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**“We cannot imagine”: US Preservice teachers’ Othering  
of trans and gender creative student experiences**

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**Abstract**

Research suggests that teachers are not meeting the needs of trans and gender creative students.  
Thus, we ask: How do US preservice teachers (PSTs) discursively construct the experiences of  
trans and gender creative students? How are these constructions informed by and reinscribe

broader gender normativities in educational contexts? We analyzed 549 PST authored, online discussion posts from an educational foundations course, finding PSTs lacked familiarity with and engaged in rhetorical distancing from trans and gender creative student experiences suggesting barriers to empathy that may obstruct teacher-student relationships and promotion of equity, which teacher education is called to address.

**Key words:** transgender students, gender identity, preservice teachers' attitudes, teacher education, teacher empathy, LGBTQ students

## 1. Introduction

Trans and gender creative<sup>1</sup> youth are increasingly visible across society (Bartholomaeus, Riggs, & Andrew, 2017; Meyer & Sansfaçon, 2014). Visibility has heightened awareness about the need to support and protect trans and gender creative students, while simultaneously increasing misunderstandings, expressions of bias and hate, and misguided assumptions about the range of identities, desires, and practices of these youth, by students, teachers, and the general population.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, given ongoing shifts in interpretation of federal regulations, heightened political debate, court involvement, and broad variation in policies and protections at local and school levels, school staff often lack clear policy and institutional

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that terminology is dynamic, complex, and political. We use the terms trans and gender creative here to include children who express their gender in a wide range of ways, with the intention of broadly including transgender, agender, gender complex, gender creative, gender fluid, genderqueer, intersex, nonbinary, and other folks who resist or complicate normative gender identities and expressions, while recognizing that each term has its own history and relationship to the gender system (Ehrensaft, 2016; Enke, 2013; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018). We also suggest that students must be empowered to choose the language (and expression) that best fits them. Note that when referencing prior research, we use the terminology from the given study, except when discussing study findings in aggregate.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, this tension is evident in the well-publicized US case of *Gavin Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board* (see Stevens, 2018).

guidance on supporting trans and gender creative students (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, & Airton, 2016; Sadowski, 2016).

Yet, research in the US and elsewhere suggests supportive teachers and administrators can have a powerful influence on trans and gender creative students' experiences and outcomes (e.g. Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Higa et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2016). At the most basic level, teachers can improve school climate by effectively intervening when trans and gender creative students experience harassment in school and by not participating in the harassment (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). One US study found that transgender students who identified one or more supportive teachers reported significantly lower levels of victimization in school compared to transgender students without support (Greytak et al., 2013). In Australia, researchers found that transgender students with supportive school staff reported higher persistence in school and social engagement, decreased risk of harassment and abuse, and higher educational outcomes (Jones et al., 2016). Some scholars suggest school staff are most effective when they actively and publicly support trans and gender creative students and resist everyday practices that reinscribe gender oppression (Dykstra, 2005; Luecke, 2011; see also Gilbert, Fields, Mamo, & Lesko, 2018), affirming external (identity-mirroring) and internal (identity-affirming) safety for trans and gender creative students (Miller, 2016). Such a stance aligns with social justice teaching practice that seeks to transform oppressive systems and promote educational equity (see Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Given the important influence teachers can have on trans and gender creative students' wellbeing and academic success, it is critical that teacher candidates are well prepared to support trans and gender creative students and effectively navigate school policy and culture related to gender identity and oppression. As we describe below, researchers are just beginning to explore

if and how preservice teachers (PSTs) are prepared to engage in this vital practice. Yet, the literature leaves largely unexplored how PSTs understand trans and gender creative students' experiences and how these logics influence their preparation to create supportive educational contexts for students with a range of gender identities and expressions (see Bartholomaeus, Riggs, & Andrew, 2017 and Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, & Tompkins, 2017 for notable exceptions in Australia and Canada, respectively).

To effectively support PSTs to promote safety, support, and equity of students across gender identities in their future teaching careers, we investigate how PSTs conceptualize trans and gender creative student identities as a starting point for theorizing approaches to change. Our research questions include: How do US PSTs discursively construct the experiences of trans and gender creative students? How are these constructions informed by and how do they reinscribe broader gender normativities in educational contexts? Three themes emerged in our analysis, PSTs: 1) described a lack of familiarity with trans and gender creative student experiences, 2) created cognitive and emotional distance between themselves and trans and gender creative students, and 3) positioned trans and gender creative students as heroes or victims. These findings suggest that PSTs commonly “Other” trans and gender creative students and evidence barriers to empathy that may obstruct future teacher-student relationships and the promotion of equity. Thus, this study aims to develop our understanding of PSTs' perspectives and nascent understandings of trans and gender creative students, and of gender identities in schools, to better tailor teacher education curricula to promote PSTs' growth and social justice in schools.

### *1.1. Background*

Scholars note the need for increased investigation on how gender expression is navigated in schools (Wimberly, 2015). Existing research has largely focused on documenting the

experiences and mental health outcomes of trans and gender creative students and has highlighted the frequency with which they face harassment and violence within schools, feel unsafe and unsupported, and struggle with school failure (e.g., Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016; Wimberly, 2015). Indeed, studies find high levels of transphobia, physical and sexual violence, and pervasive harassment against trans and gender creative students in school settings (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; McGuire et al., 2010; Meyer et al., 2016; Sausa, 2005). This pattern of harassment and abuse fits into a larger system of gender regulation, bullying, and oppression in schools reinforced through everyday, pervasive school practices (Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008; Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Pascoe, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2014; Thorne, 1993). Thus, in this section, we review the literature on the role teachers play in this dynamic and discuss research on interventions in teacher education. We then frame our research in theory on Othering and teaching across difference.

### *1.1.1. Teachers, trans and gender creative students, and missing preparation*

Research demonstrates that US teachers are not meeting trans and gender creative students' educational and safety needs in school and often resist disrupting everyday gendering processes in schools that stigmatize students (Frohard-Dourlent, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Miller, 2016; Payne & Smith, 2014). For instance, teachers regularly fail to intervene when trans and gender creative youth are harassed by peers, sometimes blaming trans and gender creative youth rather than perpetrators, or insisting that trans and gender creative students act more masculine or feminine, or even initiating harassment, ultimately contributing to a hostile environment (Higa et al., 2014; McGuire, et al., 2010; Pascoe, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2011; Sausa, 2005).

Literature also suggests that US teachers feel unprepared to address the needs of trans and gender creative students specifically (Luecke, 2011; Meyer et al., 2016), and LGBTQ students more broadly, with educators often reporting lack of knowledge and preparation, and reluctance to address LGBTQ issues or intervene in gendered harassment including sexist, homophobic, and transphobic language and behaviors (Kintner-Duffy, Vardell, Lower, & Cassidy, 2012; Kitchen & Bellini, 2012; Meyer, 2008). These studies document educator confusion and reticence to disrupt the policing of gender binaries in school, conditions which also undermine recognition and support of trans and gender creative students (Kearns et al., 2017; Kitchen & Bellini, 2012; Luecke, 2011; McEntarfer, 2016; Meyer et al., 2016; Miller, 2016). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that some educational scholars, administrators, and classroom teachers are developing and taking up policies and innovative practices that affirm trans and gender creative students, broadly support student recognition and self-determination, and teach students to complicate binaries (e.g. Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Greathouse, 2016; Hicks, 2016; Meyer & Sansfaçon, 2014; Miller, 2016; Rands, 2009; Sadowski, 2016; Sullivan, 2016).

Teacher education scholars have advocated for inclusion of trans and gender creative content (and LGBTQ issues more broadly) in the curriculum, calling for preservice programs to engage PSTs with critical lenses in exploring gender identity and oppression (Brant, 2016; Erden, 2009; Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013; Kearns et al., 2017; McEntarfer, 2016; Rands, 2009). To improve the schooling experiences and outcomes of all students, scholars argue, effective teacher preparation must go beyond framing “trans issues as identity ‘problems’ of a very small number of students” to consider how trans and gender creative discrimination fits into an intersectional, systemic understanding of oppression (Boucher, 2011, p. 66; Miller, 2016; Payne & Smith, 2012). Nonetheless, research suggests that US teacher education programs still

rarely prepare PSTs to deeply engage LGBTQ perspectives or to identify and resist heteronormativity or heterosexism in schools, and seldom substantively include trans and gender creative topics (Bishop & Atlas, 2015; Gorski et al., 2013; Kitchen & Bellini, 2012; Lee & Carpenter, 2015; Martino, 2013; Payne & Smith, 2012; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006; Vavrus, 2009).

### *1.1.2. Theorizing gender identity and Othering*

Our investigation employs a queer and feminist theoretical lens, drawing on Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity: rather than fixed characteristics, femininities and masculinities are constructed through a "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (p. 151). Gender is a process, constructed through everyday practice, and situated within the sociohistorical moment (Mayo, 2017; Pascoe, 2007). Butler's (1990) approach suggests that "gender identities are constituted through relations of social and cultural coherence between sex, gender, sexuality and desire, of which a pivotal practice is the Otherisation of those performances which rupture gender coherence" (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 577). Hence, in schools the individual and systemic positioning of trans and gender creative students as Other, outside of "normal" student experiences, is essential to producing and policing normative gender identities (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Nicolazzo (2017) names this process "compulsory heterogenderism," arguing that "trans\*" identity is rendered "unknowable" (p. 77) by "nontrans\*" individuals who primarily understand gender based on sexuality. Through this process, students' gender identities are regularly made invisible or unknowable, contributing to Othering. This process may, in turn, inform teachers' lack of support of trans and gender creative students.

### *1.1.3. Relational connection and teaching across difference*



The centrality of Othering in the production of normative gender identity, and in the linking of gender and sexuality, is particularly problematic given established scholarship that suggests that relational *connection*—including caring, empathetic, and supportive teacher-student relationships—is often central to effective, ethical teaching practice (Cornelius-White, 2007; Noddings, 1984, 1992; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004). Psychological research shows observed or perceived positive, emotionally-supportive, and mutually-respectful teacher-student relationships can have a range of positive effects for students including: gains in student engagement, interest, and motivation; student critical thinking, academic effort and achievement, and self-regulated learning; student attendance and dropout prevention, and reductions in student disruptive behavior and increases in positive peer relationships (Cornelius-White, 2007; Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Ruzek et al., 2016; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wentzel, 1998).

For marginalized students, teacher empathy and high-quality teacher-student relationships can be central to promoting positive outcomes and student empowerment (Carter Andrews, Richmond, Warren, Petchauer, & Floden, 2018; Jaber, Southerland, & Dake, 2018; Vass, 2017; Warren, 2018; Zygmunt et al., 2018). Further, research suggests that positive student-teacher relationships can have protective effects for students who have experienced trauma (Masten, 2014; Pianta, 2016), a heightened risk for trans and gender creative students (Olson et al., 2016). Consequently, the development of recognition and empathy is critical to support teachers' culturally responsive practice and can drive PSTs' interest in understanding their students in deeper, humanizing ways (Carter Andrews et al., 2018; Miller, 2016; Warren, 2018).

However, research highlights barriers to the development of high-quality teacher relationships with students who are systemically marginalized or Othered. Documentation of the

“similarity effect” in social psychology supports observations that teachers are likelier to feel comfortable or empathize with students whom they perceive as similar to themselves (Gehlbach et al., 2016; Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). Given that only a small proportion of adults in the US, for example, identify as transgender (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016), social barriers may obstruct cisgender teachers’ sense of similarity with trans and gender creative students. These barriers to empathy are evident in research on bullying, which finds that PSTs largely focused on addressing the behavior of the perpetrator rather than supporting the victim, “most pre-service teachers had little recognition, empathic concern, problem-solving and management behaviors related to empathy for the victim,” and that the race and gender background of victims may influence teacher identification and empathy (Tettegah, 2007, p. 54). Furthermore, scholars note that emotions can inhibit learning about marginalized groups and are linked to negotiations of power in schooling (Tatum, 1992; Zemblyas, 2005). Tatum (1992) explains, learning about “issues of oppression often generate[s] powerful emotional responses in [undergraduates] that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair” (pp. 1-2). Emotions must be addressed or withdrawal, resistance, and interference with cognitive understanding can result.

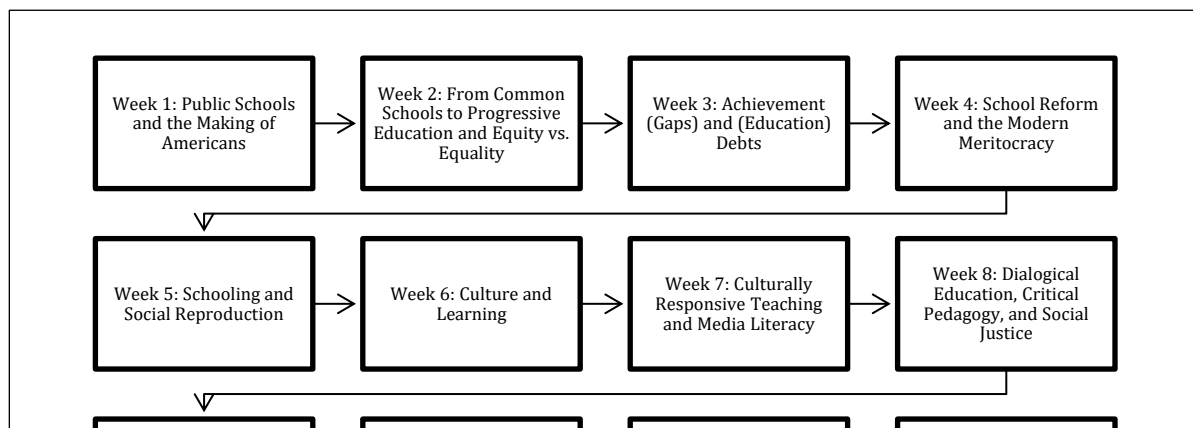
Consequently, scholars suggest that PSTs need support to engage and negotiate discomfort, and to develop empathy and social perspective-taking skills to leverage the power of teacher-student relationships, bridge difference, and reject implicit ideologies of superiority and inferiority in their future practice (Barr, 2011; Boler & Zemblyas, 2003; Carter Andrews et al., 2018; Gehlbach, Young, & Roan, 2012; Rojas & Liou, 2017; Warren, 2018). Warren (2018) proposes that teacher educators must actively scaffold PSTs’ empathy through perspective taking, to support PSTs to reflect on patterns in their beliefs about difference and to facilitate the application of empathy in teaching practice. Indeed, we would further suggest that perspective-

taking skills and capacity for empathy are likely to support teachers' positive engagement across all kinds of difference, including with students who identify as trans and gender creative.

## 2. Methodology and methods

### 2.1. Site, participants, and data sources

Participants (N=183) attended a relatively small, comprehensive residential college in the rural Northeastern US, named as "LGBT-friendly" by a national organization. Students were primarily teacher education candidates, second-semester, first-year students through seniors, and one non-degree student, who were seeking state teaching licensure for secondary grades (12-18-year-olds) in history, English language arts, health and physical education, science, music, world languages, and speech language pathology. PSTs from this program go on to teach in suburban, urban, and rural schools, primarily in the Northeast US, with varied policies for trans students. Participants were enrolled in a required course on the social and cultural foundations of education in one of ten different course sections across four semesters. One of the first courses in PSTs' education sequence (along with special education and educational psychology courses), the course addressed topics related to the history of US education, education policy, and educational equity related to race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and language (see Figure 1). Common in US teacher education programs, the focal course was the single course required for all teacher candidates that expressly focused on issues of "diversity." Subsequently, PSTs take field experience and student teaching courses, often with a placement in a school district with more liberal/trans-positive policies, surrounded by more conservative districts.



Demographics of participants mirrored the backgrounds of the US teaching force at large, which is predominantly White and female (see, Ingersoll, Merrill, Stuckey, & Collins, 2018; see Table 1 for select participant demographics). Additionally, participants ranged in age from 19-22, hailed primarily from the Northeastern US, and most could be described as middle-class.<sup>3</sup> Notably, none of the participants were trans, and some actively identified as cisgender. Finally, PSTs were informed in person that their de-identified class contributions could be used for research and were invited to opt out of participation in person or via email. Institutional Review Boards at our universities approved research methods and data use.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

Characteristic	Participants ( <i>n</i> = 183)
Gender <sup>a</sup>	
Women	122
Men	61
Other / Non-binary / No Identification	0

<sup>3</sup> Around forty-four percent of students are from the state in which the college is located, and sixty-eight percent of the student body received some type of need-based financial aid. Fewer than twenty percent receive US Federal Pell Grants, college tuition grants reserved for families with exceptional financial need (families who earn less than 50,000 USD can apply, with most awards going to families who earn less than 20,000 USD annually).

Race	
White	154
People of Color <sup>b</sup>	25
Other / No Identification	4

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*Note.* Demographics are self-reported. Some PSTs identified as lesbian/gay/bisexual at different points during the course, but students were not asked to officially identify their sexuality for research purposes.

<sup>a</sup>None of the PSTs identified as trans.

<sup>b</sup>Includes Black, Latinx, Asian, Asian American, Native American, and multi-racial.

In this course, students had two weeks of class sessions on gender and sexuality in the last third of the semester, potentially the only class sessions to specifically focus on gender as a social construct across their teacher education program, with one online session specifically exploring gender identity and children (see Table 2). While the course primarily met in-person, students regularly posted comments, reflections, and responded to each other on the online course platform. Data included 549 online discussion posts authored by 183 PSTs in this topical session. In this discussion, PSTs were instructed to write a post reflecting on, commenting on, or reacting to the course topic and materials on gender identity and children (including Katch and Katch's (2010) dialogue about meeting the needs of a gender creative child in a kindergarten classroom and audio from *This American Life* (Kirchner, 2009) sharing stories of two trans and gender creative children navigating elementary school) and to respond to two classmates' posts. The purpose of the online discussion format, and study design, was to allow PSTs more time to thoughtfully process the course concepts and to ensure that *all* PSTs could articulate their nascent views. Scholarship on teacher education on race and equity indicates that PSTs may be hesitant to actively discuss topics considered divisive in person (e.g. Pollock, 2004, Singleton & Hays, 2008). Online reflective writing may address teacher fears about in-person confrontation, as students have the opportunity to thoughtfully select the words they use to express their meaning without the pressure of keeping up with conversation (Author 2, 2010, 2017). Teacher

reflective writing also provides a distinctive window into teachers’ thought processes (Britton, 1970; Emig, 1977; Hoover, 1994) and gives teachers the opportunity to make tacit knowledge explicit (Perl, 1979; Smyth, 1989). Therefore, given study design and course scope, we explore PST responses as nascent views: course materials provided context for initiating discussion that allowed PSTs to make their implicit understandings explicit. Drawing on methodology from similar discursive studies exploring posts in online educational contexts, our analysis is grounded primarily in students’ written expression (Author 2, 2017); while evidence from face-to-face meetings and written reflections shared with the professor informs this paper and corroborates findings, it is not the focus.

Table 2  
*Related Course Sequence*

Class Topics and Guiding Questions	Materials
Becoming Boys and Girls in School: How do schools circumscribe appropriate ways to be boys and girls? What gender biases have been documented in schools? How does gender impact students’ educational opportunity and outcomes?	Bryan, J. <i>From the Dress-Up Corner to the Senior Prom: Navigating Gender and Sexuality Diversity in PreK-12 Schools</i> , Chapter 1, “Gender and Sexuality Diversity at School: What Educators Need to Know and Then Some”
Producing Normal: Gender + Sexuality in Schools: What is heteronormative bias? How does it play out in schools? How does it impact LGBT youth as well as straight-identified youth?	For these two in-person meetings, students selected from a variety of choice materials posted on the course website from among the following topics:
The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsive Heterosexuality in Schools: How do schools shape perceptions about (appropriate) sexuality and gender identity expression? What happens when young people defy prescribed norms? What are teachers’ rights and responsibilities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History and Overview of Gender and Schooling</li> <li>• Gender Bias</li> <li>• Intersectionality (Class, Immigration Status, Race)</li> <li>• Gendered Harassment</li> <li>• Boys and Girls Negotiating School</li> <li>• Single-Sex Schooling</li> </ul>
When Boys Won’t Be Boys ( <i>Session of focus</i> ): How useful is it to think in terms of “boys” and “girls” in our work as educators? What are the implications of instances where young people defy dualistic gender categories? What role do students play in revealing/shaping their own gender identities?	Katch and Katch “Act Two. Tom Girls.” from the “Somewhere Out There” episode of <i>This American Life</i>

*Note.* Though there was slight variation in materials across the semesters and course sections in question, the information provided here illustrates the general approach, which was consistent throughout.

## 2.2. Data analysis

We conducted an inductive, thematic online discourse analysis (Author 2, 2017; Boyatzis, 1998). Our iterative approach began with each of us open-coding posts of a subsample of three course sections (selected via random number generator) and memoing about concepts and patterns in the data that responded to our research questions (Maxwell, 2005). After sharing preliminary analyses, we collaboratively developed initial low-inference codes and returned to the data to refine these codes (Carspecken, 1996; see Figure 2 for an example of our coding progression). We then created a codebook (see Table 3) and systematically coded all 549 posts (Boyatzis, 1998). This process included noting ambiguous passages in the data that we subsequently discussed and jointly coded (see Authors, forthcoming, for additional description). Throughout the coding process we met to discuss emerging patterns, documented the process, and confirmed the dependability of the codes by engaging processes of constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Honestly, I do not know what I would do if my children told me that they wanted to identify as the opposite gender from what they were born. (A1: **confusion-own children; A2: don't know, use of "opposite gender" → Focused: lack knowledge, confusion → Axial: Don't Know, Conflicted/Uncomfortable**) I think it is important to communicate and have the children articulate why they want to do that. But then again, should I require that my children defend themselves or simply allow them to express themselves and be themselves as they so please? These are difficult questions that I do not yet have the answer to. (A1: **trans kids must justify, trans kids should express, conflicted; A2: parental perspective, conflict on trans expression → Focused: confusion, cognitive conflict → Axial: Conflicted/Uncomfortable**) Hearing about transgender children put an interesting spin on my thoughts. I never thought that people could be so young and identify as transgender. I always thought it was something people decided when they were older. (A1: **"never thought," trans as decision, young children identify; A2: lacked knowledge on young children, expanding knowledge "spins" thoughts, Focused: new understanding of young children → Axial: Surprise-young children**) I now realize how one-minded I have been about transgender people. I am definitely going to reconsider just how open-minded I really am and challenge myself to think beyond what I think I know now (A1: **beginning to understand/push on own unawareness; A2: understanding self more, opportunity for growth/challenge understanding; Focused: Gained self-perspective, Potential growth → Axial: Other**).

*Figure 2.* Coded Data Excerpt. An example of our data coding process from open coding by each author (A1= Author 1, A2= Author 2), to focused coding, to final axial coding (regular text=data,





Table 3  
*Selected Codebook*

Axial Code	Code Definition	Code Examples
<b>Don't know</b>	Shares a lack of knowledge, familiarity, or understanding of trans identities or issues	"I am not too familiar with listening to stories about transgender people and the way that they view the world" and "When we talk about transgender people, I often feel disconnected because I have not had personal experiences with people that identify as transgender"
<b>Surprise- young children</b>	Focus on the expression of trans and gender creative identities in young children as surprising, unfamiliar	"Is it possible to know what gender you want to identify with at such a tender and very young age? And if so, how should it be handled in schools? (in terms of explaining it to other students)" and "I find it very intriguing how at such a young age children already have a perception of gender roles. I always thought at young ages children just played with/however they wanted"
<b>Conflicted/ Uncomfortable</b>	Expresses uneasiness, confusion, or conflict about how to understand or relate to trans and gender creative people	"Personally, and I very much hate to admit it, but I have a hard time understanding the idea of being transgendered. But that's not to say that I don't accept people who are. I just personally have never felt that way, and so relating to their feelings and struggles is a challenge" and "I can't fully understand what a transgender person might feel because I myself have not felt those emotions...."
<b>Fear teaching/ interaction</b>	Expresses fear or discomfort specifically about teaching trans and gender creative students, or teaching about trans topics	"It scares me in many ways that I may find myself in the situation...how do I teach equality" and "I would not have known exactly how to approach the topic or what to say in response....Is it a teacher's place to tell a student what gender he/she is? Or to teach students to be open-minded about gender?"
<b>Heroes</b>	Positions trans and gender creative students as courageous, brave, laudable, super human	"amazing...strength and courage to accept who they are and to make it known to others that they like who they are" and "their courage and bravery [is] inspiring"
<b>Victims</b>	Positions trans and gender creative students as suffering, wounded, harmed, abused	"If you keep a child from expressing him or herself, the build up of anger and frustration and sadness can lead to suicidal thoughts, as can the horrible bullying one may face" and "to hold the feeling of being an anomaly, existing outside the accepted norms of society, must be so lonely....The stress puts on children must be ridiculous"

In our analysis, we drew upon Bakhtin's (1934-1935/1981) notion of dialogic language—language that contains different points of view that listeners can hear silently. Bakhtin argues that all language enters into a world already laden with argument. For our project, PSTs enter discussion about gender identity from a social world that stigmatizes non-conformity, rendering invisible and exceptional identities that fall outside of the male/female binary. Consequently, in our analysis we explored both what emic themes emerged in the PSTs' writing, and, through our interpretive memos and analysis, listened also for participant's responses to the course context and implicit call to be responsive to trans and gender creative students.

### *2.3. Researcher positionality*

As qualitative researchers, we acknowledge our role as the instrument of our analysis: our subjectivities, experiences, and curiosities influenced the path of investigation, so we wish to make our positionality transparent (Luttrell, 2010). We both teach education courses on diversity and social justice to PSTs that include exploration of trans and gender creative identities: Author 2 was the instructor for all sections from which the study data is drawn; Author 1 has no connection to study participants or the study site. Author 1 identifies as White, while Author 2 identifies as bi-racial (Black/White). We both identify as cisgender, heterosexual women, while acknowledging the limitations of these binary categories in capturing the complexities of embodied, culturally-grounded experiences and desires (Allen, 2010), and in our teaching and research analysis we were mindful that we lacked the first-person perspective of navigating schooling, and the world, as a trans and gender creative person.

In addition to reflecting on our positionality across the research process, to further ensure trustworthiness of our findings, we utilized systematic and transparent data analysis processes, engaged in reflexive memoing, and received feedback from our interpretive community of

scholars (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Luttrell, 2010). Our contrasting outsider/insider relationships to the study participants and data strengthened our analysis, as our findings emerged within an iterative dialogue that allowed us to engage with and question data interpretation through the lenses of our differing perspectives. Throughout our analytic process Author 2 recorded surprise at how her perceptions of her students' learning changed through our data analysis. We further consulted the literature during analysis to extend our interpretations and sometimes refer to this literature in our findings to illuminate our analytic process (Gabriel & Lester, 2013).

### **3. Results**

Three themes emerged: First, PSTs described lacking knowledge or familiarity with trans and gender creative student experiences and considering the role of gender in schooling. Second, participants expressed emotional discomfort and engaged in rhetorical distancing from trans and gender creative student experiences. Third, PSTs positioned trans and gender creative students as Other, often heroes and/or victims, and identified few personal connections with trans and gender creative students. Below we describe these findings and include quotations representative of broader patterns expressed across PSTs. We interpret these findings and PSTs' understandings as implicitly informed by and responsive to existing dialogue circulating in this sociohistorical moment (Bakhtin, 1934-1935/1981).

#### *3.1. Gender identity as an unfamiliar construct*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the relatively recent growing visibility of trans and gender creative identities in mainstream US culture, many PSTs in this study expressed a lack of knowledge or familiarity with the identities and experiences of trans and gender creative students and frequently claimed ignorance about trans and gender creative topics. For example, one PST explained, "I had no idea that being transgender was widespread." While a second expressed, "I

am not too familiar with listening to stories about transgender people and the way that they view the world.” PSTs also reported a lack of understanding of trans and gender creative youths’ school experiences. For instance, a PST declared, “I will be the first to admit a lack of knowledge and experience in situations with transgender students.” These statements reflect the relative privilege of cisgender PSTs in not often having to think about gender identity in their everyday lives.

Many participants also described surprise that negotiations of gender identity may emerge in early childhood, a discourse identified in previous research (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). One PST remarked, “I was shocked as well to find out that at such a young age children can know that they want to be a different gender.” Another PST explained, “it had not occurred to me that children, especially that young, were capable of identifying a sense of not belonging in terms of their sex.” These constructions evidence PST confusion in understanding concepts of sex, gender, and gender identity, framing trans students as wanting to shift gender, rather than align their gender expression and identity. These quotations again reify the idea that one’s sex assigned at birth naturally aligns with one’s gender identity, suggesting the “capability” to resist such alignment would require developmental complexity.

Furthermore, many PSTs expressed a lack of understanding not only of trans and gender creative student experiences, but also of how sex and gender could influence student experiences in the classroom generally. One participant explained, “I too, despite being very accepting of everyone, was ignorant to what sexuality and gender even meant.” Another reported a lack of consideration of the ways children are expected to engage in gendered play in school, “it was interesting... to think about a boy doing ‘girly’ activities and girls doing ‘boy’ activities. I’ve never really thought about it hard enough to realize that the judgment still goes on today.” Both

quotations imply that the ways that (hetero)sexuality and gender normativity are sustained in schools are so ubiquitous that they become invisible—"judgment" becomes commonsense (Edley, 2001), even for individuals open to engaging and acknowledging difference. Exploration of gender and sexuality in teacher education, then, becomes a critical opportunity to facilitate PSTs' growth and understanding.

### *3.2. Creating emotional distance from trans and gender creative students*

PSTs' lack of familiarity with trans and gender creative students' identities and experiences and exploring the idea of having trans and gender creative students in their classroom was, at times, wrought with confusion, discomfort, and cognitive dissonance. As one PST shared, "These topics [trans and gender creative identities] can still seem uncomfortable to talk about and new in society." This quotation and similar participant expressions highlight the ways that lack of visibility or discourse around variations in gender identity may stimulate PST discomfort in exploring these topics in teacher education. Additionally, some seemed to express cognitive dissonance, or distress about internal inconsistencies in beliefs, when exploring trans and gender creative identities (Festinger, 1962). One PST explained:

I personally am not totally comfortable with those who are transgender, purely because I never have been in significant contact with some. I also acknowledge that this is not a good excuse and there is no good reason to feel this way...I didn't even give the topic that much thought until we started discussing it in class. I've realized that no matter what one's view is towards others, is that everyone is still human and deserves the same personal respect as anyone else.

In this quotation, the participant expresses conflicting views, both feeling discomfort and lack of familiarity with people who identify as trans and gender creative—positioning them as

“others”—while also articulating the way that this discomfort is based on “feel[ing]” rather than “good reason” and his more abstract commitment to treating all “human[s]” with “personal respect.” At the same time, this quote alludes to the potential of teacher education, noting how the course was the first to prompt his thinking about gender normativity.

As the prior quotation begins to demonstrate, some participants emphasized how, given their lack of familiarity or sense of similarity with trans and gender creative people, they struggled to relate or empathize with experiences from trans and gender creative students. For example, one PST declared, “I can’t fully understand what a transgender person might feel because I myself have not felt those emotions,” accentuating the differences in the “emotions” of trans and gender creative people and her own emotions and positioning a trans and gender creative person as Other. Another PST described, “I’ve always been very open and accepting of who people wanted to love, whether it was someone of the same sex or opposite, but I have never been able to really understand how someone chooses a gender identity which goes against their biological sex.” This PST begins with a disclaimer, justifying his position as an accepting person, then rejects the possibility that he could appreciate the perspective of trans and gender creative students, implying that “going against their biological sex” stands outside of the realm of expected human experience. This quotation also clarifies the need for teacher education to explore trans and gender creative identities separately, rather than subsuming the “T” as part of a study on LGBTQ identities, which often focus primarily on the “L” and “G” (Martino, 2013).

These distancing expressions accentuate the Other-ness of trans and gender creative students, as having experiences or emotions outside of “normal” human experience—a potential future barrier to caring and supportive student-teacher relationships. Another PST echoed this sentiment, projecting his confusion on to trans and gender creative students’ parents:

For me, it is hard to completely understand how people come about with their feelings or identify with the opposite sex. I do not want to say I feel bad for the parents because they cannot control it and as parents must support the child with anything they do....but it must be incredibly hard to be proud or support[ing] of something you truly aren't.

For this PST, the "truth" of a child's gender comes from their biological sex, and he assumes that this fact would presumably create dissonance for parents, who are obligated to support their children.

Some PSTs opposed the notion that young children have the right or capacity to challenge assigned gender, views which often drew on implicit assumptions conflating gender identity and sexual desire embedded in compulsory heterogenderism (Nicolazzo, 2017), or linking trans and gender creative identities with taboo. For example, one participant expressed fears that younger children could engage in discussions around gender and sexuality, explaining:

I agree that children at the younger age would be hard to talk to about gender and sexuality because they are not mature. They would find it funny or want nothing to do with the transgender child. Also once they find out that they are transgender they would tell everyone and bully them. We need to educate our children or students to accept the way people are.

Here the PST explicitly links gender and sexuality, and projects emotions and behaviors of bias and bullying onto young children learning about trans and gender creative identities. While this PST argues that children should "accept the way people are," she expresses strong fears about open discussion with young children around trans and gender creative identities and locates the problem as children's "matur[ity]," rather than systemic bias against trans and gender creative

youth, as a cause of potentially negative outcomes for visible trans and gender creative students.

Another participant described:

I would guess that schools and teachers feel uncomfortable bringing this issue [gender spectrum] to light in the classroom for fear of over-exposing students or offending their parents. Isn't this dangerous though? Just because you choose to not educate students on a particular subject does not mean that they won't run into the issue when they leave the shelter of a school. It is important that students be made aware that not everyone feels comfortable with the labels that society tosses around so casually and that, as members of society, it's a student's duty to acknowledge these people's preferences.

Here the PST holds two contradictory perspectives, she can both imagine the danger teachers might feel in teaching about trans and gender creative identities or acknowledging the gender spectrum (notably undefined fears of "over-exposure" emerge, implying discussions of gender identity are shameful or should remain secret, though the quotation does not define "exposure" clearly), while also acknowledging the important role educators can play in helping all students to be accepted and to prepare students for the diverse people they will encounter when they leave school.

Finally, some PSTs openly expressed fears about how to teach trans and gender creative students. For example, one PST asked, "How am I supposed to act around transgender children if I come across them?" highlighting the ways that this PST saw trans and gender creative students as essentially Other, while at the same time showing this PST's need for information and understanding. In a contrasting case, another PST names the challenge of addressing topics seen as contentious in her classroom. She describes:



The situation would get sticky once I'm teaching in the classroom. It is my belief that I have the responsibility to help my students become the most complete human being they strive to be. Part of that discovery process will be their development of their own gender identity and sexuality. As their teacher, I need to encourage them to be their full self. But what happens when my encouragement comes in conflict with the parent's desires (even though I do not agree with them)? At what point is it my responsibility to stand up for what the child believes versus being an employee of the school district? Morally, I would want to stand behind the child. But that may prove more difficult in different school districts.

While emotional ambivalence emerges in this account, this quotation can be seen as a counternarrative: this PST rejects distancing and expresses the conviction that "help[ing] students become the most complete human being" is her central responsibility as a teacher. She acknowledges how this commitment could cause professional challenges, but she does not position herself as the victim (or without agency) of these battles, a stance implied by the participant in the previous example. Yet, both quotations suggest that PSTs need additional tools, ways of thinking, and opportunities to step outside of their own perspectives, to prepare to effectively teach students with diverse identities and needs, manage complex emotions, and navigate complex professional environments.

### *3.3. Constructing trans and gender creative students as heroes and victims*

Many PSTs' discussions of the experiences of trans and gender creative students constructed these students as exceptional Others, set apart from the experiences of "normal" students both for their struggles and resilience. PSTs' discussions often framed trans and gender creative students within two dichotomous constructs: heroes or victims. These constructions

positioned trans and gender creative students as an out-group, having very different subjectivities and school experiences from PSTs' own, and from other children whom they might teach.

### *3.3.1. Trans and gender creative students as heroes*

When taking up the trans and gender creative students as heroes frame, PSTs emphasized trans and gender creative students' advanced abilities, maturity, confidence, and bravery, often noting how much "courage," "strength," and "power some kids have at such a young age," and describing trans and gender creative students as "inspirational." The framing of trans and gender creative students as heroes was couched in PSTs' lack of personal knowledge of trans and gender creative individuals, as one PST wrote,

...never having personally known a transgender child...I was incredibly impressed and touched by these two eight-year-olds who have such an absolute and uncompromising sense of who they are: "I don't feel anything like a boy. I'm a girl, and that's all I have to say about it."

Thus, while these ways of understanding trans and gender creative students' resilience affirmed positive characteristics, this discourse also set trans and gender creative students apart, and gave them a kind of superhero status that could also be used to disclaim the need to support and protect the rights of trans and gender creative students, as implied when one PST described, "[Trans and gender creative students] seem to have the strength to handle anything."

This positioning of trans and gender creative students is evident in the somewhat hyperbolic post of one PST:

I feel a sense of pride for these [trans and gender creative] young children, being brave enough to live outside the norm. They have found a path that makes their lives most enjoyable, which some never achieve. The messages that they have

brought to society can hopefully be inspirational for the people still searching for that happiness.

This PST's post prompted the following response from a classmate, "I felt the same way you did...It blows me away that two *8-year-olds* [emphasis in original] can have so much confidence and optimism in the face of such a challenging circumstance. I don't think I'll ever achieve that kind of strength of will or bravery those girls demonstrated...It is truly admirable." Here participants emphasized the heroic or "inspirational" characteristics of trans and gender creative children, suggesting they embody positive attributes adults may not hold.

This double effect of expressing admiration, while reinforcing exceptionalism or Otherness of trans and gender creative students, serves as a hedge to both maintain PSTs' positions as "good" and accepting future teachers, while also emphasizing trans and gender creative students' difference from the speaker and other children, and disclaiming teacher responsibility to act to support these students. For example, one PST explained, "For these children to have this much confidence compared to adults who struggle daily to constantly be denied and express themselves is truly amazing and admiring." This PST's sense of amazement served to set trans and gender creative students apart, showing a confidence that exceeds the strength of adults, and implying they were well-equipped to continue daily struggle. Similarly, another PST compared some trans and gender creative students' ability to express complex notions of gender as exceeding adults' capacity, writing, "I think even adults today cannot grasp or believe [this view of gender fluidity]." Another PST emphasized trans and gender creative students' bravery, "Being true to oneself, despite the hardships one will inevitably face, is quite brave." Moreover, this PST notably frames struggles in school as "inevitabl[e]" for trans and gender creative

students, implicitly distancing the responsibility of teachers, staff, parents, and peers to support and protect these students, a repeated effect of the use of the hero discourse.

### *3.3.2. Trans and gender creative students as victims*

PSTs also positioned trans and gender creative students as victims, emphasizing the incompatibility of the identities and subjectivities of trans and gender creative students with societal expectations. Unlike the heroic descriptions highlighted above, PSTs using the victim frame focused on trans and gender creative students' suffering. Positioning trans and gender creative students as victims, PSTs constructed these young people's stories in an emotionally fraught way, using evocative language such as "heartbreaking," "traumatic," and "dread." One PST explained:

It forces them [trans and gender creative students] to feel the need to lie and hide who they really are from themselves and others....Some transgender children may be pushed back into faking their "original" gender by these roles and expectations of society. This creates so much unhappiness and feelings of not belonging in the future.

Here the participant highlighted the extent to which trans and gender creative students might be "force[d]" to hide because of societal pressure. Notably, the PST documented not only the current imagined struggle of trans and gender creative students, but predicted that this struggle would inevitably lead to a future of "so much" suffering, evoking intense, pitying emotions.

Extending the theme of future suffering, a number of PSTs discussed violence and suicide in relation to trans and gender creative students. For instance, one PST explained, "If you keep a child from expressing him or herself, the build-up of anger and frustration and sadness can lead to suicidal thoughts, as can the horrible bullying one may face." Another PST

implicated parents, "I think this is the reason some parents are protective and restrict their children from freely expressing themselves. Many parents probably fear that their kids will reach the point of suicide when they are not accepted in society." Here, the PST argued that parents' denial of trans and gender creative students' identities might be meant to protect the youth from the eventuality of suicide caused by societal exclusion. Suicide is a serious concern for communities marginalized by gender identity, often highlighted in educational research, which the PSTs are likely identifying here (Olson et al., 2016). Nonetheless, we include this finding to highlight the contrast of extremes produced through PSTs' constructions of trans and gender creative students as heroes and victims.

PSTs relied on the victim discourse to reify the idea that the experiences of trans and gender creative students are unknowable. Taking up an expression of sympathy, another PST explained, "We cannot imagine constantly being denied one's identity and constantly being discriminated against and experiencing pain." Here the suffering of trans and gender creative students was presumed so extreme and *particular* that it is beyond imagination (and empathy). Further, in this discursive construction, the pronoun "we" clearly delineated the space between the knowledge of the PSTs enrolled in the course and trans and gender creative students, reaffirming trans and gender creative students' position as separate and divergent. Similarly, another PST wrote, "I think it is sad that their gender identity isn't necessarily the hardest part of the struggle, but trying to convince those around them they are normal, which I believe they are." Here, the PST pities trans and gender creative students, imagining the "struggle" to negotiate societal demands around what is considered a "normal" gender identity.

Both hero and victim constructions implicitly serve to make the behaviors, experiences, and emotions of trans and gender creative students Other, set apart from the experiences of

“normal” students both for their struggles and resilience. Another manifestation of this pattern was that PSTs rarely connected their own experiences of bullying, gender-policing, or feeling socially excluded in school to the experiences of trans and gender creative students, connections that they *did* make when discussing other kinds of identities in the course (see Author 2, 2015). Overall, while PSTs’ comments often showed sympathy with the struggles of trans and gender creative students, they also emphasized a sense of difference and disconnection from PSTs’ own lives.

#### **4. Discussion**

Across our analysis we found patterns of responses to the request for PSTs to consider the experiences of trans and gender creative students: PSTs often implicitly engaged in this conversation by taking the Othering position, “we cannot imagine,” suggesting that trans and gender creative students’ experiences are beyond understanding and creating a barrier to authentic empathy (Rojas & Liou, 2017). First, many PSTs shared their lack of familiarity and understanding of the experiences and identities of trans and gender creative students. Second, grounded in this lack, participants expressed their emotional discomfort with engaging the experiences of trans and gender creative students and created distance between these experiences and their own. Third, PSTs positioned trans and gender creative students as essentially different, heroes or victims, set apart as inspirations. Notably, there were no trans or gender creative PSTs in this study, so we cannot speak to the influence greater variation in gender identity might have in such discussions.

PST responses took up discursive tools from existing cultural dialogue about trans and gender creative students’ experiences that often serve to reify difference (Bakhtin, 1934-1935/1981). For instance, positioning trans and gender creative students as heroes evidences

what some refer to as “inspiration porn”—when societally marginalized groups, for whom members of the dominant group might feel pity, are put on display as “inspirations,” an act that further marginalizes the group and sets them as farther apart from other members of society (Young, 2014). Indeed, participants claimed that trans students’ “strength” and “bravery” was “inspirational” and beyond what others could “ever achieve.” Young explains that inspiration porn is about “objectifying one group of people for the benefit of another group of people,” so that the dominate group can be “inspire[d]” and “motivate[d]” by the marginalized group, thinking, “Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person.” Conversely, when considering the positioning of trans and gender creative students as victims, researchers suggest that the invocation of pity for students can have problematic consequences including teacher lowering of academic expectations for marginalized students (Rojas & Liou, 2017). Expressions of teacher pity can also influence students, leading to increased internalization of messages that academic achievement may be unattainable due to life circumstances, and can be a way that teachers disclaim responsibilities for supporting students’ academic achievement: in the context of systemic bias, teacher “deficit conception[s] of sympathy can reduce students’ humanity (Ralston Saul, 2009)” (Rojas & Liou, 2017, p. 28)—expressions of pity-based sympathy may make invisible systemic practices that reproduce student oppression and can inhibit teachers’ development of justice- and equity-oriented perspectives.

Our findings suggest that while, on the surface, the ideas expressed by PSTs largely aimed to better understand or appear supportive of trans and gender creative students, PSTs were frequently unable to engage deep understanding of, and connection to, the experiences and developmental trajectories of trans and gender creative students. These expressions unintentionally replicate a broader pattern of sociocultural resistance to disrupting the

gender/sexuality binary and associated power structures. The personal implicitly links to the systemic here, as expressions of discomfort and positioning of trans and gender creative students as an out-group may create a barrier for PSTs' connection and empathy, and limit PSTs' future formation of caring, just, and supportive teacher-student relationships with trans and gender creative students. This potential effect is particularly concerning given research that suggests that trans and gender creative students face persistent obstacles to school success, and that supportive relationships with teachers can have a meaningful influence on students' academic and social outcomes and comfort and belonging in school. The disconnection and sense of dissimilarity these PSTs evidence, then, may implicitly impede these protective elements of teacher-student relationships. Furthermore, willingness to explore trans and gender creative students' perspectives with empathy and vulnerability can serve as a foundation for teachers to develop critical perspectives on the ways marginalized students are systemically excluded and discriminated against through traditional schooling practices, and can be a basis for teachers to develop authentic caring and understanding of the experiences and cultures of marginalized students that may lead to broader change (Boler & Zemblyas, 2003; Carter Andrews et al., 2018; McEntarfer, 2016; Warren, 2018).

We suggest that discourses PSTs used to claim this lack of knowledge reinforce the conceptualization of trans and gender creative students as Other (McEntarfer, 2016; Ringrose & Renold, 2010), a process which ends up dehumanizing trans and gender creative students and obscuring the patterns of systemic oppression facilitated through schooling, ultimately maintaining cisgender privilege and reifying normative gender identity as natural, rather than making space to explore how cultural norms, socialization, and power produce the "natural" gender identities located in a specific sociocultural moment (Butler, 1990; Edley, 2001; Miller,



2016). Indeed, while PSTs shared stories of gender-based teacher expectations, school rules, or bullying from their own schooling, and many began to problematize these practices in previous course sessions, almost all PSTs failed to connect these patterns to the systemic marginalization and rejection of trans and gender creative students. While it is possible that as PSTs engaged in field experiences in their teacher education sequence their perspectives would have become more nuanced, the unevenness of US school policies for trans students, and failure of many practicing teachers and schools to recognize and support trans and gender creative students, may limit opportunities for PSTs' understandings to be expanded in the field (Kearns et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Miller, 2016; Payne & Smith, 2014; Sadowski, 2016). Overall, we suggest that PSTs' lack of understanding of trans and gender creative students and propensity to position these students as Other may create a barrier for future empathy, support, and relationship-building with these students, may impede PSTs' ability to link the marginalization of trans and gender creative students in schools with other forms of oppression, and may limit their actions to address systemic inequity (see Authors, forthcoming).

## **5. Conclusion**

These findings suggest that cisgender PSTs in the US need more opportunities and tools in their teacher education sequence to move beyond prominent and limiting popular dialogue to prepare to work with trans and gender creative students and to address issues of gender normativity as a form of systemic oppression in school communities. We acknowledge the limitations of our current practice and seek to move towards a more comprehensive and integrated approach. To build such teacher capacity, PSTs need the opportunity to explore these topics from both individual and systemic perspectives: to reflect on their own beliefs and emotions, to recognize the experiences of trans PSTs among them, to build capacity for empathy

and connection, to explore how schools contribute to rigid, normative, gendered expectations and power structures, and to develop teaching practices that will create more substantively equitable classrooms. To support PSTs to develop these deep understandings, we imagine these topics could be integrated or expanded across PSTs' educational foundations curriculum and we suggest that teacher educators must be intentional in developing curriculum, selecting materials, and guiding dialogue that create these opportunities.

At the individual level, we see psychological teacher education coursework, such as child development, as providing an often under-utilized opportunity for PSTs to explore key ideas and questions related to their understandings of trans and gender creative students and critical perspectives on gender. For example, PSTs could use more support in understanding how children develop gender identity, perspective taking, and empathy for others. Coursework could give PSTs opportunities to engage and reflexively critique *their own beliefs* about gender and interrogate how constructions of "normal" students and in-group/out-group identity categories often function to obscure the common humanity and dignity of all youth (see Erden, 2009; McEntarfer, 2016). PSTs could explore how teachers use understandings of child development to fruitfully design curriculum and support children in learning about a variety of identities and differences (including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, etc.) as part of broader social-emotional learning curricula. Psychological coursework can further teach PSTs about the central role that teacher-student relationships play in promoting student achievement and belonging in schools, particularly for vulnerable students, and could support PSTs in developing relational skills. Research suggests that PSTs could be taught specific skills to improve their ability to understand and attend to others' perspectives and to identify meaningful similarities with their students (Gehlbach et al., 2012, 2016). Therefore, central to this work is scaffolding PSTs' skills

in social perspective-taking and deeply empathizing with students across social identities, while learning to cope with and analyze the feelings of distress, uncertainty, trauma, and fear that authentic care for marginalized students can evoke (Author 1 et al., 2019; Boler & Zemblyas, 2003; Tatum, 1992; Warren, 2018).

At the systemic level, PSTs need opportunities to explore the complicated role of cultural dialogue and everyday schooling practices in reproducing systemic oppression. Many teacher education programs aim to facilitate the development of these critical perspectives through a commitment to social justice. We suggest that questions of gender and gender identity must be incorporated into social foundations social justice curricula, along with more common content included in the US, such as race, ethnicity, and social class. Integrating these perspectives would also allow programs to engage ideas of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), or the ways that different identities relate and position students in different ways within schools, and would scaffold PSTs' complex and nuanced understandings of identity and systemic oppression (Miller, 2016; Rands, 2009). For example, Rands (2009) suggests that teacher education programming must go beyond a "gender blind" approach for trans and gender creative students (p. 425), to promote a "gender-complex education" approach that helps future teachers to be "aware of the ways in which the gender oppression matrix and heterosexism work in tandem to privilege certain groups of people and oppress others and take action to challenge the gender oppression matrix and heterosexism" (p. 426). This approach aims to support PSTs to identify the ways gender is produced and policed in schools and to work through their own resistance towards dismantling the commonsense status of the gender binary. Gender-complex perspectives could be integrated with material often explored in diversity and multicultural teacher education courses and could reinforce critical lessons for future teachers. These courses could also

specifically promote PST perspective taking, empathy, and connection to trans and gender creative students: for example, Author 2 is experimenting with utilizing approaches from *Theater of the Oppressed* (Boal, 2005), utilizing theater exercises to explore and rework scenes of oppression in school, promoting PSTs' understanding of teaching as an embodied practice and their positioning as change agents. These understandings must also be supported as PSTs develop their pedagogy and practice in later methods coursework (Authors, forthcoming; see also Kearns et al., 2017 for an integrated two-year approach and Miller, 2016).

Overall, we view these findings as a call to improve our practice. As teacher educators, we are committed to preparing future teachers who will support the belonging and success of all students, who will fight for justice and equity. Our research suggests that there is great opportunity for teacher education to provide future teachers opportunities to engage issues of gender identity and, ultimately, to improve the educational experiences and trajectories of many trans and gender creative students. As Rojas and Liou (2017) suggest, PSTs need our support to learn to move beyond sympathy to connect to all students:

teacher sympathy should not be limited to feeling sorry for someone's suffering, but rather should present pedagogical moments in which teachers and students are bound to address mechanisms that have long hindered student achievement. A teacher's grounds for sympathy should not be one that sees the deficits in students and their families, but be based on notions of caring, solidarity, reciprocity, and agency cultivated by and for the daily struggles of individuals navigating institutional racism, sexism, classism, and other markers of struggles. It is within these reciprocal ways of working in solidarity that teachers and students uplift each other for a common purpose through education. (Rojas & Liou, 2017, p. 38)

This precarious moment in the US for many trans and gender creative students and their families is the right time for teacher educators to take a stand for justice, and to prepare future teachers to help build strong relationships and compassionate schools that honor the humanity and dignity of all students.

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