Article

Can the Cultural Transmission of Trans-Affirming Values Serve as a Protective Factor for Transgender/Gender-Nonconforming Youth?

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Abstract: Through a social learning theoretical framework, this article seeks to understand how gender normativity is perpetuated, as well as how it results in the marginalization of transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) youth. Additionally, ways in which TGNC youth navigate oppression and how discrimination against TGNC youth may be reduced through disruption of gender normativity are explored. Using qualitative methods, including the analysis of community meeting transcripts as well as town hall meetings with gender-diverse participants, the present study will answer the following research questions: (1) how do transgender and gender-nonconforming youth navigate discrimination and marginalization? (2) How can social learning theory be leveraged to disrupt gender normativity and reduce the discrimination, marginalization, and victimization of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth? This article aims to bridge the gap in the literature by expanding on research specifically pertaining to TGNC youth and directly addressing how social learning mechanisms can both perpetuate and mitigate gender-normative ideologies.

Keywords: gender normativity; transgender; gender nonconforming; social learning

1. Historical and Societal Context of TGNC Discrimination in the U.S.

The United States (U.S.) has long reinforced heteronormative and gender-normative ideals, fostering discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) people. TGNC individuals often navigate a complex process of identity formation where their gender identity does not align with their biological sex (Pipkin et al. 2023). This experience is compounded by societal norms that conflate sex with gender, leading to significant challenges in self-understanding and expression. The misconception that sex and gender are interchangeable creates confusion and reinforces discrimination against TGNC individuals, as their nonconformity to traditional gender norms is frequently stigmatized (Buist and Stone 2014; Toomey et al. 2012; Zeeman et al. 2017).

TGNC youth, a vulnerable subgroup within the LGBTQIA+ community (Biegel 2018; Collier et al. 2013), face disproportionate harassment, bullying, and assault in schools compared to their cisgender and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) peers (Collier et al. 2013; McGuire et al. 2010; Palmer and Greytak 2017). "Cisgender" refers to individuals whose biological sex assigned at birth aligns with societal gender expectations (Zeeman et al. 2017). In contrast, LGB individuals, who are more likely to conform to gender norms, face lower victimization rates. TGNC youth often receive harsher school discipline and less peer support when victimized (Glickman 2015; Greytak and Kosciw 2014; Palmer and Greytak 2017). Outside school, they also encounter heightened family rejection and abuse (Katz-Wise et al. 2016; Simons et al. 2013).

These adverse experiences have far-reaching consequences, significantly impacting TGNC youths' mental health and educational outcomes. Studies indicate that discrimination and marginalization increase risks of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, self-injury, and negative self-perceptions among gender-diverse youth (Collier et al. 2013; Toomey et al. 2018). This population also faces heightened academic challenges

stemming from safety concerns, resulting in absenteeism, lower grade point averages, and increased dropout rates, which may exacerbate disadvantages faced by TGNC youth, affecting their secondary education and potentially hindering their plans for higher education and employment (Collier et al. 2013; Katz-Wise et al. 2016, 2017; McGuire et al. 2010).

TGNC youth are more likely to become involved in the justice system, often facing school disciplinary action for non-adherence to gender-normative dress codes and being unfairly blamed for their victimization (Glickman 2015; Palmer and Greytak 2017). To cope with victimization and mental health issues, some turn to substance use, which can lead to justice system involvement (Palmer and Greytak 2017; Reisner et al. 2015). Moreover, due to abuse and family rejection, many become homeless and resort to survival crimes like theft and prostitution (Hirschtritt et al. 2018; Jonnson et al. 2019). These factors compound the discrimination and stigma TGNC youth already endure (Rose and Martin 2008).

Historic gender-normative values in U.S. policies perpetuate inequality for gender-diverse individuals. The belief in a strict gender binary, endorsing only traditional masculine and feminine roles, labels anyone diverging as deviant or immoral, reinforcing systemic and personal marginalization (Buist and Stone 2014; Kosciw et al. 2018). Gender-normative culture also influences school policies that allow the mistreatment of gender-diverse youth (Biegel 2018; Currie et al. 2012; Glickman 2015). Addressing this culture is crucial to mitigating such abuse (Currie et al. 2012; Koppelman 2014).

Schools, integral to youth development, shape and reflect cultural norms and values, often reinforcing gender norms through discriminatory policies and peer interactions, which perpetuate the mistreatment of TGNC youth (Currie et al. 2012; Glickman 2015; Marion and Oliver 2011). Nationwide implementation of gender-inclusive policies, such as providing gender-aligned bathrooms and locker rooms and acknowledging chosen pronouns and names, is crucial for improving outcomes and validating TGNC youth identities (Kosciw et al. 2013; Kosciw et al. 2018). However, these initiatives often face resistance from those fearing discomfort or safety for cisgender students, religious objections, or claims of preferential treatment for TGNC youth (Meyer 2014; Stone 2018). This opposition stems from entrenched heteronormative and gender-normative values, coupled with limited exposure to TGNC individuals. Anti-trans rhetoric perpetuates misconceptions, posing significant challenges for TGNC youth and potentially shaping future generations' beliefs (Meyer 2014; Stone 2018).

The Current Study

This study examines how gender-normative ideals contribute to the marginalization of TGNC youth by analyzing transcripts from community meetings and qualitative field notes from town hall meetings with gender-diverse participants. It investigates how TGNC youth navigate oppression and strategies to reduce discrimination. Employing a social learning theoretical framework, the study addresses two research questions: (1) how do transgender and gender-nonconforming youth navigate discrimination and marginalization? (2) How can social learning theory be leveraged to disrupt gender normativity and reduce the discrimination and victimization of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth? These questions aim to bridge gaps in the literature by examining how social learning mechanisms can perpetuate and mitigate gender-normative ideologies.

The following sections provide an overview of gender normativity's impact on TGNC youth, detailing their discrimination, marginalization, and victimization. An examination of how social learning theory reinforces gender norms and offers potential strategies for fostering acceptance and reducing harmful behaviors toward TGNC youth is included. Subsequent sections outline research methods, including secondary data sources and analysis procedures. The findings from secondary data sources are presented, offering insights into TGNC youth experiences. The discussion explores these findings, examining the impact of societal norms and policy implementation on supporting TGNC youth, and evaluates the study's strengths and limitations. Finally, the conclusion addresses policy implications and offers reflections on the study's findings.

2. Gender Normativity and Its Connection to TGNC Oppression

This section provides a thematic overview of recent peer-reviewed literature on institutionalized gender normativity and its impact on TGNC individuals. It explores how gender normativity contributes to systemic oppression, with a focus on discrimination, marginalization, and victimization experienced by TGNC youth, as well as the negative consequences that arise. Protective factors and resilience[1] strategies adopted by TGNC youth are also discussed, concluding with a critique of the limitations of prior research. Importantly, we note that emphasizing resilience without acknowledging intersecting oppressions can obscure the need for systemic change and inadvertently reinforce the status quo, suggesting that marginalized individuals must adapt to hostile environments rather than transforming those environments to be more inclusive and equitable.

2.1. Institutionalized Gender Normativity and Discrimination

Institutionalized gender normativity dictates that one's gender should align with their biological sex, reinforcing societal perceptions that deviations from this norm are abnormal (Buist and Stone 2014; Conry-Murray and Turiel 2012). This norm is deeply entrenched from early childhood and within religious contexts, where deviations are often deemed immoral and challenge religious liberties (Donovan 2016; Koppelman 2014; Stone 2018). As a result, legal and policy frameworks have been structured to legitimize discrimination against TGNC individuals, with state laws regulating gender transition presenting significant barriers (Buist and Stone 2014; Pipkin et al. 2023; Restar et al. 2020). Healthcare access for transgender individuals varies widely by state, with many states denying coverage for gender-affirming treatments (Plemons 2019; Stroumsa 2014; Hughto et al. 2015).

Institutional policies perpetuate discrimination in various settings, including workplaces and military environments, where TGNC individuals face higher rates of harassment and job insecurity (Buist and Stone 2014; Dietert and Dentice 2015; Goodwin and Chemerinsky 2019; Juban and Honorėe 2020). Gender normativity also affects sports and the legal/criminal justice system, where TGNC individuals encounter barriers to accessing gender-affirming facilities and are subjected to violence and stigmatization (Hargie et al. 2017; Jenness et al. 2019; Sumner and Sexton 2016). Notably, the concept of "trans panic," which is rooted in harmful gender norms, illustrates how toxic rhetoric infiltrates the justice system, leading to leniency for violence against TGNC individuals (Buist and Stone 2014; Wodda and Panfil 2014).

Gender normativity, reinforced by laws and policies, leads to widespread discrimination against TGNC individuals across various areas of life (Buist and Stone 2014; Dietert and Dentice 2015; Hargie et al. 2017; Koch and Bales 2008). This underscores the urgent need for policy reforms and cultural shifts to promote equity and inclusion (Pipkin et al. 2023; Tyni et al. 2023).

2.1.1. TGNC Youth Discrimination, Marginalization, and Victimization

Gender normativity perpetuates harmful rhetoric and "gender panics" about TGNC youth, portraying them as deceitful, confused about their gender, and a threat to cisgender students' safety (Biegel 2018; Stone 2018). This leads to higher rejection rates from families and peers compared to gender-conforming youth. TGNC youth also face significant peer and staff discrimination in schools, with higher rates of harassment and negative comments compared to cisgender students (Katz-Wise et al. 2016; McGuire et al. 2010). They receive harsher punishments and less support when reporting harassment or bullying (Glickman 2015; Greytak and Kosciw 2014; Katz-Wise et al. 2016; Palmer and Greytak 2017).

Furthermore, the rights of TGNC youth at school are often sidelined. Many school policies include some form of protections for LGB students but typically do not cover gender expression and presentation, forcing TGNC youth to rely on general anti-bullying policies (Airton et al. 2019; Biegel 2018; McGuire et al. 2010; Taylor and Peter 2011).

2.1.2. Marginalization in School Policy

TGNC individuals have historically been marginalized within broader LGBTQIA+ movements, often excluded from anti-discrimination laws and policies (Meyer 2014; Vipond 2015). This exclusion extends to school policies across North America. While many Canadian districts include sexual orientation in anti-discrimination policies, gender identity and expression are often inadequately addressed, leading to incomplete protections for TGNC youth (Airton et al. 2019; Taylor and Peter 2011). In the U.S., Biegel (2018) describes the fight for transgender rights as "the last frontier" (277) in gender equity, highlighting the lack of comprehensive school policies for gender identity.

The absence of trans-affirming policies marginalizes TGNC youth by failing to provide essential accommodations, such as restrooms, locker rooms, acknowledgment of pronouns and names, and inclusion in school-sanctioned activities. This omission exacerbates feelings of invalidation and exclusion and worsens the psychological and academic outcomes associated with discrimination (Katz-Wise et al. 2016; McGuire et al. 2010).

TGNC youth experience higher rates of school victimization compared to their gender-conforming peers. Kosciw et al. (2018) found that TGNC students report more hostile experiences, with 59% of LGBTQ students reporting verbal harassment based on gender expression and 24% facing physical assault. Similarly, McGuire et al. (2010) documented frequent verbal harassment from staff and peers as well as physical assault from other students.

2.2. Negative Outcomes

Discrimination against TGNC youth significantly affects their mental and physical well-being, leading to higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts, with alcohol and substance use exacerbating these risks (Collier et al. 2013; Reisner et al. 2015; Toomey et al. 2018). They also face challenges such as limited healthcare access, social isolation, and educational disruptions due to homelessness and family rejection, which leads to higher rates of school absenteeism, lower GPAs, and heightened dropout rates, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage (Jonnson et al. 2019; Kosciw et al. 2018; McCann and Brown 2019). Increased violence, including hate crimes and bullying, further impacts their well-being and can lead to justice system involvement and economic instability (England 2022; Hirschtritt et al. 2018; Willis et al. 2021).

Understanding the multifaceted challenges of TGNC youth is vital for developing targeted interventions and supportive environments that foster their resilience and empowerment. By addressing the interesting factors contributing to their marginalization, we can create inclusive spaces where TGNC youth can thrive and fulfill their potential. Considering these diverse challenges may provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences, informing holistic interventions to effectively address their needs.

Protective Factors and Coping of TGNC Youth

Despite significant discrimination, TGNC youth demonstrate notable resilience, especially with support from family, educational institutions, and inclusive community environments (Alvarez et al. 2022; Tankersley et al. 2021). Family acceptance is a critical protective factor, greatly influencing mental health and life satisfaction. It reduces the likelihood of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Katz-Wise et al. 2016; Simons et al. 2013; Singh et al. 2014; Taliaferro et al. 2018). Tyni and colleagues (Tyni et al. 2023) emphasize that TGNC youth thrive in supportive environments that allow them to explore their gender identity free from societal pressure, which enhances their coping abilities. Such settings foster resilience by providing the necessary space and support for youth to navigate their identities and relationships, enhancing their ability to cope with daily stressors (Gooding et al. 2023).

Support from adults and inclusive school environments further bolsters resilience (Gower et al. 2018; Hatchel et al. 2019; Zeeman et al. 2017). Horton (2023) posits that parental support during a child's transition protects against negative mental health outcomes linked

to societal stigma, aligning with Tyni et al. (2023), who highlight how supportive actions foster a sense of belonging and safety for TGNC youth.

The presence of Gender & Sexualities Alliances (formerly Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs), inclusive curricula, and supportive educators are crucial for enhancing self-esteem and academic performance for TGNC youth (Marx et al. 2017). These resources provide vital support and affirmation, creating a more inclusive environment where TGNC youth can thrive (Tyni et al. 2023). Comprehensive anti-bullying policies also play a key role in reducing harassment and promoting a sense of belonging (Kosciw et al. 2013, Kosciw et al. 2018). This holistic support system is essential for building resilience and mitigating the adverse effects of mistreatment for TGNC youth, underscoring the need for a multi-faceted approach to support and inclusion.

Gooding et al. (2023) show that LGBTQ youth, including TGNC individuals, create and navigate queer(ed) spaces to assert their identities and find support. The concept of "situated agency" demonstrates how these youth adapt their social environments to construct safe and affirming spaces. These queer(ed) spaces, both formal and informal, provide crucial support and a sense of belonging, further reinforcing resilience (Gooding et al. 2023). This dynamic process highlights the importance of supportive environments that recognize and enhance the efforts of TGNC youth to thrive despite external challenges.

3. Limitations of Prior Research and Connections to Theory

Existing research on TGNC youth shows several limitations that hinder a complete understanding and support of this population. A major issue is that much research tends addresses the broader LGBTQ youth population, often neglecting the specific experiences and needs of TGNC youth (Simons et al. 2013). This lack of specificity may result in conclusions that do not fully capture the unique challenges faced by TGNC individuals.

Additionally, prior studies frequently overlook opposing viewpoints critical of gender nonconformity, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of persistent gender-normative beliefs (Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021). The generalizability of existing research is also limited by convenience sampling and geographical constraints, which restrict the applicability of findings to the broader TGNC youth population (Schutt 2015; Tankersley et al. 2021).

Qualitative research on TGNC youth frequently features small sample sizes, limiting the generalizability of findings. While these studies offer valuable insights, their conclusions may not extend beyond the specific sample studied. Many prior studies also lack theoretical frameworks, impeding a deeper understanding of TGNC youth and the impact of gender normativity. Incorporating theoretical perspectives could enhance the depth and structure of research in this area.

The predominance of cross-sectional studies also poses limitations, as they do not allow for causal inference or a temporal understanding of TGNC youth experiences (Schutt 2015; Tankersley et al. 2021; Valentine and Shipherd 2018). Longitudinal studies are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of TGNC youth experiences and perceptions over time. Addressing these limitations is crucial for advancing research and developing interventions to effectively support TGNC youth.

Our own study shares some of these limitations, including convenience sampling and the age of the data. While our study aims to highlight gaps in the literature, we also acknowledge that these constraints are common in current research. A broader discussion about the systemic and structural factors contributing to the scarcity of research on TGNC youth is essential. By addressing these limitations, we can work towards more robust and representative research that better supports TGNC youth.

Connections to Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, rooted in social behaviorism from the early 1870s, emphasizes the environmental influence on behavior (Woodward 1982). It evolved into stimulus-response theories, notably B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning, which posits that behavior

is shaped by reinforcement and punishment (Skinner 1957; Woodward 1982). Albert Bandura expanded these concepts, highlighting the role of social context and interpersonal interactions in learning (see Bandura and Walters 1963).

Bandura's social learning theory asserts that learning is a cognitive process occurring through observation and modeling. Individuals learn by watching behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others, facilitated by live, verbal, and symbolic models (Bandura and Walters 1977; Bandura 1986). This process involves four key elements: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Effective learning requires focusing on, remembering, and having the ability and desire to reproduce the observed behavior (Bandura and Walters 1963).

Social learning theory explains how social values, including gender norms, are acquired (Baldwin 1973). Children learn gender roles through observation and verbal modeling from parents, peers, and media, reinforcing gender-typical behaviors and discouraging gender-atypical ones (Shaffer 2009; Spinner et al. 2018). This reinforcement can lead to discrimination against TGNC youth, as non-conforming behaviors are often punished (Bussey and Bandura 1999; Shaffer 2009). Horton's (2023) study on parents supporting transgender children illustrates how proactive support can challenge these normative expectations and foster a more accepting environment.

Though the literature on the direct link between social learning theory and TGNC victimization is limited, this theory has been applied to bullying and discrimination contexts (Barclay 1982; Espelage et al. 2000; Powell and Ladd 2010). Recent studies (Hereth 2024) document the negative perceptions of law enforcement among young transgender women, showing how societal marginalization and mistreatment by authorities can lead to an internalized distrust of legal institutions. This aligns with social learning theory, where observing and imitating discriminatory behaviors can perpetuate TGNC victimization, especially if these behaviors are rewarded (Bandura and Walters 1963). Hereth's findings emphasize a broader pattern of discrimination starting in childhood and reinforced by systematic mistreatment.

However, social learning theory also posits that influential figures such as parents, caretakers, and teachers can disrupt gender-normative ideologies by modeling acceptance and inclusive behaviors (Bandura 1986). Consistent association with accepting peers can reduce adherence to rigid gender norms, fostering a more inclusive environment (Van Hoorn et al. 2016). Positive peer interactions with TGNC individuals can promote broader acceptance, similar to improvements in attitudes towards gay and lesbian peers through direct interactions (Swank and Raiz 2010; Swank et al. 2013). These arguments align with Hereth's (2024) emphasis on the solidarity within transgender communities, where positive interactions and community support can mitigate the negative impact of discrimination.

Social learning theory also explains how youths abandon previously learned gender norms and adopt new, more inclusive attitudes, particularly when dissatisfied with their initial socializing agents (Hunsberger 1983; Van Hoorn et al. 2016). This underscores the theory's potential to both perpetuate and challenge gender-normative ideologies. It highlights the need for comprehensive reforms, including better training for educational and criminal justice workers and cultural shifts towards greater empathy (Hereth 2024; Horton 2023). These measures are crucial for addressing systemic discrimination against TGNC individuals. By modeling acceptance and reducing reinforcement of traditional gender norms, social learning processes can help mitigate TGNC mistreatment, addressing a critical gap in the literature on gender normativity and TGNC acceptance.

4. Methods: Addressing Gaps in TGNC Youth Research through Qualitative Analysis

Considering the limitations in the recent TGNC literature, such as the lack of focus on TGNC youth, the absence of opposing viewpoints on gender nonconformity, and the scarcity of theoretically driven studies, this article aims to address these gaps. It seeks to enhance the understanding of social learning theory and its role in perpetuating gender normativity, while also exploring its potential to challenging these beliefs and reduce mistreatment of TGNC youth. Guided by this theoretical perspective, the study systematically examines

how harmful gender norms are learned and transmitted and offers strategies to disrupt these beliefs. This approach enriches our understanding of TGNC youth mistreatment and informs future research on fostering TGNC acceptance (Shank 2021; Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021).

Employing a qualitative research design, this study analyzes and interprets two secondary data sources. A qualitative approach is suitable for examining human behavior and social phenomena that cannot be quantified. Through this research design, the article addresses the following research questions within a social learning theoretical framework: how do transgender and gender-nonconforming youth navigate discrimination and marginalization? How can social learning theory be leveraged to disrupt gender normativity and reduce discrimination, marginalization, and victimization of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth?

Data Sources and Analysis of Data

The first data source comprises archived transcripts from four community meetings held by a public school district between fall of 2017 and winter of 2018 at different high schools. Research team members attended and observed these meetings. Each meeting, lasting approximately two hours, discussed a proposed gender-inclusive policy to be implemented across 336 schools. This policy aimed to accommodate TGNC youth regarding pronoun and name usage, confidentiality, restroom and locker room access, and participation in school activities. These meetings were recorded and made available on the school district's website, posing no ethical concerns as they are public records.

Recorded meetings were transcribed by research team members and then triple-checked by other team members to ensure that all comments were captured accurately (Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021). These verbatim transcripts were analyzed using an archival/qualitative narrative analysis approach (Feldman et al. 2004; Jones 2010; Lejano and Leong 2012; Lofland et al. 2006; Schutt 2015). The analysis includes community comments from 176 participants: 86 opposed 90 in support. Opponents raised concerns about children's rights, safety, religious beliefs, and misconceptions about gender and biology, while supporters emphasized the necessity and moral imperative for inclusivity and protections for TGNC youth (Shank 2021; Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021).

Qualitative narrative analysis and systemic open coding were used to categorize themes and insights from community members' statements, making it suitable for interpreting the nuanced and subjective aspects of the transcripts (Charmaz [2006] 2014; Lofland et al. 2006; Strauss 1988; Shank 2021; Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021). Specifically for this article, the public meeting transcripts underwent line-by-line open coding to identify recurring themes and implications for gender normativity and social learning theory. The analysis of public meeting transcripts reveals insights into the perpetuation of gender normativity, particularly among policy opponents, addressing a gap in understanding their views.

The second data source includes notes from two town hall meetings held in February and March 2019 with gender-diverse young adults. These town halls explored views on the gender-inclusive policy, discrimination, safe spaces, and suggestions for improving school environments, focusing on TGNC youth experiences. Organized by a local non-profit in partnership with a university legal clinic, the meetings emphasized learning about the school experiences of TGNC young adults while welcoming all LGBTQIA+ community members to participate and share their experiences.[2] There were four attendees in the first meeting and 11 in the second[3] (Shank 2021; Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021).

Participants, primarily TGNC community members and others under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, shared personal experiences and perceptions in a discussion format. University professors and graduate students associated with the legal clinic observed the meetings and took detailed notes. Using participatory action research methods (Burns et al. 2011; Schutt 2015), these qualitative field notes were gathered and analyzed segment by segment, considering the context and discussion flow.

This combined and triangulated approach provided a detailed understanding of community perceptions on TGNC youth and gender-inclusive policies, framed within social learning theory. The iterative coding process systematically categorized and re-examined data to capture participants' experiences and views (Charmaz [2006] 2014; Shank 2021; Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021). This analysis supplemented and triangulated findings from the school district community meeting transcripts, enhancing the study's relevance and depth (Burns et al. 2011; Schutt 2015).

The following will present findings from both data sources and quotations will be cited as Public Meeting #, Community Member # (PM#, CM#) and Town hall #, Participant # (TH#, P#). To protect anonymity, the name of the public school district, specific high schools, and non-profit organization are anonymized.

5. Reflections on Navigating Discrimination in School Environments

Insights from gender-diverse and TGNC community members who have navigated hostile school environments are crucial to understanding discrimination faced. Public school district meetings further illuminate community perspectives on these experiences. This section highlights TGNC reflections on school experiences and suggestions for improving environments for gender-diverse, queer, and TGNC students. These findings supplement those from the public school district meeting transcripts and help detail elements of social learning present in participants' responses.

5.1. Negative School Experiences

In addition to recounting experiences of bullying, differential staff treatment, and challenges in reporting bullying, participants also reflected on positive aspects, including safe spaces and supportive individuals. These factors played a crucial role in mitigating the negative impacts of the prevailing gender-normative culture within their school environments. These findings not only shed light on the various challenges faced by TGNC youth but also highlight the importance of safe spaces and supportive networks in fostering resilience and well-being. Furthermore, they underscore the significance of these findings within the context of discussions held during the public school district meetings.

5.1.1. Bullying

TGNC participants identified various groups as "bullies," including "popular girls," "engineering kids," "jocks," "the football team," "dance kids," "rich kids," "cheerleaders," and other "popular kids." This diversity underscores the pervasiveness of gender normativity. The distinction between bullying and victimization was notable; participants believed "bullying" was an inadequate term for their experiences, often downplaying the severity of their situations. One participant noted the difference between "typical schoolyard bullies" and those who made TGNC students feel like they "want to die" (TH2, P1), suggesting that some situations should be described as assault or abuse.

Both town halls and public school district meetings highlighted bullying, victimization, and lack of staff intervention as significant barriers to TGNC youth feeling safe, included, and validated at school. One town hall respondent, when discussing safety concerns on campus, bluntly stated: "We don't feel safe. Like, ever" (TH1, P2). Contrary to community member concerns that the gender-diverse policy would lead to cisgender students being mistreated, TGNC youth seek not special treatment, but to live authentically, safely, and comfortably, much like their cisgender peers. According to town hall participants, the "perfect school day" would involve hanging out with friends without fear of bullying or misgendering by staff or students, and the freedom to dress how they like (TH1, P3).

Community members from the town hall meetings described their experiences with bullying on campus, with one participant stating: "Public school is harmful and damaging" (TH2, P4). Most of the bullying was verbal, which teachers and staff often did not take as seriously as physical victimization. Despite facing severe verbal abuse, such as homophobic slurs and comments telling them to "go kill yourself," staff rarely intervened. One

participant described a cycle of victimization occurring roughly fifteen times per year in just one class, where perpetrators sent to the dean's office were promptly returned to class.

Efforts by staff to mediate conflicts between these student bullies and TGNC victims were described as "unhelpful." Participants did not want to discuss issues face-to-face with their bullies or compromise with them. One respondent highlighted the ineffectiveness of school-based mediation, stating that "There is no little bit of bullying" (TH2, P7).

In the absence of effective staff intervention, participants adopted tactics like switching classes and avoiding school or social events to evade bullying. Their disinterest in such events stemmed from negative experiences, reflecting the fear and lack of belonging many TGNC youth feel in school (Kosciw et al. 2013, 2018). When bullying occurred, participants often sought safety in their group of "queer peers," often ignoring bullies or collectively telling them to "fuck off" (TH2, P6). One participant described maintaining a "silent, protective state" (TH2, P3) to guard against bullies, demonstrating their collective approach to navigating oppression and fostering a culture of acceptance.

During the town halls, particularly the second session, participants discussed strategies to address bullying and assessed their feasibility. Short-term solutions included establishing student "protection committees" (TH2, P8). There was a consensus that school administrators should cease punishing victims and instead enforce zero-tolerance policies uniformly. Efforts to raise awareness of bullying were also highlighted. One participant mentioned an anti-bullying club at their previous school that put up posters and handed out pins as a sign of solidarity. Another suggested anti-bullying assemblies, though some participants dismissed these efforts, arguing that many students perceived assemblies as a "joke" and that the messages failed to result in real behavioral change.

Some TGNC town hall participants believed that meaningful improvement in bullying required "fundamental changes in society" (TH2, P4). Long-term solutions suggested included comprehensive education on what constitutes bullying and its harmful effects. Participants also discussed incorporating mental health education and the cycle of violence into anti-bullying efforts. They suggested potential mottos for raising awareness such as "hurt people hurt people," with one participant adding: "but hurt people can help people." This individual emphasized the importance of spreading kindness within school communities (TH2, P8). Another participant suggested that schools should "foster a connection between people" (TH2, P9), while noting that this should not be obligatory for victims who prefer not to engage with their perpetrators. "People make the place safe" (TH2, P5), stated another respondent, further highlighting the importance of acceptance and meaningful connection in school settings.

Several respondents believed that bullies themselves required more attention, suggesting that underlying issues in their lives might cause them to lash out. There was a consensus on the need for mechanisms to help bullies, whether through mental health interventions or investigations into potential abuse at home. Conversely, some town hall participants advocated for harsher punishments for bullies, including mandatory videos, essays, or community service, to hold them accountable and encourage positive contributions to the community.

5.1.2. Differential Staff Treatment

Participants in both town halls extensively discussed the differential treatment and discrimination they experienced from school staff. A significant aspect of this discrimination involved inconsistent enforcement of zero-tolerance bullying policies, which often resulted in TGNC youth being punished instead of the perpetrators. "It's always gonna be my fault" (TH1, P3), one participant stated when discussing difficulties in reporting assault to staff. According to another respondent, the conservative school administration, described as "bullies themselves" (TH1, P2), showed preferential treatment to jocks, cheerleaders, and popular kids, allowing them to discriminate against gender-diverse youth with little consequence (Shank 2021).

Participants also highlighted the differential enforcement of dress code policies. Gender-normative dress code policies disproportionately targeted girls and TGNC youth who did not conform to traditional gender norms. For instance, one participant recalled that cheerleaders were allowed, and sometimes required, to wear their uniforms during class, even though the skirts were shorter than the dress code typically permitted. This illustrates the discriminatory treatment faced by TGNC youth, who are often punished for gender nonconformity (Glickman 2015).

At school, mistreatment of TGNC youth frequently remains unaddressed, contributing to feelings of alienation and insignificance among participants. They expressed frustration with the failure of staff to intervene in instances of harassment and bullying. One TGNC participant mentioned: "People aren't inclusive because it doesn't affect them personally" (TH1, P2). This illustrates how the cultural transmission of gender normativity has fostered indifference and neglect from staff, alongside overt discrimination and victimization from cisgender and heteronormative peers (Shank 2021).

The stress caused by such discrimination and disproportionate punishment were significant. Participants noted that these experiences led to lost class time and a sense of being marginalized. One respondent described using the restroom as a refuge during panic attacks caused by their mistreatment. They explained, "I was either disassociating or in the bathroom" (TH2, P1) when reflecting on their school experience. Despite the existence of inclusive policies, the influence of socially learned gender-normative values perpetuated preferential treatment for gender conforming students (Glickman 2015; Palmer and Greytak 2017).

Yet, supportive responses from community members applauding the inclusive school district policy demonstrate how social learning can disrupt gender normativity. One mother with experience raising a bullied child stressed the importance of such a policy, asserting: "I think it's more important that we don't hide our differences, but we teach our differences" (PM1, CM35). Through verbal and live modeling, an inclusive gender-diverse policy could potentially challenge gender normativity. Verbal aspects affirm that gender-diverse students are entitled to be called by their preferred names and pronouns, along with access to corresponding facilities. Live modeling allows these students to openly and authentically navigate school life without infringing on other students' rights. Overall, inclusive policy serves to normalize TGNC youth in the eyes of peers and school staff.

5.2. Difficulty Reporting Discrimination

Participants felt powerless to address their negative school experiences due to difficulties in reporting their victimization to school officials. The differential enforcement of zero-tolerance policies led participants to believe that reporting would either be futile or result in punishment for themselves. Many participants also feared being outed, which discouraged them from reporting bullying. They worried that staff might inform their parents or family members, to whom they were not out.

An effort to ensure anonymity through a mobile app that allowed students to report bullying anonymously was also ineffective. Participants expressed skepticism about the app's anonymity, as some level of cooperation with victims was needed to follow through with reports. Additionally, they feared retaliation from perpetrators who might identify them despite the anonymity.

The continued concerns about anonymity and safety highlight a significant gap in the understanding and implementation of gender-diverse policies by school administrators. This gap underscores the need for administrators to comprehend the importance of allowing TGNC youth to come out on their own terms, emphasizing the failure of current systems to consider the unique issues faced by this population.

Connections to Mental Health

In exploring the interplay of gender identity, discrimination, and mental health among TGNC youth, participants shared poignant insights into the profound mental health chal-

lenges they confront. Their narratives underscored pervasive depression and anxiety stemming directly from discrimination and bullying within educational settings. Consistent with prior research (Mezzalira et al. 2022), these adversities often manifest in tangible academic repercussions, such as school absenteeism due to mental health struggles.

Moreover, participants lamented the inadequacy of support from school personnel in addressing their mental health needs. They highlighted a notable lack of awareness and training among counselors and teachers, hindering effective intervention and exacerbating their psychological distress. Although some respondents mentioned a few supportive staff members, the overall sentiment was a significant lack of support on campus. As one participant noted, "Most of the time, adults don't check in" (TH1, P1). This deficiency in institutional support further compounds the already disproportionate levels of mental health issues experienced by TGNC students within their educational environments (Katz-Wise et al. 2016).

To address these systemic inadequacies, participants advocated for gender-inclusive policies with clear protocols for assisting TGNC youth, critiquing traditional approaches as ineffective in addressing their unique challenges (Kosciw et al. 2013, 2018). Integral to their recommendations was the proposal for comprehensive staff training initiatives to increase awareness and competency in supporting LGBTQIA+ students' mental health needs, denoting the importance of understanding TGNC issues.

Furthermore, participants advocated for the implementation of additional support mechanisms, such as the introduction of third-party counselors, specifically trained to address the mental health concerns of gender-diverse students (Mezzalira et al. 2022). They contended that such measures would not only enhance the knowledge base and empathy of school staff but also cultivate a more supportive and inclusive environment conducive to the well-being of TGNC students.

The elucidation of these connections between discrimination, mental health, and institutional support underscores the imperative for proactive interventions and policy reforms within educational settings. By prioritizing the mental health needs of TGNC youth and fostering a culture of inclusivity and support, educational institutions can play a pivotal role in mitigating the adverse impacts of discrimination and promoting the holistic well-being of all students.

6. Community Perspectives on Gender Diversity Policies in Schools

Community reactions to the school district's policy on gender diversity were varied, reflecting division in perspectives. While some expressed support for the policy, emphasizing the importance of providing a safe and inclusive environment for all students, particularly those who are gender diverse, transgender, and gender non-conforming, others raised concerns and objections.

6.1. Opposition to Gender-Inclusive Policies

Opposition to gender-inclusive policies primarily revolved around concerns about the inclusion of TGNC individuals in traditionally gender-segregated spaces like restrooms and locker rooms. Opponents of the policy commonly expressed concerns about privacy, comfort, and safety of their cisgender and heteronormative children in such spaces. This opposition often stemmed from pervasive rhetoric depicting TGNC individuals as dangerous or predatory, perpetuating harmful gender normativity (Buist and Stone 2014; Shank 2021; Stone 2018). Such rhetoric historically depicts gender-diverse individuals as deviant and deceptive, particularly in gender-segregated spaces (Biegel 2018). Specifically, opponents expressed concerns about the "boy in the girls' bathroom," reflecting the cultural transmission of gender normativity where individuals assigned male at birth are rigidly categorized as boys and perceived as not belonging in female-designated spaces.

Furthermore, discussions among respondents about the disproportionate victimization and safety concerns of TGNC students highlight the impact of social learning in perpetuating gender normativity. The criminalization of TGNC youth, stemming from beliefs

that they are deviant from gender-normative standards, morally suspect, or predatory, contributes to their heightened vulnerability to victimization (Biegel 2018; Buist and Stone 2014; Bussey and Bandura 1999; Shaffer 2009; Stone 2018).

Additionally, opponents of the policy raised concerns about potential negative impacts on cisgender and heteronormative students. Some expressed worries about being "bullied for their moral beliefs or if they call one of these kids by the wrong pronoun" (PM1, CM10), fearing disciplinary action or mistreatment for failing to adhere to the policy's guidelines (Shank 2021, p. 39).

One community member expressed their concerns, stating that "The current policy paves a path for those who do not hold the same morals and beliefs to be bullied by students and corrected by teachers, and we cannot create an environment where students are fearful of peacefully speaking about their beliefs" (PM1, CM14). These responses are rife with concern from the opposing side that the gender-diverse school policy will protect one particular group (i.e., gender-diverse and TGNC students) at the expense of others (i.e., cisgender and heteronormative students).

6.2. Supportive Perspectives on Gender-Inclusive Policies

Supporters of gender-inclusive policies presented compelling arguments addressing safety concerns, emphasizing the imperative of creating a secure environment for TGNC students. Their advocacy was grounded in data revealing the heightened vulnerability of TGNC youth to violence and bullying in schools. Community meeting participants underscored the perils and anxieties faced by TGNC youth, including increased risks of victimization and feelings of insecurity due to inadequate protective measures. A concerned mother, expressing the urgency of the matter, remarked:

"I think it's really important here that we talk about these policies; that we get less involved in the beliefs and the moral background that we can squabble over and more involved in talking about the safety of our children. 60% of LGBT youth in school feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation. 28% have been bullied in bathrooms. 32% have been bullied in gym class. I could read you this whole page of statistics, but it's out there that we need a policy in order to protect these students" (PM1, CM38).

Such sentiments echo previous research highlighting the elevated risk of victimization among TGNC youth (Kosciw et al. 2018; McGuire et al. 2010).

Moreover, supporters challenged misconceptions surrounding the safety of gender-inclusive policies, offering evidence to debunk fears propagated by opponents. One participant refuted common concerns by stating:

"The person most likely to experience violence in the bathroom is actually the trans person. No, not the cisgender person. We have little to no records showing that the circumstances that everyone is afraid of—about boys pretending to be girls sneaking into the girls' restrooms. We have no data that actually shows that, but we do have a lot of data showing trans people getting chased or assaulted inside of bathrooms" (PM3, CM34).

Another community member aimed to correct misinformation by asserting:

"For those amongst us who only get their primary information from the internet and gossip, trans children are not predators. In fact, they are victims of predators" (PM3, CM40).

In light of these discussions, it becomes evident that supporters of gender-inclusive policies are actively challenging prevailing misconceptions with factual evidence. Data presented during community meetings strongly refute common fears perpetuated by opponents. One participant aptly highlighted the disproportionate vulnerability of transgender individuals to violence within gender-segregated spaces, dispelling the unfounded notion of transgender individuals as predators. Another emphasized the victimization experienced by transgender children, countering misinformation and highlighting the urgent need for policy support.

Moreover, adult members of the transgender community joined the conversation, advocating passionately for the rights and safety of gender-diverse youth. These voices not only debunk harmful rhetoric but also underscore the importance of fostering inclusive environments to safeguard the well-being of all students. For example, one community member claimed:

> *"I'm a transgender male. There are a lot of things that I am. I am not a criminal. I am not a pedophile. I am not a predator. Neither are these children"* (PM2, CM25).

These affirmations underscored the imperative of implementing gender-inclusive policies to ensure the safety and well-being of all students, irrespective of their gender identity. Participants stressed the significance of clear guidelines for accommodating and protecting TGNC youth, fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding. As one eloquently put it,

> *"We have passed laws that protect the rights of African Americans, women, people with limited abilities and disabilities, and many other groups to protect their basic human rights. There is no difference for trans kids"* (PM4, CM9).

Many community members in support of the policy emphasized the importance of clear guidelines for accommodating and protecting TGNC youth. One community member mentioned:

> *"I read the policy line-by-line. I see it as clear guidance that would assist teachers, staff, and parents in navigating the how-to in demonstrating respect and support of our gender-diverse students"* (PM1, CM30).

In summary, the engagement of adult members from the transgender community in advocating for gender-inclusive policies underscores the need for creating safe and supportive environments for all students, irrespective of their gender identity. Their affirmations not only dispel harmful stereotypes but also emphasize the necessity of clear guidelines to accommodate and protect TGNC youth.

As highlighted by participants, such policies are instrumental in fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding within educational settings. Supporters believe that such policies are essential for creating a safe and inclusive environment where all students, particularly those who are gender diverse or transgender, feel respected and supported. They argue that clear guidelines help teachers, staff, and parents understand how to appropriately address and support TGNC students, ultimately fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding.

While gender-inclusive policies are important, participants in the study express skepticism about their effectiveness in improving the lives of TGNC youth. One respondent noted: "[They] can change the law, but can't change people's mindsets" (TH1, P1). Many believe policies alone cannot fully address the deep-seated cultural transmission of gender-normative beliefs. This underscores the necessity for policies to be accompanied by genuine efforts to promote acceptance and affirmation. As one participant remarked, "real change" requires a shift in societal mindsets.

6.2.1. The Importance of Policy, Supportive Environments, and Safe Spaces

Participants highlighted the importance of supportive environments in workplaces and colleges, where inclusive policies and accepting peers foster feelings of safety and belonging. Among the 90 community members supporting the school district policy, many emphasized the need for inclusive measures, likening them to laws protecting marginalized groups. One foster mother asserted:

> *"I firmly believe that this policy will protect all children in our schools, and enhance learning and ensure a safe environment for all children despite their gender identity"* (PM1, CM26).

Echoing this statement, another woman asserted:

> *"Kids just want to be kids, and should have the right to be kids. . . All kids should have the same basic right to have access to a restroom, locker room, dorm room, and be identified by the gender that they identify with"* (PM4, CM9).

Supporters of gender-inclusive policies, despite opposition, emphasized their importance in promoting acceptance. They advocated for the establishment of safe spaces and inclusive clubs for gender-diverse, queer, and transgender students, stressing equitable treatment and support from school authorities. Furthermore, some community members urged understanding and empathy towards TGNC youth, emphasizing the role of personal engagement in normalizing gender diversity and dispelling harmful misconceptions (Bandura and Walters 1963, 1977; Swank and Raiz 2010; Swank et al. 2013). Implementing gender-inclusive policies is crucial for ensuring that all students feel safe and supported in their educational environment.

In conjunction with policy advocacy, participants underscored the crucial role of supportive environments for TGNC students. They highlighted the significance of ensuring that TGNC youth voices are heard and advocated for fair and compassionate treatment from school staff. A mother passionately expressed this sentiment, urging others to overcome fears and misconceptions by interacting directly with transgender children and their families:

> *"So, I myself, as a mother of four, have been blessed to really know a transgender child. And my request is that all of you that have so much fear, just like every other parent that ever has been, please get to know a child, and a parent, and a family that loves and wants to protect their transgender child, just as you do"* (PM2, CM40).

These comments underscore the negative impact of harmful gender-normative beliefs while highlighting the importance of genuine acceptance, which can be fostered through meaningful connections with TGNC youth.

In response to the challenges faced by TGNC students, town hall meeting participants emphasized the need for safe spaces and inclusive clubs tailored specifically for gender-diverse, queer, and TGNC individuals. One participant noted the inadequacy of such spaces in their school, pointing out the presence of numerous clubs, "but only one for us" (TH1, P2), a small LGBTQIA+ club managed by a lesbian-identified teacher. Participants described difficulties accessing safe spaces within schools, such as an art room known as a "queer hub" that served as a sanctuary for approximately 45 students. A rule prohibiting eating in classrooms disrupted this safe haven, highlighting deliberate efforts to limit these essential spaces.

Despite these obstacles, participants made use of various clubs and supportive teachers' classrooms whenever possible. Restrooms emerged as critical safe spaces, especially for TGNC students who faced unsafe and uncomfortable conditions in gender-segregated restrooms. Town hall participants frequently expressed feelings of insecurity on campus. TGNC individuals often avoided school restrooms, especially when large groups were present, fearing victimization. Some even resorted to using the restroom in the nurse's office to evade potential trouble. These experiences align with prior research on the pervasive danger and fear faced by gender-diverse and queer youth due to harmful gender norms and rhetoric (Kosciw et al. 2013, 2018).

Participants stressed the importance of informal safe spaces, such as friend groups and LGBTQIA+ student organizations, for fostering community and shielding against a hostile school environment. TGNC participants highlighted these spaces' crucial role in maintaining mental health and well-being, offering refuge and a platform for self-expression without fear of bullying or discrimination. They advocated for schools to establish and support formal LGBTQIA+ clubs to create more inclusive environments and provide essential support for TGNC students.

Participants also emphasized the significance of virtual safe spaces, including online platforms and social media, which facilitate connections with peers facing similar challenges, access to gender-diverse knowledge, and exposure to uplifting stories. The rapid

dissemination of information and support online was recognized as a powerful tool in challenging gender norms and promoting acceptance, complementing school policies.

To strengthen our application of social learning theory, it is crucial to integrate data from town halls with youth directly as this approach aligns with social learning theory's emphasis on how individuals learn and adapt their behaviors through direct interactions and role modeling (Herbert et al. 2004; Kedler et al. 2015). Direct input from youth enhances our understanding of how they navigate and influence their social environments, offering a clearer application of social learning theory in this context.

6.2.2. Supportive Individuals and Peer Groups

Participants highlighted the limited presence of supportive figures in their lives, noting the lack of acceptance and advocacy from teachers, administrators, and peers. However, they praised "cool teachers" who demonstrated acceptance, support, and non-discriminatory behavior, significantly improving their school experience. These supportive teachers play a central role in fostering an affirming environment for TGNC youth, illustrating how positive adult role models can challenge entrenched gender normativity.

Peer support was also essential for town hall participants, providing comfort and protection through mutual reliance. The solidarity among TGNC peers was crucial for their well-being, serving as a platform for social learning of new norms and values within these groups (Herbert et al. 2004; Hetzel and Mann 2021). This sense of community fostered among TGNC peers fostered a culture of acceptance and provided a necessary counterbalance to the exclusion and discrimination experienced in broader school settings.

The significance of safe and supportive individuals in the lives of TGNC youth cannot be overstated. These individuals contribute to shifting cultural norms by actively challenging gender normativity and supporting the well-being of TGNC and queer youth. However, participants expressed a desire for greater support from teachers and staff, feeling disillusioned by the ineffectiveness of self-advocacy efforts. They proposed appointing adult advocates to amplify student concerns and enforce gender-diverse policies and suggested establishing queer student organizations supported by these advocates to provide representation and support at the school district and community level.

Central to these proposals is the introduction of dedicated adult advocates to assist students in navigating hostile environments and educating staff on the needs of gender-diverse youth. These suggestions offer a promising approach to disrupting gender normativity and addressing significant barriers to inclusivity, comfort, and safety for TGNC youth.

7. The Role of Societal Norms and Policy Implementation in Supporting TGNC Youth

The study reveals the complex interplay between societal norms, policy implementation, and the support of TGNC youth. While gender-inclusive policies are a crucial component, they are insufficient on their own to address the multifaceted challenges faced by TGNC students. Genuine acceptance and affirmation from individuals and institutions are essential to disrupting harmful gender normativity and creating a truly supportive environment for TGNC youth.

Participants in the study emphasize that effective support for TGNC youth requires more than just policy changes. As one town hall participant noted, "real change" demands "fundamental changes in society" (TH2, P4). This perspective underscores the importance of shifting societal norms to foster a more inclusive environment. Merely implementing gender-inclusive policies without addressing broader societal attitudes and norms is unlikely to yield meaningful progress.

The town hall meetings with queer community members and TGNC youth were essential in addressing the first research question: how do transgender and gender-nonconforming youth navigate discrimination and marginalization? According to participants, this study found that TGNC youth navigate these challenges by relying heavily on safe spaces, supportive individuals, and solidarity with other LGBTQ students who face similar hardships. These safe spaces, whether formal clubs or informal gathering areas,

provide essential refuge where TGNC youth can express their identities freely without fear of judgment or discrimination. As noted by one participant, there were many clubs at their school, "but only one for us" (TH1, P2), highlighting the scarcity of inclusive environments that cater specifically to TGNC needs.

Participants also described how TGNC students form their own supportive social circles with fellow "rebels" and "comrades" as a strategy to cope with discrimination. These peer groups offer a critical support network, providing emotional and practical assistance in navigating what some described as "The Battle" against hostile school staff and peers. This sense of community and solidarity is vital for TGNC youth, as it helps them withstand the pressures of a dominant gender-normative culture that frequently marginalizes them.

To address the second research question—how can social learning theory be leveraged to disrupt gender normativity and reduce the discrimination, marginalization, and victimization of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth?—we examined how societal interactions and behaviors influence TGNC youths' experiences. Social learning theory, as articulated by Bandura (1986) and Bandura and Walters (1963, 1977), posits that individuals learn behaviors and attitudes through observation and interactions with others. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding how TGNC youth navigate their environments and how these environments can be transformed to better support them.

Participants in town hall discussions and public school district community meetings underscored the importance of social learning in fostering acceptance. Supporters of the gender-diverse policy highlighted that direct interactions with gender-diverse youth are crucial for dispelling common fears and misconceptions. These interactions allow others to recognize the shared humanity of TGNC individuals, fostering more positive and accepting attitudes. By facilitating these connections, the cultural transmission of trans-affirming values is enhanced, serving as a protective factor for TGNC youth (Swank and Raiz 2010).

Modeling is a critical component of social learning theory. Verbal modeling involves actively communicating that there is nothing to fear from gender-diverse youth, while live modeling occurs as individuals observe and learn from accepting behaviors and interactions (Bandura 1986; Bandura and Walters 1963, 1977; Swank and Raiz 2010). Teachers, parents, and peers who demonstrate acceptance through both verbal and live modeling play a pivotal role in promoting a culture of inclusion. Creating environments where acceptance is visibly practiced and encouraged allows TGNC youth to experience and internalize positive behaviors and attitudes. This can significantly contribute to reducing discrimination and fostering a supportive school environment. Such modeling helps in spreading acceptance more broadly, thereby challenging entrenched gender normativity and promoting a safer environment for all TGNC persons.

The importance of acceptance and inclusion as protective factors for TGNC youth is well-supported by both the data from this study and prior research. These factors help mitigate mental health issues, academic difficulties, and social problems stemming from dominant gender-normative cultures (Katz-Wise et al. 2016; Kosciw et al. 2013; Singh et al. 2014). By leveraging social learning theory, educational and social settings can more effectively transmit acceptance and affirmation, creating a more inclusive environment for TGNC students. Addressing both policy and societal norms through this theoretical lens offers a promising approach to fostering greater support and inclusivity for TGNC youth.

This study recognizes several limitations that warrant acknowledgement. These include the dependence on secondary data sources and the contextual specificity inherent in utilizing such data. While qualitative methods were deemed appropriate and feasible for this study, certain limitations associated with subjectivity, secondary data utilization, observer presence, the cross-sectional nature of the project, and the generalizability of findings must be considered.

Qualitative research inherently entails subjectivity, which may introduce bias into data interpretation. To mitigate this risk, this study employed a multiple-researcher analysis approach to enhance interrater reliability. Furthermore, the transcription of public school meetings was conducted by teams and then double-checked for accuracy by different

teams. Town hall notes were compared with those taken by other research team members in attendance for consistency in data collection and interpretation. Despite these efforts, potential limitations associated with qualitative research and secondary data usage should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

Secondary data, although not originally collected specifically for this study, remain relevant for examining societal perceptions of gender normativity and TGNC youth. The presence of overt observers at town hall meetings could have influenced participant responses, although these effects diminish over time (Schutt 2015). As a cross-sectional study, data were collected at one point in time, limiting causal inferences (Weisburd 2003). The study's generalizability is also limited, as data were collected from a single metropolitan area within a state known for progressive pro-LGBTQIA+ legislation, potentially not reflecting other regions' experiences (Warbelow et al. 2019). Small, non-random samples from town hall meetings further reduce generalizability, as participants self-selected to attend and may not represent the broader TGNC population. However, the qualitative approach provides a thorough understanding of the complex social dynamics affecting TGNC youth, providing valuable insights into applying social learning theory in this context (Shank 2021; Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021).

Despite these limitations, the study offers in-depth insights not possible with quantitative methods or larger samples. Town hall meetings involved TGNC individuals, who provided firsthand accounts of discrimination and marginalization, contributing valuable perspectives through participatory action research methods (Burns et al. 2011; Shank 2021; Troshynski and Bejinariu 2021).

8. Applying Social Learning Theory to Disrupt Gender Normativity

Drawing on Bandura's social learning theory, the study posits that genuine acceptance and affirmation of TGNC youth can disrupt entrenched gender normativity (Bandura and Walters 1977; Bandura 1986; Bandura and Walters 1963). By modeling acceptance both verbally and behaviorally, individuals can challenge harmful beliefs and practices, fostering societal change over time. If a significant number of people actively engage in open acceptance of gender-diverse youth, both within and outside of school environments, this could lead to more TGNC youth feeling comfortable expressing themselves and living authentically. Consequently, through reciprocal determinism, others may also begin to reject the harmful aspects of gender normativity and practice increasing acceptance of gender-diverse individuals.

The findings of the study corroborate social learning theory, indicating that disrupting gender normativity requires not only policy changes but also widespread acceptance and affirmation of TGNC individuals. This underscores the crucial role of social learning processes in shaping attitudes and behaviors towards gender diversity. Additionally, the study emphasizes the necessity for broader societal changes to cultivate an environment where TGNC youth feel safe, supported, and valued.

Gender normativity remains pervasive, as evidenced by the responses at the public school district community meetings. Participants opposing the gender-inclusive policy expressed strong adherence to gender-normative beliefs, misconceptions, and damaging rhetoric. They perceived the policy as a threat to their rights, values, and safety, displaying significant indifference toward the needs of TGNC youth and the benefits of an inclusive school policy.

The negative effects of gender normativity are also apparent from the responses of policy supporters. They highlighted how gender-normative beliefs lead to physical, psychological, and academic harm to TGNC youth. This was further confirmed by the town hall meetings, where participants detailed their overwhelmingly negative school experiences, ranging from bullying and verbal abuse by peers to differential treatment and discrimination by school staff. These adverse experiences contributed to mental health problems, academic difficulties, suicidal ideation, and feelings of isolation among TGNC youth, consistent with previous research on their discrimination and marginalization

(Collier et al. 2013; Greytak and Kosciw 2014; Katz-Wise et al. 2016; Kosciw et al. 2018; McGuire et al. 2010; Palmer and Greytak 2017).

In analyzing these findings through the lens of social learning theory, the necessity of inclusive policy becomes evident. Supporters of the gender-inclusive policy stressed the moral imperative to enforce it and accept TGNC youth, underscoring the positive outcomes that result from such acceptance. Knowing TGNC youth personally helped dispel fears and fostered more positive attitudes, as evidenced by community meeting participants who advocated for policy changes. This aligns with social learning theory, which posits that direct interaction and modeling of positive behaviors can lead to the adoption of more accepting attitudes.

Those who model acceptance, such as supportive teachers, parents, and peers, play a crucial role in this process. Through verbal and live modeling, these individuals can promote a culture of acceptance, demonstrating to others that TGNC youth are simply juveniles with similar aspirations and desires as their cisgender peers. This modeling helps to dismantle misconceptions and foster an environment where TGNC youth can thrive.

However, the need for safe spaces, private bathrooms, and protection highlights the hostile school environment created by those who adhere to gender-normative beliefs. Town hall participants envisioned a school day free from bullying, discrimination, and misgendering, where they could express their gender identity without fear. Accommodating these needs does not constitute special treatment; rather, it ensures that all students can exist authentically and express themselves.

Thus, dismantling gender-normative beliefs is imperative. While policy changes are necessary, they are insufficient without genuine acceptance and affirmation from parents, teachers, peers, and the broader community. This calls for the "fundamental changes in society" referenced by participants during that second town hall meeting. Until such changes occur, the town hall participants offered valuable suggestions for creating a more inclusive and welcoming school environment for gender-diverse youth. These included greater advocacy from adults in schools and communities, equitable enforcement of anti-bullying policies, increased access to clubs and safe spaces, enhanced training for school staff on gender diversity and mental health, awareness campaigns about gender identity-based bullying, and support for the bullies themselves.

Implementing these recommendations, informed by social learning theory, can foster a culture of acceptance and inclusion, thereby reducing the discrimination, marginalization, and victimization of TGNC youth. This approach underscores the transformative potential of positive modeling and direct interaction in disrupting harmful gender norms and promoting a more inclusive society.

Leveraging Social Learning Theory to Support TGNC Youth

The present study has significant policy implications, particularly in addressing the pervasive nature of gender normativity, which remains a substantial barrier to the wellbeing of TGNC youth. While the introduction of gender-inclusive policies represents progress, the data indicate that policy implementation alone is insufficient. Many opponents of such policies demonstrated an unwillingness to accept the identities of TGNC youth, suggesting that inclusive policies must be accompanied by efforts to promote acceptance and affirmation.

One effective solution is the implementation of more safe spaces and inclusive clubs, particularly those emphasizing the arts, for TGNC youth on school campuses. Participants in both town hall meetings highlighted the importance of these spaces, noting that they not only provide safety but also acceptance and inclusion. Increased access to safe spaces can enhance the visibility of TGNC youth among peers and staff, especially in environments that include gender-conforming youth and cooperative staff members. These efforts can foster meaningful connections and the cultural transmission of acceptance through social learning mechanisms. Teachers and students who learn to accept TGNC youth can further disrupt gender normativity by modeling such acceptance outside these designated spaces.

The town hall participants also emphasized the necessity for school staff to listen to and address concerns of gender-diverse students. This requires comprehensive education and training for staff on gender diversity and mental health. Collaborations between schools and agencies that serve TGNC and queer youth can be particularly beneficial. Adult advocates and representatives can provide training to school staff while ensuring that the concerns of gender-diverse and queer youth are adequately addressed. Furthermore, these representatives can offer insights into supporting and educating students who victimize TGNC youth, advocating for a compassionate response to bullying—a sentiment echoed by many participants in the second town hall meeting.

Although some staff members may be resistant due to adherence to gender-normative values, collaborations can be instrumental in swaying those open to learning and supporting TGNC youth. Partnerships between youth advocacy programs and schools are essential in dismantling the social learning of gender normativity.

The Internet and social media were identified by town hall participants as vital tools for TGNC and queer youth, providing education, resources, uplifting stories, and connections with other queer students. These virtual spaces serve as essential safe havens, and increasing awareness and access to them on school campuses can help disrupt gender normativity. Collaboration among supportive teachers, community advocates, and TGNC youth can lead to the creation of comprehensive websites and social media accounts that offer resources, education, and connections with queer youth within and beyond the campus. Flyers and posters advertising these virtual safe spaces can be displayed by supportive teachers, counselors, and librarians, providing additional avenues for students to seek support discreetly.

Finally, the public school district transcripts revealed substantial support for TGNC youth from religious community members and organizations. This suggests that while religious beliefs can perpetuate harmful gender normativity, they also have the potential to disrupt it. Religious leaders and organizations that disavow negative rhetoric and fully accept TGNC youth should collaborate with schools and community advocates to promote a culture of love and acceptance. The cooperation of religious organizations may resonate with staff and students who cite religious beliefs as the basis for their gender-normative views. Thus, reconciling religion with inclusive policy and acceptance of TGNC youth could be crucial in challenging and ultimately dismantling gender normativity.

Future research should delve deeper into the relationship between social learning theory and gender normativity, particularly in how this theoretical framework may aid in disrupting gender-normative values. This study provides a crucial foundation for such inquiries. However, expanding the scope with larger sample sizes and a more diverse range of TGNC community members across various regions in the U.S. could further validate and build upon these findings. Such expanded studies would help identify tailored solutions for students in communities that may require more intensive efforts to counteract the pervasive gender-normative culture.

Additionally, involving individuals who once held gender-normative, anti-TGNC beliefs but have since adopted more accepting views could offer invaluable insights. Understanding the processes and influences that led to their change in perspective would enhance our knowledge of the social learning mechanisms involved in fostering TGNC acceptance and affirmation.

Employing participatory action research methods in future studies is also crucial. The present study benefited significantly from the contributions of queer participants in town hall meetings. Future research should aim to strengthen partnerships with TGNC community members, allowing them to assume roles as researchers in addition to participants. This approach would ensure that TGNC voices are integral throughout the research process, leading to more targeted and meaningful solutions to the challenges their communities face (Felner et al. 2022; Proctor and Krusen 2017; Wagaman and Sanchez 2017). It is imperative that future research and policy efforts work in tandem to address the multifaceted challenges faced by TGNC youth. By leveraging social learning theory,

promoting and enforcing inclusive policies, and fostering genuine acceptance, society can make significant strides towards creating safer, more supportive environments for TGNC and gender-diverse individuals.

Notes

[1] An intersectional critique of "resilience" highlights that the concept can inadvertently place undue responsibility on marginalized individuals to overcome systemic barriers, rather than addressing the structural inequalities that necessitate resilience. This perspective recognizes that factors such as race, class, gender identity, and disability intersect to create unique experiences of oppression, which can amplify the challenges faced by TGNC youth.

[2] Every week, this non-profit holds one group session dedicated to LGBTQIA+ youth aged 13–17 and another session targeted at youth aged 18–24. The research team attended both sessions.

[3] The town halls aimed to provide a platform for young adults within the TGNC/LGBTQIA+ communities to discuss their experiences openly. Data on specific participant gender identities, such as transgender status, were not collected. Anonymity was ensured by not recording any identifying information.

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