I received the following email in September of 2015:
Hello. My name is Ronn. I am a senior at a [southern state] high school, and I am a transgender male. I quit choir last year because my director forced me to wear a dress. I begged him and begged him to let me wear the attire of my gender identity, but he repeatedly refused, even after talking with the counselor about it. I was furious and miserable, and I quit.
These types of sentiments and experiences have become increasingly common as of late. And while many choral educators are compassionate and kind toward trans students, there are a handful that exhibit ignorance about gender diversity.
To explore this issue, I spent a year visiting with and observing three transgender high school students in the context of their school choral programs. The goal of this narrative study, and for this presentation, is to allow these three incredible students to speak for themselves. The names of all people and places in this presentation are pseudonyms.
Several recent studies explored trans issues in music education.
—Silveira & Goff’s survey of teachers uncovered positive feelings overall, but what is concerning, is that 40.1% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “Transgender students in choir should be permitted to sing with a vocal part that aligns with their gender identity” (p. 11).
—In Nichols’ portrait of a gender fluid student, Rie/Ryan’s teachers were “unprepared for [the] presence” of trans students.
—In a national survey Paul Caldwell and I completed in 2015: Nearly 12% identified as trans and the data indicate that they felt less safe in MS/HS than their lesbian, gay, and bisexual peers.
The study was based upon two research questions and one emergent question about policies.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

• (1) How do transgender students navigate their gender identity in the school choral context?

• (2) Were transgender choir students supported by their choral teachers, choral peers, and school administrators? If so, how? If not, why not?

• Emergent Question: What were the policy approaches taken by each school and school district?
METHOD AND ANALYSIS

- Guided by intrinsic case study design (Stake, 1995)
- Narrative and cross-case analysis (Fraser, 2004)

The emergent research design employed narrative inquiry and ethnographic techniques to honor and highlight voices of the three participants. I used a narrative analysis framework from the field of Social Work developed by Heather Fraser (2004). This study features the stories of three students: Sara, Jon, and Skyler. We begin with Sara’s story.
Sara was an 18-year old high school senior in River Glen, a small town (population 5,000) near a mid-sized Midwestern capital city. Later in the data collection, she was a college freshman. She was a section leader in her high school’s chamber choir and was chosen to sing in Regional, State, and All-State honor choirs.
Because I have enough data to fill several hours, and to maintain a focus on music teacher education, this presentation will focus on these students’ experiences’ with music educators and other adults who influenced their music experiences. I will also highlight issues of voice and gender identity that are important for preservice choral music educators to consider. Sara spoke bluntly about her voice and gender:
I’m a girl and I’m a bass and I own that. It makes me unique in the scope as far—as wide as [State Choral Organization] as a whole. Much earlier on in my transition, two, three years ago I thought, “well, I’m not supposed to like this,” but since the whole honors choir thing has happened it’s become my signature and it’s something that I’m proud of.

This statement indicates that some trans people feel little or no connection between their voice and their gender identity—an important realization for choral music educators.
Sarah and her high school choir teacher Mr. Thompson had a close relationship and she trusted him to make a decision about which voice part she should sing.
Sara: My sophomore year with Mr. Thompson, I talked about how my voice lessons were focused on falsetto, so I thought, “well, maybe I should just float and sing alto or something.”

JP: Is that something you made known?

Sara: No, no. Mr. Thompson said, “No, you should sing in the bass section.”

Sara’s first interaction with choral teacher Mr. Thompson occurred before she joined choir.
Mr. Thompson proved to be an incredibly influential role model for Sara—including going “above and beyond” in supporting her before she was his student.
Since the purpose of this study was to improve vocal/choral instruction for trans students, I asked each participant what they would like to ‘tell choral teachers about working with you or another trans student.’ To this question, Sara reiterated the importance of mindful language use — One issue Sara had in her honor choir experiences.
The short answer is, when you’re talking about voices, don’t say “men and women” and when you’re talking about “men and women,” don’t say voices. “Men and women” applies when people are choosing tuxes or dresses, voices apply for just about everything else in that context...
For Sara, words in rehearsal carry great emotional weight. In addition to her clear advice for educators, she had the following advice for a hypothetical trans girl interested in singing in choir.
Figure out who you are, become confident in that; even if you’re not confident in that, stick to that idea. Put on the face of being confident about that idea and it will manifest itself and build a diplomatic relationship with your teachers and your administration and they’ll be willing to help you get where you need to be.
Short, confident, and (admittedly) loud, Jon was a 17-year-old high school senior at the time of data collection. He had always lived in Landerstown (population 3,400), in a large suburban area on the Eastern seaboard. Jon sang in select choir and was involved in the gay-straight alliance at Landerstown High School.
Jon first came out as a lesbian at school at age 12. This was not received well and he experienced some bullying during his adolescent years. In middle school choir, Jon’s choir teacher did not openly discuss his sexuality, but did make vocal accommodations that helped Jon feel at ease as he navigated use of his ‘non-normative’ voice:
I had a really great choir director in middle school, and so he gave me parts that went with my voice. I was an alto, I guess, all through middle school. And I did the middle school musicals (...) He’d give me male roles. Not ‘male roles,’ but roles that had lower vocal parts because he knew that I could sing—I just couldn’t sing high. (...) I always felt **comfortable in my voice**, you know? I was never scared of the fact or embarrassed about the fact that my voice was lower.

Here Jon demonstrates the fact that he always had a low voice and that he had a supportive teacher who helped him feel comfortable with his voice, and, indirectly, his gender identity.
Unlike Sara, Jon felt an extremely strong sense of connection between his voice and his gender identity, as demonstrated in the following quote:
I don’t think I’d be as strong or as confident of a singer if I didn’t sing a male voice part. I really think it gives me confidence to be able to sing and to want to sing. I don’t think I’d want to sing if I was still an alto. But, you know, even just my speaking voice, I think it makes me more comfortable when I’m out and about. Especially if I’m with a group of guys that I don’t know. It’s a grrrr [growling sound] thing. So, there’s definitely a correlation and a connection. As much as there’s no connection and it doesn’t define who you are or define you, it’s the same as how I dress or how I wear my hair. It’s an appearance aspect of myself.

“An appearance aspect of myself…” a perfect distillation of gender expression and “doing” your gender in public.
Jon had parents that did not take his coming out well, and he was not Testosterone at the time of our interviews. However, Jon had spent several years purposely lowering his voice in an attempt to be ‘stealth’ in public, which caused serious vocal health issues, namely vocal nodes.
Dr. Endroth [my voice therapist] said that I need to bring up my voice an octave. So I work on it. And I’ve tried to bring it up in school and bring it up at home, but when you go out places, it’s hard. Because I already look like I’m twelve. So as much as Dr. Endroth is like, ‘that doesn’t define your gender: your voice doesn’t define your gender.’ Of course it defines your gender. So, it’s hard. But I know that I need to, so I try to and it’s obviously a lot easier and helpful—beneficial...

Strong connection between voice and gender identity.
Mr. Mullins, Jon’s high school choir teacher, was helpful in getting Jon to see an ENT who diagnosed these vocal issues and also monitored his vocal health. Mr. Mullins was also extremely influential in “going to bat” for Jon with the state music education organization, which had a policy on the books that would have prevented Jon for auditioning as a tenor. This extreme support, combined with the fact that Mr. Mullins was openly gay and the founder of the LHS Gender-Sexuality Alliance, helped Jon feel extremely comfortable in the “E-Wing,” which housed the choir and theatre spaces.
Importance of music classrooms as safe spaces; mirrors the idea of music classrooms as “home away from home”

I think when I’m back here [in the E-wing] in the department and I’m doing rehearsal or I’m in choir, people are calling me Jon and saying “he” because that’s what they view me as. That’s who I am to them. But when it’s out in the rest of the school, people are calling me Jon because it’s what they know I want to be called. So it’s the difference between someone actually seeing me as male and someone just doing what is making me happy. And that definitely has an affect on how I carry myself, because I’m a lot more comfortable and I’m a lot more confident when I’m back here because you’re not judged.
In our conversations, I expressed dismay that there are choral teachers who do not accept the true gender identity of their students, to which Jon said: ‘It’s bullying. I think that’s a large problem. How can we expect students to respect students if there’s bullying and intolerance at the adult level in schools?’ He warned choral teachers against:
Jon also stated quite clearly the power of policies in the lives of trans students and urged us to create “music policies” for trans students.

Acting like trans students are an issue that need to be addressed rather than just another student with another situation (...) I think that if music teachers got over that hurdle of thinking that it's a blockade that they just can't approach, won't approach, ignore, then dealing with it is a lot simpler than ignoring it. (...) Dealing with it and then moving on. You know? It's the moving on part. It's addressing it, "ok this is the situation, this is what we're going to do about it," and then continuing to just treat that student as if they're any other choir student.
At the time of data collection, Skyler was a junior at Parkton High School in a suburb outside of a medium sized Midwestern city.
An increasing number of gender liminal people are choosing to identify themselves using pronouns typically reserved for a group of people—namely, they, them, and their. Some people also use original pronouns such as ze and hir.
In middle school, Skyler began to use their new name and later had it legally changed. In our first interview, Skyler clarified their gender identity as agender. They said, “I think gender is kind of dumb and I really don’t see the need to have one.” Although they did make declarative statements, they also remained unsure about what “transition” meant for them, including the meaning of their voice—
I'm the type of person that is comfortable with my voice. I understand people that want to change it and I understand that that can be hard. Personally, since I don’t really have an ideal to work toward if that makes any sense, it makes some things harder but some easier. Because I’m not working toward presenting as a specific gender...
I’m not sure what I actually want out of my transition sometimes, or how to get what I want, because some things I want are impossible. But, it does give me a little more freedom (...) because I’m not working toward a specific presentation ideal, I feel like I’m a little more comfortable just letting my voice be how it is.
I realized early in the data collection process that Skyler had not disclosed their transgender identity to Mr. Cooper and had not requested that he use they/them/their pronouns in class. Skyler said:
I’ve been wanting to have a conversation with him anyway and none of the fact that I hadn’t told him was anything about, “oh, I don’t think he’d react well” or anything along those lines. It was honestly just I hadn’t really told anybody and I hadn’t had a really big reason to. But, honestly, I did tell him and I did talk to him. And, I mean he just—he responded like he always does to things, which—it’s a good response...
Skyler is an extremely well-spoken, articulate young person. I asked them what they would say to room full of choir teachers on the topic of including and honoring trans students in choir.
If a student talks to them about something that they don’t understand, don’t respond immediately if you don’t understand what they’re saying. (...) Talk to the student. And think it over. Think about whether what they’re asking for or what they’re telling you is really that important, not to them, but think about...
If they say, “Hey, can I wear a tux?” If your gut reaction is “No of course you can’t,” think about why that was your gut reaction and then think about if it really matters. Why does it matter? Maybe there are some honest reasons. Maybe it matters because you stand in sections. Well, what can you do about that? Can you change the way people stand? Can you give people an option for different uniforms? Can you make the uniform unisex?
If a student comes to you and wants to change voice parts or sing with a different part and you don’t—that’s understandable if you look at it and say “I don’t think that’s healthy for your voice.” But can you talk to them about it and figure out what makes them the most comfortable that’s possible for the program and for their voice? What’s the most comfortable for them and doesn’t hurt them?
And I think most good choir directors should stop and think about this and realize that the student comes first. It’s not about them [the director]. It’s about the kids in the program.
What can these data mean for choral music educators?
Monks (2003) and Lipson (2013) asserts that one’s vocal identity is very closely tied to one’s sense of self. Data from this study support this notion and also suggest that the link between gender identity and vocal identity may be quite complicated. It is important that choral teachers not assume that students’ voices and gender identities are linked. Teachers should engage in clear communication with trans students about this link or lack thereof and how it will influence what voice part they sing. **This is a complicated issue that I break down further in my recent choral journal article.**

Briefly, I suggest the following process **click through**. This may result in a student singing a ‘hybrid’ part for certain pieces/sections (e.g., switching back and forth between alto and tenor). If a student who identifies as FTM (female-to-male) begins hormone therapy (testosterone), then a voice change will occur.
**DEFINE BINARY** Based on the data in this study, several choral policies should be examined when considering trans students and their experiences: (a) The vocal part assigned to, or chosen by, trans singers may influence their gender identity and expression, (b) Choral teachers will need to decide how to accommodate trans and especially non-binary singers within traditional ‘gendered’ ensembles (e.g., men’s and women’s choruses), (c) Choral teachers should reconsider the ‘tradition’ of tuxedoes and dresses as the standard choral uniform, and (d) Choral teachers should consider language that addresses sections, not genders.
All three participants had significant mentor figures that helped them navigate their trans identity. In each case, at least one of their choir teachers proved influential. Sara often spoke passionately about her first choir teacher—the one who left for another school district after her sophomore year. Even before Sara was Mr. Thompson's student, he reached and gave her a ‘pep talk’ when he could tell that she was struggling socially at school. This extraordinary act of kindness played a large role in Sara’s musical life and her gender journey. Skyler’s teacher did not seem to grasp the concept of they/them/their pronoun use, but was still honored their identity. All music educators should be prepared to use a student’s chosen pronouns in class. As a profession, it seems that, there is confusion and a great deal of ignorance about trans issues in choir. I have been involved with numerous threads in the I’m a choir director Facebook group regarding which voice part trans students should sing as exemplified in the increasing number of threads about this topic on social media.
And what can we as music teacher educators do to help trans students?
Discussions of LGBTQA topics deserves a place in preservice teacher coursework. Discussions of Gender-Sexual diversity can take place in all coursework, but seems especially apt for Introduction to Music Education and Choral Methods Courses. William Sauerland and I presented many suggestions for incorporation of gender in undergraduate courses in our session yesterday and our handout is available by request.
e.g., bathroom bills (Gavin Grimm), Obama era protections for trans students in public schools and the meaning of the Trump administrations abandonment of these supports.
WORK WITH LOCAL AND
STATE ORGANIZATIONS
WHO SPONSOR HONOR
CHOIRS TO ENSURE
EQUITABLE POLICIES FOR
TRANS STUDENTS

e.g., Mr. Mullins, Jon’s teacher, TMEA
Create more safe people who will be safe people for the queer youth of tomorrow. A safe space sticker is an easy fix (I have some here today if you want one!)
Transgender students exist everywhere—including in school choral programs. It is my hope that this study will add to the ongoing discussion about how to include and honor all gender identities in the choral context. The experiences of these three students illuminate new issues for consideration and multiple paths forward. It is imperative that choral educators expand their notions about gender—away from a simplistic binary category toward a ‘gender-complex’ approach in which all choral students—cisgender, trans, genderqueer, questioning, and every other variation—can thrive.
THANK YOU FOR COMING

WE WILL NOT WIN OUR RIGHTS BY STAYING QUIETLY IN OUR CLOSETS