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## **Supporting Transgender Students: Implementing an Inclusive Education**

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Supporting Transgender Students: Implementing an Inclusive Education

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LS 400: Senior Capstone

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### **Abstract**

The focus issue addressed in this Capstone Project is acknowledgement of transgender students and lack of gender identity education in California public schools. These are important issues for transgender students, their families, and the LGBTQIA+ community because they help address and prevent the discrimination, violence, and academic barriers they face. Primary stakeholder perspectives were obtained from two parents, one parent on the school board, and one transgender high school student, because of their first hand experiences with the systemic flaws in our public education when it comes to transgender youth. Three action options emerged from an analysis of the data and are explored as ways to address the issues presented. Training all school staff is argued to be the most effective way to achieve the goals of representing transgender voices, teaching about gender identity, and supporting identity development.

### **Supporting Transgender Students: Implementing an Inclusive Education**

Growing up it was clear that my family did not fit into the societal standards when it came to marital status, gender identity, and our loud acceptance for those who identified with the LGBTQIA+ community. I was first exposed to the LGBTQIA+ community and the work they did to change laws when my grandmother was hired by Marriage Equality USA. MEUSA at the time was working vigorously to have the marital laws changed to allow same sex marriages for gay and lesbian couples. As a young child, I would attend MEUSA rallies for Proposition 8, walk the golden gate bridge in protest, and even spoke to Arnold Schwarzeneger's assistant at the Capitol to pressure them to allow people like my grandmother to marry whomever they loved regardless of gender. At this time, the conversation of transgender individuals was barely beginning, because the focus was about equal rights for the gay and lesbian community.

Jumping five years into the future, my father fell in love with a transgender woman and my eyes were opened to her experience, and theirs as a LGBTQIA+ couple. She began to open up about her childhood, school, and her transition as an adult, causing me to reflect on my own education and become aware of if our system had shifted the teaching approach. I found myself having this wave of protection over my, now, step mother, becoming hyperaware of all and any hardship or discrimination that she may face due to her identity, which established this need to support the transgender community as a whole. She would casually give me little tips or suggestions on how I could make my future classroom a better environment than what she was exposed to, or how to approach conversations with students and their families. Evidently, this sparked an interest to study transgender students' experiences in schools, what ways to better support their academic and developmental growth, and why that was important.

### **Literature Synthesis and Integration**

Gender identity, including but not limited to transgender, is a topic that is not commonly discussed in public schools, thus resulting in noticeable negative implications. For example many transgender students experience discrimination and a lack of safety or acknowledgement within California's public school system. Children are aware of themselves and their surroundings, soaking up and retaining everything, but we are not facilitating student identity development or their ability to respect people different from themselves if we don't have the conversation of diverse groups.

### **What is the issue?**

Transgender students are not only a population that is rarely discussed in education, but they are also a minority that faces discrimination on a daily basis, largely due to the lack of acknowledgment and acceptance. Transgender is a term defined by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (2021), as "people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth". When discussing gender identity, we are referring to what the person identifies as, rather than who they are attracted to, which is sexual identity. Transgender students are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, which includes sexual identities, though these terms, sexual and gender, are not interchangeable and we will be focusing solely on the gender identity issues transgender students face in public school.

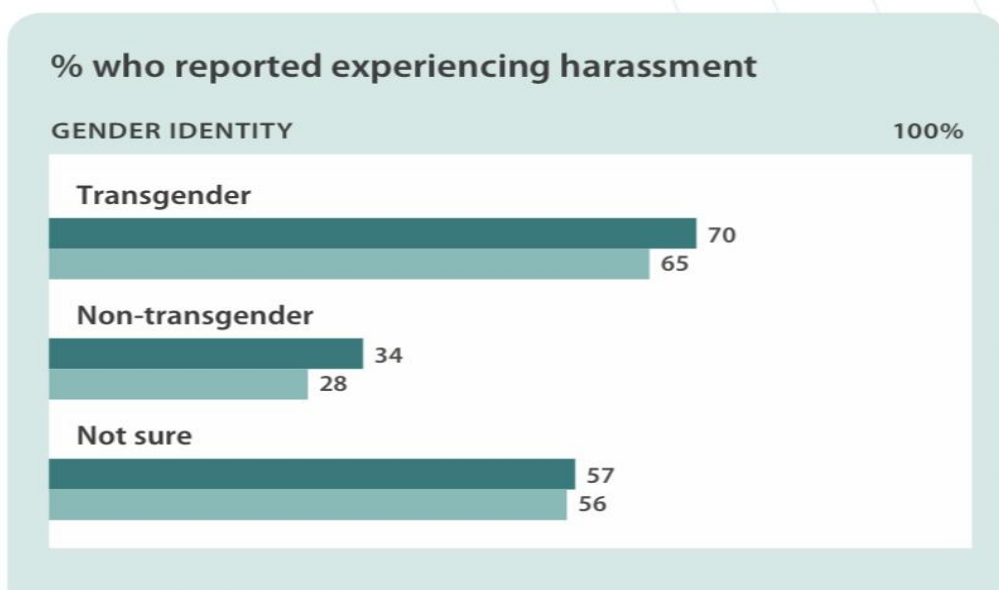
Transgender students make up about four percent of our student body in California, as calculated in California, our education should put a greater emphasis on educating for and with this population (Population Reference Bureau, 2017). According to Teach for America, in the United States there are approximately 1.4 million transgender identifying individuals (Zingg, 2019), and it is common for children to recognize their gender identity, whether or not they are conforming, as early as two years old (Planned Parenthood, 2021). The major issues that our

transgender students face is the utter lack of acknowledgement within education and discrimination at the hands of their peers and teachers. A study conducted by the California Healthy Kids Survey found that 80 percent of transgender students faced some form of harassment in their public school campus (Hanson, 2019). These issues have led to mental health concerns (see Figure 1), including suicide and substance abuse in our transgender youth. It is four times more likely for a transgender student to attempt suicide than a cis-gender student before they enter adulthood, and the rate of mental health issues is twice as likely (Hanson, 2019).

As we grow and develop a sense of individuality and identity, we go through the societal, cultural, and personal expectations of who we are supposed to be and what we desire to be. Throughout our lifetime, we continue to reevaluate our identity and make adjustments as we learn about the world around us and within ourselves. This is a part of being human, which many of us struggle with, therefore, it can be assumed that if you are non conforming to the gender norms, you could face greater internal and external obstacles. In order to ensure that our students have the best opportunity to grow into the humans they want and need to be, we must educate ourselves and our students on gender and transgender individuals.

Figure 1.

*California Healthy Kids Study Data*



Note. Source: <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Infographic-LGBTQ-R21.pdf>

### What is being done?

The US Department of Education (2016) released a letter, *Fact Sheet on U.S. Department of Education Policy Letter on Transgender Students*, which includes the rights, laws, and policies that are in place to protect and encourage inclusivity in our schools for transgender students. However, it never mentions that there should be mandatory educational materials, resources, or curriculum that teaches about gender identity and transgender students. Unfortunately, during the Trump presidency, we experienced a “withdrawal of federal policy” which protected our transgender youth in schools (Zingg, 2019). In many cases, it is left to the teachers’ own devices to implement material or lessons that feature or discuss influential transgender figures, such as Laverne Cox, Georgina Beyer or Billy Tipton. In 2016, California passed a law that stated we must teach LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual education lessons that include topics around gender identity and expression, though many parents threatened to remove their children from schools that implemented this law (North, 2019). To protect against discrimination, the California

Education Code Section 51500 states, “public schools can’t provide instruction or sponsor activities that promote or reflect bias or discrimination against any person on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or gender” (LGBTQ Student Rights, 2018). This means that in all public schools in the state of California, teachers cannot teach their personal beliefs or discriminate against a person based on their gender identity or sexual identity, but it is not required to teach about either topic even if approached in a safe, inclusive and educational manner.

### **What should be done?**

In order for schools to create an environment that acknowledges and accepts transgender youth, we must begin with educating teachers and faculty. Teachers then can implement that knowledge to create a curriculum and build material that features, supports, and educates students on the transgender population. This also forms a more organic approach to a topic that can be viewed as more sensitive for some educators. Since children gather a lot of messages about gender from the world around them, and not just from direct teaching, it’s important that the classroom materials, such as books, also be inclusive (Planned Parenthood, 2021). Most sources suggest beginning with conversations about different families and cultures and how to be respectful of them.

One of the questions that arises often is, at what grade level should we begin teaching about gender identity, and the simple answer is right away. It’s argued that this education should begin in kindergarten because “gender identity, including transgender and gender nonconforming identities, are cemented early in elementary school” (Planned Parenthood, 2021). Children are sponges that are soaking up everything they experience, and having knowledge of transgender



individuals and gender identity fosters their own identity development, as well as, acceptance and respect (Planned Parenthood, 2021).

### **Method**

For this capstone project, the researcher investigated to what extent public schools were supporting their transgender students and the options to increase inclusivity within the classroom. After considering the relevant literature and analyzing the data collected from the participants, criteria was used to evaluate the options, where conclusions were drawn. The researcher followed through with this recommendation with an action to address the issue.

### **Context**

This research took place within two neighboring school districts in California. The first district, Bay School District, is diverse with a public school system that includes many minority groups. In contrast, Sunny School District has a majority middle class, Caucasian demographic attending its public schools. Within the Bay School District, our focus school is Bay School of the Arts, due to its diversity, mission statement, and participant attendance. There is not one focus school for Sunny School District since the participants are involved with multiple schools, including a Montessori charter school, a public elementary, and a public high school, and all be addressed in this study. According to the participants, both districts still have a very low number of openly- identifying transgender students, making their children one of the few if not only at their school.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study include two families, where both parental figures were present, as well as, one child from one of the families. These participants were selected because

of their involvement with the focus issue and their relevant, personal experiences with gender identification throughout their school years.

**John Smith-** The father of a seven year old child, Myka Smith, who identifies as transgender. He currently works as a high school teacher and is on the school board for his district, advocating for transgender student rights.

**Sara Smith-** The mother of Myka Smith. She also has involvement with the LGBTQIA+ center in their area.

**Jamie Wells-** A gender transitioning high school student who lives with their adopted parents.

**Lorraine Wells-** The adopted mother of Jamie. She works as a high school teacher and is a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. <sup>1</sup>

### **Researcher**

This topic issue is something that I have been studying from different angles for a few years now. I became increasingly aware of the issues transgender students face when I was introduced to the LGBTQIA+ community through my family members, specifically a close loved one who identifies as a transgender woman. After reflecting on my own education, and observing current curriculum in public schools, I noticed a lack of gender inclusive information, causing me to rethink my values as a future educator. I strive to teach with equity and in order to do so, I must be aware of the flaws our education system has when it comes to the transgender student population.

### **Semi- Structured Interview Questions**

1. What challenges do you see with transgender/ gender identity inclusivity in public schools?

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the names of all people, schools, and locations.

2. What do you know about what is currently being done and which aspects are useful?
3. How can teachers better support these students currently?
4. When should schools provide gender identity education to their students and why?
5. What issues do you see arising as we make this transition in our curriculum?
6. What can teachers do versus what should our administration do to implement gender inclusive curriculum?

### **Procedure**

Participants were interviewed in a no- contact method, either via Zoom or phone, with follow up interactions conducted over email. Interviews were one and a half hours and both participants from either family were interviewed within that time. The interview with the Smith family was held over the phone, due to their availability and comfortability. The interview that included Jamie Wells, was done in the supervision of their parent, Lorraine Wells via a Zoom meeting. Each interview used the same semi- structured interview questions, with informal follow up questions to clarify or further ideas and themes. Due to the fact that one of the participants was a minor, there were other informal questions or comments given by the present parent to ensure comfortability and keep the child engaged in the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

For the phone interview, the data was collected through a written transcription as the interview took place. The Zoom interview was transcribed and the researcher took a written transcription of the interview as well. Each interview was analyzed to find emergent themes and experiences.

### **Results**

For this Capstone Project, transgender students and parents of those students were

interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve inclusivity, support, and awareness for transgender students. This is important because these students face the fact of continuously being denied acknowledgment through our education system. They are exposed to an alarming rate of discrimination, harassment, and bullying, as a result of not conforming to societal gender norms, and the way to prevent ignorance or hate is to educate. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time; reach; and effectiveness. Time is a very important factor to consider in this issue because most school staff members are already struggling with having the necessary time to complete what they need their students to know. Since being transgender can expose you to violence, discrimination, and other life- long obstacles, this is a very time sensitive issue. Reach is important to consider because this is not a population that is congested into one area, but rather one that you will find all over the world. One school making a change is great, but it is not enough to get the systemic changes these people deserve, therefore the reach is necessary for evaluating these options. Effectiveness will allow us to take a look into how successful the option will be and what implications may play a part in this success. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1.

	Time	Reach	Effectiveness
Policy changes at the State Level	High	High	Moderate
Training for All School Staff on	Low	High	High

LGBTQIA+ Education and Gender Identity Support			
Curriculum Changes for Inclusion of Gender Identity and Transgender Individuals	Moderate	High	Moderate

### Changing the Law

While there are laws in place that protect transgender students from prejudice or discrimination in schools, the laws do not state that students should be educated on what it means to be transgender, let alone gender identity as a whole. Even with the laws in place that are meant to protect our transgender youth, without making it necessary to educate the rest of students, it cannot be expected that all discrimination or bullying will end. According to the school board member John Smith, “policies at the district level isn’t doing enough”, teachers can then lean on the state legalities to back their approach (J. Smith. personal communication, March 2, 2021). His wife follows up with, “we need policy changes for the communities that aren’t as progressive” because you will face “traditional teachers”. She argues that this “obsession with binary is not fair, even for the cis kids”, meaning that having an education on gender identity will allow cisgender, (gender conforming, or students who identify with their birth sex), to identify greater with their gender (S. Smith. personal communication, March 2, 2021). It is not a policy that is focused on transgender students or identifying with a gender other than your birth gender, but rather a policy that will facilitate identity development and create a supportive and inclusive environment for those who identify outside of their birth gender.

In the United States, a law goes through a very long and extensive process to be passed, therefore this option is very high on the criteria of time. The process begins with the bill being drafted, assigned to a committee, voted on, and if passed, then gets transferred to the next committee to be voted on again (The Legislative Process). It takes some time before the bill makes it to the president then is passed as a law. Since the law would be at the state level, the reach is high because it would be mandatory to follow by all Californians, though the effectiveness is only moderate because it takes time for change to follow the new policy.

### **Educating the Staff**

Teachers are educated greatly before they are able to enter a classroom, and they continue to learn throughout their career. However, we are mostly educated on content which we should teach, and not focused on how to care for people, which is a large part of this job. How can a teacher be expected to implement knowledge on gender identity when they have not received this education themselves? Training teachers on gender identity is not enough though because these students have interactions with other school staff, who also play a huge role in students' development and their attitudes towards school. "Classified staff needs training", we don't realize the level of interactions they have with our students. Training all school staff will allow the conversation of gender identity to flow more organically, and not to single out the diverse group, but rather talk about all groups equally and accurately (J. Smith. personal communication, March 2, 2021). It will give teachers the resources, materials, and support they need to relay this information to their students, assist their students with coping, and reduce the likelihood of bullying. Lorraine Wells described how "even the parents of trans kids are still learning", and having the staff educated, will give them the opportunity to provide support and resources to these parents as well (L. Wells. personal communication, March 11, 2021). For many transgender

students, they do not have the support they need at home, so if they are able to gain that support and information from their educators or school counselors, it can make a world of difference.

In regards to the criteria, the time necessary is quite low for this option, with both the effectiveness and reach being high. Training sessions held by different LGBTQIA+ centers throughout California were found to be typically within two hours per training. These can take place during staff development days, or on the teachers own time, therefore they do not cut into classroom time. The knowledge gained from these training sessions can be used for years to come, reaching many different students, and teachers can refresh or update with training each year, or however often the school feels necessary. The most effective way to find a solution to an issue or concern is to educate yourself on what is going on, making this option quite effective.

### **Inclusive Curriculum**

“There is no inclusion of public figures in curriculum” and no conversation about gender in elementary school (J. Wells. personal communication, March 11, 2021). It benefits student learning when you can provide them information about or from people they can relate to. For example, if you have a female student who is interested in science, you may gather books that feature women astronauts to inspire and empower that child. Therefore, if you have a transgender student, you should have materials available that feature other transgender figures to empower that student and motivate them to continue learning. The inclusive curriculum benefits cisgender students as well because the more exposure to diversity, the less likely the child is to fall into discriminatory behaviors. It also creates the feeling of equality, open- mindedness, and positivity within the classroom, which is proven to increase academic success.

Changing our curriculum standards to include information about gender identity and transgender individuals forces teachers to “do something!” (L. Wells. personal communication,

March 11, 2021). It prevents teachers from letting their own biases or values form the way they talk about gender because they will need to follow the guidelines that coincide with the state standards. This ensures that each teacher is giving the same information to all students and provides a less awkward way of incorporating the topic into their daily lessons. Lorraine Wells confirms that a gender inclusive curriculum will give a time dedicated to the topic, whereas currently, she is the only teacher who is incorporating transgender voices into her lessons (L. Wells. personal communication, March 11, 2021). Teachers have such a focus on curriculum because it is basically the map for what you need to know, teach, and assess, therefore when curriculum includes this topic, teachers can fall back on this guide.

Similarly to the policy changes, altering the curriculum takes a bit more time. While teachers can make their curriculum inclusive independently, changing the standard requires a moderate time frame. Once a standard is implemented, it has to be followed by all teachers, making this option one to consider based on the reach and effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

Given the options listed above and based on the criteria, I would recommend training all school staff to be the step taken to address this issue. From what was learned in the literature synthesis and suggestions with first hand experience from the participants, I believe that this option would not only provide the change necessary, but it will propel further changes within our education system with the intent of providing a more inclusive education and learning environment to our students in public schools.

### **Concessions**

Though I have chosen the training of all school staff to be the best option for approaching this issue, the other two options do provide great stances for changing how our education system



treats transgender students. In the long run, we would hope for policy changes at the state level, because that is how we will continue to progress towards a safer and inclusive country. Not only does this hold teachers and administrators accountable if they fail to incorporate gender identity education into their teachings, but it also stands as a back bone for them to rely on if they face community backlash or need further resources. Similarly to option one, the third option also takes some of the stress away from the teachers themselves, because they have a guide to follow. This will help with bringing a natural flow to this topic, so that they are not singling the diverse group, but rather including it with the other diverse groups we teach about. Again, it takes the heat off of the teachers if there is community backlash, because it is not selective, and is indeed a state- wide curriculum inclusion. Each of these options provides a solution, it is only after considering the criteria that option two be the first step taken to address the focus issue.

### **Limitations**

While the argument is strong for implementing training for all school staff, we must consider the limitations that will arise. As explained by Sara Smith, “the newer generations are more comfortable with the topic, but geographics matter”, because there are still whole districts that function at more of a “traditional” view (S. Smith. personal communication, March 2, 2021). In these areas, it can be expected to face community backlash, especially from the parents. Even in an area that is considered more diverse and progressive, there is still a population that does not believe this should be a topic included in our education, let alone one that should be taught as early as kindergarten.

Another limitation we face is the sensitivity of this topic and those who identify as transgender not being comfortable voicing their needs. Jamie Wells described how it can be difficult for the transgender students to come forward because in their case they weren't ready to

acknowledge their own identity. “Bring this up sooner, it’ll help the young children make sense of their own feelings when they can’t put words to it” (J. Wells. personal communication, March 11, 2021). Jamie also explained how seeking out the support in school can be “disheartening”, therefore these students may lose their motivation to continuously fight for their acknowledgement. Without their voices, this issue cannot be resolved, but it takes a lot to stand up for yourself when you have to fear for your safety.

### **Potential Negative Outcomes**

The potential negative outcomes are unfortunately some that are quite drastic and violent. As a country, we do not have an agreement on the treatment or acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community, especially those who identify as transgender. This poses a risk for the safety of these lives, because they do experience physical assaults at an alarming rate. When the goal is to educate about and for a diverse population, the last thing we want to create is an opportunity for someone to attack.

### **Conclusion**

Even with the limitations and potential negative outcomes, I strongly believe based on the research gathered in this study, that requiring all school staff who have contact with students and families, be trained in educating and supporting gender identity, specifically our transgender youth. Given that they face these limitations and negative outcomes already, the only way to take a step to prevention of transgender discrimination and violence is to educate. The solution to facilitating identity growth and development is to educate our students on what gender identity means and what systemic or societal expectations still stand. Without the proper knowledge, our teachers, counselors, and administrative staff could actually be doing a disservice when they actually have well intentions. We expect our schools to hold their staff to a high standard of

education, equality, and safety for all students, and this training will ensure that the transgender student population is gaining such qualities throughout their academic career.

### **Action Documentation**

Based on the literature, there is a major fault in our education system when it comes to gender identity and transgender student support, resources, and knowledge. After considering the criteria for each option; policy changes, inclusive curriculum, and staff training, I concluded that the action needed to address this issue is training all school staff. The participants and literature support that given these trainings are implemented, we can expect an increase in positive experiences within public schools for transgender students. This option leads to academic success, furthering education, reduced bullying, violence, and mental health concerns for our transgender youth, as well as facilitating identity development. With this option recommendation, I contacted the California Department of Education through their online emailing system with my suggested action option (see Image 1). Within that email, I provided links to lgbt centers throughout California that provide training on transgender youth and students for the department to evaluate and share with their educators.

Furthering this recommendation, I would like to contact these centers and schools willing to participate directly, to facilitate the integration of these trainings into schools. The hope is that with the momentum of more public school participation, we can gain the support of districts, which will lead to policy changes explained in the first option. Due to the length of time that is required, this option is not the ideal first step, but is indeed the goal. With more teachers, administrators, and counselors advocating for these trainings, the state will need to recognize the impact it makes.

California Department of Education: Copy of Recommendation Email

To Whom It May Concern,

I am a California State University Monterey Bay undergraduate student studying the impact our education system has on the transgender student body within our public schools. For my Final Capstone Research, I looked into ways our public schools can increase their support, acknowledgment, safety, and academic success of our transgender students. Through previous literature and interviews, I determined the most relevant options for tackling this issue and the criteria which I evaluated each option in order to recommend to our state the most effective solution.

After conducting my research, I found that implementing teacher and school staff training on transgender youth and gender identity development be the best option. This option met the criteria for time, reach and effectiveness, being the most efficient option in the littlest time needed with the greatest reach. In the state of California, we have the privilege of access to lgbt centers that provide trainings and resources for holding trainings, which are linked below.

National Education Action Team: <https://www.theneat.org/>

Diversity Center of Santa Cruz: <https://www.diversitycenter.org/training>

Sacramento LGBT Community Center: <https://saccenter.org/outreach-training>

GLSEN Los Angeles: <https://www.glsen.org/chapter/los-angeles>

San Francisco LGBT Center: <https://www.sfcenter.org/resources/?filters=17&at=0>

San Diego LGBT Community Center: <https://thecentersd.org/programs/transgender-services/>

I want to thank you for your time and consideration of my recommendation. Please contact me with any questions or suggestions on how to further my recommendation within our state.

Sincerely,  
Reema Allen  
CSU Monterey Bay  
rallen@csumb.edu

*Image 1. Copy of Recommendation Email.*

### **Critical Reflection**

When I began thinking about how I was going to address this issue for my Capstone, I found myself struggling with the broadness of this topic. My research took me down a slightly

different path than the course, because it wasn't until I conducted my interviews that I discovered the area I was going to focus on. This issue holds personal meaning to myself and my family, and my research only furthered my appreciation for the transgender community and heightened the need to advocate for their success within the California public school system. Through my interviews, I learned what ways teachers and administrators can better support their transgender students. From the literature, I realized how much our current approach to transgender inclusivity affects the mental health, academic success, and safety of these students. CSU Monterey Bay emphasizes the importance of teaching with equity, and from what was taught about the role educators have in including a multicultural education, this is one area that I noticed was lacking in our public schools. In order to teach for social change, the educator has to be knowledgeable on the issue and actions that aid in the resolution of the issue. While the idea of teaching with inclusivity for transgender students poses its limitations and potential negative reactions, the outcome is one that will bring equality and acceptance to a group of students that face a great deal of hardship just living their true lives. I am hopeful that this new generation of educators will propel the government to pass policies that support this population, and until then, we can continue to educate ourselves and our youth on gender identity development and transgender individuals.

### **Synthesis and Integration**

This Capstone course has tested and strengthened all aspects of my professional development including content knowledge, multicultural teaching practices, relationships with my community, understanding of social justice, and education systems. One of the Major Learning Outcomes (MLO) of this course is Developing Educators, which is how I evaluated my knowledge on public school systems. Through my research, I learned about policies and

standards and the differences between what was at the district or state level. The second MLO is the Diversity and Multicultural Scholar, assessing the students' understanding of societal institutions and practices, as well as multicultural knowledge. This research gave me the opportunity to go in depth about the current and past school practices around a diverse group of students. Finally, the fourth MLO, Social Justice Collaborator, was a skill that I wasn't confident in prior to this course. When entering a profession that requires you to be a part of your community and the important role you play in the development of these students, future educators need to use this knowledge to advocate for access, equality, and justice in public education. With the resources and experience gained throughout this project, I know I have fulfilled this learning goal and can continue my stance towards social justice.

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