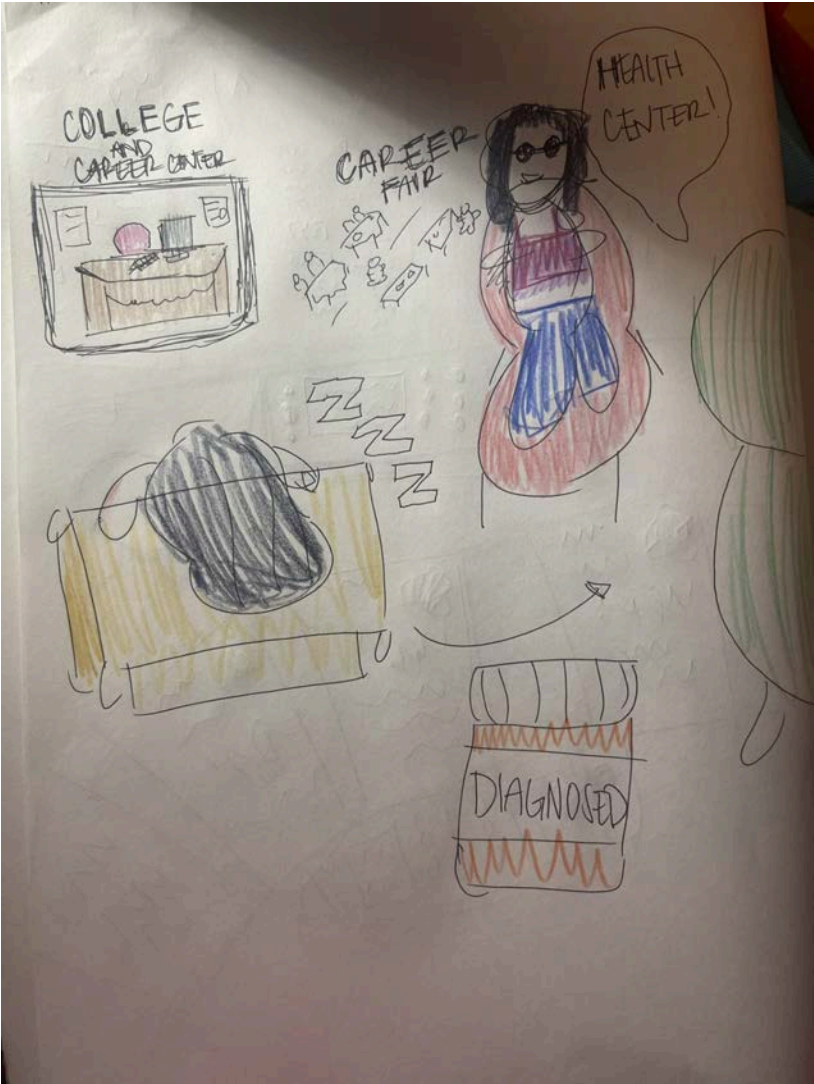


Figure 2: Participant 1 Art 2

Participant 2

Question 1: Think back to when you were an adolescent, particularly in your school environment. What challenges were you facing with regards to our research focus:

- *Youth exploring a transgender identity*
- *Youth experiencing SI*
- *Youth experiencing housing insecurity or being unhoused*
- *Youth who identify as first gen college students.*

What did this look like for you? How did you feel? What else was happening at this time?

In describing a time during their adolescence, when they experienced the challenge of being a first generation college student, Participant 2 was asked to create an image using art materials at their disposal to depict “what did this look like for you?, and how did you feel?”. The researcher provided Participant 2 with ten minutes to create an image that would represent the challenges that this Participant faced in their adolescence. They then reconvened to discuss what was created, what they found particularly challenging, and if there were any stories that stood out to the Participant . Participant 2 began by sharing with the researcher that they started by doodling on their page and reflected back to the different schools they had attended throughout their adolescence. Participant 2 also shared about how their parents had not gone to college as they immigrated to the United States from El Salvador. The researcher observed Participant 2 to be eager and excited to share their experiences as evidenced by energetic tone and rapid speech. As Participant 2 described their art and experiences, they used the word “like” repeatedly to connect thoughts and ideas. For the purpose of this research, researchers have chosen to omit “like” to increase the clarity of the data. Participant 2 stated, “the image that I have of my schooling is my parents devoutly listening to whomever they thought was really important or smart, whether it was a teacher or college counselors or whatever they could find”. Participant 2 went on to describe going along with what their parents wanted for them because they were told by someone else that a certain program was better for their child. “I feel like it

was a really isolating experience of going to different schools at different points in my life, never really sticking at one school for too long or sticking with the same group of friends.”

Participant 2 also described the significant challenge of learning English as their second language, which they described as being a big deal in their family and educational upbringing.

Participant 2 and their family had to make the conscious decision to speak English, because the Participant's teacher at the time told them to do so to reduce confusion for the Participant and support academic success. Participant 2 reflected on their art and their experiences as a first generation college student, they said, “Because at the end of the day, I did go to a prestigious, small PWI¹, liberal arts college, I got a scholarship, and I got my graduate [degree], ya know I figured out the way to get there, but it was a lot of trial and error”. They went on to add, “I think a lot of my experience with the first gen concept is just the lack of social capital that's accessible to you. And so, all the messing around and the figuring it out process is what sticks with me”.

The interviewer noted that the image Participant 2 created appeared to resemble a map that goes around the page. The researcher then asked Participant 2, “Where did it start? ...Do you feel like you were always aware of what was going on in this process or was it kind of just confusing for you?”. Participant 2 recounted what their experience was like at school, “I think all things considered, I was good at schooling, I'm the type of kid that was able to follow directions and I enjoyed making like adults happy...”. The area where Participant 2 felt a challenge was with the dynamics of their parents seeming to have a plan for them, and because of the plan Participant 2 struggled socially at school as they felt most comfortable in the classroom setting. Participant 2 went on to recall at what point in their school career did they decide that college was the route they wanted to take. Participant 2 states, “But yeah, it was never a goal that I guess I chose, or I wanted it was just expected. You're going to do this because this is your responsibility as a

¹ Predominately white institution

first-gen student”. As the interview progressed, the researcher asked, “Were you aware of your identity as a first generation student? Or how did that affect you as you started to go through your adolescence?”. Participant 2 stated that they felt coached through their adolescence and a large motivating factor was to be the first in their family to go to college, and they remember hearing this from as early as sixth grade. When the researcher asked if Participant 2 felt any pressure or any emotional challenges during this time, Participant 2 commented that they did feel the pressure to be studious and pull all nighters if that is what it would take to succeed, they felt they could handle it as they felt rewarded by working hard and doing their best.



Figure 3: Participant 2 Art 1

Question 2: *This next question explores ways that you felt you were supported at school with this specific challenge and or ways that your school could have been more supportive. Please use the materials to add to your image or create an additional image that represents what was*

helpful and supportive for you in your education environment in adolescence and/or what would have been more helpful.

In describing the ways in which Participant 2 felt supported at school, Participant 2 stated, “I was pretty well-supported at school. In the sense that I had everything I needed. A bunch of people were really concerned with my academic success growing up in terms of counselors and my parents.” For this, Participant 2 shared their experience with being on track to being a first generation college student was a supportive journey from their parents to teachers’ and counselors. This participant was also able to recognize that this might not have been the case for all first generation college student, stating, “I just assumed that everybody has this support, everybody gets what I got, right?” and now being able to reflect and notice that that was not the case. While describing imagery from the art they created, Participant 2 stated, “this image of my head getting bigger, I feel like I was such an a*****e coming out of high school”. They went on to say they felt like they were better than others because they were smarter and worked harder. Participant 2 added they felt like they fit into the mold of a good student which their school resources were poured into making them feel like a poster boy for they’re school. They felt supported in getting to college, however Participant 2 stated not having any mental health support, “no mental health check in. It was always just like, oh, you got good grades. You're doing fine.” The researcher then asked Participant 2, “Do you feel like you recognized that in your high school time that you needed mental health support? Did you understand your own mental health during that time? Or is this more like now that you're an adult? You look back at that?” to which the participant responded, “Yeah, definitely now more as an adult.” Participant 2 reflected on having such a high focus on education during their adolescence while also experiencing a variety of concerns such as discussions of a parental divorce and housing

insecurity. When thinking of tools that Participant 2 was taught to use to cope through their challenges, they recalled being told to “just keep moving forward”.

Participant 2 went on to share their personal experience and perspective as they are now working as a teacher for the same charter school system that they graduated from. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of educators getting to know their students as whole individuals and not just a good student with good grades. Participant 2 was able to recall a few teachers that they were able to experience genuine connections with because they took the time to build trust and took interest in simple things the participant enjoyed in their adolescence. Participant 2 took pride in expressing that they were now able to be that positive teacher figure for their students. Finally, the interviewer asked Participant 2 if they would discuss the imagery that they had created, specifically the leg drawing on the page. Participant 2 went on to say that the journey to getting their masters degree was like climbing up the ivory tower, and once you get to the top it was like falling off and trying to understand who you are if you are no longer a student. In wrapping up the interview, Participant 2 shared about how important it was for them to take some time away from the academic world after reaching their academic goals.

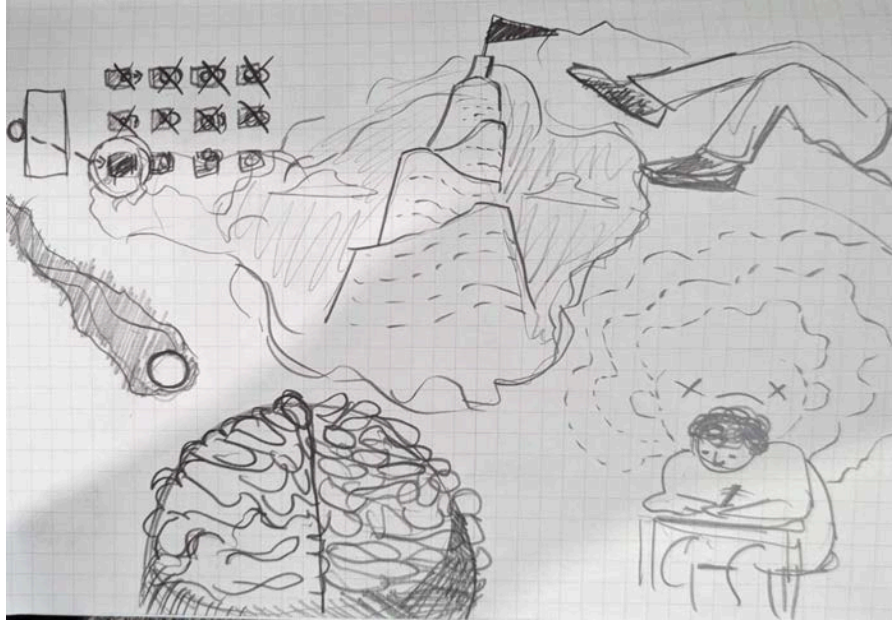


Figure 4: Participant 2 Art 2

Participant 3

Question 1: Think back to when you were an adolescent, particularly in your school environment. What challenges were you facing with regards to our research focus:

- **Youth exploring a transgender identity**
- **Youth experiencing SI**
- **Youth experiencing housing insecurity or being unhoused**
- **Youth who identify as first gen college students.**

What did this look like for you? How did you feel? What else was happening at this time?

In describing a time during their adolescence, when they experienced the challenge of being a first generation college student and experienced SI, Participant 3 was asked to create an image using art while reflecting on what did this look like for you? How did you feel? What else was happening at the time? Once Participant 3 had completed the 10 minute drawing period, they were then asked to share about what they had drawn. Participant 3 stated, “it's kind of intense. I didn't really realize how intense it was until I took a step back.” The interviewer then asked the participant if they needed to take a moment for a deep breath. The participant took a breath and then said, “I'm good.” and proceeded with the discussion. The interviewer said, “Alright, tell me

about this.” Participant 3 prefaced their art piece by saying that they pinpointed their adolescence through the age of 16 to 18, and stating, “I was very conscious of my body and in a really negative way. So that's why I drew myself as this big circle. I just was always conscious of the space I took up. And also physically what I looked like size-wise. And I was very aware of being a person of color in a way that made me upset. So there was just a lot of negativity surrounding how I felt about myself and my skin being a really defining piece of that.” Participant 3 went on to describe other elements of their drawing like the cloud that was raining red drops of blood, which the participant reflected on stating that they were self harming at this time in their life during their adolescence. Participant 3 then added, “positioning myself between home life which was stable in the sense of like I had a home, I didn't worry about meals and stuff, but unstable in the sense of where my parents were in their relationship. Then coming out to myself at that period of time and not feeling like I really felt comfortable at home. And then this escape of where I was spending the other parts of my day at school and this road to where that would lead me somewhere away.” Participant 3 went on to share that they did feel support at school with assistance to go to college, and they were never discouraged from trying, however they also realized that going to college felt unattainable because of the lack of confidence and knowledge that a first generation student may face. In reflecting on what felt unattainable, the participant shared “it just felt like it was really far away and just also the steps of getting there I had to do by myself, like FAFSA, figuring out what that was, figuring out where I even wanted to go to school and what that research even looks like, writing essays...” During this time Participant 3 was also getting a better understanding of themselves as a queer person and not feeling comfortable to share that with their parents at that time. Participant 3 recalled having the support of a great friend group at school which was inclusive and they never felt bullied at school. The interviewer

then asked, “Was there any particularly challenging aspect to being first gen or non-binary during your education in adolescence?” the participant stated, “ I mean there are similarities between being a person of color and being a first-generation college student and why am I in that position of, ‘my parents are migrants and parents didn't go to college because of XY and Z’... and just being the butt of racist jokes or more so microaggressions or like flat out being racist, right.” Participant 3 was able to identify challenging situations that they went through and felt resentment towards. While wrapping up this first prompt the interviewer asked, “what are the things that educators could know about that, you experienced that they didn't even see happening?”. Participant 3 expressed the discrepancies of their white student counterparts having more access and knowledge to resources, “ I think those blind spots of like what actually the social dynamics look like when you're bringing together these two groups of people.”



Figure 5: Participant 3 Art 1

Question 2: *This next question explores ways that you felt you were supported at school with this specific challenge and or ways that your school could have been more supportive. Please use the materials to add to your image or create an additional image that represents what was*

helpful and supportive for you in your education environment in adolescence and/or what would have been more helpful.

In describing the ways in which the Participant 3 felt supported at school, Participant 3 stated they created a much happier image than in the first part of the interview. In this image they shared what they could have and what did support them during their adolescence. The participant stated, “the majority of my friend groups were queer trans people of color, and you know there's just like the vibrancy in that and like the kinship that forms in those specific circles that is still familial in different ways.” They went on to share about the gratitude they felt for not recalling a time where they experienced any queerphobia or transphobia in an academic setting. Participant 3 was able to participate in the gay, straight, sexuality alliance in high school, and for college they attended a historically women's college that was queer affirming. Participant 3 created a vibrant rainbow in their image, they connected the vibrancy of the rainbow to the school murals that they were allowed to create in high school which facilitated creative expression for students in their school. The second part of their drawing was a representation of what could have helped the participant during this time; a more united and loving home where they could feel comfortable to communicate and express their love for their family. The interviewer then asked, “Do you have any memories or feelings about how you were supported as a first-gen student while you were in college?” Participant 3 stated, “I mean we literally would have workshops on what it meant to be first gen and the concept of being first gen and not being a position of disadvantage in terms of what I'm capable of was very clear. We took workshops on understanding that but also classes that taught us this is what your college coursework is going to be like and ultimately to help foster retention now.” The interviewer reflected on the participant's art pieces and asked, “how do you think it went from the progression of that first image to being surrounded and changing your perspective into really seeing the queer unity that

you were sharing about?” Participant 3 recalled that therapy was a useful tool for them as a first generation queer student, they had a space to say, “I feel sad” and talk about what was on their mind. Participant 3 went on to share their concerns at the time, “I internalized that I need to be good, I need to be successful, I need to make money, I need to get a good job, and also like that success is not just for me, it's, so I can take over something like my parents mortgage, so they can retire, not have to worry. Like those are the things that me going to college as a first gen student also entails. It's not like about just my own success, right? Success for the benefit of others and setting an example for my brother too.” Participant 3 also shared how they found community in their college environment, they did not feel as alone as they said they felt in their first art piece. Participant 3 added, “I just became more expressive about what I was going through because I just felt like I had the room to do that.” Throughout their life, including their adolescence, up until they moved away to college, Participant 3 shared a bedroom with their younger brother. The experience of sharing space, not being able to express emotions freely, and not feeling comfortable to express themselves as they wanted to all played a role in Participant 3's adolescent experience. In wrapping up the interview, the participant stated “I felt like being alone in the other photo, like those feelings of loneliness were because I wasn't wanted, I wasn't desired, I didn't feel like I was ... I can be alone [now]. I know I have people who got my back. I know I have a supportive family and I know I have things that I want for myself.” To conclude the interviewer reflected back to the participant, “It seems like getting in tune with yourself but also being empowered by your own identities was the thing that helped you get to this kind of rainbow image”.



Figure 6: Participant 3 Art 2

Participant 4:

Question 1: Think back to when you were an adolescent, particularly in your school environment. What challenges were you facing with regards to our research focus:

- **Youth exploring a transgender identity**
- **Youth experiencing SI**
- **Youth experiencing housing insecurity or being unhoused**
- **Youth who identify as first gen college students.**

What did this look like for you? How did you feel? What else was happening at this time?

In describing a time during their adolescence, when they experienced their identified challenge, Participant 4 was asked to create an image using art materials at their disposal to depict what did this look like, how did you feel, and what else was happening during this time. Participant 4 stated, “the first thing I drew was the background. And I know it's just very cliché to be like, oh, darkness. So like dark time, period. Let's use darkness to portray that. But I mean, that's just the first thing that came to mind when I think about that time in my life.” Participant 4 went on to share about how much of an isolating experience it was for them and how they truly did feel like they were surrounded by darkness that was inescapable. Participant 4 was detailed

in their description and explanation of the image they created, “I drew these two stick figures next, which kind of resembles family life. My parents are divorced.” The participant added that they felt they were not affected by their parents being divorced as they had separated before they were born and it was all they had ever known. Participant 4 described home life with both parents to be “very abusive, verbally, physically, emotionally”. The participant discussed more symbolism that came up in their image like that of a clown, and recalling that they felt like a clown and also viewed others around them as a clown, “Like you all look like fools. I look like a fool for dealing with this. You look like a fool for putting me through this when you're supposed to have this life put together and not act this way”. Participant 3 then described the imagery of the crown in their drawing, “I know better than you or I [was] just very self referential or whatever.” Participant 3 also self identified as a teacher's pet. During their adolescence, Participant 4 viewed school as their escape, and they leaned into that role to receive validation and approval they were not receiving anywhere else. Not only did Participant 4 have challenging relationships with their parents, they also did not have the best relationships with their siblings either as they commented when they threw them into the image. The interviewer then inquired, “Did you see that reflected also in school? How did those challenges that you were facing with your family or personally get reflected in school?” Participant 4 stated that they felt like school was the complete opposite experience for them, they were more extraverted as they were finding their own way to make community and receive validation for who they were. The participant also identified being funny or humorous to be one of their main sources for connection with others, “I was also kind of like a jester type or like I'm always like a type to like try to make people laugh.”, as the participant shared this thought they were able to draw the connection to the clown imagery that they have previously stated. Participant 3 also recalled the academic

demand from parents as they compared themselves to their older sibling who excelled in math and science, which were subjects that they did not care for.



Figure 7: Participant 4 Art 1

Question 2: *This next question explores ways that you felt you were supported at school with this specific challenge and or ways that your school could have been more supportive. Please use the materials to add to your image or create an additional image that represents what was helpful and supportive for you in your education environment in adolescence and/or what would have been more helpful.*

The interviewer asked, “How were you supported at school with the challenges you were facing or how do you feel like school could have supported you better?” Participant 4 started off by explaining their image, “it’s really just my three favorite subjects as buildings, and then I’m walking to them with friends I made through those classes.” The participant described the

change in academic pressure they felt when they entered the IB² program at their school in their junior year. Participant 4 felt more contained in the IB program as they had a set class and would only take classes with the same students for every subject, they were also limited to IB classes only which did not allow for extracurricular classes. Participant 4 stated, "I've always loved really artistic classes. That's what I really enjoy doing, expressing myself... I think noticing the absence of those classes in my, not even everyday life, but just like, having the option to have it at least once a semester, I think was felt by me, extremely." The interviewer asked, "So you felt like you needed those creative sources or outlets?" To which Participant 4 said, "Yeah, definitely." The interviewer then followed up with, "Do you feel like you saw that in other students too, this need for students to also let go or that they needed these creative sources too?" The participant reflected and shared that they felt that for themselves and their classmates they felt "bottled up like we were all just trying to contain everything", they added that many of the students came from similar backgrounds where parents forced their child to be in this program with the hopes of bettering their future. Participant 4 stated, "If you have to get two hours of sleep a night, if you have to pull all-nighters, you're doing it for your future. So it's going to pay off. And even if you have to work yourself to the bone, that's what you have to do. Welcome to the real world." The academic demand and expectation was so high and stressful that Participant 4 felt the need for structured free time where they have the option to create, express themselves, or move their body if they needed to. The interviewer inquired, "Did you ever also have any mental health interventions, any counselors, or anything like that present opportunities while you were in high school?" Participant 4 stated that they did not have access to those kinds of services in school, the counselors that were available to them were all academics. Participant 4 then shared that their father was not a supporter of mental health counseling and he did not believe in

² International Baccalaureate

finding help for them until after the Participant 4 had attempted suicide in their sophomore year of high school, and even then they only got to meet with a therapist once. For Participant 4, they were able to identify a lack of mental health resources and support in their school system, “It was like, well, they're managing this course just fine. And they're doing great. But it's like you only see me for an hour and 20 minutes a day.” They went on to share how teachers acknowledged the high stress the students were under but did not provide resources to better support them. The interviewer then asked, “Is there anything else you want to point out from this image?” in reference to their art. Participant 4 highlighted their three favorite subjects in high school which were yearbook, ceramics, and Japanese. The interviewer reflected back to the participant that the second image appeared much brighter and abundant in comparison to the first image. To wrap up, the participant stated, “I definitely think when I create something, I don't know just like getting something on a piece of paper or like creating something with your hands is such a good outlet. Because I know, when I'd feel these emotions, I like just felt like, I don't even know what the feeling was like, almost like bugs under your skin or just like, like itchy, like, I need to get something out.” For Participant 4, having the space to be creative was healing and necessary to realize their built up feelings and emotions.



Figure 8: Participant 4 Art 2

Participant 5

Question 1: *Think back to when you were an adolescent, particularly in your school environment. What challenges were you facing with regards to our research focus:*

- *Youth exploring a transgender identity*
- *Youth experiencing SI*
- *Youth experiencing housing insecurity or being unhoused*
- *Youth who identify as first gen college students.*

What did this look like for you? How did you feel? What else was happening at this time?

Participant 5 engaged with the image making thoughtfully, taking time to process their emotions and memories while translating them into visual form. Upon completion of the art-making phase, the participant shared their artwork with the interviewer, initiating a deeply

introspective dialogue about their experiences. Participant 5 found it challenging to discuss their artwork due to its emotionally charged subject matter, describing it as "tough stuff." They shared their Filipino heritage and revealed their parents' disapproval of their involvement with the LGBTQ+ community. Conversations with their parents often centered on warnings of damnation for associating with the LGBTQ+ community, leaving the participant confused about their family's stance. In their culture, gender and sexuality were intertwined, leading Participant 5 to express a more fluid understanding of identity. They questioned the relevance of God's judgment on same-sex relationships, feeling conflicted by their parents' sudden shift in attitude towards such relationships. Despite previously non-judgmental behavior, Participant 5 recalled that their parents seemed to disapprove of their LGBTQ+ identity, causing confusion and distress. When asked about parental support, Participant 5 responded with a resigned "Yeah, no," feeling let down by both their parents and their partner, who failed to provide the expected support. Seeking help from their school during their senior year, Participant 5 stated that they were met with dismissive responses, exacerbating their sense of isolation and fear of being expelled from home. They described a volatile household environment, marked by verbal aggression and sleepless nights filled with nightmares and paranoia. Feeling unsafe, Participant 5 shared that they resorted to keeping a knife under their pillow, despite their parents' attempts to confiscate weapons. While Participant 5's siblings also faced verbal abuse, Participant 5's relationship with their mother appeared particularly strained, adding to the household's tense atmosphere.

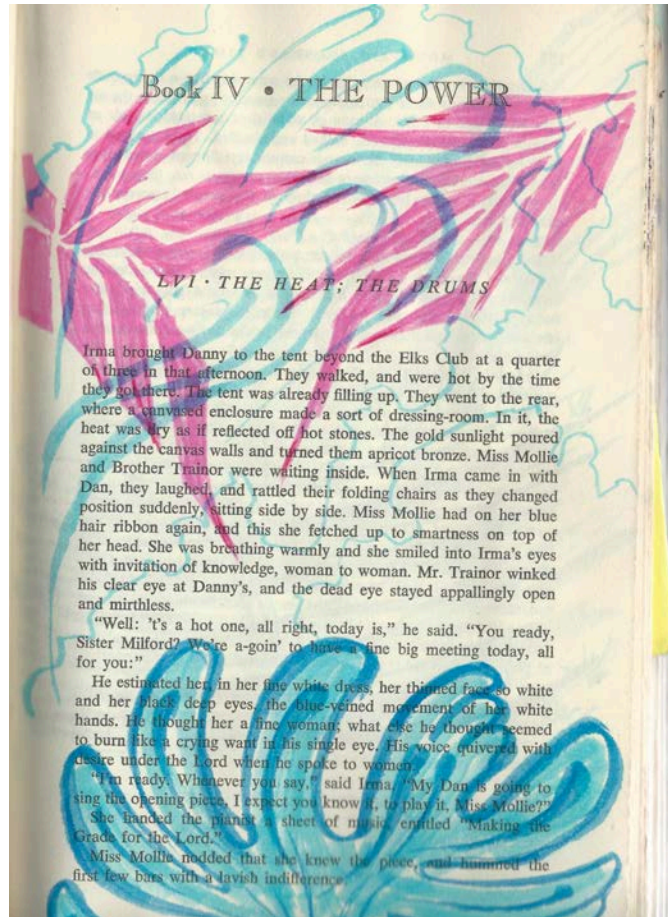


Figure 9: Participant 5 Art 1

Question 2: This next question explores ways that you felt you were supported at school with this specific challenge and or ways that your school could have been more supportive. Please use the materials to add to your image or create an additional image that represents what was helpful and supportive for you in your education environment in adolescence and/or what would have been more helpful.

Participant 5 engaged in their artistic expression, with a focus on two high school teachers whom they once considered trustworthy. Reflecting on their experiences, the participant regretted not seeking help from one of these teachers, acknowledging, "I honestly should have, but I didn't. I'm not sure why. My mistake, I suppose." Despite this, they fondly recalled a daily ritual in a teacher's class where students would sow seeds in the forest, providing a brief respite from personal struggles. As a senior, the participant found solace in solitude during lunch, opting to remain in the classroom. Although intellectually stimulated, they noted discomfort due to the

teacher's homophobic views, and expressed a desire for more understanding figures at this time. They recounted a disheartening interaction where the teacher likened being gay to stealing a car, leaving the participant feeling disappointed. Conversations between Participant 5 and this teacher occasionally offered temporary relief, such as during a panic attack, yet no formal child abuse reports were made regarding the participant's struggles. Feeling isolated and unsupported, Participant 5 lamented the lack of education and empathy among faculty regarding LGBTQ+ issues, advocating for mandatory training to foster a more inclusive environment. Their high school years were marked by unsupportive and toxic experiences, leading the participant to emphasize the importance of empathy and education in supporting marginalized students. They stressed the need for ongoing training for faculty members, suggesting a curriculum that provides practical strategies for supporting LGBTQ+ students. Transitioning from high school to living with their uncle, Participant 5 faced financial challenges and ultimately found refuge with friends. Their summer camp experience within the lesbian community provided a sense of belonging, motivating them to save for community college. Despite encountering financial barriers, they appreciated the supportive environment community college provided as well as the diverse curriculum, particularly classes focused on LGBTQ+ studies. Reflecting on their journey, Participant 5 highlighted the importance of online communities, such as Tumblr, in connecting with the LGBTQ+ community. They advocated for accessible resources and support networks for queer youth, emphasizing the need for inclusive spaces within educational institutions.

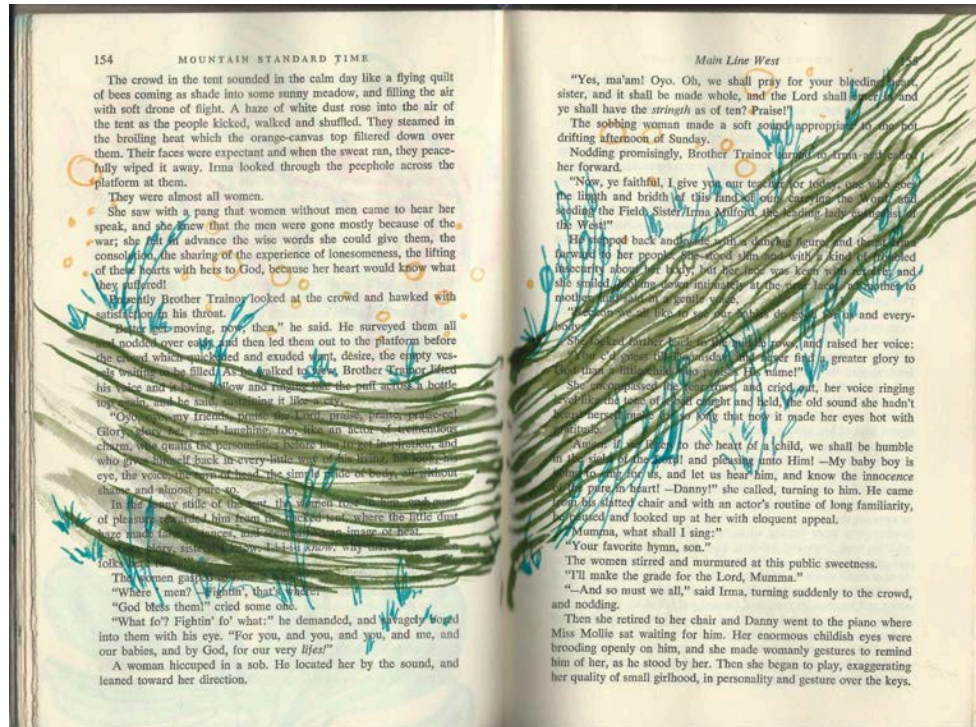


Figure 10: Participant 5 Art 2

Analysis of Data

The following data analysis consists of a narrative analysis using an inductive approach and arts-based inquiry. Common themes and differences were identified through the interviews, art, and art descriptions provided by the five interviewed participants. For this analysis, researchers were guided by the research question, "How can educational environments promote resilience and positive youth development during adolescent identity exploration?" Researchers followed the below steps in their analysis process;

Analysis of Data Flow Chart

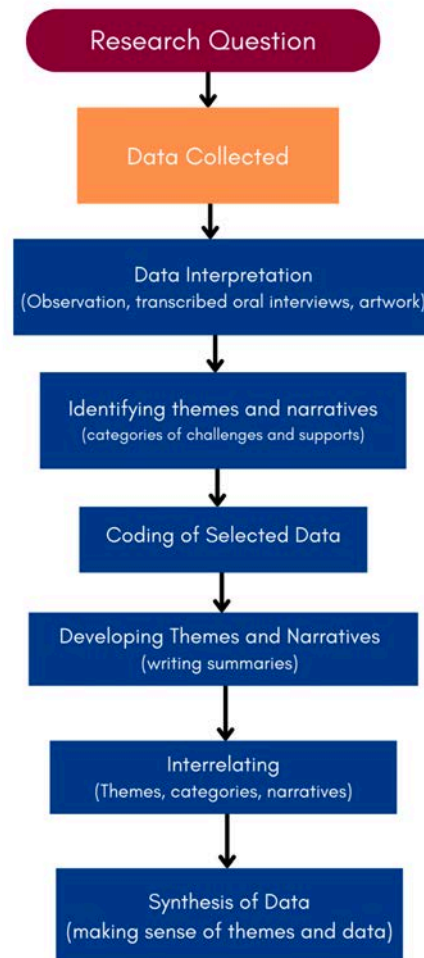


Figure 11: Analysis of Data Flow Chart

Researchers began analysis looking for emergent narrative themes within individual experiences and then those of all participants as a whole. The art directive responses and audio interview transcriptions were analyzed and organized by categorizing subthemes under two main themes that were explored during participant interviews:

1. Themes related to Support and Resiliency
2. Themes relating to Challenges

Using the above themes, researchers first began by identifying key points that described significant moments or ideas expressed in each interview with the participants by creating narrative summaries. Next, researchers clustered key points within the narrative summaries into common sub-themes that emerged in the analysis of all participant interviews. Researchers then reviewed the art responses and the participants' explanations of their imagery, which allowed for the exploration of common themes in imagery and metaphor use that were then added to the identified subthemes. Ultimately, six key sub-themes were identified through this arts-based inquiry. Within themes related to support and resiliency, researchers identified "Feeling Seen" as a major theme. Researchers categorized further by creating three subthemes, which are identified as "feeling seen" outside of academics, amongst community and social circles, and through self-expression. Within themes related to challenges, the research identified three subthemes: lack of support, pressure to achieve/succeed, and mental health challenges.

In the following section, the five narrative summaries and corresponding art are presented. This is followed by identified themes related to overall support and resiliency and themes related to challenges.

Participant Narrative Summaries

Participant 1 Art Narrative: "Managing the Conveyor Belt"

Participant 1 began by reflecting on being a first-generation college student and the stress they felt from the pressure to succeed academically. During the art-making process, they chose to represent their experiences and emotions, through the metaphor of "conveyor belt." The conveyor belt was "pumping out A's" and managing college applications (Fig ____). They described that this image represented their stress, which included academic pressures and

familial expectations. The participant reported the conveyor belt then took a toll on their mental health. They shared:

“I was [like] having issues with mental health in high school, I think. It started there [referencing conveyor belt] And if I could finish the drawing, if I had the skills to do it, it would show that it’s also taking a toll [referring to mental health] doing this conveyor belt thing.” (Participant 1, personal communication, 2024)

For the second directive, Participant 1 reflected on the support they received from their school. They shared their gratitude for a teacher who identified their mental health struggles and urged them to visit the health center in order to speak with a counselor. Participant 1 reflected, “I think I just got lucky with a teacher that cared about me.” The participant shared that their school seemed to understand the student demographic, and therefore catered to their specific needs. As depicted in their drawing, the participant reflected on feeling supported by their school’s college and career center, counselors, teachers, and curriculum. The participant shared that while they felt alone at the time, upon reflection they felt:

“I did have support. So I guess if I were to redraw the first drawing, I probably would add more people to the factory.” (Participant 1, personal communication, 2024)



Figures 1 & 2:

Participant 2 Art Narrative: “Just keep moving forward”

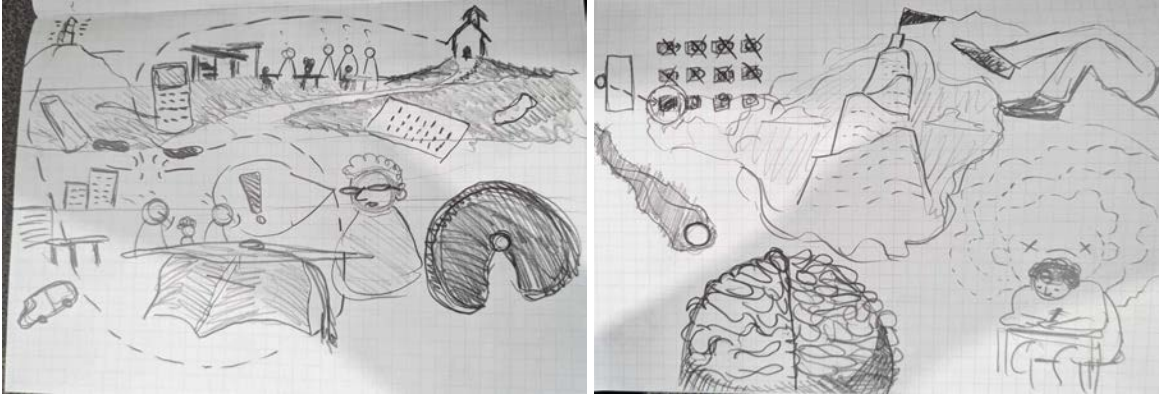
Participant 2 shared challenges that reflected their experience as a first-generation college student. Though these challenges began years before they would attend college, they shared their experience as they learned to navigate the world of higher education independently. Participant 2 explained that their parents immigrated to the United States from El Salvador, believing their children would have better academic opportunities. As immigrants, their parents followed the guidance of teachers and individuals they believed understood the best educational route for Participant 2 and their siblings. The winding path in Participant 2’s first art piece reflects the changes and uncertainty they faced on their journey to higher education. Participant 2 reported always performing well in school, excelling in their courses. They shared feeling academically comfortable within the classroom. As their parents followed the guidance of trusted individuals,

this resulted in a journey that required the participant to consistently change schools, thus forcing them to adapt to different environments and lose friendships.

“I feel like it was a really isolating experience of going to different schools at different points in my life, never really sticking at one school for too long or sticking with the same group of friends.” (Participant 2, personal communication, 2024)

As Participant 2 reflected on their academic experience, they found that their experience as a first-generation college student was greatly affected by the lack of social capital accessible to them at the time. Participant 2 did feel supported academically at their school, as their teachers and counselors were able to provide them with counsel and resources to ensure academic success. During the interview, Participant 2 acknowledged the importance of having supportive adults who helped guide him toward his goal of higher education. Participant 2 recognized that while they once assumed everyone had access to these opportunities, as an adult, they recognized that they were supported in ways other first-generation students were not. In their second art piece, they depicted this sense of pressure and loss of identity that came with achieving their educational goals, alongside the uncertainty of what comes next. Though Participant 2 felt supported in their academics, they ultimately identified a lack of emotional and mental support.

“I had a lot of people looking over my shoulder making sure [like]are you doing your homework? Are you getting the help you need, you going tutoring all that good stuff... I didn't really question it too much. I just assumed, because you always assume, you know, I just assumed that everybody has this support, everybody gets what I got, right?” (Participant 2, personal communication, 2024)



Figures 3 & 4

Participant 3 Art Narrative: “Exploring my Queerness”

“My friend group actually, by the time that we ended high school, we were all, we had all come out in some capacity. So it was just a lot of gays in that, in that school, that program specifically, which was really nice to have. I never felt bullied.”

When reflecting on their adolescence, Participant 3 described being particularly conscious of their body and the space it took up, particularly in relation to their experience as a person of color. Participant 3 began the interview by drawing a large circle in the middle of the paper filled with brown scribbled and swirling lines which then became a sad face. On one side of the circle is a representation of school, the other of Participant 3’s home. When describing their life in high school, Participant 3 shared feeling unsupported at home and experiencing internalized racism as a result of the blind spots and microaggressions prevalent in their high school environment. Above the face, are clouds which are raining red drops. According to Participant 3, they did not feel comfortable or confident in who they were at home or school, which resulted in self-harming at the time. In reflection, they shared:

“So just kind of the sadness between these two things that I would love to run towards each of them [home and school], but I just didn’t feel like I could do that at the time”

In terms of support, Participant 3 shared their drawing depicting several people together under a vibrant rainbow. The vibrant rainbow represents their support and experiences surrounding queer kinship and community. Participant 3 shared their experience finding community both in high school and college. They shared feelings supported by their friends as they explored their gender and sexuality. On the other side, the participant drew a house and heart to reflect their shifted familial dynamic. While reflecting, Participant 3 shared the support they received toward their first-generation identity, particularly in high school and college. They identified attending a “summer bridge” program designed for first-generation college students which offered classes, workshops, mentorship, and leadership opportunities. They shared that their acceptance of their first-generation identity, through high school and college increased their confidence, thus allowing them to become a leader in their academic community. When reflecting on their first-generation identity they shared:

“I think that was a really a first, I was like, oh, first-gen, kind of be a good thing. Not like that, but there (are) people who actually see the shit that you go through and (they) are there to make sure it stops or decreases in some level.”

Lastly, Participant 3 identified their access to mental health support in college as crucial to their development. They shared that the school made therapy accessible and allowed students to request therapists of color. Through this support Participant 3 was able to receive the mental health support they needed, which allowed them the space to become more expressive and process what they needed.



Figures 5 & 6

Participant 4 Art Narrative: “I don't have to fit in a box”

At the beginning of the interview, Participant 4 identified challenges during their adolescence, specifically in high school, which they described as a “dark time”. They depicted this through a night sky backdrop (Fig. ___) behind various figures placed intentionally on the page. For Participant 4, academic success was strictly encouraged in their household, where anything below a letter grade of a “B” signaled an uncertain future fueled with disappointment from their parents. Growing up, Participant 4 admits to not having a great relationship with their siblings or their parents, describing it as “abusive...verbally, physically, emotionally”. As a first-generation college student, Participant 4 was conditioned to rely on academics as the path toward success. It is through the exploration of symbolism and art exploration in the interview that Participant 4 was able to identify the limitations and gaps in their educational experience in adolescence.

“If you have to [like] get two hours of sleep a night, if you have to pull all-nighters, you're doing it for your future. So [like] it's going to pay off. And even if you have to work yourself to the bone, that's what you have to do. Welcome to the real world.”
(Participant 4, personal communication, 2024)

Throughout the interview, Participant 4 spent time describing clown symbolism which they intentionally included in their image. Participant 4 connected to this symbol as a persona that embodied humor and extrovertedness at school, and in social circles, all while simultaneously representing a facade that masked the challenges faced at home. In terms of support in high school, Participant 4 particularly emphasized the opportunity to express themselves through extracurricular classes (i.e. yearbook club, ceramics, and Japanese) which provided distance from the rigidity of International Baccalaureate classes and the emotional toll they were struggling with at the time. Participant 4 also described the shared sentiments their classmates identified in high school, and the high pressure placed on their academics. Participant 4 described the impact of mental health in their life sharing the limited support from adults in their life, both at home and at school. Finally, Participant 4 concluded the interview by reflecting on their resiliency in overcoming the challenges faced in adolescence, eventually arriving at a more authentic form of themselves.

“I did have conversations with myself on why I was putting myself into certain boxes or limiting myself. And then I did come to some revelation. I was [like], I don't have to fit in a box. I don't have to be this one thing and fit into this one image that people have of me.”(Participant 4, personal communication, 2024)

Figures 7 & 8



Participant 5 Art Narrative: “I didn’t really understand why that would be a problem”

The interview began with Participant 5 drawing their first response inside of a book. While reflecting on their artwork and adolescent experience, the participant identified challenges with their parent's disapproval of their gender and sexuality. The participant's artwork did not appear to visually represent their experience but rather their feelings at the time. They expressed feeling confused by their parent's disapproval and religious outlook on their identity. As a result of their queer identity, they shared experiencing physical and emotional abuse at the time. When considering their social supports, they identified feeling unsupported by their family, friends, and school. As a result, the participant expressed feeling isolated as they explored their gender and sexuality in a way that felt natural to them. When recalling their adolescence, the participant experienced moments of being overwhelmed and overcome with emotions. At these points, the interview was paused to allow for breathing and emotional regulation. During these moments, the participant was reflecting on their adolescence and their constant fear at the time. They explained that during this period of life, they experienced suicidal ideation as a result of the ongoing abuse and disapproval from their family. The participant shared:

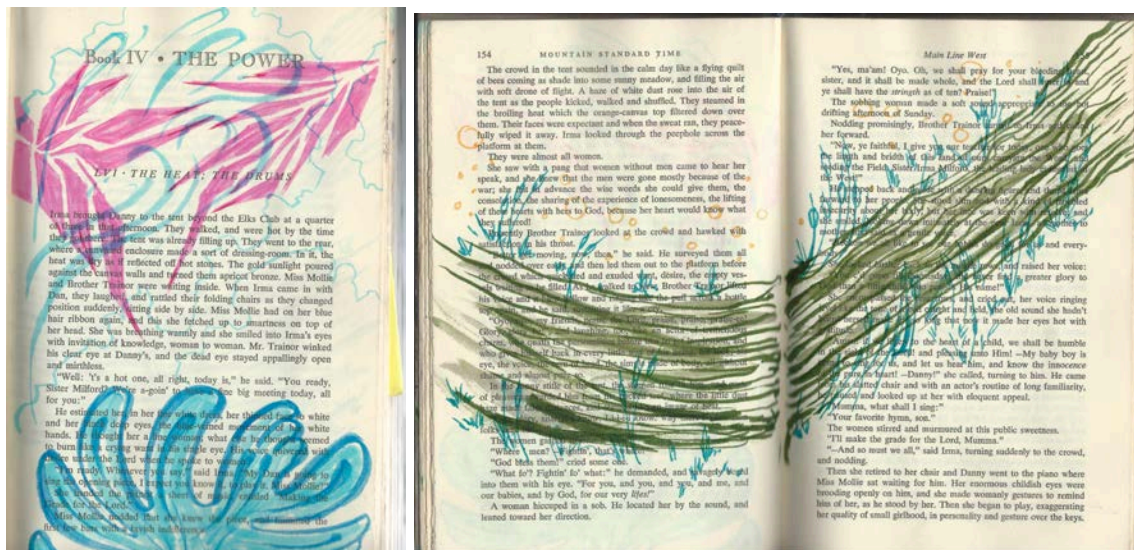
“And I just, I didn’t know my parents were abusive. I thought it was normal for people to be shitty all the time. Yeah, and they just scream at me constantly. But [like], in a way I was used to and [like], I don’t know...So I was [like], oh, life is not supposed to be like this. So I guess I had some hope for things being different and then, [like] I don’t know, having some future after that” (Participant 5, personal communication, 2024)

In terms of support, the participant identified two teachers they “could depend on.” They identified enjoying nature and opportunities to spend time outside where they could “chill out after the everyday horrors” of their life. Despite forming connections with teachers within their school, they expressed that being queer was not accepted within the school's culture. The

participant felt as though their school failed to protect them, often foregoing their responsibilities as mandated reporters. The participant reported sharing their experiences of physical abuse with multiple teachers who failed to report their abuse. They explained:

“Umm, I just wished someone had maybe used some critical thinking skills and asked like one, maybe even two more questions, but they did not. . . So I don’t know, [like] in an ideal world, [like] they would have cared a little more. They would have done the bare minimum. They would have done their mandated reporter job, if they had done the bare minimum” (Participant 5, personal communication, 2024)

The participant reflected and shared that they wished their teachers had been educated on supporting LGBTQ+ youth. They identified that later going to college in a predominantly queer space allowed them the opportunity to “reframe how they understood community.” Ultimately, they identified space that encouraged and supported queer acceptance as an important cornerstone in their journey. The participant acknowledged that if they had access to these affirmative spaces earlier, maybe things could have been different.



Figures 9 & 10

Themes Related to Support and Resiliency

Feeling Seen

Participants consistently expressed a desire to be "seen" as whole individuals when discussing instances of support they received at school for their vulnerabilities and challenges, along with suggestions for additional support from the school. The emergent sub-themes connected to the theme of being seen, specifically emphasize being seen outside of academics as well as being seen in the context of community and social circles. In expressing moments that they felt seen, participants were able to describe how this theme supported their resiliency.

Outside of Academics

In analyzing the specific vulnerabilities of participants such as those who identified as either, a first-generation college student, transgender, unhoused or experienced housing insecurity, and/or experienced suicidal ideation in adolescence, it was clear that most participants, with the exception of one, identified with at least the status of identifying as a first-generation student. In reflecting on the support they received as a student in high school, one participant noted, "I feel like I was pretty well-supported at school. In the sense that [like] I had everything I needed... people were really concerned with my academic success growing up...in terms of counselors, my parents." This same participant also described much of the academic support and resources they received feeling "transactional", describing the meaningful interactions that helped them feel seen outside of their academic identity, "teachers that would listen to my rants about Star Wars or about whatever nerdy thing that I was really into...it doesn't seem that serious but...they knew that I liked Star Wars. They didn't just know that I was a straight-A student". Another participant who also identifies as a first-generation student verbally

and visually described the support of a teacher who recognized that they were struggling with their mental health and connected them to the school's health center, "I think I just got lucky with a teacher that cared about me...they were very supportive with resources". It is evident that the element of being seen outside of their academic skills and identity aided in supporting resilience specifically as it addressed the high pressure produced by academic achievement.

Community and Social Circles

When considering other supports of which aided in cultivating resilience and identity during adolescence, Participant 3 emphasized the value of community, "the majority of my friend groups are like queer trans people of color [um], and you know there's just like the vibrancy in that and the kinship that forms in those specific circles that is still familial in different ways". Moreover, another participant speaks about how although the academic pressure to succeed from her parents was present, her social circle, specifically friends, seemed to be supportive and not impacted by active challenges. In addition, Participant 4 described the significance of her high school meeting the needs of the demographic and population of the school, specifically as a first-generation student who felt seen by the resources and opportunities to build community with other students who were challenged by similar factors,

I know there are some schools that don't talk about that stuff at all. It's kind of like you're on your own. You have to have a family member who knows about this stuff to help you. Or an older sibling. And I don't. I don't have an older sibling or parents who went to college. So, having that at school was really helpful. (Participant 4, personal communication, 2024)

In considering the participants' narratives about the strengths and supports they identified in regards to identity development, there is a visible thread that runs through each which highlights the impact of providing social opportunities that allow for community building.

Self-Expression

For Participant 5, the opportunity to be seen outside of academics was specifically through non-academic-based courses that allowed them to practice their creativity and encourage self-expression. However, as academic rigidity and pressure to succeed increased, the diminishing of extracurricular electives and classes decreased, in terms of the support they wished the high school had more of, Participant 5 states, “I would resort to self-harming and things like that. And so, if the ability to create something else and do something else with your hands was there, I think it would have been a lot more helpful”. Additionally, another participant describes feeling a sense of validation in their LGBTQ+ identity in high school due to the support from administrators and staff...

I'm really grateful that in the educational environments I've been in, it's never really been suppressed...thinking back about high school...all the rooms that were the program's rooms had murals inside. They would switch them out almost every year. There'd be mural days, and students can bring ideas to teachers. Teachers could ask students to do a certain type of painting on the wall...that vibrancy was very inviting and really distinguished. (Participant 3, personal communication, 2024)

In analyzing the participants' descriptions, self-expression appears to be crucial for fostering individual identity, promoting emotional well-being, and facilitating personal growth.

Themes Relating to Challenges

Participants reported facing a variety of challenges in relation to their self-identified vulnerabilities. For analysis, the researchers have consolidated three main themes concerning challenges: lack of support, mental health adversity, and pressure to achieve/succeed.

Lack of Support (family support, school support, mental health resources)

All participants reported experiencing difficulties with a lack of support in some aspects of their lives. Participant 5 reported experiencing a lack of familial support as their experiences physical and emotional abuse from their parents, who did not support the exploration of their queer identity. As a result, the participant experienced depression and suicidal ideation.

Participant 5 reported sharing their experiences of abuse with multiple school staff members, “Um, I talked to my school to ask for help, and they told me I deserved it.” Despite multiple attempts to receive support, the participant ultimately felt the school failed to protect them.

Participant 3 shared their similar difficulty while experiencing a lack of familial stability.

According to Participant 3, their parents “were in a weird place in their marriage” which resulted in them, “hiding so much of myself at a time where I was also needing to like...I was coming to realize a lot about myself and keeping that hidden and also, I just didn't have the best communication with my parents. My parents weren't communicating with each other at that time.

So, it just felt really icy in the house.” As a result, the participant expressed feelings of

depression and suicidal ideation. On the other hand, participant 2 reported experiencing a lack of mental health support. According to the participant, “...not a lot of umm support when it comes to [like], should [like] the mental health stuff, how to [like], balance the stress. No support in terms of like, hey, [like], are you doing good? [Like], are you doing good? You know, [like] no check-in, like no mental health check-in.” Overall, all interview participants attributed a lack of

support to their ongoing mental health concerns, low self-esteem, and challenges throughout adolescence.

Pressure to Achieve/Succeed

4 out of 5 participants reported experiencing pressure to succeed or achieve set expectations. According to Participant 1, they experienced pressure as a first-generation college student. In their artwork, the participant utilized the metaphor of a “conveyor belt” to describe the pressure of “pumping out stuff.” As a first-generation college student, they explained they took “all AP classes” and “anything under an A was so bad.” Similarly, Participant 2 shared hearing, “This is your way out of poverty. This is your way out of...this is the reason why your parents [like] immigrated to this country. This is the.. so [like] obviously that's going to affect me, and it's in [like] a subconscious way, right, even if I don't, if I couldn't admit it at that point myself.” While both Participants 1 and 2 shared experiencing pressure due to their identities as first-generation college students, Participant 5 reported experiencing pressure to achieve the gender expectations set by their cultural background and immediate family. Participant 5 shared that their parents were “very set” that they adhere to heteronormative gender roles. Participant 5 shared, “ I was [like], not sure if they were going to [like] kick me out” as a result of their exploration of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, the participants identified the pressure to succeed and achieve as a common stressor throughout their adolescent experience.

Mental Health Challenges

All participants identified experiencing a variety of mental health difficulties due to the challenges incurred by their adolescent experience. These mental health challenges ranged from depression, feelings of isolation, suicidal ideation, and anxiety or “stress,” Participant 4 described their experience, “...I really just felt surrounded by darkness. I could not escape it. I

could not see anything beyond it, anything like that.” Participant 4 explained that their mental health challenges were often exacerbated by external pressures, like their relationship with family or their pressure to succeed. Participant 2 shared this sentiment by explaining that “certain behaviors were [like] incentivized by the school. So like it was [like]... if you were stressed out and [like] that meant you were trying.” Participant 2 then explained that this went on to create mental health challenges that went unaddressed within the school system. Participant 1, similarly, explained that the “conveyor belt” of responsibility and pressure created a “burden on their mental health.” While the participants experienced mental health concerns, they were often exacerbated by the ongoing pressure and challenges created by their vulnerable identities.

Findings and Recommendations

Throughout our narrative research process and data analysis, several key findings emerged to address the research question, “How can educational environments promote resilience and positive youth development during adolescent identity exploration?” This section will begin with a brief overview of key findings including a discussion on their relation to the existing literature on resilience and positive youth development. The remainder of this section will explore the relationship between support, resilience, and challenges that may occur during adolescent identity exploration. Moreover, these findings are supported by literature that emphasizes specific elements that can positively aid adolescents' identity development, such as support by school staff, connections with peers, connectedness with the school setting, and diversity affirmation as well as clarity of supportive resources available (Riekie et al., 2016). Finally, we will present a list of recommendations constructed from our findings.

Findings on Resilience and Support

Across multiple studies, literature has shown that developing a sense of community and belonging can greatly increase resilience and positive youth development (Riekie et al., 2016). Our data analysis identified supports and resiliency that have been referenced by both existing literature and the narratives provided by this research project's participants. These findings were categorized by three subthemes. The sub-themes are as follows: support from teachers and school staff, support from peers, and self-expression.

Support from Teachers and School Staff

According to existing literature, students develop much of their identities through the influences of their community, which includes teachers and school staff. The literature indicates

that positive teacher relationships can further promote resilience, provide positive moral influence, and increase support (Riekie et al., 2016).

During the data collection process, participants shared experiences in which their teachers or school staff had either a negative or positive impact on their sense of well-being. For example, Participant 1 shared an experience where they were comforted when their teacher checked in on their overall well-being and mental health. On the other hand, Participant 5 shared an experience in which they felt let down by the teacher's handling of reported abuse. This participant expressed feeling as though the system had failed to keep them safe. According to our findings, it is critical for schools to adopt a holistic approach, not solely focusing on academic achievement when implementing positive identity formation frameworks within education. For example, Participant 2 shared...

I definitely can think of the teachers that I've had the best relationships with that [like] are most genuine...teachers that [like] would listen to my rants about [like] Star Wars or about [like] whatever nerdy thing that I was really into...It doesn't seem [like] that serious but...They didn't just know that [like] I was a straight-A student you know I think that...was the key difference (personal communication, February 19, 2024).

The data collected here revealed that participants reported positive impacts on their sense of well-being when they were seen and supported in ways that extended beyond their academic identity. To support this, existing literature has emphasized the value of meaningful interactions with teachers who understand students more than their academic achievements, as previously explained by Participant 2 (Riekie et al., 2016). In addition to Participant 2, two other participants mentioned the importance of having a teacher take an interest in them outside of their academic identity. The three participants identified teacher support and acknowledgment as

integral in promoting their well-being. In conclusion, both existing literature and our data suggest student resilience and support increase through meaningful relationships with teachers and school staff (Zeeman, 2017).

Support From Peers

In addition to support from teachers and school staff, our research confirms that peer support is vital for positive youth development. For example, one participant described having friends who they felt a sense of familial support and kinship, due to their identification with similar experiences, such as identifying as LGBTQ+ in adolescence. Furthermore, Participant 3's narrative suggests that in facing individual challenges due to vulnerabilities that are often marginalized or underrepresented on a societal level, can have positive effects when there is a type of solidarity with peers, and thus understanding of the individual. Moreover, another participant discusses another piece of this finding, of which she explains how although there was academic pressure at school and pressure from parents to succeed, Participant 1 felt that their friendships were not impacted and they also influenced her awareness of educational resources available. These findings are in line with research that explains how positive youth development is influenced by relationships. With reference specifically with trans youth, recent research suggests that providing safe, inclusive spaces for youth to socialize positively impacts wellbeing (Hillier, 2020; Zeema, 2017).

Self-Expression

Within our data, we found that self-expression is vital for fostering individual identity, promoting emotional well-being, facilitating personal growth, and cultivating connectedness. Additionally, literature from our research revealed that providing a means for self-expression and creativity both affirmed students and allowed for identity exploration. By providing creative

opportunities, students are more easily able to build community with others, navigate challenges and explore coping identities outside of traditional academics (Saltis, 2023; Zeeman, 2017). For example, Participant 4 describes how being part of clubs such as yearbook, as well as classes such as Japanese and ceramics, offered a “break” from her rigorous international baccalaureate class schedule, which Participant 4 described as necessary for her mental health. Additionally, these creative outlets seem to provide an opportunity for meaning-making and community around activism and self-advocacy (Hillier, 2020; Saltis, 2023). For example, Participant 3 expressed feelings supported by other queer-identifying students at their school. Finally, our findings confirm existing literature which describes how opportunities for self-expression in an academic setting may offer a strengths-based and asset-based lens for understanding students' experiences, specifically those who face vulnerabilities and challenges (Whitley, 2018).

Findings on Challenges

In our research, three themes emerged as challenges to promoting resilience and positive youth development: academic pressure, intersectional identities, and lack of support.

Pressure to Achieve

Across all participant interviews, there was an emergent theme of participants feeling an increased level of pressure during their adolescence. Many of the participants reported that this pressure was primarily evident from their caregivers, particularly emphasizing the need to conform to set expectations. While all identified with intersectional identities and vulnerabilities, participants reported a pressure to conform to societal or parental expectations. This pressure to conform to expectations of others may be supported by literature which suggests how interdependent familial roles can influence different forms of independence for first-generation students (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Despite the forms of independence first-generation students

develop in the transition to college, there appears to be a cultural focus where interdependence was intricately tied to their resiliency development (Covarrubias et al., 2018). Further, Huynh explains how first-generation students tend to report higher levels of stress in response to independent focused school communication, further explaining that first-generation students often emphasize interdependency when seeking support (personal communication, December 4, 2021).

Moreover, in regards to the reported high level of pressure experienced by all participants, it was also reported that participants' mental health was negatively impacted with some participants reporting overt symptoms and behaviors i.e excess sleepiness in class, suicidal ideation, and depressive mood, while other participants described suppressing their emotions and hyper-focused on the set expectations. Four out of five participants reported feeling pressure to achieve academically, while two felt the pressure to conform to set expectations surrounding gender and sexuality. This pressure to achieve has also been supported by a study in which more than 40% of Australian youth reported feelings of stress which impacts their ability to perform in terms of studying and cope with the stressors (Riekie et. al, 2016). Of note is literature that suggests that academic marginalization of students, i.e. first-generation college students could result in challenges in understanding norms, rules, and attitudes within the context of institutions (Williams et al., 2022) where decoding curriculum can create a positive impact and counter the challenges students are facing in academia (Delgado, 2023). In reviewing the data, researchers also found that although these mental health challenges were present in tandem with their academics, their school environments provided little to no intervention or mental health support.

Intersectional Identities

All of the participants who were interviewed disclosed having intersectional identities specifically related to their race/ethnicity, family of origin, gender, and sexuality in addition to the vulnerabilities addressed in the study. This finding sheds light on how these intersecting identities shape the challenges, supports, and resiliencies present during the participant's adolescent experiences and identity development. For example, Participant 3 discussed their feelings of alterity in a predominantly white school where they did not feel supported as a queer person of color. Participant 3 shared,

I felt [like] when I was [like being] around a lot of white people who just did not get it. And feeling like when [like] just being the butt of racist jokes...umm made just my self-esteem really like, oh, I'm not, [like] I literally would have thoughts about..., if I was white, then I would [like] have X, Y, Z. Like I would not be going through this and really resenting my own [like] family trajectory and my own identity and [like] my appearance. (personal communication, February 20, 2024).

In parallel, Participant 2 discussed feeling a sense of increased stress as they reflected on being a child of immigrants whose parents had limited knowledge on the American education system. They reflected that despite their multifaceted identity and experiences they were only "seen" by faculty and staff through the lens of their academic identity. The findings from the aforementioned participant's experiences are strongly supported by literature which states that students of color, specifically those who identify as Black/African-American and children of immigrants, particularly first-generation students, are likely to report alienation from their educational environments in addition to stress-related mental health issues such as hypervigilance, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and physical manifestations (Williams et al., 2022).

Lack of Support

All participants reported experiencing difficulties with a lack of support in various aspects of their lives. Participants particularly reported experiencing a lack of support within their families, school, and access to mental health resources. While some of our participants acknowledged school support around their queer or trans identities, Participant 5 reported experiencing emotional harm due to teachers or staff who were unprepared, unwilling, or unaware of how best to support the students exploring a variety of identities. Participant 2 reinforced the lack of support by sharing “No support in terms of like, hey, like, are you doing good? Like, are you doing good? You know, like no check in, like no mental health check in” . Participant 1 shared that their lack of support was largely due to their family’s inability to support their experience as a first generation college student. Participant 1 shared, “It’s kind of like you’re on your own. You have to have a family member who knows about this stuff to help you. Or like an older sibling. And I don’t. I don’t have an older sibling or parents who went to college”. Existing literature further reinforces the detriments of lacking support by recognizing that distress amongst these vulnerable populations can result in higher school dropout rates, suicidal ideation, and experiences of violence or homelessness (Saltis, 2023), as seen throughout the participant narratives.

Recommendations

Based on our findings and emergent themes, we are presenting a list of recommendations for educators, administration and staff to consider implementing to promote resilience and positive youth development during adolescent identity exploration in educational environments. The following specific recommendations are provided:

- 1. Integrate opportunities for creative self-expression in general education spaces.**

Educational environments are encouraged to increase opportunities for students to cultivate their creativity for the purpose of coping with the stressors adolescents face, especially for students with vulnerabilities such as those our research emphasizes; first-generation students, LGBTQ+, have experienced housing insecurity, and/or have experienced suicidal ideation. For example, Aguilera and Lopez believe that centering students' stories of resilience through creative means can offer a reframe of academic marginalization that vulnerable students may face by focusing on assets and strengths (2020). These opportunities can be integrated in the form of art-based activities during class, extracurricular clubs and organizations, prioritization of creative classes to support a holistic and balanced schedule, as well as specialized workshops that allow students the dedicated time to reflect on their identities, well-being, and environment. Additionally, the mere presence of art in schools can be impactful and can also be an opportunity to involve students in the creation of artwork and/or as part of the decision making process of selecting artwork to display on campus.

2. Professional Development for Educators

Further, findings from our study recommend that educational environments develop and implement professional development opportunities for educators to train in integrating social emotional learning (SEL) and effective use of creative based modalities within the curriculum. In implementing professional development training, educational spaces are able to tap into the various aspects that promote resilience and identity development youth. Literature states that support can be cultivated “between individual strengths and environmental resources, e.g., opportunities for mentorship, caring relationships with family members” (Milot Travers & Mahalik, 2019 p.324). Moreover, literature states that specifically in supporting trans youth,

educating staff and administration “is also an essential element in promoting inclusiveness and reducing feelings of isolation” (Hillier 2020, Kosciw 2015, Saltis 2023).

3. Create opportunities for social interactions between students and educators

Educational environments, specifically school staff and teachers, should consider a strengths-based lens by supporting students through the Five C’s (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring) of positive youth development (Johnson & Ettekal, 2023, Lerner et al., 2005, 2021). Findings showed that participants often reported feeling seen only through their academic identity, however through the Five C’s model of positive youth development, school staff can cultivate social development. In addition, as our literature states, interconnectedness can be a cultural focused protective factor specifically for first-generation students. Thus implementations of programs or processes that support the Five C’s model, such as the integration of mentorship would increase overall positive school culture (Milot Travers & Mahalik, 2019 p.324).

4. Create and support opportunities for social interactions between students

Our next recommendation emphasizes peer connections as a key element in supporting identity formation and resiliency (Reikie et al., 2016). Across all our findings, social interactions and sense of community among students appeared to be a defining factor in positive youth development. Specifically in data from participants who identified as first-generation students and students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, there was expressed sentiment regarding having social connections with others who understood their identities and shared experiences. In addition, ensuring there are safe and inclusive spaces for students to socialize at school, i.e. clubs, can support students in positive youth development (Hillier, 2020; Zeema, 2017). Participant narratives can also be supported by literature that explains cultural factors of

educational environments and how students may value certain forms of support and connection, thus impacting social interactions. For example, Covarrubias et al (2018) speaks on interdependence and interconnectedness which seemed to be favored over the independence based ideals often emphasized in western educational spaces among first-generation students. This research therefore recommends the emphasis of communal spaces and support groups for students who may be historically marginalized in educational spaces, such as the populations our research has focused on.

5. Ensure educational spaces include mental health support

An admirable program that seeks to support youth through their development is the YEP program, a program which aims to mitigate high risk behaviors among minority youth (Pan and Papanek, 2012). Although more institutions are implementing some form of a YEP initiative today, to our knowledge only two of the seven entities are required, one of which is health or mental health agencies. However, based on the data and participant narratives collected in this study, we recommend that educational mental health support be a required element as part of implementing a YEP initiative in school settings, or at the minimum allocating resources to the prioritization of mental health support, rather than an optional integration. This recommendation is supported by research which demonstrates that “levels of academic pressure have risen among adolescents (Löfstedt et al., 2020), over a similar time period to the increases in depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide” (Stearns et al., 2023). Thus, it is imperative that more educational environments for adolescent students see the interconnectedness of mental health and academic achievement. Moreover, rather than taking the approach that YEP has encouraged of mitigating risk behaviors, we propose a strengths-approach where the emphasizing is the youths assets and strengths.

By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can cultivate positive youth development, support adolescents during the critical time of identity exploration and enhance student learning experiences and academic achievements.

Conclusion

This study focussed on four specific adolescent populations that may benefit from further exploration and support in the process of identity formation. The four populations included unhoused individuals, transgender youth, first-generation college students, and adolescents at risk of suicide. This research aimed to understand the additional challenges these groups face and explore potential supports that can be provided by their school environment. By investigating the relationship between the educational environments, identity formation, and overall well-being within these four populations, we aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role schools can play in shaping positive adolescent development. Additionally, this research aimed to explore how the education system can be better utilized to respond to the diverse experiences and vulnerabilities of students. As researchers we employed a qualitative narrative-based methodology, incorporating semi-structured interviews that use arts-based inquiry and storytelling to capture the lived experiences of our adult participants as they reflected on their adolescents.

Findings

Through the use of art and narrative inquiry, we were able to gather a detailed account of our participants' reflections of their adolescence. We found that self-expression, exploration of individual identity, promotion of emotional well-being, facilitating personal growth, and cultivating connectedness are all areas for improvement in academic settings. Additionally, literature from our research revealed that providing a means for self expression and creativity both affirmed students and allowed for identity exploration. Our findings support the initiative for schools to adopt a holistic approach, not solely focusing on academic achievement when implementing positive identity formation frameworks within education. Many of our participants

stressed the pressure they felt to achieve academic success, however they also identified the lack of emotional support they would have wanted to foster their identity formation outside of being a student. For those participants who did receive that kind of support, the data collected in this study revealed positive impacts on their sense of well-being when they were seen and supported in ways that extended beyond their academic identity. This support does not only have to come from teachers, faculty, or administrators, it could come from students themselves. When schools allow for more opportunity for students to engage and uplift one another, this can have positive effects amongst the students as they build solidarity with peers, and thus understanding of the individual as a part of the group.

Participant experience

Based on participant data, it appears that further research and studies pertaining to academic marginalization, specifically as it applies to first-generation students and their intersectional identities may be beneficial. In addition, participants verbally expressed gratitude to the researchers for allowing them the space to express themselves both verbally and artistically through drawing. Though the experience of the semistructured interviews were not intended to be a therapy session, participants expressed positive experiences through the art making and storytelling.

Limitations, Challenges, and Strengths

Through the research process, the researchers were able to identify areas of strength, challenges, and limitations within the research. Some limitations included sample size and geographical area of sample. Being that our study was limited to 5 participants, that could make our findings challenging to apply to larger populations overall. As researchers we experienced challenges in finding participants who identified with our populations of interest that we

identified through vulnerabilities experienced in adolescence. Time was also a limitation we came up against as we were limited to time constraints as graduate student researchers. The participants that we did find came from a smaller pool of individuals who are in higher education, widening the scope of our participants could have led to richer findings in relation to experience and diversity. As researchers we would like to address the limitation of not having adolescent aged participants, for our study we chose adult participants who were willing to reflect on their identified challenges they faced in adolescence. By not having participants who are currently adolescents this study is limited in understanding what practices and changes have been implemented to support students who are facing difficulties in their current stage of life. This is an area for further study in addition to widening the scope of participants geographical location and age. Finally, a limitation that we would have wanted to expand on is the exploration of the participants' art work, due to the semi structured interview format of the research we were limited in how much time we spent discussing the area created and exploring the metaphorical imagery presented by the participants.

As for our strengths, though our sample size was small, we did have diversity in representation of ethnicity and gender identity. Because our study focussed on 4 marginalized groups of interest, and our researchers had high ambitions, the scope of our literature is vast, making our understanding of the identified groups an asset as we moved forward through the research. We used art in exploration and reflection of our participants' experience which allowed us as researchers to gain a great deal of insight as to what resources would have benefited their identity development throughout their adolescence. Finally, one of our proudest and greatest strengths from this research is the creation of our list of recommendations from results found in our study and as supported by the extensive literature review that we created.

Recommendations

As educational settings continue to adapt to meet the needs of students, existing literature recognizes the importance of addressing mental health concerns within education environments. By incorporating opportunities to promote resilience and positive youth development, educational environments can play a crucial role in supporting identity achievement amongst adolescents. From our findings we have created a comprehensive list that can be utilized as a starting point to build from and further support adolescents in their identity development.

1. Integrate opportunities for creative self-expression in general education spaces.
2. Professional Development for Educators.
3. Create opportunities for social interactions between students and educators.
4. Create and support opportunities for social interactions between students.
5. Ensure educational spaces include mental health support.

By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can cultivate positive youth development, support adolescents during the critical time of identity exploration and enhance student learning experiences and academic achievements. Considering their potential risk for added challenges, this research acknowledges the importance of interventions aimed at promoting identity achievement amongst these populations. By addressing these challenges and providing appropriate solutions and resources, educational environments can better support the holistic and individual development of adolescents.

Educational environments should prioritize fostering student creativity to help them manage stress and foster identity development, particularly for vulnerable groups like first-generation students, LGBTQ+ individuals, those with housing instability, and those experiencing suicidal thoughts. By supporting the use of art in schools, it provides opportunities

for students to collaborate in creation and build community with one another. Finally, educators should undergo continued professional development to integrate social-emotional learning and creative modalities to further support their students' growth in their academic settings.

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