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Promoting Inclusivity and Acceptance of Diverse Sexual and Gender Identities in Schools

A rapid realist review of programs identifies five types of universal interventions to support students.



Schlieff and Colleagues, 2023

This report summarizes findings from: “A rapid realist review of universal interventions to promote inclusivity and acceptance of diverse sexual and gender identities in schools”

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Supporting Youth with Sexual and Gender Minority Identities

Youth identifying as sexual and gender minorities (SGM) are twice as likely to experience depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidality than their heterosexual peers.¹ Throughout the report, we use the term SGM to report findings that include all sexual and gender minority youth. Otherwise, we use the term used by study authors (e.g., LGB, LGBTQ+).

SGM is a term used to describe people who are not heterosexual or cisgender.

In a 2022 Trevor Project survey of LGBTQ+ youth:²

63%

reported self injury

59%

reported seriously considering suicide in the past year

23%

reported attempting suicide in the past year

Schools play a critical role in supporting youth

Schools play an important role in supporting SGM youth; research has shown that lack of supportive environments is a strong risk factor for LGBTQ+ youth substance use³ and many LGBTQ youth have reported feeling fewer social supports from teachers and peers than their non-LGBTQ peers.⁴

Five Universal Interventions to Support Youth

Using insights from the research literature and consultation with a youth advisory group and a stakeholder advisory group, authors identified five types of universal interventions that can support SGM youth at school.

1

**Gay-Straight Alliances
or similar student clubs**

4

**Sexual and gender minority
ally and staff training**

2

**Inclusive anti-bullying and
harassment policies**

5

Inclusive curricula

3

**Workshops including
media interventions**



1

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) or similar student clubs

Student-run clubs that aim to create a safe and supportive school environment for youth with sexual and gender minorities and allied youth.

How does it help youth?

- Reduces bullying and discrimination
- Reduces the likelihood of suicidal thoughts and attempts
- Reduces feelings of isolation
- Increases feelings of safety

When does it work best?

1. When clubs are integrated into a wider school strategy
2. When clubs are established long-term
3. When schools have an overall positive climate
4. When SGM teachers attend clubs and wear rainbow lanyards

Why does it work?



What are potential harms?

Harms of these programs are most likely to occur in schools with school climates that are unsupportive of SGM youth. Possible adverse effects might include increases in bullying and reluctance to attend the clubs due to fear of being stigmatized and bullied.

Where can I learn more?

- [GLSEN virtual GSA resources](#)
- [GSA Network](#)

2

Inclusive anti-bullying and harassment policies

Policies that aim to address all forms of bullying and create safe and supportive school climates for students with protected characteristics.

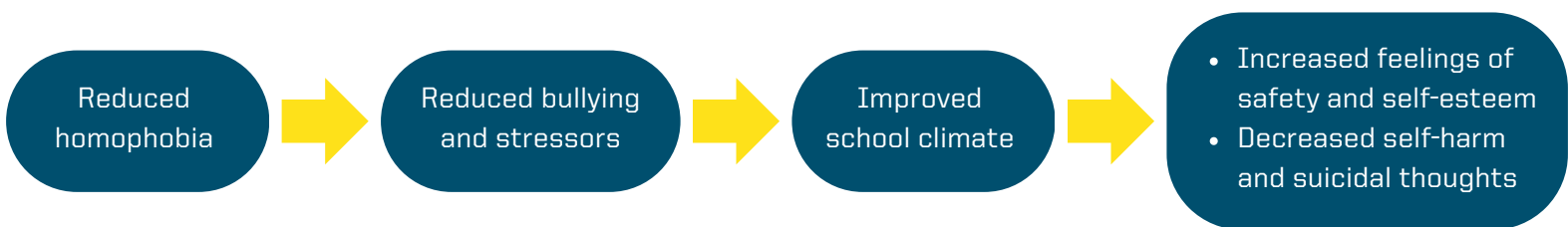
How does it help youth?

- Increases feelings of safety
- Raises self-esteem
- Reduces likelihood of self-harm, suicidal thoughts and attempts

When does it work best?

1. When policies are specific to SGM issues
2. When policies are established long-term
3. When there is supportive school leadership and staff
4. When support is provided to students who bully via conflict resolution talks
5. When done in combination with other policies at the least safe schools

Why does it work?



What are potential harms?

Harms of these policies are most likely to occur in schools that are hostile towards SGM youth. These include increases in bullying and feelings of isolation, as well as facing backlash when being “out.”

Where can I learn more?

- [GLSEN model laws and policies](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education toolkit](#)
- [YPA model school policy initiative](#)

3

Workshops including media interventions

Interventions including panel discussions, film screenings, and theatre performances that aim to raise awareness about homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic bullying and discrimination and promote understanding towards people identifying as SGM.

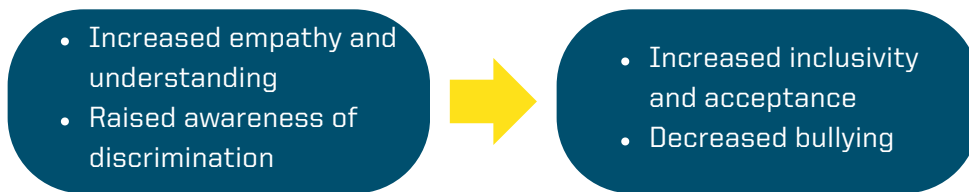
How does it help youth?

- Increases inclusivity and acceptance
- Decreases homophobic and transphobic bullying

When does it work best?

1. When workshops or media interventions are led by SGM peer educators
2. When workshops or media interventions are included in a wider long-term commitment to inclusivity and acceptance by the school

Why does it work?



What are potential harms?

There may be harms if workshops are tokenistic (for example, occurring during pride month but not thereafter), as they may not signal a long-term commitment to inclusivity at the school.

Where can I learn more?

- [GLSEN movie discussion guides](#)
- [University of Florida's Center for Arts in Medicine youth theater program](#)
- [YPA acceptance week program](#)

4

Sexual and gender minority ally and staff training

Training for all school staff on SGM-related issues is essential to promoting a positive school climate for SGM students.

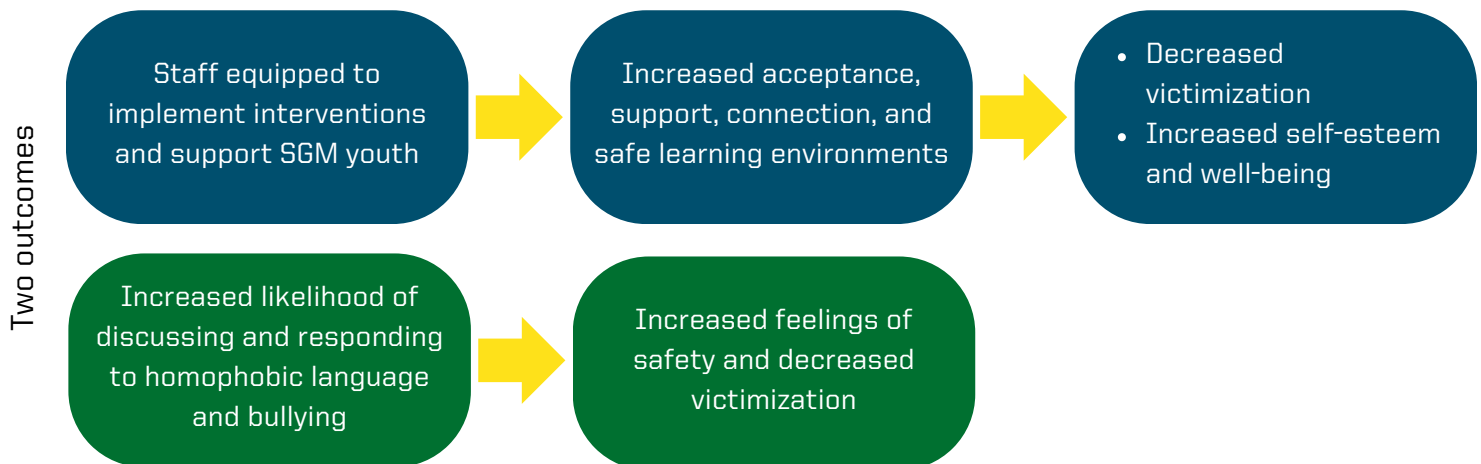
How does it help youth?

- Reduces victimization
- Improves self-esteem, well-being, and mental health

When does it work best?

1. When training includes how to discuss homophobic language use and bullying
2. When there are sufficient resources dedicated to training
3. When training is co-designed and co-delivered by SGM staff and students

Why does it work?



What are potential harms?

Potential harms of training include insufficient training; teachers may be more likely to discuss homophobic language in class, but not more likely to intervene in discrimination or bullying.

Where can I learn more?

- [GLSEN professional development tools](#)
- [NEA LGBTQ+ Resources](#)
- [Safe Zone Project](#)
- [The Trevor Project Ally Training](#)

5

Inclusive curricula

Curricula that aim to promote diversity and equality for all students and treat SGM issues on an equal footing to heterosexual and cisgender issues.

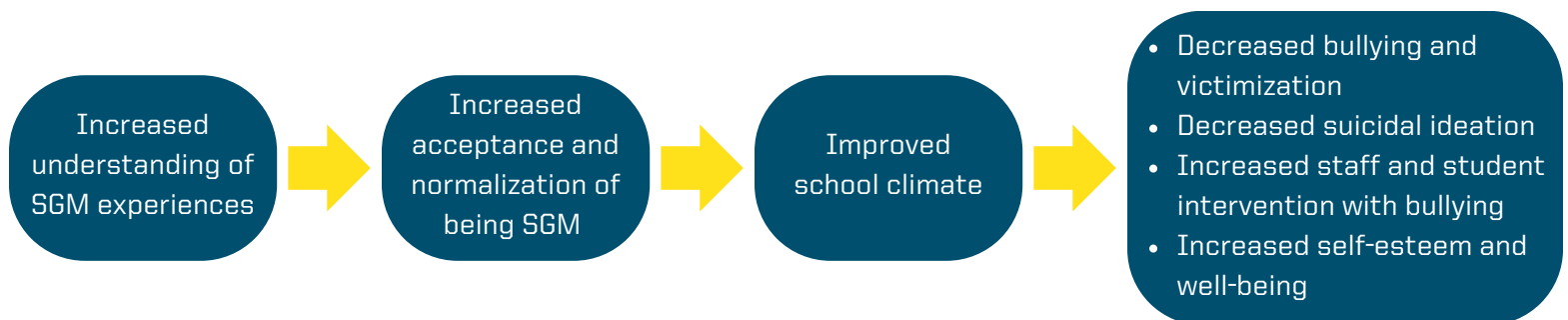
How does it help youth?

- Decreases victimization and bullying
- Increases intervention with bullying

When does it work best?

1. When it includes positive SGM representation/role models
2. When it avoids deficit and at-risk narratives
3. When it is implemented at an early age

Why does it work?



What are potential harms?

Harms of inclusive curricula may occur if the program faces backlash from a wider community (including parents or teachers), which may lead to increased bullying of sexual and gender minority youth students.

Where can I learn more?

- [CDC safe schools for LGBTQ+ youth training](#)
- [GLSEN inclusive classroom resources](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education toolkit](#)

Study Characteristics

Location:

The majority of studies took place in the United States.



United States: 27

South Africa: 2

Canada: 7

New Zealand: 2

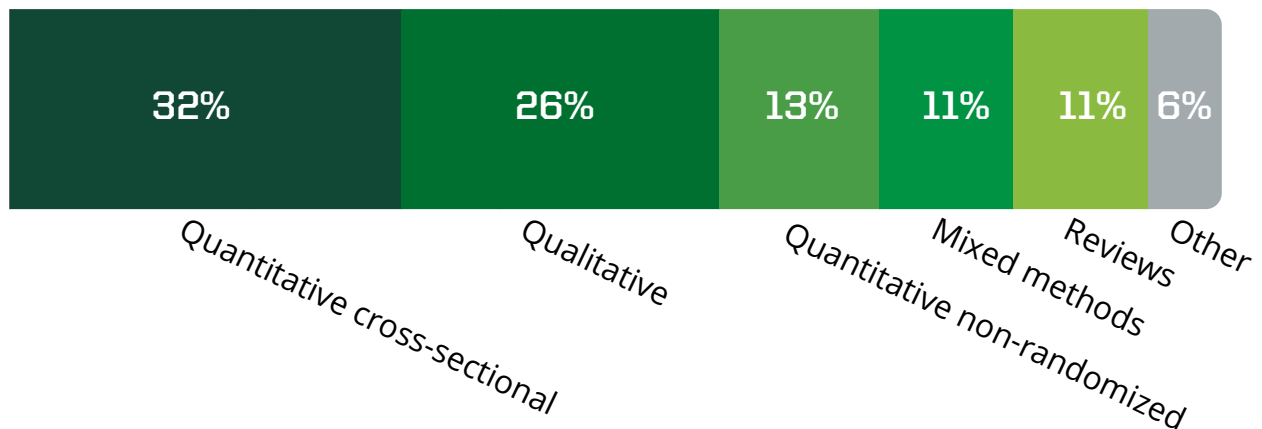
Australia: 5

Netherlands: 2

England: 2

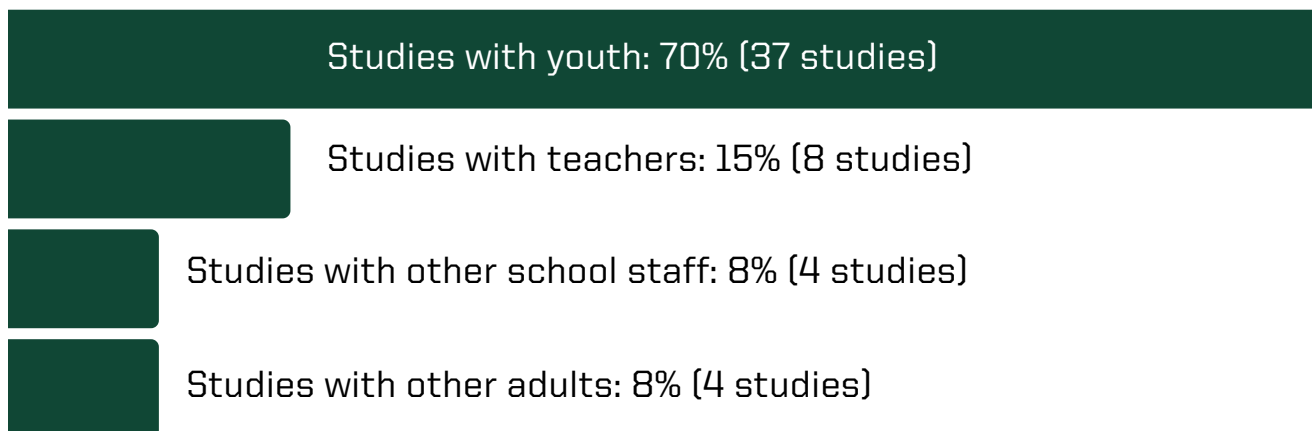
Countries with 1 study: Israel, Italy, Norway, Philippines, Republic of Ireland, Taiwan

Most studies were quantitative cross-sectional or qualitative studies.



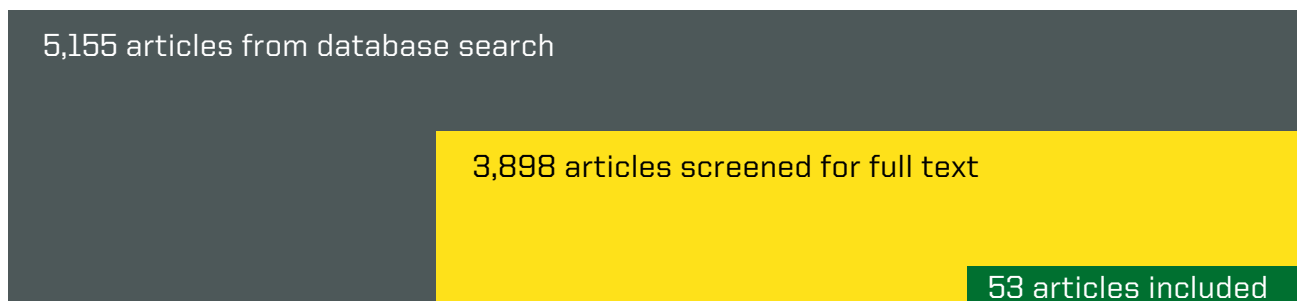
Study Characteristics

Most studies included adolescents or students in secondary schools.



Note: does not total to 100 due to some studies including multiple groups

Methods



What is a Rapid Realist Review?

Realist reviews use context–mechanism–outcome (CMO) configurations to generate program theories, which explicate how certain interventions are more or less likely to work, for certain people, in certain situations.

Compared to traditional realist reviews, rapid realist reviews do not aim to conduct comprehensive literature searches of peer-reviewed literature and other sources. Instead, they draw more heavily on input from reference groups and include experts in research and practice to develop program theories.

Supplemental Materials for the paper provide more details and insights into the Youth Advisory Group and Stakeholder Advisory Group ideas and feedback: [See the materials.](#)

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3. Goldbach, J. T., Tanner-Smith, E. E., Bagwell, M., & Dunlap, S. (2014). Minority stress and substance use in sexual minority adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Prevention Science*, 15, 350-363.

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