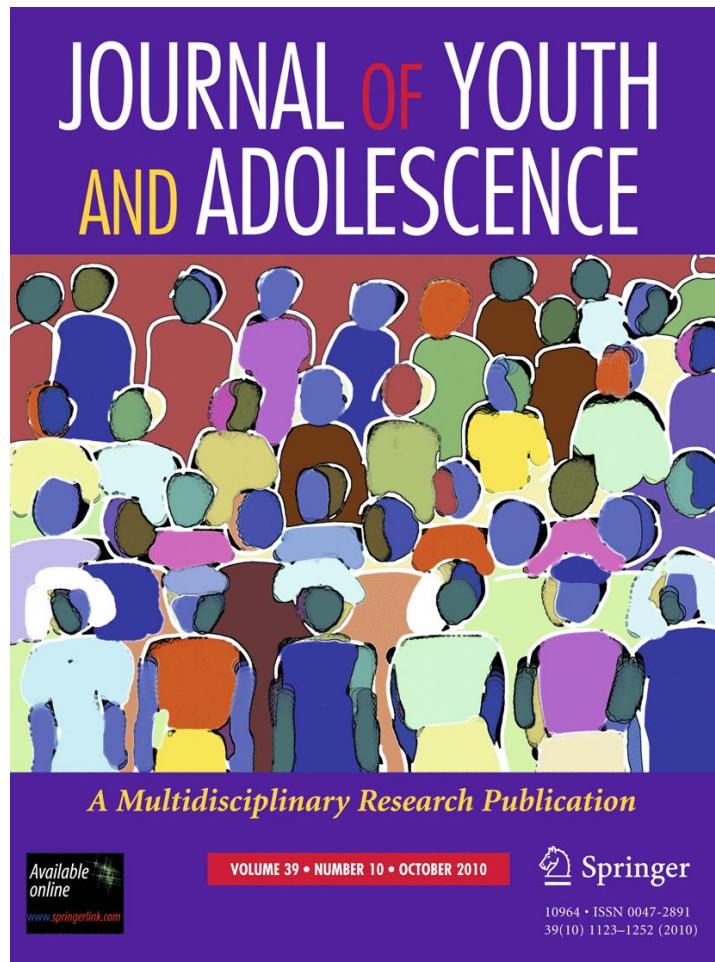


**ISSN 0047-2891, Volume 39, Number 10**



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# School Climate for Transgender Youth: A Mixed Method Investigation of Student Experiences and School Responses

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Received: 31 December 2008 / Accepted: 15 April 2010 / Published online: 29 April 2010  
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**Abstract** Transgender youth experience negative school environments and may not benefit directly from interventions defined to support Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) youth. This study utilized a multi-method approach to consider the issues that transgender students encounter in school environments. Using data from two studies, survey data (total  $n = 2260$ , 68 transgender youth) from study 1 and focus groups ( $n = 35$ ) from study 2, we examine transgender youth's experience of school harassment, school strategies implemented to reduce harassment, the protective role of supportive school personnel, and individual responses to harassment, including dropping out and changing schools. In both studies, we found that school harassment due to transgender identity was pervasive, and this harassment was negatively associated with feelings of safety. When schools took action to reduce harassment, students reported greater connections to school personnel. Those connections were associated with greater feelings of safety. The indirect effects of school strategies to reduce harassment on feelings of safety through connection to adults were also significant. Focus group data illuminate specific processes schools can engage in to benefit youth, and how the youth experience those interventions.

**Keywords** Transgender · School climate · Sexual minority · Harassment

Prior research on transgender youth has documented increased risk for mental health problems (Di Ceglie et al. 2002; Rosenberg 2002; Burgess 1999; Cohen et al. 1997) and, to a lesser extent, increased HIV risk in the form of sexual risk taking behaviors for male to female transgender persons (Garofalo et al. 2006). The cumulative literature suggests that some transgender youth face significantly more mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety and self harming behaviors, and engage in more sexual risk-taking than their gender conforming peers. However, the pathways leading to risk are not clear. It may be that transgender youth experience difficulties that are not associated with their transgender status per se, but stem from stigma, rejection, and victimization by parents, peers, and others. Clinicians suggest that family relationships, community contexts, and the degree of societal acceptance may explain why some transgender youth experience difficulties while others are resilient (Fontaine 2002). Negative experiences with families and parental rejection provide another possible explanation for difficulties faced by transgender youth (Grossman et al. 2005). In this study, we examine school contexts experienced by transgender youth, and contribute to a growing body of literature documenting experiences of harassment at school (Graytak et al. 2009).

Models examining risk and protective factors (Fraser and Terzian 2005) provide a useful framework for considering school climates overall, and may be helpful as a lens to organize the experiences of transgender youth within school settings. The current study seeks to apply a conceptual framework that examines both risk factors and protective factors in school environments as a basis for exploration of the well being of transgender youth. We examined contextual and interpersonal protective factors, such connections to adults at school or participation in a

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Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), and contextual risk factors, such as hearing negative comments about gender identity or presentation from students and school personnel, or experiences of harassment and bullying. We consider the risk and protective factors to be cumulative and examine their combined association with connections to adults and feelings of safety.

### Harassment by Peers and School Personnel

As the need for safe school environments for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth has become more understood, attention has begun to shift to the school experiences of transgender youth. Transgender youth face even more marginalization than their LGB peers, and have less access to remedies because many policies designed to protect LGB individuals do not provide protections based on gender identity or expression. Most studies that document harassment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons have few if any transgender participants, and focus more on the experiences of the LGB participants (Ryan and Rivers 2003). However; several recent studies have documented the pervasive harassment experienced by transgender youth in school environments (Grossman et al. 2009; D'Augelli et al. 2006; Kosciw et al. 2008).

Transgender youth report harassment at higher levels than previous reports among LGB youth. Studies that investigate school climate for transgender youth confirm that transgender youth experience significant harassment ranging from having their sexuality questioned to verbal and physical assault (Grossman and D'Augelli 2006; D'Augelli et al. 2002, 2006). Transgender students report verbal, relational and physical harassment, including being the target of mean rumors and being deliberately excluded. In the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2008 report on school climate, 85% of transgender students reported verbal harassment, 49% experienced physical harassment in school, and 34% reported physical assault (Kosciw et al. 2008). About two-thirds (69%) felt unsafe in school due to their sexual orientation or gender presentation (Graytak et al. 2009). In another study of transgender youth aged 16–21, 96% reported verbal harassment and 83% reported physical harassment (Sausa 2005). Often harassment was reported in unmonitored spaces like hallways, locker rooms and while approaching and leaving the campus (HRW 2001). Transgender students have described being the object of negative attention and hate speech from their peers (Grossman et al. 2009), and that attending school was “the most traumatic aspect of growing up” (Grossman and D'Augelli 2006, p. 122).

Consistently, increased victimization is reported for youth who present with greater gender non-conformity

(D'Augelli et al. 2002, 2006; HRW 2001). One study found that gender atypicality was significantly correlated with levels of victimization in school for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth (D'Augelli et al. 2002), and another extended this finding to describe more mental health problems in response to victimization for gender non-conforming youth (D'Augelli et al. 2006). Among male-to-female (MTF) transgender youth, those who reported gender expression milestones at earlier ages experienced more victimization (Grossman et al. 2006). Often transgender youth are assumed to be gay (Mallon and DeCrescenzo 2006), likely because of the strict heteronormative ideas that are enforced in school. Paired with atypical gender expression and peer assumptions of homosexuality, transgender youth experience conflict and distress on the basis of two stereotypes: one due to homophobia (Quinn 2002) and the other because of cultural ideas regarding gender conformity (HRW 2001; Kosciw et al. 2008). Kosciw et al. (2008) found that transgender youth more often reported harassment based on both gender presentation and sexual orientation together than either factor in isolation.

In several studies, harassment of transgender youth was explained by youth within the context of “passing” and fitting into a gender binary as a transsexual, with little accommodation of fluid gender presentations. This interpretation suggests that transsexual youth experience less harassment when they conform to their new gender and remain closeted about their identity. In one study, a transgender student brought up the issue of “passing” and living full time in the new gender, suggesting that if one dressed as a female then people would “think of you as a female, but if you give them reason to think of something else then it is your own fault,” (Grossman et al. 2009). An earlier study reported a very similar finding of transsexual youth indicating that they could not let anyone know, and had to “pass” in the new gender (HRW 2001). While on the surface these comments describe efforts among transsexual youth to protect their own safety, they reveal an internalized belief system about binary gender expressions, and a concerning rejection of fluidity of presentation that does little to protect the diverse presentations included under the umbrella term “transgender.”

Evidence suggests that transgender youth also face difficulties at school from school employees (Kosciw et al. 2008; Kosciw and Diaz 2005; Grossman and D'Augelli 2006). In one study, researchers found that school professionals contributed to transgender youths' distress by using students' given [birth gender] names rather than their preferred [identified gender] names (Grossman and D'Augelli 2006). Sausa (2005), found that transgender students reported problems associated with teacher harassment, including being “coached” to act like one's birth gender, being told that “they bring the harassment on

themselves," and being subjected to sexualized verbal and physical actions (sexual assault, clothing checks, sexual comments and sexualized gestures). Other studies corroborate those findings with reports from transgender students of sexually harassing comments and gestures from teachers (Grossman and D'Augelli 2006), and being mocked or called names by the teacher (Grossman et al. 2009). One intervention study found improved reactions to LGBT students by school administrators after receiving an intervention (Quinn 2002) suggesting that sexual orientation and gender identity training for teachers and school personnel could help to reduce harassment of LGBT youth by empowering school personnel.

### Protective Contextual Factors in School Environments

A variety of studies on LGB youth have identified protective contextual factors that should prove promising for transgender youth as well (Grossman et al. 2009; Russell et al. 2008; O'Shaughnessy et al. 2004; Sausa 2005; McKinney 2005; Grossman and D'Augelli 2006). Potential strategies include intervention by school personnel when harassment occurs, presence of policies prohibiting discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity or presentation, presence of a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) or other LGBT student groups, availability of information regarding LGBT issues at school, and inclusion of LGBT issues in the school curricula. When teachers intervene in LGBT-motivated harassment there are fewer reports of harassment (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2004) and students feel safer (Russell et al. 2008). However, Sausa (2005) found that teachers infrequently intervened in harassment, ignored requests for help, and established non-equivalent disciplinary practices when physical fights occurred. When concerns were raised with school personnel, the students were often met with ignorance, teacher unwillingness to take action, or teachers who blamed the victim (Sausa 2005; Kosciw et al. 2008). Grossman et al.'s (2009) study described the lack of intervention by school personnel as contributing to an inability to effect change.

Factors that are protective for LGB youth may or may not be protective for transgender youth. Grossman and D'Augelli (2006) found that transgender focus group participants (age 15–21) had even less access to information about transgender issues or persons in school than LGB issues or persons. Transgender students in Sausa's (2005) study suggested a variety of strategies to increase comfort specifically for transgender youth, including gender neutral bathrooms, accommodation of gender identity in dances, sports, physical education, locker room environments, and acknowledgement of name and pronoun preferences by

faculty and on school records and identification. As the issues of safety for transgender students in school become more visible, it is important that policy makers and school administrators work towards developing trans-affirming systems (Mallon and DeCrescenzo 2006). The specific role that supportive adult relationships at school can play in promoting the safety and well being of transgender youth is not well known. However, early studies have found that positive teacher relationships can help to mitigate school problems for LGB youth (Russell et al. 2001), or provide support for completing school (Sausa 2005). Students have identified the need for mentors and supportive teachers in the context of well being for sexual minority youth (Grossman et al. 2009).

### Well-being and Response to Harassment

Links of social climate indicators to well being specifically for transgender youth are limited in the literature. Individual students have reported varied responses to harassment at school. Transgender youth risk rejection and negativity at home based on their gender nonconformity (Grossman et al. 2005), and may be less likely to seek support from their parents if school harassment occurs. Aggression in response to victimization is also a well documented social phenomena that has been extended to sexual minority youth (Russell et al. 2001), but not transgender youth. Transgender youth have reported transferring to more accepting public or even alternative schools known to have better environments for LGBT youth (Grossman and D'Augelli 2006). Transgender youth are also at risk for academic difficulties, school absence due to harassment (Rosenberg 2002), and dropping out (Sausa 2005; Burgess 1999; Grossman and D'Augelli 2006). Transgender youth who experienced higher levels of harassment reported missing more school due to safety concerns, lower grade point averages, and fewer plans to attend college than transgender youth who experienced less harassment (Graytak et al. 2009).

### The Current Study

The current study addresses the following research questions. What are the experiences of transgender youth in school environments, and how do they compare to other students? How are contextual and interpersonal risk and protective factors associated with feelings of safety and well-being for transgender youth? To do this, we examined transgender youth in two contexts: First using survey data collected at middle and high schools, and second with focus groups conducted in community centers that

provided support groups for transgender youth. The two studies provide complementary approaches to understanding the role of school climates in promoting well being for transgender youth.

## Study 1: Method

### Sample

The first study uses data from the *Preventing School Harassment* (PSH) survey, which included 2,560 middle and high school students in the state of California. The survey was available in both paper and online formats at the end of each school year for three consecutive years (2003–2005). The target population of the study included lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and their heterosexual allies (Russell et al. 2008). Students were recruited through affiliations with GSA clubs in high schools throughout California, although some clubs in other states participated as well. Paper surveys were administered by GSA members during club times, or students were directed to an online survey tool. There were no differences between students who took the survey online or in paper. The analytic sample is limited to the 2,260 respondents with complete data on key study variables. About one-third (34%) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer, and 50% reported ethnic minority status. Participants were students in 6th to 12th grades ( $M = 10.52$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ). The PSH survey included 68 participants who self-identified as transgender, queer, or questioning on a survey item about their gender identity, and had complete data on each of the three manifest variables used for the data analyses (2,192 self-identified as male or female). Human subject's approval was obtained through the University of Arizona Institutional Review Board.

### Measures

#### Contextual Risk Factors

Questions about school-based harassment included: "How often do you hear other students make negative comments or use slurs based on gender identity or expression (not being 'masculine' enough, or not being 'feminine' enough, or being transgender)?" (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often;  $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = .96$ ), and "How often do you hear teachers or school staff make negative comments or use slurs based on gender identity or expression (not being 'masculine' enough, or not being 'feminine' enough, or being transgender)?" (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often;  $M = 1.48$ ,  $SD = .74$ ).

#### Contextual Protective Factors

Five strategies to improve school climates for LGBT students were assessed. One item assessed prevalence of teacher intervention in bias-motivated harassment: "How often do you hear teachers or school staff stop others from making negative comments or using slurs based on gender identity or expression (not being 'masculine' enough, or not being 'feminine' enough, or being transgender)?" (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often;  $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ). To determine presence of a policy, students were asked: "Does your school have a harassment policy that specifically includes sexual orientation?" (0 = No/I Don't Know, 1 = Yes [47%]). Availability of information and school support was assessed through the question: "If you wanted information and support from your school about sexual orientation, gender identity, or LGBTQ issues would you know where to go?" (0 = No/I Don't Know, 1 = Yes [66%]). Inclusion of LGBT issues in the curricula was determined through one question: "In your classes at school, have you ever learned about LGBTQ people, discussed LGBTQ history or current events, or received information about sexual orientation and gender identity?" (0 = No/I Don't Know, 1 = Yes [50%]). Finally, participation in a GSA was assessed with a combination of two items: "Does your school have a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or similar club?" (0 = No/I Don't Know, 1 = Yes [81%]); and "If yes, are you a member of the Gay-Straight Alliance or similar club?" (0 = No/School Doesn't Have GSA, 1 = Yes [39% of the total sample]).

For the regression models with only transgender students ( $n = 68$ ), we computed a count score (based on a cumulative approach model) such that participants received one point for each of the strategies they reported. Students only received a point for a GSA if they were in the GSA because most of the transgender students were from schools with a GSA. Teacher intervention was dichotomized with "Never" or "Rarely" = 0, and "Sometimes" or "Often" = 1. Cumulative scores ranged from 0–5 ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ). We decided to use a count because each strategy is not highly correlated with the other strategies, which makes a scale score less meaningful, but each strategy should ultimately provide some incremental benefit to the overall construct of positive school climate. Further, given the small sample of transgender youth, we needed a way to combine the contextual protective factors without the drain on statistical power of including each of the variables individually. We considered contextual protective factors using a cumulative approach (i.e. more is better), rather than independently examining a variety of contextual factors based on the literature about cumulative risk and protection in other populations.

*Interpersonal Protective Factors*

Students reflected on their relationships with teachers to determine the degree to which each participant felt connected to at least one adult at school. The four items that assessed student–teacher relationship quality included: “At my school, there is a teacher or some other adult... (1) who really cares about me, (2) who listens to me when I have something to say, (3) who notices when I’m not there, and (4) who makes sure that everyone is treated fairly and with respect.” Responses were coded on a 1–4 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = strongly agree) and averaged to create a single scale ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = .68$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Safety*

One item assessed school safety: “I feel safe at my school” (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = strongly agree;  $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = .77$ ). Safety of gender nonconforming peers was assessed by combining two questions, “My school is safe for guys who are not as ‘masculine’ as other guys” and “My school is safe for girls who are not as ‘feminine’ as other girls” (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = strongly agree;  $r = .69$ ,  $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = .72$ ). Personal safety and perceived safety of gender non-conforming peers were averaged to compute a single manifest indicator of perceived safety. The correlation between these two types of safety was ( $r = .52$ ).

*Plan of Analysis*

We begin with a series of comparisons between transgender and non-transgender youth on each of the study measures. We then assessed bivariate correlations between cumulative risk and protective factors, and feelings of safety for transgender students. We next examined risk and protective factors as simultaneous predictors of perceived safety, and finally specifically tested an indirect pathway from contextual protective factors to perceived safety, via connections to adults among transgender youth. All analyses are interpreted with a significance level of  $p < .05$ , for a two tailed test. This is a standard significance level and appropriate to the sample size and number of variables.

**Study 1: Results**

Comparisons of transgender students and non-transgender students on each of the study variables are presented in Table 1. There were no differences between males and females in this sample, so they were combined for the comparisons to transgender students. Similar to other studies (Graytak, et al. 2009), we found that negative comments based on gender presentation are common: 60% of the full sample and 82% of transgender students report hearing negative comments based on gender presentation from students “sometimes or often.” Additionally, teacher or staff intervention is uncommon: 45% of students in the full sample and only 25% of transgender students report teacher intervention. Transgender youth are as likely to

**Table 1** Experiences at school for transgender and non-transgender students

	Transgender (n = 59)	Non-transgender (n = 2201)	Significance
Students make negative comments	3.29	2.90	$t(2258) = -3.08^{**}$
Teachers make negative comments	1.98	1.46	$t(59.48)^a = -3.74^{***}$
Connection to an adult at school	3.11	3.07	$t(2258) = -.37$
Teachers stop comments	1.98	2.36	$t(2258) = 2.80^{**}$
School has a policy	.44	.47	$t(2258) = .49$
Know where to get info	.66	.66	$t(2258) = .02$
LGBT issues in the curriculum	.35	.50	$t(61.38)^a = 2.36^*$
School has GSA	.88	.81	$t(62.56)^a = -1.62$
I am in GSA	.46	.49	$t(61.58)^a = 5.44^{***}$
School is safe for gender nonconforming students	2.53	2.73	$t(2258) = 2.08^*$
I feel safe at school	2.47	2.94	$t(60.22)^a = 3.89^{***}$

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ <sup>a</sup> Degrees of freedom are smaller when equal variances are not assumed across groups

**Table 2** Risk and protective factors correlated with safety among transgender youth

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Students make negative comments	1				
2. Teachers make negative comments	.282*	1			
3. Connection to an adult at school	−.062	−.243*	1		
4. Protective school factors	−.217	−.131	.333**	1	
5. Perceived safety	−.357**	−.329**	.366**	.246*	1

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Listwise  $N = 67$

hear negative comments by school personnel (31% say sometimes or often) as to hear school personnel stop other youth from making negative comments (25% say sometimes or often).

Bivariate correlations among protective school factors, attachment to adults, negative comments by school personnel and students, and perceived safety are presented in Table 2. At the bivariate level, each of the risk and protective factors were associated with perceived safety in the anticipated direction. In addition, connection to adults was positively correlated with school protective factors, and negatively correlated with negative comments from school personnel.

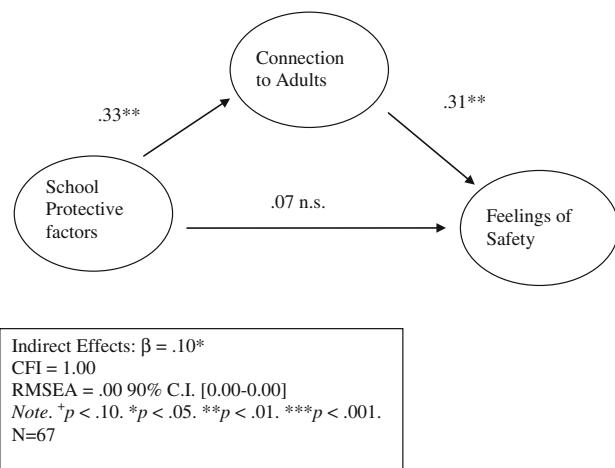
We examined associations between risk and protective factors and perceived safety. We were particularly interested in the associations between protective school factors and perceived safety once other risk and protective factors were accounted for (see Table 3). The protective school factors represent characteristics of schools that have been shown in the larger sample to be associated with greater perceived safety for sexual minority youth. We were interested to see the strength of the association specifically with regard to gender presentation among transgender youth in this sample. School protective factors were significant predictors of safety on step 1, consistent with the bivariate correlation, but became non-significant as soon as negative comments and connections to adults were added into the model. Additionally, negative comments from school personnel were non-significant when connections to

**Table 3** Risk and protective factors predicting safety among transgender youth

	Step 1 $\beta$	Step 2 $\beta$
Protective school factors	.24*	.06
Students make negative comments		−.28*
Teachers make negative comments		−.17
Connection to an adult at school		.29*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Listwise  $N = 67$

**Fig. 1** Feelings of safety and attachment to adults as a function of school safety strategies (standardized coefficients)

adults were included in the model, likely due to the correlation between those two variables.

In order to examine associations simultaneously, including a specific test of indirect effects, we tested the structural paths among three manifest variables using MPLUS software. The small sample size of transgender youth ( $n = 67$ ) made it difficult to examine the multiple constructs as latent variables, which precluded estimates of model fit because all of the variables were manifest. However, this strategy can yield an estimate of the indirect pathway from school protective factors to perceived safety via connections to adults. School strategies were indirectly ( $\beta = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ) associated with transgender students' feelings of safety via connections to adults (see Fig. 1).

## Study 2: Method

### Procedures

The data were collected collaboratively with four community resource centers that provide services to LGBT youth in Western United States cities. Currently, few

community centers around the country provide services tailored specifically for youth (age 13–23) who identify as transgender. Centers that already provided support groups specifically geared to transgender youth were targeted for this data collection. An internet search in preparation for data collection revealed four LGBT focused community centers in the Western US that listed a regular support group for transgender youth on their respective websites.

The agencies recruited persons for one group per center. Incentives for youth included snacks and cash payment of \$10.00. The focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed by an independent transcriber and were verified by the principal investigator. Each focus group lasted 1.5 to 2 h depending on the depth of responses from participants. All procedures were anonymous to protect the identities of the participants. Parental consent was not required based on concerns that disclosure of transgender identity to parents could put participants at risk for violence or parental rejection. The University of Arizona Human Subjects Protection Program review committee approved the study protocol.

The focus groups started with a series of questions about LGBT youth community centers and how they could best support transgender youth. Questions specific to school climates asked participants to describe their school climates with a focus on safety for gender non-conforming youth. They were asked if they were “out” at school, and what difference that made to their experiences. Finally, they were asked to make recommendations to improve school safety for transgender youth. These were the only formal standard questions, although group leaders did probe if participant responses were short, seemed not to fully address the question, or revealed a relevant experience or topic. Questions did not specify experiences on school property, versus near the school or on the way to or from school. However most of the discussion was about time spent *at* school, and as such discussions of places like bus stops or nearby contexts were missing even though some research indicates these contexts can be the site of considerable victimization (HRW 2001).

## Participants

Four focus groups were conducted with 3–16 participants per group, for a total of 36 youth participants. The participants ranged in age from 12–23. Participants were ethnically diverse: 61% identified as African-American, 16% Latino, 14% white, and 9% mixed ethnicity. Participants that identified as female to male (FTM) made up 78% of the groups; 22% reported male to female (MTF) gender identity. The participants were heterogeneous in terms of transgender identity and transition status (i.e., not all participants labeled themselves as transsexual or were in the process of a medical transition). Participants varied in

gender presentation. Some presented as fairly gender typical to their birth gender, some presented as fairly gender typical to the new gender, and many presented as gender atypical. Given the broad range of gender presentations and the study topic of school climate, participants had a wide range of interpretations and experiences with gender presentation and the school environment.

## Plan of Analyses

Transcripts of the focus groups were analyzed using qualitative data interpretation techniques. Two independent coders developed and then came to consensus on the major themes of the groups. The group transcripts were broken into idea segments, with each segment of discourse representing one of the themes (Krueger and Casey 2000). Within each theme, the independent coders generated a list of meaningful subtopics and then came to consensus about the number and content of these subtopics. The segments were coded by both raters to determine the relative prevalence of each of the primary ideas. In the case of discrepancies, consensus was reached. For each thematic segment, representative quotations and interpretation describe the content of that segment.

## Study 2: Results

Participants discussed school experiences with other students and with school personnel, school policies, queer oriented activities, and alternatives to the mainstream school environment. There was near universal agreement that schools could be an unsafe place for transgender and gender non-conforming youth. Across the groups, experiences with school personnel were varied; with some students reporting harassment or apathy from teachers and administrators, while others found important allies among the adults at school. Efforts at school interventions such as policies, Gay Straight Alliances, and responsiveness to harassment were discussed with mixed appraisals from participants. Finally, in all groups there were some youth who had separated themselves from traditional schooling environments by attending charter schools or opting for a general equivalency diploma (GED). Participants generally attributed these transitions to concerns about safety or difficulty fitting into traditional schools.

### Contextual Risk Factors

#### *Harassment by Peers*

In all four focus groups participants expressed a belief that schools were a place of considerable harassment and

victimization for gender nonconforming and transgender youth. Reports of physical violence were common with descriptions of gender nonconforming youth (both masculine females and feminine males) being “pushed around,” “getting the crap beat out of them,” and “getting their asses kicked,” by other students. Verbal harassment and “teasing” were also common. Peer rejection was another major theme. One participant reported, “I had some nasty people who were like ‘Eww, that’s gross.’” It is possible that harassment served the function of reigning in or policing the gender nonconformity of youth. One youth described the motives of the harassers: “they would do anything they can to take them out, to make them think that you... shouldn’t be doing that.”

Even youth who were post-transition and were living completely in their new gender had significant fears that their identities would be discovered, and their safety threatened. One person voiced this fear, reflecting on concerns that a peer from pre-transition may enter the post-transition environment:

If they ever like changed in school, changed to the gender they want to be. Like, if any of the other kids from their previous school came to the new school that they were at too. They should get a note, or someone should tell them that somebody from the old school ... is coming over here....

This FTM young person was post-transition and lived completely as male with very few people at school aware of his transgender status yet lived with a constant knowledge that his status could be discovered and his safety would be jeopardized.

There appeared to be an attribution bias on the part of participants that was difficult to interpret. Descriptions of harassment and violence often were not those that were personally experienced by the participants. In fact, several of the participants described negative climates in general, but explained that their own experiences did not include harassment, or included harassment that was of little consequence, or “not that bad.” It is unclear if participants believed that other youth experienced more harassment and violence than they themselves did. Some of the comments would suggest such an interpretation like the following comment by an FTM who presented through high school as a butch lesbian: “I don’t know. I never had a problem with it. Like some of the other dykes that were in school are femmes that had problems. But I never had any problems.” Witnessing more harassment than one personally experiences could be a by product of the largely (78%) female to male sample. Other studies have found that gender nonconforming females experience less harassment than gender non-conforming males (D’Augelli et al. 2006). Because most of the youth presented at one point as gender non-

conforming females, they may have experienced less harassment than they witnessed towards their gender nonconforming male peers.

An equally plausible interpretation suggests a bias on the part of participants that harassment against themselves is less important than harassment against others. A bias of this nature indicates a deeper concern that transgender youth have come to accept the harassment they encounter on some level. The following two quotes represent examples of ways that participants down-played the amount or importance of harassment experiences at school. In the following quotation, a participant downplays the *amount of harassment*:

So I didn’t have to like deal with like any of the crap that they would...that would come out of their mouths towards me or anything. Like I would always get called dyke, or whatever, like some kind of name at least once...once a week. I mean it wasn’t that bad.

Another FTM downplayed the *importance* of harassment:

There were problems with the boys, you know guys...the girls were just like, whatever. But the guys, they were all like, trying to intimidate me. You know, kind of like, you know if you wanted to step up to that plate of being a man and like performing that role, you have to be an asshole kind of thing. But that’s not really what I’m...like. It wasn’t that big of a deal for me in school.

The underlying motivation for downplaying harassment to self is unclear. What is clear is that participants interpreted their own experiences differently than those of their peers. This tendency could contribute to a significant concern that transgender youth may shy away from seeking help to abate harassment in order to conceal their transgender identity. However, as all of the youth in the focus groups were participants in a regular support group, it could be that the tendency to downplay harassment reflects efforts to manage stigma that were learned from social support structures.

#### *Harassment by School Personnel*

Although there was consensus across all of the groups that schools were places of considerable harassment and risk of abuse from students, only a few participants voiced experiences of discrimination or harassment by teachers. Nevertheless, one FTM participant explained, “I actually had a teacher who wouldn’t let me do a lot of stuff because [of being] queer.” Another MTF participant voiced a similar concern “I had to have my momma come up there, and had to have my momma talk to her [the teacher] because she really had something against me.”

## Contextual Protective Factors

### *School Personnel Intervention in Harassment*

Participants were optimistic about the role that teachers could play in improving school climates. Youth believed that if teachers would intervene more, school climates would improve. One person remarked: “[teachers] should actually speak up, because I’ve been in a lot of classrooms where stuff is said, and the teachers don’t do [anything]. And if they did, it would stop right there if the teacher actually did something.” However, examples of teacher intervention were rare: most groups reported little to no intervention by teachers. The following example illustrates how teacher intervention was not easily identified by students. This excerpt was the response to a *second* prompt that asked specifically how teachers reacted when students were harassed.

Moderator (M): So, I didn’t hear a single person say that a teacher intervened. Is that true?

Participant (P): They break it up after a while. They feel they don’t even get paid enough. They don’t want to get hit in the process.

P<sub>2</sub>: I had a teacher, she was different though. She was like aware. She didn’t play that...she didn’t tolerate none of that. And like if she ever saw fighting or anything, or whatever, people calling people a name she wouldn’t have it. But that was rare... That’s the only one that ever...like that one teacher. You know.

### *GSAs/Student Activities*

Many youth reported participating in Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) or other such queer oriented groups. One youth noted:

There’s a lot of different groups and things that you can do with being queer and be able to identify the safe places. Like there are teachers that are more gender identified and available for people in that... that group.

Several participants voiced a desire for more queer oriented activity time: “...something different where they can actually go out and play sports and do all this without the straight people bothering them.” Participants seemed to believe that the presence of GSAs at schools improved school climates. One youth described a high school that had a GSA, and the alternative high school that was located immediately across the street: “they have an amazing GSA.” Some participants who went to schools that did not have GSAs actively wished that there had been a GSA when they were in school. One youth explained: “I didn’t

hear a lot about a GSA being there. I wish they would have had one at the time. I didn’t know about it, no one told me about it.” Queer oriented spaces were valued among these youth for the safe location they provided, and the context to explore ones identity.

### *Connection to Adults*

In most groups, at least one youth described the important contributions of a single person who advocated for them. In one group a representative from the school district independently counseled transgender youth (among other minorities) to help them find the most appropriate school placements, and to help those schools best accommodate transgender youth. Every participant in that group had consulted directly with the school district advocate. One participant described part of her role:

And if you call ..., she will help you find a more match fitting school.... She works with the Public Schools, and um, she basically gets any youth who doesn’t like their... school, she talks to them and tries to find out, okay, try this one.

The previous quote highlights the importance of advocates at the district level to support the specific needs of transgender youth. District level advocates for youth with other sorts of special needs (e.g. physical or learning accommodations) are fairly common, however the services of these advocates are typically either not available to transgender youth, or are not known about by transgender youth.

In another group, two young people who were in the process of transitioning described the important roles that school personnel (e.g. principals, nurses, and instructors) played in helping to keep them safe and able to navigate the school environment. In many cases these supports were pragmatic such as being allowed to use private bathrooms. One participant described: “If they ask where I’m going, I just say the nurse’s bathroom; because I go to the nurse’s bathroom in the new school.” For a couple of youth, principals helped to keep students’ prior gender unknown to teachers and other students by making sure that names were changed in official databases so that even teachers and other administrators would not see participants’ legal (birth gender) names. Nurses and some teachers were described as allies in helping to meet physical needs, such as avoiding showers or public changing in physical education class. One youth noted:

The instructional supervisor was cool with it, so, ... I just sort of did my own thing. ... I got in some trouble for changing in the closet, because they’d always be like, “Where are you going, the locker room is here.”

In each case, individuals felt that without the effort of this single person their own safety would be compromised. The pragmatic support of being allowed to use private dressing rooms and bathrooms allowed youth easier ways to navigate contexts that can be difficult for gender non-conforming youth. The impact of this access to private spaces and relationships allowed youth to give the excuse of going to an administrator or teacher as a way to navigate sensitive potentially revealing circumstances. Implicit in these youth's explanations was a trust that the school personnel would not question, embarrass, or "out" them in front of peers.

### *Systemic Actions*

Participants suggested a variety of strategies and steps schools and other entities could take to improve the school climate for transgender youth. Several youth suggested trainings and requirements that teachers intervene when harassment occurs. A participant suggested, "I know that all schools have in-service days for the teachers, to get training... GLBT issues should be mandatory training that they have to go to."

One student was sensitive to the external policy issues that can affect the safety of a transgender minor:

The thing about changing your name is they announced it on the newspaper and stuff, they put like a little column on it. I don't know what for or why, I think there should be like, something against that, announcing that you're changing your name to a new one.

This student discussed publication of name changes in the context of concerns about disclosure of the identity of already transitioned transsexuals. When this student changed his name from a female name to a male name it was published in the newspaper without his consent, despite the fact that he was under 18 years old at the time.

Across the groups, some youth were very knowledgeable about systemic factors in communities or states that could help protect the safety of students. In two groups, youth described statewide safe schools coalitions, and the roles that they can and should play in promoting intervention by teachers and staff. When asked how schools could better access the resources of statewide coalitions, one participant responded: "Unfortunately, I think it's the other way around. Safe Schools Coalition has to say we're here, we're queer look us up." From this person's perspective, schools may not have the capacity or willingness to step forward and proactively address school climate issues, and need proactive support from external organizations.

### Well Being and Responses to Harassment

#### *Personal Demeanor at School*

Youth discussed strategies they or others had employed to deflect or avoid harassment on campus. In some groups, some participants took on the responsibility for deflecting harassment and seemed to blame other youth who were harassed. Two common personal approaches to avoid harassment included aggression and social capital.

There were youth in every group that expressed a belief that aggression was a reasonable strategy to respond to or prevent harassment, yet this strategy was not the consensus among youth. Nevertheless, for some, efforts to obtain adult intervention had failed or were not tried due to a belief that the adults would be unsupportive. In such cases, aggression seemed to be the only logical response for some youth. One participant said, "I've never had any problems because I was always one of those kids that were with the cool kids that beat up everybody else. So...no I was too busy bothering everybody else." Another youth recounted, "I had to stab someone in the neck with a pencil to get them to leave me alone."

Others argued that the individual played a role in deflecting harassment, or that personal characteristics that may be independent of gender presentation such as humor or economic status may play a greater role in predicting harassment than gender presentation alone.

P<sub>1</sub>: It depends upon how you carried yourself. I've been out at my school...but it was just like, I got along with everybody. There was another gay person up there that didn't nobody like.

P<sub>3</sub>: It depends upon that individual. It depends upon that school. It's like how you carry yourself and all that.

M: What do you mean by how you carry yourself?

P<sub>3</sub>: If you carry yourself like real strong minded. Like I went through all four years, I was a cheerleader. I didn't have no shit. So...

P<sub>4</sub>: To be a comedian. Me having the ability to make people laugh, got me over.

In another group, a participant mused, "Because I think, depending on your economic class, the way you interact with other people changes a little. And they just didn't cause trouble. If they didn't like you, they just didn't talk to you."

The interpretation of these sorts of comments can be complex because on the one hand they have an air of "blaming the victim," but on the other hand they reveal remarkable resiliency among youth to develop strategies that help them to succeed in spite of significant ostracism. For the most part, comments such as these came from

youth who described environments with few or no social supports for transgender persons.

### *Transferring Schools*

Almost all of the youth voiced difficulties functioning in traditional school environments. Participants believed that alternative schools were better able to create comfortable and secure environments for queer youth, and many of the youth reported multiple school transitions, including charter and alternative schools. Two representative reflections are provided below:

Then I dropped out when I was 18. I cut my hair off and started calling myself [a male name] and was at [an alternative school]. And that was perfectly fine, they didn't care. They called me [the male name], even though my girl name was on everything.

Another participant reported that fellow students “keep teasing me about it ‘n stuff, so I finally decided to change [schools] and I don’t get teased anymore.” Both of these participants, like many others, experienced so much harassment or difficulty in a traditional school environment that they transferred to other schools, often alternative or charter schools. Participants in other groups described the value of non-traditional school environments: “It’s way more diverse in thinking because...and a little more accepting, because of the people that are...like other queer youth, and homeless youth and kids that have places to go and jobs and stuff.” Another said:

A majority of the students were out queer...and the teacher was out and queer. ... [It was a] really good, solid, half a year. It was a good experience to end it off after like many years of bad years and dropping out.

Participants defined their educational options as outside of mainstream culture: youth seemed to feel safer in alternative environments. The value of these environments was in their acceptance of queer youth and gender non-conformity. It is noteworthy that there was no discussion of how choosing alternative environments may limit youth’s options academically or in extra-curricular activities.

### **Discussion**

It is important to understand school experiences for sexual minority youth as a way to improve school climates (Russell and McGuire 2008). Transgender youth, in particular, may have a variety of unique experiences and needs in school environments (Graytak et al. 2009). The current studies contribute to the literature about transgender youth in several important ways. Both studies extended prior research

findings that transgender students experience considerable harassment (Sausa 2005; Kosciw et al. 2008; Graytak et al. 2009), and that previously identified risk and protective factors (Goodenow et al. 2006; Russell and McGuire 2008) were associated with feelings of safety in the expected directions. The first study was able to examine the cumulative impact of multiple protective contextual factors. Both studies extend prior findings about the importance of connections to adults at school (Grossman and D’Augelli 2006; Grossman et al. 2009). The second study was able to provide reflection and context to the other findings via students’ descriptions of their personal experiences. While there are important limitations to these studies, they nonetheless contribute to our understanding of school climates for transgender youth.

### **Implications of Current Findings**

#### *Impacts of Student Harassment*

Consistent with other studies (Sausa 2005; Kosciw et al. 2008; Graytak et al. 2009), we found that harassment of transgender youth was pervasive in schools, with about 80% of transgender survey participants hearing negative comments “sometimes or often.” Participants in Study 1 were as likely to have experienced negative comments by teachers as teacher intervention to stop negative comments by other students. We found in both studies that transgender youth experienced physical and psychological distress as a result of harassment, including reduced feelings of safety and fear of physical violence. In the focus groups, youth described their varied responses to this fear, including transferring schools (sometimes numerous times), dropping out, and avoiding school. Some youth reported becoming aggressive in order to stop the harassment. The physical and psychological distress we found is consistent with studies of school safety for LGB youth (Russell et al. 2001a, b).

For many [non queer] young people, decisions about schooling are based on considerations of academic rigor, opportunity for extra-curricular activities, or proximity to home. The youth in these groups were making school decisions based on the acceptability and safety of the school environment for queer youth. In effect, access to schools that may provide certain resources (e.g. AP classes, marching band) was not available to many youth in the groups because of the unsafe climates in those mainstream schools. The long term implications of a pattern of transferring schools among transgender youth are not well known, but worthy of further study. Additionally, the motivation of transgender students to participate in broader, more mainstream school activities has not been studied. After school activities provide an important social and developmental context in schools, but it is not known

how those contexts may or may not support and benefit transgender students. Finally, the financial and social implication of a segment of the population missing considerable amounts of school, and not achieving academically to the level they might have otherwise, is not well known. Future studies should incorporate interventions to improve climates, with an eye for the long term implications of negative school environments via reduced academic achievement, low attendance and poor graduation rates among transgender youth.

The importance of GSAs for queer youth has been found in other studies (Goodenow et al. 2006), but most studies do not specifically focus on GSA as an important tool for transgender youth. In these studies, we found that many of the students had access to a GSA or other group at their schools. However, only about half of the survey respondents reported that they were members of the GSA. The value of a GSA on campus, while established as a benefit for queer climates overall, may be variable in its benefit for transgender youth based on how transgender friendly the GSA is. We do not know why so many survey respondents were not participating in the GSA. The focus group participants were motivated by a positive GSA, and in some cases transferred schools in order to have access to a better GSA. Leadership development among GSA advisors and peer leaders could focus on ways to specifically support transgender students as a means to improve participation and school experiences for transgender students.

#### *School, District, and State Policies*

In both studies, we found important associations between the actions schools take and the well being of transgender youth. The focus group participants were able to articulate the specific nature of policies and their potential influences. In the survey data, we found an indirect relationship from combined school strategies to feelings of safety. Many students in the groups were sensitive to the policies that did or did not support their safety, and were able to make productive suggestions for policy change. This finding suggests that the inclusion of transgender youth in school climate policy making bodies such as school district committees could yield useful contributions to improve policy.

Comments from participants also suggest that district level efforts to train existing advocates on issues of gender identity and to publicize the availability of those advocates to young people could go a long way to improve the status of individual students as they move through schools. Findings such as this make clear the importance of state-wide or regional coalitions that seek to improve climates for transgender youth. It may be that schools will be more likely to take action when they are supported (or even challenged) by an external coalition.

#### *Relationships with School Personnel*

Participants desired for teachers to intervene and stop harassment, despite the fact that such support from teachers was rare. Findings from studies of sexual minority youth have found that at the school level, teacher intervention to stop harassment was associated with greater feelings of safety for all students, even those not personally harassed (Russell and McGuire 2008). Concerns about safety and security were pervasive in the discussions about school climate, but teachers were experienced as indifferent to the harassment and threats of transgender youth, even though participants believed that they had the power to enhance their safety. Currently, little is understood about why teachers choose to intervene or not in student harassment. Existing studies (Grossman and D'Augelli 2006; Grossman et al. 2009) focus on student experiences and interpretations of teacher harassment and non-intervention (e.g. teachers are apathetic, blame the victim, or don't feel safe). Until we better understand why teachers do not intervene, it is impossible to fully support them in changing this pattern. Further study examining teacher motivations to intervene or not could establish parameters for how best to support teachers in improved intervention.

In some cases, participants reported here as in other studies (Sausa 2005; Kosciw et al. 2008; Grossman and D'Augelli 2006) that school personnel actually contributed to the harassment of transgender students. These experiences, though rare, are particularly concerning because they represent harassment or discrimination at the hands of authority rather than from peers. When teachers engage in harassment of students, they send a clear message to transgender youth that they will not reduce the harassment of other students, and they model to other students that harassment is acceptable. Thus, elimination of harassment by teachers should be among the highest priorities of schools.

Third, we document the important ways that schools can improve climates for transgender youth. In Study 1, we found that when teachers intervene to stop harassment, when schools provide information about LGBT issues, and when classes address LGBT issues in the curricula, transgender students feel safer and report a safer environment for their gender nonconforming peers. These findings were echoed in the focus groups when students reflected on the power of teacher intervention, the importance of having a GSA in school, and the value of school policies. Clearly the current state of harassment for transgender youth is subject to the policies and strategies implemented by schools and can be improved with effort and intervention. Our findings of the value of school interventions for transgender youth are consistent with prior studies of school interventions for LGB youth (Russell and McGuire 2008; Ryan and Rivers 2003).

Finally, consistent with past research on same-sex attracted youth and academic well-being (Russell et al. 2001), we specifically document the value of attachment to adults at school for transgender youth. We find that being attached to an adult at school was associated with feelings of safety. Trust of school personnel is an important factor for academic success among students in general, and we found this to be true among the transgender youth in our study as well. The focus group participants explained issues of trust eloquently in describing the actions of principals, teachers and nurses who offered refuge and safe spaces in the form of private bathrooms, secrecy about students' legal names, freedom from exposing locker room environments and advising in other academic matters. These sorts of supports are likely especially important for transgender youth who face considerable safety concerns if forced into vulnerable situations.

#### Strengths and Limitations of the Current Studies

A major strength of this study is the way that the qualitative and quantitative findings converge on a primary message, that school environments are unsafe for transgender youth, and that school efforts to promote safe environments can help. The value of trusting adult relationships was supported in both studies as well, and helps to illuminate processes that schools can utilize in making their environments more welcoming and safe.

The youth in both studies came from specific environments which could mean that their experiences may not be representative of transgender youth in other environments. The survey data were collected from youth in California schools. California was one of the first states to require all schools to have anti-harassment policies on the basis of gender identity, appearance and behavior. As such, the youth in this study may experience less harassment and better support from school personnel than youth in other states. Our data, however, suggest that the rates of hearing negative comments are similar to the national studies of such experiences (Greytak et al. 2009). The focus group data were collected at LGBT youth centers that had regular transgender support groups. In most cities, there is not an LGBT youth center, and where there is one, it usually does not host a regular support group for transgender youth. The youth who participate in these groups should present with more sophistication and understanding of their experiences because they have likely received more specialized support services than most other transgender youth. Even so, these youth revealed considerable concerns with their school environments, and many opportunities for growth on the part of school management and administration.

Sample size is both a strength and limitation of this study. The survey analyses were limited by the small

sample size. At the same time, most studies of transgender youth are not able to include as many youth as were in this sample. In the analyses, we decided to test structural paths so that we could simultaneously estimate the relationships among three variables, and estimate indirect and direct paths. Because of the small sample size, it was necessary to use manifest variables instead of latent variables, thus the model fit indices are difficult to interpret. However, the magnitude of the coefficients was similar with SEM and multivariate regression, indicating that the estimations were reliable. The relative advantage of estimating the indirect effects makes use of the SEM beneficial.

The focus group findings were limited by a few confounding factors. First more of the participants were FTM than MTF and the MTFs were older and more likely to be out of school in this sample. Additionally, most of the MTFs did not begin the transition process until after leaving the high school environment and thus had fewer school experiences to draw from. The over representation of FTM participants in the focus groups could have contributed to the tendency of participants to downplay harassment towards themselves, because they may have actually witnessed more harassment than they had experienced by virtue of being FTM instead of MTF.

Both of the studies focused on youth perspectives and did not include adult or school personnel perspectives. While youth perspectives are important, and may be more candid about actual concerns than adult perspectives, they do not give a complete representation of the school environment. It would be worthwhile to examine how adults in school environments experience those settings, and why they choose to act in the ways that they do. For instance, we do not know why some teachers intervene to stop harassment and others do not.

#### Conclusions and Future Directions

Taken together, the above findings suggest opportunities to create positive change in schools. When policy makers and school personnel stop harassment when it occurs, refrain from participating in harassment, and promote safe environments on campus for transgender youth, transgender youth are more likely to report safe environments. Stopping harassment of transgender youth will take systematic efforts to address safety among peers, teachers, and at an administrative level. At a broad level, administrative policies that invite the establishment and maintenance of LGBT support groups and training convey a message of acceptance of diversity. Such leadership sets a tone for sensitivity training for teachers and peers within the school setting.

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