

Improving School Outcomes for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Youth: A Rapid Review

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Abstract

Transgender and gender-diverse students may experience poorer school outcomes due to a threatening school climate. A rapid review using systematic search found 2,111 studies mentioned LGBTQ+ students, but only three were peer-reviewed empirical tests of potential interventions to improve school outcomes among transgender and gender-diverse youth: (a) Sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression (SOGIE) inclusive policies were associated with greater school safety, less victimization, less social aggression, and higher teacher support. (b) Among the interventions, the use of the chosen name in school reduced negative health outcomes. (c) Gay–Straight Alliances (GSA) reduced reports of frequent gender-based bullying. Several implementation facilitators for school interventions included transgender and gender-diverse students, along with informative families, trained teachers, and supportive principals. Randomized controlled trials focusing on this population would contribute greater certainty when developing school interventions. The lack of high-quality studies should serve as a wake-up call to conduct the necessary research.

Keywords

transgender, gender-diverse, schools

Tweet

Transgender and gender-diverse students may have a harder school experience without action to consider equity and focus on implementation. More rigorous research should address the specific needs of this group.

Key Points

- Three interventions—(a) Sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE) inclusive policies, (b) use of the chosen name in school, and (c) Gay–Straight Alliances (GSA)—could positively affect school outcomes for transgender and gender-diverse students.
- School, as an institution, can positively influence transgender and gender-diverse students’ attendance by investing in creating a favorable school climate.
- Open communication and advocacy by parents, educators, and principals can create a safer environment for transgender and gender-diverse students.
- Even though families were often the source of diverse educational materials, schools must proactively train their staff.

Background

Transgender and gender-diverse students may experience poorer school outcomes due to a threatening school climate. To be clear, the term “transgender” refers to individuals whose gender identity does not align with the gender assigned to them at birth, whereas “gender-diverse” encompasses people who self-identify as having a gender identity outside the binaries of male and female (e.g., nonbinary, queer, and a-gender). Because social structures are most frequently not designed to accommodate gender diversity, transgender and gender-diverse individuals often experience direct and systemic marginalization (Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

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A key context, *school climate* refers to a sense of belonging and positive interpersonal relationships, as well as feeling safe within the school limits (Cohen, 2009). A positive school climate is associated with enhanced academic performance (Maxwell & Maxwell, 2016) and reduced absenteeism (Kearney & Hendron, 2016). Beyond the influences on achievement, school climate is linked to adolescent health and well-being (Modin & Östberg, 2009; Saab & Klinger, 2010; Schultz, Glass, & Kamholtz, 1987). Evaluating school climate usually measures safety and school connectedness (Maxwell & Maxwell, 2016; Thapa & Guffey, 2013).

School connectedness is the belief that adults in the school care about students learning as much as their individuality (Prevention, 2009). Bonding and engagement in school activities are excellent indicators of school connectedness (Prevention, 2009). School connectedness, also measured by inquiring about the presence of caring relationships with adults at school, has been associated with higher academic achievement and better mental health outcomes, such as less frequent suicidal ideation among LGBT+ youth (Whitaker et al., 2016).

Safety enters into the relationships between school connectedness and dropout, particularly salient in transgender youth, as this population is more exposed to environmental stressors (Fontanari et al., 2021; Fontanari et al., 2019; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018). At school, discrimination and violence can lead to school disconnectedness (Day, Perez-Brumer, & Russell, 2018; Fontanari et al., 2018; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Zeluf et al., 2016). In the United States, most transgender students report feeling unsafe at school because of their gender identity (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016; Grossman et al., 2009; McGuire et al., 2010). Indeed, U.S. transgender students experience high levels of school victimization, varying from verbal harassment to physical assault (Day et al., 2018; Grossman et al., 2009; McGuire et al., 2010) and, thus, avoid gender-segregated spaces in schools, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, for fear of harassment (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Indeed, U.S. transgender youth who experienced harassment were more likely to miss school due to safety concerns than their cisgender peers (Greytak et al., 2016). Compared to their cisgender peers, U.S. transgender students were more likely to have been bullied at school and have been absent from school for three or more days in a month (Pampati et al., 2018). Consequently, one in ten transgender students missed four or more days of school in a month due to feeling uncomfortable or unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2018).

The hostile school environment can negatively affect the academic success and, later, the labor market engagement of transgender youth (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016).

Educational attainment predicts later success in terms of income, occupational status, and life satisfaction (Mirowsky & Ross, 1998; Ross & Wu, 1995). Furthermore, transgender students had lower grades and were less ambitious when it came to college attendance (Kosciw et al., 2016).

Understanding the role of school climate has become a focus of research interest in the last few years, particularly in the United States (Cohen, 2009; Thapa & Guffey, 2013). However, findings from developed countries may or may not generalize to other nations. Most U.S. studies investigating school climate do not consider socioeconomic status (SES) and social support as potentially confounding the relationship between school climate and student outcomes (Sellstrom & Bremberg, 2006). But the U.S. studies could converge with insights from developing countries, where school climate also links to well-being (Varela et al., 2019), prosocial behaviors (Kanacri, Eisenberg, Gerbino, & Caprara, 2017), and school performance (López et al., 2017). Lower SES is widespread in developing countries, increasing inequalities such as a worse mental health among LGBT+ youth (Costa et al., 2017; Terra et al., 2022). It has been associated with school climate variables, including fewer extracurricular activities (Greytak et al., 2016). Moreover, SES has repeatedly been linked with elevated dropout rates (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Cholewa, Hull, Babcock, & Smith, 2017; Gonzalez-Betancor & Lopez-Puig, 2016; Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2017; Ross & Wu, 1995; Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux, & Truscott, 2017), equally moderating the relationship between school climate and physical abuse (Jain et al., 2018). A known protective factor against adversities among adolescents is social support, which sustains the claim that both SES and social support should be considered as potentially affecting the relationships between family, school connectedness, and dropout (Marie, Oscar, Heather, Jayne, & Barrios, 2018; Seibel et al., 2018; Valentine & Shipherd, 2018; Veale, Peter, Travers, & Saewyc, 2017).

This review aims to identify interventions to ameliorate school outcomes for transgender and gender-diverse youth. Equity, as well as implementation barriers and facilitators, are considered. *School outcomes* encompass school climate, safety, absenteeism, and dropout, whereas *implementation* focuses on facilitators, barriers, and cost of interventions. Finally, *equity* includes the components of the PROGRESS Framework (O'Neill et al., 2014): Place of Residence, Race, Occupation, Gender, Religion/Culture, Education level, SES, or Social Capital.

Given the dearth of literature on this topic, our review aims to address the question: What interventions reportedly improve school outcomes among transgender and gender-diverse youth? As a secondary objective, we explored the main implementation and equity considerations reported in the broad literature.

Review Methods

A 30-day rapid review was conducted. A rapid review is an adaptation of the recommended steps of a systematic review, producing a synthesis of the best available evidence promptly to meet specific demands (World Health Organization, 2017).

A population, intervention, control, outcome, type of study (PICOT) question was developed to guide the rapid review:

- P: Transgender and gender-diverse youth
- I: Interventions at the individual, group, school and community level
- C: No intervention
- O: School climate, absenteeism and school dropout
- T: Peer-reviewed cross-sectional studies, cohort, case-control, randomized and non-randomized controlled trials and systematic reviews of effects

Search Strategy

The search strategy (transgender OR trans OR nonbinary OR gender-diverse) AND (school dropout OR school climate OR school absenteeism) was adapted to meet five different databases' styles (see online Appendix 1—<https://osf.io/d67h9/>): Scopus, PsycINFO, ERIC, PUBMED, and Social Systems Evidence. Grey literature was not included.

Inclusion Criteria

For the main question, eligible studies should be peer reviewed and report empirical findings on the effects of interventions that address school climate, absenteeism, and school dropout among trans and gender-diverse students. Studies published between 2006 and 2021 were included regardless of their language.

Papers that did not report the effects of interventions but addressed implementation and equity considerations were tagged during the screening process and included in the discussion.

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

The search results were exported to Rayyan where duplicates were manually excluded. Two independent reviewers screened the remaining studies applying the inclusion criteria. Any discordances were solved through discussion until a consensus was reached. A third reviewer was consulted if necessary. Included studies were appraised using the ROBINS-I tool (Sterne et al., 2016).

One reviewer did the data extraction from each study using a predefined data extraction sheet, including information on authors and year of publication, country (where intervention was carried out), objectives, design, main findings,

participants, interventions (description of duration, follow-up, control, and setting), outcomes, implementation details (description of facilitators, barriers, and cost), and equity considerations (description of potential differences in the implementation/outcomes due to Place of Residence, Race, Occupation, Gender, Religion/Culture, Education level, SES, or Social Capital).

Findings

From the initial 2,111 studies identified through our search, only three reported on interventions directly related to transgender and gender-diverse students (Day et al., 2020; Kull, Greytak, Kosciw, & Villenas, 2016; Pollitt, Ioverno, Russell, Li, & Grossman, 2021). Most studies included in the screening of titles and abstracts—and then excluded—mentioned LGBT+ as a population but did not describe data exclusively on transgender and gender-diverse people. Characteristics of included studies are described in online Appendix 2 (<https://osf.io/kjf7g/>). The risk of bias assessment is detailed in online Appendix 3 (<https://osf.io/cg7p8/>). Overall, included studies were considered to have moderate to serious risk of bias.

Three interventions were reported as having a positive effect on the school outcomes for these students: (a) Sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression (SOGIE) inclusive policies (Kull et al., 2016; Day et al., 2020); (b) Use of chosen name in school (Pollitt et al., 2021); and (c) Gay–Straight Alliances (GSA) (Day et al., 2020).

SOGIE-inclusive policies—Students in districts with SOGIE-inclusive policies reported significantly greater school safety, less victimization, and less social aggression based on their sexual orientation and gender expression compared to the ones in districts with generic and no identified policies. Higher teacher support was also reported in schools with LGBT+ -focused policies (Day et al., 2020). Schools with generic policies, meaning policies that did not address specifically SOGIE, did not exhibit different outcomes from schools without identified policies (Kull et al., 2016).

Use of the chosen name in school—Using the chosen name in school was associated with better mental health outcomes. More precisely, disclosure to parents and teachers was associated with having their chosen name used. Furthermore, reporting teachers who support their chosen name was associated with less school victimization and absenteeism, as well as with school connectedness, among transgender youth (Pollitt et al., 2021).

GSAs—Experiences of frequent homophobic and gender-based bullying were less frequent in schools with GSAs. Also, classmate support was more often reported. When combined with LGBT+ -focused policies, GSA was associated with even less bullying and higher perceived classmate and teacher support (Day et al., 2020).

Implementation and Equity Considerations

Shifting a school culture to be gender-inclusive is a formidable task (Mangin, 2020). Facilitators for school climate interventions for transgender and gender-diverse youth include educational materials; faculty, staff, and parents' involvement; inclusive policies, and students' involvement. Families were often the source of diverse educational materials, used in schools to educate their children (Mangin, 2020; Goldstein, Koecher, Baer, & Hicks, 2018). Nevertheless, not all families can devote volunteer hours (Goldstein et al., 2018), and some families may not be so supportive of transgender and gender-diverse identities. Regarding the inclusion of didactic material, one study showed that objections to adding multicultural literature were made by a handful of students, mostly on a religious basis (Flores, 2016). Therefore, schools must apply active efforts to train their staff independently.

The benefits of open communication and advocacy by parents, educators, and principals helped to create a safer environment for transgender and gender-diverse students (Goldstein et al., 2018; Mangin, 2020). By hearing transgender and gender-diverse students' experiences through their families, teachers can better understand their needs. Teachers may also educate themselves on how to properly support transgender and gender-diverse students and colleagues (Goldstein et al., 2018).

Supportive principals seem to (a) employ a child-centered approach to decision making, (b) leverage learning and knowledge to create a positive elementary school experience for transgender children, and (c) characterize their experience as professionally and personally beneficial (Mangin, 2020).

While the "student-in-charge" narrative—where the transgender and gender-diverse student is put at the center of decision making—is usually celebrated (Luecke, 2018; Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016), concerns were also raised (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018). Indeed, due to educators and students being embedded in a cisnormative context (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018), transgender and gender-diverse students may be seen as "sacrificial lambs" who sometimes are exposed or used as examples, and frequently are being required to take the spotlight and stand-up for themselves (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Lee, 2016). There are also preoccupations with only having LGBT + teachers or LGBT + students leading all gender-related and peer support activities (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016; Nguyen, Brazelton, Renn, and Woodford, 2018) since these should be developed by all members of the school community and not serve as a "niche".

Large-scale policies (Lewis & Eckes, 2020) include the prohibition of harassment, the creation of student-led clubs and "safe spaces" (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016; Luecke, 2018), and the development of social and psychological services/health services located in school grounds and focusing on LGBT + youth, but they are scarce (Day,

Ioverno, & Russell, 2019). School districts could join forces in implementing large-scale programs and policies (Luecke, 2018), including in-service training, encouragement, and certification of professional school counselors, social workers, and teachers to serve as "safe adults" (Goodrich & Barnard, 2019). Service-based learning groups at local LGBT + not-for-profit organizations for undergraduate teachers can significantly improve their active-empathic listening and self-efficacy for working with LGBT + high school students. When compared to a 3-hour lecture, learning groups achieved better results (Coulter et al., 2021).

Several implementation recommendations that resulted in positive action were highlighted, such as allowing students to change their gender on campus records without changing legal documents; offering private changing facilities and single-person showers in athletic/recreational facilities (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2019); editing school district forms to reflect parent #1 and parent #2, rather than "mother" and "father"; adding gender identity to the district's nondiscrimination policy; adding books that are LGBT + inclusive to school libraries; providing training for principals and assistant principals regarding state and federal anti-discrimination laws and assisting them in understanding and addressing LGBT + family issues; assuring that students are not obliged to wear attire reflecting their gender assigned at birth (Goodrich & Barnard, 2019); and establishing restorative justice programs to deal with gender-related conflicts (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016).

Equity-wise, unequal experiences regarding school climate were reported when using an intersectional framework that considered gender, race, class, and disability as markers. For instance, there are limitations on the support offered to black and immigrant transgender and gender-diverse youth by white teachers (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016). Transgender people of color and transgender people with disabilities have higher suicidality rates related to gender discrimination than their white and non-disability counterparts (Seelman, 2016).

Sexual orientation and gender identity-focused policies showed a more positive effect on lesbian, gay and bisexual youth than on transgender youth's experiences and perceptions (Day et al., 2019). However, transgender and gender-diverse youth are not always included in school interventions directed at the LGBT + community. A more respectful climate in their GSA was perceived by members who more frequently discussed transgender topics, had more transgender friends, received more support and information/resources, and did more advocacy (Poteat et al., 2018).

The place of residence plays a relevant role in the positive perception of school climate. Transgender and gender-diverse students living on campus were able to better connect with queer and trans faculty, staff, and other students, resulting in access to more campus resources, than students living outside campus (Simpfenderfer et al., 2020).

Furthermore, students from schools situated in rural areas, as well as in small towns endure victimization more frequently than their peers from schools located in urban and suburban areas (Hackimer & Proctor, 2015). They may have difficulty accessing basic resources and support that are typically found in urban areas (De Pedro; Lynch & Esqueda, 2018). LGBT + support and peer and teacher intervention were associated with higher levels of safety among rural LGBT + youth, while the presence of a GSA at school was associated with lower levels of safety (De Pedro; Lynch & Esqueda, 2018).

Differences between organizations were pointed out by the authors (Goldberg et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018). For instance, public, religiously affiliated, and 2-year institutions provided less support for transgender students. Community college students were also reported to be less aware of supportive policies for transgender and gender-diverse students, thus, having less access to services. Having college/university-sanctioned LGBT + groups and gender-inclusive housing policies was reported as more important for undergraduate than for graduate students (Goldberg et al., 2019).

Implications for Practice and Research

The number of studies evaluating school climate among transgender and gender-diverse youth, albeit increasing, is still very limited (Bear et al., 2016; Franco & Cicillini, 2016). When considering specifically the effects of interventions on school outcomes, the evidence is even more scarce.

School, as an institution, could positively influence transgender and gender-diverse students' attendance by investing in creating a favorable school climate (McGuire et al., 2010). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and The Institute for Educational Sciences suggested promoting school climate as a data-driven strategy to prevent dropouts (Dynarski et al., 2008). Accordingly, the school climate is frequently targeted in school-based programs aiming to improve students' development and ameliorate behavior issues.

Institutional support can assume multiple formats. For example, creating a GSA or similar club, supporting educators and other staff to become trained in LGBT + issues, including sex and gender in the curriculum, and implementing comprehensive anti-bullying policies may improve school climate for transgender students (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013); however, these interventions need to be properly monitored.

Considering the repercussions of an unfavorable school climate on the lives of transgender and gender-diverse youth, schools should recognize their transphobic practices, retraining their staff, and reformulate their curriculum to include sex and gender diversity. Furthermore, health care providers, as well as school counselors, should engage transgender and gender-diverse youth and their caregivers about the importance of school environment, and select schools

with LGBT + resources, supportive staff, inclusive curriculum, and extensive anti-bullying policies.

Among the several research gaps identified, we highlight first the evident lack of rigorous research on school interventions focusing on transgender and gender-diverse students. Clinical trials with high methodological quality were not identified in this review. Second, transgender and gender-diverse students' particularities are often made invisible, or diluted, in studies involving cis-gender homosexual students. Accordingly, gender-diverse students' idiosyncrasies were often erased by providing data exclusively on transgender students' needs. Third, the few studies available were from the United States. Communities with fewer resources need to be represented in future research.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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