J Youth Adolescence (2017) 46:917–930
DOI 10.1007/s10964-017-0652-1

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Gender Identity Disparities in Bathroom Safety and Wellbeing among High School Students

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Received: 19 January 2017 / Accepted: 1 March 2017 / Published online: 30 March 2017
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Abstract By examining the relationship between trans identity, bathroom safety and wellbeing among high school students, this article empirically investigates how educational institutions operate as sites through which gender is negotiated in ways that are consequential for trans youth. We draw cross-sectional survey data, from a multi-school climate survey ($n = 1046$) conducted in the Midwestern United States, to examine three aspects of high school students' wellbeing: safety at school, self-esteem, and grades. The sample included students in 9th–12th grade who identified as trans (9.2%) and cisgender (41.2% boys, 49.6% girls), as well as LGBQ (21.6%) and heterosexual (78.4%). Most respondents were monoracial white (65.8%), monoracial Black (12.4%), and multiracial (14.1%). Using mediation and moderation linear regression models, we show that feeling safe using school facilities helps to explain widespread inequalities between trans and cisgender students. Based on these results, we suggest that in order to address disparities in educational outcomes between trans and cisgender students, as well as to improve student wellbeing in general, policies and practices need to ensure that all students have the right to safely access bathrooms and school facilities.

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Keywords Transgender · Bathroom access · Cissexism · School climate · Wellbeing · Students

Introduction

According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), educational institutions have a responsibility to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities (U.S. Department of Education 2015). Schools must therefore implement policies and practices to create and sustain learning environments that address educational disparities by fostering the success of students who experience barriers to achieving educational outcomes (Fabricant 2010; Lee 2001; Oakes and Lipton 2002). Trans students, who understand and express a gender that does not align with their sex assigned at birth, experience a range of increasingly well-documented barriers to accessing and succeeding within educational institutions. School-age trans youth have reported poor mental health (Clements-Nolle et al. 2006; Robinson and Espelage 2011; Toomey et al. 2010; Yunger et al. 2004) and educational outcomes (Greytak et al. 2009; Kosciw et al. 2016) compared to their cisgender counterparts (those who identify with a gender identity and expression in line with normative expectations given their sex assigned at birth). A growing body of research has further linked these disparities to trans students' experiences of violence, harassment, and exclusion in educational settings. Trans youth face physical violence and harassment, disregard for their gender identity and expression, as well as curriculum and pedagogical practices that are harmful to their development (Esmaeili and Arabmofrad 2015; McGuire et al. 2010; Wernick et al. 2014). Researchers have found that these disparities are evident not only between trans and cisgender students, but

also that trans students are at greater risk when compared to lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and similarly identified students (Baum et al. 2013; Grant et al. 2011; Greytak et al. 2009; James et al. 2016).

It is difficult to obtain reliable estimates on the number of trans students in school settings. Social science surveys have historically assumed that all students identify within cisgender binaries and inquired about only "male" and "female" identities. Some researchers have begun to inquire about a wider range of gender identities. A recent study published by the Williams Institute estimates that 0.7% of youth ages 13–17 years old (150,000 youth) in the United States identify as transgender (Herman et al. 2017). But there are persistent difficulties in inquiring about transgender, gender expansive, and gender non-conforming identities in surveys designed for quantitative analysis (Gates 2011; Toomey 2014). While categories such as "trans" and "transgender" are useful ways to group individuals and communities, these terms erase differences among the diverse self-understandings of young people about their gender identities, especially across racial and sexual communities. Different aspects of social identity, personal history, and individual experience influence the lived realities of those who consider themselves to be "trans" or "transgender" in drastically different ways. For instance, trans people assigned male at birth who express a feminine gender identity are targeted for violence in the policing of both binary gender norms as well as misogynistic beliefs about the value of feminine self-presentation (Barker-Plummer 2013; Julia 2007; Koyama 2003). Researchers have found that acts of anti-transgender violence, including murderous attacks, are disproportionately targeted toward trans women of color (Koken et al. 2009; Sevelius 2013; Stanley and Smith 2011). The grouping of non-cisgender people within a single category may conceal as much diversity as it exposes, as the same move does with cisgender categories of "men" and "women."

Terms such as genderism and cissexism have been used to describe the distinct systems of oppression that target and stigmatize trans individuals and simultaneously privilege binary cisgender identities (Hill and Willoughby 2005; Browne 2004). Genderism pervades trans individuals' everyday lives (Grant et al. 2011; Lombardi et al. 2002; Lombardi 2009) and is intimately connected to systems of sexism, racism and heterosexism. Understanding anti-transgender violence within this framework highlights that while trans students make up a relatively small minority of the school system, the targeting of these students is central to the maintenance of institutional norms that reproduce wide-ranging inequalities. Thus, it is vital to address, prevent, and heal from genderism not only to support the success and positive development of trans students, but further, to create supportive and inclusive environments for all students.

In this article, we focus on the role of students' feeling of safety using sex-segregated school facilities (e.g., bathrooms, locker rooms) as it relates to the success and wellbeing of high school students. The widespread segregation of bathroom usage between "men" and "women" facilities compels trans individuals to navigate spaces in which their non-conformity to binary norms of gender identity and expression can be called into question (Ingrey 2012; Porta et al. 2017). The process of having one's gender called into question and anticipating such threats in the future jeopardizes the safety and wellbeing of trans individuals who need to execute the bodily functions for which bathrooms are constructed (Bender-Baird 2016; Browne 2004). Bathroom access for trans youth in high school is a particularly important issue in the current United States political climate where the civil rights of trans individuals is hotly debated (Larsen 2016). In contrast to other studies that have examined individual or interpersonal dimensions of discrimination and violence (Baams et al. 2013; Nadal and Griffin 2011), this article contributes to existing research on how educational institutions perpetuate the subordination of trans students through organizational policies, procedures and practices (Fischer et al. 2016; McGuire et al. 2010; Woolley 2016).

Recently, a range of studies have investigated the legal ramifications of trans students' access to bathrooms (Johnson 2014; Moffit 2015; Reisner et al. 2015; Sterling 2014; Szczerbinski 2016; Tobin and Levi 2013; Weinberg 2009). Feminist scholars have also been keen to examine how public discourse around trans bathroom access produces important theoretical contributions to our understanding of gender (Bender-Baird 2016; Browne 2004; Ingrey 2012). More traditional social science research has looked at the individual and institutional ramifications of the threats to bathroom access for trans individuals. For instance, trans college students report negative experiences in bathrooms (hostility, harassment, and discrimination) that have adverse consequences on their physical health, such as dehydration and urinary tract or bladder infections, from avoiding or waiting to use the bathroom. This exclusion from public space also exacts a mental toll, including increased risk for suicide (Seelman 2014, 2016; Sutton 2016). Together, these studies show that bathrooms and related facilities operate within school settings to communicate norms of exclusion and bias against trans people and increasingly serve as sites for physical harm against them.

However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have quantitatively examined these relationships among high school students. While we anticipate that similar dynamics will play out across educational settings, trans high school students operate within a distinct stage of adolescent development and experience greater constraints on their mobility than adults. Given that the bodily changes associated with adolescence can bring the ongoing development

of gender identity and expression into sharp relief, it is important to investigate the ways in which educational institutions shape trans students' success. To extend existing research documenting bathroom accessibility and safety as a function of genderism among high school students, we investigate the relationships between trans identity, safety using school facilities, and students' wellbeing. Specifically, we examine three aspects of wellbeing: safety in the school environment, individual mental health, and academic success. These outcomes are used as multiple indicators of students' ability to access positive opportunities. Assessing these outcomes enables us to examine both the symbolic and physical aspects of gender inequality relative to bathroom safety in schools. While research on inequality often focuses on testing how well various risk factors can predict negative outcomes, we examine the role of students' perception of school facilities as a barrier to accessing opportunities for current and future success and self-determination (Breen and Jonsson 2005).

The Current Study

In this study, we test inter-related hypotheses to better understand the role of feeling safe in the bathroom as an influence on students' wellbeing. First, due to widespread discrimination against trans youth, as well as the anticipation of harassment in sex-segregated restrooms, we hypothesize that trans students will report feeling less safe than their cisgender counterparts in using bathroom and locker room facilities. Second, for similar reasons, we hypothesize that trans students will report significantly lower rates of school wellbeing and success, as measured by school safety, self-esteem, and grades. Third, we hypothesize that students' feelings of safety using school facilities will mediate these associations between gender identity and lower reported rates of school wellbeing, as feeling unsafe using school facilities may contribute to both social and physical barriers in succeeding at school. Fourth, we also investigate potential moderating effects of reported experiences of bathroom safety on the relationship between trans identity and student outcomes, as well as serial mediations between safety, self-esteem, and grades. Finally, we explore whether the effect of gender identity on grades could be serially mediated through facilities safety and self-esteem.

Methods

Procedure

Our analysis uses data drawn from a climate survey conducted in 2014 at five public high schools in southeast Michigan. LGBTQ youth leaders and allies designed and distributed the survey as part of the Riot Youth Climate Action Project that brought together Riot Youth leaders from the Neutral Zone (a teen center located in Ann Arbor, Michigan) with Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) and similar school-based clubs. Young people designed and distributed the survey, adapting questions from previous community-based surveys (Kosciw et al. 2016; Wernick et al. 2014) and worked with adult advisers [LW, AK] to assess a range of issues related to school climate in relevant and accessible terms for youth audiences. De-identified data were made available to researchers and the Institutional Review Board at Fordham University and University of California Santa Barbara designated analysis of this data as exempt from oversight.

The five schools were sampled to strengthen regional networks of LGBTQ youth activists and to ensure geographic and racial diversity within the sample. Two of the schools were in a suburban/semi-urban city, two in rural settings, and one in an urban locale. At the time of data collection, there were no local or state policies explicitly addressing transgender students' rights to access a bathroom based on their gender identity. Individual students, teachers, and administrators worked to address students' needs on a case-by-case basis. These efforts are largely contingent on the visibility of individual students, their willingness to come forward, and the resources available to school staff. A description of the full study sample is presented in Table 1 and a description of the trans students in the study is presented in Table 2.

Measures

Independent variables

Demographics The survey used two questions to inquire about gender identity. Students were first asked "What gender(s) do you identify with?" and instructed to select all that apply from a list of six options: man, woman, genderqueer, agender, questioning, and not listed. The survey also asked "Do you identify as transgender or gender non-conforming?" and asked respondents to select all that apply from a list of: No; Yes, I identify as transgender; Yes, I identify as gender non-conforming; and Not Listed. For the present analysis, we included all respondents who indicated that they identify as genderqueer, agender, questioning, transgender, gender non-conforming, or a gender identity not listed in the survey as trans (GI).

The survey also included similar measures for race and sexual orientation, which were grouped dichotomously to indicate the potential for experiencing oppression based on one or both of these categories. Respondents who indicated

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for total sample and by school

Variable	Total ($n = 1046$) *M* (SD)	Suburban school A ($n = 327$) *M* (SD)	Suburban school B ($n = 158$) *M* (SD)	Rural school A ($n = 228$) *M* (SD)	Rural school B ($n = 194$) *M* (SD)	Urban school A ($n = 139$) *M* (SD)
Self-esteem[a]	3.01 (0.66)	2.95 (0.69)	2.98 (0.63)	3.05 (0.64)	3.04 (0.63)	3.04 (0.66)
Anti-LGBTQ language[b]	2.99 (0.97)	2.34 (0.85)	3.36 (0.86)	3.35 (0.89)	3.13 (0.82)	3.34 (0.90)
Safety at school[b]	4.71 (0.74)	4.81 (0.58)	4.69 (0.71)	4.73 (0.72)	4.78 (0.56)	4.31 (1.20)
Facilities safety[b]	4.66 (0.84)	4.78 (0.62)	4.58 (0.89)	4.81 (0.67)	4.82 (0.56)	3.89 (1.43)
Grades[c]	5.62 (1.51)	5.70 (1.51)	5.32 (1.70)	5.90 (1.19)	5.93 (1.43)	4.75 (1.56)
	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
Grade-level						
9th	168 (17.6)	88 (27.8)	24 (15.6)	20 (9.3)	–	36 (35.6)
10th	248 (26.0)	81 (25.6)	78 (50.6)	76 (35.5)	1 (0.6)	12 (11.9)
11th	236 (24.8)	79 (24.9)	26 (16.9)	53 (24.8)	69 (41.3)	9 (8.9)
12th	301 (31.6)	69 (21.8)	26 (16.9)	65 (30.4)	97 (58.1)	44 (43.6)
Race						
White	617 (65.8)	230 (73.0)	67 (45.6)	181 (85.4)	139 (85.3)	–
Black	116 (12.4)	18 (5.7)	17 (11.6)	5 (2.4)	1 (0.6)	75 (74.3)
Latino	22 (2.3)	12 (3.8)	9 (6.1)	1 (0.5)	–	–
Middle Eastern	10 (1.1)	3 (1.0)	4 (2.7)	1 (0.5)	2 (1.2)	–
Multiracial	132 (14.1)	39 (12.4)	33 (22.4)	19 (9.0)	17 (10.4)	24 (23.8)
Native	4 (0.4)	1 (0.3)	–	1 (0.5)	–	2 (2.0)
Asian	37 (3.9)	12 (3.8)	17 (11.6)	4 (1.9)	4 (2.5)	–
Sexual orientation						
Straight	735 (78.4)	226 (72.7)	119 (79.9)	177 (84.7)	133 (81.6)	80 (76.2)
LGBQ	202 (21.6)	85 (27.3)	30 (20.1)	32 (15.3)	30 (18.4)	25 (23.8)
Gender						
Cis boys	385 (41.2)	148 (47.4)	62 (41.9)	71 (33.5)	70 (43.2)	34 (34.0)
Cis girls	463 (49.6)	140 (44.9)	73 (49.3)	120 (56.6)	78 (48.1)	52 (52.0)
Trans	86 (9.2)	24 (7.7)	13 (8.8)	21 (9.9)	14 (8.6)	14 (14.0)

[a] Theoretical range [1, 4]

[b] Theoretical range [1, 5]

[c] Theoretical range [1, 7]

that they identified as monoracial white were coded 0, while students who selected one or more racial minority identities (African American/Black, Hispanic/Latin@/Chican@, Middle Eastern, Multi/biracial, Native American/American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Not Listed) were coded 1. Similarly, respondents were grouped by their sexual orientation (0 = only straight/heterosexual, 1 = bisexual, gay/lesbian, pansexual, questioning, queer, and/or not listed).

We also used a measure of students' current grade (9th–12th) and the school at which they were surveyed to control for potential developmental and regional differences. Based on observed patterns of difference in the independent and dependent variables, urban school A was selected as the referent category for multivariate analysis.

School climate Further, we controlled for experiences of general school climate to account for perceived differences in the symbolic policing of binary gender and sexual identities. We constructed a three-item scale by combining items addressing multiple forms of anti-LGBTQ language: "Sometimes people use phrases such as 'it,' 'he-she,' or 'tranny' that are derogatory toward transgender people. How often do you hear phrases like the above in school?"; "Sometimes people use phrases such as 'that's so gay' or 'no homo' that are derogatory toward LGBTQ people. How often do you hear phrases like the above in school?"; "How often do you hear homophobic or biphobic slurs in school? (for example, 'faggot,' 'dyke')" (1 = *never*, 5 = *frequently*). This measure showed evidence of acceptable internal reliability among this sample ($\alpha = .73$). This scale combines

Table 2 Descriptive statistics by gender identity

Variable	Trans ($n = 86$) M (SD)	Cis girls ($n = 463$) M (SD)	Cis boys ($n = 385$) M (SD)	Total ($n = 934$) M (SD)
Self-esteem[a]	2.71 (0.65)	2.90 (0.63)	3.19 (0.65)	3.19 (0.65)
Anti-LGBTQ language[b]	3.05 (0.93)	2.99 (0.96)	2.94 (1.00)	2.94 (1.00)
Safety at school[b]	4.12 (1.18)	4.77 (0.61)	4.80 (0.64)	4.71 (0.74)
Facilities safety[b]	3.98 (1.34)	4.78 (0.67)	4.72 (0.75)	4.66 (0.84)
Grades[c]	5.08 (1.61)	5.84 (1.36)	5.52 (1.60)	5.52 (1.60)
	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
Grade-level				
9th	17 (20.0)	76 (16.5)	71 (18.7)	164 (17.7)
10th	24 (28.2)	118 (25.6)	100 (26.4)	242 (26.2)
11th	23 (27.1)	113 (24.5)	91 (24.0)	227 (24.5)
12th	21 (24.7)	154 (33.4)	117 (30.9)	292 (31.6)
Race				
White	61 (75.3)	339 (74.0)	298 (78.6)	298 (78.6)
Black	15 (18.5)	80 (17.5)	67 (17.7)	67 (17.7)
Latino	2 (2.5)	27 (5.9)	26 (6.9)	26 (6.9)
Middle Eastern	2 (2.5)	14 (3.1)	18 (4.75)	18 (4.75)
Multiracial	5 (6.2)	13 (2.8)	16 (4.2)	16 (4.2)
Native	9 (11.1)	23 (5.0)	19 (5.0)	19 (5.0)
Asian	6 (7.4)	26 (5.7)	31 (8.2)	31 (8.2)
Sexual orientation				
Straight	39 (45.9)	355 (77.7)	322 (86.8)	322 (86.8)
LGBQ	46 (54.1)	102 (22.3)	49 (13.2)	49 (13.2)

[a] Theoretical range [1, 4]

[b] Theoretical range [1, 5]

[c] Theoretical range [1, 7]

measures of derogatory language use based on both gender identity as well as sexual orientation, as these forms of biased behavior often co-occur in practice, despite the differences between gender and sexual identities.

Bathroom safety We measured students' safe access to school facilities (FAC) by combining two items that inquired about students' feelings of safety when using bathrooms and locker rooms at school: "How safe do you feel using public restrooms/locker rooms at school?" based on "gender identity" and "gender expression" (1 = *very unsafe*, 5 = *very safe*). This scale showed evidence of strong internal reliability among this sample ($\alpha = .97$).

Wellbeing outcomes

School safety We measured a sense of belonging at school by examining general feelings of overall safety (SAFE) in the school environment by combining two items: "How safe do you feel in school?" based on "gender identity" and "gender expression" (1 = *very unsafe*, 5 = *very safe*). This measure showed strong evidence of internal reliability among this sample ($\alpha = .91$).

Self-esteem We measured students' self-esteem (SE), as an indicator of mental wellbeing, using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1979) that inquires about overall positive self-evaluation on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*) with negatively worded items reverse-scored so that higher values indicate greater self-esteem. The reliability coefficient for the current study was good with a Cronbach's alpha of .91.

Grades Finally, we measured academic performance using a single item of self-reported grades (GRADES) on a 7-point scale from "mostly Ds" to "mostly As".

Analysis

Our analysis began with exploratory tests of variable distributions and bivariate group differences. We then used

regression models to test for the associations between transgender identity, feelings of safety using bathrooms, and success in school. To test our hypothesis that trans students will report lower rates of safety using school bathroom and locker room facilities we used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, controlling for grade, race, gender, sexual orientation, school and reported anti-LGBTQ language use. To examine our hypotheses on wellbeing outcomes, we used mediation and moderation analyses for all models. Significant models are shown first and alternate models summarized last. To test that safety using school facilities will mediate associations between gender identity and lower reported rates of school wellbeing and success, as measured by school safety (GI → FAC → SAFETY) and self-esteem (GI → FAC → SE), we used the SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 4, Hayes 2013, p. 445), which uses OLS regressions to test mediation effects. We also tested the moderation effects of bathroom safety on the relationship between trans identity and students' self-reported grades using OLS regression with and without interaction variables, as well as the main effect of self-esteem on grades and its moderation by trans identity. Finally, as an alternate exploratory model, we examined whether the effect of gender identity on grades could be serially mediated through facilities safety (Mediator one) and self-esteem (Mediator two) (GI → FAC → SE → Grades) using PROCESS (Model 6, Hayes 2013, p. 446). Each of these models controlled for differences based on gender, race, sexual orientation, grade, hearing anti-LGBTQ language, and school. All mediation analyses were conducted with SPSS Statistics 24 and standard errors are based on the HC3 estimator. All other analyses were conducted with Stata 14. Missing data were imputed using Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) fully conditional specification, using all variables (demographics, climate, bathroom safety, and wellbeing outcomes) to predict missing values for each case.

Results

Disparities in Bathroom Safety

The regression model using demographic and control variables to estimate feelings of safety in school bathrooms, reported in Table 3, accounted for 19% of the variance in respondents' scores, $F(10,\ 1018) = 12.22$, $p < .001$. Both gender and sexual orientation were significantly associated with self-reported safety in facilities. Trans students reported significantly lower average safety in facilities than both cisgender girls and boys, $\beta = -.25, -.23$ (respectively), $p < .001$. Holding a sexually marginalized identity as LGBQ was significantly associated with lower self-reported levels of safety in facilities than heterosexual students, $\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$. Students at each of the suburban and rural schools reported significantly greater bathroom and locker room safety than students at urban school A, $-.30 \leq \beta \leq -.19$, $p < .001$. We did not find evidence for significant differences in facilities safety by grade, race, hearing anti-LGBTQ language, or between cisgender girls and cisgender boys.

Table 3 Linear regression predicting safety in facilities ($n = 1029$; Robust SEs)

Variable	β	B (SE)
Grade-level	−.02	0.02 (0.03)
Gender		
Cis-boys[a]	−.04	−0.07 (0.05)
Trans[a]	−.25***	−0.73 (0.12)
Trans[b]	−.23***	−0.65 (0.12)
Sexual orientation[c]	−.12***	−0.26 (0.07)
Race[d]	−.11***	−0.20 (0.06)
School[e]		
Suburban A	.30***	0.55 (0.12)
Suburban B	.19***	0.44 (0.13)
Rural A	.27***	0.57 (0.13)
Rural B	.27***	0.61 (0.13)
Anti-LGBTQ language	−.05	0.05 (0.03)
Model statistics		
Constant (ref: cis girls)	4.53*** (0.41)	
Constant (ref: cis boys)	4.03*** (0.17)	
R^2	.1926	

Models include cases with imputed data

Cis = cisgender

[a] Ref. cis-girls

[b] Ref. cis-boys

[c] Ref. straight

[d] Ref. white

[e] Ref. Urban A

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p \leq .001$

Mediation of Bathroom Safety on Overall School Safety for Trans Students

Our analysis examining the effect of gender identity (independent variable) on school safety (dependent variable) through safety using school bathroom and locker-room facilities (mediator), controlling for gender, race, sexual orientation, anti-LGBTQ language and school, using PROCESS (model 4, Hayes 2013, p. 445) are displayed in Fig. 1. The analysis revealed a significant influence of trans identity on overall safety in schools, in comparison to cisgender girls and boys, $B = -0.54$, $\text{SE} = 0.11$, $p = .0001$ (both), and the mediator, $B = -0.73, -0.65$ (girls and boys, respectively), $\text{SE} = 0.12$, $p = .0000$. Analyses on the influence of mediator, bathroom facilities, on overall school

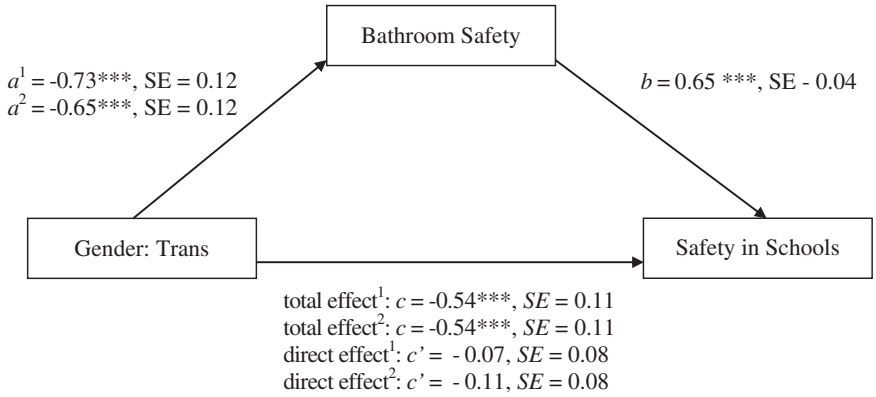


Fig. 1 Bathroom safety mediated the effect of trans* identity on overall school safety. Model controlled for gender, race, sexual orientation, anti-LGBTQ language, and school (ref. urban school A); $n = 1029$; 5000 bootstrap. The mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS (model 4, Hayes 2013, p. 445). *a, b, c, and c'* are unstandardized regression coefficients. [1]ref. cisgender girls [2]ref. cisgender boys. ***$p <$ 0.001

safety showed a significant effect, $B = 0.65$, SE = 0.04, $p = .0000$. When examining the influence of trans identity and bathroom facilities on overall school safety, the effect of trans identity was reduced in comparison to both cisgender girls and boys, $B = -0.07$, SE = 0.08, $p = .8650$ and $B = -0.11$, SE = 0.08, $p = .1483$ (respectively). The indirect effect of trans identity on overall school safety, through the mediator of bathroom accessibility (GI → FAC → SAFETY), was highly significant in comparison to both cisgender girls and boys as indicated by the 95% CI [−0.67, −0.32] and 95% CI [−0.62, −0.27] (respectively) using 5000 bootstrap estimations. Direct and total effects models that include the full model with control variables are displayed in Table 4.

Mediation of Bathroom Safety on Self-Esteem for Trans Students

Our analytic model examining the effect of gender identity (independent variable) on self-esteem (dependent variable) through safety using school bathroom and locker-room facilities (mediator), controlling for gender, race, sexual orientation, anti-LGBTQ language and school, using PROCESS (model 4, Hayes 2013, p. 445) are displayed in Fig. 2. The analysis revealed no significant influence of trans identity on self-esteem in comparison to cisgender girls, $B = -0.12$, SE = 0.07, $p = .0838$, but a significant influence of trans identity on self-esteem in comparison to cisgender boys, $B = -0.40$, SE = 0.07, $p = .0000$. There was also a significant influence of trans identity on the mediator in comparison to both cisgender girls and boys, $B = -0.73$, -0.65 (respectively) SE = 0.09, $p = .0000$. Analyses on the influence of mediator, bathroom facilities, on self-esteem showed a significant effect, $B = 0.12$, SE = 0.03, $p = .0000$. When examining the influence of trans identity and the mediator, bathroom facilities, on self-esteem, the effect of trans identity was reduced in comparison to both cisgender girls and boys, $B = -0.04$, SE = 0.07, $p = .5032$ and $B = -0.32$, SE = 0.09, $p = .0000$ (respectively). The indirect effect of trans identity on self-esteem, through the mediator of bathroom accessibility (GI → FAC → SE), was highly significant in comparison to both cisgender girls and boys as indicated by the 95% CI [−0.14, −0.04]; CI [−0.13, −0.04] (respectively) using 5000 bootstrap estimations. Direct and total effects models that include the full model with control variables are displayed in Table 4.

Moderation of Bathroom Safety on Grades for Trans Students

Our models examining the moderation effects of bathroom safety on the relationship between trans identity and students' self-reported grades are reported in Table 5. In the main effects model (Model 1), trans identity was associated with significantly lower grades compared to cisgender girls ($\beta = -.11$, $p = .003$). However, safety using facilities was not significantly associated with grades ($\beta = .06$, *ns*). After including the interaction between safety using school facilities and trans identity (Model 2), the moderation effect was significant in predicting grades ($\beta = -.28$, $p = .008$). The significant negative interaction effect suggests a moderating relationship of bathroom safety on the relationship between trans identity and students' self-reported grades. Specifically, the negative effect of trans identity on overall grades is buffered by feelings of safety in the bathroom, and the inequality in grades between trans students and cisgender girls can be explained (in part) by trans students' lower feelings of safety in the bathroom. In the moderation model, the main effect of trans identity was no longer associated with a significant decrease in grades when compared to cisgender girls, but there was a significant difference between trans students and cisgender boys ($\beta = .25$, $p = .023$).

Further, while controlling for these relationships (Model 3), self-esteem was positively associated with grades ($\beta = .20$, $p = .000$). The interaction term between self-esteem and trans identity was also significant and negatively

Table 4 Direct, total and indirect effects of gender identity on school safety and self-esteem through bathroom safety. ($n = 1029$)

Model	Gender identity → Facilities → Safety3		Gender identity → Facilities → Self-esteem	
Outcome	Safety	Safety	Self-esteem	Self-esteem
	Direct effect	*Total effect*	*Direct effect*	*Total effect*
	B(SE)	*B* (SE)	*B*(SE)	*B* (SE)
Controls				
Grade-level	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Gender				
Cis-boys[a]	0.05 (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)	0.29 (0.04)***	0.28 (0.04)***
Trans[a]	−0.07 (0.08)	−0.54 (0.11)***	−0.04 (0.07)	−0.12 (0.07)
Trans[b]	−0.11 (0.08)	−0.54 (0.11)***	−0.32 (0.07)***	−0.40 (0.07)***
Sexual orientation[c]	−0.17 (0.05)***	−0.33 (0.06)***	−0.17 (0.05)***	−0.28 (0.05)***
Race[d]	−0.01 (0.04)	−0.14 (0.05)	−0.02 (0.05)	−0.04 (0.05)
School[e]				
Suburb A	0.07 (0.07)	0.29 (0.11)**	−0.30 (0.07)***	−0.24 (0.07)***
Suburb B	0.03 (0.07)	0.26 (0.11)*	−0.16 (0.07)*	−0.11 (0.07)
Rural A	0.15 (0.07)	0.23 (0.11)*	−0.11 (0.08)	−0.04 (0.07)
Rural B	0.10 (0.07)	0.30 (0.11)**	−0.18 (0.08)*	−0.11 (0.08)
Independent				
Anti-LGBTQ language	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.06 (0.03)*	−0.10 (0.02)***	−0.11 (0.02)***
Facilities safety	0.65 (0.04)***		0.12 (0.03)***	
Model stats				
Constant[a]	1.89 (.26)***	4.90 (0.17)***	2.77 (0.16)***	3.31 (0.11)***
Constant[b]	1.94 (.25)***	4.90 (0.16)***	3.06 (0.16)***	3.59 (0.11)***
R^2	.60	.15	.13	.11
Indirect effects[a]	*B*(SE) = −0.48 (0.09); 95% CI (−0.6662, −0.3195)		*B*(SE) = −0.09 (0.03); 95% CI (−0.1433, −0.0408)	
Indirect effects[b]	*B*(SE) = −0.43 (0.09); 95% CI (−0.6226, −0.2742)		*B*(SE) = −0.08 (0.02); 95% CI (−0.1321, −0.0384)	

5000 Bootstraps

Cis = cisgender

[a] Ref. cis-girls

[b] Ref. cis-boys

[c] Ref. straight

[d] Ref. white

[e] Ref. Urban A

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p \leq .001$

associated with grades ($\beta = -.29$, $p = .043$), while the significant negative interaction term between bathroom safety and trans identity continued to show a negative association with grades ($\beta = -.23$, $p = .030$). After taking the role of self-esteem in predicting grades into account, as well as its disparate impact for trans students, trans identity was also significantly associated with a positive effect on grades when compared to cisgender girls ($\beta = .40$, $p = .018$) as well as cisgender boys ($\beta = .50$, $p = .003$). These models estimate that were it not for the gendered disparities in students' feelings of safety in the bathroom, as well as similar disparities in student's self-esteem, trans students would, on average, have higher grades than cisgender students.

Other Demographic Differences

Our findings also demonstrate the importance of intersecting identities and contexts in shaping school success for students. Direct and total effects on school safety and self-esteem with control variables from the two mediation models above are shown in Table 4 and the moderation



Fig. 2 Bathroom safety mediated the effect of trans* identity on self-esteem. Model controlled for gender, race, sexual orientation, anti-LGBTQ language, and school (ref. urban school A); $n = 1029$; 5000 bootstrap. The mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS (model 4, Hayes 2013, p. 445). *a, b, c, and c'* are unstandardized regression coefficients. [1] ref. cisgender girls [2]ref. cisgender boys. ***$p < 0.001$

effects on grades with control variables are shown in Table 5. In addition to the effects listed above, in the total effects model, hearing anti-LGBTQ language was associated with lower sense of school safety $B = -.06$, $p < .05$. And, in both total and direct effects models, hearing anti-LGBTQ language was associated with lower levels of self-esteem, $B = -.10$, $-.11$ (respectively), $p < .001$, and grades in all three models, $\beta = -.11$, $p < .001$ (Model 1 & 2) and $\beta = -.09$, $p < .01$ (Model 3). Cisgender boys reported a higher self-esteem than cisgender girls in both the direct and total effects models, $B = 0.29$, 0.28 (respectively), $p < .001$. Cisgender boys reported lower grades than cisgender girls in all three models, $\beta = -0.13$, -0.13, -0.18 (respectively), $p < .001$. Respondents who identified as LGBQ reported significantly lower overall school safety, self-esteem and grades in all models: safety, $B = -.17$, $-.33$ (direct & indirect respectively), $p < .001$; self-esteem, $B = -.17$, $-.28$ (direct & indirect respectively), $p < .001$, and grades, $\beta = -.10$, $p < .01$ (Model 1 & 2) and $\beta = -.08$, $p < .05$ (Model 3). Students of color reported significantly lower grades in all three models ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .001$). Finally, students at each of the suburban and rural schools reported significantly higher overall school safety than students at urban school A in the total effects model, $-.30 \leq B \leq -.23$, $-.01 \leq p \leq .05$. In the direct effects model, students from urban school A reported higher levels of self-esteem than the suburban schools A and B, and rural school B, $.30 \leq B \leq -.11$, $-.001 \leq p \leq .05$, and only suburban school A reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem than urban school A in the total effects model $B = -.24$, $p < .001$. Students in both rural schools reported significantly higher grades, $13 \leq \beta \leq .27$, $p < .01$ in all three models.

Alternative Models

In order to ascertain the relationship between bathroom safety and well-being for trans students, we also ran alternative plausible mediation and moderation models. The first alternative model examining the moderating effects of bathroom safety on the relationship between trans identity and reported overall school safety showed no significant interaction effects. Likewise, the second alternative model examining the moderating effects of bathroom safety on the relationship between trans identity and self-esteem showed no significant interaction effects. We also examined bathroom safety as a mediator on grades for trans students. This model also produced no significant indirect effects.

Finally, because of the strong correlations among trans identity, bathroom safety, self-esteem and grades, and we ran a serial mediation model to explore these relationships. While not typically run on a cross-sectional dataset, the results can both examine and illuminate possible theoretical models to understand these relationships (Hayes and Rockwood 2016). This model examined the effect of gender identity (independent variable) on grades (dependent variable) through safety using school bathroom and locker-room facilities (mediator one) and self-esteem (mediator two), controlling for gender, race, sexual orientation, anti-LGBTQ language and school, using PROCESS (model 6, Hayes 2013, p. 445). Results are displayed in Fig. 3. The indirect effect of trans identity on grades, through mediator one (bathroom safety) and two (self-esteem) (GI → FAC → SE → GRADES), was highly significant as indicated by the 95% CI [−0.07, −0.02] using 5000 bootstrap estimations. This indicates that future research should address this possible serial mediation model with longitudinal data.

Discussion

As of the writing of this article, the issue of bathroom access for trans youth is of national significance in the United States, as President Trump has issued a directive to rescind protections for transgender students (Peters et al. 2017) while the right of trans high school students to use the bathroom associated with their gender is currently the subject of legal deliberation at the level of the Supreme Court (Liptak 2016). There is no shortage of research that

Table 5 Linear regression predicting grades ($n = 1029$; Robust SEs)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Variable	β	*B* (SE)	β	*B* (SE)	β	*B* (SE)
Grade-level	.01	0.01 (0.04)	.00	0.01 (0.03)	−.00	−0.00 (.04)
Gender						
Cisboys[a]	−.13***	−0.40 (0.09)	−.13***	−0.40 (0.09)	−.18***	−0.53 (.10)
Trans[a]	−.11**	−0.57 (0.19)	.17	−0.85 (0.55)	.40*	1.99 (.84)
Trans[b]	−.03	−0.17 (0.20)	.25*	1.25 (0.55)	.50**	2.52 (.85)
Sexual orientation[c]	−.10**	−0.34 (0.13)	−.10**	−0.36 (0.13)	−.08*	−0.30 (.13)
Race[d]	−.14***	−0.45 (0.12)	−.14***	−0.44 (0.12)	−.14***	−0.44 (.11)
School[e]						
Suburban A	.30	0.26 (0.17)	.30	0.08 (0.17)	.12*	0.37 (.17)
Suburban B	.19	0.19 (0.19)	.19	0.05 (0.19)	.07	0.27 (.19)
Rural A	.27**	0.45 (0.17)	.27**	0.13 (0.17)	.13**	0.48 (.17)
Rural B	.27**	0.46 (0.19)	.27**	0.12 (0.19)	.14**	0.54 (.18)
Anti-LGBTQ language	−.11***	−0.17 (0.05)	−.11***	−0.17 (0.05)	−.09**	−0.13 (.05)
Bathroom safety	.06	0.10 (0.06)	.11**	0.19 (0.07)	.07	0.13 (.07)
Bathroom safetyXtrans			−.28**	0.32 (0.13)	−.23*	−0.27 (.13)
Self-esteem					.20***	0.46 (.08)
Self-esteemXtrans					−.29*	−0.51 (.25)
Model statistics						
Constant (ref: cis girls)	5.79*** (0.39)		5.39*** (0.42)		4.16*** (0.46)	
Constant (ref: cis boys)	5.39*** (0.38)		4.99*** (0.41)		3.62*** (0.47)	
R^2	.1139		.1205		.1526	

Models include cases with imputed data

Cis = cisgender

[a] Ref. cis-girls

[b] Ref. cis-boys

[c] Ref. straight

[d] Ref. white

[e] Ref. Urban A

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p \leq .001$

can be used to support this juridical decision making process, as various studies have investigated discrimination against trans people (Grant et al. 2011) and the experiences of trans students in school environments (Greytak et al. 2009). However, while these studies are helpful in a general sense, they do not provide empirical information on the specific subject that constitutes the core of this legal case: the impact of bathroom safety on trans high school students. Although researchers have investigated these variables among trans college students (Seelman 2014, 2016; Sutton 2016), the particular developmental phase of trans youth in high school (including their potentially nascent phase of gender identity development) and the specific institutional arrangements in high school (which tend to be more restrictive than college) point to the importance of attending to the specificity of experiences among trans youth in secondary educational institutions.

By analyzing a multi-school climate survey in the United States Midwest to examine the relationship between trans students' grades, self-esteem and access to safe bathroom facilities, this study advances our knowledge in this domain. Our findings suggest that amidst considerable variation in the ability of schools to provide opportunities for healthy development among students, there are significant demographic disparities by gender, as well as race and sexual orientation. This affirms a wide range of research that has documented the existence and persistence of inequalities through the educational system (Aragon et al. 2014; Buchmann et al. 2008; Solorzano and Ornelas 2004; Yosso 2006). Specifically, we found that trans students reported significantly lower feelings of overall safety at school as well as lower grades than their cisgender counterparts. However, in the multivariate models, there were no significant differences between trans and cisgender girl

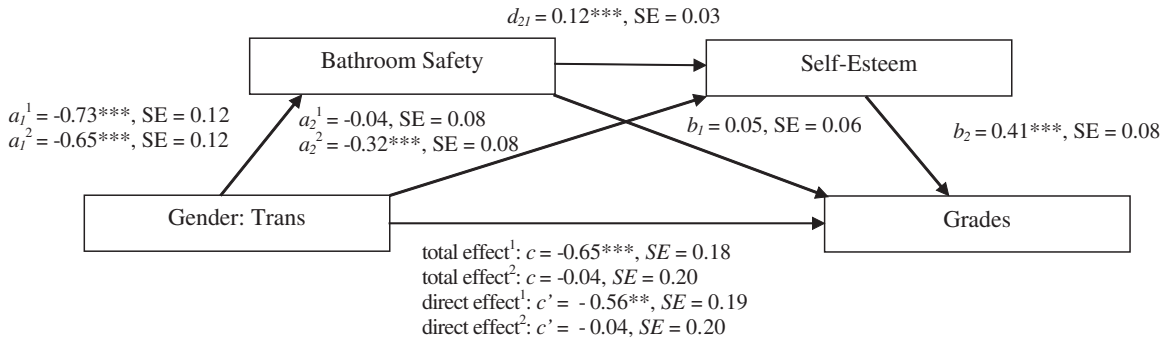


Fig. 3 Bathroom safety (mediator one) and self-esteem (mediator two) mediated the effect of transgender identity on grades. Model controlled for gender, race, sexual orientation, anti-LGBTQ language, and school (ref. urban school A); $n = 1029$; 5000 bootstrap. The mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS (model 6, Hayes 2013, p. 445). *a, b, c, c', and* d_{21} are unstandardized regression coefficients. [1]ref. cisgender girls [2]ref. cisgender boys. $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$

students on self-esteem, but highly significant differences between trans and cisgender boy students. Together, these findings suggest that while identifying as trans may help students, on average, to affirm their sense of self within the broader community, it also exposes students to multiple barriers, including sexism and genderism, in successfully accessing both social and educational opportunities in school environments.

We extended the existing literature on educational inequalities by testing the role of access to safe bathroom use as a contributing factor to these inequalities. Our findings show evidence that trans students' lack of safety in using school facilities contributes to both symbolic and physical processes of genderism. The exclusive provision of binary-identified restrooms/locker-rooms, as well as the policing of gender identity which is enabled through these spaces, may contribute to trans students' feelings of exclusion and denigration (Porta et al. 2017). It is important to note that these psychic consequences are not uniformly experienced by trans students, for a number of reasons, such as the extent to which trans students may align themselves with binary modes of gender identification. While it is important to consider the specificity of trans students' experiences with institutional policies that regulate the use of space along gendered lines, the very fact that these policies require and facilitate gender policing have a net negative impact on trans students, many of whom are in the process of developing their relationship to their gender. The anticipation of negative social sanctions in these spaces may also produce physical harm among students who are compelled to delay or forego their physical needs to accommodate the rules of the institution. We found that LGBQ students reported feeling significantly less safe using school facilities compared to heterosexual students. While many LGBQ people identify as cisgender (and many trans people as straight), the policing of these marginalized identities is often conducted simultaneously. Thus, LGBQ students may also benefit from interventions designed to ensure safe access to bathrooms for trans students. Our findings further showed that LGBQ students also reported significantly lower scores on all three measures of student wellbeing when compared to heterosexual students.

In addition to demonstrating the specific impact of bathroom safety for trans students' experience, our analysis also points to the ways that cisgender segregated bathroom facilities disproportionately impact school climate writ large. A school's anti-LGBTQ climate, as indicated by the presence of derogatory language, was associated with significantly lower scores on all three indicators of school success among all students, including straight and cisgender students. These relationships persisted while controlling for differences by sexual and gender identities. Our findings thus support the notion advanced by past research that holistic interventions that simultaneously address everyday behaviors, policies, and institutional practices that marginalize LGBTQ people will also contribute to the positive self-determination of cisgender and heterosexual students (Dessel et al. 2013; Porta et al. 2017).

Implications

This study shows that ensuring safe access to bathrooms and other school facilities among trans students is a vital component of addressing educational inequality. On a policy level, positive endorsements by school boards and governments can help to ensure that students can use the restroom in an institutional context that affirms their gender identity and expression. Effective enforcement of such policies necessitates educational interventions and support to ensure that students are not met with overt violence or microaggressions when using the facilities. Such interventions should address bathrooms as one private issue amidst a range of concerns facing trans students (Schuster et al. 2016). There are a variety of ways that such a policy might

be implemented, including allowing students to use the bathroom that best aligns with their gender identity and expression. Within such a context, student choice need not be limited to "male" and "female" restrooms, as schools can also elect to have single-stall, all-gender, or gender-neutral/gender-inclusive bathrooms. It can be particularly useful to consider these different arrangements in constructing new building and renovating existing ones as these kinds of facilities can help to provide more options to accommodate the multiple needs and identities of diverse students, especially those who identify as gender non-conforming, gender expansive, or otherwise outside of a male/female binary.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our analysis helps to fill an important gap in the existing literature on genderism in educational settings. However, given the paucity of research in this area, our study includes several limitations which can be addressed through future research. Our use of cross-sectional survey data collected by a non-profit organization enabled the examination of this topic among high school students. Regulations over the study of minors, as well as the policies and practices of school officials create challenges for the systematic study of sexual and gender diversity among adolescents. As well, the use of cross-sectional data only allows us to make associational claims to infer causal relationships. A larger study of students over multiple time-points could help to illuminate additional dynamics at play. For instance, we found some evidence for racial and regional differences among our sample. Future studies with a greater number of schools might use multi-level modeling to more closely interrogate the role of context. As well, a study with greater racial diversity and a larger number of trans students could test for differences in both forms and impacts of trans identity on bathroom safety and school success.

Conclusion

Educational institutions are key sites in distributing resources and opportunities to young people. In this study, we focused on a previously unexamined aspect of gendered inequalities facing trans identified students in high school settings. Our results mirrored some of those found with older students in college settings. However, given the current legal and political contentions over the rights of trans students, our findings are particularly important in elucidating the specific dynamics of bathroom safety among adolescents who are both more substantially limited in their mobility and agency than adults, as well as engaged in crucial years of identity development (relative to both gender as well as a range of other identities and experiences). Our findings show that safety using bathroom facilities mediates the inequalities in overall school safety experienced by trans students. In order to support the wellbeing and healthy development of all students, especially trans students, educational policies and practices can explicitly support the right of students to use a bathroom that matches their identity, including the provision of gender-neutral restrooms.

Acknowledgements Thank you to the leaders involved in Riot Youth at the Neutral Zone in Ann Arbor and the school-based organizations who helped to collect this data and are working to ensure that LGBTQ and similarly identified students have access to educational opportunities and supportive communities. We'd also like to thank Fuhua Zhai and Daniel Coleman from Fordham University for their statistical support and Milo Inglehart and Adrienne Dessel for their collaborations in the larger project. Funding for this project was provided by the Faculty Research Expense Program, Fordham University (Grant awarded to LJW).

Author Contributions Riot Youth leaders conceived of the study in consultation with A.K. & L.J.W. L.J.W. conceived of this manuscript with A.K. and performed statistical analysis. A.K. contributed to the exploratory statistical analysis and interpreting quantitative findings. A.K. and L.W. consulted with legal experts and adult stuff at Neutral Zone. M.C. reviewed extant literature and crafted the introduction. L.J.W., A.K., and M.C. collaborated in writing the manuscript, including the theoretical framework and implications. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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