Belonging for all Identities: Investigating Responsive Strategies for Inclusion, Voice, and Equity in Secondary Schools

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Belonging for all Identities: Investigating Responsive Strategies
for Inclusion, Voice, and Equity in Secondary Schools

by

Gregory W. Allison

Accepted in Partial Completion

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Belonging for all Identities: Investigating Responsive Strategies

for Inclusion, Voice, and Equity in Secondary Schools

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of

Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

Gregory W. Allison

May 2024
Abstract

We are witnessing a shift in how some students both identify themselves and are welcomed into our schools and communities. The experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse can vary distinctly depending upon geography, individual, peer, and community factors. Most impactful in these experiences are the structures, culture, and support systems that individual schools and districts can intentionally put into place to promote inclusion, safety, and voice for this population of students. While we observe increasing concerns regarding mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, we also notice an increased level of empowerment and connection in schools where gender and sexuality diverse students report they are provided increased safety, voice, and leadership in their environments. When schools and communities effectively create inclusive cultures and support systems, students can connect in more substantial ways and demonstrate improved social-emotional and academic outcomes.

This study builds upon existing research through a phenomenological inquiry regarding the experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse in our schools. Further, the study will explore intentional actions and best practices that schools and educators may take to create a sense of belonging and increased outcomes for students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. The findings and recommendations of the research capture both student voice and practitioner experience on how schools may utilize community resources and take focused actions for safety and support for students in the GSD community. As we address social justice issues, providing key stances and school culture strategies, inclusive spaces, and strategies to increase belonging and voice for all can be accomplished, particularly for those in the gender and sexuality diverse community and those furthest from academic justice.
Dedication/Acknowledgements

Completing a doctoral program and a project of this magnitude takes the support, guidance, and feedback from a larger network and team of folks. First, I would like to acknowledge my family for their ongoing encouragement. My wife, Pam, for her patience as I pursued this goal of an Ed.D. for the past few years. I am also grateful to my parents, Winn and Sandra, who helped to instill a love for ongoing learning and the level of persistence required for this type of endeavor. Second, the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Wayne Robertson provided invaluable guidance and clarity as an advisor and a mentor, supporting my project along the way. Dr. Don Larsen and Dr. Justin Irish are crucial members of my committee, providing valuable feedback and support as we moved through the research process. My colleagues in Cohort II in the Woodring Educational Leadership Doctoral Program are outstanding thought partners, and I learn a great deal from them in every interaction. Congratulations to Christine Bell, Scott Leick, Heather Leighton, and Kelly Raymond for their scholarship and adherence to completing this journey of higher education. Thank you also to the educators in the Woodring School of Education at Western Washington University for providing unique learning experiences and particularly to Carola McGowan for her ongoing care and support for all of us. Finally, I am grateful for the many staff members, community members, and current and former students who participated in this research project. I endeavor that their voices are distinctly heard in this research. I dedicate this study to more fully honoring and providing voice to those who are furthest from social and academic justice. Through listening, learning, and leading, we can achieve better outcomes for all.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Background to the Research

“Diversity is a fact. Equity is a choice. Inclusion is an action. Belonging is an outcome” (Chan, 2020). For so many and for so long, gender and sexuality identity were cloistered into binary and rigid societal standards. Today, we are observing clear shifts in these standards. Even though progress is being made, inclusivity and inclusion are not always moving forward in a straight line. Gender and sexuality diverse individuals, and particularly students, are still marginalized and shamed in certain circles. Students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse routinely report harm, harassment, and discrimination at schools throughout the country as reported in the bi-annual school climate survey (GLSEN, 2021). Even more concerning, we know these individuals also suffer from higher incidences of depression, suicide, and substance abuse (Johns & Lowry et al., 2019) that may stem from both formal and informal discrimination; in addition, non-inclusive practices in organizations such as schools may contribute to feelings of marginalization Gender and Sexuality Diverse individuals experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these concerns were exacerbated, especially with adolescents who were transitioning or were questioning their gender and sexuality identity (Truong et al., 2020).

In some locations in our country, we do observe a shift in more inclusive policies, practices, and norms, creating a more equitable and just environment for all identities. Unfortunately, the converse is also true. We see reports of increasing attempts in some states to promote and pass legislation to suppress and dehumanize gender and sexuality diverse individuals and their ability to express their identity, particularly in schools (Lytle & Sprott, 2020). Even in the state of Washington, where protections are codified by state law and model
school policies, key community and societal differences for students and their experiences may vary, depending on the geographical location in which the students happen to reside.

Our nation’s schools exist at the forefront of many of these cultural and societal proving grounds. My own curiosity regarding human experience has led me to examine what specific practices can lead to a greater sense of belonging and connection in a school community and what can ultimately lead to a decrease in these rates of depression, suicide, and substance abuse, particularly in the gender and sexuality diverse community. At McMurray Middle School, a part of the Vashon Island School District in western Washington, as principal of the school, I am observing many of these struggles and shifts firsthand. Over the last five years, a substantial increase in the number of students who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ or gender and sexuality diverse community parallels the shift happening within our society. My observing the various dynamics of this group of students indicates to me that there are serious barriers for the individuals to share a sense of belonging and connection to the school community due to a variety of factors.

In partnership with our school counselors, teachers, and community partners, we are taking an ad hoc, or grassroots, approach to developing and implementing policies and practices that are intended to promote safety and inclusion and to provide a voice for all. As a part of the district’s recent Strategic Planning process in 2021–22, data gathered from a variety of sources and participants indicated that non-binary students were much more likely to feel disaffected with and disconnected from our school communities. These indications were in direct contradiction to data gleaned from the CEE (Center for Educational Effectiveness) survey that highlighted noteworthy gains in students’ overall sense of belonging and identity comfort. This discrepancy led me to consider how we as a school could be more systematic and intentional
regarding the policies, practices, and responses that we implement at our school. As I work with our teachers, counselors, and staff and better understand the literature and current research on best practices, it is clear to me that our schools need specific, thoughtful, and orchestrated strategies that maximize student voice, honor student dignity, and promote safety and a sense of belonging for all students, regardless of identity and culture.

This topic is also personal to me as I have not only observed our students who are gender and sexuality diverse struggle with their emerging identities but have also witnessed them as they face stigmatization and social isolation without proper support. Many students who identify in this way routinely struggle with social-emotional issues and various mental health needs in a much more profound way than their peers. We have also seen victimization of these students crop up in several different forms, including harassment, hate speech, and marginalization. In addition, I have observed friends, and even a family member of mine, who faced unresolved issues with their identity struggle for many years with depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Our counseling team, instrumental in creating a unique, welcoming, and empowering environment in our schools, routinely shares with me examples of these ongoing challenges that our students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse face each day and how they see the school environment in their own context. Witnessing these struggles provides me with a unique window to consider how we as educators exercise our duty and the ethic of care for our students by cultivating spaces where all students are affirmed, welcomed, and have a shared voice in the culture. This ethic of care, which highlights the expectation for schools to act within the best interests of all students, motivated me to pursue this research so that we can reach this group of students in new and dynamic ways (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011).
Throughout the country, laws, policies, practices, and attitudes toward gender and sexuality norms vary quite considerably by state and by locality. Currently, only twenty-one states are considering or have enacted either medium or highly supportive gender and sexuality inclusive legislation and school policy for students (Movement Advancement Project, 2023).

Figure 1

**Gender Identity Policy by State**

When looking at this map we see a stark disparity between western and northeastern states and midwestern and southern states. The types of policies that are referenced are designed to create safety and non-discrimination for students, name and pronoun rights, and access to facilities and athletics based upon their gender identity. For instance, Washington State has one of the most inclusive and comprehensive sets of laws and policies to support gender inclusivity. As codified in Washington law, RCW 49.60 and RCW 28A.642 address and support the types of rights for gender and sexuality diverse individuals referenced above. Highlighted in WSSDA model policy 3211, “a district’s legal obligation is related to protecting student safety and to treat students in a manner that is consistent with their gender identity at school. Best practice is to act
as a buffer to protect vulnerable students and their families” (WSSDA, 2022). While questions abound as to how well this policy is implemented either de jure or de facto geographically within Washington, at least there is a foundation for equitable legislation and policy within our state.

These stark differences can certainly be profound barriers to creating systemic change in how we support gender and sexuality diverse students in a more equitable and comprehensive manner throughout the country. We consistently observe various conservative states and local governments enacting policies and legal barriers for gender and sexuality diverse students, and this certainly flows down to school district policies and attitudes. Regionally, school districts in the Northeast, Washington, Oregon, and California were most likely to have both anti-bullying policies and enumerative gender and sexuality diverse–inclusive policies for students. Districts in rural and southern areas were least likely to enumerate protections to any group of students in their policies (Lytle & Sprott, 2021). As a whole nation, 38.7% of districts were not providing protections to students based on actual or perceived sexual orientation in their anti-bullying policies, and 60.3% of districts were not providing protections to students based upon gender identity/expression in their anti-bullying policies (Kosciw et al., 2013). While this data may have shifted recently, Washington continues to be on the vanguard of supporting students not only in areas of policy and legislation but also in areas of facilities and sports participation.

Regardless of an individual’s beliefs, position, or politics about the issue of gender rights, the ethic of care as educators should be first and foremost about how we care for all of our students as human beings in our schools and classrooms. Joan Shapiro and Jacqueline Stefkovich, in their disaggregation of various forms of educational ethics, stress the importance of making “education a human enterprise, and at the forefront of educator’s minds should be the best interests of students, not ideological focuses” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 19).
Educators must put aside their personal ethics and focus on their professional ethics in this potential clash of principles. Certainly, if we look intently at the notion that gender and sexuality diverse identifying students are most certainly humans first, uniquely identifying themselves many times with weighty struggles in their background, we highlight this ethic of care in how schools effectively prepare to serve this unique community of students. How schools and educators show up in this manner for the gender and sexuality diverse community is not a political, religious, or rhetorical exercise; rather it is a moral imperative for us to see them as humans and do our absolute best to create inclusive and responsive spaces for all individuals.

Each community represents a unique cross section and demographic of these beliefs, politics, and values. Amid these microcosms of society, schools are in the unique position of both upholding community standards and norms while also maintaining the ethic of care and upholding the rights of previously marginalized groups. As highlighted in WSSDA’s policy guidance, “Unfortunately, we have seen communities around the nation torn by stark ideological and political splits, sometimes leading to hostility, including a specific hostility toward transgender and gender and sexuality diverse individuals” (Westbrook, 2022, p. 7). This rancor can be particularly stressful for the gender and sexuality diverse community and place the school’s duty and ethic of care in a potentially controversial and divisive situation. As Shapiro and Stefkovich also note, “The tension between the community and individual rights must be faced frequently by those educational leaders working at the very heart of the debate” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011, p. 41). This is the difficult modern “arena” that educators face in how to create inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms and schools, especially when local community values may differ from what is required. Once again, schools have the legal and moral obligation effectively and intentionally to support and protect students in the gender and sexuality diverse
community, no matter the location or the ethos of a particular community or locality. As George Takei said, “We should indeed keep calm in the face of difference and live our lives in a state of inclusion and wonder at the diversity of humanity” (Takei, 2013).

Since 1999, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has conducted a biennial school climate survey. Consistently, the survey data indicate substantial adverse impact, stemming from hostile environments, that gender and sexuality diverse students face at schools. While these impacts can also vary a great deal, depending upon geographic regions, the results paint a bleak picture for the struggle that most gender and sexuality diverse students face during their school days. Below are key statistics from the Executive Summary for the 2021 survey that represent these impacts.

- 81.8% of LGBTQ+ students in our survey reported feeling unsafe in school because of at least one of their actual or perceived personal characteristics.
- 68.0% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at school because of their SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression) characteristics—50.6% because of their sexual orientation, 43.2% because of their gender expression, and 40.3% because of their gender.
- 76.1% experienced in-person verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened) specifically based on sexual orientation, gender expression, and/or gender at some point in the past year—60.7% of LGBTQ+ students were verbally harassed based on their sexual orientation, 57.4% based on gender expression, and 51.3% based on gender.
- 91.8% of LGBTQ+ students heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting “masculine enough” or “feminine enough”); 56.2% heard these remarks frequently or often.

- Only one-tenth of LGBTQ+ students (10.9%) reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when overhearing homophobic remarks at school, and less than one-tenth of LGBTQ+ students (8.8%) reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when overhearing negative remarks about gender expression.

LGBTQ+ students who experienced LGBTQ+-related discrimination at school were,

- nearly three times as likely to have missed school in the past month as those who had not (43.3% vs. 16.4%);

- had lower GPAs than their peers who experienced no anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination (2.92 vs. 3.20);

- were more likely to have been disciplined at school (51.2% vs. 26.2%); and

- had lower self-esteem and school belonging and higher levels of depression. Of the LGBTQ+ students who indicated that they were considering dropping out of school, a sizable percentage (31.4%) indicated that they were doing so because of the hostile climate created by gendered school policies and practices.

(GLSEN, 2021, pp. 5–9; “41% of Surveyed LGBTQ+,” 2023; Lamiell, 2019)

While this data may be alarming, there is hope as numerous examples of resilience, empowerment, and success emanate from the gender and sexuality diverse community. In areas
and schools where these individuals are connected and supported, there is opportunity for increased achievement and voice amid the overall struggle that this community may face.

While the survey data illustrates the impact and harm that harassing, bullying, and hateful actions can cause gender and sexuality diverse students, a shift in how schools work to reduce this harm is in order. It is not enough just to create a program to focus on “anti-bullying;” it takes recognizing and understanding that schools are in fact cultural sites that create their own ethics, values, and norms. Schools can intentionally develop a positive school culture of inclusion and belonging that has the potential to produce dramatic results for students, their well-being, academics, social-emotional, and health outcomes.

How we address harm and injustice when it occurs, particularly with historically marginalized cultures, is an important question for schools. While it is both our moral and legal duty to respond effectively when these incidents occur, perhaps shifting our methodology may offer a more holistic manner of resolution (Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2013). When gender and sexuality diverse students do experience discrimination, what measures of support can exist to support these students, such as the provision of school counselors, mental health practitioners, community advocates, and other key allies? How can administrators and other school staff provide a voice to those affected individuals in how they may wish to resolve issues? This voice may include perspectives on potential options for restorative or transformative justice, seeking potential reparations or restitution in certain cases, as well as simply providing an empathetic stance in hearing what perceptions and perspectives may exist. An opportunity exists for schools to utilize these stances to build a more inclusive, empowered, and just community and environment (Anderson, 2023; Orr et al., 2015; Proia, 2016).
Gender and sexuality diverse students represent a variety of other groups who may also be historically marginalized or may be further distanced from educational justice. This intersectionality and applicability to other elements of culture is a dynamic for educators to acknowledge and consider as they are embracing their own awareness and affirming stances in classrooms (Warner & Shields, 2013). As noted in *The Educators Guide to LGBT+ Inclusion*, Shane notes that:

Intersectionality recognizes that each group’s memberships are more than simply the sum of society’s mistreatment of each group within which a person identifies. The definition in this context is acknowledging that although an LGBT+ identity is, in itself a minority status, many individuals exist within the intersection of two or more minority groups, which directly impacts their school experience. (Shane, 2020, p. 49)

The author further describes the multiplicity of impacts that this intersectionality may have on students and what it may lead to, what she describes as “battle fatigue” (Shane, 2020). There may be increased pressure for these students to represent various cultures that they may represent in various contexts, while they are often in the midst of finding out just who they are as people. At its core, this awareness of various cultures and identities and their intersection is a key component to building empathy, awareness, and understanding in how we function in various spaces and the power dynamics that certainly exist within these constructs (Lindsay et al., 2020).

Another notion that is associated with this concept is the idea of minority stress theory and exacerbated mental and physical health issues. According to Frost and Meyer, who posit this
theory, the stress that individuals who identify as gender and sexuality diverse experience is considerable due to the ongoing prejudice and stigma that permeate our culture (Frost & Meyer, 2023. This concept is crucial for educators to recognize as they are considering best practices that will help the gender and sexuality diverse community feel supported and acknowledged in our schools. Bringing an empathetic and strategic lens to the work of planning for connectedness in schools will assist in creating a more inclusive environment. In addition, the conceptual notion of minority stress theory described in the graphic below emphasizes not only system or school levels of support, but also individual and community levels of support that schools may wish to leverage in how we approach this work.

**Figure 2**

*Flow Chart Describing Minority Stress Theory*
(Frost & Meyer, 2023). Once again, this theory is an example of the human dynamic that is at play in schools, which should always be outside of the many political, social, and cultural debates regarding gender and sexuality rights (Lord, 2020; Gender-Inclusive Schools, n.d.).

As Paul McCabe and Karla Anhalt note in their research, the narrative that historically developed regarding gender and sexuality diverse students warrants change. Instead of highlighting the ongoing struggle and aspects of harm that gender and sexuality diverse individuals face, McCabe and Anhalt advocate for the notion of focusing on a strengths-based approach including advocacy and resilience stories. “The goal of this process is to empower gender and sexuality diverse youth to foster change within systems and institutions … a process of deconstructing oppressive and discriminatory cultural narratives and reconstructing these narratives to focus on strengths, resilience, and acceptance” (McCabe & Anhalt, 2022, p. 4). This does not mean that we ignore the aforementioned struggle and incidents of harm; on the contrary, we address these incidents head on while also honing our approach to celebrate the progress and rejecting the former “dominant” narratives that existed in the past. As we shape our levels of support in schools for gender and sexuality diverse students, this approach can make a dramatic difference in honoring student identity at school.

A more positive, inclusive culture in a school has the potential to foster more students who can navigate various changes in their life in a more resilient and proactive manner. Students who feel safe and comfortable expressing their identity at school can challenge these dominant narratives by providing a more diverse perspective and worldview for other students (Corcoran, 2022). The more schools can provide opportunities for students to demonstrate leadership and empower voice, the more schools can accentuate and promote an inclusive and welcoming
environment where students can thrive. As noted in Hope and Hall’s case study of LGBTQ+-affirming schools, they indicated this type of environment in the following manner:

Offering a thriving LGBTQ-affirming space is more radical than simply offering a safe space. It is inextricably linked with participation, belonging, recognition and acceptance, and as such, strengthens any claim that Pride School offers a form of inclusivity. This implies a different type of school ethos and culture, one that proactively affirms LGBTQ identities rather than simply keeping these students safe from attack. (Hope & Hall, 2018b, p.1328)

Schools are beginning to recognize and incorporate this advocacy in developing their culture and therefore providing a means for all groups to be represented and supported.

Another foundational component for creating a welcoming environment is to strategically ensure access for all staff to high-quality professional development that brings an awareness of the cultures that are represented in their classrooms. Professional development that works to challenge long-held personal beliefs and perceptions and focuses on a humanistic approach to instruction and pedagogy is vital to this effort and enables staff to be proactive in their supportive stance. “Supporting teachers to be proactive requires high quality, focused professional development. We invite other communities to explore approaches that focus on building knowledge, reflecting, sense-making, and practice the work” (Leonardi & Staley, 2015, p. 6). Not only does this work assist teachers and staff in better understanding and affirming the cultures from which their students come, it allows teachers to feel more confident to challenge homophobic and transphobic attitudes as well as intervene in anti-LGBTQ behaviors when observed. Providing high-quality professional development and helping staff to develop
reflective, responsive, and affirming practices are foundational to efforts to improve educational outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse students (Leonardi, 2014).

As school leaders around the country know full well, the culture of a school is a foundational element for success for students, staff, and the community. We also know that the development of a school culture is never-ending work that requires consistent “feeding and watering” as a collaborative staff effort. The degree to which we are responsive and dynamic in ensuring that our school culture is representative of its population is a vital indicator of our success in shaping this effort (Arriaga et al., 2020; Soria, 2020). School leaders who wish to evolve their practices in creating welcoming, supportive spaces for gender and sexuality diverse students may be on the vanguard of this phenomenon in our nation. It is also imperative for educators to recognize when they are not necessarily the experts on a given topic such as this one. In this study, I wanted to gain insights on what professional development experiences and supportive stances educators can utilize. In addition, I explored the ways in which schools can potentially utilize community and other partnerships to better support gender and sexuality diverse youth. This may support a more intentional set of strategies that can bridge the gap of knowledge and understanding in this area.

Throughout this research project, a variety of school practices and leadership practices were explored that can be implemented to build a school culture that ensures all students have a sense of belonging, a voice, and a real place in a school. Building key relationships, inclusive attitudes, and allyship within a school community are essential components of this work. It is often discussed in educational circles that you can tell a lot about a school by what the environment feels like when you walk through a building (“5 Ways Educators,” 2022). While this can be subjective, and certainly qualitative, it requires an intentional focus and in many cases
a shift in how we are analyzing the “feel” of a school. This shift must be intentional for schools to have a positive impact in creating a sense of belonging and voice in the overall school. Ensuring that all students’ cultures are represented across their experience is a vital component of creating this environment. Cultural representation includes the gender and sexuality diverse community and should include visual representation as well as curricular representations throughout the disciplines within the school. As noted, this shift is symbolic, as well as vital for individuals across the nation, and over time it will have influence in the lives of many. As philosopher Lao Tzu notes, “The journey of a thousand miles starts beneath your feet.” (Lao Tzu, BBC, n.d., p. 95).

**Problem Statement**

Gender and sexuality diverse students across the nation face issues related to marginalization, harm, and disempowerment. As a result, this student community experiences a myriad of social-emotional, academic, and mental health impacts. Schools exist as a beacon and a crossroads for the type of society and community we wish to create in this nation. School practices that highlight support, inclusion, and voice for all represented students can be the key to facilitating change for the gender and sexuality diverse community and all cultures represented in our society.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to examine best practices in schools to affirm each student’s identity and to explore what conditions may exist in schools that have increased the sense of belonging and connectedness for students who are Gender and Sexuality Diverse (gender and sexuality diverse). By examining and reporting these efforts to increase belonging
and connectedness, this study sought to offer insights that will lead to increased social emotional, mental health and academic outcomes for students in this community.

Significance of the Study

In conducting this study, I intended to shed practical and usable light on a growing body of research that implores schools to utilize best practices to support our students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. Schools are the most important foundation for a free, fair, and equitable society. The degree to which we can provide safer spaces and environments for all students will determine the successful outcomes we will have for individuals furthest from social and academic justice. If we provide a roadmap for schools to improve their ability to connect, support, and nurture specific communities of students, the result will be more members of our society who are engaged, active, and thriving. This issue is rapidly emerging and evolving as boards, administrators, staff, and communities search for ways to address and connect our students.

Research Questions

The following set of research questions guided this study:

- What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have hampered their ability to be successful and to feel affirmed in their expression of self?
- What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have enhanced their success and increased affirmation of themselves?
- What intentional school-wide strategies do schools employ to provide positive messaging and inclusive language and to promote an identity-affirming culture?
• How do educators, considered to be effective by students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse employ strategies school-wide and in the classroom to promote a sense of belonging in gender and sexuality diverse students?

• What strategies are considered effective in impacting the social emotional, mental health, and academic success of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse?

These questions represent the basis from which I selected the literature in the following chapter.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

In developing a strategy for searching for literature on this topic, it was enlightening to consider the nomenclature that exists and has evolved in recent studies. Terms like “LGBTQ+,” “trans,” and “non-binary” were all terms that showed up in various searches for literature. The manual of the American Psychological Association provides the following guidance:

Use the umbrella term “sexual and gender minorities” to refer to multiple sexual and/or gender minority groups or write about “sexual orientation and gender diversity” (these terms are used by the Office on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity at APA and the Sexual & Gender Minority Research Office at the National Institutes of Health). Abbreviations such as LGBTQ, LGBTQ+, LGBTQIA, and LGBTQIA+ may also be used to refer to multiple groups. (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 237)

For the purposes of this study, the term “Gender and Sexuality Diverse” (gender and sexuality diverse) was utilized, as it is the most inclusive and respectful expression, as of this time, to represent the broad spectrum of individuals in this community. In building a foundational set of literature to focus on, I selected text-based sources and a large number of articles on assorted topics cited in journals and other publications, as well as several videos and websites that highlight the current research on this topic. The topic itself is relatively recent as a research focus, as most of the literature is from 2010 to the present. This reality provided the ability to focus the search for the sources that provided the basis of this study.
Text-Based Sources

Throughout the text-based sources that I have examined in this project, a variety of key themes for schools emerged, including elements that support allyship (including professional development), addressing harm, terminology, systems-based models, and advocacy models providing a theoretical framework for successful school-based approaches in various locations across the United States. Hence, this study was rooted in the examination of applicable research in how schools might support Gender and Sexuality Diverse students. Following this examination, I intended to develop more specific and practical school and community strategies to support gender and sexuality diverse student success.

Allyship is an extensive cross-cutting concept in the literature reviewed. This concept may be broken down into several different hierarchical levels: (a) awareness, (b) knowledge/education, (c) skills, and (d) action (Lindsay & Lindsay, 2016). The author notes this is a highly personal journey for individuals:

The “inside-out” process of change is fundamental to being an ally and involves having a strong sense of your own heterosexual culture. … Understanding the systemic oppression of heterosexism but failing to engage in examinations of cultural privilege will negate even the best of intentions and result in your being experienced as inauthentic. (Lindsay, et al., 2013, pp. 118–19)

Inherent in this process is the value that a school or a district must place on supporting professional development in building awareness and individual capacities in this area. As noted, this elemental level clearly does not exist in every geographic location or individual locality,
highlighting the highly disparate attitudes and experiences for gender and sexuality diverse students across the country.

When considering how to be an LGBT+ ally, Kris Shane’s work, *An Educator’s Guide to LGBT+ Inclusion* (2020), provided insights, instructing the reader on how to recognize various stances and purposes that individuals may take when considering an “ally” stance. Some of these can be considered as supportive, and some may be viewed by individuals from the gender and sexuality diverse community as being misguided or self-serving. In recognizing an empathetic stance in allyship, Shane notes,

One way to improve is to listen to your LGBT+ students and LGBT+ colleagues. Being willing to hear the stories of LGBT+ people without interrupting them or turning the conversation back to you and your experiences allows that person to share their story and to feel heard as it is happening. (Shane, 2020, p. 44)

From this empathetic and listening approach, a more authentic allyship can occur that is respectful, responsive, and ultimately more supportive of the individual student or colleague who has oftentimes endured stigmatization and stress throughout their lives.

Addressing harm and providing safety was a consistent theme for how schools can provide support in a proactive and sustainable manner. As the recent GLSEN and Trevor surveys note, 76% of LGBTQ+ students reported being verbally harassed at school, and 31% reported being physically harassed. Consistent with the minority stress theory highlighted in Chapter I, the toll that these acts of harm can create is profound.

The effects of a virulently anti-LGBTQ+ culture is severe and lasting. Academic performance suffers, affecting the likelihood of LGBTQ+ young people finishing high
school and going on to college. Feelings of belonging at school are drastically eroded. Due to hostility, LGBTQ+ students have lower self-esteem and much higher rates of mental health problems like depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. (Benz, 2023, p. 3)

The moral imperative to shift culture and provide safe and affirming spaces for this impacted group has never been clearer. Schools must embrace their unique role in addressing harm in a meaningful way while working diligently to create safe, inclusive cultures everywhere (Gower et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2013).

As we highlight the need to begin creating “safe spaces” for students, inclusive messaging and signage in places highlighting unwanted behavior, such as bigoted slurs, are becoming more of a norm in some areas of the country. Shane’s work (2020) distinguishes a “safe space” vs. a “brave space,” which is a newer designation that is growing in popularity. In a safe space, there is a designation that homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic language and actions are strictly forbidden. In a brave space, it goes beyond this. Experts have realized that while it is crucial to stop horrible things from being said, it is insufficient to stop there. (Shane, 2020, p. 36)

Brave spaces are concerned with understanding the “why” behind the bigoted language and addressing the resulting harm through restorative practices that provide victims with greater agency and voice in what resolution may look like. The practice of safe spaces and brave spaces may support a school in moving its culture forward and supporting conversations that provide greater safety, inclusion, and sense of belonging for all groups, particularly gender and sexuality diverse students.
In several correlational studies in journal literature, researchers suggest moving this concept of safety beyond just the impacts of bullying and harm, seeking to “change the narrative” for gender and sexuality diverse students into stories of hope, resilience, and courage in the face of hateful speech or violence. Anti-bullying programs and strategies often “contain, regulate and manage violence” rather than actually addressing it in a meaningful way to change attitudes and culture (Payne & Smith, 2012, p. 4). This thinking also highlights the need to view schools through a lens of culture and identities as we seek to shift our practices. They suggest that future research on creating safe and inclusive schools for gender and sexuality diverse students should,

focus on exploring schools as cultural sites and the interactions between litigation, legislation, and educational practice. … Shifting the common understanding of the problem away from the individual student behavior and toward systemic oppression allows researchers to examine the multiple ways schools privilege heterosexuality and (implicitly) give their students and educators permission to marginalize LGBTQ youth. (Payne & Smith, 2012, p. 7)

Truly, this is a “both/and” resolution for schools. As the literature suggests, we must continue to adhere to strong policies and responses against hateful speech and action; however, in order to move the conversation forward, schools must address situations from a place of reparation and education in order to begin transforming the culture, mindsets, and societal norms toward inclusion and more equitable outcomes for all (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2018; Shane, 2020; McCabe & Anhalt, 2022).
Several texts highlight terminology and the various evolutions that continue to develop in this area (Shane, 2020; Lindsey et al., 2013). In both Shane’s work (2020), and Lindsey et al. (2013), these terminology sections provide context and history to the evolving nomenclature and acronyms that are utilized for the community. Both authors recommended keeping a nimble and open mind when considering both shifting terminology and pronoun usage. As noted, one of the ways that educators can show their allyship and support is to bring an open mind and a curiosity when working to understand these evolving dynamics. Similarly, providing an invitation for all students to share their pronouns as a means of normalizing identity is a powerful representation for schools and classrooms. In the Columbia Teachers College article “5 Ways Educators can Help Support LGBTQ+ Students,” this concept is further articulated: “The more we normalize sharing pronouns, the more it will help people ‘come out’ with their preferred identity and pronouns and push the conversation forward.” (“5 Ways Educators,” 2022). These inclusive strategies may seem straightforward but may indeed provide a powerful and empowering message to a school climate.

In Supporting Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Diversity in K-12 Schools, Lytle and Sprott highlighted a number of systems-level considerations that have been implemented across the nation to support gender and sexuality diverse communities. Many school policies and mission statements, and the specific language within them, were identified as being potentially exclusive and containing “microaggressions” by omission to the gender and sexuality diverse community (Lytle & Sprott, 2021). In addition, schools may unwittingly reinforce negative societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality diverse families. Highlighted in this piece are several staff development systems and strategies that could help raise educators’ cultural awareness and proficiencies that address gender and sexuality diverse issues.
Multicultural training can build levels of comfort by imparting knowledge and skills, building empathy, and remediating misinformation. In addition, multicultural education is a tool that can disrupt heteronormative and CIS normative culture that permeates many school systems. It can impart perspective and empathy to educators, which may lead to more frequent recognition of heteronormative and CIS normative assumptions. (Lytle & Sprott, 2020, p. 86)

Building greater awareness, understanding, and capacity among school leaders and all staff members is a key foundation to begin the transformational work of supporting gender and sexuality diverse students in a more focused manner (Payne & Smith, 2011; Shaffer & Schlanger, 2017).

Lindsey et al. (2013) made important connections to the Cultural Proficiency Framework, developed by the Center for Cultural Proficient Educational Practice (CCPEP, n.d.), and viewing the gender and sexuality diverse community through this lens in schools. This key framework provided a unique lens as the research for this study was developed, providing an assessment tool and a useful guide for educators to utilize in shifting the culture of their schools to provide inclusive environments for all students. The Essential Elements of the Cultural Proficiency Framework applied to educational leaders encompasses these values and behaviors:

- **Assesses culture.** The culturally proficient educational leader is aware of their culture and the effect it may have on the people in their work setting. They learn about the culture of the school/district and the cultures of the parents/guardians and members of the larger community and anticipate how these cultures will interact with, conflict with, and enhance one another.
• **Values diversity.** The culturally proficient educational leader welcomes a diverse group of parents and community members into the school setting and appreciates the challenges diversity brings. They share this appreciation with other fellow educators, parents/guardians, and community members, developing a learning community with each group.

• **Manages the dynamics of difference.** The culturally proficient educational leader recognizes that conflict is a normal and natural part of life. They develop skills to manage conflict in a positive, constructive way. They also help fellow educators, parents/guardians, and community members to understand that what appear to be clashes in personalities may in fact be conflicts in culture.

• **Adapts to diversity.** The culturally proficient educational leader commits to the continuous learning that is necessary to resolve issues caused by differences. They enhance the substance and structure of the work done so that all work is informed by the guiding principles of cultural proficiency.

• **Institutionalizes cultural knowledge.** The culturally proficient educational leader works to influence the culture of their school/district so that its policies and practices are informed by the guiding principles of cultural proficiency. They also take advantage of teachable moments to share cultural knowledge about their colleagues, their supervisors, the parents/guardians, and the communities from which they come. They create opportunities for these groups to learn about one another and to engage in ways that honor who they are. (Adapted from Lindsey et al., 2013)

**Figure 3**

*Continuum of Cultural Proficiency*
The Cultural Proficiency Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Destructiveness</th>
<th>Cultural Blindness</th>
<th>Cultural Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Incapacity</td>
<td>Cultural Precompetence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compliance Based Tolerance for Diversity  | Transformation for Equity

(Lindsay, et al., 2013; Lindsay & Lindsay, 2016)

This continuum above provided another tool for this study as we work not only to build our own competences and proficiencies about our own unique cultures at a location but, ultimately, to transform these spaces with an equitable mindset and strategy.

The text sources offered several community-based models to promote advocacy and empowerment. I highlighted these in my research methodology, as it forms the basis for leveraging community-based resources in supporting the gender and sexuality diverse community in schools. In the Lytle and Sprott text, the gap in this area of the research is highlighted:

Some of the latest efforts incorporate socioecological theory in their philosophy and design, and this approach highlights the need for more research about community connections and involvement as it relates to particular kinds of school programs relevant to gender and sexuality diverse students. Specifically, to directly address the ecological context of programs and interventions, we need additional research and programs that examine how positive messages about gender diversity in school are enhanced or detracted by messages from family and
community as well as how students navigate these sometimes-conflicting messages. (Lytle & Sprott, 2020, p. 156)

This gap in the research is connected to the aforementioned notion that shifting the narrative for gender and sexuality diverse students is a vital way for individuals and school systems to promote resilience, inclusion, and pride within their community culture. This will be a key focus area for this research study and in determining the methodology (McBride & Neary, 2021; Naser et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2020).

**Articles and Publication Sources**

The variety of journal articles and summaries provided a means of categorizing three levels of factors contributing (or not) to gender and sexuality diverse students’ overall success at school. These three levels were individual factors, interpersonal (relationship) factors, and school-level (community) factors. Two additional themes surfaced in these reviews: a focus on the power of student voice and how the ability to choose your name provides power (Meyer & Keenan, 2018; Miller et al., 2018). The final sources included emerging research focused on a school-wide screening and mental health program that can support all students but particularly students who identify as a part of the gender and sexuality diverse community. (Agee-Aguayo et al., 2017; McDermott et al., 2023a).

**Individual Factors**

Individual factors related to school connection for gender and sexuality diverse students that surfaced in the literature focused on student safety and inclusivity, noting that students in rural and southern schools report that their schools are less inclusive and felt less safe than in urban and northern areas (Johns & Lowry et al., 2018). Another element considered an
individual factor was the consideration of students’ characteristics of self-advocacy and self-compassion. Students’ ability to declare their identity freely and how that corresponds to the degree to which students were more successful in school environments proved to be a key factor (Miller et al., 2018). Finally, in the Johns & Poteat et al. (2019) article, the researchers surface differences as to how a student’s sexual and gender identity intersects with other social identities (race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) and how these correlations impact their school experiences, either positively or negatively. Across the sources, these connections highlight the importance of these individual factors and how they are connected to school (Taylor et al., 2022).

These sources highlighted a number of questions, included below, that correspond to the dynamic of individual factors. These questions provided additional foundation to my own research questions and the interview and survey questions in my research.

1. How do various forms of systemic oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) intersect to shape the school experiences of gender and sexuality diverse youth?

2. What are the characteristics of gender and sexuality diverse students who are thriving in their schools?

3. What do gender and sexuality diverse students name as the key indicators of inclusive and welcoming schools?

4. How might educators develop and sustain a school climate that supports gender and sexuality diverse students?

5. How do community-level beliefs and attitudes about gender and sexuality diverse people affect the school community? (Johns & Poteat et al., 2019)
**Interpersonal Factors**

Johns & Poteat et al. (2019) identified interpersonal-level factors as a key distinguishing element for students. Among these identified factors is the significance of supportive and trusted adults who value all students as individuals no matter their identity. “LGBTQ students who identify the presence of supportive teachers and staff report more positive mental wellbeing and better academic outcomes” (Johns & Poteat et al., 2019, p. 150). One observation indicated in this source suggested that intentional professional development for staff in promoting inclusive classroom spaces for students is a promising practice to promote inclusivity and foster trust with adults. These studies highlighted a potential gap in this area of research, encouraging additional studies to review various dynamics associated within schools. Peer, family, and other types of social support are indicated in the literature comparatively, with peer support providing the most evidence as a protective factor for gender and sexuality diverse students during their school experiences. Related to these findings in the literature, in both pilot interviews I conducted, the respondents noted that there were one or two key staff members in their school experiences who made a difference in their perceptions of school. The characteristics they identified were consistent with the literature, indicating that a caring, inclusive classroom, where individuals were “seen” by their teachers made a difference for these individuals.

As noted above, leveraging community resources remains a critical and perhaps underutilized dimension of this work to transform school systems. Noted in the Leonardi and Staley article is a viable concept:

A whole-community engagement model alters traditional teacher-centered professional development and ideas of accountability: It takes the focus off teachers as the primary conduits for change and places responsibility also on school communities … a whole-
community model involves reframing the conversation with and about parents, not focusing on potential pushback, but instead taking a proactive stance and inviting the school and community at large into conversations. Educating and holding accountable all stakeholders in these efforts will provide communities the best chance at creating safe, affirming, and equitable schools. (Leonardi & Staley, 2015, p. 5)

Utilizing mentors from the community, while also co-designing with both individuals and community partnerships, will be a strong focus of this research study as I endeavor to explore this rich resource with the individuals I interview. In addition, these critical questions surfaced in the Johns & Poteat et al. (2019) article as areas for potential new research to explore in the dimension of interpersonal factors:

1. What are the critical dimensions of support from educators needed by gender and sexuality diverse youth?

2. How do we train supportive educators, and to what extent are currently available resources meeting these needs?

3. How do role models or mentors inform the identities of gender and sexuality diverse youth and their ability to navigate school environments?

4. Which family factors affect school outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse students?

5. What are effective models of parent/community/school partnerships that could be leveraged to improve outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse youth? (Johns & Poteat et al., 2019, p. 148)
School-Level Factors

The final set of factors that surfaced in the literature were focused on school-level processes, attitudes, and practices. Many research studies and articles highlighted theoretical and practical actions that can dramatically improve both the well-being and outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse students, including inclusive language, representation, and honoring student voice (Gower et al., 2018; “5 Ways Educators,” 2022; Ullman, 2017; “Welcoming Schools-Gender and LGBTQ+ Inclusive Schools”, n.d.; Johns et al., 2018; Wiseman, 2014). Several text sources, as well as journal articles, highlight the importance of evaluating and developing inclusive curricula within schools. Recommendations implore schools to embrace a diverse, intersectional curriculum that also includes gender and sexuality diverse experiences and representations in stories, examples, histories, and imagery (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018; Naser et al., 2022; Snapp et al., 2015). Researcher Oren Pizmony-Levy’s work from Columbia Teachers College highlighted this notion:

Our research shows that students who see themselves in the curriculum are more likely to feel that they belong to the school community and that belonging keeps them in school. They are not missing lessons, and they feel more engaged. … When we send a message of inclusion to all students, other students are going to treat LGBTQ students better as well. (Pizmony-Levy, 2020, p. 3)

While this approach can certainly receive pushback and negative feedback depending on the geographic locations and age of students, the researchers highlighted that by creating an environment where discourse is accepted and the realities and honest stories of gender and sexuality diverse students are discussed, the approach helps all students feel validated, affirmed, and celebrated.
A number of strategies described in the literature are classified as programs that “focus on issues of social justice and equity” (Johns & Poteat et al., 2019, p. 151) and in particular affinity groups such as Gender/Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) within a school. Schools that identify key social emotional learning goals for their students correlate generally to a more positive, inclusive, and safe environment, particularly for gender and sexuality diverse students. The notion of partnership with community groups also emerged within this set of sources. This impactful strategy provides increased awareness, empathy, and inclusion across a whole community in addition to what may occur in schools. Utilizing community agencies could also support a more sustainable program of support for both increased awareness advocacy and education as well as professional development for all staff throughout the school (Johns & Poteat et al., 2019). In both of the pilot interviews I conducted, the individuals cited the GSA groups at both McMurray Middle School and Vashon Island High School as being instrumental in shifting the culture of support for gender and sexuality diverse-identifying students as well as providing a major vehicle for student voice.

In addition, a 2023 article (Rice & McEntarfer) distinguished a lens for schools to consider when creating systems and responses for gender and sexuality diverse students. “Leaders and educators must support trans, non-binary, and gender expansive youth proactively and reactively. Such support is crucial, and literally lifesaving.” (Rice & McEntarfer, 2023, p. 2). Proactive actions can include some of what was described earlier as direct, inclusive teacher and school actions such as providing a safe space for students to share the name and pronouns of their choosing. Working diligently to get these names and pronouns right is also a sign of inclusivity and allyship among educators. More subtle binary language such as “boys and girls” and “ladies and gentlemen” can also be removed from educators’ lexicon. Utilizing language
such as “scholars,” “you all,” and “human beings” can enhance the culture of inclusivity and help students to check their stereotypes as well (Swindle, 2022; Ullman, 2017). Some schools have also been in the practice of separating students by gender or other identifying characteristics, a practice that may perpetuate stereotypes (Tomczyk, 2023). At the school level, changes in how teachers and others address students can be adopted proactively as a matter of everyday habit (Rice & McEntarfer, 2023, p. 4). Each member of a school community can make a difference in sharpening our strategies to approach all students with care, dignity, and respect and increase the sense of belonging and connectedness for students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. An observation from Sadowsky (2020) includes a vision for this improvement:

Today, right now, educators working in different parts of the country and in various capacities—as teachers, administrators, librarians, and counselors—realize aspects of this vision every day with their students. Their efforts illustrate not only that schools should be more than safe for LGBTQ students but that they already are in many respects, in a wide range of communities and contexts around the country, and that they therefore can be in many others. (p.2)

Conversely, reactive support can help provide safer, more effective responses to biased language and more serious incidents of bullying and harassment (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021). These responses include naming behaviors, providing teachable moments, providing support to targeted students as allies, and adhering closely to existing policies and procedures to provide accountability (Rice & McEntarfer, 2023; Taylor et al., 2017). The authors recognized that with both proactive and reactive strategies, teachers are utilizing universal principles that promote value, respect, and inclusion in the classrooms. This focus will not only enhance the school experience for gender and sexuality diverse students but help all culture groups improve their
sense of belonging and connection to school and improve both social emotional and academic outcomes (Ullman, 2022; Welcoming Schools, n.d.).

Student voice remains a powerful tool for schools to promote inclusive and tolerant communities where students feel connected and are more likely to thrive in both affective and academic areas. In the article by Miller et al. (2018), the authors focused on not only policy shifts and differences throughout the country but also on encouraging and strengthening student voice through programs such as GSAs. Such programs provide individuals the opportunity not only to form their identities in more profound ways but provide a sense of voice and connectedness that may not exist without these opportunities (Day et al., 2020; Evans, 2020; Poteat et al., 2016).

Both the research and the pilot interviews I conducted highlighted a student’s ability to choose their preferred name as opposed to their birth name as critical to promoting an individuals’ place and identity in the culture of a school. Schools that promote a form of “literacy” around both chosen names and preferred pronoun usage can also provide another layer of intentional support and inclusive care for students.

Such self-identification helps another come to different ways of self-knowing and even in expanding or inventing terms based on newfound knowledge. … When gender identity is personal, when shared publicly, not only is it legitimated (though up for scrutiny), but it takes on social validation while it simultaneously produces new meanings and new knowledge. (Miller et al., 2018, p. 354)

I reviewed a number of articles that indicated amplifying student voice and cultural competence through affinity groups for gender and sexuality diverse students, most often called Gender Spectrum Alliances, is a recent practice that schools are implementing (Lessard et al.,
2020; Porta et al., 2017; Staley et al., 2015; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). The author Dorthea Benz, in “A Refuge for LGBTQ+ Young People” highlighted this practice:

> Across the board, every measure of well-being for [gender and sexuality diverse] young people improves when a school has a GSA, resulting in a significant decrease in homophobic and transphobic speech, victimization, missed school, and levels of depression and suicidal thoughts. … Positive developments in school climate may be particularly important for [gender and sexuality diverse] students of color overwhelmed by intersecting sources of hostility. (2023, p. 3)

As in the other sections on factors noted, the Johns & Poteat et al. (2019) article highlighted some “school-level” questions regarding GSAs that I wove into my research study and methodology in the forthcoming chapter:

1. Which GSA club characteristics provide the greatest academic, social emotional, and mental health benefits to gender and sexuality diverse youth?

2. To what extent are GSAs universally beneficial for all students or beneficial for some more than others, based on differences in identity (orientation, race, ethnicity, gender, SES, geography)?

3. What in-school resources best support gender and sexuality diverse students (counseling, mental health, community, etc.)?

4. How do schools develop policies that best create a safe and supportive environment for gender and sexuality diverse students?
5. What is the most effective way to implement policies and practices to support gender and sexuality diverse students? (Johns & Poteat et al., 2019, p. 149)

**Related Literature Themes**

Youth who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have consistently shown disparities in mental health issues and suicidal ideation (“41% of Surveyed LGBTQ+,” 2023). These disparities only increased during the pandemic era of 2020–2022. An emerging best practice for schools is providing social emotional and mental health support embedded in schools. These types of programs show promise in decreasing anxiety, reducing youth suicide, and promoting overall well-being within our school environments for all students. In Stepanchak et al. (2022), the authors highlighted this emerging practice as a part of the Best Starts for Kids Levy in King County, Washington. The county has awarded grants to middle schools across the county for program development for the past four years (Stepanchak et al., 2022). In the school district where I am principal, we are utilizing the screening process identified and utilizing our school counseling and partner mental health counselor to provide an opportunity to all our students for a direct connection with a supportive, caring adult at our school. This is one of the consistent factors that the other articles highlighted (Ginicola et al., 2017; Johns & Lowry et al., 2019; Wolpert et al., 2013) that helps to improve a sense of belonging within students, particularly with gender and sexuality diverse-identified students. This article, as well as the anecdotal data that we have observed throughout our school from discussions with our students, suggests that this intervention and support is working in helping these students feel that connection of belonging with an adult as well as support for their chosen identity. The article provided a more county-wide analysis of student input through focus groups that support the efficacy of the program. Other data released county-wide demonstrates an overall positive impact for students who
identify as non-binary and LGBTQ+. In the current study, I endeavored to explore this school- and community-level factor in my research towards promoting best practices for how schools can support all students through wellness and support.

Several other articles reviewed provided additional foundational research and data to support that building awareness and providing partnered mental health and social emotional support for gender and sexuality diverse students is a powerful tool for schools (Fish, 2020; Ostermeyer, 2019). These studies highlighted the need for practitioners to sharpen their stances in awareness, care, and honoring individual identities as they enter into work with gender and sexuality diverse students. In addition, schools who have implemented these types of practices as a part of their Tier II and Tier III systems of support have observed noteworthy increases in students reporting a connection to an adult and a higher sense of belonging as a result (Greytak et al., 2013; Johns & Lowry et al., 2019; Wolpert et al., 2013). While schools around the nation may face funding issues, many states are noticing the need to embed these resources into the schools, especially following the pandemic. This research study explored emerging strategies schools are utilizing to secure grant opportunities to incorporate mental health services in schools (Fish, 2020; McDermott et al., 2023b; McPhail, 2022).

**Summary**

The foundational research that supports this study continues to evolve and develop out of a body of work dating back roughly 15 years. In connecting this literature to the research study, clear themes emerged throughout these sources that provided the basis for a phenomenological study that could also develop a framework for schools to adaptively meet the needs for gender and sexuality diverse students. As reflected in the literature, to create inclusive environments,
schools must first recognize various challenges this community faces and work to validate and support these diverse identities.

Identified challenges faced by gender and sexuality diverse students in the literature include the following:

- Hostile discriminatory language and incidents of harm: Many gender and sexuality diverse students encounter bullying, harassment, and discrimination from peers and sometimes even educators. This hostile environment can have a profound impact on their mental health and academic performance.

- Lack of representation and voice: The absence of inclusive curricula and representation in textbooks and classroom materials can make gender and sexuality diverse students feel invisible and marginalized. This lack of representation perpetuates stereotypes and ignorance.

- Limited access to supportive resources: Many schools lack the necessary resources and support systems, such as gender-neutral restrooms, LGBTQ+ clubs, or counseling services tailored to the needs of these students.

- Mental health issues: Gender and sexuality diverse students are at a higher risk of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety due to the stress of navigating a prejudiced society and often facing rejection from family or peers.

Despite the challenges they may face, gender and sexuality diverse students bring unique perspectives and strengths to the school community. Acknowledging and embracing these opportunities can lead to a more inclusive and enriched educational experience for all. This
research study is grounded in the notion that schools can make experiences better for Gender and Sexuality diverse students. As Maya Angelou notes: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better” (Angelou, 2020).
Chapter III: Research Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The proposed research project focused on investigating schools that utilize intentional strategies that enhance and promote inclusive and supportive environments for students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. Many school districts across Washington and the United States are embarking upon equity-based initiatives to address systemic inequities for underserved or marginalized groups, including BIPOC students and others. The goal of this research is to highlight and identify best practices that support the unique needs of the gender and sexuality diverse population in our schools. Preceding this study is a research framework that identified a phenomenological approach that sought to understand student experiences from those who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. A more complete understanding of this lived experience will allow for the capacity to document and categorize specific school practices that promote and sustain a sense of belonging and increased safety for this community. In pursuing this research model, I aspired to understand more completely the experiences of this population of students and observe strategies and supports that help them in both social, emotional, and academic areas in schools. As Merriam & Tisdell (2016) noted, “The overall purpose of a qualitative study is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 24). In this study, I focused on phenomenological research methods to understand the essence of the experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse, and work toward a more complete understanding, so that we can improve these experiences in the future. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Research Methodology & Design

This research utilized a qualitative design to build upon the various levels of existing research highlighted in Chapter II. While this study focused on a more complete understanding of the experiences of gender and sexuality diverse students in schools, I sought to also uncover how practitioners create spaces in classrooms that foster safety and honor the unique cultures that are represented there. As the authors Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, “All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a qualitative study is to uncover and interpret those meanings” (p. 25). From the data collected, I framed findings, and from these findings, developed recommendations for best practices that may improve social emotional and academic outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse students and all students from marginalized backgrounds. Finally, the participants in this study were instrumental in accomplishing these future actions as they are a part of the community that is pioneering strategies and engagement with the gender and sexuality diverse community on Vashon Island.

As a member of the Vashon community and school district, and as lead researcher, I would consider myself as an “insider” to the organization, especially as I endeavor to be a better “ally” and advocate for the gender and sexuality diverse community in our school district. As Merriam and Tisdell also noted, “It is common practice for researchers to examine their biases and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest before embarking on a study” (p. 27). As I considered this study and my own biases and assumptions, I concluded that this study was warranted to enhance the culture and environment of our schools for gender and sexuality diverse students. This study relied on the corpus of extant literature and endeavored to engage key practitioners and former students with in-depth interviews, make key observations, and seek
student voice through a qualitative survey. This process enabled the findings to be triangulated and verified into a rich set of recommendations that schools should consider to better support students.

I considered a range of methodologies when developing this research study. As the gender and sexuality diverse community evolved in recent years and gained an increased voice in our society, we recognize shifts and growth in the population of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse in our schools. I considered both a case study approach and action research, both of which offer means of exploring the phenomenon. However, I selected phenomenology because of the opportunity to probe and analyze perspectives of those within the gender and sexuality diverse community and those who are allies. As a practicing school administrator, who views the work of leading schools through an equity lens, my hope is to provide other practitioners with a practical and focused approach and recommendations that are implementable within a school’s bounded capacities. There is a clear need to build the body of research in supporting the work of practicing educators with the gender and sexuality diverse community of students. The unique and diverse cultural attributes of this community require schools to adapt their practices and become more inclusive and responsive to these students.

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in the theory that schools must know and understand the various cultural representations that make up their student body. Gender and sexuality diverse students make up a unique culture within a school, and to serve these students better, schools, school leaders, and staff members may adopt and practice specific actions to connect, support, and better engage this unique community. This study sought best practices, attitudes, and support
systems that foster a sense of belonging and connectedness for students in the gender and
sexuality diverse community. The design of this study centered on the experiences of students
who identify as gender and sexuality diverse in schools. As a part of the study, I reviewed and
documented community resources and active leadership shown by partners in the Vashon Island
School District to better understand how these resources can be utilized in the future. Following
the analysis of the data revealed, I developed structured recommendations for schools who wish
to better understand students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse and to improve those
students’ school experiences. I view this form of practical qualitative research as a means to
identify promising practices that will enable educators to enhance the experiences of gender and
sexuality diverse students in all schools and aimed to utilize the wisdom and expertise of both
our recognized educators and community members to provide practical strategies and services
that school leaders and educators can embrace and implement.

In keeping with many of the reviewed literature themes, I proposed an identification of
both community partners and staff members who have experiences in school settings who
provide intentional support and practices for inclusion of the gender and sexuality diverse-
identifying students. These individuals were interviewed using the protocol listed in Appendix F,
which focused on determining the conditions that support a sense of belonging for students
within schools. In addition, a key question in these interviews was to inquire about what the key
characteristics of supportive school staff members are that make a difference for individuals in
feeling more connected to school. The data from the interviews developed into major themes,
best practices, and a theory or roadmap for schools to use that identify best practices in
promoting a sense of inclusion, identity, and empathy for those students who identify as gender
and sexuality diverse.
An additional research strategy was to survey students with a qualitative survey tool with focused questions that explored the environmental and human factors that may exist that make a difference for these students’ overall well-being. Student voice is a powerful data point, and through this survey, I endeavored to provide a unique lens into this voice. Overall, the goal was to triangulate and verify these data sources to provide strong reliability within the study. According to Mirriam & Tisdell, “triangulation—whether you make use of more than one data collection method, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories—is a powerful strategy for increasing the credibility or internal validity of your research” (2016, p. 244).

**Research Questions**

The following set of general research questions guided this study:

- What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have hampered their ability to be successful and to feel affirmed in their expression of self?
- What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have enhanced their success and increased affirmation of themselves?
- What intentional school-wide strategies do schools employ to provide positive messaging and inclusive language and to promote an identity-affirming culture?
- How do educators, considered to be effective by students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse employ strategies school-wide and in the classroom to promote a sense of belonging in gender and sexuality diverse students?
- What strategies are considered effective in impacting the social emotional, mental health, and academic success of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse?
Participants

To obtain as many perspectives as possible, I intended to focus on a broad network of individuals who were willing to participate in semi-structured interviews. Both practitioner voice and former student voice were identified for a sample selection. For this study, I employed purposeful sampling of recognized leaders and community partners. Interviews were conducted with five school staff members who are recognized leaders in developing supportive environments for students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. I also invited four community partners who identify as part of the gender and sexuality diverse community who shared their experiences from schools in various locations. As a part of this research project, I invited recent graduates of Vashon Island School District for semi-structured interviews to explore their perspectives as recent students on how schools have successfully served gender and sexuality diverse students the in recent years and what potential changes they would recommend to schools to foster inclusion, voice, and equity for students from this community. Because of my role as principal and my cumulative experience in communicating with and supporting gender and sexuality diverse students, I identified both adults and former student participants who matched the profile I was seeking for this study. I invited student participants based upon their leadership, resilience, and perspectives on gender and sexuality diverse issues. I utilized “snowball sampling” in the process, inviting the research participants to identify other individuals whom they believed could contribute to the study. In determining the overall number of participants, I analyzed the quality and depth of the data collected in the interviews to determine at what point my data reflected saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition to conducting interviews with recent graduates who are part of the gender and sexuality diverse community, I invited students at both McMurray Middle School and Vashon...
Island High school who are members of the Gender/Sexuality Alliance clubs to participate in a confidential qualitative survey designed to seek their perspectives on what schools and classrooms can do to support students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. This survey focused on positive strategies and school culture elements that they have observed as helpful to them in their experience. The number of participants for this survey was determined by the availability of current Gender/Sexuality Alliance Club members at McMurray Middle School and Vashon Island High School. I anticipated inviting twenty or more students to participate in the survey. Appendix A, E, and F describe the recruitment flier, the permission and assent procedures implemented for both the interviews, and the survey.

**Sample Selection Protocol**

The sample selection protocol was as follows:

- interviews with four staff members who are recognized as leaders and best practitioners in creating inclusive classrooms,
- interviews with three community partners who are recognized as trained leaders and as instrumental in support of gender and sexuality diverse students,
- interviews with two recent graduates who can describe their recent experiences at a school that supported them, and
- implement a qualitative survey with approximately twenty current middle and high school students who identify as members or allies of the gender and sexuality diverse community.

**Setting**

This study focused on gathering qualitative data from educational and community
members who are recognized on Vashon Island as best practitioners, allies, and leaders to the gender and sexuality diverse community. I interviewed these individuals utilizing open-ended questions in a semi-structured process. I conducted these interviews in a school-based setting, providing privacy and confidentiality for the participants who agreed to participate in the interviews. I endeavored to utilize “snowball sampling” in the process, inviting the research participants to suggest other individuals whom they believed could contribute to the study. “Snowball sampling strategy involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you have established for participation in the study. As you interview these early key participants, you ask each one to refer you to other participants” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98).

As a part of this research project, I identified recent graduates of Vashon Island School District for similar semi-structured interviews to gather information as to their student perspectives on how schools have successfully served gender and sexuality diverse students in recent years and what potential improvements they would recommend to schools to foster inclusion, voice, and equity for students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. All participants were provided with an informed consent description highlighted in Appendix C. All interviewees were referred to in this research with appropriate pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality throughout the study.

In addition to the interviews, I invited students at McMurray Middle School and Vashon Island High School who belong to the Gender Spectrum Alliance (GSA) clubs to complete a survey. This survey was administered via Google Forms and allowed for student voice to be included in my research. All participants were provided with a description of consent and assent
highlighted in Appendix C and E. All survey data was kept strictly confidential on a secure storage device.

**Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures**

The purpose of the study was to determine best practices that schools can implement to support gender and sexuality diverse students more effectively and create an increased sense of belonging within the school community. The interviews were held in each participant’s natural environment to the degree possible. Each interview lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. I utilized Zoom recording and Otter AI transcription tools to provide an accurate and detailed transcript. These tools enhanced my own precise notetaking and review of the data collected in the interviews. As noted earlier, I ensured the precision and accuracy of the transcripts by providing each of the participants with the opportunity to review and member check the record of the interviews. Again, this was a strategy to ensure reliability and validity of the research project. Utilizing qualitative data derived from interviews from the survey, I coded the data and began to develop themes through an inductive and comparative analysis. More details on this process will be shared later in this chapter and in Chapter IV.

In coordinating the semi-structured interviews, I shared with each participant the purpose of the research, the procedures used, and the protocol for the data collection. I also communicated the safeguards I implemented for the data and for participant confidentiality. In addition, I communicated with participants that they may stop the interview or their participation in the study at any time. The interview followed a semi-structured protocol, and additional questions were adapted based upon the nature of the conversation.
Interview Protocol for the Study

My goal for the interview was to get a sense of how both practitioners and former student respondents’ observations and experiences about school practices are similar or different. In addition, I hoped to use staff members’ perspectives, from working with current gender and sexuality diverse students, in hearing the student voice about what school practices contribute to a sense of belonging and connectedness for all students. I planned to interview two to three community partners who are co-leaders of our Gender/Sexuality Alliance clubs, an affinity group for gender and sexuality diverse students at our school. In addition, I intended to interview our embedded school mental health counselor, school counselor, and one or more teachers who may provide insights from students with whom they have worked with in determining the best practices related to serving this community of students. Finally, I sought to interview two or three recent graduates of Vashon Island High School to gain insights from their experiences in our school system. Pseudonyms were utilized in reference to all participants in the research findings and recommendations. All interview transcripts and recordings were securely stored and kept in a locked filing cabinet. Following this study, the data will be destroyed per research recommendations.

Survey Protocol

The goal for the student survey was to get a sense of how students from the gender and sexuality diverse community perceive their experiences in school. The goal was to understand what practices in classrooms and the school-wide setting promote a sense of belonging and connectedness and provide enhanced student voice for this community. I planned to invite members of the Gender/Sexuality Alliance, an affinity group for gender and sexuality diverse
identifying students and allies. This survey was anonymous and ensured that all information was kept confidential and secure. The data collected was stored securely and kept in a locked filing cabinet to which I alone had access. Following this study, the data will be destroyed per research recommendations.

Data Analysis

Analyzing data into practical themes that will be useful for leaders and educators who wish to support gender and sexuality diverse students was critical to this research study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) provided guidance on best strategies to “make sense out of the data” (p. 202). Put simply, they suggest that “data analysis is the process used to answer your research question(s)” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). The process of data collection and analysis should be done in a concurrent manner in qualitative research, and this “process of data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.195). This process should be centered on category construction through the process of coding, sorting the categories and data, and naming the categories. Throughout the analysis process, a focus should be made on making the units or categories of data “heuristic—that is, the unit should be focused on revealing information relevant to the study and stimulate the reader to consider a larger context or applied meaning” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 203). This study identified themes that can apply to and clarify strategic and relevant areas to support gender and sexuality diverse students in schools. I employed a coding process in analyzing the data gleaned from the interviews. These codes were recorded and processed according to the designations that the individuals provided, and I utilized Atlas.ti software to assist in this process. “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 199). From this
recording, I created an inventory of the entire data set to facilitate the more in-depth analysis in the next step. Utilizing a step-by-step process, this simultaneous collection and analysis process is called *constant comparative* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and it was commenced upon completion of the first interviews. The goal of this process was to make sense of the data through consolidation and interpretation and the making of meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I utilized open coding procedures as the first interview was completed, constructing as many categories as possible. Upon subsequent interviews, I implemented a more analytic coding procedure by grouping open codes into more functional categories including a reflection on the meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). “The purpose of phenomenological reduction is to lead the researcher back to the experience of the participants and to reflect on it, in order to suspend judgment, so that one can stay with the lived experience of the phenomenon in order to get at its essence” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 227).

Utilizing the themes identified in Chapter Two, individual factors, interpersonal factors, school factors, mental health supports, and, finally, inclusive leadership strategies, I created categories from the data. These “buckets” provided an initial means of sorting the first phase of code organization. Following this process, I analyzed the initial code sorts for commonalities and differences to create larger, more synthesized themes. As the process unfolded, I utilized a constant comparative methodology to support a thorough analysis and means to authentically analyze the qualitative data provided by the interviews. As Merriam & Tisdell aver, “Qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative … and seeks to ultimately answer the research question(s) that you are utilizing” (2016, p.201). Employing inductive methodology, I followed a process described below:

**Figure 4**
Categories, Themes, and Findings

EXHIBIT 8.2. CRITERIA FOR CATEGORIES, THEMES, AND FINDINGS.

Must be responsive to (that is, answer) the research question(s) and . . .

1. Be *exhaustive* (enough categories to encompass all relevant data)
2. Be *mutually exclusive* (a relevant unit of data can be placed in only one category)
3. Be as *sensitive* to the data as possible
4. Be *conceptually congruent* (all categories are at the same level of abstraction)

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 213)

The data gleaned from the qualitative survey was compared to the themes identified from the coding and theme development from the interviews. This process found convergence on the themes generated as well as identifying potential gaps in the codes or themes that were significant enough to add to the mix of themes identified.

Limitations of the Study

This study intends to provide a rich and robust set of recommendations for educators and leaders who wish to recognize and support the gender and sexuality diverse community in a more profound way while incorporating intentional inclusive strategies that will improve students’ sense of belonging and connectedness. A key limitation in this research is that the study focused only on secondary schools and not elementary school settings. While conversations about gender and sexuality identity at younger ages are necessary, these are pointedly different and should be pursued by other researchers. In addition, this study only focused on one community (Vashon Island) and one segment of time (2021–Present). Another potential
limitation of this study is the potential that I brought bias to this study. As an ally to the gender and sexuality diverse community and in my position as a school and community leader, I work to address equity and social justice issues. My intent for this study was that I surface these biases in my analysis of the data while continuing to be open-minded about the various directions that the data may lead. In developing a process for the constant comparative methodology, Merriam and Tisdell recommended a constant analytic balance between the “trees” and the “forest.” Each time a researcher goes between, they recommended that the researcher consider their biases that were brought into their framework with the following questions: “What might you be projecting onto the data based on your own beliefs and life experience? How does your ‘positionality’ or ‘social location’ affect what you see? How are you guarding against your biases?” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 208).

A final limitation of this study is that the participants who are interviewed for the study may lack the scope of experience and perspective to support generalizability to the findings. To address this limitation, I focused on recruiting participants who routinely demonstrate leadership and are recognized by the community as leaders in developing safe and inclusive environments in their practice. In addition, I utilized the notion of snowball sampling to continue to seek those individuals who can provide the most effective perspectives and experiences that will allow me to have a rich data collection process.

Subject Positioning

My position in relation to the research study is one of an “insider” for the purposes of the work. While I do not identify as a member of the gender and sexuality diverse community, I clearly delineate myself as an ally to the community and continue to lead the work in our school district assisting our most marginalized students. My position in the school district provided me
with a unique window to embark upon this study. Supported by the findings that emanated from the study and guided by the perspectives that participants in the study shared with me, I endeavored to continue to develop inclusionary practices that foster higher engagement and belonging for all students. Peer review was also employed to solicit feedback as to the nature of the questions in both the interviews and the survey. This allowed me to adapt questions that may have been seen as concerning or problematic to the student community.

**Validity and Reliability**

Throughout this process of data collection, data analysis, and construction of categories and themes, a rigorous focus was made toward ensuring validity and reliability in the research study. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the researcher may employ several strategies to accomplish this goal.

**Figure 5**

*Promoting Validity and Reliability in a Study*
Member checking was utilized by providing transcripts to each participant to provide verification of their statements. Participants were invited to contribute to this research project through checking the interview and survey questions knowing that their recommendations and feedback were incorporated into the implementation of the research.

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Triangulation</td>
<td>Using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm emerging findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Member checks/ Respondent validation</td>
<td>Taking tentative interpretations/findings back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Adequate engagement in data collection</td>
<td>Adequate time spent collecting data such that the data become “saturated”; this may involve seeking discrepant or negative cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Researcher’s position or reflexivity</td>
<td>Critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Peer review/ examination</td>
<td>Discussions with colleagues regarding the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Audit trail</td>
<td>A detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rich, thick descriptions</td>
<td>Providing enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context, and, hence, whether findings can be transferred.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Maximum variation</td>
<td>Purposefully seeking variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259)
The trustworthiness of a qualitative study relies on a triangulated methodology. The goal of triangulation was to focus, to create synergy and common themes from the practitioner and community interview data, the recent graduate individual interview data, and the current student survey data. This notion of triangulation was a focus to provide the type of validity and reliability that researchers must attain in their study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I conducted thorough member checking, respondent validation, and an “audit trail” throughout the interview and survey data collection process. I self-reflected and sought peer review and examination throughout the process of data collection and analysis to ensure that my positioning, as well as the research position, was valid and reliable in its scope. Finally, I provided a rich description in Chapter IV of the information gleaned from both the interviews and surveys, with the focus of honoring the voice of practitioners, community members, and students.

Summary

This qualitative study is focused on surfacing a more complete understanding of the lived experiences of individuals from gender and sexuality diverse communities in schools. As noted in Chapter II, students from the gender and sexuality diverse community report feeling less connected to adults and other peers in many schools around the country and in higher proportions than their cis-gendered peers. Extant research and anecdotal personal observation suggest that students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse suffer from increased levels of depression and suicide attempts. This pattern is not uniform in certain areas and states, with particular incidence noted in rural and southern communities. With increasing numbers of students who are examining their own gender and sexuality, schools are beginning to understand the conditions that provide an increased sense of belonging and improved educational outcomes for diverse groups of students.
This study utilized a phenomenological approach to the research to observe and gain an understanding of the school experiences of individuals from the gender and sexuality diverse community and the staff members who support them in schools. The goal of this study was to develop a more comprehensive perspective of what actions make a difference in creating a sense of belonging and increased outcomes for students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. I interviewed individuals who have broad experience in supporting this community on Vashon Island, and I ensured that former student voices were documented throughout the research process. Finally, I surveyed current students at the middle and high school level regarding their perceptions of supportive practices in the current context.

Interview participants in this study were recruited from the current staff in the Vashon Island School District, community partners who work closely with our students, and former students who may provide unique insights from their journey through our school system. These semi-structured interviews provided the basis for a thorough data collection process utilizing Zoom recording and Otter AI transcription methods. Throughout the research process, these transcripts were cataloged and analyzed to construct themes that emerge from the data. I also utilized the data collected from the survey to compare and potentially surface additional themes. The themes that emerged provided recommendations for future research and best practices that schools may wish to implement. This study is intended to contribute to a growing body of research that begins to address potential barriers and inequities that gender and sexuality diverse students face in many areas of the United States.
Chapter IV: Research Results and Outcomes

Introduction

The problem investigated in this study is how schools can better support students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. The purpose of this study was to understand educator, community partner, and student experiences in schools to highlight a set of practices that may provide an increased sense of belonging and improved social emotional and academic outcomes for students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. The study focused on qualitative research methodology, with a phenomenological design, and sought to analyze the various experiences these individuals observed in schools. Data sources included semi-structured interviews with educators, community partners, and former students in the Vashon Island district and community. In addition, a group of current students participated in a qualitative survey to give access to their insights regarding their perceptions of school and classroom climate factors. The Vashon Island School District granted permission to conduct this research. The participants included the following categories: teachers, administrators, mental health practitioners, counselors, community partners, former students, and current students, some of whom reside in the Vashon Island community and a few in nearby areas.

Overview of the Research Process

Great care was taken to maintain trustworthiness and credibility throughout the data collection process. I used several procedures to represent the perspectives of the participants with accuracy with the goal of establishing a dependable and transferable outcome that could apply to other school systems and communities. Furthermore, creating clear protocols and maintaining these systems throughout the study contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.
Credibility in a study derives from the extent to which a study measures what it intends to measure and how significantly the results align with reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As noted, adherence to protocols and procedures ensured the credibility of the study. Thorough, accurate transcription of the interviews and verification through member checking were strategies I utilized throughout the interview process. Member checking allowed participants to clarify their intended meanings as well as consider additional information they intended to share. In addition, the data collection process involved an inductive analysis process that involved aggregating the data into themes that intersected across the interviews. These strategies contribute to the credibility of the data and the review process.

A study that demonstrates dependability and can provide evidence of transferability to other settings is clearly a goal of qualitative research studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, creating a consistent interview environment that included semi-structured questions, review of consent documents, and procedures that accurately documented the testimony were essential to dependability and transferability. A clear protocol existed to ensure the survey data collection process was purposeful and transparent with any student participants and their parents or guardians. These data points provided additional student voice and additional evidence of the validity of the interview data. The recording of a thorough audit trail throughout the study was also a focus that enhanced the dependability of the study. In terms of reliability, due to the protocols and procedures noted in this study, the data that was collected is forthright, honest, and accurate.

Confirming the results of a study contributes to the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Triangulation of data points is certainly an outcome that is desired to promote confirmability and objectivity more accurately in a particular study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study utilized a
cross-sectional group of participants to highlight educators, community affiliations, and student perspectives to achieve this desired triangulation of the data. Throughout the study, I maintained a continuous and self-reflective perspective regarding my positional reflexivity in the study. Maintaining my own position in this organization was central, yet projecting my stance as a listener and an ally of the community was equally important. Throughout the process, I consulted with colleagues and members of the gender and sexuality diverse community on Vashon Island regarding the nature and purpose of my research as well as the interview and survey protocols. Finally, the research included an audit trail that provides clear and comprehensive information regarding the entire data collection and analysis processes. This audit trail can provide future researchers with the opportunity to build upon this study to potentially apply these findings to other geographical locations.

Figure 6

Data Collection and Analysis Process
A systematic coding process followed each of my interviews and culminated in a synthesis of the codes derived from each interview. I utilized the program, Atlas.ti to upload the transcripts of the interviews and the data from the student survey. This program provided initial coding and corresponding quotations from individuals. Following this initial coding, I reviewed and collated the codes for accuracy. I collapsed the initial codes into a series of categories derived from these data. Following the administration of the student survey, I utilized Atlas.ti to upload the survey data and develop additional separation and analysis of the information. This process revealed additional codes, which were condensed into four additional categories. Consistent with the chart above, comparison and verification for the various categories ensued. In addition, the analysis involved a review of transcripts and open responses to be sure no codes or categories were omitted. Finally, an examination of the existing categories produced five major themes. These five themes were then assigned to the essential research questions for this study.

**Semi-Structured Interviews—School Staff**

I chose to initiate the research phase of this study with semi-structured interviews with various school staff at both McMurray Middle School and Vashon Island High School. This provided an opportunity to hone the semi-structured interview protocol and practice ensuring that the participants felt comfortable, valued, and supported in the process. I invited a purposive sampling of educators who are either recognized classroom leaders in creating inclusive environments or are advisors and allies of the Gender/Sexuality Alliance clubs at both schools. These individuals were recruited utilizing an email script (Appendix A) and provided with the consent document in addition to the proposed semi-structured interview questions (Appendix F) in advance of the interviews. The interviews were all conducted via the Zoom platform. I recorded each interview via audio, video, and Zoom transcription. I also utilized Otter AI as a
backup transcription tool, which provided an additional means to cross-reference and provide greater accuracy to the transcription for each interview. The interviews took place between February 5, 2024, and March 5, 2024. Each of the interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 50 minutes in length. As noted, a digital copy of the revised transcript was provided to each of the interviewees to ensure member checking throughout the process. These semi-structured interviews relied on an interview protocol (Appendix F), but each interview involved follow-up questions that grew out of the answers and perspectives provided by the participants.

**Participants (All Names are Pseudonyms)**

School staff participants provided a rich source of information to this study. They were very effective thought partners to this research. We also discussed confidentiality issues related to their quotations in the manuscript. While I provided assurances that pseudonyms were used, Vashon Island School District is a relatively small district, and there would be an off chance that their quotations could be loosely attributed to them. While these individuals were unconcerned about this possibility and were very proud to be sharing their work and advocacy for the gender and sexuality diverse community of students, attempts were made to de-identify these individuals when referring to them in this manuscript.

**Carolina**

Carolina is an English teacher in the Vashon Island School District. She also is the advisor to both the Gender/Spectrum Alliance Club (GSA) and the Queer Spectrum Alliance Club (QSA). Carolina began as a teacher in 2021, so this is her third full year in the Vashon Island School District. Prior to that time, she served as a paraeducator in another district. Carolina is a graduate of Western Washington University.
Anna

Anna is a Social Studies teacher in the Vashon Island School district. Anna also teaches a Gender and Queer Studies elective class at the middle school. She began her service in the Vashon Island School District in 2017. Anna is a Fulbright Scholar and leads a language institute for Russian language immersion. Prior to this role, she taught in various schools in Southern California. She has been in education for approximately 20 years.

Yvonne

Yvonne is a school counselor and has served in the Vashon Island School District since 2008 at the middle and elementary level. Prior to this role, she served as a school counselor and school psychologist in the Bethel School District. She has been in education for approximately 24 years. Yvonne also serves as a co-advisor of the Gender Spectrum Alliance (GSA) club at one of the schools.

Montgomery

Montgomery is also a school counselor and has served in the Vashon Island School District since 2021. Prior to this role, she served as a school social worker in the Bethel School District. Montgomery also serves as a co-advisor of the Gender/Spectrum Alliance (GSA) at one of the schools.

Suzanne

Suzanne is a central office administrator for the Vashon Island School District. Prior to this position, she served as a building administrator in the district. She was also a math teacher in
the Vashon School District and Peninsula School District. Her educational service spans approximately 34 years.

The school staff interviews proved to be very enlightening toward addressing three of the research questions posed in this study:

- How do educators, considered to be effective by students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse, employ strategies school-wide and in the classroom to promote a sense of belonging in gender and sexuality diverse students?
- What strategies are considered effective in impacting the social emotional, mental health, and academic success of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse?

Notably, a variety of data gathered in the school staff interviews related to the last three research questions regarding school-wide strategies and characteristics effective teachers demonstrate in their classroom environments. School staff were very forthright in describing their intentional practices and learning over the course of many years in education. Considerable information to support the study emerged from these interviews.

While all of the school staff who were interviewed were able to provide unique information from their perspectives and what they have heard directly from students, the interview with Carolina was particularly informative, as she had shared the interview questions with her students from the Gender/Spectrum Alliance club at Vashon Island High School. Interestingly, the information provided added a level of student voice to the research and more directly addressed the first two research questions about school experiences of students. This element to the research was not expected but was certainly appreciated, as my goal was to represent the student element for the study.
**Semi-Structured Interviews—Community Partners**

The interviews with various community partners who connect with our schools proved to be very illuminating. Like the staff interviews, it was imperative to me that the participants felt comfortable, valued, and supported during these interviews. I did not have a similar familiarity with these individuals as I had with the staff members, and several of these community partners identify as part of the gender and sexuality diverse community. It was equally vital to these interviews that I positioned myself as an advocate and an ally to this community. During the interviews, I articulated that my goal with the research was to make schools more inclusive and safer places for all individuals.

Three individuals who are or were a part of the DOVE project agreed to participate in the survey, and all three participated in an interview. One other community partner served for several years as a mental health provider in our school and works with the organization NeighborCare, a nonprofit school-based health care provider. Again, this purposive sampling of these individuals provided me with a rich selection of folks who have worked as youth advocates and in very particular circumstances have collaborated with our school’s Gender/Sexuality Alliance club. Two of these individuals have also provided professional development to Vashon Island School District staff on how the schools can create inclusive spaces in their classrooms for the gender and sexuality diverse students.

These individuals were recruited utilizing the email script highlighted in Appendix B and provided with the consent document (Appendix C) in addition to the semi-structured interview questions highlighted in Appendix F in advance of the interviews. The interviews were all conducted via the Zoom platform, and I recorded each interview via audio, video, and Zoom
transcription. I utilized Otter AI as a backup transcription tool, which provided an additional means to cross-reference and provide greater accuracy to the transcription for each interview. The interviews took place between February 21, 2024, and March 10, 2024. Each of the interviews required between 40 minutes and 60 minutes. I sent each of the interviewees a digital copy of the revised transcription of the interview to ensure member checking throughout the process. These semi-structured interviews utilized scripted questions consistently throughout the interviews (Appendix F), but each interview also involved follow-up questions that corresponded with answers and perspectives provided by the participants.

Participants (All Names are Pseudonyms)

Kristina

Kristina is the Youth Advocate and Prevention Specialist for the DOVE Project, a non-profit organization on Vashon Island, and is community partner for the schools. She co-leads the Gender Spectrum Alliance (GSA) and works in the schools to lead prevention work during lunches at McMurray Middle School. Prior to this role, she was a behavioral health specialist in both Montana and Washington.

Mary

Mary is currently finishing her tenure as a facilitator for the Teen Council and a youth advocate, both roles with the DOVE Project. Mary has served in these roles for the past six years and works with students at the middle school level and the high school level.

Lou
Lou currently works at the Orbit Youth Program, another community partner nonprofit organization. Prior to this role, Lou worked as a youth advocate for the DOVE Project. Lou also serves as a co-leader for the Gender/Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at McMurray Middle School and has provided professional development training for the McMurray Middle School staff.

Molly

Molly is currently a school social worker at Meeker Middle School in the Seattle Public Schools. Prior to this role, she served as a school-based mental health practitioner for NeighborCare Health and focused on serving students at McMurray Middle School. She has worked closely with the two school counselors to support students at McMurray Middle School for the past five years.

These community-focused interviews provided abundant data points connected to all the research questions posed in this study. In addition, the observations noted by community-based partners tended to augment and solidify the perspectives of the school staff. As several of these individuals identified as part of the gender and sexuality diverse community, their perspectives created an even greater level of validation. As these individuals are extensive contributors to our school’s social emotional learning and mental health supports, the key research questions for which they provided insights were as follows:

- What intentional school-wide strategies do schools employ to provide positive messaging and inclusive language and to promote an identity-affirming culture?
- What strategies are considered effective in impacting the social emotional, mental health, and academic success of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse?
More detailed information regarding the codes that emanated from these interviews will be forthcoming in this chapter.

**Semi-Structured Interviews—Former Students**

Recruiting former students for interviews proved to be the most challenging exercise in the research process. While it was going to be a significant part of the data collection process and moving the research toward a triangulated outcome, securing a commitment from two students for interviews was difficult, and it took approximately three weeks to complete two interviews. However, these interviews were valuable in terms of leading to a better understanding of the complexities these individuals faced at school and how they are approaching the next phase of their lives. A total of six former students were recommended as potential participants, and I recruited all these individuals utilizing the notice in Appendix A. I utilized a modified set of questions for the semi-structured interviews, and these interviews happened on March 6, 2024, and March 17, 2024. These interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were conducted via the Zoom platform. I utilized the transcription tool in Zoom and used Otter AI to provide a backup for the transcription. Following the interviews, I edited the transcripts and provided a copy to each of the participants for them to review, modify, and edit. For these interviews, we stayed closer to the original questions (Appendix G), as these provided sufficient structure for these participants to provide information about their experiences.

**Participants (All Names are Pseudonyms)**

Adam
Adam is a recent Vashon Island School District graduate (2023). Adam was a member and leader in the Gender/Sexuality Alliance at Vashon Island High School for the years they attended the school. Adam identifies as gender and sexuality diverse and shared their experiences throughout their time at both McMurray Middle School and Vashon Island High School.

Drake

Drake is a recent Vashon Island School District graduate (2023). Drake was also a member and leader in the Gender/Sexuality Alliance at Vashon Island High School for the years they attended the school. Drake identifies as gender and sexuality diverse and shared their experiences throughout their time at Vashon Island High School.

As noted, these interviews provided key insights from the recent student perspective about how they were able to navigate through the school experience as gender and sexuality diverse students. These individuals were able to articulate struggles they experienced and the key support that they received from various educators throughout their school tenure. The willingness of these individuals to share their experiences was notable, and I am grateful for their contributions to the research. These interviews were critical data points in addressing the first two research questions posed in this study:

- What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have hampered their ability to be successful and to feel affirmed in their expression of self?
- What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have enhanced their success and increased affirmation of themselves?

More specific information regarding codes and categories that were related to these two questions will follow in this chapter.
Student Surveys

Recruiting students at both schools for surveys also proved to be a challenging endeavor. Due to the constraints of the parent opt-out notification, I wanted to ensure that I was following proper data collection protocols as established yet still honoring the possibility that some of these students who wished to participate in the survey may not have divulged their identity to their families yet. Throughout this process, I consulted with the Gender/Spectrum Alliance advisors and community partners to navigate this tricky balance so that we were able to make sure that our students could participate while maintaining their safety and confidentiality. My goal originally was to recruit 20 students to participate in the survey between the two schools. Due to some issues with the assent/permission process, I was only able to recruit a total of 14 students to participate in the survey detailed in Appendix H. The survey consisted of eight total questions, three of which were open responses. The survey was administered via Google Forms. The responses were downloaded into a spreadsheet, which was a usable format for data analysis purposes.

The two figures that follow are a part of the survey data. They relate to Questions 3 and 4 of the survey.

Figure 7
Similar to the former student interviews, these surveys enhanced my understanding of the perceptions of how students view their lived school experiences. The data collected in these surveys provided relevant information that addressed the first two of the research questions for this study:

- What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have hampered their ability to be successful and to feel affirmed in their expression of self?
What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have enhanced their success and increased affirmation of themselves?

More detailed categories, codes, and themes will be articulated later in this chapter.

Categories and Themes Derived From the Interviews

Utilizing the software, Atlas.ti, I uploaded the transcripts of the interviews for data analysis purposes. An initial run of codes that stemmed from the interviews noted 512 separate individual codes that connected to individual data points. Following an initial analysis, I determined that these codes would consolidate into the “top 16” categories. These categories are as follows:

1. Identity, diversity, and orientation
2. Empathy, respect, and validation
3. Professional development, reflection, and growth
4. Inclusion, acceptance, belonging
5. Community engagement and relationship building
6. Communication and perspectives
7. Positive personal behaviors and characteristics
8. Support, connection, and safety
9. Impacts for individuals
10. Youth voice and empowerment
11. Classrooms and schools
12. Equity and tolerance
13. Family dynamics
14. Leadership and influence

15. Access to resources and mental health

16. Cultural and societal change

Figure 8

Collapsed Codes and Corresponding Quotations

These categories provided a more condensed yet comprehensive way to approach the data analysis from the study. The Atlas.ti software was also useful to connect the quotations from individual survey transcripts that corresponded to these condensed categories. This assisted the analysis process, providing a clear means of making these inductive connections throughout the process. I then utilized inductive and comparative methodology to look for commonalities among these categories and the extent to which they might align with the various research questions posed in this study.
Categories and Themes Derived From Student Surveys

Again, using the software, Atlas.ti, I uploaded the open-ended questions for data analysis purposes. This coding process yielded 14 separate categories from these responses. These categories are as follows:

1. Affirmation
2. Inclusive language
3. Lack of respect
4. Teacher impact
5. Unwanted physical contact
6. Bullying
7. Discrimination
8. Identity affirmation
9. Deadnaming
10. Lack of affirmation
11. Lack of acceptance
12. Peer support
13. Positive school experience
14. Teacher support

Figure 9

Initial Categories From Student Surveys
These overall categories were collapsed into the following four categories following a review process:

1. Affirmation of identity

2. Correct pronoun usage

3. Teacher support

4. Positive school experience and peer support

**Figure 10**

*Collapsed Categories From Student Surveys*
Atlas.ti also organized these condensed codes into a ranking by quotation numbers. Utilizing this software to define and sort the categories and codes was also effective in creating a comparison to the categories derived from the survey. Once this comparative analysis was finalized, a set of proposed themes emerged.

**Composite Themes Supporting the Research Questions**

For each of the research questions identified in this study, I connected a focused theme derived from the categories analyzed from the interviews and the surveys. Two of these themes centered on the student experience and how we can create safety, belonging, and a voice for students in the process. Three additional themes focused on school practices that highlight community engagement and professional development, creating a culture and community of inclusivity and developing networks of support for students.

**Theme #1: Student Safety, Connection, and Support**

This theme addresses the first of my research questions: What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have hampered their ability to be...
successful and to feel affirmed in their expression of self? The former students interviewed for this study articulated a generally positive experience in the Vashon Island School District. Former student Adam, for example, noted the following description for his experience living on Vashon, “I think Vashon … well, while having its difficulties, it is one of the most accepting communities I have been a part of, and most of the students and staff were very supportive and very polite.” Similarly, former student Drake expressed his perspectives in this manner:

I just think that it was a really supportive environment, like, I don’t think that a lot of harassment or bullying was tolerated or, like, allowed, which I appreciated, because it’s not like that everywhere. … I would say it’s honestly one of the best places to be if you are transgender. Like out of all the places I’ve lived or visited. It has been like the most accepting for me and where I feel safe. So, I would say, it’s pretty supportive, like there’s obviously still some tweaks, but like, it’s pretty good.

Conversely, one former student described a difficult incident when they did not feel the support that they wished they could have had. This student described their experience as a transgender student who went out for the football team with an initially positive response that then led to a concerning and unresolved incident from their perspective:

And there was an incident in my freshman year I had when I joined the football team. And most of these guys were like the nicest people I had ever met, which was really surprising to me. But, like a good kind of surprise. But you know there was, of course, a few guys who did not like the fact that there was a transgender person playing with them, and I had reported one incident where the harassment had gotten violent, and nothing was done, from the school. And so, I felt like I didn’t have the school behind me in this, so I ended up just leaving the football team.
Three open response comments on the survey corresponded to the survey question asking if they could offer ideas for changes in the school environment:

- Being more strict about bullying specifically about gender and sexuality, introduction surveys each semester instead of each year, and having homeroom talks about different genders, sexualities, races, etc.
- I would like teachers to discipline more when they hear hateful comments.
- Our school is close to making sure that no one is physically harmed but the main punishment for homophobia is getting told to stop.

These data suggest that even in the Vashon Island school system, while there are predominantly progressive and inclusive attitudes toward gender and sexuality diverse students, these individuals still faced issues of hateful and homophobic language directed at them and even physical acts directed against them.

During the interviews, former students consistently described active listening as a key means of developing trust and showing support. In his interview, Adam articulated what key members of the staff did well to demonstrate their support:

I think that the most helpful thing that my teachers and other staff members did was just listening, like a lot of them were very open to feedback. I remember—I think it was our GSA affinity group. We had a meeting with all the teachers where they could ask questions and where we gave them information about what we needed. I feel like everyone was really open, like listening here. And that had, like, the biggest impact.
This perception corresponds to the data collected from educators who also expressed that keeping an open mind through ongoing learning was a key practice and approach that made them more successful in working with gender and sexuality diverse students. In my interview with school counselor Montgomery, she described this practice in the following ways:

In middle school, now there are students that are exploring their sexuality and gender identity so much more. And so, I'm really learning a lot more like you've said. The adults don't know anything. We just have to let the student’s kind of lead us and keep us up to date. Nearly on a weekly or monthly basis, as things change in with them, and in society. But I think my impression is that there is a lot more open exploration and a lot more openness about people’s true identities.

Lou, a community partner, and co-leader in the Gender/Sexuality Alliance, described this concept in similar, but alternate, terms:

I think some of the key things that kind of come up for me is just the importance of remembering to hold space, for wherever the youth is on that day. Really trying to like to put aside adult assumptions or attitudes, and just hold space. You know why? Why, you know, why are you feeling this way or that? The “why” doesn’t matter, it’s just how that young person is showing up right and how you need to show up as someone to support them. Right?

This type of listening provides validation of a student’s lived experience while also helping them to feel the connection to trusted adults who allow students to be who they are in a more comfortable and authentic way.
Theme #2: Developing Student Voice, Agency, and Leadership.

This theme addresses the second research question: What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have enhanced their success and increased affirmation of themselves? As noted, both former students reported a number of individuals who supported their sense of belonging and connectedness to school. In the interview, Adam explained this regarding a specific teacher:

I feel that with Ms. R, the biggest connection I had to her was really what is the fact that she was part of the [gender and sexuality diverse] community. I liked having that to look up to as someone who also wants to be a teacher, and she had, like, zero tolerance policy against any hate speech or language against us, yeah. And she is also a great example of what I mentioned previously, when teachers just listen, like she was a great person to go to like even outside of class time to just talk.

This example demonstrates not only the importance of listening but of addressing incidents of potential harm in the classroom. An additional theme from this interview describes the idea of representation. If we can support more teachers who look like and are a part of the various communities represented in our schools, more students will see themselves represented in their experiences. In addition, Drake mentioned how a particular teacher demonstrated inclusivity in the classroom:

I mean, I did a lot of drama classes when I was there. So, like I mean acting, so, Mr. J., he would make sure he actually had this form that people would fill out before every production that would say, Are you uncomfortable playing female and male characters, or any character, or like just female characters, or just male characters? And he would stick
to that when casting you. So that was really nice of him, just like to make sure that he
was making sure, and you were comfortable. And he did try really hard to make sure that
everybody could be included in the theater department. So, he was just a really supportive
guy, and I really appreciated him for my sophomore year especially.

These data are examples of how teachers can respect all students’ gender and sexuality identities
by taking informal surveys, seeking to understand student preferences for names, pronouns, and
in this instance, the types of their characters they might play in productions. Student survey
responses also indicated that this practice is a highly effective way to support and honor
students’ identities. These two open-ended responses reflect which teacher practices were most
helpful to the students:

- Teachers who make an effort to say the right name and pronouns. One time we had a sub
  who used our last names to mark us as here, which I thought was nice since that meant no
  one had their dead name said. If there is no possible way to change the name on the
  attendance sheet [sarcasm], then I think using last names should become standard
  practice for subs.

- They provide sanitary products without question, they use proper names and pronouns
  when they are aware of changes, and they do their best to be respectful about changes
  that students may choose to make about themselves. A lot of it, though, has more to do
  with certain teachers’ personality and vibe that they give off than what they physically do
  for each individual student.

These examples of student voice clearly show that intentional teacher practices can provide a
more welcoming and supportive environment that honors student identity in meaningful ways.
The notion of “affinity groups,” such as the Gender/Sexuality Alliance clubs at each school, came up on a number of occasions in the interviews. Both Adam and Drake described how this club experience was vital to their ability to connect to the school and have peers whom they could trust and in whom they could confide. Adam expressed his appreciation for these groups stating, “And our QSA. And our gender/queer friends’ group. When that came around, it was definitely a support. It was really just a place that made me feel more connected to my peers who are also trans or queer.” Drake clearly felt a sense of pride when recalling his participation and leadership in these groups:

Actually, when I was going to Vashon High School, one of the things that I got recognized most for was my effort as a part of the GSA/QSA to put a stop to the harassment in gender neutral bathrooms. Like, I was very serious about that, and I went to board meetings, and I went—I went to the superintendent about it. And I did this whole thing, and like, some stuff, did get better. Like now, I think trans kids are allowed to go in and use the office restroom. So that’s good. And then, like, that was really important to me.

In addition, one open-ended survey response characterized the importance of education and a climate of respect and inclusivity: “They let us share our pronouns, and we are educated about the LGBTQ+ community. There are out LGBTQIA+ teachers who are very kind and supportive.” Promoting student voice, agency, and leadership is a major way in which schools can demonstrate solidarity and allyship with the various communities of students. Actively seeking to be representative for this community is a key component to developing agency and identity. Various strategies can be utilized in classrooms, but making a commitment to know students and respecting preferred names and pronouns are critical first steps. Beyond this,
creating a venue such as affinity groups like Gender/Sexuality Alliances can provide an avenue for demonstrating active listening, fostering student leadership, and developing strong connections.

**Theme #3: School Collaboration With Community Resources**

This theme provides a strong relationship to the following research question in this study: What intentional school-wide strategies do schools employ to provide positive messaging and inclusive language and to promote an identity-affirming culture? During the interviews with our community partners, a great deal of information was gathered regarding this theme and how essential these partnerships are in developing a rich program that supports this population of students. These partners have provided critical first-hand knowledge of the gender and sexuality diverse community while also serving as a resource and providing much-needed training for school staff. Routinely in the interviews, school staff members and leaders cited how vital these community collaborations were to the success of our students and programs. In many instances, school staff may lack the expertise and perspectives necessary to meet the needs of students adequately and to provide ongoing professional development opportunities for educators. Community partnerships can fill the void in these areas and potentially provide positive role models and a rich set of experiences and knowledge. Suzanne, a central office administrator, highlighted the importance of these partnerships:

And then, of course, all of our community groups. We’re very fortunate in our community to have a lot of community groups that are focused on social emotional support. So, whether it’s the DOVE project with the Teen Council or, you know, the Circles groups—they are important connection points for our students.
Mary, the facilitator at the DOVE project for the Teen Council program, which trains high school-aged students to support and teach health lessons in classrooms, noted that adults being open to continual learning on this topic was a key factor:

I mean everything that I teach, and Teen Council is something that I’ve learned as I’ve gone along, and a lot of it, learned from them, you know. I’ll be very honest at the beginning of every year. Like, there’s stuff that I don’t know that you may, and this is a place for us all to, like—I don’t feel comfortable in the position of, like, I’m the authority, because I’m learning all this stuff as we go along. So, when we’re answering anonymous questions, there’s a lot of questions that they get from my classmates where they’ll be, like, “I don’t know. I’ve never even heard of this term before.” And so, we’ll all look it up, and it will be great. That’s new information that we now have. And just this idea that language is constantly evolving, and that’s this and that’s that. It’s constantly evolving. And you have to kind of pay attention and use the language that other people are comfortable using as opposed to being attached to what you know or what you think, you know. Yeah, it’s just never-ending learning, I think.

Utilizing the resources and expertise of these community partners can make such a difference in modeling continual learning opportunities for school staff, which will lead to increased awareness and inclusive practices in the classroom. When schools not only partner with these groups but co-design what these experiences can be, the opportunities can be that much richer and more robust. Kristina, who collaborates with the DOVE project as a youth advocate, also highlighted the uniqueness of the Vashon community when compared to other communities that were less tolerant of gender and sexuality diverse students.
And sometimes I get a little, like I think about my privilege in living here and how so
many people don’t have that. And then I think, like, oh, God, I did my time in those other
places, like I did so much time not feeling safe, like it’s my time to feel that safety and
still do the outreach that I can. But it really changes how you work with youth depending
on where you are. And even just supporting youth in a lot of those places, whether you’re
queer or not, is very much looked down upon, and a lot of barriers to that get in the way:
parental barriers, organizational barriers, and just, I mean, systemic barriers in general.

As a final school perspective on this theme, Yvonne, a school counselor, summed up this
community conversation and collaboration in additional terms:

So, we just know that this student population, we have to be really mindful about how we
support and then how we help to access resources for and recognizing that school systems
have a component of it, that when we can partner with other groups or organizations that
can provide support beyond the school day—like, that’s the optimal. So, I think that
model that we’ve built over the last three or four years in partnership with DOVE & Orbit
really is pretty essential to not just making it a school support system, but a community
support system. I think our youth can cope better with it when they know it’s not just a
place to go to school but a place where you can get support for what you need.

Each school system is representative of its broader community. Often there are willing and able
community resources to support schools that could be overlooked if they are not intentionally
cultivated or harnessed. In the Vashon School District, there are ample resources that extend
from the community and add richness and diversity to the educational mission of the school.
These resources can also make a key difference in the lives of individual students, particularly those who may be marginalized or furthest from academic justice.

**Theme #4: Creating a School Culture That Promotes Inclusivity, Empathy, and Equity.**

The culture of a school is a crucial aspect of how students tend to describe their lived experiences. Positive school cultures do not develop by accident but rather are a series of intentional practices and strategies that cultivate these cultures. The fourth research question in this study relates to this notion: How do educators, considered to be effective by students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse employ strategies school-wide and in the classroom to promote a sense of belonging in gender and sexuality diverse students? Molly, a youth advocate, noted a change that she would like to see in our schools:

The change that I would make is making tolerance a part of every single lesson. And every single subject that’s ever taught about tolerance, being able to see things from another perspective and [with] empathy—not so much in like compassion and sympathy, but what is it like to really try and put yourself in somebody else’s shoes, like to see the world from their perspective and how they may or may not be like me.

Two key interviews with classroom teachers at both Vashon Island High School and McMurray Middle School provided insights into this question of unique practices that educators can employ. One teacher, described her practice in the following ways:

I think it takes time. I think it takes getting to know kids. I think one of the mistakes I see some people making is that they are so worried about telling the kids that they’re a trusted adult—and the words don’t matter. You have to show kids that you are a trusted
adult. And so, you know, you can have as many … I mean the posters on the wall are important, and the books on the bookcase are important. But you also have to show up. When you see stuff going down in class, or I mean, I teach social studies, right? So, you have to bring in issues that are in there and talk about them. And so, I think for our students, actions speak a lot louder than the talk does. I think the other is, I don’t have to know everything. And I tried to cultivate an environment in which we are on a journey, learning together. And I have things to learn. And the kids have things to learn. And so, you know, I tried to, at least, when it comes to the learning part, reduce that power differential with kids.

For this teacher, it was not just the words that were spoken but how actions and ways of being were even more vital for students in how the individuals are perceived. She also reiterated a common notion articulated in the interviews of continual learning and ongoing professional growth, particularly how this mindset resonates with students when adults demonstrate that they have a lot to learn from their students.

One other teacher represented students’ perspectives about classroom practices. They highlighted the importance of teachers understanding and respecting each student’s preferred name and pronouns. They even went beyond this to demonstrate a sensitivity that teachers need when considering communication home with students’ families from this perspective:

What I have noticed is really a lot of changing practices around using pronouns and names and the processes for starting a survey to use. And they said so at the start of the year, it is so great. And even throughout the year, I do this every semester. I start asking for pronouns and names from everyone—not just the names that they prefer, but the
names that they want to use in the classroom. But also asking the student are these pronouns and names okay to use at home, like, when I’m calling home or emailing home? Or do you prefer to use a different name or set of pronouns? And that goes for both genderqueer folks but also non-gender/queer. There might be a student that uses a nickname at school that doesn’t, you know, their family doesn’t use it at home.

The teacher also indicated student views about how they saw themselves represented in classrooms around their school: “But the students did say they love how many pride flags we have at this school. I mean, I have the ones right outside my door, the quilts that we made, we have the ones inside. But even throughout the school, it’s common to see at least a profile here and there.” Both practices highlight inclusive strategies that teachers may utilize to demonstrate respect, allyship, and representation.

One response from the student survey also reflects this theme and correlates to the data collected from the interviews. Answering the question of what characteristics or actions that teachers do to make them feel comfortable incorporates several of these practices, the response makes the following suggestions:

- Comfy lighting and furniture, quiet space, affirmative posters, and signs. Making sure to use the right pronouns and correcting themselves if they make a mistake, including “people in between” when saying “ladies and gentlemen,” and similar things.

This response surfaces how language is misperceived at times and is historically gender binary. Creating greater awareness for school staff to practice substituting language such as “you all,” “folks,” or “scholars” which can subtly provide a more gender-expansive articulation of
language in a school setting. Kristina, a youth advocate, also shares her community perspective of the strategy of representation:

A lot of the artwork that’s up around McMurray. And I’ve seen in other schools and other buildings as well on Vashon because it isn’t just queer-friendly stuff or queer-inclusive stuff, but it’s inclusive of other races and ethnicities, and other, you know—maybe I don’t think religions really is one I’ve seen, but other types of bodies, right? Like there’s all sorts of that artwork. And so, I think, being inclusive of all marginalized groups helps each marginalized group individually as well. Because it’s not just like, okay, the gay thing is the top hot topic right now, and so let’s love gay people right now, or like, oh, it’s pride month, so, let’s put up some rainbow decorations. It’s year round, and it’s for everybody who’s in a marginalized population. And I think that pulls a lot more weight than just being like, okay, it’s Black history month, so put a Black leader on the wall. I think that helps all the students. But I think you know, as a queer kid, seeing that adults are doing the work. To accept everybody who is typically pushed aside by society is hugely important because it doesn’t feel tokenized, and it doesn’t feel performative. And it doesn’t feel like a one-off moment, either.

Schools that are intentional in how they display inclusive messaging and empowering imagery around the school provide a lens through which students can see themselves represented and feel connected to their school community. This representation goes beyond just imagery and messaging but also how various cultures are represented in daily teaching and the curriculum.

One teacher shared their thinking on this topic:
But one of my core beliefs as an educator is that our students need to see themselves represented in the curriculum. And so, you know, that doesn’t end with ethnicity, right? We need to have our students understand that queer folks have existed since time immemorial as well and that there are vibrant histories there that have often been suppressed by power structures that don’t give them a voice. I think the other opportunity that I have with our students is we just talk about it, you know. Like we have classes where we talk about the way in which language and whose stories are told and, you know, like, have a whole thing what we do with, you know, intersectionality. And you know there’s the box, and there are all these identities that fit in the box, right? And that the farther you go outside, the more identities you have, because, you know, nobody walks in the room as just trans or just a lesbian. Right? You walk into the room with a lot of your identity and that includes, you know, race. It includes, you know, ability, things of that nature. And so, you know, we talk about this at the beginning. And I have kids you know, put everything that they think goes into the box. And then we talk about it. You know how the farther the distances of your various identities can move you away from that box, and that opens a way of looking at where we’re currently at and how things have occurred over, you know, over time, historically.

These were powerful insights that this teacher conveyed to me throughout the interview. It demonstrates keen reflection and introspection into her own teacher practices. Her consistent mindset to represent their students within the classroom is a noble endeavor and one that students and families consistently appreciate.

The last topic that connects to this question of supportive school-wide processes and strategies is the strategy of offering gender-neutral restroom options for students. This is a topic
of conversation in many schools as an option for how to be more inclusive in the school community. At both secondary schools on Vashon, the student GSA clubs advocated for more expansive access to gender neutral restrooms. Both schools were able to provide access to this type of restroom, but hearing students share how they view this as a symbol of support is noteworthy. Kristina described her perspective and what students share with her:

Well, the gender-neutral bathrooms for sure. I’m going to speak specifically at McMurray right now, because even when I work with elementary kids, we were taking them over to McMurray. So that’s the building I’m most familiar with. Gender-neutral bathrooms are a huge thing, I think not just for gender nonconforming or gender diverse people, but for straight kids and cisgendered kids to be able to be exposed to that inclusion and just kind of grow up being like, it’s not a big deal. … So having that, I think, is important for all students, not just the ones that are gendered and sexuality diverse.

Lou, the GSA co-advisor who helped students advocate for the gender-neutral restrooms, noted the following regarding the presence of these facilities:

I think that in itself is huge, just the presence of that. So, go you all! Yay! I think gender neutral bathrooms are huge. I heard you have added some vape detectors to your bathroom, so congrats. That’s smart. Because that is the issue, too, right? … Of like sometimes when we are trying to make things more inclusive, others can, you know, maybe use those spaces in ways that are not beneficial and supportive for others and not used the way for which they were intended.
Schools that are making these shifts in practices can demonstrate to the individuals who identify with the gender and sexuality diverse community that they matter and that their school is a place that they can feel connected to and supported in a variety of explicit and implicit ways.

**Theme #5: School Support for Social-Emotional Learning & Counseling.**

This final theme highlights the reality that an increasing number of schools are focusing intently on social emotional learning and supporting mental health resources for their students. The research question for this study most aligned with this theme is, What strategies are considered effective in impacting the social emotional, mental health, and academic success of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse? The interviews with both school counselors, Yvonne and Montgomery, were noteworthy in underscoring the importance of this topic. Similarly, the interview with Molly, a former mental health provider, accentuated the role that this type of support can play for students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse.

Both of the school counselors described their work with the gender and sexuality diverse community of students in distinct ways. They both recognized that they need to modify their practices to consider how students’ lived experiences impact their ongoing development and growth in both social emotional and academic learning. They see that the impacts of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation have more dramatically impacted this population of students. One school counselor observed,

And I think that what we know is that our experience is that these youth in our building really do struggle significantly more with anxiety and depression. You know other mental health challenges that naturally lend itself to needing more individual support as well. So,
we know for sure this is a higher risk factor, as far as, you know, suicidal ideation, depression, and everything else.

Both counselors indicated that access to mental health resources was vital to all students but particularly students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. Often, in their experience, this access was limited for students, particularly on Vashon Island. The past five years, the model of mental health counseling in schools has made a momentous difference in providing equitable access for all students. Montgomery, a school counselor, added this perspective to how she approaches helping students access these resources:

So much of my time working with students who identify as part of the LGBTQ2+ community is really spent just listening and learning and letting them really be the guide of conversation and support needs. I have ideas and thoughts, but I don’t have the experience, the personal experience aligning with their identity. And so, I really need to make sure to listen with a very, very open mind. So that they can really inform what their needs are. And I can be a partner in navigating those supports rather than assigning them.

Molly, who was a school-based mental health counselor with NeighborCare Health at McMurray for four years, played a vital role in this partnership and connecting students to counseling support services. Funding for her role at the schools is secured by a Best Starts for Kids grant through King County in Washington. She shared her perspective about working with this population of students:

I have always had a disproportionate number of students—or patients, you know, depending on the work setting. It’s always been disproportionate, the number of the students that identify somewhere on that gender and sexuality spectrum when compared with the general population. And like, we know that they’re at higher risk. You know, the
data shows us they’re at higher risk. They are at higher risk of suicide; they are at higher risk of disruptions in their family life. And I do see those mirrors in my work. I think that has not shifted yet.

This often-disrupted life experience that Molly articulates can look quite different depending on each student. For some students, they are able to get the support they need as a part of a group or social setting, such as a GSA club or other affinity group, but for some students, they need to process their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a more personal, one-on-one setting with a school counselor or through a deeper therapeutic conversation with a therapist. Yvonne, a school counselor also had the following to say regarding this multilayered issue:

My experience is that it is such a personal experience for each student. And it can create a social network support system in a way where they are finding others who are also exploring or understanding their gender and sexuality. Diversity. But often it requires a one-on-one kind of conversation. Time, I think, is pretty critical to understand what students need. Because it is an individual experience, and although they can be heavily swayed by their peer group, each person is going at it separately.

These perspectives highlight how varied these individual experiences are and how it is imperative for schools not only to create safe, social spaces and opportunities for students but also to provide school-based individual support such as identity-affirming school counseling and mental health resources. While these resources may vary depending on location, there is an increasing number of communities and schools that are moving to provide these services to students directly in schools. The survey had a question on this topic that relates to this perspective as well. Most students who participated in the survey at both McMurray Middle and
Vashon High School perceive that school counseling and mental health services are identity-affirming. The following chart references this data:

**Figure 11**

*Student Responses to Identity-Affirming Counseling & Mental Health Practices*

**Does your school provide school counseling and mental health support that is identity-affirming? (14 responses)**

While these data show the majority perceive affirming support, there could be more for the schools to do in terms of advertising these services and perhaps making students more aware that these services are indeed identity-affirming.

A key aspect of prioritizing access to resources and services in schools is how well school leaders can not only embrace these practices but also consider how their schools and systems have the resources to implement them in a practical manner. Both schools on Vashon Island, utilizing the NeighborCare Health partnership and leveraging the Best Starts for Schools grant from King County, are instrumental in providing the needed resources for school counseling staff as well as being the vehicle for providing mental health support in schools. Yvonne recognized that this was a critical aspect of this level of support:
Well, I think that obviously, we have had admin leadership and support of this [social-emotional] work in the building and the district. This is vital, because if you don’t have an admin who’s willing to think out of the box and create space and sometimes financial resources to create opportunities, it’s going to be a no go. And our students know right away if their principal or assistant principal or people around them care or at least [are] trying to understand and support them. And I think that’s just an essential piece we haven’t talked about.

Molly, the former mental health therapist at McMurray, is now a school social worker in the Seattle School District and is embracing many of these shifts and is searching for additional resources to provide these services in schools. Having served in several school districts, including one in Eastern Washington, she distinguished the importance of these resources and the emerging promise she is seeing with students:

I think a lot of schools in this area are making really positive changes, because—like, the things that come to my mind are things that McMurray has already done, and Seattle has already done. Giving them that choice, increasing exposure to inclusive language, even in the face of perhaps that increase of, like, a negative reaction, like not backing away from it, you know. Accepting, like, a new normal. I do think partnering with the school-based healthcare centers is just such an amazing model of care, because they didn’t have access to a medical provider that can answer that side of concerns, questions, issues that come up because a school can’t really do that, you know. Like you can’t talk to a kid about how to safely wear a binder. But giving them access to someone that is trusted and isn’t just the Internet, which is hit or miss, you know, I think that’s an amazing resource. But I think the schools are already doing a lot in this area.
These evolving practices for more identity-affirming counseling and mental health support are promising. It will be interesting to observe future research that emerges on this topic to better understand the connection between increased school-based resources and improved social-emotional learning and academic outcomes for students.

**Summary**

This research study examined critical questions related to the experiences of the gender and sexuality diverse community in the Vashon Island School District. I interviewed former students to inquire about practices and environmental characteristics that may have helped them to be more successful in the school environment. Conversely, these students also shared what experiences may have hampered their success at school. These interviews provided a more complete understanding of how these students’ experiences were perceived and what recommendations they would share to make things better in the future. In addition, current students in both McMurray Middle School and Vashon Island High School participated in a survey that provided them an opportunity to share their varied experiences and perspectives. These students also shared what teacher and school practices supported and affirmed their gender and sexuality identity.

Educators, community partners, and a former mental health provider in the Vashon Island schools were also interviewed for this study. The purpose of these interviews was to determine what school-wide and classroom practices were identified as effective in supporting students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse in our schools. Furthermore, these educators and partners identified key social/emotional and mental health supports that exist in schools that provide critical assistance to students who may have been harmed by hateful language or action.
and/or struggling with anxiety or depression. These interviews and surveys yielded valuable and meaningful insight as well as a considerable amount of data that addressed the key research questions for this study. These data were coded, categorized, and analyzed to clarify five major themes that corresponded to the research questions.

Consideration for careful and thoughtful research and data control was maintained during this research to ensure validity, reliability, and dependability of the data collected and the overall process. This study incorporated triangulation of the distinct types of data considering multiple viewpoints from interviewees and a survey of current students. I sought student voices, educator experiences, and community partner perspectives. These perspectives that emerged were varied and realized in the data that informed the study. Each participant reviewed their responses and possible identifiable information, which allowed for member checking and validation of the participants’ intent and contribution. Throughout the process, I identified and worked through issues of reflexivity in the process to recognize my positionality in the research. This study included peer review and consultation strategies throughout the process to eliminate bias and issues of confidentiality and to gain insider perspectives on the various questions in the interviews and surveys. An audit trail exists for all research activities. All protocols were established and approved with careful consideration. Finally, this chapter describes many of the rich insights and recommendations the participants shared during this study. The corpus of interviews I conducted, together with survey responses from students, ensured saturation of the data. The intent of the following chapter will be to establish a level of confirmation and transferability for this study while connecting these themes to the body of existing literature examined in Chapter II.
“Delivering a high-quality education to all children cannot be taken lightly. If we do not provide equitable opportunities, will we miss the opportunity for individuals to step up and rise beyond the circumstances they are born into? We must find a cure for so many of the social ills that our society has grown to accept as natural” (Blankstein et al., 2016, p. 95). This quote aptly describes the modern challenge for all educators to meet the needs of historically marginalized students more equitably. The problems explored in this study are the concerning impacts that students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse face when confronted with marginalization, harm, and disempowerment. This student community experiences impacts related to social-emotional learning, academic outcomes, and mental health areas. When schools engage their communities with practices and strategies that strengthen support, inclusion, and voice for all, profound examples of empowerment, connection, and voice will ensue. This study sought to understand more thoroughly the school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse and surface effective practices that create safety, promote inclusion, and instill a sense of belonging for this population of students.

I used a qualitative and phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of these students as well as to examine educator practices in the Vashon Island School District. This study used interviews with former students, staff members, and community partners to gain insights into the perspectives and mindsets these individuals had related to these issues and to provide rich data to explore. A qualitative survey was incorporated into the study to gain insights from current middle and high school students and to provide a means of verification and confirmation for the interview data. I thoroughly analyzed the data gleaned from these
instruments and condensed the perspectives of participants into five major themes that emerged from the data: student safety, connection, and support; student voice, agency, and leadership; school collaboration with community resources; creation of a school culture that promotes inclusivity, empathy, and equity; and school support for social-emotional learning and counseling.

I encountered several barriers and limitations as I conducted this study, including recruitment efforts and parental permission issues involving confidentiality concerns for participants. While this study only involved secondary schools in a single school district, the data set that emerged provided authentic and viable perspectives that apply to many different settings and other schools in this state and across the nation. Also, the positionality of the researcher posed questions regarding bias and potential conflicts of interest. Open-minded, allied communication evolved throughout the process, providing participants freedom to share their authentic and unvarnished viewpoints. Furthermore, the participants also demonstrated considerable personal experience and were clearly invested in this topic. The professional staff I interviewed are leaders in their practice of providing and promoting inclusive spaces for students in the gender and sexuality diverse community.

**Summary and Discussion of Findings**

As noted, this study explored experiences and perspectives of both former and current students as well as leaders, educators, and community partners who have unique, personal perspectives pertaining to providing support for the gender and sexuality diverse community. The findings for this study are connected to existing research and literature in this area. This
section will provide a discussion of the various findings in relation to both the research questions for this study and the themes that emerged from the data.

**Research Question #1**

The first research question aimed to lead the study with the direct, lived human experiences of both current and former students. What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have hampered their ability to be successful and to feel affirmed in their expression of self? This question relates directly to the first of the themes identified in the data: student safety, connection, and support. It was noted in the findings that the two former students interviewed had generally positive experiences in the Vashon Island School District, while each of them described incidents that had occurred that hampered their success and overall affirmation. Both individuals also referred to a certain level of homophobic or hateful speech to which they had almost grown accustomed. Even amidst these harassing experiences, they were able to maintain perspective and identify actions that individuals either did or could have done to show better support.

The two former students suggested that teachers who set a “no nonsense” or firm approach to hate speech and homophobic language in their classrooms were supportive and allied with them. This relates directly to several of the examples in the literature that noted that interrupting this type of language when observed can be tremendously effective in reducing harmful behaviors as well as contributing to a climate of inclusion and tolerance (Abreu et al., 2022; Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2018; Swindle, 2022; Tomczyk, 2023; Wiseman, 2014). Conversely, it is imperative for schools to communicate diligently with individuals when harmful incidents occur and to seek a resolution that is meaningful to the individual. One
former student described an incident that was not satisfactorily addressed. The practice of restorative and transformative justice can result when schools are transparent and seek to provide learning experiences for students who commit hateful acts so that the cycle of hate and violence can be interrupted for the future. This notion also appears in the literature, providing policy and practical shifts schools can make to support a more integrated approach to discipline and restoration (Evans, 2020; Hope & Hall, 2018a; Leonardi, 2014; McCabe & Anhalt, 2022).

The importance of teachers and other adults engaging in active and deep listening to students came through clearly in the interviews with former students, educators, and community partners. While this may seem like a simplistic and easy-to-implement strategy in a school setting, providing this consistency is a foundational element to providing safety, support, and human connection for students in this community. By listening, educators and other adults provide a safe and brave space for youth to share lived experiences while also providing a means for a more thoughtful and open mentoring relationship between students and adults (Anderson, 2023; Benz, 2023). Deep listening requires tremendous self-awareness and consistency, as well as ensuring that egos are left behind. If teachers and other adults practice genuine listening routinely, allyship and a culture of care and inclusion should follow.

**Research Question #2**

What school experiences of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse have enhanced their success and increased affirmation of themselves? This second research question provided a lens through which to understand better what school structures and practices are effective in creating a sense of belonging. The theme that closely aligns with this question is developing student voice, agency, and leadership. Data from my research provide evidence that
not only is providing affinity groups such as Gender/Sexuality Alliance clubs essential, but allowing students to emerge from these groups with opportunities for active leadership can provide a means to enhance overall student success. Both former students had opportunities for this type of leadership in high school, and both individuals emanated pride and agency based upon the accomplishments they reported. Educators and community leaders alike highlighted the importance of these affinity groups to empower students with a connectedness and support that might otherwise be absent.

Representation and care for identity-affirming practices were also key ideas related to this theme. The two former students noted that there seemed to be an increase in the number of teachers hired who identified as members of the gender and sexuality diverse community. They felt as though they could clearly see themselves in these staff members and felt that these educators effectively represented these students’ interests in school. In addition, an affirming strategy staff members used was incorporating a confidential survey where students could designate their preferred pronouns and names, even if these were not in the school database. In addition to this theme of finding voice in the survey of students, this practice emerged throughout the staff and community interviews, highlighting the need for a more systematic approach that schools may utilize to honor preferences for how students opt to be addressed. Literature sources focused on the classroom also connected this strategy to a more gender-inclusive school culture, noting that these practices provided a safe means for normalizing gender/sexuality-expansive and non-binary terms for students (Biegel, 2018; “Gender-Inclusive Schools”, n.d.; Meyer & Keenan, 2018; Rice & McEntarfer, 2023).

Finally, the notion of empowering student leadership to strengthen professional development for teachers and other adults in a school surfaced as a vehicle for providing not only
effective training but also opportunities to build agency and voice for this population of students. At both McMurray Middle School and Vashon Island High School, students from the GSA groups have routinely provided panels and presentations on what may be working for these students as well as what may not be working for these students. These sessions have provided an even more powerful and efficacious venue for the active listening described earlier in this chapter. The former students interviewed accentuated these opportunities as positive memories and tangible symbols of support and allyship. This type of strategy did not show up in the literature sources that I consulted, which suggests this may be a strategy that could be on the vanguard of how we train our educators in schools while concurrently accentuating student voices from the gender and sexuality diverse community.

**Research Question #3**

The third research question for this study queried, What intentional school-wide strategies do schools employ to provide positive messaging and inclusive language and promote an identity-affirming culture? This question aligns well with a clear theme from the data focused on school collaboration with community resources. Authentic partnerships with community groups continue to provide unique experiences for the students in the Vashon Island School District. During the interviews with both the school counselors and community partners, it was notable that this partnership was evident and clearly provided a valuable resource for our students. This partnership has continued to evolve into shared leadership and a “co-design” model, where a school-centric or educator-centric approach was de-emphasized. This concept relates very well to Ann Ishimaru’s work in *Just Schools* where she surfaces this notion: “What would it mean for us to move toward a community-centric universe in which schools play a critically important role but are no longer the sole source of social gravity?” (Ishimaru, 2020, pp.
33–34, emphasis in original). Particularly in the case of better understanding gender and sexuality diverse students, the need for relevant, grounded understanding of the population is vital. If we can utilize community resources to accomplish this goal, it will be a “win-win-win” for schools, students, and communities.

“When we enact the principle of beginning from family and community priorities and knowledge, it becomes clear that nondominant parents may have insights, knowledge, and expertise that can be a source of professional learning for educators in creating more inclusive and holistic learning environments” (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 71, emphasis in original). Vashon Island Schools prioritize inclusivity and tolerance not only because it is noble and just but also because the community demands that these tenets exist. Both former students and community partners who provided input for this study noticed the type of culture that exists in the Vashon Island community, promoting an elevated level of acceptance and awareness of issues related to gender and sexuality diverse communities. Kristina, who identifies as part of this community described this acceptance as a “privilege,” comparing it to various other regions that were not necessarily as tolerant or accepting of these notions. This is certainly an ongoing social justice issue that will play out in the broader culture of our society; but if each school and community begin from within, there can be real change in how the human beings who make up these communities are respected and honored.

**Research Question #4**

How do educators, considered to be effective by students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse employ strategies school-wide and in the classroom to promote a sense of belonging in gender and sexuality diverse students? Connectedness is a basic human need, and it
is one of the most paramount, yet challenging, duties schools have. Throughout the interviews, perspectives on this theme of creating a school culture that promotes inclusivity, empathy, and equity abounded. For individuals, going beyond this notion of listening was key, but to cultivate a spirit of growth and open-mindedness within a school community, schools must allow for both students and educators to be continual learners. This can be difficult for educators, especially on this subject, as there may be a myriad of conflicting political, religious, and ethical considerations they confront. However, putting an ethic of care and humanization at the forefront must be the priority for all educators and will offer a way forward for how students develop an increased sense of belonging in school.

The concept of inclusive educator practices also pertains to how cultures are represented in imagery, pedagogy, curriculum materials, and the books that are available for students. When various ethnicities, genders, and identities are highly visible throughout a school, individual students can see themselves within the content and practices and are more likely to feel connected and supported toward both social emotional and academic success. Schools must continually assess their broader community and representation to accurately reflect these individuals and groups. Literature sources reviewed echoed these themes, providing resources and emerging curricula frameworks that allow leaders and educators to inventory and review for their own specific circumstances (Anderson, 2023; Gower et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2013; Sadowsky, 2020). It is clearly incumbent upon educators to recognize and acknowledge a representative perspective for students to connect in more personal ways to their school experiences.

A school strategy that schools are beginning to embrace is the adaptation to gender-neutral restroom facilities. While this shift may require a potentially significant financial
investment, the real and symbolic benefits to the gender and sexuality diverse community are noteworthy. As noted in Chapter IV, advocacy for increased access to gender-neutral bathrooms for both secondary schools in the Vashon Island School District emerged from the data in this study. Both schools were able to make these facilities available, and this effort was highly acclaimed by this population of students. Not only were more safe environments created for individuals, but this shift was a symbol of solidarity with this community of students. While issues may abound regarding supervision and the potential misuse of these more private facilities, there is no doubt that these spaces provide a more affirming environment and means for students to tend to human needs. Literature sources illustrate this shift for schools, demonstrating the need for districts to evaluate and consider these spaces, particularly when new construction is considered (“Gender-Inclusive Schools,” n.d.; Lytle & Sprott, 2021; Sadowski, 2020).

**Research Question #5**

The final research question of the study asked, “What strategies are effective in impacting the social emotional, mental health, and academic success of students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse?” Emerging programs, such as King County’s Best Starts for Kids and others, are beginning to take root in Washington schools, particularly at the secondary level. Partnerships with local Youth and Family Services and other nonprofit organizations are finding that therapists have a greater level of access and ability to support students in an embedded school model. My data showed that both school counselors and the mental health therapist believed that students from the gender and sexuality diverse community were overrepresented in the number of students they served on their caseloads in either a Tier II or Tier III support. Embedded school mental health support provides this population of students with the ability to
receive confidential support in a space where they feel more comfortable. For students in this community, confidentiality is a major concern (Varjas et al., 2016). Students over the age of 13 in Washington have the right to seek mental health therapy without parental permission.

Another vital component for both social emotional and mental health support is that it must be gender and sexuality affirming. Counselors and therapists must be adequately trained and highly qualified in these practices to provide the safe, inclusive, and effective care that these individuals require. The literature spoke specifically to this practice, providing key attitudes and strategies that mental health professionals can utilize when working with this population (Agee-Aguayo et al., 2017; McDermott et al., 2023a; Ostermeyer, 2019). While these types of embedded supports in school are increasingly present in schools, the costs of providing these services can be a major barrier for school districts, given the budgetary and funding constraints that many districts face each year. As the issue of providing mental health services has become more publicly considered and accepted, an increasing number of state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and other groups have begun to consider options for school-based health clinics. In King County, this trend continues, notably with the Best Starts for Kids levy program and a grant process for school districts. This program collects a considerable amount of data as to the effectiveness of the program, so more studies that measure the effects should ensue. School district leaders should continue to be creative in terms of considering local partnerships, as well as pursuing grant opportunities that may exist, to embed health and support resources in local schools.

Overall, data from this study indicate that schools play an integral role in supporting and encouraging students who identify as part of the gender and sexuality diverse community. Exceptional care and affirming practices are essential to this effort, as this population is
historically marginalized and remains vulnerable within our society. These practices can lead to increased voice, empowerment, and an improved sense of belonging and academic success. Specific recommendations that emanate from this study will follow.

**Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

**Recommendation for Practice #1**

Schools should adopt policies and procedures that allow for students to adopt the name and pronouns of their choice. These procedures include classroom surveys or school-wide confidential surveys that are distributed to all staff members to affirm chosen names and pronouns. In addition, schools should consider the various cultures represented in their environments and make efforts to ensure that all cultures are represented in imagery displayed around the school campus as well as in curricular and pedagogical practices in the classroom. In particular, school libraries should ensure that the student demographics are well-represented in the selections of literature and informational texts that are available to students. Students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse should be able to observe key contributors to culture and history in their school environment to connect and thrive more effectively as students. An inclusive school culture with rich and diverse viewpoints benefits all students by promoting empathy, tolerance, and a broader perspective on the world. Understanding and accepting diversity is a vital skill for all students to develop as they prepare for life beyond the classroom.

**Recommendation for Practice #2**

Schools should seek community-based resources and expertise in this effort, providing a co-designed and co-led model of increasing awareness and capacities for supporting gender and
sexuality diverse students. All communities have assets that can augment this essential effort. This collaborative approach will benefit schools that may lack the capacity or resources to embark upon this work alone. Leveraging these community resources can provide richness, authenticity, and validity to this important aspiration. As schools develop GSAs as a means for student voice and empowerment, these mentors can not only be role models for our students but also can co-design and lead the efforts these groups develop to change the narrative and promote positive and inclusive messaging, as well as promote unique relationships for social emotional learning. Utilizing these resources may fill the knowledge and experience gap that school leaders and practitioners face regarding gender and sexuality diverse issues.

**Recommendation for Practice #3**

I recommend that all schools seek to hire staff members who represent their communities culturally and with a view toward hiring gender and sexuality diverse educators. This is a tangible sign of allyship and advocacy that will allow schools to provide additional opportunities for students and adults within a school to become allies and advocates for their gender and sexuality diverse peers. This effort can foster a sense of empowerment, activism, and solidarity within the school community. In addition, ongoing professional development will also anchor staff members in continual growth opportunities to understand and prepare for evolving needs from the gender and sexuality diverse community. Including individuals from community groups and leveraging student leaders for this purpose will also add to developing a school culture where all voices are acknowledged and where an emphasis is placed on inclusivity and tolerance.

**Recommendation for Practice #4**
Student voice, leadership, and activism should be cultivated in all schools, particularly at the secondary level. Affinity groups, such as Gender/Sexuality Alliance clubs, and other leadership opportunities for this population should be encouraged and supported by all school leaders and staff members. This powerful example of allyship and inclusion can have influence in how students effectively connect with the school and have agency in their ongoing lived experiences. As noted above, merging school resources with community-based resources can make these clubs and organizations even more authentic, relevant, and powerful for students, providing critical mentorship and role modeling opportunities.

**Recommendation for Practice #5**

Increasingly, schools are pursuing opportunities to embed both social emotional learning and mental health resources within the school day. This service model shows compelling evidence of success in meeting the needs of all students but particularly students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. Based on evidence that emerged from extant research as well as from perspectives of participants, districts and schools should pursue local grant opportunities, state or federal funding possibilities, and creative partnerships with local nonprofit healthcare providers to open doors to create increased funding for embedding mental health counseling in local schools. These resources can provide potentially life-altering support for students who may be struggling or are furthest from academic and social justice.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Initially, this study focused entirely on secondary school practices and collaborations within these contexts. In my review of literature on this topic, most sources focused on the secondary level, while a few identified elementary school–level strategies that can be adapted in
an age-appropriate manner. I believe that further research for elementary-grade students should also be pursued to better support students who are in a place of questioning their identities at a much earlier age. This study was limited in scope to a single school district in a progressive area. Future research could focus on distinct parts of Washington State, or other parts of the United States, with different demographics and community values and services. Future research could utilize a similar approach as this study did, documenting practices in similar or different communities and schools, confirming or adding to the major themes derived from this study. And, as further quantitative research emanates from embedded mental health and social emotional support in schools, practical and action-based research could provide additional evidence of the effectiveness of the programs. These studies may potentially lead to additional funding for school counseling and other related mental health services both in schools and in local communities.

Conclusion

The existence of gender and sexuality diverse identifying students as a culture within our schools implores us to adapt our practices to help these students connect and belong to our educational institutions and their communities. Their experiences, challenges, and opportunities deserve acknowledgment and support. To create truly inclusive schools, it is essential that educators, administrators, and policymakers take proactive steps to ensure that these students are valued, protected, and empowered to thrive academically and personally. By doing so, we can foster schools that embrace and celebrate diversity in all forms and create a more inclusive and dynamic society.
Through this study I intended to merge theoretical research practices and cast a usable light on a growing body of research that implores schools to utilize intentional strategies to support our students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. Schools are the most important foundation for a free, fair, and equitable society. The degree to which we can provide safer spaces and environments for all students, the more successful outcomes we will have for individuals furthest from social and academic justice. If we can provide a roadmap for schools to improve their ability to connect, support, and nurture specific communities of students, the result will be more members of our society who are engaged, active, and thriving. This issue is rapidly emerging and evolving as boards, administrators, staff, and communities search for ways to address the needs of and connect with all of our students.

We continue to become an increasingly diverse and evolving society; hence, it is crucial for our schools to acknowledge and accommodate the unique experiences of gender and sexuality diverse students. Gender and sexuality diversity encompasses a wide spectrum of identities and intersections with other cultural influences and expressions. Students from this community often face distinct challenges and opportunities within the school environment, making it imperative for schools to foster inclusive, safe, and affirming spaces for all students, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. At the same time, in settings where school and classroom practices seek to humanize and honor all cultures and identities, students from the gender and sexuality diverse community continue to demonstrate resilience, courage, and leadership.

Community and intergovernmental partnerships are vital and are often underutilized in schools that wish to create inclusive and safe environments for gender and sexuality diverse students. As school leaders and staff pivot, develop greater awareness, and implement inclusive
practices in their environments, it is important to remember that expertise may exist in one’s own backyard. Engaging strategically with community partners and advocacy groups will no doubt increase the effectiveness of a school’s program of support and aid in creating protective factors for gender and sexuality diverse students. In successful schools, these community and intergovernmental partnerships can assist in providing rich professional development for school staff, create affirming and pro-social messaging around a school, and facilitate a successful Gender Spectrum Alliance (GSA) or similar affinity group as a club within a school. Building on Ann Ishimaru’s (2020) persuasive work in building equitable collaborations and partnerships, schools can build coalitions with their communities and co-lead in making improvements as to how gender and sexuality diverse students are represented, supported, and engaged in their schools. A quote from Dr. Ishimaru provides context for this aspiration: “Educators, leaders, students, families and communities can not only rehumanize each other through the process of unveiling history and power in education, they can also create knowledge and practices to reshape education as a vehicle of liberation” (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 64). The quest of schools to serve their students in new and better ways should never end, as schools are the most important foundation for a free, fair, and equitable society. If we can provide a roadmap for schools to improve their ability to connect, support, and nurture specific communities of students, the result will be more adults who are engaged, active, and thriving in our society. Real belonging within our schools, communities, and society can truly be an outcome for all.
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Appendix A

Recruitment Promotion Notice

**Belonging for all Identities: Designing Responsive Strategies for Inclusion, Voice, and Equity in Secondary Schools Survey**

Are you 13-18 years of age and interested in making your schools more inclusive and supportive?

Make a difference by taking a brief survey and sharing your experiences of what has worked for you in the community and schools in the past or present. This information will be used to help teachers and schools in the future to design programs that meet the needs of all students, particularly students who identify as Gender & Sexuality Diverse.

All survey responses will be confidential, and the information will be kept safe for study purposes only.
Appendix B

Recruitment Email (Staff and Community)

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear ____________,

My name is Greg Allison, and I am a doctoral student at Western Washington University (WWU).

I am conducting a research study to gain an improved understanding of the conditions, practices, and supports that are effective in creating a sense of belonging, equity, and voice, as well as improved learning outcomes for students who identify as Gender and Sexuality Diverse (GSD). I am seeking to interview adults associated with schools for their insights in this area.

Please read this document to learn more about this study and determine if you would like to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary and confidential, and I will address your questions or concerns at any point before or during the study.

Please let me know if you are interested by responding to this email. We will then schedule an interview via Zoom when it is convenient for you.

Thank you for considering this important contribution to research,

Sincerely,

Greg Allison

Western Washington University Graduate Student
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form—Interviews

TITLE: Belonging for all Identities: Designing Responsive Strategies for Inclusion, Voice, and Equity in Secondary Schools

RESEARCHER: Gregory W. Allison, Woodring School of Education, WWU, allisog4@wwu.edu

ADVISORS: Dr. Tim Bruce, Woodring School of Education brucet2@wwu.edu & Dr. Wayne Robertson, Woodring School of Education, WWU, robertw@wwu.edu

PURPOSE: I am conducting a research study to gain an improved understanding of the conditions, practices, and supports that are effective in creating a sense of belonging, equity, and voice, as well as improved learning outcomes for students who identify as Gender and Sexuality Diverse (GSD). I am seeking to interview adults associated with schools for their insights in this area.

Please read this document to learn more about this study and determine if you would like to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary, and I will address your questions or concerns at any point before or during the study.

DEGREE REQUIREMENT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in education at Western Washington University.

RISKS: Risks include the possibility that a question or questions during the interview may cause the participant to recreate negative or unpleasant memories related to prior school experiences in the individual’s past. To minimize this risk, you may skip any question you do not wish to answer; in addition, you may stop your participation at any time.

BENEFITS: For the participant, there are no anticipated direct benefits from taking part in the survey apart from the opportunity to share insights and reflections relevant to supports and programs they may have experienced that create a sense of belonging and voice for students.

INCENTIVES: You will receive no gifts/incentives for this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY: I will collect your name and role associated with this research. Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of these data (publications, presentations, etc.) without your permission. I will store all research materials securely in OneDrive and Only
myself and my Western faculty advisor will be able to see the information collected in the interviews unless, under necessary circumstances, the WWU HRPP or IRB has cause to access study data. Human participant research regulations require that I retain identifiable data for a minimum of three (3) years. When I complete my study, I will remove any identifying information from or destroy the data. I will keep all information you provide confidential and any reference to this information in my study will use pseudonyms in place of real names/roles.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: Upon request, I will provide a free summary of research results, available by May of 2024. Please email me at allisog4@wwu.edu to make this request.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read this consent information and understand what the researcher is asking me to do. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and may withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. On these terms, I agree that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any concerns about my participation in this study, I may contact Greg Allison at allisog4@wwu.edu. If I have any concerns about my rights as a participant in this research project, I may contact the WWU Human Research Protections Program at compliance@wwu.edu or 360-650-2437.

________________________________________  ______________________________
Participant’s Signature                        Date

________________________________________  ______________________________
Investigator’s Signature                      Date
Appendix D

Parental Permission/Opt-Out Letter

TITLE: Belonging for all Identities: Designing Responsive Strategies for Inclusion, Voice, and Equity in Secondary Schools

RESEARCHER: Gregory W. Allison, Woodring School of Education, WWU, allisog4@wwu.edu

ADVISOR: Dr. Wayne Robertson, Woodring School of Education, WWU, robertw@wwu.edu

PURPOSE: I am inviting your child to participate in a research project that is investigating how teachers and schools may design inclusive and affirming programs that meet the needs of all students. I will ask your child to take a brief survey that will take about 10 minutes. Your child will be enrolled in this study unless you contact me to opt your child out of participation (see opt-out instructions at the end of this form).

CONSIDERATIONS: You may want your child to participate in this study because this study may help advance practices and policies that would help all students feel connected to school and be more successful. You might not want your child to participate in this study because your child might experience discomfort or nervousness while answering the survey questions. There are no known risks to your child associated with this study.

ELIGIBILITY: Your child is eligible for this study because they attend either McMurray M.S. or Vashon Island High School and participate in a club.

INCENTIVES: Your child will receive no gifts/incentives for this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you or your child.

CONFIDENTIALITY: No direct identifying information will be collected during the survey. I will store all research materials in a secure and password protected OneDrive account. Only myself and my Western faculty advisor will be able to see the information that is submitted for the survey unless, under necessary circumstances, the WWU HRPP or IRB has cause to access study data. Human participant research regulations require that I retain identifiable data for a minimum of three (3) years. I will keep all information your child provides confidential; however, if I learn your child intends to harm themselves or others, I must notify appropriate authorities.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your child’s participation in this study is voluntary. They may decide to withdraw at any time without consequences. Or you may withdraw your permission for your child’s participation at any time without penalty.
SUMMARY OF RESULTS: Upon request, I will provide a summary of research results, available by May of 2024. Please email me at allisog4@wwu.edu if you would like these results to be shared with you.

OPT-OUT Instructions: Be sure you have carefully read this study information and that you understand what the researcher is asking your child to do. If you have any questions about the study or your child’s participation, please contact Greg Allison at allisog4@wwu.edu or at 206-650-1208. Remember that your child’s participation is voluntary, and they may withdraw their assent at any time, for any reason, without penalty.

If you do not want your child to participate in this study, you must contact Greg Allison at allisog4@wwu.edu or at 206-650-1208 by February 16th, 2024. Otherwise, your child will be enrolled in this study. However, at any time after the study begins, you may contact the researcher and indicate that you no longer want your child to continue participating.

If you have any concerns about your child’s participation in this study, please contact [name of investigator, phone number, and WWU email]. If you have any concerns about your child’s rights as a participant in this research project, please contact the WWU Human Research Protections Program at compliance@wwu.edu or 360-650-2437.
Appendix E

Minor Assent Form

My name is Mr. Greg Allison, and I am a student at Western Washington University. I am working on a research study called Belonging for all Identities: Designing Responsive Strategies for Inclusion, Voice, and Equity in Secondary Schools because I want to know more about how teachers and schools may design inclusive and affirming programs that meet the needs of all students. Because of your participation in the Gender/Sexuality Alliance at either McMurray M.S. and/or Vashon Island High School, I would like your help if you wish to participate. If you decide to help me with this study, I will ask you to complete a brief survey about your experiences in our schools.

There is not anything dangerous about being part of this study. You might feel somewhat nervous about taking the survey, but I will be sure to keep your responses strictly confidential.

I will not give you any money or prizes to be part of this study, but what I learn might help to make a difference for students who attend our schools to feel a greater sense of belonging and be more successful in the future.

I will not collect your name or identifying information during the survey, when I do this study, and only myself and my Western faculty advisors will be able to see the information that you submit for the survey. I will also keep everything safely stored in a password protected file. If I write a paper or give any presentations about this information, your name, or any other information specifically about you will not be in it. I will not tell anyone else about anything you say or do in this study unless I learn that you might hurt yourself or someone else.

I am asking your parent or guardian’s permission for you to be in this study. But you get to decide whether you want to do it. If you decide to participate, you can stop at any time, and no one will be upset with you. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect my school standing in any way.

If you want to find out what I learn in this study, you or your parent can contact me at allisog4@wwu.edu

If you understand everything I have explained to you and would like to be part of this study, please write your name below and the date. If you start to do this survey and become worried about anything, you can contact the people at Western Washington University who watch over studies involving people at compliance@wwu.edu.

Participant’s Signature _____________________________ Date ____________
Appendix F

Interview Questions (Staff and Community Partners)

1. Please describe your present and past positions as well as the length of time you have worked as an educator.

2. What were your experiences and learning about working with Gender and Sexuality Diverse students over the years of your work as an educator?

3. Please describe your experiences in working with Gender/Sexuality diverse students.

4. What school-wide processes or strategies have you observed as successful in helping students feel a sense of belonging or inclusion as a member of a school community?

5. What classroom processes or strategies have you observed or implemented successfully that help students feel a sense of belonging or included as a classmate?

6. What additional impacts from the school closure/pandemic do you observe in our middle school students, particularly those who are gender and sexuality diverse?

7. If you could implement change(s) in the middle or high school environment that would have a positive impact on gender and sexuality diverse students, what change(s) would you make?

8. What other information would you like to share that may be important to my research?

9. Who else would you recommend that I speak to that could provide more information important to this research? Would you be willing to introduce them to me?
Appendix G

Interview Questions: Former Students

1. How would you describe your school experiences when you were attending either middle school or high school?

2. What was most helpful to you?

3. What made school more challenging for you?

4. How would you describe a teacher (or individual) who helped you feel a sense of belonging in school? What was it about that person that made you feel comfortable in their class?

5. In what ways, if at all, do you see the experiences of gender and sexuality diverse students in 2024 as different from when you were in school?

6. What other information would you like to share that may be important to my research?

7. If you could implement change(s) in your prior school environment that would have a positive impact on gender and sexuality diverse students, what change(s) would you make?

8. Who else would you recommend that I speak to that could provide more information important to this research? Would you be willing to introduce them to me?
Appendix H

Student Survey

1. What school do you attend?
   a. McM
   b. VHS

2. Are you a member of the GSA club at your school?
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. Which of the following identity affirming practices does your school support (Select all that apply)
   a. The ability to be referred to by your preferred name.
   b. The ability to choose your preferred pronoun.
   c. Gender/Sexuality affirming posters and messaging.
   d. Addressing incidents of harm in an affirming manner

4. Which of the following gender/sexuality affirming practices do your teachers practice? (Select all that apply)
   a. Surveys
   b. Welcoming/inclusive environments
   c. Inclusive curriculum such as books that represent a variety of identities and cultures.
   d. Addressing incidents of harm in an effective manner

5. What characteristics or actions do your teachers do that make you feel comfortable in their classes?
   a. Open Response

6. Does your school provide mental health support and school counseling support that is gender/sexuality affirming?
   a. Yes
   b. No
7. If you could implement change(s) in your school environment that would have a positive impact on gender and sexuality diverse students, what change(s) would you make?
   
   a. Open Response

8. What other information would you like to share that may be important to my research?

   a. Open Response