7-29-2024

Serving Gender-Expansive Students in Catholic High Schools: Understanding the Perspectives of Catholic School Leaders

Cassandra Elyse Gonzales
Loyola Marymount University

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Serving Gender-Expansive Students in Catholic High Schools:

Understanding the Perspectives of Catholic School Leaders

by

Cassandra Elyse Gonzales

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2024

Serving Gender-Expansive Students in Catholic High Schools:

Understanding the Perspectives of Catholic School Leaders

by

Cassandra Elyse Gonzales
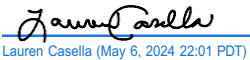
Loyola Marymount University
School of Education
Los Angeles, CA 90045

This dissertation written by Cassandra Elyse Gonzales, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

6/17/2024
‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾
Date

Dissertation Committee
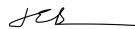
Lauren Casella (May 6, 2024 22:01 PDT)
‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾
Lauren Casella, Ed.D., Dissertation Chair

Elizabeth Stoddard
‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾
Elizabeth Stoddard, Ph.D., Committee Member

‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾
Jane Bleasdale, Ph.D., Committee Member

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people, without whom I would not have been able to conduct

this research.

The members of the Dissertation Committee, Dr. Jane Bleasdale, Dr. Lauren Casella, and Dr.

Beth Stoddard, for providing guidance, wisdom, and support for this study. In particular,

thank you to Dr. Lauren Casella, the dissertation chair, for her guidance, brainstorming

sessions, and confidence in this study.

Dr. Rebecca Stephenson for additional guidance, structure, and conversation throughout the

development of this study.

Michaela Cooper for holding the dissertation process together through her exceptional

communication and commitment to the Ed.D. program.

David Palmieri and the Without Exception community for their support, connections, and

encouragement for this work.

And, of course, thank you to the presidents and principals who took part in this study. Your

commitment to Catholic education and the well-being of your students is unparalleled.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the LGBTQ+ scholars and their allies who are doing the work to create Catholic schools that are worthy of our LGBTQ+ students, faculty, staff, alums, and parents. Your work changes lives.

This dissertation is also dedicated to all the people who have struggled to excel in school systems that were never designed for us. Your thoughts, concerns, and brilliant minds are needed. Your universities are blessed to have you. Neurodiverse scholars are needed to make the changes needed in our education systems. This is your encouragement that people with psychiatric disabilities belong in educational leadership. Yes, it is difficult to simply survive in systems designed to make us fail, but you have made it so far, and your contributions create the world we need, where multiple ideas of success exist.

<div align="center">

TABLE OF CONTENTS

</div>

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

Serving Gender-Expansive Students in Catholic High Schools:

Understanding the Perspectives of Catholic School Leaders

by

Cassandra Elyse Gonzales

While there are many calls to maintain Catholic values in National Catholic Education

Association (NCEA) and (arch)diocesan standards for Catholic school leaders, there is still a lack

of guidance on operationalized support for gender-expansive students. This lack of clarity

hinders the ability of leaders of Catholic schools to support and accompany gender-expansive

students in their schools. This lack of guidance results in unclear leadership, which can adversely

affect the well-being of gender-expansive students in Catholic schools.

This qualitative study explored the experiences of principals and presidents of Catholic

high schools in the United States as they work with gender-expansive students and their families.

It was conducted through semi-structured interviews of six principals and two presidents, who

were asked questions about their practices working with gender-expansive students, the ways of

proceeding they use or plan to use in these conversations, and the barriers they face to supporting

these individuals institutionally.

Findings revealed three themes: (a) *cura personalis* versus *cura apostolica*, (b)

individualized approach and institutional consistency, and (c) individual values and beliefs

versus institutional values and beliefs. Findings suggested that individual school communities

need to engage in thoughtful dialogue to define a way of proceeding. Overarching policies

mandated from the top down will face barriers to implementation. At the same time, it is

essential to proactively engage in the work of defining organizational values and beliefs when it

comes to gender inclusivity. It is not enough to handle it on a case-by-case basis, relying on

students and families to tell you what they need.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

For as long as people have existed, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other minoritized genders and sexualities (LGBTQ+) identities have existed, yet current society still struggles with understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. While understanding and awareness of LGBTQ+ issues have grown over the past few years, this has not necessarily resulted in people being more informed about LGBTQ+ terminology (Parker et al., 2022). A 2022 Pew Research Center poll found that 60% of respondents believed that gender is determined by a person's sex assigned at birth, an increase of 4% in the past year (Parker et al., 2022). However, gender, sex, and sexual orientation are all distinct components of a person's identity. Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time (Kari, n.d.). A 2021 Pew Research poll found that 42% of U.S. adults reported knowing someone who goes by gender-neutral pronouns, an increase from 37% in 2017 (Minkin & Brown, 2021). While more U.S. adults reported knowing someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns, the percentage of U.S. adults who were comfortable using gender-neutral pronouns to refer to someone if asked has remained the same since 2018, 48% (Minkin & Brown, 2021). In reviewing these surveys from the Pew Research Center, it was clear that there was a wide variance in understanding terminology related to gender, sex, and sexuality. For that reason, I offer a glossary of terms that will be utilized throughout this dissertation (also found in Appendix A).

LGBTQ+: An acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer" with a "+" sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of the community (Safe Zone Project, n.d.).

Biological sex: A medical term used to refer to the chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics that classify an individual as female, male, or intersex. Often referred to as simply "sex," "physical sex," "anatomical sex," or specifically as "sex assigned at birth." (Safe Zone Project, n.d.).

Sex assigned at birth: A phrase used to intentionally recognize the sex, male, female, or intersex, that a doctor or midwife uses to describe a child at birth based on their external anatomy (not gender identity). Sometimes called "designated sex at birth" (DSAB) or "sex coercively assigned at birth" (SCAB), or specifically used as "assigned male at birth" (AMAB) or "assigned female at birth" (AFAB): Jenny was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman (Safe Zone Project, n.d.).

Gender: The characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time (Kari, n.d.).

Gender identity: The internal perception of one's gender and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or do not align with what they understand their options for gender to be. This is often conflated with sex. However, they are two distinct categories (Safe Zone Project, n.d.).

Gender expression: The external display of one's gender through a combination of clothing, grooming, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors, generally made sense of through scales of masculinity and femininity (Safe Zone Project, n.d.).

Gender-expansive youth: Person(s) between the ages of 14 and 24 years old who do not identify with traditional gender roles, allowing us to talk about youth who do not meet "traditional" understandings of gender without putting their identity in a box. This term conveys a more comprehensive, flexible range of gender identities and expressions. Gender-expansive can encompass transgender, gender non-binary, and gender-fluid people (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020).

Transgender: An umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth (American Psychological Association, 2023).

This study's focus fell under the umbrella of LGBTQ+ research with a narrower focus on gender-expansive youth, which refers to people between the ages of 14 and 24 years old who do not identify with traditional gender roles, allowing us to consider youth who do not meet "traditional" understandings of gender without putting their identity in a box. This term conveys a more comprehensive, flexible range of gender identities and expressions. Gender-expansive can encompass transgender, gender non-binary, and gender-fluid people (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020).

The mental health and wellness of LGBTQ+ youth is at stake across school sectors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). A 2023 survey by the Trevor Project (2023) reported that nearly one in three LGBTQ+ youth said their mental health was poor due to anti-

LGBTQ+ policies and legislation. The same survey reported that the mental health of nearly two in three respondents was worsened by hearing about potential laws banning the mention of LGBTQ+ people in schools. In general, gender-expansive students are more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation depending on the way they are treated. It is important to note that mental health outcomes are related to how gender-expansive youth are treated, not because of anything inherent to them (Kosciw et al., 2022). For example, according to *Improving School Climate for Transgender and Nonbinary Youth: Research Brief,* completed by Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 2021, transgender and nonbinary students were more likely to have felt unsafe at school based on their gender (84.4.% of transgender students and 52.4% of nonbinary students), compared to their nonbinary when compared to their cisgender counterparts (20.6%) (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2021). Additionally, the same study found that transgender and nonbinary students who could identify more supportive staff reported greater levels of school belonging, higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression, higher academic outcomes, and greater educational aspirations. Recently, there has been a rise in anti-LGBTQ+ hate, including more than 125 bills that target healthcare, 45 bills that ban students from playing school sports, and more than 30 bills that prevent gender-expansive students from using a bathroom in alignment with their gender (Peele, 2023).

According to a 2022 Pew Research Center poll, 78% of U.S. adults say there is at least some (if not a great deal of) discrimination against transgender people in our society, yet 30% of those people believe society has gone too far in accepting transgender people (Parker et al., 2022). Recently, there has been a rise in anti-LGBTQ+ hate, including more than 125 bills that

target healthcare, 45 bills that ban students from playing school sports, and more than 30 bills that prevent gender-expansive students from using a bathroom in alignment with their gender (Peele, 2023). A 2023 survey distributed by the Trevor Project (2023) reported that nearly one in three LGBTQ+ youth said their mental health was poor due to anti-LGBTQ+ policies and legislation. The same survey reported that nearly two in three respondents said that hearing about potential laws banning the mention of LGBTQ+ people at school made their mental health a lot worse. In general, gender-expansive students are more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation depending on the way they are treated. It is important to note that mental health outcomes are related to how gender-expansive youth are treated, not because of anything inherent to them (GLSEN, 2021). For example, according to *Improving School Climate for Transgender and Nonbinary Youth: Research Brief,* completed by GLSEN in 2021, transgender and nonbinary students were more likely to have felt unsafe at school based on their gender (84.4.% of transgender students and 52.4% of nonbinary students), compared to their nonbinary when compared to their cisgender counterparts (20.6%) (GLSEN, 2021). Additionally, the same study found that transgender and nonbinary students who could identify more supportive staff reported greater levels of school belonging, higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression, higher academic outcomes, and greater educational aspirations. Additionally, the same study found that transgender and nonbinary students who could identify more supportive staff reported greater levels of school belonging, higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression, higher academic outcomes, and greater educational aspirations.

Research has shown that a student's psychological safety and sense of belonging in school plays a significant role in academic performance and positive attitudes toward education

in general (Goodenow et al., 1993, as cited in Ma, 2003). Additionally, research shows that a sense of belonging positively affects academic outcomes, including academic motivations, academic effort, absenteeism (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Sánchez et al., 2003), and classroom engagement (Klem & Connell, 2003). The research has also shown a relationship between school connectedness and decreased emotional distress (Lonczak et al., 2002). A 2021 study by GLSEN found that gender-expansive youth experienced a higher level of school belonging as their access to supportive resources increased (GLSEN, 2021).

This study sought to explore the experiences of Catholic school leaders in building a mission-driven culture of support for gender-expansive students attending Catholic high schools. While people in many different roles in Catholic schools could have experience working with gender-expansive students, this study focused on the experiences of presidents and principals of Catholic high schools. Teachers interact with students more profoundly and on a daily basis. Therefore, their experience in teaching gender-expansive students would vary from those of the principal or president of the school. The president of a Catholic high school is tasked with ensuring the school's mission and vision reflects the school's Catholic, academic, and social goals (Archdiocese of Los Angeles [ADLA], 2022). The president works closely with the principal and occasionally interacts with students directly; these interactions are often brief and cursory. Principals interact more often and deeply with students than the president, but they are still less directly connected with students than faculty. Due to the more consistent relationships built between faculty and students, more research has been completed on teachers' experiences working with LGBTQ+ students. Little research focuses on the roles of principals, presidents, or administration in working with LGBTQ+ students. Faculty support affects students more directly

in the immediate. However, the president and principal are the people who set the tone of the school. Understanding their experiences added a new dimension to understanding LGBTQ+ student support in Catholic high schools. This topic is highly specific, and for that reason, it is essential to understand the current and historical context of LGBTQ+ support in both public and Catholic schools.

Public School Governance and Policy on LGBTQ+ Students

All schools, traditional public, charter, private, and religious, fall under an overarching accountability system that impacts all educational institutions. In the public school sector, federal and state law guides decisions on specific groups of students. For example, the *Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act, 1972*, commonly referred to as *Title IX,* was passed to "ensure that male and female students and employees in educational settings are treated equally and fairly." (Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act, 1972). Although the initial wording of *Title IX*, (1972), "male and female" students, signals the binary nature of law, it protects transgender students and students who do not conform to gender stereotypes in addition to protecting against discrimination based on sex. California law prohibits discrimination based on gender (defined as "sex"), gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The preamble of *Title IX* of the *Education Amendments of 1972* stated, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." In 2016, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, under the Obama Administration, issued guidance to the nation's public schools clarifying that *Title IX* (1972) protects students who are transgender. The accompanying statement affirmed the dignity of transgender youth and

implored educators to ensure that schools were safe learning environments for all students (Lhamon & Gupta, 2016). Just one year later, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, under Trump, withdrew the Obama guidance (Battle & Wheeler, 2017), sending the message that protecting transgender students from discrimination is questionable. Following the removal of the 2016 *Title IX*, (1972) guidance, discrimination based on gender and sex has grown. According to the 2017 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, 71% of respondents reported hearing teachers or other school staff make negative comments about a student's gender expression, an increase from 64.2% in 2015 (Kosciw et al., 2016; 2018). While the removal of the 2016 guidance (Battle & Wheeler, 2017) limited protections for LGBTQ+ youth in schools, some targets of sex discrimination and harassment have successfully relied on *Title IX* (1972) protections in court cases against schools.

While this study sought to understand the experiences of school leaders in a non-public school setting, specifically a Catholic school environment, it's essential to understand the practices and policies that inform their public school colleagues. Understanding public school practices and policies helps educators and school leaders to see different approaches to LGBTQ+ students, approaches that the majority of students and educators experience in the United States. This study focused on schools across the United States, where policies and practices vary from state to state with some overarching federal control. For example, in California LGBTQ+ students enrolled in public schools are protected from discrimination by California Education Code Section 220, under which public schools are required to "afford students equal opportunity and access to the school's facilities, activities, and programs, in a manner that is consistent with each student's gender identity, irrespective of whether the student's gender identity matches the

student's assigned sex at birth" (Prohibition of Discrimination, 2018). This code requires public school employees to use a student's chosen name and pronouns and allows students to use facilities in accordance with their gender identity. While California public schools function under the policy direction of the Legislature, more local responsibility is granted to school districts and county education officials than other governmental entities.

School districts are government entities that provide education to students within a specific territory. School board members are locally elected public officials entrusted with governing a community's public schools. Policies and regulations are typically uniform across all schools within a district. For example, the Los Angeles Unified Schools District (LAUSD) policies can be considered. According to *Gender Identity and Students—Ensuring Equity and Nondiscrimination* (Holmquist, 2019), the overarching guideline for LAUSD policy is that "schools shall accept the gender identity that each student asserts." Included in this guidance are numerous policies in place to support students in their exploration of gender and understanding of their own identity. While private non—religious schools must follow the California Education Code and local education policies regarding LGBTQ+ students, religious schools are exempt from such policies depending on the organization's religious beliefs.

According to California Education Code Section 49070, a student can ask to be addressed by the name or gender consistent with their gender identity at school without legal documentation. Legislation passed in 2013 requires school staff to respect a student's request to address them by the name and pronouns consistent with that student's gender identity without requiring legal documentation or changing the student's official school records (Rights of Parents, 1976).

California Assembly Bill 1266 was introduced in 2013 and required that students be permitted to participate in sex-segregated school programs and activities—and use facilities—consistent with their gender identities, which may or may not be the same as the genders identified in their records (Assembly Bill, 2013). Preserving a transgender student's privacy by referring to the student by their chosen name and pronouns fosters a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment (Russell et al., 2018). Revealing a student's gender identity or expression to others may compromise the student's safety, as many gender-expansive youth would not classify their homes as gender-affirming places. A 2022 survey conducted by the Trevor Project noted that only 32% of transgender and nonbinary youth identified their homes as gender-affirming spaces, while 51% identified as a gender-affirming space (The Trevor Project, 2022). Thus, preserving a student's privacy is of the utmost importance. The right of transgender students to keep their transgender status private is grounded in California's constitutional antidiscrimination laws as well as federal and state laws (California School Boards Association, 2022). Disclosing that a student is transgender without the student's permission may violate California's antidiscrimination law by increasing the student's vulnerability to harassment and may violate the student's right to privacy (Family Educational Rights and Privacy [FERPA], 1988).

Courts have recognized that deliberately refusing to address transgender individuals by the name and pronouns consistent with their gender identity can be a form of sex-based harassment under state and federal anti-discrimination laws (United States Equal Employment Commission, 2021). Not using a student's chosen name and pronoun or allowing them to use a bathroom facility that aligns with their gender can also result in an unsafe learning environment,

which legally could qualify as discrimination, meaning that transgender students would not have the same access to safe education environments as cisgender students (*Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board*, 2020).

To ensure that transgender students have equal access to the programs and activities provided by the school, all public school community members must use a transgender student's chosen name and pronouns. Schools should also implement safeguards to reduce the possibility of inadvertent slips or mistakes, particularly among temporary personnel such as substitute teachers (California Department of Education, 2024).

A transgender student or gender nonconforming student may decide not to express their gender identity openly in all contexts, including at home. Revealing a student's gender identity or expression to others may compromise the student's safety. Thus, preserving a student's privacy is of the utmost importance. The right of transgender students to keep their transgender status private is grounded in California's antidiscrimination laws as well as federal and state laws. Disclosing that a student is transgender without the student's permission may violate California's antidiscrimination law by increasing the student's vulnerability to harassment and may violate the student's right to privacy (Prohibition of Discrimination, 2018). Education Code section 220 stated,

> No person shall be subjected to discrimination on the basis of disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, nationality, race or ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic that is contained in the definition of hate crimes set forth in Section 422.55 of the Penal Code, including immigration status, in any program or activity conducted by an educational institution that receives, or benefits from, state

financial assistance, or enrolls pupils who receive state student financial aid. (Prohibition

of Discrimination, 2018)

Catholic School Governance

In order to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth enrolled in Catholic schools, it

is important to note the overall governance and policy structure of Catholic schools. While

public schools operate under constitutional law, private schools are considered private agencies

and are not protected under constitutional law. Catholic schools function under contract law,

meaning that Catholic schools are governed by canon law, the law of the Catholic Church

(Shaughnessy, 1991). Catholic schools are operated by independent boards or affiliated with a

religious organization such as a diocese, religious order, local church, or state or national

religious organization. Private schools determine curricula and other academic policies with

some alignment with state standards and graduation requirements. However, they are not

required to utilize a state-wide curriculum or state-approved textbooks. Since private schools are

not publicly funded, they are exempt from many education codes. Most significant to this study

was that the *Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act,* commonly known as *Title IX*

(1972) does not apply to an educational institution that a religious organization controls to the

extent that the application of *Title IX* (1972) would be inconsistent with the organization's

religious tenets (Prohibition Against Discrimination; Exceptions). The choice of curricula and

exemption from *Title IX* (1972) plays a large role in the level of support LGBTQ+ students

experience at school.

While independent, religiously sponsored Catholic schools have more freedom to create

policies and procedures in alignment with a specific religious order or interpretation of the

Catholic faith, all Catholic schools must maintain a relationship with their local (arch)diocese with the expressed consent of the Local Ordinary. In some cases, Catholic schools are accredited through a co-accreditation process: Western Catholic Education Association (WCEA) and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) for Catholic schools on the west coast of the U.S. The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) has administrative ownership of non-binding national standards and benchmarks that guide a school's embodiment of the four standards: Mission and Catholic Identity, Governance and Leadership, Academic Excellence, and Operational Vitality (National Catholic Education Association [NCEA], 2014). Benchmarks include "The governing body and leader/leadership team ensure that the mission statement includes the commitment to Catholic identity" (NCEA, 2014, Standard1.1) and "The curriculum adheres to appropriate, delineated standards and is vertically aligned to ensure that every student successfully completes a rigorous and coherent sequence of academic courses based on the standards and rooted in Catholic values" (NCEA, 2014, Standard 7.1). In independent Catholic schools, administrators are left trying to balance between the expectations of their (arch)diocese and the charism they hold as an independent, religiously sponsored Catholic institution.

Foundational Mission of Catholic Education

The *National Standards and Benchmarks of Effective Catholic Schools* assert nine defining characteristics of a Catholic school, namely the education of the whole child, i.e., schools that center the whole child, supporting a student spiritually, academically, and socially (NCEA, 2023). In accordance with the mission of Catholic schools, every student's dignity and humanity should be protected. Catholic education strives to support students throughout their formation, creating citizens of the world who think critically for the common good (NCEA,

2023). Since true Catholic education must aim for the complete formation of the human person that looks to their end as well as to the common good of societies, children and youth are to be nurtured in such a way that they can develop their physical, moral, and intellectual talents harmoniously, acquire a more perfect sense of responsibility and right use of freedom, and are formed to participate actively in social life (Catholic Church et al., Code of Canon Law, 1999, c. 795). The National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), through the WCEA, sets guidelines to ensure a school's commitment to Catholic faith and mission-driven education. Benchmarks include "the governing body and leader/leadership team ensure that the mission statement includes the commitment to Catholic identity." (NCEA, 2014, Standard1.1) and "The curriculum adheres to appropriate, delineated standards and is vertically aligned to ensure that every student successfully completes a rigorous and coherent sequence of academic courses based on the standards and rooted in Catholic values." (NCEA, 2014, Standard 7.1). The NCEA publishes clear standards regarding Mission, Catholic Identity, Governance, and Leadership and benchmarks that provide observable, measurable examples of how a school can assess its success in meeting these standards. Providing clear guidance allows schools to succeed in their mission more effectively. When Catholic school leaders are left without guidance on integral issues such as the support of gender-expansive students, they are set up to fail students, families, faculty, and staff in providing a space where each community member's dignity is respected and honored.

Catholic Doctrine and the Humanity of LGBTQ+ People

According to the Code of Canon Law, Catholic schools must ground their instruction in the principles of Catholic doctrine (Catholic Church et al., Code of Canon Law, 1999, cc. 793— 821). In regard to LGBTQ+ issues, the *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)* is often referred back

to. *Amoris Laetitia* (Pope Francis, 2016) is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation by Pope Francis addressing families' pastoral care. The *Amoris Laetitia* reaffirmed that "every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence" (Pope Francis, 2016, para. 250). Paradoxically, Pope Francis went on to reiterate the belief that LGBT family members cannot "fully carry out God's will in their lives" (2016, para. 250). Gender-identity is seen as a challenge that "denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family" (Pope Francis, 2016, para. 56). *Amoris Laetitia* emphasizes the church's belief that "biological sex and the socio—cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated" (Pope Francis, 2016, para. 56). In the vast difference between the church's view on gender and biological and psychology definitions of gender, it is difficult to identify a way forward where gender can be understood for what it is scientifically.

The Congregation for Catholic Education is part of the government of the Holy See; concerning primary and secondary education, the main purpose of the office is to apply general principles of the Church to the field of Catholic education and to communicate these ideas through meetings, briefings, conferences and documents (Grocholewski, 2015). In 2019, the Congregation for Catholic Education published *Male and Female: He Created Them —Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* building from the *Amoris Laetitia* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). While this document called for dialogue and listening, there is a disconnect between the experiences of LGBTQ+ people and the

understandings shared in this document. The interpretation of gender theory as an ideology that seeks to force children and families into questioning and restating their gender and sexuality added an additional barrier. The document continued the argument from *Amoris Laetitia* that while biological sex can be distinguished from gender, it cannot be separate and went on to describe "transgenderism" as a person being able to "choose a gender not corresponding to his or her biological sex, and therefore with the way others see that person." (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019, para. 11). While gender expression can be seen as a choice, the challenge with this argument is that viewing gender identity as a choice does not consider the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ people.

Statement of the Problem

The educational problem of practice addressed in this study was the lack of clarity in place to guide Catholic school leaders in supporting and accompanying gender-expansive students in Catholic high schools. While there were many calls to maintain Catholic values in NCEA and (arch)diocesan standards, there was still a lack of guidance on operationalizing support for students identifying as gender-expansive. Additionally, there was a scarcity of research focused on understanding the experiences and perceptions of Catholic school leaders and their support of LGBTQ+ students. As early as 1983, Church leaders made it clear that discrimination is sinful; in the magisterial document, *Prejudice Against Homosexuals and the Ministry of the Church*, it is stated that "prejudice against homosexuals is a greater infringement of the norm of Christian morality than is the homosexual . . . activity" (Washington State Catholic Conference,1983). While the moral argument was clear: we cannot be a moral society if we use discrimination to reach said morality. In other words, it was antithetical to discriminate

against LGBTQ+ people in order to support the Church's sexual ethics tradition. While Catholic school leaders remain grappling with the call to support LGBTQ+ students fully, gender-expansive students are suffering daily due to this ambiguity.

A 2021 research brief conducted by GLSEN reported that 84.4% of transgender students felt unsafe at school based on their gender, compared to 20.6% of cisgender students (GLSEN, 2021). In addition to the baseline concerns of adolescents, such as academic stress, social dynamics, and identity development, gender-expansive youth were faced with fears for their safety, exacerbated by school policies that caused emotional distress.

There were numerous actions identified that would help to improve mental health and academic outcomes for gender-expansive students, most of which related to providing stability. However, there was no guidance from the institutional Church regarding working with gender-expansive students attending Catholic high schools. Each (arch)diocese could create its own policies regarding the support (or discrimination) of gender-expansive students, which has happened in increasing numbers. At the time of publication, 34 out of 194 (arch)dioceses in the United States had policies regarding what they referred to as *gender ideology* or *gender* theory (Scott, 2023). The most commonly occurring non-affirming practices prohibited 1) anything referred to as "gender-affirming care," 2) pronoun changes, 3) name changes, 4) the use of bathroom facilities that are in alignment with a student's gender identity, and 5) the use of hormone therapy or puberty blockers while on campus. In addition to these consistent prohibitions, many dioceses would allow a gender-expansive student to continue attending a Catholic school in their diocese if they rejected their gender identity and accepted the invalidation of their experiences as a gender-expansive youth (Catholic Diocese of Milwaukee,

2022; Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, 2022; Diocese of Harrisburg, 2015). The practices that were most commonly under attack by (arch)dioceses were the ones that are shown to improve mental health and academic outcomes most significantly (The Trevor Project, 2022). As of 2024, the policies implemented by (arch)dioceses left Catholic school leaders reconciling their personal commitments to Catholic values of respect and dignity with the actions of their (arch) dioceses.

In addition to vague guidance from the institutional Church, little research focused on LGBTQ+ students, let alone gender-expansive students. There was a chasm in the literature when considering Catholic high school contexts. Gaps in the literature needed to be addressed to understand the challenges gender-expansive students and their allies at Catholic high schools face and the possibilities for building a culture of support.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to understand Catholic school leaders' experiences working with gender-expansive students. It identified the primary sources of concern that potentially discourage leaders of Catholic high schools from being vocally supportive of gender-expansive students. The study sought to understand different school contexts to identify any relationships between school context and gender-affirming policies. The study also explored the challenges school leaders face institutionally and individually in supporting gender-expansive students.

Research Questions

In order to explore the concerns and challenges of leaders of Catholic high schools in response to supporting gender-expansive students in their communities, this study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are Catholic high school leaders' experiences in serving students who identify as gender-expansive?

2. What challenges do leaders face institutionally and individually when supporting gender-expansive students?

Theoretical Frameworks

As noted, there was very little literature published on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in Catholic high schools and the experiences of those Catholic school leaders in accompanying LGBTQ+ students. Due to this, no theoretical or conceptual framework could easily be assigned to this study. The newness of this topic provided numerous possibilities for research while adding the challenge that came with a lack of research to build upon. This is not to say that this study was the first of its kind; however, this topic was rarely addressed in the comparative world of educational research. Exploration of this topic would not be possible without the existence of Queer Theology, a methodology, and a theoretical perspective developed from the approach of queer theory rooted in the work of scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Teresa de Lauretis (Anzaldúa, 1987; de Lauretis, 1991). Queer Theory is a way of interacting with society that questions heteronormativity and revisits topics through a queer lens (Sedgwick, 1990). Queer Theology builds upon this perspective, asserting that gender variance and queer desire have always existed in human history, including in faith traditions and their sacred texts such as the Bible (Cheng, 2011). While queer and trans theologies might provide insight during the analysis and interpretation phase of this study, I utilized the Bridges Transition Model to frame my research (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). At the heart of this study was a desire to understand the experiences of Catholic school leaders in their schools' responses to the needs of

gender-expansive students. Regardless of the school leader's personal beliefs, institutional support of gender-expansive students in Catholic schools would be a change. Bridges Transition Model allowed me to identify the stages each school is at organizationally (Bridges & Bridges, 2016).

Bridges Transition Model is a foundational concept in organization theory used in various organizational settings. This model focuses on transition, seeing change as a catalyst for transition. Change is what happens to an organization, while transition is the process organizations go through to address the change (Bridges, 2001). The Bridges Transition Model identifies three phases of transition, starting with an ending and ending with a beginning. In other words, to begin the transition (response to change), an organization must let go of the current way of doing things (Bridges & Bridges, 2016).

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach to exploratory research, allowing participants to be understood in the context of their school sites and the current moment. This allowed the richness of individual experiences to inform findings (Yin, 2015).

Participants

Participants of this study were presidents or principals of Catholic high schools in the United States. This study included representation of independent, religiously sponsored, (arch)diocesan, single-gender, and co-educational Catholic high schools. Participants were required to have some level of responsibility for defining and defending the operations of the school and were minimally knowledgeable of their school's stance on the support of gender-

expansive students. This study utilized purposive sampling in order to identify participants who would yield the most relevant data.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews, allowing for more relational conversation. I began interviews with a prepared entering approach; following pleasantries, I asked participants to "Tell me about their school," following up with probing questions such as, "What is your favorite thing about your school? What makes your school unique? Or who does your school serve?" Preparing entrance questions can set a relational tone that will carry into the rest of the conversation. Similarly, preparing an exit question such as, "Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in working with gender-expansive students?" provided a clear ending signal while allowing the participant to have the last word (Yin, 2015). I started the more substantive part of the interview by asking a grand tour question such as, "How would you describe the climate around gender inclusivity at your school?" which helped the participants to connect their experiences with the focus of the study (Spradley, 1979). Due to the complicated nature of this topic and the reliance on accurate wording, I utilized an interview guide that identified four main themes, listed areas to explore, possible initial language for questions, and topic sequences (Brenner, 2006).

Data Analysis

In order to process the interview data, I utilized phenomenological data analysis through empathic interpretation, which focused on the participants' experiences as described in the interview (Ricoeur, 1970). After transcribing and segmenting data, I used in vivo coding (Strauss, 1987) to develop codes organically (Leavy, 2017), followed by identifying emergent

themes (Willig, 2017). The themes I focused on are practices, barriers, and opportunities for change.

Significance

The significance of this research is its contribution to policy making, best practices, and educational leadership preparation, helping Catholic school leaders to embody their school's values more fully. By focusing on the experiences of school leaders, this study sought to affirm and support the community of school leaders who actively support gender-expansive students, not *in spite* of their Catholic school but *because of* the values of Catholic education. Documenting and analyzing the experiences of school leaders of Catholic high schools helped to identify the opportunities for gender-affirming policies, statements, or guidelines. While there is some research on LGBTQ+ youth, mental health, and academic outcomes, very little focuses specifically on the experiences of gender-expansive youth. The research that has been completed shows that gender-expansive students are more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation depending on the way they are treated. It is important to note that mental health outcomes are related to how gender-expansive youth are treated, not because of anything inherent to them (GLSEN, 2021). For example, according to *Improving School Climate for Transgender and Nonbinary Youth: Research Brief,* completed by GLSEN in 2021, transgender and nonbinary students were more likely to have felt unsafe at school based on their gender (84.4.% of transgender students and 52.4% of nonbinary students), compared to their nonbinary when compared to their cisgender counterparts (20.6%) (GLSEN, 2021).

Additionally, the same study found that transgender and nonbinary students who could identify more supportive staff reported greater levels of school belonging, higher self-esteem and

lower levels of depression, higher academic outcomes, and greater educational aspirations (GLSEN, 2021). The question this study addressed is, if we know that non-affirming responses to gender-expansive students have detrimental effects on their ability to live with dignity and respect, what conversations need to happen in order to move Catholic school communities forward in their support of gender-expansive students? In June of 2023, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation continued to grow (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2023). Regardless of the status of these bills, the damage is done in hearing that there are government leaders representing the country where you live who do not believe in your existence. In addition, *Dignitas Infinita* was released on April 8, 2024 by the Holy See's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith Holy See and approved with a signature by Pope Francis (Pope Francis, 2024; Holy See's Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024). Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, stated, "While this declaration offers a wonderful rationale for why each human being, regardless of condition of life, must be respected, honored and loved, it does not apply this principle to gender-diverse people" (DeBernardo, 2024). This study adds to existing research on the support of LGBTQ+ students by focusing on gender-expansive youth and the experiences of Catholic school leaders as they accompany these students in a time where questions of gender identity are especially relevant.

Positionality

Positionality acknowledges that interactions are shaped by the experiences of individuals whose values or beliefs are formed by social identities such as faith, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, gender expression, and social class (Sikes, 2004). Due to my lived experience, it was essential to be mindful of my positionality in the development of this study. If it were not for

my lived experiences and my current career as a Catholic high school leader, I might not have chosen to explore this topic. While positionality cannot be removed, I have and continue to reflect on how my experiences affect how I interact with the participants of this study.

As a graduate of an independent Catholic high school, I never thought I would return to anything related to religion. Due to my experiences with the Catholic church and organized religion in general, I stayed as far away from religion as possible for about 15 years of my life. It was not until I happened upon a part-time job at a local independent Catholic high school that I considered returning to the world I had hoped never to interact with again. While attending a Catholic high school, there was no acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, little acknowledgment of racism and systemic oppression, and microaggressions committed toward historically excluded populations were a daily occurrence. While I can relate to some of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in Catholic high schools, I am a cisgender woman, meaning my gender identity aligns with the sex I was assigned at birth, and my high school experiences happened decades ago. In this way, I cannot fully understand what it is like for gender-expansive students attending Catholic school in 2023. The point in discussing my personal experiences with the Church and Catholic education is to share that this work is deeply personal. As the researcher, it is vital to recognize any potential biases that might be present due to my positionality. For example, while I might personally disagree with the way that a participant is addressing gender identity in their school, the point of this research was to understand the honest experiences of Catholic school leaders, not offer suggestions or question their understanding of gender identity.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations I considered in this research design were generalizability, self-selection of participants, confidentiality due to the small sample size, and my positionality. Generalizability referred to the extent to which this research and findings could be applied beyond the participants' contexts (Maxwell, 1992). Due to the complex nature of my research topic, applying these findings on a large scale was challenging. While the participants represented a wide variety of regions and types of Catholic high schools, there was a wide variation on this topic. With a small sample size, it was a challenge to interpret my findings as applicable to other cities, states, or school contexts.

Another limitation was the possibility of participants self-selecting from the study if they did not feel confident in their understanding of gender. Prospective participants might also have opted out if they had views on gender identity and expression that were not the norm in their institutions. I consciously tried to avoid phrasing that signals a value judgment on a school's response to gender-expansive students. However, some school leaders might have found that by asking the question, the study showed a preference for school responses that supported the exploration of gender identity and expression. In addition, when considering the roles of presidents and principals in Catholic high schools, there was a challenge in recruiting participants due to busy schedules or a general concern in discussing the topic as a representative of their organization.

Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the study, including its background, purpose, significance, and research methodology. Background about the varied responses of public,

private, and Catholic schools to LGBTQ+ students was provided. Additionally, this chapter introduced Catholic school governance and the challenges leaders at Catholic high schools face. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to this topic, including school governance, roles of Catholic high school presidents and principals, LGBTQ+ youth mental health, educational policies regarding LGBTQ+ students, and examples of policies/ guidelines/ statements put forth by several (arch)dioceses. Additionally, Chapter 2 dives deeper into the theoretical framework of Queer Theology (Cheng, 2011; Laden, 2018) and the organizational framework of Bridges Transition Theory (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). Chapter 3 explains my research methodology, including qualitative interview designs. Chapter 4 presents the findings of my research, including participant profiles and answers to my research questions. Chapter 5 concludes this dissertation with discussion, recommendations, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study sought to understand the experiences of school leaders of Catholic high schools as they encounter gender-expansive students. In order to gain an understanding of the research completed in this realm, I reviewed literature in various fields, including school governance and student experience. This literature review begins with an overview of school governance, comparing public, independent, and faith-based schools focusing on Catholic school governance. More detailed information about school governance is available in Chapter 1. Following this is a review of literature focused on sense of belonging, the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth, and the effects of gender-affirming policies in school settings. The third section of the review focuses on Catholic doctrine, the current state of gender policies in Catholic high schools, and ways that Catholic organizations can move forward in support of LGBTQ+ people's full humanity. The final section of the review connects the research to the theoretical framework of Queer Theology (Cheng, 2011; Ladin, 2018) and the organizational framework of Bridges' Transition Model (Bridges & Bridges, 2016).

Student Well-Being and School Policy

Gender Identity Development

Extensive research spanning several decades has told us that gender identity begins developing in early childhood and, in some cases, intensifies in early adolescence (Bussey, 2011). According to social cognitive theory, research has shown that someone's gender identity is not fixed and transforms throughout someone's life through personal and social influences

(Bussey, 2011). As adolescents spend most of their day at school, the environment of a school plays a significant role in a student's gender identity development.

Sense of Belonging

The concept of belonging needs a consistent definition among fields of education and social psychology, often conflated with school connectedness, school climate, and school attachment. For this research, I referred to *sense of belonging* as the feeling and reality of being a valued member of a community, living in reciprocal relationships with one another while being one's authentic self (Brown & Evans, 2002; Voelkl, 1996). The first academic usage of sense of belonging came from the field of psychology in 1959 when psychologist Stanley Schacter wrote about the importance of group affiliation in human interaction, although living in reciprocity has long been a part of Indigenous practices (Schacter, 1959). Abraham Maslow ranked love and belongingness in the middle of the hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1968, as cited in Over, 2016, p. 2). Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis suggested two criteria for satisfying belongingness. First, interactions need to be frequent and pleasant with a small number of other people, and second, interactions should be stable and enduring. Baumeister and Leary reviewed empirical literature and showed that belongingness has multiple and robust effects on emotional patterns and cognitive processes. While the literature did not connect this belongingness hypothesis with the K-12 education system, a teacher could provide frequent non-aversive or aversive interactions that affect a student's sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In 2017, Verhagen et al. expanded on this work, hypothesizing that adverse emotional effects stem from unmet belongingness needs as opposed to them being related to the person's level of belongingness need or the level of satisfaction in the relationship (Verhagen et al., 2017, p. 345).

Research has shown that a student's sense of belonging in school plays a significant role in academic performance and positive attitudes toward education in general (Goodenow et al., 1993, as cited in Ma, 2003). Additionally, research showed that sense of belonging positively affects academic outcomes, including academic motivations, academic effort, absenteeism (Sánchez et al., 2003; Croninger & Lee, 2001), and classroom engagement (Klem & Connell, 2003). The research has also shown a relationship between school connectedness and decreased emotional distress (Lonczak et al., 2002).

A 2021 study by GLSEN found that gender-expansive youth experienced a higher level of school belonging as their access to supportive resources increased (GLSEN, 2021). Gender-expansive students with: (a) supportive school clubs were 22.3% more likely to have a higher-than-average sense of belonging, (b) supportive school personnel were 35% more likely to have a higher-than-average sense of belonging, (c) inclusive curricular resources were 28% more likely to have a higher than average sense of belonging and (d) comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies were 19.7% more likely to have a higher than average sense of belonging (GLSEN, 2021). These results aligned with the research into sense of belonging and academic outcomes. Those students in the GLSEN survey who experienced a high sense of belonging obtained higher grade point averages and educational aspirations and were less likely to be absent from school.

Mental Health and LGBTQ+ Youth

According to the *2021 National Climate Survey on the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools* conducted by GLSEN, 57.4% of LGBTQ students surveyed experienced verbal harassment based on their gender expression,

20.6% experienced physical harassment based on gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2022). According to The Trevor Project, 50.5% of gender-expansive youth considered suicide in the past year compared to 32% of cisgender youth, and 76.75% of gender-expansive youth experienced symptoms of anxiety compared to 63.5% of their cisgender peers (The Trevor Project, 2022). It is important to note that while LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of suicidal ideation, symptoms of anxiety, and general mental health concerns, this is not due to their LGBTQ+ identity inherently but is a result of how they are treated in society. A 2016 study on gender identity-related disparities in suicidal ideation or on factors that underlie this disparity found that established psychosocial factors, including depression and school-based victimization, partially explained the association between gender identity and suicidal ideation (Grossman et al., 2016). Interventions addressing depression and school-based victimization could address these disparities. However, those factors did not explain all cases of gender identity-related suicidal ideation or depression. A 2015 study of intervenable factors associated with suicide risk in transgender persons found that social inclusion, such as social support, gender-specific support from parents, use of chosen name, and protection from victimization, has the potential to affect rates of suicidal ideation and attempts in transgender communities (Bauer et al., 2015).

School Policy and LGBTQ+ Students

One way that schools can support gender-expansive youth is through supportive and proactive policy making. While most schools have anti-bullying policies, few have policies directly supporting LGBTQ+ students. Only 10.9% of students who responded to the 2021 National Climate Survey reported that their school or district had official policies or guidelines to support transgender or nonbinary students (Kosciw et al., 2021). Transgender and nonbinary

students attending schools with clear transgender/nonbinary student policies or guidelines were less likely to experience anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, less likely to be prevented from using their name or pronoun of choice, less likely to miss school, and felt a great sense of belonging to the school community (GLSEN, 2022). Gender congruence is the feeling of harmony in a person's gender experienced as comfort in one's body as it relates to their gender, the naming of their gender that adequately corresponds with who they are, and being seen consistently by others as one sees themselves (Gender Spectrum, n.d.). Gender congruence is essential for mental wellness for all people, regardless of gender identity, and seeking this harmony looks different for each person. Due to the often gender-specific nature of first names, chosen name use can be part of a person's pursuit of social gender congruence (Gender Spectrum, n.d.). Unfortunately, many gender-expansive youths are prevented from using their chosen names for interpersonal, safety, or institutional reasons. When a gender-expansive youth is not allowed to use their chosen name or pronouns, they are vulnerable to victimization and discrimination (Russell et al., 2018). In a 2018 study, Russell et al. found that transgender students who could use their chosen name in multiple contexts reported fewer depressive symptoms and less suicidal ideation and behavior. Preventing students from using their preferred pronouns has been associated with lower psychological well-being (Russell et al., 2018). Since students spend a large majority of their time at school, schools must work with students to develop policies that address the needs and concerns of gender-expansive youth, like requiring school officials to respect pronouns, which has been found to improve mental health outcomes. Not only have discriminatory policies been shown to affect the mental well-being of gender-expansive students; concealment, harassment, and stigma have been associated with feelings of isolation, emotional

31

distress, cognitive preoccupation, negative self-esteem, disengagement from academic

responsibilities, and lower GPA among LGBTQ+ students (Pachankis, 2007; Smart & Wegner,

1999; Woodford & Kulick, 2015, as cited in Wolff et al., 2016).

<div align="center">**Catholic Teachings and LGBTQ+ People**</div>

Catholic Doctrine and the Humanity of LGBTQ+ People

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

[USCCB], 2016), promulgated by Pope John Paul II, attempts to summarize the beliefs of the

institutional Catholic church. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (USCCB,

2016), "Homosexual acts . . . are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift

of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no

circumstances can they be approved" (USCCB, 2016, para. 2357). While stating clearly that

those who are not heterosexual are living with "disordered inclinations," the Catechism of the

Catholic Church also called Catholics to accept "homosexuals" with respect, compassion, and

sensitivity. It condemned discrimination (USCCB, 2016, para. 2358).

Amoris Laetitia (Pope Francis, 2016) is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation by Pope

Francis that addressed the pastoral care of families. While the *Amoris Laetitia* reaffirmed that

"every person regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and

treated with consideration, while 'every sign of unjust discrimination' is to be carefully avoided,

particularly any form of aggression and violence" (Pope Francis, 2016, para. 250), Pope Francis

reiterated the belief that LGBT family members cannot "fully carry out God's will in their lives"

(Pope Francis, 2016, para. 250). Gender-identity has been seen as a challenge that "denies the

difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without

sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family" (Pope Francis, 2016, para. 56). *Amoris Laetitia* emphasized the church's belief that "biological sex and socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated" (Pope Francis, 2016, para. 56). Through this document, the church's unwillingness to engage in dialogue and understanding with LGBTQ+ communities and biological/psychological sciences was on full display.

In 2019, the Congregation for Catholic Education published *Male and Female. He created them —Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* building from the *Amoris Laetitia*. While this document called for dialogue and listening, there was a disconnect between the experiences of LGBTQ+ people and the understandings shared in this document. The interpretation of gender theory as an ideology that seeks to force children and families into questioning and restating their gender and sexuality added an additional barrier. The document continued the argument from *Amoris Laetitia* that while biological sex can be distinguished from gender, it cannot be separate and went on to describe "transgenderism" as a person being able to "choose a gender not corresponding to his or her biological sex, and therefore with the way others see that person" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019, para. 11). While gender expression can be seen as a choice, the challenge with this argument is that viewing gender identity as a choice does not consider the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ people. As Father James Martin (2019) wrote,

> The document largely neglects to discuss new scientific understandings and discoveries about gender. It relies mainly on the belief that gender is determined solely by one's visible genitalia, which contemporary science has shown is an incorrect (and sometimes even harmful) way to categorize people. (para.10)

While the Congregation for Catholic Education might have intended for the document to be an invitation to dialogue, it was clear that the real-life experiences of LGBTQ+ people and their families were not considered in its writing (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019). It is challenging to start an honest dialogue when one party is unwilling to engage with the knowledge already shared.

Governance and Policy Affecting LGBTQ+ Students in Catholic Educational Settings

As explained in Chapter 1, private schools function outside most state education regulations since they raise their operating income without state or local government support. Catholic schools are governed by independent boards of trustees and affiliated religious organizations such as a (arch)diocese, religious order, local church, or state or national religious organization. When considering the support of gender-expansive students in Catholic schools, it is important to consider that Catholic school leaders are faced with unique situations depending on the governance of their school site.

The Code of Canon Law (1999) identified three types of schools that can be considered Catholic: (a) schools directed by an ecclesiastical authority (i.e., a bishop or parish priest), (b) schools directed by a public ecclesiastical jurid person (i.e. a religious order), or (c) schools that an ecclesiastical authority (i.e. diocesan bishop) recognizes as such through a written document (para. 803). As seen in these three types of Catholic schools, canon law allows for almost any school to be considered Catholic as long as an ecclesiastical authority recognizes it as such. This makes for an unclear understanding of how much oversight ecclesiastical authorities have over Catholic schools.

In most cases, individual schools have clarity in day-to-day decision-making authority; for example, a school leader in one Catholic school may know that they have decision-making authority regarding the school schedule. However, choices of religious studies textbooks are influenced by their (arch)diocese. That same school leader might move to a different Catholic school under the same (arch)diocese and find that their decision-making authority is different from the previous school due to a lack of clarity around the power of ecclesiastical oversight. In general, this ambiguity might not profoundly affect the daily operations of schools. However, once a crisis erupts,

> If there is a lack of clarity in the school's structure of governance or provisions of its governance documents regarding administration, needless anxiety and tensions can build up, important relationships upon which the school depends for support can be damaged, turmoil and even chaos can result. (Brown, 2010, p. 469)

When exploring the conversation around gender expansiveness, Catholic school leaders are not only considering the ways they can support their students; they also exist under the stress of knowing their ability to bear the name Catholic School can be withdrawn if Church authority feels that a school does not manifest a sufficiently Catholic identity." (Brown, 2010, p. 474). The level of confidence in defining a policy or position statement depends on the (arch)diocese a school is located within or the religious order the school is governed by due to the unclear positions of the institutional Church.

Catholic schools strive to advance and implement programs that educate the whole child in the academic, faith, and service dimensions (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, p. 29). Catholic education should impart not only technical knowledge but also spiritual wisdom

and virtuous behavior that is practiced daily (Pope Francis, 2019). Catholic Social Teaching proclaims that "every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person" (USCCB, n.d.). However, the ministerial exception allows Catholic schools to fire LGBTQ+ employees, dismissing the Catholic moral arguments (Ruiz & Bleasdale, 2022). Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff at Catholic schools cannot always fully benefit from Catholic wisdom on human rights.

Role of President and Principal in Catholic Educational Settings

The majority of Catholic high schools utilize a president and principal model; however, some schools continue to utilize a head-of-school model, wherein the duties of a president and principal are merged into one role while other duties are assigned to other senior leadership roles such as associate heads of school for instruction. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, principals "direct the overall operation of the school, set and oversee academic goals, and ensure that teachers have equipment and resources to meet those goals" (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). While job descriptions may vary from school to school, an example of the division of labor is found in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles' (ADLA) handbook. According to the ADLA,

> The President is the chief administrator of the school and bears the responsibility for the school's operations and policies, concentrating primarily on its Catholicity, vision, and philosophy, finances, development, and fund-raising efforts, care of physical facilities, marketing, public information and maintenance of positive relations with pastors, parents, other schools, and the civic community. The President is primarily responsible for

36

ensuring sufficient resources, sound fiscal management, and the long-term financial

stability of the school. (Archdiocese of Los Angeles [ADLA], 2014, p. 6)

The role of the principal in Catholic schools focuses on spiritual and educational leadership.

According to the ADLA (2014, p. 6), "These responsibilities encompass the areas of spiritual

development, realization of the school's philosophy, curriculum, co-curricular activities, fiscal

policies, discipline, personnel practices, school plant, and marketing and community relations."

While these are examples from one archdiocese, there is a generalizable understanding of

the roles of president and principal in a Catholic school. Rieckhoff (2014) argued that Catholic

school principals are expected to lead and oversee a wide variety of functions, including

engaging directly with all school stakeholders and collaborating with constituents (Rieckhoff,

2014). The roles and responsibilities of Catholic school principals continue to expand with an

increasing focus on instruction, growing school enrollment, obtaining resources for scholarships,

supporting effective pedagogy, and serving as a faith leader (Rieckhoff, 2014). Principals'

behaviors mostly affect student achievement indirectly, meaning that their impact is seen through

school policies and supporting a positive school culture (Cotton, 2003). Hallinger and Heck

(1996) were quick to clarify that indirect does not mean less effect or less important effect. They

state,

> The fact that leadership effects on school achievement appear to be indirect is neither
>
> cause for alarm nor dismay. As noted previously, achieving results through others is the
>
> essence of leadership. A finding that principal effects are mediated by other in-school
>
> variables does nothing whatsoever to diminish the principal's importance. (p. 39)

While schools are made up of many leaders, I chose to interview presidents and principals of Catholic high schools because they have a unique understanding of the needs of the whole school, including operational, fiscal, spiritual, and academic. In addition, the president and principal are responsible for maintaining "the relationship with the Local Ordinary marked by mutual trust, close cooperation, continuing dialogue, and respect for the Local Ordinary's legitimate authority" (NCEA, 2023, p. 18). While other school leaders such as Directors of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Campus Ministers, and Assistant Principals may have more experience with the student body, I was interested in learning more about how the variety of responsibilities presidents and principals have affected their ability to support gender-expansive students.

Most literature that inspected the relationship between Catholic schools and LGBTQ+ students focused on the sexual orientation side of identity, which differed from a person's gender identity and gender expression. That being said, there were similarities in the experiences of sexual minority (SM) and gender-expansive (GE) youth. One challenge felt in both of these populations and those who interact with them was the lack of clear support from the church. While there were many general statements of support and love for all people in church doctrine, nothing expressly affirmed LGBTQ+ youth. To understand the context of the situation, Canales (2016) offered three areas of theological thought:

> (1) traditional/conservative, who are those theologians who adhere to the Magisterium's position on homosexual acts with little or no pastoral concern for the LGBTQ person; (2) mediating/moderate, who are those theologians who do not challenge magisterial teaching on homosexual acts but place a greater emphasis on the pastoral ramifications

for the LGBTQ person; and (3) revisionist/progressive, who are those theologians who

openly challenge the magisterial teaching on LGBTQ persons. (p. 61)

Canales argued that it is the last school of thought we must embrace to consider this issue with

an open mind. Catholic Church's teaching on human sexuality centers on the belief that all

human beings should be treated with dignity and respect, worthy of love, and called to love.

Catholic doctrine also recognized the importance of acknowledging and accepting one's sexual

identity and the effects that sexuality has on the unity of the human body and soul. In the same

document, homosexual acts are referred to as intrinsically disordered and contrary to natural law.

It must be acknowledged that while the Catholic church continues to use the term "homosexual,"

it is not the currently accepted terminology due to its association with negative and clinical

history. Although the LGBTQ+ community is clear about the use of the word "homosexual," the

Church continues to use this historically harmful word in a way that is at odds with the Catholic

Church's foundation of love and dignity for all humans.

Non-affirming Policies Regarding Gender-Expansive Students

Non-affirming care in a faith-based educational institution has been shown to negatively

affects students' mental health, academic success, and sense of belonging (Wolff et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, the only Diocesan policies that have been created provide non-affirming

guidelines for schools to follow regarding LGBTQ+ students. In recent news, many Catholic

(arch)dioceses have released non-affirming policies regarding gender-expansive students in their

schools. Currently, 34 out of 194 dioceses in the United States have policies regarding what they

refer to as "gender ideology" or "gender theory" (Scott, 2023).; below are a few key examples;

however, as of June 2024, the scene is consistently changing.

One of the first policies regarding gender identity came out of the Harrisburg, PA, Diocese in January 2015. This policy focuses on the differences between "where a child is born with sexually ambiguous genitalia" and "where the gender identity question is psychological in origin" (Diocese of Harrisburg, 2015, p. 1). The Harrisburg policy does not address the wide range of gender-affirming care but only addresses "efforts to chemically or surgically alter the given biology" (Diocese of Harrisburg, 2015, p. 1). According to the Harrisburg Diocese, these forms of gender-affirming care are considered "self-mutilation and, therefore, immoral" (Diocese of Harrisburg, 2015, p. 1). Students who engage in surgical or chemical gender-affirming care would be ineligible to attend or remain in attendance in a Catholic school.

In January 2022, the Catholic Diocese of Milwaukee published *Catechesis and Policy on Questions Concerning Gender Theory*, which attempted to answer questions Catholics have regarding gender identity and expression. This policy was crafted with consideration of key passages of Church documents such as the Code of Canon Law (Catholic Church et al., 1999) and Catechism of the Catholic Church (USCCB, 2016). The main tenants of the guidance, as stated by the Catholic Diocese of Milwaukee (2022), are (1) "Biological sex is expressed in and through the body and cannot be changed because it is bestowed by God as a *gift* and as a *calling*"; (2) "While biological sex and "gender"—or the socio-cultural role of sex as well as "psychological identity" can be distinguished, they can never be separated."; (3) "Respect for creation is also a respect for one's biological sex" (Catholic Diocese of Milwaukee, 2022, p. 2). The policy outcome of these tenants includes (a) no use of preferred pronouns; (b) All persons must use bathrooms or locker rooms that match their sex assigned at birth; (c) "All persons must wear clothes that conform with their sex assigned at birth"; (d) "Single-sex programs including

schools, camps, and retreats are restricted to persons whose sex assigned at birth matches that specified by the program"; and (e) "No person is permitted to have or distribute gender affirming medication while on campus" (Catholic Diocese of Milwaukee, 2022, p. 3).

Following the publication of *Catechesis and Policy on Questions Concerning Gender Theory*, the Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls produced a restrictive policy titled *Conforming with the Church's Teaching on Human Sexuality in Education Settings,* effective July 2022. The Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls interpreted various Church documents and writings of Pope Francis to uphold a strong belief in what is referred to as the "natural law" that sexuality is ordered to be between a man and a woman within the bond of marriage and gender is binary (male and female) and aligned with one's biological sex. The policy attempted to protect the dignity of LGBTQ+ people, stating, "We must not demean or deny the sincerity and struggle of those who experience same-sex attraction or who feels his/her true gender identity is different from his/her biological sex," (Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, 2022, p. 2), however, the Diocese continued to see LGBTQ+ people as a problem to fix rather than a gift. It was the view of the Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls that affirming the identities of LGBTQ+ people harmed the greater good by denying "fundamental truths" (Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, 2022). While their policy covered a wide array of topics related to human sexuality, this dissertation focused on the policies specific to gender-expansive students. The policy referred to gender-expansive students as experiencing "gender dysphoria" and "transgenderism" (Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, 2022). Gender dysphoria was defined by the Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls (2022) as "the psychiatric or psychological condition of experiencing a strong desire to be a person of the opposite gender" (p. 4). "Transgenderism" was defined by the Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls

(2022) as "the belief that an individual has the ability to change his or her gender. This belief is inconsistent with our anthropological reality as human beings, and it holds significant moral consequences" (p. 4). According to this policy, "Students may not advocate, celebrate, or express transgenderism in such a way as to cause confusion or distraction in the context of Catholic school classes, activities, or events" (Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, 2022, p. 3). All school records are to conform to a student's sex assigned at birth.

Additionally, even after students have graduated from the school, historical records will utilize the following format: "Original Name, n.k.a. New Legal Name". According to the policy, current students who were transitioning or had transitioned would be reported to the bishop through the local pastor or school system, and a committee would convene to decide on that student's educational future at the school. The Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls emphasized that all persons have inherent dignity and that bullying and harassment would not be tolerated (Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, 2022). The policy laid out, in extensive detail, considerations that schools should have followed regarding gender-expansive students, key directives being:

1) School records must conform to a student's sex assigned at birth.

2) Students must wear uniforms that conform to their sex assigned at birth.

3) Students, teachers, and school personnel must use pronouns to conform to a student's sex assigned at birth; specifying that if a student uses a pronoun that does not align with a student's sex assigned at birth, action must be taken immediately.

4) Catholic school administrators are not to provide support to gender-expansive students; specifically denying investments in physical structure no matter the source of funding.

42

5) Be "intentionally exclusionary" (Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, 2022, p. 9) in not allowing gender-expansive students to serve as lectors, music ministers, or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion during liturgies celebrated at a Catholic school. (Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls, 2022)

Unfortunately, research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth who grew up in religious communities experience increased discrimination and homophobia (Barnes & Meyer, 2012). Some families with strong religious beliefs found it challenging to support their gender-expansive child, not for lack of love but because they struggle to reconcile their reality with their religious institution. Using religion to hinder a gender-expansive child's identity development can be detrimental as "religion is an important source of solace and support for children of religious backgrounds" (Brill & Pepper, 2008, pp. 82–83). In a 2017 study by Capous-Desyllas and Barron, four families were interviewed about their experiences raising a gender-expansive child. Three of four families identified as somewhat religious and expressed challenges reconciling their religious beliefs with their child's well-being (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017). One parent, Amy, felt she failed her child (Isabel) by sending her to a Christian preschool because she thought the school would support her child's moral and faith development. Unfortunately, the school did not embrace Isabel, and other parents told Amy, "What she is doing is wrong" and that they would "pray that Isabel will stop sinning" (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017, p. 536). Isabel's parents believed that "God puts the right people in the path she [Isabel] follows" and "Isabel is a blessing . . . and whatever God's plan is for Isabel . . . it's a good one" (Capous-Desyllas & Barron, 2017, p. 536). Herriot and Callaghan argued that "the current practice of having trans children and their families withdraw from Catholic school is

untenable and antithetical to many of the distinctly Catholic aims of Catholic school" (Herriot & Callaghan, 2019, p. 58).

In addition, Catholic school policies that allowed for discrimination against LGBTQ+ employees resulted in pain and vulnerability for those employees, especially religious studies educators or campus ministers (Ruiz & Bleasdale, 2022). This 2022 study conducted by Ruiz and Bleasdale found that a majority of participants (LGBTQIA+ educators) "feared they would be fired from the school if it were discovered they were LGBTQIA+" (p. 2157). With the precarious position of job security for LGBTQ+ educators in Catholic schools, this discrimination not only caused pain to employees and the community at large but also reduced the already small number of LGBTQ+ role models students interacted with (Ruiz & Bleasdale, 2022).

Affirming Practices Regarding Gender-Expansive Students: Ways of Proceeding

The lack of literature addressing the relationship between gender-expansive students and Catholic educational institutions, in general, demonstrated the need for this research. The majority of this research combined sexual identities and gender identities into one category, which limited the understanding of gender-expansive students. However, little research explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ students at Catholic schools in general, and even less research focused on gender-expansive students in Catholic, single-gender high schools; therefore, this literature section explored a wide breadth of research in the field. While several Dioceses have published restrictive policies regarding gender identity and expression in Catholic schools, these policies put forth similar instruction and offer little human-centered guidance. Additionally, not every Catholic school is under the control of their Diocese, leaving Catholic school leaders feeling disempowered to create guidelines and policies that work for their individual

communities. While I have not found published examples of gender-affirming policies in Catholic schools, there was literature focused on the intersection of LGBTQ+ students and Catholic educational institutions.

The majority of the literature discussed the adverse effects of non-affirming care on faith, mental health, academic success, and sense of belonging in schools. In 2016, Wolff et al. conducted a study of the effects of attending non-affirming, religious-affiliated universities (NARAUs) on mental health and identity, focusing on *sexual minority* (SM) students (those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer/questioning). Wolff et al. (2016) found that SM students who were involved with a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) on campus were more likely to have a favorable view of their sexual identity and less religious incongruence when compared to those who did not engage with a GSA. This could have been for three reasons: 1) There would be less stigma and shame surrounding an LGBTQ+ identity if students knew they are not alone and could share their experiences with peers; 2) NARAUs who allow a GSA to form on campus may already be less restrictive campuses; and 3) an LGBQ student who joins a GSA might already be confident in their sexual identity (Wolff et al., 2016). In a 2010 study, Wolff and Himes found that NARAUS can create a culture of support for LGBTQ+ students consistent with their institutional religious views. For example, Catholic Social Teaching says, "Every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person" (USCCB, n.d.). Additionally, NARAUs are rooted in spiritual growth and fellowship, which provides a solid impetus to build communities of support for LGBTQ+ students in their institution.

In 2017, Wolff et al. conducted one of the very few studies of the experiences of *transgender/gender non-conforming* (TGNC) students in Christian higher education, which found four significant themes from responses: (a) Invisibility of TGNC identities, (b) rejection from others, (c) ambivalence of psychological conflict and, (d) resilience and importance of campus support systems. Participants noted the distinction between the visibility of LGBQ students and TGNC students on their Christian college or university (CCU) campus. For example, while there may have been a GSA on campus, there was no TGNC representation in those groups. Some participants reported that they began to question their religious beliefs due to the non-affirming environments of their CCU. Others reported feeling accepted by God due to their gender identity. However, they feared rejection from their religious friends.

Similarly, a 2012 study of male-to-female transgender Christians found that participants' relationships to their faith varied in relation to their transgender identity. Several participants found that their gender identity conflict strengthened their relationship with God while reporting negative experiences with organized religion or their church (Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012). This study found that "though there may be persons within the church community that make it difficult for the transgender person to worship or participate in their congregational activities, the spiritual guidance and internal experience of one's faith proves to be a positive influence in the life of the transgender Christian" (Yarhouse & Carrs, 2012, p. 28).

Additionally, the literature explored the call the Catholic faith makes for pastoral care and dignity for LGBTQ+ students. The discussion of LGBTQ+ issues shamelessly and with genuine openness combats dominant heteronormative views that alienate and suppress LGBTQ+ youth (Canales, 2022). Catholic youth ministry documents such as *Renewing the Vision: A Framework*

for Catholic Youth Ministry (RTV) provide Catholic youth ministers with eight components to shape the curriculum, including advocacy and pastoral care (USCCB, 1997). Canales argued these sections would have been ideal places to include LGBTQ+ affirming passages; for example, "Advocacy includes standing up for LGBTQ youth and engaging in policies and practices that eradicate discrimination of sexual minority young people and examine and analyze the practices that alienate LGBTQ youth" (Canales, 2022, p. 67). Again, in the section regarding pastoral care to adolescents, RTV stressed the importance of

> Caring for adolescents and families in crisis through support, counseling, and referral to appropriate community agencies; providing guidance as young people face life decisions and make moral choices; and challenging systems that hinder positive development (advocacy). Pastoral care is most fundamentally a relationship—a ministry of compassionate presence. (USCCB, 1997)

Canales argued that while these are caring words, they lack anything specific to LGBTQ+ youth (Canales, 2022). By ignoring the needs of LGBTQ+ youth, they were not given a real chance to engage in their spirituality in a way that honors their whole selves. Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ youth were more likely to experience homelessness, a number that increases for Black LGBTQ+ youth (Morton et al., 2018). Many of these youth were experiencing homelessness because of family rejection, so Catholic parishes needed to engage in authentic advocacy and genuine pastoral care. In a 2008 article, Fernando Arzola stated, "If the church does not provide a safe, nonjudgmental environment to help them process issues and questions, they undoubtedly go elsewhere for help" (Arzola, 2008, p. 47). Regarding Catholic schools, this rings true, as gender-

expansive students who attended single-gender schools find themselves transferring to public or independent secular schools due to the lack of support they received.

In Herriot and Callaghan's 2018 exploration of the commonly portrayed trans-versus-Catholic dichotomy, they questioned the idea that trans-inclusive policies must be in opposition to Catholic values. They argued that instead of finding a balance between the two, there is "theological support that inclusion and acceptance, especially of those with transgressive bodies, is a fundamental component of Catholicism" (Herriot & Callaghan, 2018, p. 180). Herriot and Callaghan posited that through the reconciliation of Catholic doctrine and trans inclusion, Catholic schools could more fully affirm gender-expansive youth. They stated, "Only with the trans/Catholic binary fully dismantled can more affirming and doctrinally sound policies be imagined on issues pertaining to gender identity, gender expression, and beyond" (Herriot & Callaghan, 2018, p. 181).

Theoretical Frameworks

Due to the lack of literature in this realm, no single theoretical or conceptual framework could easily be assigned to this study. The newness of this topic provided numerous possibilities for research while it added the challenge that comes with a lack of foundation to build upon. This is not to say that this study was the first of its kind; however, this topic has been rarely addressed in the comparative world of educational research.

Queer and Trans Theology

In considering theoretical frameworks for this study, I have to acknowledge that the exploration of this topic would not be possible without the foundational work in Queer Theology and Trans Theology. Queer Theory, popularized by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Teresa de

Lauretis called to mind and questions the heteronormative nature of society (Anzaldúa, 1987; de Lauretis, 1991). Queer Theology expanded on this, asserting that gender beyond the binary and queer desire has always existed in human history, including in faith traditions and sacred texts such as the Bible (Cheng, 2011; Ladin, 2018). Queer Theology can be defined in three ways: (a) theology that centers on the specific needs of LGBTQ+ individuals and is conducted by, with, or for those communities; (b) theology that opposes strict social and cultural norms of gender and sexuality and seeks to uplift perspectives that support theologies conducted by LGBTQ+ people; and (c) Theology that confronts and deconstructs historical and systemic forms of oppression that affect LGBTQ+ people (Cheng, 2011). Queer Theology, in relation to young people, encourages youth and young adult ministers to approach topics of sexuality and gender in the spirit of respect and dignity for the human person. Trans Theology affirmed that human beings are not only created according to a gender binary, pushing us to look beyond our sex, gender, and binaries to understand how humanity reflects the image of God (Ladin, 2018).

This study focused on Catholic school leaders' experiences, whose personal and institutional levels of understanding varied. By considering the question of how to support gender-expansive students in Catholic schools, I was questioning the heteronormative structures of Catholic education that say students must be heterosexual (or quiet and ashamed) and gender must be binary. Queer Theology would argue that, as everyone is made in God's image, each person's gender and sexual identities make them who God intended them to be. In this way, affirming and supporting LGBTQ+ students (and community members) is a true expression of Catholic values (Cheng, 2011). Rather than positioning Catholic religious rights and LGBTQ+ rights against each other in a zero-sum enterprise, Herriot and Callaghan argued that we "can

map out imaginative theoretical spaces within which trans inclusion and affirmation are seen as fully integrated in the moral and theological dimensions of Catholic schools" (Herriot & Callaghan, 2019, p. 58).

Organizational Theory

From an organizational theory lens, initially, I utilized the Bridges Transition Model (Bridges, 2001) to organize my findings considering each leader's and school's understanding of gender identity and support of gender-expansive students. Bridges Transition Model (Bridges, 2001) was a foundational concept in organization theory used in various organizational settings. This model focused on transition, seeing change as a catalyst for transition. Change is what happens to an organization, while transition is the process organizations go through to address the change (Bridges, 2001). The Bridges Transition Model identified three phases of transition, starting with an ending and ending with a beginning (Bridges, 2001). In other words, to begin the transition (response to change), an organization must let go of the current way of doing things. The first stage looks more like an ending, an ending of the old way of doing things (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). The second phase of Bridge's transition model is the neutral zone; this is when the "old is gone, but the new is not fully operational" (Bridges & Bridges, 2016, p. 23). The third phase of Bridges transition model is the new beginning. This is when the organization can develop its new way of doing things. They have spent a good deal of time in the neutral zone where they adjusted to the new without the weight of the old, and now they are ready to fully engage in the transition to a new way of doing things.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Independent Catholic schools' unique structures provide benefits and disadvantages to the school leader. As discussed in Chapter One, various factors affect the governance of a Catholic high school, ranging from parish oversight boards of trustees and dioceses. For this reason, leaders of Catholic schools are often left feeling apprehensive about setting clear and published policies regarding LGBTQ+ students, let alone gender-expansive students. The focus of this study was on the experiences of school leaders as they consider how gender-expansive students are or are not supported in their Catholic schools. In defining and unpacking the perceived challenges school leaders face in developing institutional support for gender-expansive students, this study is a resource for any school leader, especially those working at Catholic high schools who are approaching this conversation on their campus.

While there is a fair amount of research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in public schools and some research on the experiences of gender-expansive students in public schools, there are significant gaps in research when it comes to gender-expansive students and faith-based schools, specifically Catholic high schools. For example, according to the *2021 National Climate Survey on the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools* conducted by GLSEN, 57.4% of LGBTQ students surveyed experienced verbal harassment based on their gender expression, 20.6% experienced physical harassment based on gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2022). According to The Trevor Project, 50.5% of gender-expansive youth considered suicide in the past year compared to 32% of cisgender youth, and 76.75% of gender-expansive youth experienced symptoms of anxiety

compared to 63.5% of their cisgender peers (The Trevor Project, 2022). While the climate surveys conducted by organizations like GLSEN are meaningful and necessary to understanding the experiences of gender-expansive youth in high school, the majority of participants attend public schools. Of the 22,298 participants of GLSEN's 2021 climate survey, 2.7% attended religious-affiliated schools, 8% attended private and non-religious schools, and 88.1% attended public schools (Kosciw et al., 2022). As stated, it is essential to note that while LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of suicidal ideation, symptoms of anxiety, and general mental health concerns, this is not due to their LGBTQ+ identity inherently but is a result of how they are treated in society. A 2016 study on gender identity-related disparities in suicidal ideation or on factors that underlie this disparity found that established psychosocial factors, including depression and school-based victimization, partially explained the association between gender identity and suicidal ideation (Grossman et al., 2016). This is not to say that the research on supporting LGBTQ+ students is exhaustive; there are many more areas to explore. While there are numerous gaps in research specific to Catholic institutions, this study focused on the experiences of leaders working at Catholic high schools because, ultimately, they are the people charged with creating and defending policies, guidelines, or position statements. Of course, the student experience is essential to understanding this issue; however, there is broader research that addresses the experiences of gender-expansive students and the effects of gender-affirming care by which this study is informed.

This chapter offers an overview of the study's methodology, including the processes used to collect qualitative data, approaches to analyzing data, and a discussion of the study's limitations and delimitations.

Research Questions

In order to explore the concerns and challenges that leaders of Catholic high schools hold in response to supporting gender-expansive students in their communities, this study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are Catholic high school leaders' experiences in serving students who identify as gender-expansive?

2. What challenges do leaders face in institutionally and individually supporting gender-expansive students?

Theoretical Frameworks

In this study, I addressed a change new to Catholic education, although schools in the broader context have addressed the support needed by gender-expansive students for years. For many years, the question of supporting gender-expansive students in Catholic schools was a non-issue because it was willfully ignored. While the existence of gender-expansive people has become more accepted over the past few years, there are still many who would agree with the Church's view of "gender ideology." For example, a Pew Research Poll conducted in 2021 reported that about four in ten Americans say that they personally know someone who is transgender, which is an increase of 5 percentage points since 2017. Additionally, about one-quarter of Americans know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns, a rise of 8 percentage points from 2018 (Minkin & Brown, 2021). While societal awareness of gender-expansive people has grown, the belief that gender is tied to a person's sex-assigned-at-birth has grown as well, with about 60% of Americans believing that gender is determined by a person's sex-assigned-at-birth, an increase from 54% in 2017 (Parker et al., 2022). All that to say, in a climate

where gender identity is a top concern among people, many Catholic educational organizations have been forced to finally address the experiences of the gender-expansive students who have always existed in their schools.

Bridges and Bridges described three phases of transition in his model; the first stage looks more like an ending, an ending of the old way of doing things (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). This phase is where most participants and schools were. According to the NCEA, Catholic schools should ensure that the student is seen as "a person whose intellectual growth is harmonized with spiritual, religious, emotional, and social growth" (NCEA, 2023, p. 8). In this first phase of Bridges Transition Model (Bridges, 2001), schools recognize the end of the old way of ignoring the existence of gender-expansive students in their entirety. It was not too long ago that the institutional Church had to transition towards a more inclusive attitude towards LGB people and the balancing of their sexual ethics and social justice traditions. That change has been present in many Catholic schools, and in many, there is much more open support of LGB students than even two years ago. While acceptance of LGB students has increased, the Q and the T have been pushed aside to address later. This is an example of change without transition; as Bridges described, this is more of a "rearrangement of the chairs" (Bridges & Bridges, 2016, p. 22). While a school may have attempted to change its culture to be more inclusive, without understanding why the change is needed and engaging in the work of transition, meaning growth cannot happen. In order to get to the stage of addressing the needs of gender-expansive students, schools need to move forward from the old way of doing things and toward new possibilities.

The second phase of Bridges's Transition Model is the neutral zone; this takes place when the "old is gone, but the new is not fully operational" (Bridges & Bridges, 2016, p. 23).

During this phase, a school might have left behind a "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding LGBTQ+ students. Still, they have not enacted an inclusive policy in its place. Without an inclusive policy in place, Catholic schools cannot "do everything in their power to manage available resources and seek innovative options to ensure that Catholic school education is geographically, programmatically, physically, culturally, and financially accessible" (NCEA, 2023, p. 10). Bridges stated that this is when "psychological realignment" takes place, essentially, this is when an organization begins adjusting to the new rather than holding on to the old (Bridges & Bridges, 2016, p. 23).

The third phase of Bridge's transition model is the new beginning. This is when the organization can develop its new way of doing things. They have spent a good deal of time in the neutral zone where they adjusted to the new without the weight of the old, and now they are ready to fully engage in the transition to a new way of doing things (Bridges, 2001). During this phase, a school would be ready to enact new LGBTQ+ inclusive policies with a new sense of purpose and understanding. In this phase, school leaders could promote genuine trust among community members and work towards a fully accessible program.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach, which allowed participants to be understood in the context of their school sites and the current moment, allowing for the richness of individual experiences to inform findings (Yin, 2015). The participants of this study likely had multiple reasons for their concerns, which could be related to various individual circumstances, such as personal understanding of Catholic theology or personal connections to gender-expansive individuals, making a qualitative study the best fit.

Participants

      This study's participants were leaders of Catholic high schools in the United States. For the purposes of this study, leaders are defined as those with the role of President, Principal, or Head of School. Participants had some level of responsibility for defining and defending the school's operations and were minimally knowledgeable of their school's stance on the support of gender-expansive students.

Recruitment

      In order to identify participants who would yield the most relevant data, this study utilized purposive sampling (Yin, 2015). Purposive sampling allowed me to engage a broad range of perspectives while selecting participants who fit within a specific group (Kuzel, 1999). Participants were identified by me, the researcher, who made initial contact via email. As a result of my professional association, I planned to utilize personal contacts at many Catholic schools to find participants. However, I quickly realized the limits of my network geographically. In partnership with my dissertation chair, we selected Catholic education leaders from a wide variety of locations in the United States, shared information about the dissertation, and invited them to share the opportunity with colleagues who fit the participant profile and who they believe would be interested. In addition, I advertised the study in a newsletter sent to Catholic educators who are supportive of LGBTQ+ students and utilized LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) to expand my reach. Potential participants were informed of the research topic, the voluntary and confidential nature of the research, the criteria for selecting participants, the number of participants who will be selected, and the timeline for conducting interviews. See Appendix B

for an example of the initial recruitment email. All potential participants completed an initial questionnaire to determine if they qualified to participate.

Participants were selected and notified within two days of completing the online questionnaire, and a Zoom (www.zoom.com) video interview was scheduled within the following two weeks on average. In creating a diverse group of participants, I considered geographical locations throughout the United States, followed by the potential participant's role in their school. I interviewed eight school leaders who represented a variety of locations, roles, and school contexts. Additional considerations included the size of the school, the political leanings of the city in which the school is located, and the participant's religion.

Data Collection

Questionnaire

Potential participants were sent an initial questionnaire, which helped me understand the individual's level of experience with gender inclusivity (see Appendix C), school leadership, and Catholic school settings. The questionnaire also helped me set an informal baseline for where schools are regarding conversations about supporting gender-expansive students.

Qualitative Interviews

Data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews (Appendix D), which allowed for more relational conversation. Interviews were one hour long and took place through online video conferencing. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the features of Zoom video conferencing. I began interviews with a prepared entering approach; following pleasantries, I asked participants to "Tell me about their school," following up with probing questions such as, "What is your favorite thing about your school? What makes your school

unique? Or who does your school serve?". Preparing entrance questions can set a relational tone

that will carry into the rest of the conversation. Similarly, preparing an exit question such as, "Is

there anything else you would like to share about your experience in working with gender-

expansive students?" provides a clear ending signal while allowing the participant to have the

last word (Yin, 2015). I started the more substantive part of the interview by asking a grand tour

question such as, "How would you describe the climate around gender inclusivity at your

school?" which helped the participants to connect their experiences with the focus of the study

(Spradley, 1979). Due to the complicated nature of this topic and the reliance on accurate

wording, I utilized an interview guide aligned with the NCEA Defining Characteristics of

Catholic Schools (NCEA, 2023), which included possible initial language for questions and topic

sequences (Brenner, 2006). Themes included: Distinguished by Excellence, Committed to

Educate the Whole Child, Steeped in a Catholic Worldview, Shaped by Communion and

Community, Accessible to All Students, and Established by the Express Authority of the Bishop.

This design helped to guide the interview while allowing the flexibility to follow up on

unexpected themes and build on participants' responses (Brenner, 2006). Please see Appendix D

for a list of interview questions and the relevant themes.

Data Analysis

In order to process the interview data, I utilized phenomenological data analysis through

empathic interpretation, which focuses on the participants' experiences as described in the

interview (Ricoeur, 1970). After transcribing and segmenting data, I used in vivo coding

(Strauss, 1987) to develop codes organically (Leavy, 2017), followed by identifying emergent

themes (Willig, 2017). As I did in the interviews, I needed to be mindful that I was not

selectively identifying themes that affirm my personal beliefs when analyzing data; this is why I avoided using a priori codes (Miles et al., 2014).

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations I considered in this research design are generalizability, self-selection of participants, and my positionality. Generalizability refers to the extent to which this research and findings can be applied beyond the participants' contexts (Maxwell, 1992). Due to the complex nature of my research topic, I was unable to interpret my findings as easily applicable to other cities, states, or school contexts. It was significant that I was able to speak with a diverse group of participants. However, they lead schools across the country, meaning they have varying contexts and (arch)diocesan policies and involvement, making it difficult to generalize the findings and recommendations.

Another limitation was the possibility for participants to self-select from the study if they did not feel confident in their understanding of gender. Prospective participants might also opt out if they have views on gender identity and expression that are not the norm in their institutions. I consciously tried to avoid phrasing that signals a value judgment on a school's response to gender-expansive students. However, some school leaders might have found that by even asking the question, the study showed a preference for school responses that support the exploration of gender identity and expression.

Lastly, my positionality was a consideration when designing this study. While I would not say my personal experiences were a limitation, they will always inform my worldview. At the time of this research, I was a leader at a Catholic high school, having worked in Catholic schools for five years. I developed my interest in this topic due to working with LGBTQ+

students in these settings. I made a conscious effort to show how I am taking responsibility for

my positionality and combating the effects of my bias on the study's outcome. Finally, this

research project is personal to me due to my experiences attending a Catholic high school as a

member of the LGBTQ+ community. My experiences with bigotry towards LGBTQ+ people

from those who considered themselves to represent the Catholic church is a reason that I stepped

away from my faith for so long. In returning to a system that let me down as an adolescent, I

have made sure that I am in a place of emotional well-being to be able to embark on the journey.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Study Background

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Catholic high school leaders as they encounter gender-expansive students. The qualitative interviews asked presidents and principals of Catholic high schools if they had encountered gender-expansive students in their schools and, if so, how they had responded to the needs of gender-expansive students in their schools. For those leaders who had not worked with gender-expansive students, they reflected on what they imagined their individual and organizational response would be. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What are Catholic high school leaders' experiences in serving students who identify as gender-expansive?

2. What challenges do leaders face in institutionally and individually supporting gender-expansive students?

While Bridges Transition Model (Bridges, 2001) offered an entryway into planning this research, I found that the model did not suit my goals due to its lack of nuance in the spaces between the three main phases of transition described. In reviewing my data, I found that all of my participants fell somewhere between phases one and two, and therefore, I could not utilize this model to more deeply understand their experiences. After assessing this limitation, I moved my focus to utilizing the defining characteristics of Catholic schools, as defined by NCEA (NCEA, 2023). Specifically, I focused on three defining characteristics of Catholic schools: 1) commitment to educating the whole child, 2) being shaped by communion and community, and

3) accessibility to all students, which allowed me to more deeply understand the experiences of these leaders through the lens of Catholic education (NCEA, 2023).

In conducting these interviews, three main themes of tension emerged, which I will later expand upon:

1. *Cura Personalis* versus *Cura Apostolica*,

2. Individualized Approach versus Institutional Consistency, and

3. Individual Values and Beliefs versus Organizational Values and Beliefs

The following section will describe the data collection process, including participant demographics, interview procedures, and methods for coding and identifying themes.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews via Zoom with eight leaders of Catholic high schools to answer these questions. To control for variations in job duties and experience in student-facing interactions, each participant was a president or principal at a Catholic high school. I specifically looked at high schools because this is when, developmentally, youth tend to become more aware of gender and explore their gender identity. Prior to scheduling each interview, the participants completed a questionnaire to establish their qualifications for the study and collect personal and professional data, such as gender, race/ethnicity, place of employment, and role in the high school. Through data analysis, I also considered the size of the school, the region it is located in, the governance structure, and whether the school is co-ed or single gender. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants. Participants are listed in the order in which they were interviewed.

Table 1

Institutional Demographic Descriptions of Participants' Schools

School Pseudonym	Role of Interviewee	Region	Student Body Size	Governance	Gender
West Coast Catholic High School	Principal	West	220	Religious Order	Girls
Academy of the North	Principal	East	272	Religious Order	Girls
Saint Preparatory School	Principal	East	331	Diocesan	Girls
Holy Academy High School	Principal	West	1270	Religious Order	Boys
Faithful Scholar Academy	Principal	East	900	Religious Order	Boys
Trinity High School	President	Midwest	600	Religious Order	Boys
Catholic High School of the West	President	West	800	Diocesan	Co-ed
Blessed Scholars High School	Principal	West	1600	Diocesan	Co-ed

I utilized a qualitative approach to examine school leaders' experiences and understand the participants in the context of their school sites and the current moment, allowing for the richness of individual experiences to inform findings (Yin, 2015). I collected the qualitative data through the video conferencing platform Zoom in order to reach a wide variety of participants from across the United States while maintaining some personal contact through face-to-face conversation.

To analyze the interviews, I utilized phenomenological data analysis through empathic interpretation, which allowed me to focus on the participants' experiences as described in the interview (Ricoeur, 1970). I conducted interviews via Zoom and utilized its transcription feature,

which provided me with a text transcript and audio recording of each interview. Following each interview, I reviewed the transcript to correct errors and highlight phrases that stood out immediately. After completing the interviews, I reviewed the transcripts and read and re-read the text, which helped me remember and understand the context within which the participant's experience occurred (Ravindran, 2019). I used in vivo coding (Strauss, 1987) to develop codes organically (Leavy, 2017), identifying words or phrases that stood out as significant or summative of the participant's response (Saldaña, 2014). I followed this by clustering codes that related to one another and identifying emergent themes (Willig, 2017). In order to avoid subconsciously selectively identifying themes that affirm my personal beliefs when analyzing data, I avoided using a priori codes (Miles et al., 2014).

This section starts with participant profiles, which allows the reader to understand the experiences of the participants more fully. This is followed by addressing the first research question: What are Catholic high school leaders' experiences in serving students who identify as gender-expansive? Through three emergent themes identified because of commonalities between the participants' experiences (see Table 2). This section concludes by addressing the second research question: What are the challenges that Catholic school leaders face in supporting gender-expansive students?

Participant Profiles

This dissertation sought to understand the experiences of eight Catholic school leaders in the United States. All participants had previous connections to Catholic education prior to arriving at their leadership positions, ranging from teacher, assistant principal, campus minister, alum of a Catholic school, and parent of a Catholic school alum. Participants have worked in

Catholic education for an average of 15 years, with some having dedicated their careers to Catholic education and others pursuing unrelated careers before going into Catholic education.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked all participants to share a few characteristics of their schools that they are especially proud of. Kayla, principal of West Coast Catholic High School, noted that the parent community was actively engaged with the school. She also named the diverse leadership team, mostly consisting of women of color, as a unique benefit to the school. Gina, principal of Academy of the North, aligns deeply with the mission of the founding order, which is social justice-centered and focused on inclusivity. The deeply curious and mission-aligned nature of the Board of Trustees was a reason the school has been able to make progress in its support of gender-expansive students. Being new to leadership at Academy of the North, Gina was also grateful for the supportive internal leadership team that helped her to understand institutional knowledge. Evelyn, principal of Saint Preparatory School, shared that her school community is economically, ethnically, and religiously diverse, making for a rich school culture. Byron, principal of Holy Academy High School, identified with the school's mission and tradition. As a leader of an all-boys school, one of the things he is proud of is the brotherhood and positive male relationship building the school supports. While an all-boys environment can be toxic, he finds that Holy Academy High School allows students to build positive male relationships steeped in seeing God in all things. Jeremy, principal of Faithful Scholar Academy, aligned deeply with the mission of his school and the way the charism of the founding order is seen in the students. The school's diverse student body was another characteristic important to the school's culture. A wide variety of students come from different walks of life and converge in this one place. Randall, president of Catholic High School of the

West, was proud that the tenant of Catholic education focused on educating the whole child is seen in the practices at the school. He believes students at Catholic High School of the West are able to explore and grow their spirituality in all aspects of life, not just theology class or Mass. The school supports this multi-faceted approach to faith that helps students thrive in the classroom and experience a sense of belonging at school. Leigh, principal of Blessed Scholars High School, named many characteristics of her school, such as the diverse population and supportive faculty. However, one thing that stood out was how having the presence of open and accepting priests on campus helps to grow a more inclusive community of students and parents.

Another component of the participants' experiences I explored was how often they were involved in conversations about specific supports for a gender-expansive student in real time. I found that participants encountered these situations at the most two or three times in the past four years, with some participants having never had to address the question in a concrete way. Kayla shared that before she had started West Coast Catholic School, there had been one or two conversations about how to respond to the needs of gender-expansive students. Still, the schools in her network needed a more precise way of proceeding or guidelines, and no decisions arose from those conversations. When Kayla started working at West Coast Catholic School a little over one year ago, she encountered a student named Elliot. At that time, Elliot (a gender-neutral chosen name) used female pronouns and presented a masculine appearance. In this situation, the parents were on board and supportive of Elliot's gender identity, so it was easier to officially change the student's name since the parents requested it. However, Elliot requested that a teacher use he/him pronouns this year, and the school was unprepared for this. This situation started a conversation about male pronoun usage at an all-girls school and how to be more transparent

about the limits of their support for gender-expansive students. Kayla's goal is to find an intentional and clear way of proceeding that centers their charism.

Gina has been principal at her school for five years and has a bit more experience than other participants in building a culture of LGBTQ+ support at Academy of the North, an all-girls school. She described the city where the school is located as a more conservative Catholic community and relatively new to gender-inclusivity. LGBTQ+ families and students see Academy of the North as a bit of an oasis because of their clear support for that community at large in a town that might not be so inclusive. That being said, the number of gender-expansive students she has encountered is small. She shared her experience with a family who started at Academy of the North, knowing that their child was questioning their gender identity and likely was transgender. Through this transparency and parent support, Gina has been able to accompany this student through their time at Academy of the North. The student has used the name Matt instead of Veronica and is now starting to use he/him pronouns as a junior. The boundary that Academy of the North has set is that they are a school for biologically female students and will support Matt until that changes. Still, Gina has found it challenging to know that when Matt graduates, all of his diplomas and awards will likely need to say, Veronica, as this is his legal name. She anticipates there will be hard conversations with the family, acknowledging that it feels confusing to know this student as Matt and refer to him as Matt in everyday settings, and then she will have to graduate him as Veronica. Gina has started to engage with their partner schools to ask, "Would you ever graduate a student from our school so that he can have his chosen name on the diploma?" At the same time, this would be hard for Gina

because the student would ultimately have spent four years at Academy of the North and bonded with his experience there.

Evelyn shared that she has not encountered gender-expansive students at Saint Preparatory School, attributing their cisgender population to their admissions and enrollment policies that require students to submit a birth certificate showing their sex assigned as female at birth. Evelyn shared,

> Well, because we're an -girls school, we haven't had much experience [with gender inclusivity]. There hasn't been too much push in terms of policy-wise, because our process as it currently stands is any student who enrolls must provide a birth certificate, and because it's a single-gender school, your birth certificate must say you are a female.

While she sees students expressing their gender in a variety of ways, some more masculine than others, the only time she had been asked about the school's policy in transgender students was in relation to a transgender girl from a different school playing in a girls' rugby match.

Jeremy, a principal of an all-boys high school, shared two specific experiences with gender-expansive students and multiple general questions about gender expression and identity, mainly relating to dress code. At that moment, he described the school's level of understanding as "learning/trying to figure out a response to the changing landscape. We've had moments with students who were exploring and transitioning . . . this year, we are trying to have discussions about a way of proceeding at the board level."

Byron, principal of Holy Academy High School, an all-boys school, has experience working with gender-expansive students at the school he previously worked at but has yet to address this issue with any current families. He shared that previous to his tenure at Holy

Academy High School, there was a student who was exploring their gender identity and now, as a college student, identifies as transgender. Byron's understanding of that situation was that the student was supported in their name change. However, there were no specifics handed on to Byron as the incoming principal. In his previous school, a co-ed Catholic high school, Byron worked with a student who was assigned male at birth (AMAB). This student applied to the school as male initially and then did not attend, knowing that she was exploring her gender identity and the family felt it would be easier to socially transition at a public school. When she did apply to transfer to the school in the 10th grade, all of her enrollment forms referred to her gender as female, and she was enrolled using her chosen name, Ella. Byron was quick to admit that while he was a leader of the school at the time, he leaned heavily on the school counselor, who had open and frequent communication with Ella's parents. Even in this situation, with a fairly accepting administration, a well-informed school counselor, and an accepting family, some challenges came up when considering accommodations. These mostly were in the realm of athletics and bathroom usage due to the lack of previously considered guidelines to address these accommodations. Initially, Ella was allowed to use the bathroom facilities that aligned with her gender identity; however, soon, two female students from more conservative families expressed their discomfort with Ella using the girls' changing facilities. The school had a single-occupancy bathroom available; however, Ella advocated for her right to use a bathroom that aligned with her gender identity. In the end, through conversations with the family, the student, the principal, and the school counselor, Ella agreed to use the single-occupancy bathroom. It is important to note that while this situation seemed to end on an agreeable note, the use of bathroom facilities

that align with a student's gender makes a significant difference in a student's sense of belonging at school (GLSEN, 2021).

Understanding the Experiences of Catholic School Leaders through Emergent Themes

In addressing the first research question, the first theme, *cura personalis* versus *cura apostolica,* focuses on the tensions between care for the school as an institution and care for students as individuals within the school. For example, Byron, the principal of Holy Academy High School, said, "Even if our progressive religious order . . . there is a divide around what are classic conservative views versus the more progressive views." In speaking to alums, he has heard of their mixed experiences at Holy Academy High School, stating,

> They got a lot out of it in terms of opportunities to see the world and understand social justice. But they also talk about the pain and harm of being closeted or the anxiety of being out during high school.

The second theme is Individualized Approach versus Institutional Consistency, which focuses on the experiences of leaders working with students on a case-by-case basis while yearning for more consistency and clarity in how they respond to the needs of gender-expansive students. Kayla, a new principal at West Coast Catholic High School, mentioned that the past interactions with gender-expansive students have been "case by case, void of any charism or overarching philosophy or value. It just happens." The third theme, Individual Values and Beliefs versus Organizational Values and Beliefs, focuses on the significance of beliefs and values in encountering gender-expansive students.

After exploring these themes, I compared the defining characteristics of Catholic education. Three characteristics emerged as the most relevant to these leaders' experiences:

commitment to educating the whole child, shaped by communion and community, and

accessibility to all students (NCEA, 2023).

Table 2

Common Themes Among Participants

Theme	Example	NCEA Defining Characteristic
Cura Personalis Versus *Cura Apostolica*	Supporting a gender-expansive student while avoiding controversies that would harm the school	Commitment to Educating the Whole Child
Individualized Approach and Institutional Consistency	Responding to gender-expansive students on a case-by-case basis is important, however, it adds a challenge when considering equity and long-term planning	Commitment to Educating the Whole Child
Individual Values and Beliefs Versus Institutional Values and Beliefs	Holding an inclusive view of gender informed by their strong faith	Communion and Community

Theme 1: *Cura Personalis* Versus *Cura Apostolica*

Across all of the interviews, one commonality was the tension between care for the

individual and care for the organization, *cura personalis*, and *cura apostolica. Cura personalis*

translates from Latin to "care for the [individual] person" in English. This way of proceeding is

rooted in Ignatian spirituality, where the guide (or teacher) builds relationships with students,

listens to them, and leads them toward personal initiative and responsibility for learning (Traub,

2022). *Cura apostolica* refers to care for the organization, meaning the responsibility towards

promoting a school's vision and mission, following the sponsoring order's guidance. This was

especially a concern for leaders of single-gender schools.

For example, Kayla, the principal of West Coast Catholic High School, found tension in

leading an all-girls school while caring for a student questioning their gender identity. She stated,

This is an all-girls school, and there are tenants that need to be upheld in order to remain an all-girls school, but at the same time, what does [the student] need? And the student needs to be here [at the school] with people who love her and can support her.

Similarly, Gina, the principal of Academy of the North, an all-girls school, felt that while she and her board of trustees expect pushback when they consider ways of proceeding that support gender-expansive students, they know that those who are pushing back "are not interacting and working with these beautiful humans every day and their families who are really trying to support their child." She knows that scrutiny will come from their diocese at some point. Still, Academy of the North has been doing this work for five years under the umbrella of counseling, and students name it as meaningful and important to their experiences. In this way, Gina is committed to the education of the whole child, including psychological and social education.

Evelyn, another principal of an all-girls high school, Saint Preparatory School, explained that she has had students complain about teachers using gendered terms such as "ladies," and while some faculty use gender-neutral terms, she said they will continue to use gendered terms because Saint Preparatory is a girls' school, and there is a focus on building sisterhood as a marginalized gender. This reflects other thoughts I have heard from all-girls school educators. Often, the mission of an all-girls school is rooted in sisterhood as a marginalized gender; however, living out the mission with a commitment to communion and community can come about in various ways, some that may be more inclusive than others.

Jeremy, the principal at Faithful Scholar Academy, an all-boys school, has had experiences with transitioning students, and the issue he keeps at the top of his mind is the safety

and care for the student. In his experience with these students and families, he has involved the school guidance counselor and parents in these conversations. Jeremy stated the importance of being clear about what the school can offer a student as an all-boys institution. In one case, a student was questioning their gender identity in 9th grade, and Jeremy talked to the family about the gendered environment that the student would be enduring if they stayed at the school. Ultimately, the family decided to leave Faithful Scholar Academy to attend public school because they were so early in their high school journey. In another case, an 11th grade student decided to stay, knowing that they would endure a gendered environment; they felt that this was the best place for them, where they had friends and teachers who supported and loved them.

While expressed differently, leaders of coeducational high schools carried similar tensions. Leigh, the principal of Blessed Scholars High School, expressed frustration with being unable to provide students with the support they need and deserve due to their diocesan governance. She named the biggest challenge in attending to the needs of gender-expansive students in her (arch)diocesan high school "that I can't give them what they want." To know that using a student's chosen name or pronouns is "how they feel that they're heard and cared for and yet, be unable to give them that. That is brutal to me."

Similarly, Randall, the president of Catholic High School of the West, expressed his deep commitment to the school and tried to balance a pastoral approach with the promulgated policies of his (arch)diocese. He felt that being the battleground for these issues would not make things better for the LGBTQ+ kids at the school; instead, it would bring more scrutiny and possibly more non-affirming policies to the school.

All participants felt they would like to do more to support their gender-expansive

students. Still, they were either confined by (arch)diocesan policies or fear of putting their school

in a precarious position.

Theme 2: Individualized Approach and Institutional Consistency

Another theme that arose from these interviews was responding to gender-expansive

students with an individualized approach while needing consistency and clarity within their

organizations. Many participants had found ways to support gender-expansive students in their

self-expression; however, in all these instances, they were dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Kayla expressed frustration that her school has handled individual cases as they come up, but the

responses are not intentional. She hopes that under her leadership, they can form more

intentional guidelines, policies, or ways of proceeding rooted in the sponsoring order's charism.

Gina expressed the individualized approach in two ways, noting that she takes this

approach when working with faculty or staff members who might be struggling with gender

inclusivity and where it fits in with their faith. She is grateful that faculty struggling with this

will come to her to talk it out. Most of her faculty's challenges involve using a student's name

and pronouns. While the school does not have a policy that faculty must use a student's chosen

pronouns, Gina has explained to faculty how using a student's chosen name and pronoun can

positively affect their experience in school. In one case she shared with me, the faculty member

did end up leaving her position because she felt that the school was no longer living out its

mission in a way that was fully in line with her view of Catholic teaching. That said, the teacher

continues volunteering in the alum office, showing her commitment to the school's history.

Regarding student cases, Gina and her team respond under the umbrella of the counseling office. They do have an LGBTQ+ support group, but it is not a club or affinity group; in other words, it is not part of student affairs but rather housed in the counseling department. While the group that meets is small, students have identified it as a place of comfort and support. Gina is hesitant to create a specific policy on gender expansiveness because she fears it might back them into a corner eventually and would need constant updating in order to remain inclusive. The school does have anti-bullying and anti-hate policies, and these protect LGBTQ+ identities. While a lack of policy means little consistency, Gina believes that housing gender support in the counseling department will have a bit more sustainability. Gina considers the possibility of their Bishop, who is currently somewhat progressive, changing and trying to set the school up for success in upholding their support for gender-expansive students.

Evelyn has not had experience working with a gender-expansive student at her school, which she believes is a result of the fact that students must enroll with a birth certificate that shows their sex assigned at birth as female. She knows the situation will arise soon, though, and she wonders how her school and (arch)diocese will react. She said, "We are looking to our diocese to say, "Well, what do you want us to do? You're our boss" but so far there is no clear guidance. The superintendent in her diocese has attended a few conferences, but they still haven't had any policies that have been promulgated."

Jeremy is the participant who has had the most experience working with gender-expansive students and leads the school that has engaged the most with professional development in this area. Working with each student involved an individualized approach, and the families were deeply involved in these conversations. In one case, Faithful Scholar Academy

75

had a student who had been questioning their gender identity, and the family had been in conversation with the school's guidance counselor. It did not seem like the student would ultimately be transitioning; however, upon the student's return from summer break, they shared that they were going to start the process of transitioning and ultimately spent their senior year transitioning socially (using a different name, presenting a feminine gender, using feminine pronouns). While the school was supportive through this student's transition, they had a major challenge when considering graduation. Similar to many single-gender Catholic schools, graduation attire is gendered at Faithful Scholars Academy. The student wanted to wear a dress, but the dress code was a tuxedo. The administration offered the student permission to wear a graduation robe over whatever clothing she chose (in other words, a dress). In the end, the student did not attend graduation, resulting in a painful moment for everyone involved, especially the student. Since that experience, the family has communicated that they feel good about the school while acknowledging their disappointment in how it addressed the graduation situation. Jeremy shared this story to say that those moments are the ones informing them as a school and pushing them to think about where they want to go from here.

Theme 3: Individual Values and Beliefs Versus Organizational Values and Beliefs

In the interviews, most participants found ways to share their values and beliefs in connection to the support of gender-expansive students. Gina shared how her background in ministry has informed her pastoral approach to this topic, highlighting the importance of engaging in conversation when complex topics arise. In her time at Academy of the North, she has engaged with two alums who transitioned after graduating from high school. She is proud of the school and sees its mission shining brightly in seeing these alumni return and bring their

families to alum events. While students might transition after high school, they remain connected to the single-gender school environment that supported them while they found who they are.

Saint Preparatory School has a clear admissions policy centered on student birth certificates and the designation that they were assigned female at birth. While this is the institutional policy, Evelyn stated that for her, individually, she sees people through their gender expression and gender identity. Her main concern is how to make sure that all students feel safe in the environment they're in, regardless of their gender or sex.

In discussing the relationship his school has with their (arch)diocese as a religious-order school, Jeremy expressed his concern that a more conservative bishop might come in and enforce anti-LGBTQ+ policies. He brought up the case of Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School, which had its Catholic recognition revoked by the Archdiocese of Indianapolis in a dispute about a faculty member's same-sex marriage. Jeremy wonders how Faithful Scholar Academy would respond to a situation like that. He considers himself a faith-filled Catholic and is of the mind that "Jesus was a very inclusive person," noting that it would be hard for him to go along with a policy that excludes LGBTQ+ people from the Catholic faith. Luckily, at the moment, he feels that this is a great conversation to continue but that it is not likely an issue that will arise soon. The next section will answer research question two, presenting participant-identified institutional challenges to supporting gender-expansive students.

Understanding the Challenges of Catholic School Leaders

Institutional and Individual Challenges to Supporting Gender-Expansive Students

In addressing the second research question of identifying institutional challenges to the support of gender-expansive students, the majority of participants shared the concern that they

77

did not feel empowered or, in some cases, allowed to support students as they personally wish they could due to institutional restraints. Another common barrier was parents who believed LGBTQ+ support was going against Catholic values.

Kayla's answer to the question was rooted in an understanding of the way society treats those "at the margins" and connected her concerns to those surrounding other minoritized groups, bringing to mind the importance of understanding support through the lens of intersectionality.

> Society never does a great job of supporting a minority's desire to define themselves; there is always the spin on it that media brings. [This] makes the education piece to the common person such a huge hill to climb; we are not necessarily dealing with people who have an accurate understanding of the situation.

She continued, explaining that when she is meeting various stakeholder groups to discuss issues of race, sexism, sexuality, or gender, "it feels impossible to come to an understanding because there is so much external noise getting in the way".

Kayla believed there needs to be a way of approaching this situation that is comprehensive. That "centers our sharing of God's love in every interaction with the student, which supports the relationship building between the child and the parent and the school". Another barrier she is working against is that there is "no approach that is clear and transparent and would allow us (Catholic schools) to respond with one voice". She is clear that this approach would take work and would need to be reassessed every few years as dynamics change. Kayla concluded, "When I have called other principals to [to discuss their approach], I hear 'we take it case by case,' but that just screams inequity."

Flying Under the Radar with No Clear Direction

Gina, principal of Academy of the North, an all-girls school, finds the biggest challenge lies in balancing support for gender-expansive students and uplifting the school's identity as a "school for biologically female students". She provided the example of working with a student who has used "they/them" pronouns with support, but now wants to use he/him pronouns, and Gina wonders how that affects their identity as a school for girls. This situation with this student is being handled with an individualized approach due to the supportive and engaged family; but Gina wonders what will happen if a student does not have such a supportive family or wants to transition during high school. Gina brings up a point I have heard from other Catholic school leaders – deciding when to stand up for change and when to fly under the radar in order to protect the good work that has been done. In regard to graduation and formal documents, she shared, " Given that we've affirmed we're an all girls school, it creates a challenging situation. . . . I don't want to jeopardize the strides we've made with something that feels more formal, where I am graduating a male student."

For Evelyn, principal of Saint Preparatory School, another all-girls school, the hardest part for her lies in unclear policies. As an (arch)diocesan school, she is looking to the superintendent for guidance but no policies have been shared. While she worries about a policy being too prescriptive, she believes having some guidelines would be beneficial.

Kendrick, president of Trinity High School, explained one of the largest challenges he has is one shared by other schools that belong to the same religious order. Members have asked religious order leaders for guidance or a statement regarding LGBTQ+ student support, but they have not received any guidelines or statements. He expanded on this, saying,

So many leaders feel like it is on them to go ahead and try to draft this in a vacuum, and they don't have the support or the backup for the order. That's really confusing and frustrating because they don't want to misstep, but they also don't want to do something that is not enough, right?

Cultural Shifts and Long-Held Traditions

Byron, principal of Holy Academy High School, identified two types of challenges, the first being more practical, addressing facilities concerns, and the second being a shift in culture in understanding what they are and who they serve, noting the importance people place on their status as an all-boys school. In response, Byron shared,

I'm really conscious of talking about students as young people. I'll try to ungender my language. And who knows? I guess it is my small subversive kind of way of doing that in all of my public speaking engagements and no one has called me on that. So I would say the unknown of the pushback around what people believe [is a challenge].

For Byron, moving forward with a more expansive view of gender is challenged by traditional institutional culture and the outsized power of long-standing board members. He was sure to applaud the school's recent efforts to diversify the board, bringing in "some really powerful and dope women on to the board who push the old boys that are on the board on other social issues" but the board is yet to enter into genuine dialogue on gender inclusivity. The biggest issue is going to asking ourselves, "Are we, as a community, ready to make a young person who is gender-expansive comfortable and whole? And a full member of our community, loved and lauded…if you ask me, we have a lot of work to do."

Challenges for Leaders of (Arch)diocesan Schools

Participants who lead (arch)diocesan schools had commonalities among the challenges they faced. They were constrained by policies promulgated by their (arch)diocese while doing as much as possible to support and care for their students. For example, Randall, president of Catholic High School of West, shared that his (arch)diocese promulgates that you can only use pronouns that align with a student's sex assigned at birth; he shared,

> If a faculty member asked me how they can do that and treat students with dignity, I say, well, you use their preferred first name. . . . I am meeting the letter in the spirit of the (arch)diocesan policy while also providing my faculty member a way to treat a student with dignity, respect, kindness and love, right? Maybe I am threading the needle too much there but that is how I look at it.

Since Randall is required to follow (arch)diocesan policy, he would never be able to write down his way of proceeding because that would be considered a violation of the school's governance. This becomes a challenge because these supportive measures are workarounds, and they might not be carried over after Randall's tenure at the school. Leigh, the principal at Blessed Scholars High School, shared her frustration, saying the biggest challenge she faces is that she cannot give gender-expansive students what they want in regard to using pronouns that do not align with the sex assigned at birth. She shared,

> If that's the one thing that they're wanting and to know that I can't, no matter what, no matter who I am in my heart, I can't give them that. That is brutal to me . . . that's how they feel that they're going to be seen and cared for, and yet I can't do it.

Randall identified another challenge to supporting gender-expansive students is the parents who have decided it is their job to enforce their particular view of Catholic values. Similarly, Leigh, principal at Blessed Scholars High School, identified parents who are against LGBTQ+ support as a significant challenge in her work. She shared,

> No matter how much education I do for their children about God is love, they go home and hear something else. And then they come back to school and we have to reteach it, and then they go home and hear something else. That's a hard cycle to break.

Leigh expressed that official support of LGBTQ+ students from the local (arch)diocese would make a huge difference in moving away from this cycle or reteaching and reteaching. She and other local Catholic school leaders believe that their (arch)diocese could make a huge impact by putting something in writing, but they haven't. She believes that this would go a long way towards getting those parents to understand what she is trying to do at the school.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perspectives of principals and presidents as they worked with gender-expansive students in their schools. Three themes were identified: *cura personalis* versus *cura apostolica*; individualized approach versus institutional consistency; and individual values and beliefs versus organizational values and beliefs. These three emergent themes connected to the defining characteristics of Catholic education under the umbrellas of Commitment to Education for the Whole Child, Communion and Community, and Accessible to all Students. The second research question focused on identifying the challenges that participants face as they support gender-expansive students in their schools. These responses centered around three topics: 1) Flying Under the Radar with No Guidance (the need for transparent support or guidelines), 2) Cultural Change and Long-held Traditions, and 3)

Challenges specific to (Arch)diocesan Schools. The next chapter will explore the implications of these findings and recommendations for practice and further research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Catholic high school leaders as they worked with gender-expansive students in their schools. The study explored different school contexts, including varying governance structures, population served, and geographical location, to identify any relationships between Catholic school leaders experiences working with gender-expansive students. It also explored the challenges Catholic school leaders face in institutionally and individually supporting gender-expansive students.

This study addressed the lack of literature focused on the experiences of school leaders as they support gender-expansive students. By gaining insight into the challenges, successes, and actions taken by school leaders, progress can be made in building more inclusive Catholic schools. The lack of clarity guiding Catholic school leaders in supporting and accompanying gender-expansive students in Catholic high schools was a common challenge for participants. While there are many calls to maintain Catholic values in NCEA (NCEA, 2023) and (arch)diocesan standards (USCCB, n.d.) there is still a lack of guidance on operationalizing support for students identifying as gender expansive. As early as 1983, Church leaders have made it clear that discrimination is sinful; in the magisterial document, Prejudice Against Homosexuals and the Ministry of the Church, it is stated that "prejudice against homosexuals is a greater infringement of the norm of Christian morality than is the homosexual . . . activity" (Washington State Catholic Conference,1983). The moral argument is clear: we cannot be a moral society if we use discrimination to reach said morality. In other words, it is antithetical to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people in order to support the Church's sexual ethics tradition.

While Catholic school leaders remain grappling with the call to support LGBTQ+ students fully, gender-expansive students are suffering daily due to this ambiguity.

A 2021 research brief conducted by GLSEN reported that 84.4% of transgender students felt unsafe at school based on their gender, compared to 20.6% of cisgender students (GLSEN, 2021). In addition to the baseline concerns of adolescents, such as academic stress, social dynamics, and identity development, gender-expansive youth are faced with fears for their safety, exacerbated by school policies that cause emotional distress.

There are numerous actions that would help to improve mental health and academic outcomes for gender-expansive students, most of which relate to providing stability. However, there is little guidance from the institutional Church regarding working with gender-expansive students attending Catholic high schools. Each (arch)diocese may create its own policies regarding the support (or discrimination) of gender-expansive students, which is happening in increasing numbers. Currently, 35 out of 194 (arch)dioceses in the United States have policies regarding what they refer to as "gender ideology" or "gender theory." The most commonly occurring non-affirming practices prohibit 1) anything referred to as "gender-affirming care," 2) pronoun changes, 3) name changes, 4) the use of bathroom facilities that are in alignment with a student's gender identity, and 5) the use of hormone therapy or puberty blockers while on campus. The practices that are most commonly under attack by (arch)dioceses are the ones that are shown to improve mental health and academic outcomes most significantly (The Trevor Project, 2022). The current policies implemented by (arch)dioceses leave Catholic school leaders reconciling their individual commitments to Catholic schools that are accessible to all students

and educates the whole child (including psychologically and socially) with the actions of their (arch)dioceses.

In addition to vague guidance from the institutional Church, little research focuses on LGBTQ+ students, let alone gender-expansive students. There is an even larger gap in the literature when considering Catholic high school contexts. Gaps in the literature need to be addressed to understand the challenges gender-expansive students and their allies at Catholic high schools face and the possibilities for building a culture of support. I explored these concepts guided by two main research questions:

1. What are Catholic high school leaders' experiences in serving students who identify as gender-expansive?

2. What challenges do leaders face in institutionally and individually supporting gender-expansive students?

This study identified three primary themes in the participants' experiences: *cura personalis* versus *cura apostolica*, individualized approach versus institutional consistency, and individual values and beliefs versus organizational values and beliefs. In addition to these three main themes, unexpected connections among participants were found among parent engagement, athletics, and dress code.

Discussion

Cura Personalis **Versus** *Cura Apostolica*

In addressing the first research question, the first theme, *cura personalis* versus *cura apostolica*, focused on the tensions between care for the school as an institution and care for students as individuals within the school. Many participants shared the tension between wanting

to care for the student in front of them and their current lived experience while remaining committed to their schools' mission and values. For the all-girls schools, there was a specific tension in considering what it means to be a girl right now in 2024, versus what it meant to a be a girl at the time of their school's founding. Similar concerns were brought up by leaders of all-boys schools, however, it was to a lesser extent. For Holy Academy School, Byron, the tension he felt was between caring for gender-expansive students as individuals and moving a conversation around long held traditions forward in a way that honors history while responding to the times we live in.

For schools that are under the governance of their (arch)diocese, there was a lot more concrete concern about following the policies of their (arch)diocese. Randall, president of Catholic High School of the West, his tensions lie between following the rules promulgated by their (arch)diocese while knowing that in deciding day-to-day practices he pushes the limits of what those policies say and don't say. Of course, this is not specific to Catholic High School of the West; this is an overarching challenge I hear from many Catholic school leaders, even those who are not governed by their local (arch)diocese. Many Catholic high school leaders are willing to stand up for the humanity of their gender-expansive students through concealed day-to-day practices that do not live in a handbook or policy. The challenge with this is that students benefit from having clear policies or guidelines that clarify the school's support of gender-expansive students. While this tension might seem like something that only school leaders have to deal with, it does affect the well-being of gender-expansive students. They are the ones who are most deeply harmed by this tension.

Institutional Ways of Proceeding Bring Clarity

A primary finding that arose from this research was that participants felt both empowered by their ability to respond to students' needs individually and frustrated by the lack of stability that case-by-case reactions bring about. While the participants were responding to these questions from their specific school context, they shared the commonality of enjoying the freedom to work around a system that could become more strict and unsupportive of gender-expansive students. There was an overarching feeling of not wanting to "rock the boat" and make things worse for gender-expansive students by publicly advocating for institutional change. While they might feel safer flying under the radar, it is gender-expansive students (current and future) who would suffer most from inconsistent and unstable policies, procedures or guidelines. Most participants acknowledged that this is not a way of proceeding with long-term applications; however, when considering the next steps to actualize clarity, participants needed support.

Individual Values and Beliefs Versus Organizational Values and Beliefs

The third theme focuses on the significance of individual and organizational beliefs and values in encountering gender-expansive students. This theme arose from statements from school leaders who considered what they would do in the case that they were asked to comply with policies that conflicted with their personal understandings of Catholic values and educational leadership. For example, Jeremy, principal at Faithful Scholar Academy, expressed his concern that a more conservative bishop might come in and enforce anti-LGBTQ+ policies. He brought up the case of schools that had their Catholic recognition revoked by their (arch)diocese in a dispute about a faculty member's same-sex marriage. Jeremy wonders how Faithful Scholar Academy would respond to a situation like that. He considers himself a faith-filled Catholic and

88

is of the mind that "Jesus was a very inclusive person," noting that it would be hard for him to go along with a policy that excludes LGBTQ+ people from the Catholic faith.

Shared Practical Concerns

In addition to the themes extracted from the interview data, multiple participants mentioned a few practical considerations, such as dress code, athletics, and parent engagement. While these items do not necessarily rise to the level of a full theme, they are relevant findings to share.

Dress Code

Multiple participants mentioned dress codes when discussing ways that they can or have supported gender-expansive students. For example, Jeremy, the principal at Faithful Scholar Academy, shared that his students can express their gender on "dress down days" or days when students do not need to wear the school's uniform. He gave the example of a student wearing what would be considered women's clothing on one of these days. While some parents asked if that was allowed, he could support that student because he did not break any rules regarding the dress code for "dress down days." In addition, Jeremy mentioned that students can wear a sweater, turtleneck, or blazer on uniform days, which gives them a little more flexibility in their gender presentation. Similarly, Gina mentioned that students at her all-girls high school have the option to wear pants rather than skirts, and the administration is considering the addition of uniform shorts in the future. While I did not plan to ask specifically about the dress code, I found that this was an area where principals and presidents felt they could express their individual inclusive values while staying in line with the expectations of their local (arch)diocese. These considerations are not minor, as social transition is one form of gender-affirming care and has

89

been shown to have a positive benefit in a youth's development and reduction in anxiety (de Castro Peraza et al., 2023). Social gender is one dimension of gender identity and includes gender expression. This is how we communicate our gender to others through things like clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms (Gender Spectrum, n.d.). Social transitioning might involve a student exploring gender expressions that might differ from what is expected based on the sex assigned at birth.

Athletics

Two participants mentioned athletics when asked about the challenges they face as Catholic school leaders. Similar to other concerns, both participants mentioned that these were individual experiences resulting in one-time reactions, not necessarily policy changes. For most Catholic school leaders, questions about gender-expansive students playing sports at the high school level would be answered by their league. In one instance, Evelyn shared her concern about a transgender girl playing on another school's sports team. As the sport they were playing was a physical contact sport, her concerns were more about cisgender girls being injured by a player who was much larger than the other players. While I believe transgender students should have access to play sports within a league that affirms their gender, I can understand the genuine concern for physical safety that Evelyn explained. In this case, the student attended a local co-educational high school, not Saint Preparatory School, so any policy creation was not under her individual responsibility. That being said, she and other all-girls school leaders expressed concern about this student, and ultimately, the league moved to create a policy that players participating in female contact sports were limited to those whose sex assigned at birth is female. In that case, it seems there is now some clarity; however, when policies are made out of

90

reactions, not thoughtful responses, new problems are created. For example, what is the policy if the student is a cisgender female who is physically large, whether that be with muscle, height, or weight? Would the league limit physically large girls from playing? What about girls who present as masculine? Would they be asked to prove their sex assigned at birth?

In another case, Byron shared his experience as a principal at a coeducational high school prior to working at Holy Academy High School. A transgender female student wanted to play volleyball and was discerning whether it would be best to play on the boys' or girls' teams. This student had the support of their parents and the school counselor and was able to have conversations about what would be best (at this point, there was no rule in the league). In the end, the student decided to play on the boy's team, even though she presented as female. This situation worked out because the student had parental support and institutional support in the form of the counselor. However, there was no information about if that was a good experience for her. In his current school, Byron expressed concern that Holy Academy High School had not had a more extensive discussion about those types of situations, and he feels the administration team is not prepared for a case like that.

Parents as Primary Educators

Many participants mentioned the pillar of Catholic education, the parent as a primary educator. In all anecdotes of working with a gender-expansive student, the parents were identified as supportive of their child's gender identity exploration. However, most LGBTQ+ youth do not identify their home as an LGBTQ-affirming space, even though support from parents and caregivers can improve mental health among LGBTQ+ youth (The Trevor Project, 2022). Kayla, principal at West Coast Catholic High School, named the high level of parent

engagement and parent buy-in as one of the things that makes her school unique. In the case that students do want to transition, she was clear to say that "none of this happens without the parent…the approach is not having the conversation with the student alone. Parents still remain as primary educators, which is the hallmark of a Catholic education." When a gender-expansive student at West Coast Catholic High School wanted to be referred to by a different name, the student was supported by their parent, and she completed the necessary paperwork to change the child's name.

Jeremy, principal at Faithful Scholar Academy, found tension in wanting to support the parent as primary educator tenant of Catholic education while wanting to support a student in using a chosen name. He shared:

I know the parents are not privy to the name that the student is referred to at Faithful Scholar Academy, so when we send communications home, we use the name we have in [our learning management] system. The student is aware of that and wants it to remain that way. It's just another thing to navigate.

Leigh shared that one of the challenges she faces at Blessed Scholars High School is the parents who are against LGBTQ+ student support. Her approach is to focus on teaching students that God loves all; she shared that "no matter how much education I do with their children about God is love. They go home and hear something else. And then they come back, and I have to reteach it . . . it is a hard cycle to break." Living the commitment to parents as primary educators is challenging when parents do not have the context to understand experiences different from their own. One thing she named that ties back to the larger themes is that Blessed Scholars High School and other local schools are desperate for their local bishop to outwardly support

LGBTQ+ rights because she feels that parents would really listen to the bishop on this topic and become open to changing their minds.

A significant finding of this study was that each participant strives to do their best to support their gender-expansive students. While this might look different at each school and is affected by many variables, the underlying commitment these leaders had was to learn to support their gender-expansive students more successfully. While they all did their best with what they had, I could sense that the participants felt they were not doing enough.

Recommendations to School Leaders

This section discusses recommendations for school leaders to engage in community-wide education and dialogue before a need to react is upon them. Asking questions ahead of time with dedicated time to process allows a school community to enact more intentional responses rooted in mission and faith. As a school leader, making room to be wrong or change your mind is essential. Normalizing these behaviors helps communities move forward, keeping the dignity of all humans at the forefront of their ways of proceeding.

Based on my findings, the following recommendations arose:

1. Individual school communities need to engage in thoughtful dialogue to define a way of proceeding that works for them. Overarching policies mandated from the top down will face barriers to implementation. At the same time, it is essential to proactively engage in the work of defining organizational values and beliefs when it comes to gender inclusivity. It is not enough to handle it on a case-by-case basis relying on students and families to tell you what they need.

2. While a widely applicable overarching policy should be implemented in every school, engaging in genuine dialogues as a community in order to define ways of proceeding would help alleviate the stress felt by gender-expansive students and their families. A 2021 research brief conducted by GLSEN showed that gender-expansive students are less likely to miss school due to feeling unsafe in schools with comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies.

3. Engaging in this work proactively and publicly is one way that school leaders can show their support for gender-expansive students. Knowing that school leaders have engaged in this work in preparation for students rather than in reaction to student needs increases students' sense of belonging. In addition, school leaders have a special role to play in the school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. While they can act as one more supportive member of school personnel, they have the unique responsibility of setting the tone of the school and determining specific policies and programs that support the school's climate. In GLSEN's 2021 National School Climate Survey, 35.6% of LGBTQ+ students reported that their school administration was very or somewhat supportive of LGBTQ+ students, 23.7% reported unsupportive or very unsupportive administration, and 29.7% reported neutral administration. GLSEN stated, "It may signify that students are unsure of their administration's stance on LGBTQ+ issues because they have not been at all vocal about LGBTQ+ student issues" (Kosciw et al., 2022).

4. Every student is an individual, every family has different needs, and a unique tenant of Catholic education is to uplift the parents as a child's primary educator. School

leaders need to acknowledge parental rights while taking responsibility for their roles as lead educators and experts in the field of education. If we consider the support of students with learning disabilities, it would be expected that the school personnel would guide accommodation discussions as experts in the field. With the wealth of knowledge accessible to all school leaders, it is no longer acceptable to back away from conversations around gender identity due to lack of knowledge or discomfort.

5. The parent community needs to be engaged in the community's intentional dialogue and learning. Offering parent education evenings to help inform the community about gender identity, as well as LGBTQ+ issues in general, helps to create a more inclusive community. Most participants of this study referred to unsupportive parents at least once in my interview with them. While leaders of (arch)diocesan schools highlighted this issue more significantly, most participants mentioned the effects of anti-LGBTQ+ parents ranging from being a distraction to actively harassing specific students.

6. Prayerful and contemplative conversations need to happen in school communities before there is an immediate concern to react to; this will allow leaders to be more thoughtful in their approaches. Considering how these dialogues might take place, I have attached a discussion guide in Appendix E.

Genuine Dialogues for Learning and Consistency

In developing a guide for genuine dialogue centered on gender-inclusivity, my goal was to incorporate findings from this study, other LGBTQ+ climate surveys, and the defining characteristics of Catholic schools as defined by NCEA (NCEA, 2023). Participants found that,

while they did not think a policy would be the best way to move forward in this area, they did feel that a consistent and straightforward way of proceeding would support their efforts, especially regarding equity. When every situation is reacted to on a case-by-case basis, the challenge becomes ensuring that each student receives the care and compassion they need in their wholeness of identity. A simple policy might hinder one student while supporting others. However, well-thought-out guidelines or ways of proceeding can respond to the individual student in the current moment while taking a mission-driven approach.

While my findings did not result in an overarching policy for all schools to consider, this study did result in understanding what could be more helpful to Catholic school leaders, a guide to assist them in having conversations around gender-inclusivity at their schools (Appendix E). It is important to know that these discussions will not necessarily be linear; school leaders might feel they have taken a huge step forward after one meeting and then be disappointed when things feel less productive at the next meeting. This push and pull is necessary for the growth process, so it is essential to provide ample time to engage in this work. At the same time, it is crucial to set a timeline to avoid a seemingly never-ending cycle of theoretical conversation.

School leaders should also consider the modality of these conversations. These dialogues should be just that, not town halls or lectures. While it will take more time to have small group conversations, the outcomes will be more fruitful. The school should also create a plan for communicating the reason for these dialogues and the outcomes that arise from them. Consider that this process can be started with one constituency at a time, which will help school leaders improve on processes and build capacity for conversations. SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity), a project out of the Wellesley Center for Women at Wellesley College, serves as

a wonderful example of how communities can build knowledge collectively. SEED believes in the transformational power to connect personal stories to systemic analysis (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity [SEED], n.d.), rooted in founder Peggy McIntosh's Interactive Phase Theory first developed in 1983 (McIntosh, 2020, pp. 119–151). Individual beliefs are shaped by our lived experiences (as cited in Gay, 2013). Therefore, it can be beneficial to use a conversation model that allows for personal sharing while connecting conversations to larger systems. SEED leader Jondou Chen put it this way (2014), "Stories help us realize that we are part of and responsible for something greater than either life lived in a vacuum or unrealistic rules for political correctness,". One of the founding principles of SEED is being grassroots and avoiding hierarchical methods of teaching; there are leaders who facilitate the conversations. However, there is no expert versus novice dynamic (SEED, n.d.). This method of learning would be a benefit to the highly individualized work that school communities would be doing in asking themselves questions of gender inclusivity.

One of the hallmarks of SEED is the continuous training of SEED leaders who will facilitate conversations at their school site and among their colleagues. Hosting conversations that are specific to various constituencies minimizes the challenges of power dynamics. For example, a school leader might start with three separate groups: senior leaders, board members, and faculty who are passionate about the issue. After engaging in the first dialogues, the next steps could be to form and train those participants to host conversations with others in their constituency. Parents could host discussion circles for parents, faculty for faculty, etc.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study suggest a variety of spaces where future research could focus. While there is some literature that addresses the experiences of faculty, students, and administrators as they work with LGBTQ+ students at Catholic schools, more is needed. The unique experience of attending, working at or leading a Catholic school result in differing needs for all constituents. In addition, asking parents of Catholic school students what their questions, concerns and suggestions are regarding gender inclusivity would be beneficial in understanding ways to engage with the community at large.

I suggest that more research is done to understand the experiences of Catholic school leaders, considering the ways that this might differ between religious orders. Additionally, a survey of professional development or professional networks that inform Catholic school leaders on these issues would be helpful in spreading knowledge across our communities.

Additionally, this study suggests there is a need for mixed-methods research that would record the types of policies or ways of proceeding that exist in Catholic high schools. For example, how do schools respond to a student's change of pronouns? Does that action vary between faculty, staff, and administrators? The wider Catholic school network would benefit from understanding other schools' practices, whether that be because they can see how far they have progressed or to see how much further they can go.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of principals and presidents of Catholic high schools in the United States as they work with gender-expansive students. It was conducted through semi-structured interviews of six principals and two presidents, who were asked questions about

their practices working with gender-expansive students, the ways of proceeding they use or plan to use in these conversations, and the barriers they face to supporting these individuals institutionally. There is a lack of guidance from (arch)dioceses and the institutional church on operationalized support for gender-expansive students. This lack of guidance hinders the ability of leaders of Catholic schools to support and accompany gender-expansive students in their schools. This lack of guidance results in unclear leadership, which can adversely affect the well-being of gender-expansive students in Catholic schools.

There is significant research confirming the significance of high school climate on the well-being of gender-expansive students. Research shows that gender-expansive students experience discrimination disproportionately in their schools, and there are numerous interventions that have been identified to interrupt this pattern. This study explored the experiences of principals and presidents in Catholic schools in order to better understand the ways they respond to the needs of gender-expansive students and the challenges they face in providing the support needed for gender-expansive students.

This study and its findings suggest that leaders of Catholic schools need support in guidance to operationalize the supports needed for gender-expansive students in Catholic high schools. There is guidance needed in order to move the conversation forward and be responsive to the needs of gender-expansive students.

APPENDIX A

SELECTED GENDER & SEXUALITY TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

LGBTQ+: An acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer" with a "+" sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of the community.

Biological sex: A medical term used to refer to the chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics that classify an individual as female, male, or intersex. Often referred to as simply "sex," "physical sex," "anatomical sex," or specifically as "sex assigned at birth."

Sex assigned at birth: A phrase used to intentionally recognize the sex, male, female, or intersex, that a doctor or midwife uses to describe a child at birth based on their external anatomy (not gender identity). Sometimes called "designated sex at birth" (DSAB) or "sex coercively assigned at birth" (SCAB), or specifically used as "assigned male at birth" (AMAB) or "assigned female at birth" (AFAB): Jenny was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman

Gender: The characteristics of women, men, girls, and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time (Kari n.d.).

Gender identity: The internal perception of one's gender and how they label themselves, based on how much they align or do not align with what they understand their options for gender to be. This is often conflated with sex. However, they are two distinct categories.

Gender expression: the external display of one's gender through a combination of clothing, grooming, demeanor, social behavior, and other factors, generally made sense of through scales of masculinity and femininity.

Gender-expansive youth: Person(s) between the ages of 14 and 24 years old who do not identify with traditional gender roles, allowing us to talk about youth who do not meet "traditional" understandings of gender without putting their identity in a box. This term conveys a more comprehensive, more flexible range of gender identities and expressions. Gender-expansive can encompass transgender, gender non-binary, and gender-fluid people (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020).

Transgender: An umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth (American Psychological Association, 2023).

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT CORRESPONDENCE

Dear [First Name]

I am a doctoral candidate at Loyola Marymount University, and I am currently completing

research for my dissertation.

My study is "Serving Gender-Expansive Students in Catholic High Schools: Understanding the

Perspectives of Catholic School Leaders." This study will identify the primary sources of

concern that potentially discourage leaders of Catholic high schools from being outwardly

supportive of gender-expansive students. This study will seek to understand varying school

contexts, including governance structures and funding sources, in order to identify any

relationships between school context and institutional attitudes towards gender-expansive

students as seen in written policies (or lack thereof). The study will also explore the challenges

school leaders face institutionally and individually in supporting gender-expansive students.

You are invited to participate in this study by engaging in a one-hour semi-structured interview.

In the interview, we would discuss your experience as a Catholic school leader. These interviews

will be confidential, utilizing pseudonyms throughout the study. Any identifying information you

provide, be it your own or others', will remain entirely confidential.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and is not being conducted by your school. If you

are interested in participating, please complete this questionnaire; I hope to conduct these

interviews by December 2023.

Best,

Cassandra Gonzales

cgonz114@lion.lmu.edu

APPENDIX C

INITIAL PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant Criteria Questions

1. Do you currently work at a Catholic high school located in the United States?

   a. Yes

   b. No

2. In what city is your school located?

3. Which of the following titles most accurately describes your role in the school where you currently work?

   b. Head of School

   c. President

   d. Principal

   e. None of the above – please describe

4. How would you describe your awareness of your school's stance on supporting gender-expansive students?

   a. Very unaware

   b. Unaware

   c. Aware

   d. Very Aware

5. How would you describe your familiarity with gender identity?

   a. Very unfamiliar

   b. Unfamiliar

   c. Somewhat familiar

   d. Familiar

   e. Very familiar

Demographic Questions (optional)

I will utilize answers to these optional questions to build a diverse pool of participants.

1. Please indicate your race and/or ethnicity

    a. Asian American

    b. Black and/or African American

    c. Indigenous and/or Native

    d. Latine/o/a

    e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

    f. Multi-racial [please specify]

    g. SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) / Middle Eastern

    g. White/European

    h. I prefer to self-describe [please specify]

2. Please indicate your present belief system or religion, if any

    a. Protestant

    b. Roman Catholic

    c. Mormon

    d. Orthodox

    e. Jewish

    f. Muslim

    g. Buddhist

    h. Hindu

    i. Atheist

    j. Agnostic

    11. Nothing in particular

    l. Prefer to self-describe [please specify]

APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW DESIGN

Interview Protocol – Guiding Questions

About the school community

1.	1. Can you tell me a little bit about your school community?	Communion & Community
2.	Who do you serve?	Accessible to All
3.	What makes your school unique?	Communion & Community
4.	What do you love most about it?	Distinguished by Excellence
5.	What is your school's governance structure?	Established by the Express Authority of the Bishop

School Community and Gender Inclusivity

1.	How would you describe the climate around gender inclusivity in general at your school?	Commitment to Educating Whole Child
2.	Does it differ between stakeholder groups? (admin., faculty, staff, students, parents, alums, board)	Communion & Community
3.	Does your school currently have any written guidelines, policies, or position statements on supporting gender-expansive students? Is it outward-facing?	Communion and Community, Accessible to All
4.	What do you perceive as the biggest challenge in attending to the needs of gender-expansive students in your school?	Communion and Community, Accessible to All
5.	What on-the-ground challenges are you currently facing in working with gender-expansive students?	Accessible to All
6.	As principal (or president), what parts of these conversations are you most involved in?	Communion and Community

7.	Where does your local diocese stand on these issues?	Established by the Express Authority of the Bishop
8.	How does your local diocese affect how comfortable you feel publicly supporting gender-expansive students?	Established by the Express Authority of the Bishop
9.	Anything else you want to add?	

APPENDIX E

GENDER INCLUSIVITY DISCUSSION GUIDE

A Few Things to Consider

- Small group discussions (10-15 people)
- Power dynamics (will everyone will feel safe and empowered to speak their truth?)
    - Consider faculty only, parent only, student only, groups
    - Consider power dynamic responsive mixed constituency groups such as (1 board member, 1 senior leader, 2 faculty, 2 staff, 2 parents, 2 alums, 4 students
- Length of conversation over how many sessions
- Long term commitment – how will you ensure that people are able to meet continuously?
- How will you address the availability of a variety of people? (For example working schedules, student extracurricular activities, transportation, childcare concerns)
- Setting discussion agreements at the beginning of each session and reminding participants of them each time you meet.

Core Questions

- What was the original intention in creating an all-girls learning environment? Review your mission, institutional goals, and vision statements for further understanding.

- When the school was founded, what did the term "girl" mean? Who was included? Who was not? What was the historical context?

- When the school was founded, what did the term "boy" mean? Who was included? Who was not? What was the historical context?

- How is the term "girl" conceptualized now in the larger context of society? What does the term "girl" mean to you?

- How is the term "boy" conceptualized now in the larger context of society? What does the term "boy" mean to you?

Catholic Social Teaching and Support of Gender-Expansive Youth

"The starting point for any future discussions and/or policy creation needs to reject the notion that trans and Catholicism are in opposition with one another, and instead center on the compatibilities between trans and Catholic life." (Herriot & Callaghan, p. 78)

- Where do you see connections between supporting gender-expansive youth and Catholic social teaching?

- How do you envision justice for gender-expansive youth in Catholic schools?

- Where do you see connections between the school's shared vision and Catholic social teaching?

- What are we seeking in creating guidelines, statements, ways of proceeding, etc.?

Learning and Listening

- What are other schools doing?

- Who are the experts? Why? What do they suggest?

- What are students asking for?

- What do alums have to say?

- What are families asking for?

Creating Guidelines with and for Our Community

- What are the key components we should address in our guidelines/statement?

- Who is affected by this work? What are our commitments to those people?

- Who do we need to support?

- Who do we need support from?

- What external guidelines, policies, and positions are we held to? (legal considerations, larger context of (arch)diocese, sponsoring ministry, etc.)

Pause and Review

- What have we missed? Consider where your bias might have played a role in missing components of the guidelines/statements or the discussion.

Outcomes

- Looking at the drafted guidelines above, consider the following:

- How does the outcome support [your school's] mission and values?

- How does the outcome support [your school's] initial goals in being an [all-girls/all-boys/co-ed] school?

- How does the outcome support students in their development and growth?

- How does the outcome support student education?

- How does the outcome relate to the [pillars, goals, guiding commitments etc. of your school]?

Enacting Change

- Once we have developed a guideline/position statement, what steps do we need to take to implement said changes?

- What type of education needs to be provided? For whom?

- What are the risks?

- What are the benefits?

- What does a *draft* timeline look like?

This is the first step in developing guidelines, position statements, or ways of proceeding on

gender inclusivity at your school. The next step will involve deeper exploration into the more

concrete considerations.

REFERENCES

American Civil Liberties Union. (2023, July 7*). Mapping attacks on LGBTQ rights in the U.S. state legislatures.* American Civil Liberties Union. https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights

American Psychological Association. (2023, June 6). *Understanding transgender people, gender identity and gender expression.* American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/transgender-people-gender-identity-gender-expression

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands: The new mestiza = la frontera.* Aunt Lute Book Coan.

Archdiocese of Los Angeles. (2021, June 28). *Relationship of the department of Catholic schools to private schools.* Archdiocese of Los Angeles Administration Handbook. http://handbook.la-archdiocese.org/chapter-3/section-3-1/topic-3-1-2

Archdiocese of Los Angeles. (2022, June 29). *Administrative structure of Archdiocesan and parish high schools*. Archdiocese of Los Angeles Administration Handbook. https://handbook.la-archdiocese.org/chapter-3/section-3-3/topic-3-3-2

Arzola, Jr., F. (2008). *Toward a prophetic youth ministry: Theory and praxis in urban context.* IVP Academic.

Assemb. B. 1266 —Pupil Rights: Sex-segregated School Programs and Activities, Cal. (2013).

Battle, S., & Wheeler II, T. E. (2017). *Dear colleague letter. United States Department of Education.* United States Department of Justice. http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/02/23/1atransletterpdf022317.pdf

Barnes, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2012). Religious affiliation, internalized homophobia, and mental health in lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 82*(4), 505–515. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2012.01185.x

Bauer, G., Scheim, A. I., Pyne, J., Travers, R., & Hammond, R. (2015). Intervenable factors associated with suicide risk in transgender persons: A respondent driven sampling study in Ontario, Canada. *BMC Public Health, 15*(525). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-1867-2

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 497–529. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497

Brenner, M. E. (2006). Interviewing in educational research. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 357–370). American Educational Research Association.

Bridges, W. (2001). *The way of transition: Embracing life's most difficult moments*. Pereus Publishing.

Bridges, W., & Bridges, S. M. (2016*). Managing transitions: Making the most of change*. Da Capo Press.

Brill, S., & Pepper, R. (2008). *The transgender child: A handbook for families and professionals.* Cleis Press, Inc.

Brown, P. J. (2010). Structuring Catholic schools: Creative imagination meets canon law. *Catholic Education, 13*(4). 467–508. https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.1304042013

Brown, R., & Evans, W. P. (2002). Extracurricular activity and ethnicity: Creating greater school connection among diverse student populations*. Urban Education, 37*(1). 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085902371004

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2024, April 17). *Occupational outlook handbook, elementary, middle, and high school principals*. https://www.bls.gov/ooh/management/elementary-middle-and-high-school-principals.htm

Bussey, K. (2011). Gender identity development. In S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), Handbook of identity theory and research, Vols. 1 & 2 (pp. 603–628). Springer Science + Business Media.

CA Educ Code § 210.7 (2023)

CA Educ Code § 220 (2023)

California Department of Education. (2024, February 29). Frequently asked questions: School Success and Opportunity Act (Assembly Bill 1266) frequently asked questions. https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/di/eo/faqs.asp

California School Boards Association. (2022, October*). Legal guidance on rights of transgender and gender nonconforming students in schools*. https://www.csba.org/-/media/CSBA/Files/Advocacy/LegalAdvocacy/Legal-Guidance-Transgender-Legal-10-2022.ashx?la=en&rev=a3fb600ee6d640598c038dfceaef871c

Canales, A. D. (2016). Ministry to Catholic LGBTQ youth: A call for openness and affirmation. *New Theology Review, 28*(2). 60–71. https://doi.org/10.17688/ntr.v28i2.1149

Canales, A. D. (2022). Queer theology and youth and young adult ministry. *Journal of Youth and Theology, 21*(1). 5–23. https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-bja10006

Capous-Desyllas, M., & Barron, C. (2017). Identifying and navigating social and institutional challenges of transgender children and families. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 34*(6), 527–542. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-017-0491-7

Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd ed.). (2016). https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/

Catholic Church, Canon Law Society of America, Catholic Church Pope (1978-2005 : John Paul II), & Libreria editrice vaticana. (1999). Code of canon law, Latin-English edition (New English translation). Canon Law Society of America.

Catholic Diocese of Milwaukee. (2022, January 20). *Catechesis and policy on questions concerning gender theory.* https://www.archmil.org/ArchMil/attachments/2022GenderTheoryfinal.pdf

Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls. (2022, July 1). *Conforming with the church's teaching on human sexuality in education settings.* https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/22131508/bishop-ogorman-policy.pdf

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (2021). Youth risk behavior survey: Data summary and trends report. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/yrbs_data-summary-trends_report2023_508.pdf

Challenging Content of Records, Cal. Educ. Code § 49070.

Chen, J. (2014). The personal urgency and the pedagogical necessity of seeking educational equity and diversity. *Research/Action Report, 36*(1), 4–6. https://www.wcwonline.org/images/stories/researchandaction/pdf/rar_fallwinter2014.pdf

Cheng, P. (2011). *An introduction to queer theology: Radical love.* Church Publishing.

Congregation for Catholic Education. (1977). *The Catholic school.* https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html

Congregation for Catholic Education. (2019). *Male and female He created them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education.* Vatican City: Vatican Press.

Cotton, K. (2003). *Principals and student achievement: What the research says.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Croninger, R., & Lee, V. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers College Record, 103*(4), 548–581. https://doi.org/10.1111/0161-4681.00127

DeBernardo, F. (2024, April 8). *New ways ministry: Vatican document on human dignity fails LGBTQ+ people.* New Ways Ministry. https://www.newwaysministry.org/2024/04/08/new-ways-ministry-vatican-document-on-human-dignity-fails-lgbtq-people/

de Castro Peraza, M. E., Lorenzo Rocha, N. D., García Acosta, J. M., Díez Fernández, O., Rodríguez Novo, N., Pérez Ramos, A., Perdomo Hernández, A. M., & Castro Molina, J. (2023). Beneficios de la transición social temprana en menores transgénero. Perspectivas de familias: estudio cualitativo [Benefits of early social transition in transgender minors. Family perspectives: qualitative study.]. Revista espanola de salud publica, 97, e202301007.

de Lauretis, T. (1991). Queer theory: Lesbian and gay sexualities. *Differences, 3*(2). https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-3-2-iii

Diocese of Harrisburg. (2015). *Gender identity questions—Students.* https://www.hbgdiocese.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/P5112.6-15.pdf

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, 20 U.S.C. § 1232g (1974).

Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry, 43*(1), 48–70. https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. (2021). *Improving school climate for transgender and nonbinary youth* (research brief). GLSEN. https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/GLSEN_Trans%26Nonbinary_ResearchBrief.pdf

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. (2022). *Improving school climate for transgender and nonbinary youth* (Research brief).

Gender Spectrum (n.d.). *Understanding gender.* Gender Spectrum. https://genderspectrum.org/articles/understanding-gender

Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board. 972 F.3d 586 (4th Cir. 2020). https://www.supremecourt.gov/docket/docketfiles/html/public/20-1163.html

Grocholewski, C. H. E. Z. (2015). The Congregation for Catholic Education: How it works to support the educational mission of universities and schools internationally. *International Studies in Catholic Education, 7*(2), 134–144 https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2015.1072954

Grossman, A. H., Park, Y. P., & Russell, S. T. (2016). Transgender youth and suicidal behaviors: Applying the interpersonal psychological theory of suicide. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 20*(4), 329–349. https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2016.1207581

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (1996). Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research, 1980– 1995. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 32*(1), 5–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X96032001002

Herriot, L., & Callaghan, T. (2018). Disrupting the trans-versus-Catholic dichotomy: An example from a Canadian elementary school policy. *International Journal of Transgenderism, 19*(2), 170–183. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2017.1412377

Herriot, L., & Callaghan, T. (2019). Possibilities for trans-affirming policy potential: A case study of a Canadian Catholic school. *Journal of Catholic Education. 22*(3), 57–83. https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2203042019

Holmquist, D. (2019) *Gender identity and students—Ensuring equity and nondiscrimination*. Los Angeles Unified School District Policy Bulletin. https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/383/BUL-6224.2%20Transgender%20Policy%205%2013%2019.pdf

Holy See's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. (2024, August 4). *Declaration of the dicastery for the doctrine of the faith "dignitas infinitas" on human dignity*. https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html

Human Rights Campaign Foundation. (2020, December 23*). Supporting your gender non-conforming child.* https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets/SupportingYourGenderNonConformingChild.pdf

Kari, A. (n.d.). *Gender and health.* World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1

Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2003, June 13). *Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement.* Paper presented at: Wingspread Conference on School Connectedness, Racine, WI.

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Giga, N. M., Villenas, C. & Danischewski, D. J. (2016). *The 2015 National school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools.* New York: GLSEN. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED574808). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574780.pdf

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., & Truong, N. L. (2018). *The 2017 National school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools.* New York: GLSEN. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED590243). https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED590243

Kosciw, J. G., Clark, C. M., & Menard, L. (2022). *The 2021 National school climate survey: The experiences LGBTQ+ youth in our nation's schools.* New York: GLSEN. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED625378). https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625378

Kuzel, A. (1999). Sampling in qualitative inquiry. In B.F. Crabtree, & W.L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research* (pp. 33–88). Sage Publications.

Ladin, J. (2018). In the image of God, God created them: Toward trans theology. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, 34*(1). 53–58. http://dx.doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.34.1.06

Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. The Guilford Press. https://doi.org/10.1111/fcsr.12276

Lhamon, C. E., & Gupta, V. (2016). *Dear colleague letter on transgender students.* United States Department of Education, United States Department of Justice. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201605-title-ix-transgender.pdf

Lonczak, H. S., Abbott, R. D., Hawkins, J. D., Kosterman, R., & Catalano, R. (2002). The effects of the Seattle social development project: Behavior, pregnancy, birth, and sexually transmitted disease outcomes by age 21. *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, 156*(5), 438–447. https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.156.5.438

Martin, J. (2019, June 11*). Listen to the L.G.B.T. person: A response to the Vatican's gender theory document*. America Magazine. https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/06/11/listen-lgbt-person-response-vaticans-gender-theory-document

Ma, X. (2003). Sense of belonging to school: Can schools make a difference? *The Journal of Educational Research, 96*(6), 340–349. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220670309596617

Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being.* Van Nostrand.

Maxwell, J. A. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research. In A. M. Huberman & M. B. Miles (Eds.), *The qualitative researcher's companion* (pp. 37–64) SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986274

McIntosh, P. (Ed.). (2020). *On privilege, fraud, and teaching as learning: Selected essays 1981–2019.* Routledge, Taylor & Francis, Group.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A.M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (*3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Minkin, R., & Brown, A. (2021, July 27). *Rising shares of U.S. adults know someone who is transgender or goes by gender-neutral pronouns.* Pew Research. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/27/rising-shares-of-u-s-adults-know-someone-who-is-transgender-or-goes-by-gender-neutral-pronouns/

Morton, M. H., Dworsky, A., Matjasko, J. L., Curry, S. R., Schlueter, D., Chávez, R., & Farrell, A. F. (2018). Prevalence and correlates of youth homelessness in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 62*(1), 14–21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.10.006

National Catholic Educational Association. (2014*). Guidelines for interpreting and scoring benchmarks.* National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools. https://ncea.org/NSBECS/NSBECS/Assessment_Tools/Benchmark%20Guidelines/Benchmark_Guidelines.aspx

National Catholic Educational Association. (2022, March 3*). Statistical report on Catholic elementary and secondary schools for the years 1967–68 to 1969–70; A report on Catholic schools, 1970–71 through 1973–74; A statistical report on U.S. Catholic schools, 1974–75 through 1980–81; and United States Catholic elementary and secondary schools, 1981–82 through 2021–22*. http://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/Catholic_School_Data.aspx?hkey=8e90e6aa-b9c4-456b-a488-6397f3640f05.

National Catholic Educational Association. National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools Advisory Council (Eds.). (2023). *National standards and benchmarks for effective Catholic elementary and secondary schools,* 2nd edition. Arlington, VA; National Catholic Educational Association. https://ncea.org/common/Uploaded%20files/NSBECS/Standards/NSBECS_2nd_Edition-v2.pdf

Over, H. (2016). The origins of belonging: social motivation in infants and young children. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B., 371*(1686), 2–8 http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0072

Pachankis, J. E. (2007). The psychological implications of concealing a stigma: A cognitive-affective-behavioral model. *Psychological Bulletin. 133*(2), 328–345. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.2.328

Parker, K., Horowitz, J. M., & Brown, A. (2022, June 28*). American's complex views on gender identity and transgender issues*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/06/28/americans-complex-views-on-gender-identity-and-transgender-issues/

Patsy Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 et seq. (1972). https://www.justice.gov/crt/title-ix-education-amendments-1972

Peele, C. (2023, May 23*). Roundup of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation advancing in states across the country.* Human Rights Campaign. https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/roundup-of-anti-lgbtq-legislation-advancing-in-states-across-the-country

Pope Francis. (2016). *Amoris laetitia of the Holy Father Francis.* https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf

Pope Francis. (2019). *Lectio divina of Pope Francis: Pontifical Lateran University.* https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/speeches/2019/march/documents/papa-francesco_20190326_lectiodivina-univlateranense.html

Pope Francis. (2022). *Meeting with Indigenous peoples: First Nations, Métis and Inuit [address of His Holiness].* https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/july/documents/20220725-popolazioniindigene-canada.html

Prohibition Against Discrimination; Exceptions, 20 U.S.C. §1681.

Prohibition of Discrimination, Cal. Educ. Code 220 (2018)

Ravindran, V. (2019). Data analysis in qualitative research. *Indian Journal of Continuing Nursing Education, 20*(1), 40–45. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-015-1867-2

Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and philosophy: An essay on interpretation* (D. Savage, Trans.;11th ed.). Yale University Press.

Rieckhoff, B. S. (2014). The development of faith leadership in novice principals. *Journal of Catholic Education, 17*(2), 25–56. http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1702032014

Rights of Parents, Cal. Educ. Code § 49070 (1976)

Ruiz, I., & Bleasdale, J. (2022). Mixed blessings: Understanding the experience of LGBTQIA+ educators in Catholic schools. *Journal of Homosexuality, 69*(12), 2148–2166. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1984787

Russell, S. T., Pollitt, A. M., Li, G., & Grossman, A. H. (2018). Chosen name use is linked to reduced depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior among transgender youth. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine, 63*(4), 503–505. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.02.003

Safe Zone Project. (n.d*.). LGBTQ+ vocabulary glossary of terms.* https://thesafezoneproject.com/resources/vocabulary/

Saldaña, J. (2014). Coding and analysis strategies. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 581–605). Oxford University Press.

Sánchez, B., Colón, Y., & Esparza, P. (2003). The role of sense of belonging and gender in the academic adjustment of Latino adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34*(6), 619–628. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-005-8950-4

Schacter, S. (1959). *The psychology of affiliation: Experimental studies of the sources of gregariousness.* Stanford University Press.

Scott, K. C. (2023, February 17). Catholic dioceses release new gender policies: Grassroots groups demand input, sufficient dialogue and transparency. *National Catholic Reporter, 59*(10). https://www.ncronline.org/news/catholic-dioceses-release-new-gender-policies-grassroots-groups-demand-input

Sedgwick, E.K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet.* University of California Press.

Seeking Educational Equity in Education. (n.d.). *What is a SEED seminar?* https://www.nationalseedproject.org/how-seed-work\s/seminars

Shaughnessy, M. A. (1991). *The law and Catholic schools: Approaching the new millennium.* National Catholic Educational Association. Washington, D.C.

Sikes, P. (2004). Methodology, procedures, and ethical concerns. In C. Opie (Ed.), *Doing educational research: A guide for first time researchers* (pp.15–33) SAGE publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446280485

Spradley, J. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Holt, Rinhart and Winston.

Smart, L. & Wegner, D. M. (1999). Covering up what can't be seen: Concealable stigma and mental control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*(3), 474–486. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.77.3.474

Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcap.12322

Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, 20 U.S.C. §§1681–1688 (2018).

The Trevor Project. (2022). *2022 National survey on LGBTQ youth mental health.* https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/#support-youth

The Trevor Project. (2023). *The 2023 U.S. national survey on the mental health of LGBTQ young people. https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/*

Traub, G. W. (2022). *Do you speak Ignatian?* Xavier University. https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/ignatian-resources/do-you-speak-ignatian

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1997). *Renewing the vision: A framework for Catholic youth ministry*. https://www.usccb.org/topics/youth-and-young-adult-ministries/renewing-vision

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2011). *Sharing Catholic social teaching: Challenges and directions*. https://www.usccb.org/resources/sharing-catholic-social-teaching-challenges-and-directions

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (n.d.). *Catholic education.* https://www.usccb.org/committees/catholic-education

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2016). *Catechism of the Catholic church (2nd ed.).* https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/

United States Equal Employment Commission. (2021). *Sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) discrimination.* https://www.eeoc.gov/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-sogi-discrimination#

Verhagen, M., Lodder, G. M. A., & Baumeister, R. F. (2017). Unmet belongingness needs but not high belongingness needs alone predict adverse well-being: A response surface modeling approach. *Journal of Personality, 86*(3), 498–507. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12331

Voelkl, K. E. (1996). Measuring students' identification with school. *Educational & Psychology Measurement, 56*(5), 760-770. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0013164496056005003

Washington State Catholic Conference, *The prejudice against homosexuals and the ministry of the Church* (Seattle, Washington: WSCC, 1983).

Western Catholic Education Association. (2014). *Guidelines for interpreting and scoring benchmarks.* https://www.wcea.org/schools-1

Willig, C. (2017). Interpretation and analysis. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analyses* (pp. 136–149). SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243

Wolff, J. R., Kay, T. S., & Alquijay, J. (2017). Transgender and gender-nonconforming student experiences in Christian higher education: A qualitative exploration. *Christian Higher Education, 16*(5), 319–338. https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2017.1310065

Wolff, J. R., Kay, J. R., Himes, H. L., Soares, S. D., & Miller-Kwon, E. (2016). Sexual minority students in non-affirming religious higher education: Mental health, outness, and identity. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 3*(2), 201–212. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000162

Yarhouse, M. A., & Carrs, T. L. (2012). MTF transgender Christians' experiences: A qualitative study. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 6(*1), 18–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2012.649405

Yin, R. K. (2015). *Qualitative research from start to finish.* The Guildford Press