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Including ALL Students: Supporting Adolescents With Intellectual Disabilities Who Are Gender Nonconforming

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INCLUDING ALL STUDENTS: SUPPORTING ADOLESCENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL
DISABILITIES WHO ARE GENDER NONCONFORMING

By

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of my students, past, present, and future, who teach and inspire me every day.

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Abstract

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Educators and school staff often overlook students with intellectual disabilities and students who are LGBTQ+ within public schools. They recognize even less students who identify in both these areas. The purpose of this study is to add to a small pool of research about how to best support students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. A review of literature found a gap in understanding the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. This study uses a qualitative research design and intersectionality as a theoretical framework. The researcher completed interview with four special education staff using open-ended questions to learn how they have observed ways schools have supported students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. The researcher categorized responses into the following themes: gender expression, relationships, acceptance and representation, resources for students, training for educators, and policy. The researcher found through the experience, knowledge, and perspectives of these four special education staff that students can freely express their gender identity in school and have mostly positive relationships with their peers and school staff. Special education and school staff generally accept students with these dual identifiers in schools, but rarely represent them in curriculum. Schools support students through wellness centers and positive language. Educators

are in need of training on existing policy and procedure and ways to better include and represent

students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming in their classrooms.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Over the past eleven years, I have worked as a special education teacher. I have taught students in Kindergarten through 12th grade with mild to severe disabilities, ranging from specific learning disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, emotional and behavioral disturbances, visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, autism, orthopedic impairments, and speech and language impairments. For five of those years, I taught a student who has Down syndrome and appears to identify as a gender other than his biological gender. When I was his teacher, I watched his preferences and personal identity consistently align with what is generally considered, in mainstream society, as female. When asked which bathroom to use, he picked the girl's bathroom. He chose to play with pink and princess items. On the bus ride to school, he would frequently "paint" his nails using markers. My former student preferred to wear lipstick, a headband, and a pink cardigan in contrast to behavior "typically" found in individuals who identify as male. Because the student has an intellectual disability, he has not explicitly stated he is transgender, and it is unclear if he cognitively identifies this way. I would instead use gender nonconforming to describe his gender expression. He responded to directions to group with other students similar to his gender identity (i.e., "All the girls go to this group"), frequently attempted to use the girl's bathroom, applied makeup and nail polish, and chose to wear feminine clothing. My years teaching this student challenged my thinking on a binary gender system, and I pondered whether other special education teachers taught students who identified in this way. I discovered students who both have an intellectual disability and are gender nonconforming exist but are less acknowledged in the education world. There is a need for more information about how to best support students who identified in this way.

The purpose of this study is to explore how schools support students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. It is necessary to conduct this study, as educators, caregivers, school staff, and policy-makers know little about how to best support students with disabilities who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ+). Existing research has addressed students, adults, and adolescents with both disability and LGBTQ+ identities, but there is little available addressing the intersection of the two groups (Kimball et al., 2018; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016). This study looks at adolescent students in public schools with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming through the perspectives of special education educators.

Language and Terminology

Language matters. The words we use impact those around us, whether we intend them to or not. When discussing people with disabilities, the LGBTQ+ community, and gender identity, there are many different terms used to address these identities' complexities. It is important to note that the most important and reliable source about someone's identity is the person themselves. This section includes definitions of some frequently used terms and language that will be used throughout the study, while presenting reasoning for the terminology used in this study. The following terms will be defined, in addition to a statement on person-first and disability-first language: gender, gender identity, gender dysphoria and gender identity disorder, cisgender, transgender, gender nonconformity, gender variance, disability, intellectual disability, developmental disability, and cognitive disability.

The World Health Organization describes gender as the socially constructed traits of women and men, including norms, behaviors, roles, and relationships (WHO, 2021). Gender identity refers to an individual's sense of self regarding their gender (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018).

Cisgender is a term used to represent gender identity aligning with the sex assigned at birth. "Transgender, or trans, is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth" (Human Rights Campaign, 2021, n.p.). People also use transgender as an all-encompassing term for various gender identities (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018). Other terms addressing gender identity include gender dysphoria, gender nonconforming, gender variance, agender, genderqueer, bigender, and pangender (Lemaire et al., 2014; OK2BME, 2017: Parkes et al., 2009). Gender dysphoria, formally known as Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the DSM IV, is defined as a difference between expressed or experienced gender and biological sex assigned at birth (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a; American Psychiatric Association, 2013b; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018). Someone who is gender nonconforming chooses not to express typical male/female characteristics aligned with their biological gender and do not "conform" to the binary gender system (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018; Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2017). Gender variance is synonymous with "gender diverse," but implies variation from an assumed norm (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018; UC Berkeley, 2013). Agender, genderqueer, bigender, and pangender are variations of gender fluidity which move between identifying as having no gender to encompassing all genders into one identity and moving between these identities with ease (OK2BME, 2017; Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2017). When possible, it is important to ask which specific term an individual prefers to use rather than making assumptions about their gender identity.

Disability is a condition of the body or mind that limits a person's ability to complete certain activities and interactions (CDC, 2020). The Americans With Disabilities Act provides a legal, not medical, definition of disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (ADA National Network, 2021; United States

Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2021). The American Association on Intellectual

and Developmental Disabilities (2021) characterizes intellectual disability as "significant

limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior" and is diagnosed prior to

age 22. Adaptive behavior is conceptual, social, and practical skills, or domains completed in

everyday life (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2021). The

American Psychiatric Association (2013c) further elaborates by saying:

> These domains determine how well an individual copes with everyday tasks:
>
> 1) The conceptual domain includes skills in language, reading, writing, math, reasoning, knowledge, and memory.
>
> 2) The social domain refers to empathy, social judgment, interpersonal communication skills, the ability to make and retain friendships, and similar capacities.
>
> 3)The practical domain centers on self-management in areas such as personal care, job responsibilities, money management, recreation, and organizing school and work tasks.

Intellectual disability is also referred to as cognitive disability, developmental disability, and was

formerly called mental retardation before Rosa's Law passed in 2010.

It is important to note the varying ideologies around disability-first versus person-first

language. Person-first language describes the person first, and then their disability as a

descriptor of part of their identity (i.e., a person with autism rather than an autistic person)

(Myers et al., 2013; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016). Some communities use disability-first, or

identity-first, language to emphasize that the disability is a significant part of someone's identity

and as a reminder that society has an obligation to accommodate for the disabled person rather

than the disabled person assimilating to society (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Smart & Smart,

2006; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016). As with gender identity, it is important to consult the person

with the disability to determine how they prefer to identify.

For the purpose of this study, I will use LGBTQ+, gender nonconforming, and intellectual disability (ID) as identifiers. There are various acronyms to describe the LGBTQ community, including but not limited to LGBTQ, GLB, GLBT, GLBTIQ, LGBTQA, LGBTQIA, and LGBTQ+ in which the letters refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer, intersex, and androgeny or ally (Harley et al., 2002; Jones, 2015). The (+) in LGBTQ+ symbolizes a placeholder for all other related identities, some which are defined in this study (e.g., gender variant, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming). Paying attention to language is important because we use language to represent people and must make the effort to do so accurately and authentically (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Writing as an ally and advocate, I will use person-first language (i.e., person with a disability in place of "intellectually disabled person") and the acronym LGBTQ+ in an attempt to encompass all individuals who identify with this community.

Chapter one introduces the topic of study: an exploration of school support for students with an intellectual disability who are gender nonconforming. This chapter includes brief background information on gender identity and disability, the gaps in research that create an area to address, and a research question to guide the study that looks at educator perspectives about school support. The chapter also touches upon the purpose and significance of this study for individuals who fit within two minority groups while looking at intersectionality as a basic qualitative study framework. The chapter addresses the limitations and delimitations and concludes with a highlight of what is to come in chapters two through five: a literature review, methodology of the study, data collection, and data analysis.

Background

As of 2016, the number of transgender adults has reached 1.4 million, or 0.6% of the U.S. population (Flores et al., 2016). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, using data from 2013, noted that 53 million Americans, or 1 in 5 individuals, identify as having a disability in one or more of the following categories: vision, cognition, mobility, self-care, or independent living (Calfas, 2015). In a prevalence study between 1997 and 2008, one in six children in the United States had a developmental disability between 2006-2008, which included the following diagnoses: attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), intellectual disability (ID), cerebral palsy, autism, seizures, stuttering or stammering, moderate to profound hearing loss, blindness, learning disorders, and/or other developmental delays (Boyle et al., 2011). More than one-third of adults who are LGBTQ+ have a disability (Ascher, 2019). The statistics for LGBTQ+ and disability indicate that a significant portion of the U.S. population aligns with these minority groups (Ascher, 2019; Calfas, 2015; Flores et al., 2016; Harley et al., 2002). Existing research explores the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities and those who identify as LGBTQ+, but researchers know little about the intersection of these two identities (Dewinter et al., 2017; Kimball et al., 2018).

Students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ likely exist as much as LGBTQ+ students within the general population (Lofgren-Martenson, 2009). Harley et al. (2002) believe it is safe to expect students who are LGBTQ+ exist in similar proportions among persons with disabilities as they do among other populations of students. Students who have both of these identities are unrecognized within society, schools, and mainstream media, both collectively and separately within the disability and LGBTQ+ communities (Hazlett et al., 2011). A lack of recognition may be due to an assumed nonexistence, which raises concerns regarding if and how educators

support students within public schools (Dinwoodie et al., 2020; Duke, 2011; Hazlett et al., 2011; Richmond, 2012). Gender nonconformity is much more visible than sexual orientation and may elicit more blatant internalized, interpersonal, and systemic oppression (George & Stokes, 2018). The lack of recognition and risk of oppression warrants exploration to understand better how schools support students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming.

Research Problem

Disability and LGBTQ+ status are typically researched as two separate groups, rather than considering both categories as an identifier for one population (Harley et al., 2002). Research historically overlooks multiple minority identities, such as disability and LGBTQ+ identities, making this area underrepresented in the literature (Henry et al., 2010; Richmond, 2012; Wilson et al., 2016). Very little is known about the experiences of these hidden individuals, as researchers may have difficulty identifying participants who have not identified themselves as having a disability (such as a learning disability) and/or their sexual or gender identity (i.e., LGBTQ+) (Harley et al., 2002). In their book, Abbott and Howarth (2005) state that individuals with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+ exist as a "double minority." People with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+ experience dual marginalization, or are considered a "minority within a minority" (Duke, 2011; George & Stokes, 2018; Richmond, 2012; Triska, 2018; Wilson et al., 2016). Sinecka (2008) made a similar deduction in his article addressing homosexuality and deafness, similarly using the phrase "minority within a minority.". He also refers to deafness and homosexuality as identities outside the norm that are subject to "exclusion and isolation and lead to double discrimination" in addition to being "invisible identities" (Sinecka, 2008, p. 475).

We know very little about the experiences of people with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ (Dinwoodie et al., 2020; Duke, 2011; Richmond, 2012). Although researchers may not be able to determine the number of students with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+, educators need to recognize that this population exists. Educators should support their needs in the classroom and school environments (Morgan et al., 2011). We do not know enough about students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming and their experiences in school, including but not limited to relationships with peers and school staff, bullying, existing supports in school, acceptance and representation, and influence from society and policy. Students within this category are an underrepresented population and are missing from existing studies addressing disability and LGBTQ+. More research is necessary to promote inclusion and better meet the needs of students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ because they are misunderstood or misrepresented among educators and policymakers. .

There is limited research acknowledging and giving voice to students who have disabilities and identify as LGBTQ+, and even less on the impact of their sexual orientation on their development (Abbott, 2015; McClelland et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2011). There is a gap in research about general knowledge, barriers, policies, services, and practices around the sexuality of people with disabilities (Friedman et al., 2014). When addressing sexuality for people with disabilities, the focus is on heterosexuality (Dudek et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2016), and when discussing health education, gender identity and sexual diversity are frequently excluded (Treacy et al., 2018). In a study by Seelman (2014) that includes the voices of transgender college staff, students, and faculty, he does not include disability voices and states so in the limitations of the study. Strang et al. (2018) found only one study that addressed the needs of adolescents with autism who are gender diverse. In their analysis of sex education

curriculum, Wolfe and Blanchett (2003) only vaguely mention gender identities and sexual orientation. In their review of the curriculum, there is no mention of transgender or gender nonconformity (Blanchett & Wolfe, 2002). Not many studies view disability as an intersectional identity to combine with other socially constructed identities, like gender and sexuality, and there is more work needed in this area (Kimball et al., 2018; Dewinter et al., 2017). Sex education programs are missing discussion around significant issues that influence sexual development, such as rights movements and expression for LGBTQ+ and disability groups (Elia & Tokunaga, 2015). In addition, sex education programs are dependent on what is happening in the community and school culture (Elia & Tokunaga, 2015). Special education programs in K-12 schools also overlook the presence of LGBTQ+ students (Richmond, 2012). While representation has increased over the past two decades, there is little progress in the research about the intersection of the LGBTQ+ and disability populations and minimal quantitative and statistical studies (Richmond, 2012). More work is needed when looking at the intersectionality of disability and other identities (Shaw et al., 2012; Myers et al., 2013). These gaps in research have helped to narrow down the purpose of this study.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore what educators know about school support for students with intellectual disabilities who identify as gender nonconforming. According to research, this population of students is seldom recognized in the public school setting and needs further study to better support their needs. This exploratory study would seek to inform the following question: What are special education staff perceptions regarding school support for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming?

Significance

Students who are transgender or gender nonconforming and students with an intellectual disability both exist as minorities within schools. Students who are *both* transgender or gender nonconforming and have an intellectual disability experience "dual stigma" and exist as a "minority within a minority" (Hazlett et al., 2011). Students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ have unique learning needs and belong to historically oppressed minorities (Henry, Fuerth, & Figlozzi, 2010; Myers, Lindburg, & Nied, 2013). Students diagnosed with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ experience bullying, harassment, and higher rates of suicide and depression because of their identity (Huang & Guo, 2005; Novak Amado et al., 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2013; Slee, 2001). They are deserving of a voice and platform and would benefit from research to inform educators, policymakers, and the public to increase support and understanding and encourage others to take action and lift the voices of an underserved community of students. This study intends to inform educators about an underrepresented population we know little about, a community that has previously been studied as two separate entities (intellectual disability and transgender, or disability and LGBTQ+) but not as an intersection for individuals who identify with both groups.

Theoretical Framework

When studying disability and LGBTQ+ status, there are a handful of theories used, including but not limited to feminist theory, queer theory, disability theory, crip theory, intersectionality, gender studies, critical disability studies, and quality of life framework. For the purpose of this study, intersectionality is used as a theoretical framework to emphasize individuals experiencing multiple identities and the importance of representation. Individuals

with disabilities have more than one identity but are frequently excluded from intersectionality studies (Dewinter et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2010; Kimball et al., 2018). Researchers introduce intersectionality as a method to address contrary social experiences influencing the lives of individuals, within gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic status, and disability (McCall, 2005). These categories influence mainstream media, which influences social acceptance and understanding, and by association, excludes groups from the majority (Crenshaw, 1991). LGBTQ+ status and disability are most often researched as two separate groups rather than as a collective label for one group and not viewed as an intersecting identity (Harley et al., 2002; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016). One must consider the entire intersectional experience of people with disabilities (Kimball et al., 2018; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016), as people with disabilities live unique lives with many social identities, all of which should be recognized (George & Stokes, 2018; Myers et al., 2013; Seelman, 2014; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016). Therefore, it is relevant to look at disability as an intersectional identity.

When looking at disability through an intersectionality lens, one must view disability as a social identity rather than through the medical model (Myers et al., 2013; Shaw et al., 2012). People historically have viewed people with disabilities from a medical model perspective, meaning labeled as ill or in need of medical service (Mog & Swarr, 2008; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016). Students with disabilities are a minority group and have similar social experiences to other minority groups, including isolation and marginalization (Di Giulio, 2003; Fine & Asch, 1988; Kallman, 2017; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016). It is unclear how frequently and intentionally the LGBTQ+ community and people with intellectual disabilities interact, support, and advocate collaboratively (Wilson et al., 2016). People with disabilities may also experience stigma or prejudice from other minority groups about their disability, another challenge of having

intersectional social identities (Duke, 2011; Myers et al., 2013). Some studies look at the intersection of disability and gender identity but do not necessarily discuss intellectual disability and gender nonconformity (e.g., Barry, 2013). Understanding the intersection of multiple identities can help create inclusive opportunities for people with disabilities, especially when considering cultural, social, and political contexts (Myers et al., 2013). Educators must consider the intersection of issues related to race, class, gender, and ability (Vallejo Peña et al., 2016).

Research studies that cite intersectionality use qualitative study methodology to explore the complexities of social construction, shedding light on an unrecognized group of individuals who have formed as a result of the combination or merging of more than one category (McCall, 2005). Invisible groups, such as individuals with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming, may experience dual stigma, oppression, bias, and discrimination as a group that does not fall into a "master" category (McCall, 2005). An intersectionality approach confronts the idea of "typical" and "normal," shedding light on less popular identifiers and labels and providing a sense of community for individuals who may not feel they fit into existing communities. This framework provides a platform for interweaving oppressed identities, in this instance a disability diagnosis and LGBTQ+ identity. For these reasons, intersectionality is an appropriate framework for this study to understand students' experiences better. A more in-depth look at intersectionality and how it applies to students experiencing intersecting identities such as a disability diagnosis and LGBTQ+ status occurs in chapter two.

Description of the Study

The researcher uses a basic qualitative study to share the experiences, perspectives, and stories of educators who have worked closely with students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. This study focuses primarily on the perspectives, knowledge, and

experiences of special education staff, and "qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). A qualitative research design is appropriate because the research was conducted to understand the experiences and perspectives of educators who have taught students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming, an under-researched population. Participants for the study included special education teachers and instructional assistants (also known as paraprofessionals or paraeducators) who have worked at least one year with at least one student with an intellectual disability who is gender nonconforming.

Primary interviews took place for data collection. The interviews were with four special education staff with at least one year of experience working in close contact with one or more students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Consent was gathered prior to the interviews for all participants. The interviewer reiterated that the identity of the interviewees would be kept confidential. Three of the four interviews were recorded, with the interviewees' consent, and transcribed after the interviews with anecdotal notes to ensure accuracy. The researcher did not record the 4th interview per participant request and took anecdotal notes during and right after the interview. During the study, which took place over the course of 6 months, the researcher gathered data and completed follow-up interviews.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduces the topic of study, which will explore what special education staff know about school support for individuals who both have an intellectual disability and are gender nonconforming. This chapter includes brief background information on gender identity and disability, the gaps in research that have created an area to address, and a research question

to guide the study that looks at educator experiences, perspectives, and knowledge. The chapter explores the purpose and significance of this study for individuals who fit within two minority groups while looking at intersectionality as a framework for a basic qualitative study.

Chapter Two consists of a more in-depth look at existing knowledge about individuals with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+, including existing law and policy and academic experiences. It includes a deeper look into intersectionality and how it applies to this study. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used to address the research question: What are special education staff perceptions regarding school support for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming? Chapter Four presents the findings with excerpts from participant interviews. Chapter Five includes an analysis of the findings and looks at the significance, limitations, and future recommendations.

In summary, students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming experience dual stigma while existing as a minority within a minority (Hazlett et al., 2011). There is limited research on individuals who fit within these identifying categories, justifying a need for this study. Both groups have minimal representation in research studies, emphasizing the importance of discussing students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. People with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ are deserving of a platform and should be supported and recognized in schools.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

It is clear that we know little about supporting the needs of students who both have an intellectual disability and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning inclusive (LGBTQ+). Researchers and educators do not typically recognize this population for a variety of reasons. Research shows that individuals with disabilities are commonly assumed to be asexual or hypersexual, and their expression of an LGBTQ+ identity goes invalidated (Barnard-Brak et al., 2014; DiGiulio, 2003; Duke, 2011; Henry et al., 2010; Lofgren-Martenson, 2009; McClelland et al., 2012; Murphy & Elias, 2006; Richmond, 2012; Treacy et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2016). There are many topics relating to students with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+ that researchers need to address, including but not limited to academic success, peer relationships, and intersectionality. This literature review delves into a brief history of law and policy and what researchers know about the academic experiences of individuals with disabilities and individuals who are LGBTQ+. The review discusses the intersection of these two identifiers, using intersectionality as a framework for this study. Finally, the review identifies existing gaps in the research that frame this study's research purpose and question.

Disability: Background and Policy

The United Nations Convention on Rights for Persons with Disabilities and the Americans with Disabilities Act define disability as having a long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment that impedes participation in society on a level equivalent to others, or poses limitations on one or more major life events (ADA National Network, 2021; United Nations, 2008). Within the U.S., one in five adults live with a disability, while one of six

children are diagnosed with a developmental disability, including attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, autism, and other developmental delays (Boyle et al., 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Approximately one percent to three percent of the U.S. population has an intellectual disability (The Arc, 2016).

Disability History

The history of legal stipulations for individuals with disabilities has evolved since the establishment of the first school for the deaf in Connecticut in 1817 (UC Berkeley, 2010). In 1935, the Social Security Act included funds to accommodate individuals who are blind and children with disabilities, and the 1940s to present day have shown a greater prevalence and acknowledgment of the rights of individuals with disabilities (UC Berkeley, 2010). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 laid the groundwork for the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and eventually the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Myers et al., 2013). Section 504 of the American Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states individuals cannot be discriminated against solely based upon the existence of their disability from any program or activity receiving federal funding (DREDF, 2016). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and renewed in 2004, put responsibility on public education to meet the needs of children and adolescents with physical and mental disabilities, eliminating segregated facilities as the only opportunity for education for students with mild to severe disabilities (Stroman, 2003). IDEA provisions include providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), with a spectrum of placement ranging from general education to non-public institutions for students who have been expelled or are not best served on public school campuses. IDEA stipulates an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for all students receiving special education services, a multidisciplinary

and nondiscriminatory assessment practice, and parental safeguards and involvement—provided for individuals from birth to age 21. According to IDEA (2004), students with disabilities have the same rights as their typically developing peers (Treacy et al., 2018). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990, was groundbreaking for people with disabilities, introducing civil rights protection to level the playing field and legally require access to employment and public facilities (Disabled World, 2016). In 2008, Congress amended ADA to include a wider range of disabilities and what defines a disability in the short and long-term sense. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015)— which reauthorizes the ESEA (1965) and the NCLB Act (2002)— provides equal opportunity for all students. No Child Left Behind is relevant in that it recognized where students were successful and where they needed extra support, while looking at all students "regardless of race, income, zip code, disability, home language, or background" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, n.p.).

Academic Experiences for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities exist in public schools. An average of about 12.5% of students in California are receiving special education services outlined by IDEA (Petek, 2019). Student placement exists on a spectrum from least to most restrictive environment, which moves from general education to general education with pull-out or push-in services such as resource or speech, to a district self-contained mild-moderate class, to a district moderate-severe class, to a county mild-moderate or moderate-severe class on a general education campus, to a county-operated school site, and finally a non-public school, home instruction, or residential placement. Within these placement options, students have varying levels of designated instructional services, such as speech and language services, occupational therapy, and/or behavior services, in addition to mainstream and inclusion opportunities with general education

peers. The level of inclusion varies among county offices, districts, and school sites, and educators and school staff know inclusion has a strong impact on a student with a disability's peer relationships (Carter et al., 2015). High school students with disabilities typically end their high school career with either a certificate of completion or a high school diploma depending on their ability and access to core curriculum (CDE, 2020).

Individuals with intellectual disabilities are subjected to bullying, assumptions about their abilities, discrimination, and limited meaningful and healthy relationships, among many other challenges (Cameron, 2014; Cunningham & Glenn, 2004; Johnson et al., 2014). They also face physical challenges in addition to mental challenges. These obstacles present literally, in the form of manual doors, inadequate bathroom stalls, a lack of ramps or elevators, emergency systems using auditory or visual alerts only, and limited availability of accessible public transit, Braille labeling, and parking spots for people with disabilities (Cameron, 2014).

Discrimination Toward Students with Disabilities

Ableism is defined as a system of oppression that provides advantage to the able-bodied over people with disabilities (Ostiguy et al., 2016; Smart & Smart, 2006). This system of oppression exists in K-12 schools, and can be seen in the way public instruction is presented as "one size fits all" and in the way that benchmarks and growth are measured based on age and developmental milestones that do not apply to people with disabilities (Ostiguy et al., 2016). Students with disabilities experience bullying, difficulty establishing and sustaining relationships, barriers to employment and independent living, assumptions about their sexuality and abilities from school staff, public misunderstanding, and threats to quality of life (Cease-Cook et al., 2015; Ostiguy et al., 2016). They seek acceptance and inclusion from their peers.

Professionals give individuals with intellectual disabilities a diagnosis based on intellectual and social functioning and recommend services that follow them through their lives. Parents and guardians typically approve a recommended diagnosis and often without the consent of the individual (McClelland et al., 2012). As a result, they may experience difficulty finding a job, resulting in low income and a less likely chance of marrying and maintaining positive social relationships (Beart et al., 2005). Although ADA (1990) exists to protect the rights of people with disabilities, this discrimination still exists (Beart et al., 2005). Disability diagnoses, whether physical or mental, impact relationships, employment (including unemployment, underemployment, and less pay), social acceptance, and personal and sexual health (Beart et al., 2005; Cameron, 2014; Cunningham & Glenn, 2004; Lofgren-Martenson, 2009; Morgan et al., 2011). Due to existing assumptions and discrimination, able-bodied individuals typically exclude people with disabilities from decision-making and opportunities to discuss their needs (Azzopardi-Lane & Callus, 2014; Cameron, 2014). People without disabilities have excluded people with disabilities from decision-making, including the ironic lack of accessible bathrooms at the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, clear pathways in restaurants, and separate, inconvenient entryways (Cameron, 2014). In addition to the stigma they receive related to their diagnosis, individuals with intellectual disabilities may also experience difficulties in understanding the terminology used to categorize them and their disability, experience a lack of willingness to discuss their disability from typically developing peers, and experience emotionally painful interactions with nondisabled people that are a result of the stigma regarding disability that exists in society (Beart et al., 2005; Elderton et al., 2013). These are simply a few areas influencing the lives and educational experiences of individuals with disabilities.

Legal Cases

There have been countless court cases concerning equal rights and access for people with disabilities, such as *Lloyd v. Regional Transportation Authority* (1977), which established the need for public transit to provide accommodations for people with disabilities, allowing them to sue under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (UC Berkeley, 2010). *Tokarcik v. Forest Hills School District* in 1981 ruled the act of denying access to public education for children with disabilities as discriminatory. *Rowley v. Board of Education* (1982) established the necessity to individualize student needs as federal law. *Roncker v. Walter* (1983) reiterated placement decisions to be based on a student's IEP, and not on their diagnosis alone. *Honig v. Doe* (1988) stipulated due process and "stay put" when the team cannot agree about a student's IEP (UC Berkeley, 2010). *Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education* (1989) introduced the two-prong test to determine appropriate access to general education, looking beyond academic achievement as the sole purpose for inclusion. *Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District* (1993) ruled inclusion within general education as a right, and not a privilege.

Treatment of People with Disabilities

The institutionalization of people with developmental disabilities significantly decreased from 1965 to 2009, by about 189,000 (Kyzar, Turnbull, Summers, & Gomez, 2012). This is relevant to this review as it accounts for the significant need to provide support for people with disabilities within the community. Emerson, Shahtahmasebi, Lancaster, and Berridge (2010) state that having a disability is more than simply a characteristic of that person, but rather a descriptor in understanding the interaction between the impairment, the social norms and expectations, and necessary accommodations. Individuals with disabilities struggle with maintaining appropriate and rewarding employment, independent living, and a quality of life

influenced by misunderstanding and a lack of resources in their communities, despite existing policy.

Advocacy

While the disability rights movement has made many gains for individuals with disabilities, there is still work being done to support the sexual rights of people with disabilities (Duke, 2011). Another area in which people with disabilities experience discrimination is within the media. The media often exclude people with disabilities in digital portrayals, especially as desired romantic partners (Holland-Hall & Quint, 2017). A Netflix film, *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (2020), portrays people with disabilities in a positive light and tells the true story of many disability rights activists, including Judith Heumann, James Lebrecht, and Denise Sherer Jacobson, and the time they spent at Camp Jened. The film makes connections between their time at camp to their participation in the disability rights movement. Their participation in the civil rights movement, fighting discrimination toward people with disabilities, led to the creation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In his campaign plan for full participation and equality for people with disabilities, President Biden (2020) shared his intent to further enforce and uphold the ADA. The plan lays out steps to support transition and postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities, including increasing funding for community and four year colleges (Biden, 2020). Schools must now explore beyond the ADA and other disability legislation to best support students with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+ (Vallejo Peña et al., 2016).

LGBTQ+: Background and Policy

The Human Rights Campaign (2021) defines transgender as an expression of a gender identity other than sex assigned at birth. Terms including gender, sexuality, cisgender (gender identity corresponds to biological sex), intersex/hermaphrodite, transgender, transsexual, gender identity, gender expression, pansexual, gender-nonconforming, gender fluidity, gender identity disorder (GID), gender dysphoria (which replaced GID in the DSM V), androgyny, transvestite, assist in understanding the spectrum of gender identity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a; American Psychiatric Association, 2013b; Arenas et al., 2016; Lemaire et al., 2014; Slattery, 2013). It is estimated about 700,000 adults, or 0.3% of the adult population in the U.S., identify as transgender (Gates, 2011).

The U.S. is undergoing a paradigm shift in regards to understanding the spectrum of gender identity, which is now more prominently recognized in mainstream media (Steinmetz, 2021). Caitlyn Jenner has become a familiar name in many households. Documentaries such as *I Am Jazz* help to explain that a transgender identity is not a choice. Maybelline and Cover Girl recently named the faces of their new ad campaigns, which include Manny Gutierrez and James Charles, respectively, who both identify as male and are openly gay (Feldman, 2016; Feldman, 2017). The Golden 1 Center, home of the Sacramento Kings basketball team, is the first public stadium to include 23 single stall "all gender" bathrooms (Heise, 2016). On January 30th, 2017, the Boy Scouts of America announced their acceptance of boys who identify as transgender (Gender Spectrum, 2017). Well-known actors, such as Elliott Page and Laverne Cox, have brought visibility and popularity to trans rights. In a recent article in Time magazine, Elliott Page stated "Transgender people are so very real...We know who we are," (Steinmetz, 2021, n.p.). The article includes discussion about a recent surge in Hollywood of actors and actresses

coming out as transgender or gender nonconforming while meeting challenges to their gender identity and a lack of acceptance from people in the industry and in the public (Steinmetz, 2021). They also discuss representation, and the challenges that transgender people face when trying to understand their gender identity and having no models or examples (Steinmetz, 2021). *Disclosure* (2020), a Netflix documentary starring Laverne Cox and other transgender actors, addresses stereotypes and representation in film and television.

LGBTQ+ History

Despite these recent developments, the LGBTQ+ population has experienced their own history of successes and discrimination in policy and law, from the 1950s when Senator McCarthy connected homosexuality with communism and President Eisenhower passed Executive Order 10450 to prohibit homosexual employees from government employment to more recently President Trump's revoking of the protections of Executive Order 11246 signed by President Obama in 2014 protecting federal contractors from discriminating against LGBTQ+ workers (Graves, 2015; Villarreal, 2017). Title IX of the Education Amendments Act (1972) mandates all public and private institutions receiving federal funding may not exclude people from involvement in, deny benefit of, or discriminate against based on sex (NCAA, n.d.). The Briggs Initiative, introduced by California Senator John Briggs in 1978, set out to prohibit teachers working in public schools from talking positively about homosexuality. The reaction to the referendum was the equivalent of a teachers' Stonewall Riots (Graves, 2015). The defeat of the Briggs Initiative was a huge accomplishment for the gay rights movement; however, it was overshadowed by the assassinations of Harvey Milk and George Moscone three weeks later (Graves, 2015).

In 1989, Kevin Jennings, founder of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), initiated one of the first Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in Massachusetts (Graves, 2015). The Equal Access Act of 1984 (ACLU Washington, n.d.) allows for equal access for all extracurricular student groups on public campuses and use of school facilities, which paved the way for the acceptance of GSAs on public school campuses. *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (1996), the "first legal challenge to anti-gay violence in public schools," is still recognized as a groundbreaking decision for the LGBTQ+ community (Graves, 2015, p. 33). In 2000, the California Student Safety and Violence Protection Act AB 537 added sexual orientation and gender identity (actual or perceived) to the Education Code as part of nondiscrimination policy (GSA Network, 2009). Seth's Law AB 9 (2012) adds sexual orientation and gender identity to anti-bullying policies in schools (ACLU California, n.d.). In June 2013, the federal Defense of Marriage Act was ruled unconstitutional (*United States v. Windsor*) and Prop 8— the appeal in California banning same-sex marriage—was dismissed (Graves, 2015). In the same year, the School Success and Opportunity Act (AB 1266) passed, allowing student access to programs, activities, and facilities aligned with their gender identity, not their biological gender (CDE, 2017).

Academic Experiences and Outcomes for Students Who Are LGBTQ+

Understanding one's individualized identity impacts relationships. Johnson et al. (2014) state that the medical model in which school psychologists use to understand the transgender identity focuses on the perplexity that exists because of the conflict between biological sex and his/her internal gender identity. Gender constancy influences children into identifying with gender norms, such as there being only two genders (male/female) to identify with, and in doing so create a strict perspective and understanding of gender (Johnson et al., 2014). During

adolescence, individuals begin to establish their identity through exploration, in which they determine their strengths/weaknesses, interests, and goals that shape them into adulthood (Morgan et al., 2011). Much of student identity development occurs during adolescence, which means it takes place on school campuses (Morgan et al., 2011). Participants in a study by Strang et al., (2018) on adolescents with autism who are transgender shared they remembered experiencing gender nonconformity as early as elementary school, some even before then. There is a trend in research noticing LGBTQ+ students coming out during adolescence, with a recent increase in students identifying as transgender (Ryan, 2010). Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson, and Diamond (2013) define gender variation as a dismissal of the binary gender construct (male/female) expressed through behavior or any other form of expression and may cause concern for care providers. Students who identify as LGBTQ+ typically participate in general education without any accommodations or modifications, but may experience bullying and discrimination.

Discrimination Toward Students Who Are LGBTQ+

The K-12 school experiences of students who are LGBTQ+ typically result in a high school diploma, however acts of discrimination and harassment result in threats to safety and an increase in absenteeism, impacting academic achievement (Singh & Kosciw, 2016). Bullying and peer victimization impact self-esteem and self-worth, leading to feelings of depression, in turn influencing academic achievement and success (Robinson & Espelage, 2013; Singh & Kosciw, 2016). Harassed students who are LGBTQ+ tend to earn lower grade point averages and show lower interest and attainment of a four-year undergraduate degree than their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2013).

Students who identify as LGBTQ+ experience bullying, harassment, issues with mental health, difficulty sustaining positive relationships, assumptions from the peers and school staff, a lack of relatable curriculum and materials, harassment and hate crimes, higher rates of suicide, greater risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and limited access to safe health care (Blackburn & Pascoe, 2015; Espelage, 2015; Robinson & Espelage, 2013; Savage & Schanding Jr., 2013). In 1989, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released a report on youth suicide; findings showed gay and lesbian youth were two to three times more likely to attempt suicide and comprised 30% of the total youth suicides each year (Graves, 2015). Bullying and harassment can escalate, starting with homophobic slurs and moving into physical violence (Espelage, 2015). Peer victimization has an impact on academic outcomes and psychological well-being (Espelage, 2015; Robinson & Espelage, 2013).

Institutional and cultural homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia originate within educational environments—schools are representative of society and reflect existing bias, stereotypes and prejudice (Harley et al., 2011; Morgan et al., 2011; Savage & Schanding, Jr., 2013). Savage and Schanding, Jr. (2013) define transphobia as "the discrimination inflicted upon transidentified persons by others whom fit traditional gender identities" (p. 2). Transgender individuals may experience greater stigmatization than their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer/questioning inclusive allies, and are subjected to society's understanding of sex and gender, unmasking conflict in basic daily activities, such as using a public restroom (Bauerband & Galupo, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial for policy makers to understand that the emotional and sexual needs of individuals with disabilities are just as important as general needs, such as general health, housing, and employment (Abbott & Howarth, 2007). Programs and policies typically ignore meeting these needs (McClelland et al., 2012).

Responding to Discrimination

Schools are the ideal location in which to begin to change these ways of thinking, to shape new minds into acceptance and understanding (Savage & Schanding, Jr., 2013). Many schools have student-led clubs/groups to foster acceptance and inclusion, such as Gay-Straight Alliances; unfortunately, these clubs have not had a major influence on school policy (e.g., harassment, inclusion, sex education) (Morgan et al., 2011; Russell et al., 2009). Savage and Schanding, Jr. (2013) identify the public school system as the "great equalizer," being responsible for the academic, social, emotional, and behavior needs of citizens through a free and appropriate public education that disregards ability level, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity and provides an environment in which students feel safe and have the opportunity to thrive. The next section will look at how disability and LGBTQ+ communities intersect.

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Intersectionality

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Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, highlighting an alternative form of oppression that exists due to the intersection of identifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, ability and class creating multiple layers of stigma and discrimination. The purpose of intersectionality is to address and recognize these multiple layers existing in one individual, starting with Crenshaw's article about black women (Crenshaw, 1989). She states the necessity of dismantling previous frameworks that address one identifier and ignores the intersection, specifically looking at race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). McCall (2005) writes that interest in intersectionality heightened out of an absence of research looking at the intersecting points of one's lived experience.

Scholars use an intersectionality framework to focus on oppressed or marginalized groups and to recognize the challenge of experiencing discrimination when identifying with one or more

non-majority group (age, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, and ability)

(Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). In doing so, they shed light on how individuals within these groups are

marginalized, in which our understanding and creation of identities is influenced by social and

institutional constructs (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). Lemaire et al. (2014) conducted one of only 11

known studies looking at individuals with gender identity disorder (GID) and autism spectrum

disorder (ASD), Asperger's syndrome, or high-functioning autism in which they conducted a

case study on a 23-year-old woman with ASD during hormonal treatment and sex reassignment

surgery. In their article, they emphasize the importance of recognizing "gender variant feelings"

among individuals with ASD, and find this number highly prominent among GID patients in

France (Lemaire et al., 2014). Ultimately, all individuals, regardless of ability level,

race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and sexuality, want acknowledgment and respect

as human beings sharing the same world (Cameron, 2014).

There are many areas where individuals with disabilities and individuals who identify as

LGBTQ+ have common ground. These areas include, but are not limited to, strained or lacking

relationships, discrimination, bullying, harassment, difficulty accessing appropriate health care,

acceptance and inclusion from peers, recognition in media and school materials, and family

stress. Individuals with disabilities and those who are LGBTQ+ exist in cultures that view their

"circumstance" as "unfortunate" (Cameron, 2014). Cameron (2014) writes, "separate but equal'

norms [are] accepted," which therefore "translates [disability] into a minority identity" (p. 17).

Cameron's statement assists in pointing out that both disability and transgender are minority

identities, and one experiencing both of these identities is dealing with dual stigma. Another

avenue of study, the social model, recognizes disability as a legitimate minority (Cameron,

2014). Individuals who have disabilities and identify as LGBTQ+ deal with physical and mental

health concerns, health services, communication issues, and "the ability to provide informed consent" (McCann et al., 2016, p. 40). Parkes et al., (2009) found that gender variance exists in equal parts when compared among individuals with learning disabilities and individuals within the typical population. Parkes et al., (2009) state the range of gender identities found in the general population, including transgender, is reflected in the population of individuals with learning disabilities. It is therefore safe to assume a similar reflection exists among populations of individuals with other disabilities, including intellectual disability. Crenshaw (1991) shares the importance of using person first language while using race/ethnicity as an example, emphasizing the statement "I am a person who happens to be Black" as a more inclusive identifier in that it does not first define an individual based on race/ethnicity, but rather acknowledges they are a person first. This trend has become popular within the disability community for similar reasons—to acknowledge the individual as a person first, and not define them by their disability (i.e., "a boy with autism" in place of "an autistic boy"). In doing so, minority groups are recognized as people first, not their society-chosen identifier.

Research has found that care providers, guardians, and school staff often do not allow students with intellectual disabilities to express their sexuality, as it is assumed that they have no sexual desire or will not participate in sexual relationships (Lofgren-Martenson, 2008; Morgan et al., 2011). Adults associate homosexual tendencies with an inaccurate understanding of friendships among individuals with disabilities (Morgan et al., 2011). Some school professionals have shared worry that students with disabilities are already deviant from the norm, and identifying as LGBTQ+ would further alienate them from their peers (Morgan et al., 2011; Lofgren-Martenson, 2008).

Students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ have difficulty fitting in with the respective communities (Elderton et al., 2013; Morgan et al., 2011). Existing resources and support for LGBTQ+ students are not accessible for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ often find themselves "twice invisible"—both among typically developing LGBTQ+ students and heteronormative students with disabilities (Morgan et al., 2011). Students who have a disability and students who are transgender are minorities within public schools, and individuals who fall within both of these categories may experience stigma to a greater degree (Harley et al., 2002; Hazlett, et al., 2011).

California Education Code 51500-51501 states that teachers may not deliver instruction and schools may not present any activities that discriminate against students based on race or ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, nationality, or sexual orientation (CA Legislative Information, 2013). The Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, Respectful (FAIR) Education Act of 2011 mandates the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ in textbooks and curriculum—policy makers previously excluded both groups from existing law (The FAIR Education Act, n.d.). Intersection of disability and LGBTQ+ exist in Ed. Code and the FAIR Act, but are not consistently recognized in public schools. Existing policy upholds cisgender norms along with institutional ideas about race, class, and ability (Meyer & Keenan, 2018). In his 2020 campaign plan for people with disabities, President Biden cites the Equality Act (2010) and recognizes the intersection of multiple identities, stating that people may experience greater discrimination because of their disability, race, sexual orientation, or gender identity. He plans to increase enforcement of civil rights protections by introducing new legislation related to the Equality Act (Biden, 2020).

The organization GLAAD completed a report for 2019-2020 about representation of minority groups on television, including black, latinx, and asian-pacific islander characters, characters with disabilities, and bisexual+ and transgender characters. GLAAD added disability representation in the media to their report ten years ago (Townsend et al., 2019). They found ten cable and six streaming characters with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ (Townsend et al., 2019). One example of a positive portrayal of someone who both has a disability and is LGBTQ+ is Ryan O'Connell, who identifies as someone who is gay and has cerebral palsy. He is the creator and lead actor in the Netflix series *Special* (2019) and speaks openly about both identities and challenges he faces.

Conclusion

There is little research about the intersection of disability and LGBTQ+. There are emerging studies focusing on the small, but existing, population of individuals who have an intellectual disability and identify as LGBTQ+ (McCann, Lee, & Brown, 2016). In their review of existing studies about individuals with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+, McCann, Lee, and Brown (2016) found gaps in research addressing health (specifically sexual) concerns, free and equal expression of identity and sexuality, support and interventions, and education and training for families and staff. They found that few articles addressed issues related to those who identify as transgender, in relation to those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Graybill and Proctor (2016) identify the lack of research as a concern, based on what we know about bullying and victimization of students who are LGBTQ+, and that LGBTQ+ issues are not visible in existing literature.

This chapter describes important background information concerning individuals with disabilities and understanding gender identity and LGBTQ+ status. It touches upon three topics

that apply to individuals with disabilities, those who identify as LGBTQ+, and those who experience dual stigma with both identifiers. These themes include law and policy background, academic experiences, and discrimination. Intersectionality is the framework for this study and looks at the dual stigma of both having a disability and identifying as LGBTQ+. The chapter includes gaps in research, showing the importance of completing this study. Chapter three describes the design of the study, which contributes to the minimal literature addressing this unrecognized population. Chapter three includes methodology, methods, description of participants, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness and assumptions, limitations and delimitations, and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) write, "Getting started on a research project begins with examining your own orientation to basic tenets about the nature of reality, the purpose of doing research, and the type of knowledge to be produced through your efforts" (p. 14). The purpose of this study is to understand the school experiences of students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming by examining special education staff perceptions of school support. This study seeks to inform the following question: What are special education staff perceptions regarding school support for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming? This chapter describes the design of the study, rationale for using basic qualitative methodology to best answer the research question, participant selection criteria, data collection procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness and limitations of this study. It concludes with a summary of the chapter. Interview questions are included in the appendix (Appendix B).

Research Design

The researcher used an exploratory qualitative study with the purpose of sharing the experiences, perspectives, and stories of special education staff who have worked with students who have an intellectual disability and are gender nonconforming. The study focuses primarily on the experiences, perceptions, and stories of special education teachers and instructional assistants (also known as paraprofessionals or paraeducators). For the purpose of this study, gender nonconforming is defined as an expression of a gender identity differing from one's biological gender assigned at birth. The best way to inform about the research question was to

conduct a qualitative study consisting of special education staff who have worked for at least one school year with a student or students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. A study seeking the perspective of special education staff will provide other educators, policymakers, and researchers with a unique view of a marginalized and underrepresented population of students.

The researcher conducted a qualitative study and collected data through the use of interviews and follow-up interviews to determine what is known and how to better include students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming within public schools. The sample consists of four participants-- two special education teachers and two former instructional assistants. The researcher used purposive sampling to gather participants to meet specific defining criteria stated in the research question (experience working with students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming). The researcher recruited participants based on previous working relationships and through networking with colleagues. The researcher interviewed special education staff individually regarding their experiences using predetermined questions (see Appendix B). Follow-up questions were asked to clarify ambiguous questions and responses. Participants responded to open-ended questions, with revisions to encourage responses. The first two interviews took place in Fall of 2020, with the next two interviews and follow-up interviews in Winter/Spring of 2021. Analysis and final clarification deemed necessary by the researcher to inform the research question took place in Spring of 2021. Data was collected through the use of recorded interviews and anecdotal notes. All notes were completed within 24 hours of interviews to ensure accuracy. Interviews took place virtually (through phone) or in person, following shelter-in-place and COVID-19 restrictions, and on a day and time predetermined by the researcher and participants. The

researcher transcribed the interviews and coded for common themes among responses, including themes among special education teachers and instructional assistants.

Methodology

Sociologists and anthropologists initially used qualitative research dated back to the 1920s (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is used to better understand a phenomenon, using words in place of numbers for data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Qualitative research focuses on quality; has philosophical roots in phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and constructivism; associates with terms including fieldwork, ethnographic, naturalistic, grounded, and constructivist; investigates understanding, description, discovery, meaning, and hypothesis generating; has characteristics that include flexibility, evolution, and emergence; utilize small, nonrandom, purposeful, and theoretical samples; collects data through interviews, observations and documents, with the researcher as the primary instrument; analyzes data conductively and with a constant comparative method; and presents findings that are comprehensive, holistic, expansive, richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Weaknesses of qualitative research include that data is left to interpretation and has more gray areas than quantitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research can also not soundly prove or disprove an idea, but rather provides more information on a topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To address an exploratory study seeking to understand the various perspectives and experiences of educators working with a hidden population, a qualitative design is appropriate.

Methods

The researcher conducted this study with the purpose being to complete a basic qualitative study through the use of interviews to learn about special education staff perspectives regarding school support. This study seeks to better understand and give voice to an underrepresented population. There is little research addressing school experiences and existing support for students who identify with these two social groups.

A qualitative study design is appropriate as the purpose of the study is to explore the perspectives, experiences, and stories regarding a specific topic-- school support for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Participants for the study include special education staff with experience working with students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Researchers typically use qualitative methodology to share experiences and stories and to develop a better understanding of a specific topic—it has traditionally been used to give a voice to a marginalized population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Initial interviews were conducted with special education teachers and instructional assistants to determine their experiences and perspectives about school support for students falling in this lesser-known population. Prior to being interviewed, participants completed informed consent forms (see Appendix A). Follow-up interviews took place to clarify questions and answers.

Participants

Participants for this study include four special education staff-- two special education teachers and two former instructional assistants. All participants know at least one student with intellectual disability who is gender conforming, and have worked in their classroom for at least one year. The researchers selected participants based on an existing relationship and through

networking with colleagues. All participants have experience in the state of California, in either

rural and/or urban areas. They have worked with varying age groups, from preschool through

adult programs for people with disabilities. All participants identify as cisgender and use she/her

pronouns.

Data Collection

The researcher recorded three of the interviews and took anecdotal notes for the fourth

interview. All interviews took place in respect to COVID-19 restrictions. The researcher and

participants pre-selected the days and times in which the interviews occurred. The researcher

allowed the questions to be open-ended, with follow-up when appropriate to elicit a response or

more information. The researcher took anecdotal notes during the interviews to assist with later

transcription. The researcher recorded three out of four interviews-- one participant requested

not to be recorded, in which detailed notes were taken during the interview. The interviews and

follow-up interviews took place between September, 2020 through February, 2021.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study is to explicitly share what participants have observed and

experienced. The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews and looked at the transcription

and notes from all four interviews to code for patterns related to gender expression, relationships,

acceptance and representation, resources for students, training for educators, and policy. The

researcher determined themes based upon one to three words or phrases that related to predicted

themes and keywords such as relationship, resource, expression, and training.

Trustworthiness

For a qualitative study, researchers must look at trustworthiness in place of validity and reliability. Trustworthiness presents itself as rigor in the study, in addition to conducting research in an ethical manner. Validity and reliability can be met through the careful consideration of how the study is conducted, how data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and how the findings are shared (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). As stated above, the researcher collected data through interviews and analyzed them to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of identified themes.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) present ten questions challenging the trustworthiness, validity, and reliability of qualitative research. Their questions address sample size, interpretation, generalization, the researcher as an instrument, data collection timeline, bias, the absence of hypotheses, the researcher's role as participant and/or bystander, respondent fidelity, and transferability of results. By using a small sample, the researcher is able to better focus on participants' perspectives as an alternative to surveying a large number of participants. Having fewer participants allows the researcher to spend more time on each participant, allowing for follow-up and an in-depth analysis. Skeptics of qualitative research, and this study, might argue that one researcher's understanding and analysis of data may inhibit the reliability of results. In this case, the identity of the researcher and an existing relationship with participants results in a unique perspective and arguably a more valid and reliable selection of data than another researcher. The purpose of this study is not to generalize, but rather share an in-depth unique perspective that is relatable to others. The researcher did their best to ensure reliability, validity, and authenticity by identifying bias, threats, and limitations to the study. The researcher stopped collecting data when there was enough data to inform the research question. By being transparent with the interview questions, transcripts, and analysis, the researcher was able to

minimize bias. The study does not include hypotheses, as they are not necessary to answer

exploratory, open-ended research questions. The researcher's presence among participants may

have influenced responses, but may have also encouraged responses, and honest ones, because of

an existing relationship. Respondent fidelity cannot be guaranteed for any study, whether it is

quantitative or qualitative, however the researcher shared responses and observation notes with

participants to strengthen authenticity and encourage honesty. Researcher assumptions for this

study include that participants respond to questions honestly and have consistent memories about

prior experience.

Limitations and Delimitations

Possible limitations for this study include a very small participant pool, however this is

necessary to delve into the experiences of a unique population. Qualitative research has less

certainty than quantitative research—however, this method is best used to tell a story about an

individual's experience and will better answer the research questions. Another limitation, and

threat to trustworthiness included above, is researcher bias. The interpretation of something

heard is impacted by the researcher's cultural background and understanding of events that occur

around them. The researcher also identifies as a cisgender woman and does not have an

intellectual disability, nor do the interviews include people with intellectual disabilities who are

gender nonconforming. The researcher's role is that of an advocate and ally. Attempts were

made to incorporate the voices and stories of students with intellectual disabilities who are

gender conforming, however were not possible to include for this study. In an attempt to address

this possible inherent bias, the researcher is as translucent and objective as possible when

reporting data. Possible limitations with participants include pre-selected interview questions

guiding the interview that may have unintentionally omitted valuable information pertaining to

the topic under study and the method for gathering participants, which includes selecting

participants the researcher has an existing relationship with, which was necessary to address the

research question. To address these limitations, the researcher included open-ended questions,

with opportunities for participants to elaborate on or add any information outside of the topics

addressed in the interview questions. For the method for selecting participants, the benefit of an

existing relationship when studying a hidden population and experiences with school staff

outweighs any possible limitations.

Ethical Considerations

The Institutional Review Board approved this study. All participants completed a signed

informed consent form prior to engaging in interviews and three out of four participants

consented to their interview being recorded. The researcher scheduled interviews at the

convenience of each participant. Participants and the researcher engaged in private interviews

either over the phone or in person following COVID-19 restrictions. There is a minimal risk of

coercion, and participants did not receive any compensation for their involvement. The

researcher kept knowledge of participants' identities confidential and used pseudonyms in the

study. The researcher removed identifying characteristics and only includes information

pertinent to the study. All recordings of interviews, transcriptions, and anecdotal notes are on a

locked computer that only the researcher can access.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduces the methodology for this study. It includes the research design,

methodology, methods, participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and

assumptions, limitations and delimitations, and ethical considerations. This qualitative study

looks at the experiences, perspectives, and stories of special education staff who have worked with a student or students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming through the use of interviews. The researcher analyzed data through coding while looking for patterns and themes. This chapter shares threats to trustworthiness and limitations. It is safe to conclude that this topic area is hardly addressed, and is in dire need of being informed upon.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to share special education staff perspectives on the school experiences of students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. This study seeks to inform the following question: What are special education staff perceptions regarding school support for students with intellectual disabilities who identify as gender nonconforming? During the interview process, the researcher expanded this question to include the LGBTQ+ community to widen the search parameters based on a limited pool of research. However, participants primarily shared about a student or students who are gender nonconforming.

Participants

To address the research question, the researcher selected four educators to participate in interviews to gain insight into their perspectives and experience working with students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Criteria included participants who have worked in a classroom for at least one year with a student or students who have an intellectual disability and are gender nonconforming. All participants work or worked in the public school system in the state of California. The researcher conducted interviews separately, either in person or over the phone due to COVID-19 restrictions. Follow-up interviews took place to clarify information shared during the initial interviews. The researcher recorded interviews for three out of four participants. For the fourth, the researcher took anecdotal notes during the interview and immediately reviewed the notes to ensure accuracy. For the purpose of this study, interviewees are named Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and Participant 4 and are ordered in no particular order. Information about participants is also included in Table 1.

Participant 1 is a high school special education teacher with an Education Specialist credential and identifies as a cisgender female using the pronouns she/her. She describes her role as a moderate severe disabilities teacher and noted that within her district this group is now called "extensive support needs." She teaches academics at a significantly modified level and focuses on daily living skills, independence, and self-determination. Her role includes managing paraprofessionals and supporting students who are included in general education classrooms by communicating regularly with general education teachers. She is also at the end of a Board Certified Behavior Analysis program. She has been educating students with disabilities for fifteen years in both rural and urban areas in the state of California, with seven of those years as a special education teacher. Participant 1 has experience with students in Kindergarten through 12th grade with a range of disabilities including Down syndrome, autism, intellectual disabilities, orthopedic impairments, and other developmental disabilities.

Participant 2 identifies as a cisgender female using she/her pronouns. She worked as an instructional assistant (also known as paraprofessional, paraeducator) for seventeen years. Her experience is in a rural area of California and includes students and adults from pre-kindergarten through young adult programs for adults with disabilities ages 18-22. She also worked with Valley CAPS, a day program for adults with developmental disabilities. Participant 2's experience is with a variety of individuals with mild to severe disabilities including autism, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, speech and language impairments, specific learning disabilities, Down syndrome, Aicardi syndrome, and traumatic brain injuries. Her role included supporting the teacher of the classroom, running a goals program in which she worked with students 1:1 on their IEP goals, administering lessons, collecting data, and supporting students with communication and daily living needs. She is currently working as a school secretary

within a county office of education special education program in which she oversees a little over 300 students with disabilities and is in her sixth year in this position.

Participant 3 is also cisgender, female, and uses she/her pronouns. Before retiring, she worked as an instructional assistant for almost 20 years with students in Kindergarten through eighth grade and adults ages 18-22 in the young adult program. Participant 3 worked in a rural area of California and has experience with students who have specific learning disabilities, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairments, speech and language impairments, and other developmental disabilities. Her role in the classroom included engaging students in a reading program, communicating with families, supporting students during inclusion opportunities (e.g., during P.E., assemblies, and other school events), working 1:1 with students on their IEP goals, and supporting students with independence and daily living skills.

Participant 4 uses she/her pronouns and identifies as a cisgender female. She has been an educator for 10 years, with nine years as a moderate to severe special education teacher and one year as a paraprofessional. She has taught grades 9-12, with student teaching experience in a middle school classroom. Participant 4 has taught in an urban area of California and has experience working with a variety of abilities in her students. She is currently working as a high school special education teacher, and supports her students with inclusion in general education, life skills such as cooking, and other needs as outlined in their IEPs.

Prior Knowledge

The researcher asked participants about existing knowledge around policy and laws for both the LGBTQ+ and disability communities. Participants rated their knowledge on a scale from one to five, one being no knowledge at all and five being a lot of knowledge (see Table 1).

Participant 1 rated her knowledge of LGBTQ+ laws and rights as two. She stated she did not feel she knew much about LGBTQ+ laws and rights, but had recently attended a health training provided by her school district in which this topic was addressed, specifically about how the law impacts health curriculum. For disability laws and rights she rated herself a four, and stated "I know quite a bit, I think. I know what you can and can't do." She talked about existing policy around conservatorship, in which guardians can conserve their child with a disability in seven different areas, one being social and sexual contacts.

Participant 2 also rated her knowledge of LGBTQ+ laws and rights as two, and for disability rights and laws rated herself at three or four. Participant 3 rated herself between a three and five for LGBTQ+ knowledge and three to four for disability knowledge. Participant 4 rated herself a three for LGBTQ+ knowledge and a five for disability knowledge. The participants did not elaborate on their number responses, nor were they asked to explain their rating.

Table 1
Participant Information

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Years of Experience	15	23	20	10
Grade range of students	K-12	Prek-Young Adult (age 18-22)	K-8, Young Adult (age 18-22)	6th-12th grade
# of students observed within research criteria	2	1	1	1
Knowledge of LGBTQ+ laws and rights on 1-5 scale	2	2	3-5	3
Knowledge of disability laws and rights on 1-5 scale	4	3 or 4	3-4	5

Themes and Patterns

Upon completion of the participant interviews, the researcher transcribed the recordings and reviewed the notes to ensure accuracy. The researcher compared the transcribed interviews and discovered the following themes: gender expression, relationships, acceptance and representation, resources for students, training for educators, and policy. Participants shared information that aligned with these five themes.

Gender Expression

In their responses, participants identified specific forms of gender expression that helped to determine a student's gender nonconformity, in addition to students' ability to articulate how they identify. Participant 1 shared the following:

> Some things I've noticed is students express themselves in ways like clothing or attitude or body movement or the way that they talk regardless of their intellectual abilities or disabilities. I've had students that… are born male but enjoy dressing more feminine and refer to themselves as the different pronouns and things like that. Just naturally.

Summarizing from a student, Participant 1 paraphrased "one student would say, 'Sometimes I feel like a boy and sometimes I feel like a girl and sometimes I don't feel like anything at all.'" She shared that this student would often ask others "do you ever feel that way?" She also worked with another student who was often mistakenly called by the wrong pronoun. When asked, they would say "No, I'm [name]. Not a her. Not her." Participant 1 commented "... I felt like that in a way was a self-declaration of 'I don't identify as a girl, I identify as me.' And I always thought that was really powerful."

Participant 2 shared about one student she had observed in a fourth through eighth grade special day class, but suggested there may have been more students who were gender nonconforming and/or LGBTQ+ that she was unaware of. When asked how she would describe

the student, she stated "I say a loving, happy student. I feel, you know, he loves people. He loves to make people smile, laugh. I think he's overall happy." She reflected on his expression in the classroom, sharing:

> I think once, you know, he was allowed to do you know certain things or dress a certain way or carry certain things, you know, purse or, whatever it might have been, painting his fingernails. I mean, he shined. You could just tell he was in his element.

She added that he would often come to school with his purse that contained beads, and he still continues to carry his purse and express himself in this way. This student did not identify a preferred pronoun, and so is continued to be referred to as he/him.

Participant 3 recalled one student she knew who was gender nonconforming, but also suggested there may have been more students she was unaware of. She has not observed any students with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+. In terms of expression, Participant 3 recalled a time she helped a gender nonconforming student with their makeup. The student arrived at school wearing a lot of lipstick and she stepped in and helped them properly apply their lipstick. She recalls thinking this was something she would have done for any student, and never considered telling them they could not wear it. She also reflected that for this student, staff often helped them rather than restricting their form of gender expression.

Participant 4 recalled knowing one student who was gender conforming, and like other participants recognized there may have been more students who she did not know about or did not have the language to articulate their gender nonconformity. When thinking of the high school student who is gender nonconforming, she shared they would ask many questions about how to express themself and felt comfortable initiating conversations with school staff.

All participants shared examples of nonconforming gender expression, through both verbal expression and physical appearance. Students would ask questions about clothing and

makeup, receive assistance with makeup application, correct staff about their gender pronouns, and express themselves in a way in which they appeared to be happy and loved. None of the participants shared that students were restricted on their gender nonconforming expression, and that they felt comfortable asking questions and expressing themselves in class.

Relationships

All participants highlighted relationships for students they observed as being positive. Relationships touched upon in the interview questions included friendships, school staff, family, and romantic relationships. Participants were also asked if they observed bullying, discrimination, or harassment of students with disabilities who are gender nonconforming or LGBTQ+. Each participant shared only what they have observed, which mostly consisted of peer and school staff relationships. Some observations were made regarding romantic and family relationships, but these were minimal.

Participant 1 was asked about bullying or discrimination she may have observed, in which she responded:

> I don't see more bullying of those groups of people than other groups of people I think that there's a general bullying going on in high school in general but from what I've heard from like people in the wellness center or other teachers or students that attend [school] I don't think this is happening often enough to be like alarmed about it. And I've never really witnessed it. The students that I think of when I think of these questions were never bullied.

When asked about observed friendships, she shared "the students who I have known who were gender nonconforming have, are like the best friends, like they really want-- everybody wants to be friends with them and they seem to be really good friends. Friendships are really healthy." When asked about relationships with school staff, Participant 1 answered "I think those are some of the strongest relationships. Like I said with the Wellness Center, with the teachers, with the

paraprofessionals, also school psychologists. It's a very welcoming environment at the school I

work at."

Participant 2 recalled some bullying for students with disabilities, but not those who were

also gender nonconforming, specifically during a P.E. class. For the student she worked with

who has an intellectual disability and is gender nonconforming, she recalled that:

> ...for the most part, especially the younger kids I felt on the mainstream campus are the
> kids were pretty acceptable, you know, they always come and play with them. I
> remember… they had a list of people who wanted to be our helpers in our class.

When asked about friendships, she reported only positive and long-lasting friendships, for this

student and for most students in the moderate to severe special day class setting. She stated "I

think they keep their friendships… for a while," recalling how many years students spend

together when moving through classes in a special day class.

Participant 3 shared that staff relationships seemed positive, and that all were on board

with what would best help students in the classroom. When asked about bullying, she shared

that in reference to the student with an intellectual disability who is gender nonconforming, they

were very likeable. She did not witness any bullying, but also there was not much opportunity

because of their teacher and paraprofessionals always being in close proximity. She also

mentioned that because this student had Down syndrome, they were often viewed as being very

sweet, which may have also impacted how they were viewed by their general education peers.

She recalled her former student being friendly, but also wanting to do their own thing and being a

little more mature than their peers. She shared that there was not anyone in class who treated

them differently because of their gender identity and expression, and recalls them being very

friendly and strongly respected by school staff. She reflected this also may have been because of

the strong rapport that existed between the special day class staff and general education staff, and

a lot of work was put into building this rapport.

Participant 4 pointed out her perspective on bullying and peer relationships may differ

from her students. She shared:

> I see them in such a positive light, and I often see them within the context of the mod/severe classroom. And I don't really see them out there in general classes… but that's not to say that it didn't happen.

Thinking specifically about a student with intellectual disability who is gender nonconforming,

she stated:

> I would say that he was pretty popular. He was pretty well liked. I mean, he just was kind of a loud, really gregarious personality. And so I think that people wanted to be friends with him because he was pretty fun to be around. But I hope that was, like, a good spirited kind of friendship and not just keeping him around because he's entertaining.

While reflecting on relationships with peers and school staff, Participant 4 shared the following

about her former student:

> probably he really gravitated towards relationships with the paraprofessional staff and had more difficulty being friends with male peers his age in the mod/severe classes or in the general classes... I think they saw him maybe kind of just as like a novelty rather than somebody you would actually have a true friendship with.

When asked about anything she observed regarding family relationships, Participant 4

responded:

> He was from a family who was Russian and so I think a lot he had wanted to know about, like fashion and make up and dance and things like that… they weren't things that he could necessarily talk to his mom about, and so he would immediately go to the [paraprofessionals]. And a lot of the conversations were like, 'Would it be okay if I wore this to Prom? Would it be okay if I wanted to wear makeup? Would it be okay if this?' And so those were the questions that he didn't necessarily go to his mom for, but he felt comfortable talking to staff at school about.

The next section expands upon relationships and delves into acceptance and representation of students with disabilities and people who are LGBTQ+ and/or gender nonconforming.

Acceptance and Representation

When asked a general question about observations and support, there were overarching implications of acceptance by educators and school staff for individuals with disabilities who are gender nonconforming or LGBTQ+. Some participants identified specific examples of acceptance and representation they observed.

Participant 1 observed language used in IEP meetings with parents about not recognizing a student's gender nonconformity. She said that IEP team members would "say very cutesy things around it like they don't take it seriously it seems like," and stating "there's no talk or work around helping them come to a strong sense of identity, like as a team. I think it's more like 'oh, that's, it is what it is, we're not going to say "yay" or "nay" either way' and it's kind of just like, oh, that's it. So that's kind of disappointing." About her school site, she shared:

> I think we're a really tolerant department… we do a lot of trainings in our faculty meetings from, like, wellness center, school psychologist, or the principals around. I think that it's a work in progress. But I see people sign their emails with their pronouns at the bottom which a lot more students are doing too now and actually some of my students who I teach, on their Zoom accounts have their names and their pronouns.

Participant 1 also identified the importance of representation for all of her students. She specifically thought of one student and the benefit of seeing another student her age with similar interests and the positive impact of representation. She added that including student interests in topics and curriculum is a good starting point.

Participant 2 shared "in my experience, we just really let him do his thing. I mean, you know, it wasn't hurting anybody. That was when he was the most happy… So we just never really made a big deal of it." Recalling how he was supported in the classroom, she stated:

> He would show his buddies and friends the things that he would bring [purse, makeup, etc.]. And he would, you know, we put music on and he would dance, and… it was just a normal day. We didn't make it any kind of awkward or weird… Just this is how [student], you know, does. This is how he is.

When discussing general support for students with intellectual disability who are gender nonconforming, Participant 2 shared that she wanted people to know "They do exist. So the people who say, like, 'you're not born that way'… that's just ridiculous." She also added that a hope she has for the future is for people to "stop judging anybody on any level" and that "we need to love and respect [each other]."

When asked about her hopes and concerns, Participant 3 shared a hope for the future in which she stated:

> I just hope that [students with ID who are gender nonconforming] can walk into a classroom and say 'This is me and who I am' and go forward, and that's all that really needs to be said about it. This situation is what it is and it doesn't need to be accommodated.

Participant 4 shared about representation at her school site and within her city, highlighting the benefit of living in a diverse area, stating:

> I would say that, particularly because we're in [large city] and my school in general, I would say, one out of four administrators, identifies as gay, like maybe almost a quarter of the teaching staff. A huge amount of the teachers. I would say other students in the hallway. It seems like something that's pretty accepted to be out and proud.

When thinking about support provided by the school, she shared "We have gender neutral bathrooms, and the administration, you know, made that a point to say that it's important that we have restrooms that are inclusive to all students." She also shared classrooms include "safe space" posters and:

the language that a teacher uses… it's important [for] their words, like, how they talk about people that [are LGBTQ+], you know, that they are respectful, that they celebrate that population. I think if I were a kid… [how] they talked about that population would mean a lot to me.

Participants shared multiple examples of acceptance and representation at their school sites, including classroom and school support, peer and staff acceptance, and school staff representation. The next section will address resources and training for staff and students.

Resources for Students

Participants were asked generally what resources they were aware of in their schools and classrooms and information shared is split into two areas: resources for students and resources for educators and school staff. When asked about support for students with ID who are gender nonconforming, or LGBTQ+, Participant 1 stated:

The student who would question 'am I a boy or am I a girl or am I neither,' was referred to the wellness center to help with discovering their identity and actually became, like, a student worker for the wellness center. [They] in turn became an advocate and face of the wellness center which was really great. They also were paired with a paraprofessional in the after-school program who did a lot of social skills learning and things like that to build their confidence and have them join clubs that would be appropriate to help them with their identity and stuff like that so it was really supportive for that specific student.

When asked what worked well or hasn't worked well when supporting students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ she shared, "I think we can do better" and added about a student whose gender nonconformity or LGBTQ+ identity was viewed as "cute." She highlighted a specific incident, in which her students began adding their pronouns to their display names on Zoom because of their Physical Education teacher. She stated:

One of the students came [to class] and I was like 'When did you [add your pronoun]?' He goes 'My PE teacher told me to do it' and they did a whole lesson in the PE class around why it creates a climate and a community for people who, their pronouns aren't as obvious and so I thought that was really great so the [paraprofessionals] and I did it too. It's a really cool community builder and I wasn't even in that class or with that other

teacher and I was impacted by it, so that was really cool… It's a good way to give information without making people feel like they're put on the spot. Which is good in general, right?

Participant 1 was asked about any further resources that would be helpful, in which she replied:

Part of my routine is a warm up and then we do a video related to the content, because the students are way more engaged in videos and music than me, and then we talk about the video so it would be really nice to have some video representation of people who talk, look, act like them, who are also gender nonconforming or LGBTQ+ or look different.

When asked about any hopes or concerns for the future, she shared:

I hope that we can do better as educators to find ways to reach all students. I was giving a talk to people, who are going to the teaching program, of my health curriculum and how I'm super passionate about teaching sexual education to people with significant cognitive delays and there was a young woman who identifies as trans and she was saying we need to do better. Like, 'yes, your curriculum, this a great start, but where is the representation of people who are trans or gender nonconforming and are asexual and things like that?' And I told her 'I don't know, I don't even know where to start.' And so I would hope that students in the future, that they-- we would do better and learn how to create things that teachers like us who want to offer it we can. So that's kind of what I hope is that we can normalize the conversation too.

Participant 2 stated resources for students (i.e., curriculum, classroom materials, etc.) would need to be modified for them to best understand. She recalled her student not needing many more resources because of being in a very supportive classroom, but recognized that not all students may experience this and further support would be needed.

Participant 3 shared that in her classroom, they used developmental age appropriate books to help support her student who was gender nonconforming. They would read the books to the whole class, sharing the message that individuals can express any gender identity, and recalled that students were very receptive. Some of the books they used were *I Am Jazz* and *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*. She added that supporting students who are gender nonconforming is just as important as a student who has dyslexia, and gender identity should be recognized in special education classrooms.

Participant 4 shared that general support for students who are LGBTQ+, like the Gay

Straight Alliance lunch club that is open to all students. As far as curriculum, she cited sex

education curriculum that was created by her and her co-teacher, but it is not used district-wide.

Within this curriculum, they discuss gender identity and multiple sexualities. She also

recognized that educators typically do not ask nonverbal students questions about their sexuality

or gender identity and that students with disabilities are often viewed as asexual:

> If there are students who have very significant disabilities, like for example, are non
> verbal, if there was a way to kind of first create community in my classroom, which I
> think I do a good job of, but also like having conversations where we could ask students
> questions then provide support to the students or their families if they were interested in, I
> don't know, learning more, having a relationship, dating. Because right now, I think so
> often with significant disabilities, we ignore that they're sexual beings and teens, but just
> to kind of encourage those conversations and make them feel comfortable to ask
> questions.

Training for Educators

Participants were asked about resources and supports in place for students with

intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming or LGBTQ+ and shared about existing

support and needed resources and training.

When asked about support for LGBTQ+ students, Participant 1 recalled her time working

in a less populated city in 2006 and 2007, stating that there was not a lot of support for students

with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+. She responded that "parents didn't know where

to go and, even at the school I worked in or schools I worked in most often never really talked

about anything like gender or anything like that." She noted that she worked with younger

grades at this time, specifically kindergarten through third grade, and was not sure if more is

done now for students at a young age. In her current city, she stated:

> We have a really great Wellness Center and they always do faculty meeting ice breakers
> where they practice and give presentations on why it's important for teachers to introduce

themselves using their own pronouns to create safe school climate and community builders and so the Wellness Center is really great about making sure and having visual posters and stuff for anti-bullying against people who are gender nonconforming or LGBTQ. So it's more visual and you hear about it a lot more in [current city] I think. And at the high school level.

When asked about support for students with disabilities, she stated:

I think the schools in [her city] are better at serving people with disabilities, serving people individually with their own IEPs, and other school districts I've worked at, it's more blanket, like this is what we do for students like this student.

About her school site, she added that it is a work in progress and pointed out several professional development meetings taking place. She shared that she attended a professional development meeting about health curriculum for her school district:

They just added a few new units specifically on [supporting LGBTQ+ students] and the expectation is for [her district] that it's like a fully encompassing curriculum and they have to talk about topics like this, and everybody in that [professional development], there's probably 50 people, were all trained on it and then the expectation is that you teach it in the health class. But I feel like that's one class, you know, so it's a start but like for me with students with mod/severe or any type of intellectual disability or cognitive disability I struggle with that because a lot of our students are most comfortable learning in the binary and there's no clear description of things. It's very abstract.

Participant 2 stated that more resources are needed for staff, but did not elaborate about what these resources would be. Participant 3 recalled there was support for her student in the classroom, but there were no other resources or support provided by the school. She would like to see further training and seminars for school staff. She highlighted that school staff should leave their personal beliefs at home and be on the same page as each other to support students.

For further resources and support for educators, Participant 4 suggested coaching on how to talk to families:

I would like coaching, as a teacher. Coaching on how to talk to parents, coaching on how to talk to other students, coaching on how to talk to that student. I think what's difficult probably in [her city] is we're pretty laid back [about] what is safe for a teacher to have a conversation about, you know. I wouldn't want to jeopardize my job by saying anything that the family would feel uncomfortable with. You know, the kind of very generic is

like, Well, sometimes girls like girls and boys like boys. You know, sometimes boys identify as a girl, and sometimes girls identify as a boy. I think, having a basic conversation. But I don't even know if a family would feel comfortable about me saying that.

She pointed out that this is not an issue of educators being open or willing to support students, but it is unclear if there is a district policy to support educators in the instance that a family is not comfortable with multiple gender identities or sexualities being taught in the classroom. She added:

I guess I would want to also know how to support the paraprofessional. Or any training should also be offered to the paraprofessionals because often times these conversations happen more with paraprofessionals than they do with teachers. I can think of two paras that were very close to the student and one was a woman. She worked in the after school program, so she had a relationship with him and with Mom, so she felt like she could kind of talk to both of them at the same time. And then one was a male para who was gay. And so I think [student] knew that and actually would go to this para and say, 'Is this okay? How do I go about this? What is my mom gonna say? Am I allowed to do this again with the staff?'

When discussing what else should be done when students are seeking support, she shared:

I think that there is this dynamic of like a gay male para talking to a gay teen student that [the paraprofessional] immediately was like, 'I don't feel comfortable having these conversations because the parent might think, "Oh, I'm a gay man in my forties talking to their teenage son about what it's like to have a gay relationship," and that looks bad. Do you mind having this conversation instead of me?' And I get why [the student] went to him. Because that's somebody who would understand. But then the para was like, 'I don't wanna [have the conversation],' not in a negative way. But he was like, 'I don't wanna get in trouble for this.'

Within the area of resources and training, participants identified some existing tools and professional development in addition to seeking clarity about policy and acknowledging a need for more. The next and final section recognizes excerpts related to policy.

Policy

In addition to information and requests for resources and training, questions and comments arose about existing district and state policy. When previously asked about her

knowledge of disability laws and rights, Participant 1 shared what she knows about

conservatorship for students with disabilities, making a connection between one of the powers of

conservatorship that controls social or sexual contacts. She recalled addressing this with a

family during an IEP meeting:

> I'm actually working with a family right now in conserving their daughter in all seven areas and when we talked about it I told them I'm very hesitant because I'm super passionate about all people, no matter intellectual ability, to have romantic and physical relationships with someone that they choose. And the parents we had talked about it and you know they were like, 'Thank you for bringing that up because it makes us think, would we limit our daughter if she wanted to?' And they were like 'No, we wouldn't, we just want to have control and say and who it is,' you know, and I thought that was really powerful.

For this specific case, she was asked to write a letter to support their request to conserve their

daughter in all seven areas, which contradicted her personal beliefs. She recalled the internal

conflict:

> What if somebody could say, 'Well you haven't conserved them as that and I asked them if they wanted to do this and they said yes' and then the parents are like 'Well I think this is you manipulating them' and then there's all this gray area. Where if you conserve them, if you say 'you didn't ask my permission,' I mean, that's it, you know, there's no 'oh, the student or the adult said this.' It's 'they don't have the right to say that, I have the right to say that.' And we made it, it was a serious conversation because I don't want you to think that by me as your teacher writing this letter that I agree with the student never having a sexual relationship because you know my stance on that and I think everybody's entitled to that. The only reason I'm writing this [letter] is to make it clear that you need to have an approval and know that it's what your child wants or what your adult wants.

Participant 3 shared she had recently heard that the House of Representatives voted to

change wording to "chairperson" instead of "chairwoman" or "chairman" along with other

accommodations for future nonbinary members. She added this as a final thought at the end of

her interview, making a connection to recent shifts in acknowledgement and representation for

the LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming communities in the United States.

When asked about concerns and hopes for the future, Participant 4 shared her perspective living and working in a diverse city:

> I also feel that students in [her city] are lucky to be born into [her city] because already they're light years away from basically anywhere else in the country, to be at a school and in [a city] where it's really fun to say you're gay. But maybe if there was Ed. code in California that just said this is OK to talk about, more kids would feel comfortable speaking out or teachers speaking out.

She asked about district policy regarding support for safe spaces and conversations for LGBTQ+ students, stating she was unaware of district policy or state education code around procedures for educators. She added making educators and students more aware of these policies and procedures may foster environments in which students and teachers are more comfortable speaking out.

Only three out of four participants shared in their interviews information related to district or state policy. Information was shared about conservatorship, changes in the House of Representatives, and a request for clarity around district policy.

Conclusion

The researcher conducted interviews with two special education teachers and two former instructional assistants to address the following question: What are special education staff perceptions regarding school support for students with intellectual disabilities who identify as gender nonconforming? Participants shared information related to six themes: gender expression, relationships, acceptance and representation, resources for students, training for educators, and policy. In this chapter, excerpts were presented under each theme. The next and final chapter includes a summary of previous chapters, findings related to the literature, unanticipated outcomes, and final conclusions which will include implications and recommendations.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore special education staff perceptions regarding school supports for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. This chapter summarizes the study, shares significant findings and those relating to literature, identifies unanticipated outcomes, and shares implications, recommendations, and final remarks. It includes an overview of the problem, the purpose of this study, the research question, a review of the methodology, and a summary of the findings.

Summary of Study

Students with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+ and/or gender nonconforming exist in schools. Chapter one introduces the problem, that students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming are often overlooked in the public school system. There is minimal training for educators along with the existence of systemic and inherent bias and assumptions about gender identity and sexuality among people with disabilities. Chapter two reviews related literature, looking at LGBTQ+ law, disability law, and school experiences of both communities. Chapter three outlines the methodology and methods for a basic qualitative study, in which the researcher conducted interviews with four special education staff about their perceptions of school support for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. The chapter includes that the researcher transcribed and coded the interviews for themes and commonalities. Chapter four synthesizes data from interviews and lists six major themes: gender expression, relationships, acceptance and representation, resources for students,

training for educators, and policy. The next section of this chapter makes connections between what participants stated in their interviews and existing research.

Summary of Findings

Chapter four consists of excerpts from interviews with four special education staff-- two special education teachers and two former instructional assistants. The researcher coded and categorized responses under six themes: gender expression, relationships, acceptance and representation, resources for students, training for educators, and policy. There were significant responses in these areas from all participants that connect with current literature.

The researcher asked participants about their knowledge of LGBTQ+ and disability laws and rights and they rated themselves on a scale from one to five, with one being no knowledge at all and five being a lot of knowledge. All participants rated themselves higher on their knowledge about disability laws and rights, with the exception of Participant 3 who rated herself slightly higher in her range of LGBTQ+ knowledge. It was anticipated that participants would rate themselves higher when asked about disability laws and rights, as this is the field they work in, while knowledge of LGBTQ+ laws and rights would be slightly lower, as this area is rarely integrated into special education. The outcome was close to what was anticipated, with the exception of Participant 3's rating.

Gender Expression

All participants shared about gender expression for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming, and expressed an overall acceptance of gender nonconformity from their school sites. Students expressed their gender identity through clothing, attitude, body language, accessories, makeup, and verbal expression. This is associated with research that

found allowing students to express their gender identity helped students build self-esteem (Dinwoodie et al., 2020; Murphy & Elias, 2006). Participants shared that students felt comfortable asking questions and getting feedback from school staff, including getting help from Participant 3 when fixing their makeup. This is a testament to the relationships and sense of community built for students in their school environment, and educators should consider this if they are exploring ways to support their students with similar identities. This relates to what Myers et al. (2013) say about creating a safe, secure, and welcoming environment for students with disabilities. Research also states that educators have an obligation to meet the needs of all students, regardless of their backgrounds and identities (Vallejo Peña et al., 2016) and that there are benefits to including LGBTQ+ positivity in schools (Triska, 2018).

Relationships

Participants shared they did not observe bullying of the specific students they were sharing about, nor romantic relationships, and commented on peer, family, and staff relationships. Participant 2 shared about one occasion of bullying for a student with autism who was not gender nonconforming, but could not recall any other instances. Other than Participant 2's example, no other observations of bullying took place. This contradicts literature that shares about high rates of bullying and discrimination among students with disabilities and students who are LGBTQ+ (Dinwoodie et al., 2020; Duke, 2011; Frawley & Wilson, 2016; Myers et al., 2013; Richmond, 2012; Wilson et al., 2016). In their study, Dinwoodie et al. (2020) found that people with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+ experienced bullying connected with their disability, sexuality, and gender expression from people in their communities. Ryan O'Connell, creator and lead actor of the Netflix series *Special,* shared in an interview:

> In a bizzaro way, I think it's easier to be gay than disabled. I mean, look at all the Pride stuff going on right now. All the events, all the discourse, all the corporations showing their support. Can you imagine something on that scale for disability? I can't! There still is limited dialogue and visibility around disability and until that changes self-love for a disabled person is going to be hard. (Ascher, 2019, n.p.)

O'Connell shares about the impact of having disability and LGBTQ+ identities and the impact it may have on self-love, which relates to what participants shared about self-esteem.

Friendships appeared to be healthy and positive, however, Participant 4 suggested that the authenticity of friendships may be questionable and that her student gravitated toward adult staff rather than peers of his age. Participant 3 attributed an absence of bullying to adults being present for most of her student's social interactions, and also because they have Down syndrome and are seen as being sweet, which may connect with stereotypes around intellectual disability (Duke, 2011; Kallman, 2017). Participant 2 recalled her former student eagerly sharing his interests aligned with his gender nonconformity with his peers, such as his purse and makeup, and that overall his peers and classroom staff embraced and encouraged his expression. These examples contradict research students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ feeling alienated from their peers (Lofgren-Martenson, 2008; Morgan et al., 2011). Although participants did not observe bullying or harassment, contradicting literature about students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ experiencing high rates of bullying, this coincides with research about teachers and school staff not observing bullying incidents in schools (Kaufman Goodstein, 2013; Oldenburg et al., 2015). Research also suggests that when teachers and school staff actively create an environment in which bullying is not accepted, there may be fewer observed incidents of bullying (Veenstra et al., 2014). These areas of research may help to explain why participants did not observe bullying while research states that high rates of bullying exist for students with disabilities and students who are LGBTQ+.

Acceptance and Representation

Participant 4 shared that the language teachers use is important, and that the LGBTQ+ community is spoken about with respect and celebration in her school environment. Participant 1 also recognized how language was used during IEP meetings and how expressed gender identity was not always taken seriously. This connects to Kimball et al., (2018) and Triska (2018), who suggest educators assist in breaking down exclusive norms by using inclusive language, LGBTQ+ infused curriculum, and eliminating binary gender systems. Participant 1 shared that gender nonconformity was viewed as "cute" and that this was a needed area for growth among educators. This can be equated with what adolescents with autism who are gender nonconforming shared in a study by Strang et al., (2018) when they shared people often do not believe them when sharing a gender nonconforming or transgender identity.

One area that came up multiple times was addressing students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming with the correct pronoun, which corresponds with literature about imposing a cis-normative and binary gender system and implicit bias (Kallman, 2017; Meyer & Keenan, 2018) and creating LGBTQ+ positivity in schools (Triska, 2018). This includes taking their gender expression seriously and honoring their pronouns, which also relates to Title IX stipulations (Lahmon & Gupta, 2016). This is a simple area that educators can immediately put into practice to better recognize and support all gender nonconforming students. One way of doing so shared by Participant 1 is incorporating gender pronouns in email signatures. Friedman et al. (2014) state it is important to honor the voices of people with intellectual disabilities as much as possible, especially in regard to gender identity and sexuality. Triska (2018) adds to the importance of recognizing someone's identified gender, stating they should be addressed by their chosen name and pronoun, be given access to clothing that aligns

with their identity, and be allowed to participate in activities with their identified gender group, similar to what is outlined in Title IX for schools (Lahmon & Gupta, 2016; Triska, 2018). He also adds that this includes the responsibility to speak up when you hear individuals misgendered or called the wrong name (Triska, 2018). This correlates with what other researchers have found about educators defaulting to what feels comfortable and how they identify (Duke, 2011; Kallman, 2017; Treacy et al., 2018; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016) and what Meyer and Keenan (2018) write about gender stereotyping, heteronormativity, and cis-normativity having a harmful influence on students.

Participant 1 spoke about the impact of representation for her students, which is also seen in research addressing underrepresentation for people with disabilities, people who are LGBTQ+, and people with these dual identities (Duke, 2011; Elia & Tokunaga, 2015; Holland-Hall & Quint, 2017; Kallman, 2017; Richmond, 2012; Treacy et al., 2018; Townsend et al., 2019; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2016). Participant 4 shared how there are many LGBTQ+ administrators and teaching staff on her campus, which creates a positive environment in which people are "pretty accepted to be out and proud." This provides representation in students' immediate community and is associated with research about representation (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2016). Richmond (2012) discusses how students with intellectual disabilities may not feel comfortable acknowledging or be able to recognize LGBTQ+ identities due to a lack of representation in special education. Participant 4's campus offers a natural starting point to better include LGBTQ+ representation within the special education setting because of the already present staff who are comfortably openly LGBTQ+. This relates to research by Blanchett and Wolfe (2002) who state that sex education should be taught to students with disabilities in natural environments within the school setting; research

also states that sex education for students with disabilities should include LGBTQ+ topics

(Duke, 2011; Elia & Tokunaga, 2015; Friedman et al., 2014; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018;

Seelman, 2014). LGBTQ+ and disability youth are often missing from sex education

curriculum, which perpetuates stigma, stereotypes, and power imbalance (Elia & Tokunaga,

2015). There is also research about including positive and realistic examples of people with

disabilities to minimize bias among non-disabled individuals, while also providing role models

for people with disabilities (Kallman, 2017). Aaron Phillip, a black trans model with cerebral

palsy, shared her thoughts on representation in a 2018 interview when she was seventeen, saying:

> [The] lack of representation and visibility in fashion has deeply affected me throughout
> my life, and has driven me to take matters into my own hands to carve a space and try to
> provide opportunity for members of my community in this field… The possibility of
> creating opportunities for disabled and gender-nonconforming people in high fashion is
> what excites me about being in this industry. (Phillip, 2018, n.p.)

She added "I want careers for Black, disabled, and trans models to be attainable and sustainable"

(Phillip, 2018, n.p.). This corresponds with what research and this study's participants say about

the positive impact of representation (Duke, 2011; Hughes-Hassell et al., 2013).

Resources for Students

Participant 1 shared that educators can support students with disabilities who are

LGBTQ+ by including them and their interests in educational topics and curriculums. This

connects with research about including student input in developing programming (Elia &

Tokunaga, 2015; Frawley & Wilson, 2016; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Sinclair et al., 2017).

Participant 4 shared that her school has gender neutral bathrooms and administration has made a

point to students to say that school bathrooms are inclusive of all students. This aligns with Title

IX and providing bathrooms and changing areas that equate with students' gender identity

(Lahmon & Gupta, 2016). In addition, teachers use "safe space" posters as a nonverbal cue to all

students that they are accepted and supported for who they are. This exists in research about creating a safe and inclusive environment for students with disabilities and students who are LGBTQ+ (Meyer & Keenan, 2018; Triska, 2018).

When asked about resources for students, Participant 1 shared she uses videos and music related to content to engage students, and how she would like to see better video representation of people who speak and look like her students, as well as representation of students with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+. This perspective connects to research about recommended practice for special educators when teaching curriculum related to LGBTQ+ issues (Friedman et al., 2014; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018) and with research on best practices for teaching students with intellectual disabilities about abstract concepts (Duke, 2011; Frawley & Wilson, 2016; Wolfe & Blanchett, 2003). Sinclair et al. (2017) suggests incorporating multiple methods such as role play, using friendly terminology, photos when possible, examples and non-examples, 3-D models, and videos when teaching sex education for students with disabilities. Finally, campus wellness centers were a source of support for both students and educators, providing resources for both. This relates to research about connecting and collaborating with counselors, related professionals, and community resources when supporting students (Friedman, et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 2017).

Participants all shared hopes for students in the future. They each shared that students should feel accepted and welcome in their classrooms and schools. In their study on higher education, Myers et al. (2013) interviewed college students who said they did not always feel comfortable disclosing their disability with faculty because they feared stigma, discrimination, and segregation. They state that disability education is for everyone and should be done by everyone and is a shared responsibility to promote inclusion; educators have an obligation to

humanize and be an ally for people with disabilities (Myers et al., 2013). Research also states

students who are gender nonconforming should be provided an opportunity to freely explore

gender identities and expressions (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018). Triska (2018) writes about the

benefits of including LGBTQ+ positivity in schools, which include normalizing LGBTQ+

identities, creating a strong community in which people can connect with others with the same

identity, establishing a safe space for LGBTQ+ students to come to adults for help, compliance

with anti-discrimination law, and inclusive general knowledge. This is associated with what

participants said about students feeling accepted and welcomed in schools. Participant 2 shared

about her hopes of people knowing that students with intellectual disabilities who are gender

nonconforming exist and that people with the opinion "you're not born that way" is "just

ridiculous." This relates to research that discusses the implicit bias, stereotypes,

heteonormativity, and cis-normativity that exists in schools and alienates students who identify

this way (Duke, 2011; Elia & Tokunaga, 2015; Frawley & Wilson, 2016; Kimball et al., 2018;

McDaniels & Fleming, 2018; Myers et al., 2013; Richmond, 2012; Triska, 2018; Wilson et al.,

2016).

Training for Educators

Participant 1 spoke about district training and new developments in health curriculum to

include LGBTQ+ issues, and how all teachers present were taught how to incorporate the

updated units with the expectation being that it is taught in Health class. This aligns with

research saying sex education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities should be

provided in the least restrictive environment, which may be in the general education classroom

for students with disabilities who participate in inclusion (Barnard-Brak, et al., 2014; Murphy &

Elias, 2006). However, special education teachers are often left to devise their own curriculum

pulled from professional development and best practices, and then adapted to be accessible for students with intellectual disabilities (Elia & Tokunaga, 2015). Participant 1 shared that students with intellectual disabilities are used to learning in the binary, as that is what they've been taught in previous years. This is found in research that says educators in general default to what feels comfortable and how they identify, which can further influence exclusion of disability and LGBTQ+ representation (Duke, 2011; Kallman, 2017; Treacy et al., 2018; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016). Most sex education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities is missing a clear and concrete description of LGBTQ+ inclusive topics. Special educators take abstract concepts and make them concrete and understandable for students with intellectual disabilities. Intellectual disabilities impact executive functioning, affecting the ability to generalize and process abstract concepts (Treacy et al., 2018).

Participant 1 shared about her student becoming an advocate and leader for the school's wellness center, and that educators focused on social skills learning and building confidence while supporting their student's identity. This connects to research about including instruction on social skills (Barnard-Brak, et al., 2014; Murphy & Elias, 2006) and assisting in developing self-esteem (Dinwoodie et al., 2020). She included a story about a P.E. teacher doing a lesson on sharing gender pronouns, which relates to research about addressing gender identity in general education settings (Barnard-Brak, et al., 2014; Blanchett & Wolfe, 2002; Murphy & Elias, 2006).

Participant 1 and Participant 4 both discussed creating their own sexual education curriculum. Many special educators compile their own sex education curriculum from various resources (Elia & Tokunaga, 2015). Previous studies have found that educators may not feel skilled or supported when teaching sex education to people with disabilities due to unclear policy and inadequate education (Abbott & Howarth, 2007; Barnard-Brak et al., 2014; McDaniels &

Fleming, 2016; Schaafsma et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2016). Abbott and Howarth (2007) found

that special education staff typically teach sex education in a reactive way. Research says that

having a high quality sex education program positively impacts the lives of people with

intellectual disabilities (Duke, 2011; Murphy & Elias, 2006; Schaafsma et al., 2014; Treacy et

al., 2018). Because research states that quality sex education positively impacts student lives, it

is important to support educators in this area. Greiveo et al. (2006) stated that care staff and

family members should be provided training so that they may be able to provide sex education.

In her master thesis, Richmond (2012) found that facilitating conversations around individuals

with disabilities who are LGBTQ+ may help educators best serve these populations.

Participant 1 shared about how the schools in her city focus on the individual student

when following IEPs and supporting students with disabilities. Participant 2 added that

resources would need to be modified for students with intellectual disabilities, which

corresponds to research by Barnard-Brak, et al., (2014) and Murphy and Elias (2006) about how

sex education may be included in a students's IEP along with other skills like social and

behavioral skills, and may include accommodations and/or modifications to make sex education

accessible (e.g., reviewing materials and modifying to meet developmental age instead of

chronological age). Participant 3 included using developmentally-appropriate books when

discussing topics like gender nonconformity. She added that students' gender identity should be

recognized in special education classrooms, which can also be seen in relation to Title IX and

pertinent literature (George & Stokes, 2018; Lahmon & Gupta, 2016; Myers et al., 2013;

Seelman, 2014; Triska, 2018; Vallejo Peña et al., 2016).

Participant 4 reflected on practice in which nonverbal students with intellectual

disabilities are frequently not asked about their gender identity or sexual preference, which

coincides with research about people with disabilities being viewed as asexual (Barnard-Brak et al., 2014; DiGiulio, 2003; Duke, 2011; Henry et al., 2010; Murphy & Elias, 2006**;** Richmond, 2012; Treacy et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2016) and the dangers of pushing a cis-normative and binary gender identity system (Frawley & Wilson, 2016; Meyer & Keenan, 2016). Early versions of sex education in the special education classroom pushed for suppression of any type of sexual expression and prepared students for an unmarried life (Dudek et al., 2006). This relates to what Participant 3 said about pushing aside personal beliefs and supporting all students. Kallman (2017) discusses implicit bias and how it may impact the ways in which people interact with those viewed as different from themselves. Studies on implicit bias primarily focus on race and ethnicity, but do not address other minority groups like people with disabilities (Kallman, 2017).

Participants all requested further training for special education staff, which aligns with suggestions from researchers. Greiveo et al. (2006) stated that care staff and family members should be provided training so that they may be able to provide sex education for students with moderate to severe learning disabilities. McDaniels and Fleming (2018) and Sinclair et al., (2017) shared that some of the barriers impacting effective sex education for students with disabilities are training, or lack of, for educators and access to materials appropriate for students. Treacy et al. (2018) identified barriers to accessing sex education for people with disabilities which are also applicable for those who are LGBTQ+, including sexuality viewed as deviant, lack of education and preparation for educators which then impacts educator levels of confidence in teaching sex education, parent anxiety and fear, a lack of parent and teacher partnerships, valid and reliable curriculum, and a lack of funding for said curriculum.

Policy

Participants shared information and questions about policy, including how to address difficult conversations with families and how to support instructional assistants with supporting students when parents may disagree with their sexuality or gender identity. Participant 1 made an association with conservatorship, specifically the area in which guardians can conserve their adult in the area of social and sexual contacts, and her internal conflict with writing a letter to support guardians with their request to conserve their adult student in all areas, and how she was able to express her concerns to her student's guardians. Duke (2011) writes that parents/guardians, service providers, and educators can improve ways in which they support, rather than try to control, all forms of sexual expression by individuals with disabilities. This also relates to the Biden Administration's plans to work toward independence for people with disabilities by supporting them in self-determination aligned with ADA and supporting independent decision making as an alternative to conservatorship (Biden, 2020).

Participant 4 pointed out that district policy is not clear to educators and students, and in making both more aware of policy it may help to create environments in which educators and students are comfortable to speak out. A movement toward inclusion is the next step beyond tolerance or acceptance and pushes educators to create safe environments for all students (Harley et al., 2002; Henry, Fuerth, & Figlozzi, 2010).

Discussion of Findings

This study includes K-12 educator perspectives, while many previous studies focus on higher education staff and faculty, caregiver, or counseling perspectives when researching studies on students with intellectual disabilities who are LGBTQ+ or gender nonconforming (e.g., Dudek et al., 2006; Harley et al., 2002; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Smart & Smart, 2006;

Smith et al., 2008). This study also specifically looks at students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Previous studies, for example, look at sexuality and intellectual disability, LGBTQ+ and disability with only a brief mention of transgender or other gender identities, or autism and gender nonconformity (e.g., Strang et al., 2018), or simply refer to gender identity and disability as two separate entities that do not interact (e.g., Seelman, 2014). This study adds to an already small pool of research specifically looking at how to support students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming within the public school setting.

It is also important to note that participants observed positive interactions among students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming, their peers, and school staff, which according to research this is not the norm. This may be because students with intellectual disabilities are typically closely supervised by school staff for a majority of their school day. This may also be because all participants identify as cisgender, and may be less aware of discrimination or micro aggressions targeting students who are gender nonconforming.

Implications

The implications of this study are that educators are seeking ways in which to better support all students, and specifically those who are underrepresented in research and professional development. It is also clear that in some schools and areas, there are greater amounts of acceptance and representation, which may positively impact school experiences for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. This is deduced based on the single report of bullying that was witnessed for a single student. Further training is needed for educators to best understand how to discuss LGBTQ+ topics with students with intellectual disabilities. Sex education curriculum needs to be developed for individuals with intellectual

disabilities that includes LGBTQ+ issues and representation, as there is no known existing curriculum that covers these areas other than what educators have created specific to their classes from a variety of resources. Current policy is ambiguous and not well known by students or educators.

Recommendations

There are few barriers impacting support from educators for students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. It is not a lack of willingness to support students who identify this way, rather a deficit of preparation in how to systematically best meet the needs of students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Further studies should seek to include the voices, perspectives, and experiences of students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Future research should include educators in other parts of the state or country where school support may be lacking and students may be facing further challenges. They should also include educators who are transgender or gender nonconforming, as their perspectives on school support may differ from cisgender educators. Another recommendation is for researchers to conduct policy reviews on school district policy for including students with disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Further studies should explore and analyze existing health standards and curriculum to ensure it is inclusive of people with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community. Lastly, further research should look at the Biden administration's plans to make changes to policies to increase equality for people with disabilities and determine the impact these policies have on the school experiences of students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+.

Conclusion

Students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming exist and are deserving of school support. This study has looked at the intersection of disability and gender identities through an intersectionality framework. A review of literature included the history of policy and law, academic experiences, and discrimination for both the disability and LGBTQ+ communities. The researcher interviewed educators with experience in the field of special education to better understand how schools support students with intellectual disabilities who are gender nonconforming. Their depth of experience contributes to a small pool of existing research in this area, and adds to what is already known about supporting students who identify within these groups. It is clear that more support is needed for educators so they may in turn better support their students, which would look like further training and curriculum development to better include representation and topics relating to the lives of students with disabilities who are LGBTQ+. Further study is needed to include student voices, as their perspectives are the most important and valuable when determining how to create positive and inclusive learning environments. This study has helped me to reflect and better understand my former student, and my hope is that it will inspire further study and have a similar impact on educators who are seeking to do the same.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research study which will involve a case study about adolescent students and your collective experiences with public schooling.
My name is Jennifer Clare and I am a student at the University of the Pacific, Benerd School of Education. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your experience working in a Special Education classroom with adolescent students with intellectual disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+ and/or gender nonconforming, with the purpose of sharing your experiences with other educators and families with similar experiences.

The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities who present or identify as gender nonconforming (meaning expressing characteristics not expected from the gender one is born as (male/female)) and/or LGBTQ+ (identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning). If you decide to participate, you will be asked to engage in one on one interviews, check data for accuracy, and openly reflect on your observations and experiences. Your participation in this study will last one year, and requested participants include teachers and instructional assistants or paraprofessionals who have worked in a special education classroom for at least one year.

There are some possible risks involved for participants. There are potential psychological, sociological, and loss of confidentiality risks, including emotional stress as a result of addressing sensitive topics related to gender identity, sexuality, and disability that may or may not have been previously discussed, in addition to possible embarrassment during the interview, and possible loss of confidentiality that may impact respect from peers. Steps will be taken to minimize these risks, such as the use of pseudonyms for all participants involved in the study, data kept on a locked laptop, audio recordings of interviews and notes destroyed after 3 years, resources made available to participants to support psychological and sociological stress, interviews conducted in a private location, and access to data and analysis. There are benefits to this research, particularly that this study provides an opportunity to voice experiences and perspective regarding school experiences, offering support for similar educators and an opportunity to voice concerns to an attentive audience. Please note the researcher is also a mandatory reporter, and is required by law to report any abuse or negligence of minors.

It is also important to note that while Shelter in Place and social/physical distancing protocol is in place in the state of California in response to COVID-19, all interviews will be conducted with the use of technology, meaning via phone or video conference.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please call me at (209) 470-0165. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Institutional Review Board (IRB), University of the Pacific at (209) 946-3903. In the event of a research-related injury, please contact your regular medical provider and bill through your normal insurance carrier, then contact the Office of Research & Graduate Studies.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality are storing data on a locked computer and using pseudonyms. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

You will be offered a copy of this signed form to keep.

Signature   Date

_____   _____

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What has been your role in education? How long have you been working with students with disabilities? What age group/severity?
2. In your time as an educator, have you observed students with cognitive or intellectual disabilities who identify as gender nonconforming? or LGBTQ+?
3. In your experience, what have you observed? Have schools been serving students with cognitive/intellectual disabilities who identify as gender nonconforming or LGBTQ+? What works well? What does not?
4. In what ways do educators you have interacted with support alternative gender expression in their classrooms?
5. In what ways do educators you have interacted with support students who identify as LGBTQ+ in their classrooms?
6. Do you recall observing any discrimination, harassment, or bullying towards students with disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender nonconforming? Can you tell me more about that?
7. What have you observed regarding friendships for students with cognitive or intellectual disabilities who identify as gender nonconforming or LGBTQ+? Family relationships? Romantic relationships? School staff?
8. On a scale from 1 to 5, five being a lot and 1 being none at all, how much do you know about LGBTQ+ laws and rights?
9. On a scale from 1 to 5, five being a lot and 1 being none at all, how much do you know about disability laws and rights?
10. What resources have you used for support in your classroom?
11. What further resources do you feel are needed?
12. Do you have any concerns/hopes about the future of students with intellectual or cognitive disabilities who identify as LGBTQ+ or gender nonconforming? If so, what are they?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add or comment on that I haven't already asked about?