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Effective Interventions to Support LGBTQ+ Youth

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A Literature Review Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Education

Abstract

Victimization of LGBTQ+ youth in schools in the form of bullying is a national concern. Research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to be bullied than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Bullying can lead to social and emotional, academic, and mental health concerns for LGBTQ+ youth. This literature review attempted to discover effective interventions to alleviate these problems for LGBTQ+ youth. Databases were scoured for peer-reviewed articles to use in this literature review. There is an on-going challenge to help this at-risk and diverse population, but the findings of this literature review provide a starting place for adults in schools to begin the hard work of meaningful intervention.

Keywords LGBTQ+ youth victimization, LGBTQ+ suicide, LGBTQ+ academic performance, Gay-Straight Alliances

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction	4
LGBTQ+ Youth as Victims of Bullying & Effective Interventions.....	6
Poor Academic Performance of LGBTQ+ Youth & Effective Interventions.....	11
High Suicide Risk for LGBTQ+ Youth & Effective Interventions.....	16
Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) as an Effective Intervention.....	21
Future Research.....	26
Conclusion.....	27
References.....	31

Effective Interventions to Support LGBTQ+ Youth in Schools

Schools are not always safe spaces for all students. Although the majority of educators believe that bullying is not a significant issue in schools, many students hold the opposite view (Espelage et al., 2014). Students whom bullies victimize will often disengage from academics, leading to poor grades and chronic absenteeism (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Russell et al., 2011). In addition to a decrease in academic performance, these students often suffer from serious social and mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Cross et al., 2011; Hobaica et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2011). If school staff wants to improve the conditions for these students, all stakeholders must turn their focus to creating a positive school climate by implementing programs and policies that address student victimization (Espelage et al., 2014; Porta et al., 2017).

The problem considered in this literature review is that our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) students struggle the most with these social and emotional (Allen et al., 2012; Day et al., 2020; Hobaica et al., 2021; Ioverno et al., 2016; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Seelman & Walker, 2018; Williams & Chapman, 2011), academic (Watson & Russell, 2016), and mental health obstacles (Bregman et al. 2013; Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Wagaman, 2016; Williams & Chapman, 2011). Legislation in states like Tennessee have compounded these problems. Our state legislature recently passed an anti-LGTBQ+ bill that our governor signed into law which “require[s] a school district to notify parents before ‘providing a sexual orientation curriculum or gender identity curriculum’ in any kind of instruction, including but not limited to education on sexuality” (Ronan, 2021). Now more than ever, LGBTQ+ students need extra support and attention in order to flourish. The purpose of this literature review is to explore studies on

interventions and their positive effects on social, emotional, academic, and mental health concerns in LGBTQ+ young people. By sifting through the results of these studies, a clearer picture will emerge of which programs and policies schools can implement to combat each area of concern in the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth.

In order to discover the most reliable studies of the most effective programs and policies, research was conducted using the available databases through the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College and the library of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Only peer-reviewed journal articles from 2011-2021 were collected. Key words searched included: LGBTQ+ youth, sexual minority youth, LGBTQ+ victimization, LGBTQ+ suicide, LGBTQ+ academic performance, anti-bullying programs, social emotional programs, family support, community-based programs, adult mentors, inclusive policies, inclusive curriculum, and Gay-Straight Alliances. Most of the studies included in this review recruited self-identified LGBTQ+ folks as participants. The studies that did not single out LGBTQ+ youth still showed promising results for at-risk populations, and thus were included in this review.

This literature review has been organized purposefully to optimize its use as a guide for educators. It is a traditional, thematic literature review separated into topics. First, social and emotional concerns of LGBTQ+ youth and possible targeted interventions are discussed. Next, academic concerns of LGBTQ+ youth along with targeted interventions are posited. Following that section, mental health concerns of LGBTQ+ youth with targeted interventions are relayed. Then, a section is devoted to the benefits of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in overcoming all concerns for LGBTQ+ youth. Finally, future areas of research in this topic will be covered.

Review of the Literature

LGBTQ+ Youth as Victims of Bullying

Victimization in the form of bullying is a serious problem plaguing students in this country. Bullying is prevalent in schools and can lead to catastrophic results (Espelage et al., 2014; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Russell et al., 2011). Data collected during the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance survey, a survey given to high school students in the U.S., revealed that “19.6 % of respondents had been victimized on school property... within the 12-month period prior to the survey” (Marx & Kettrey, 2016, p. 1279).

Homophobic bullying is especially rampant in the U.S. Multiple studies have shown that bullies are targeting LGBTQ+ youth more frequently than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Allen et al., 2012; Day et al., 2020; Hobaica et al., 2021; Ioverno et al., 2016; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Seelman & Walker, 2018; Williams & Chapman, 2011). Large-scale surveys support the findings in these studies. For example, in a National School Climate Survey of LGBTQ+ youth conducted in 2017, participants reported “high rates of verbal harassment (53%–70%), electronic harassment (49%), sexual harassment (57%), physical harassment (23%–29%), and physical assault (10%–12%)” (Hobaica et al., 2021, p. 3).

Bullies cause harm to LGBTQ+ youth, forcing them to endure many deleterious effects. Some of these effects are long-lasting and can be life-threatening: “Homophobic victimization can have detrimental consequences on the development of LGBTQ+ youth, as it has been associated with negative outcomes such as depression, substance use, and suicidality” (Marx & Kettrey, 2016, p. 1269). Russell et al. (2011) and Hobaica et al. (2021) published qualitative

research on the negative consequences of bullying on LGBTQ+ people. The results of both studies showed that LGBTQ+ youth are suffering.

Russell et al. (2011) found that victimized LGBTQ+ students often suffer from poor mental health and difficulty interacting socially with peers. LGBTQ+ young adults who reported high victimization during their youth were 2.6 times more likely to report depression, and 5.6 times more likely to report having attempted suicide at least once (p. 227). These numbers are discouraging; however, there are a few limitations to this study. Russell et al. (2011) only polled 245 LGBT young adults living in one city. Additionally, the researchers asked participants to rely on their memories of interactions with bullies as teenagers.

In contrast to Russell et al. (2011), Hobaica et al. (2021) relied on LGBTQ+ teenagers to express their current circumstances and experiences of bullying. For their qualitative research, Hobaica et al. (2021) questioned 49,555 public school students in 8th–12th grade in Washington State. Despite the fact that this research occurred ten years after the work of Russell et al. (2011), little had changed in the poor outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth. According to Hobaica et al. (2021), “LGBTQ+ students are at a higher risk for psychological distress and suicidality through their greater risk for bullying” (p. 12). This research proves that it is past time for adults to intervene to stop bullies from harassing LGBTQ+ youth.

Effective Interventions to Bullying

Adult Intervention

When it comes to protecting LGBTQ+ youth from victimization by bullies, adult intervention is a useful strategy. The effectiveness of any anti-bullying strategy depends on the participation of the adults in a building, therefore a whole-school commitment is best (Cross et

al., 2011; Espelage et al., 2014; Hobaica et al., 2021). This commitment requires that every teacher take responsibility for recognizing bullying and following school protocols on preventing, intervening in, and reporting bullying to administrators. Every administrator must enforce consequences for all bullying incidents, as well as give vocal and full-throated support for all anti-bullying measures.

Several studies point to the positive results of whole-school intervention involving caring and committed adults (Cross et al., 2011; Espelage et al., 2014; Hobaica et al., 2021). Cross et al. (2011) looked at an anti-bullying program focused on adult intervention called “Friendly Schools.” For this qualitative research, 1968 students filled out surveys over a period of three years related to their experiences with bullying and any changes that occurred after their school implemented this anti-bullying program. The researchers found that “Friendly Schools” made a positive difference: “Students in the intervention group at the end of the first study year were significantly less likely than comparison students to report being bullied versus not bullied” (Cross et al., 2011, p. 120). Because of the positive results, this anti-bullying program offers a possible solution to bullying in the U.S.

Researchers in the U.S. have studied whole-school adult intervention and have found similar results on its effectiveness (Espelage et al., 2014; Hobaica et al., 2021). Espelage et al. (2014) polled 3,616 sixth graders in Illinois and Kansas about their perceptions of school climate and experiences of bullying. Student responses shed a light on the link between school climate and bullying. According to those surveyed, the more obvious the support of administrators and teachers for students who were harassed, the less bullying that occurred: “Strong leadership and a commitment to bully prevention are associated with less aggression and victimization”

(Espelage et al., 2014, p. 301). Even though researchers did not ask the participants in this study about their sexual orientation, they did ask about sexual harassment, so this study may be relevant in the search for effective interventions for LGBTQ+ youth.

Hobaica et al. (2021) built on the work of Cross et al. (2011) and Espelage et al. (2014) with their study on the positive effect of whole-school adult intervention on bullying. For their qualitative research, Hobaica et al. (2021) involved 49,555 participants here in the U.S. and included questions about sexual orientation on the surveys. Participants described their experiences with teacher intervention in bullying incidents. The researchers' findings indicated that the less teachers intervene during bullying events, the more often bullying events occur in a school, a result congruent with those of previous studies. When teachers did not intervene, LGBTQ+ students suffered "psychological distress and suicidality" (p. 12). Taken together, the work of Cross et al. (2011), Espelage et al. (2014) and Hobaica et al. (2021) have proven that adults must take control to spare LGBTQ+ youth from bullying.

Social Emotional Learning Programs

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs are another anti-bullying measure that ask all adult stakeholders to be actively involved. For these programs, adults educate students on how to interact socially and cope with emotional turmoil. When implemented faithfully, SEL programs boast many benefits: "The enhancement of social and emotional competencies promote achievement, substance abuse prevention, and bullying, disruptive behavior and interpersonal violence reduction" (Coelho & Sousa, 2017, p. 656). These programs also allow students to practice soft skills; for example, "to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships,

and make responsible decisions” (Coelho & Sousa, 2018, p. 1979). Students will reach for each of these soft skills throughout their lifetimes (Coelho & Sousa, 2017). Because of their record for lowering incidents of bullying and educating students on necessary life skills, SEL programs are an inexpensive and effective way to help support LGBTQ+ youth.

The effectiveness of a SEL program depends on the percentage of adults who administer the program. Wigelsworth et al. (2013) looked at dozens of studies on the positive impact of SEL programs for students before studying the Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) program in England. For this study, the researchers followed 4,443 students for two years and surveyed them about their experiences with the SEAL program. Contrary to the studies previously conducted, this study showed that the SEAL program “failed to impact significantly on the emotional symptoms and conduct problems [of students]” (p. 105). The researchers ultimately blamed the failure on poor implementation, recommending that future programs get more adults on board and train them better the next time.

Along with involving as many adults as possible, effective SEL programs are often pre-packaged by experts and take place during regular school hours. Coelho and Sousa (2017) studied a pre-packaged SEL program called “Positive Attitude Low Middle School.” For eight years, they followed 982 students in Portugal and polled them yearly about their experiences with this SEL program. The researchers concluded that the SEL program “led to gains in... social awareness, self-control and self-esteem, while also contributing to the reduction of social isolation and social anxiety” (p. 664).

Coelho and Sousa (2018) next studied how the time at which adults delivered the program affected the outcome for students. For this study, they followed 837 students for three

years. The researchers discovered that, for best results, adults should deliver this SEL program during the school day: “Implementing the program within the school schedule led to larger gains in self-esteem, self-control, and social awareness compared to the after-school schedule setting” (p. 1988). These results are encouraging; however, this study relied on a small sample size and therefore may not be replicable on a larger scale.

Wigelsworth et al. (2013) and Coehlo and Sousa (2017, 2018) concluded that, under certain conditions, SEL programs can booster the social and emotional health of LGBTQ+ students in England and Portugal. Their solid data provide schools a well-researched place to start when crafting SEL programs that improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth by putting an end to bullying.

Poor Academic Performance of LGBTQ+ Youth

The social and emotional health of victims of bullies can deteriorate to the point where these students feel so unsafe at school that they prefer to stay home. For over a decade, absenteeism has been a documented problem among the most bullied population: LGBTQ+ students. For example, in the 2009 National School Climate Survey, “29.1% of LGBT students had missed a class at least once and 30 % had missed at least one day of school in the past month because of safety concerns” (Robinson & Espelage, 2011, p. 317).

Multiple researchers cite absenteeism as a serious issue for LGBTQ+ youth (Cross et al., 2011; Page, 2017; Russell et al., 2011; Seelman & Walker, 2018). When students are continuously absent, their grades can drop, leading to low academic achievement (Day et al., 2020; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013; Wagaman, 2016; Watson & Russell, 2016).

One large-scale study reviewed offered more details on the academic achievement of sexual minority youth. In their qualitative study, Watson and Russell (2016) surveyed 20,745 LGBTQ+ youth in the U.S. for 11 years. The researchers found that the more often a student was absent, the less engaged that student was at school. This disengagement led to reduced academic achievement in high school for these students, as well as a lower chance that they would ultimately obtain a college degree.

According to Watson and Russell (2016), out of all the factors included in their study, student engagement was the greatest predictor of academic success for LGBTQ+ youth. After collecting all the data, researchers were surprised to discover that two thirds of respondents did feel engaged in academics. However, the remaining third of students had very poor outcomes. It seems that interested parties must put in more work in order for all LGBTQ+ students to be engaged in learning.

Interventions to Improve Academic Performance

Adult mentors

Every adult in a school building has a responsibility to keep students safe and engaged in learning. By committing to these ideals, adult mentors for school-age children can be an effective intervention to increase students' academic achievement (Bird et al., 2012; Fruht, & Wray-Lake, 2013; Johnson & Gastic, 2015).

Bird et al. (2012) studied the effect of adult mentoring on LGBTQ+ youth. For one year, the researchers looked at data from questionnaires filled out by 496 LGBTQ+ youth in Chicago aged 16 – 24 years. The data collected depicted the positive influence of adult mentors in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth: “Role modeling is associated with important psychological and

behavioral benefits, including increases in health and wellness and decreases in psychological distress [and] academic difficulties” (p. 354).

Bird et al. (2012) also discovered that for adult mentors to have the most beneficial effect, they must build “strong, personal relationships” with their mentees (p. 354).

Unfortunately, 60% of LGBTQ+ youth surveyed claimed that they were not very close, or did not personally know, their adult mentor. The less a student knew their mentor, the more that student suffered: “LGBT youth with inaccessible role models show increased psychological distress” (p. 356). From this data, one can deduct that it is not enough to assign LGBTQ+ youth an adult mentor; the mentor must be willing to develop a close and trusting relationship with that student.

Fruht and Wray-Lake (2013) expanded on the work of Bird et al. (2012) when they looked into possible benefits for children of having an adult mentor. These researchers analyzed results from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a study that included thousands more responses (4,882 total) than the study by Bird et al. (2012). Confirming the results of Bird et al. (2012), Fruht and Wray-Lake (2013) found that having an adult mentor predicted more school engagement and higher academic outcomes for students compared to those who did not have a mentor. The data further showed that having a teacher as a mentor was especially impactful, often leading to higher levels of success in college: “Students who build strong relationships with their teachers may be more likely to go on to higher education than students who have other types of mentoring relationships” (p. 1466). Teacher-mentors may be particularly beneficial for LGBTQ+ students because they can offer both content-area help and social and emotional support, meaning they are able to foster the necessary strong relationships.

In 2015, Johnson and Gastic added to the existing literature with their study on LGBTQ+ youth and their adult mentors. For this mixed-methods study, the researchers polled thousands of LGBTQ+ youth in seventh grade through 12th grade about their experiences with adult mentors. The resulting data showed that more LGBTQ+ youth had adult mentors than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Of those mentors, 32.2% were adults in the school building, proving that teacher-mentors can provide much-needed support. LGBTQ+ students relayed that their adult mentors were “positive, understanding, responsible, and trustworthy” (p. 403). Adult mentors encouraged and supported students not only on school-related matters, but personal matters as well.

First Bird et al. (2012), then Fruht and Wray-Lake (2013), and later Johnson and Gastic (2015) reported the positive effect that caring and responsive adult mentors, especially teachers, can have on LGBTQ+ students. A teacher mentorship program could be an inexpensive and easily implemented intervention to improve the academic performance of sexual minority youth.

LGBTQ+ Inclusive Curriculum

In addition to serving as mentors, teachers can have other positive impacts on LGBTQ+ youth. For example, when educators take steps to teach an inclusive curriculum, they are ensuring a more welcoming school climate for all students (Page, 2017; Schey, 2019, 2021).

An inclusive curriculum can involve teaching about LGBTQ+ history and culture, offering texts with LGBTQ+ characters, or using a textbook that mentions LGBTQ+ topics, rights, and history. The literature reviewed included studies that looked at inclusive curriculum for English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. Page (2017) surveyed 577 ELA teachers in middle and secondary schools in Minnesota for eight weeks. The findings pointed to a conundrum: many teachers claimed to be open to implementing an inclusive curriculum, but few actually

followed through: “While 52.6% of respondents agreed that they felt comfortable using LGBT literature in the curriculum, only 23.7% reported actually integrating this literature” (p. 4).

Research has shown that “in schools where students report usage of an inclusive curriculum, LGBTQ students feel more safe, are absent less frequently, and feel more connected to their schools” (Page, 2017, p. 2). Despite this fact, teachers remained reluctant to make changes. The data showed that 31% of respondents “were afraid of challenges or confrontations with parents or other community members” (p. 7). If schools want to booster the academic performance of LGBTQ+ youth by incorporating an inclusive curriculum, it seems that administrators must provide encouragement and support to their staff.

Continuing the research of Page (2017), Schey (2019, 2021) conducted two ethnographic studies on the inclusive ELA curriculum at Harrison High School, located in a midsized Midwestern city. Both of Schey’s studies involved curricular modifications supported by administration. The first study (2019) followed 47 sophomores who were both enrolled in the same ELA course and were members of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). Throughout the year, the ELA teacher maintained a collection of books featuring LGBTQ+ characters in the classroom library. Students chose a book to read and then discuss with classmates. From the discussions, the researcher gleaned that providing access to LGBTQ+ books was insufficient in creating a LGBTQ+-friendly environment. However, Schey (2019) found that when the ELA teacher purposefully connected with LGBTQ+ students and allowed these students to describe the ways in which the texts were meaningful to them, the classroom culture became more welcoming and enjoyable.

For the next ethnographic study, Schey (2021) followed 70 students in a humanities course at Harrison High school. The course instructors selected texts that spoke to LGBTQ+ interests, culture, and history. During class discussions, the teachers purposefully called on non-LGBTQ+ youth in order to ensure they were thinking about and contributing to the overall study of the text. According to Schey (2021), drawing non-LGBTQ+ youth into difficult discussions was a key factor in creating a supportive classroom culture for all students: “Queer-inclusive curriculum is vital because it can be a resource for developing collaborative and collective advocacy between students and teachers” (p. 630).

Even though the ethnographic studies by Page (2017) and Schey (2019, 2021) involved a small number of participants, the data collected hinted that a positive classroom culture can be possible with supportive administrators and purposeful teaching of an LGBTQ+ inclusive ELA curriculum. Once teachers establish a positive classroom culture, it is likely that higher LGBTQ+ student engagement and achievement will follow.

High Suicide Risk for LGBTQ+ Youth

LGBTQ+ students’ social emotional trauma and poor grades can lead to even more trouble if no one intervenes to stop the harassment. Bullying victims can experience serious mental health problems, including depression and suicidal ideation (Cross et al., 2011; Hobaica et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2011). When it comes to mental health issues, LGBTQ+ youth are at a higher risk of attempting suicide than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Bregman et al. 2013; Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Wagaman, 2016; Williams & Chapman, 2011). Many researchers mentioned the high risk of suicide for LGBTQ+ youth in their work (Allen et al., 2012; Cross et al. 2011; Hobaica et al., 2021; Marx & Kettrey 2016; Russell et al. 2011; Seelman & Walker, 2018; Snapp et al., 2015).

Several researchers offered further details about the mental health needs of LGBTQ+ youth (Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Williams & Chapman, 2011). Both qualitative studies recruited thousands of young people in seventh grade through 12th grade from the U.S. to fill out surveys about their mental health. Robinson and Espelage (2011) surveyed 13,213 students in Wisconsin and discovered that although most of the LGBTQ+ youth were not at risk for suicide, many more LGBTQ+ youth than their non-LGBTQ+ peers are at risk. According to the data collected, 6.2% of LGBTQ+ youth attempted suicide at least once that year compared to 1.8% of their non-LGBTQ+ peers (p. 320). These researchers also determined that LGBTQ+ youth need social support: “[LGBTQ+ youth] who do not have supports in place from their families, peers, or schools are at the greatest risk for acting on their suicidal thoughts” (p. 326).

The same year Robinson and Espelage (2011) published their work on the mental health needs of LGBTQ+ youth, Williams and Chapman (2011) surveyed 20,745 students from around the U.S. on the same topic and found similar results. Their data showed 40.8% of LGBTQ+ youth reported that their most pressing concern was “suicide attempt” (p. 201). Furthermore, 51.2% of LGBTQ+ youth reported “an unmet mental health need” (p. 201). Similar to Robinson and Espelage (2011), Williams and Chapman (2011) discovered a connection between a lack of social support and the poor mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. The researchers found that 15.7% of LGBTQ+ youth did not seek mental health services because they were afraid that their families might discover their LGBTQ+ status (p. 201).

The studies conducted by Robinson and Espelage (2011) and Williams and Chapman (2011) made evident that LGBTQ+ youth are in desperate need of high-quality social support.

Interventions to Prevent Suicide

Community-Based Programs

According to peer-reviewed research, community-based programs can provide much-needed social support. There are dozens of community-based programs in the U.S. that exist to support LGBTQ+ youth. Several studies focused on the positive impact of these programs on LGBTQ+ youth (Allen et al., 2012; Fish et al., 2019; Wagaman, 2016). For each of these qualitative studies, researchers asked LGBTQ+ youth and young adults about their involvement and experiences with community-based LGBTQ+ programs. Participants' responses gave voice to the critical role of these programs in maintaining their mental health.

Allen et al. (2012) surveyed the directors of 61 community-based LGBTQ+ youth programs throughout the U.S about their members and the services provided to them. In this study, the researchers found that “[LGBTQ+] youth travel long distances and frequently take several hours in order to secure the program services” (p. 1299). The researchers concluded that LGBTQ+ youth invested so much time and effort into these programs because of how important and beneficial they were to their well-being. Allen et al. assumed that LGBTQ+ youth were willing to go to such great lengths because these community-based programs offered help that they could not find closer to home. The benefits of these programs included “a safe environment, social support, culturally unique education, and referral to critical services for GLBTQ youth” (p. 1298).

After Allen et al. (2012) published their article, Wagaman (2016) looked into community-based programs as well and arrived at similar conclusions. The researcher surveyed a small group of 72 LGBTQ+ youth aged 14-23 years in the southwestern U.S. about their experiences in community-based programs. Participants claimed that their involvement with

these programs afforded them “increased self-esteem and positive social identity development” (p. 396).

Wagaman (2016) went beyond earlier research and discovered that community-based programs can turn LGBTQ+ youth into activists who fight for their rights. The data showed that through belonging to one of these programs, “youth can experience empowerment in the face of discrimination through social and peer support, connection to a broader LGBTQ community, and engagement in activities that involve youth in change efforts” (p. 397). Furthermore, these programs can connect LGBTQ+ youth to “a broader LGBTQ community within which opportunities for community reflection and engagement exist” (p. 402).

Fish et al. (2019) reaffirmed the positive aspects of LGBTQ+ community-based programs. For this qualitative study, LGBTQ+ youth aged 15-21 years from cities in the U.S. answered survey questions about their experiences with community-based programs. Congruent with previous researchers, Fish et al. (2019) found that community-based programs “offer critical support for positive development and well-being” (p. 2418). These programs also boasted beneficial outcomes in the mental health of their members.

The work of Allen et al. (2012), Wagaman (2016) and Fish et al. (2019) proved that community-based programs are a worthwhile intervention to support the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth, and in that respect, could help alleviate the problem of suicidal ideation.

Family Supports

Strong family support is also a potentially effective intervention that can improve the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. In several studies, researchers have shown a direct link

between the level of family support and the suicide risk for LGBTQ+ youth (Bregman et al., 2013; Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013; Rothman et al., 2012; Snapp et al., 2015).

Rothman et al. (2012) studied the effect of family support on the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. After analyzing results from the 2002 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data of 5,658 respondents in Massachusetts, the researchers found that parental support can have a lasting impact on their children: “Parental reactions to children’s disclosure of LGB sexual orientation is a contributing factor to those children’s short-term or long-term physical and mental health” (p. 196).

A later study by different authors also considered the effect of family support on the mental health LGBTQ+ youth (Bregman et al., 2013). In this qualitative study, Bregman et al. polled 169 LGB youth aged 14-24 years. Participants reported that family support mattered to them: “Parental acceptance and sexuality-specific support remain critical protective resources for LGB youth in these developmental stages” (p. 426). The data further confirmed that general family support was inadequate: “Even if families provide non-sexuality-specific support, sexuality related identity struggles and high parental rejection remain linked to LGB identity” (p. 426).

Pearson and Wilkinson (2013) built on the work of Rothman et al. (2012) and Bregman (2013) when they studied the effect of family relationships on the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. For this qualitative study, the researchers questioned 13,000 seventh through 12th grade students in the U.S. about their familial relationships. As with earlier data, data from this study confirmed a strong connection between negative family relationships and poor mental health for

LGBTQ+ youth, especially for girls: “Same-sex attracted girls’ higher levels of depressive symptoms can be attributed in part to their perceptions of poorer family relationships” (p. 382).

Snapp et al. (2015) continued the research on connections between family support and the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. These researchers surveyed 245 LGBTQ+ people aged 21-25 years living in San Francisco about their family support. The results mirrored those of previous studies: “LGBT young adults who reported high levels of parental rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide... compared with peers from families who reported no or low levels of family rejection” (p. 421). Snapp et al. relayed that LGBTQ+ youths’ relationships with their families was the most important predictor of mental health: “Family acceptance during the teenage years was the only form of support that significantly predicted all measures of young adult adjustment” (p. 426).

Rothman et al. (2012), Bregman et al. (2013), Pearson and Wilkinson (2013) and Snapp et al. (2015) concluded that strong family support was essential to the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. Based on the data, it appears that family support can help bring an end to the tragic problem of LGBTQ+ youth suicide.

Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) as an Effective Intervention

Background on GSAs

In this country, the federal Equal Access Act, passed in 1984, paved the way for public school students to create and participate in after school clubs unrelated to curriculum (Marx & Kettrey, 2016). A few years later, a straight female student from Massachusetts established the first Gay Straight Alliance club (Levesque, 2019; Marx & Kettrey, 2016). GSA clubs offer a safe space where LGBTQ students and their straight allies can discuss their thoughts, hopes and dreams free of judgement (Levesque, 2019; Porta et al., 2017). Since the late 1980s, thousands of

GSA clubs have emerged, and clubs now exist in almost every state (Ioverno et al., 2016; Poteat et al., 2016). However, their mandates and participation rates vary wildly.

Although each GSA club has its own unique structure, membership, and purpose within a school, there are some commonalities in their roles within a school community. The first role is to offer support to the students at the school (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Poteat et al., 2016). Often this involves the emotional support that the teacher-sponsors offer students and that the students offer each other. Another common role is to provide an opportunity for students to talk openly about sexuality and gender identity (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Poteat et al., 2016). Additionally, GSA clubs strive to advocate for LGBTQ youth and related issues within the school and community (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Poteat et al., 2016). Sometimes this involves simply making the student body aware of the existence of LGBTQ youth in the population. A final common purpose is to promote relationship building between LGBTQ youth and their non-LGBTQ classmates (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Poteat et al., 2016). In these ways, GSA clubs help to make schools safer for LGTBQ students.

Positive Impact of GSAs

Research has shown that solving the problem of victimization is essential in improving the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. One solution to this problem can be creating a GSA at a school. The existence of a GSA in a school can curb bullying of LGBTQ+ youth by fostering a positive school climate (Day et al., 2020; Fish et al., 2019; Ioverno et al., 2016; Wagaman, 2016). By creating a safe space for all students, positive school climates lead to lower absenteeism and increased academic achievement (Ioverno et al., 2016). When students feel safe enough to come to school and learn, their mental health improves and suicide risk decreases (Day et al., 2020; Ioverno et al., 2016; Wagaman, 2016).

Multiple studies show that students who attend schools with active GSA clubs report fewer problems with violence and victimization (Heck et al., 2011; Ioverno et al., 2016; Levesque, 2019; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Porta et al., 2017). Heck et al. (2011) were concerned about the victimization of LGBTQ+ youth. For their qualitative study, they questioned 145 LGBTQ+ youth in the U.S. aged 18-20 years about their high school experiences. Participants who had been members of a GSA relayed more positive experiences than those who had not belonged to a GSA. Among the positive experiences were “more school belonging and less at-school victimization” as well as “more favorable outcomes related to alcohol use, depression, and general psychological distress” (p. 169). The researchers hinted at a possible connection between lower rates of victimization and absenteeism and better mental health.

Years after Heck et al. (2011), Ioverno et al. (2016) added to the existing literature when they researched the victimization of LGBTQ+ youth. The researchers polled 327 LGBTQ+ youth aged 15–21 in three U.S. cities about their experiences with bullying over two years. They discovered that simply having a GSA club at the school led to decreased occurrences of homophobic bullying the next school year. They also learned that GSA presence in a school, along with student participation in the GSA, and increases in student involvement in that club led students to believe their school was a safe environment. Within a safe environment, it is possible for LGBTQ+ students to thrive academically.

Marx and Kettrey (2016) continued the work of Heck et al. (2011) and Ioverno et al. (2016) by surveying 62,923 high school students about their experiences with homophobic bullying. The researchers found that “students at schools with GSAs reported homophobic victimization at a rate .70 that of their peers at schools without GSAs, fearing for their safety at

.64 the rate, and hearing homophobic remarks at .48 the rate” (p. 1278). This data further proves that GSAs have a positive effect on bullying.

Most recently, Day et al. (2020) discovered more evidence of the positive impact of GSAs on homophobic bullying. This qualitative study involved 1,061 LGBTQ+ youth aged 15–21 in three urban cities in the Northeast, Southwest, and West Coast. Concurrent with the results of previous studies, participants who attended schools with a GSA reported fewer incidents of homophobic bullying than participants from schools without a GSA.

Along with creating a safer environment by limiting homophobic bullying, GSAs can serve as an academic boon for students as well (Porta et al., 2017). Porta et al. conducted a yearlong mixed methods study that involved a small sample of 58 LGBTQ+ youth aged 14 – 19 years from Minnesota, Massachusetts, and British Columbia. The researchers discovered that LGBTQ+ youth at a school with a GSA had “a lower likelihood of skipping school because of fear” (p. 490), which may have led to increased academic performance. It is possible that when students feel safer at school, they are less anxious and more able to focus on critical schoolwork.

Porta et al. (2017) also found that GSAs offered a sense of community and support among like-minded individuals, connected LGBTQ+ youth to caring adults and crucial resources, and promoted a safe environment at school. It seems that just by offering a GSA club, a school appears more open-minded and inclusive of all students.

On top of curbing bullying and increasing academic performance, GSAs may also have a positive impact on the mental health of sexual minority youth. In 2016, Poteat et al. wanted to know whether or not being more active within a GSA had an impact on the overall well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. They surveyed 295 GSA members in Massachusetts aged 13 – 20 years. The

data collected proved that the more often a student attended GSA meetings and the more active they were within those meetings, the more positive effect GSA membership had on their feelings of well-being. Having a positive sense of well-being could be a sufficient antidote to depression and suicidal ideation.

All of this positive data strengthens the argument that the adults responsible for student safety should support and defend the existence of GSA clubs. However, it seems that it is not enough to allow students to start a GSA. In order for students to reap the full benefits of a GSA, administrators must ensure that sponsors maintain the club in perpetuity (Ioverno et al., 2016; Marx & Kettrey, 2016). Administrators can fulfill this mission by consistently authorizing “an adult adviser, meeting space, financial support, and other resources made available to student groups” (Porta et al., 2017, p. 496).

Opposing Viewpoints

Although most researchers agreed that GSAs were beneficial to schools, and LGBTQ+ youth in particular, a few provided caveats. Ioverno et al. (2016) and Levesque (2019) offered a more nuanced take on the potential positive impact of GSAs. Ioverno et al. (2016) found that the presence of GSAs lowered incidents of bullying; however, they “found no associations between GSA presence and participation and psychological well-being” (p. 404). The researchers offered a couple of possible explanations, one being that the study lasted only nine months, and the other being that a school might need to enact inclusive policies in addition to a GSA in order to impact well-being.

Levesque (2019) also studied the impact of GSAs and discovered possible pitfalls. For two years, the researcher conducted an ethnographic study of the GSA members who attended a

large urban public high school in the Midwest U.S. The researcher witnessed problems with the participation of the straight girls in the GSA. During the study, the sponsors of the GSA allowed the straight girl allies to dominate most conversations and dictate most events, which led to a few LGBTQ+ girls to quit the club.

Future Research

In the last few years, the U.S. has experienced a monumental cultural shift around LGBTQ+ rights. In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that gay marriage is protected under the fourteenth amendment (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, n.d.). Since then, our society has had to reckon with new rights for our LGBTQ+ citizens. Teachers have felt this shift in the education system as well. The literature reviewed showed that although researchers have been studying LGBTQ+ topics for decades, studies related to gender inclusive curriculum and policies remains difficult to find. It appears that this specific area is still burgeoning and it will take time for schools to implement updated curriculum and policies that meet this moment. Once more schools make the necessary changes, researchers can begin to study the impacts.

In addition to gender inclusive curriculum and policies, the studies reviewed also pointed out various aspects that are still missing from LGBTQ+ literature. For example, Coelho and Sousa (2017) recognized that there is little data on the “cumulative results of social and emotional learning... over several grades applied to the same students” (p. 666). Page (2017) wrote about the importance of studying how to support teachers to be more comfortable in implementing LGBTQ+ curriculum. Seelman and Walker (2018) lamented the dearth of knowledge around how anti-bullying policies affect LGBTQ+ girls in particular. Day et al. (2020) discussed the need to study how LGBTQ+ supports can extend beyond high school.

Several researchers described a lack of data on how to create a safer environment for LGBTQ+ youth at school (Day et al., 2020; Fish et al., 2019; Schey, 2021; Watson & Russell, 2016). The literature reviewed included many studies on the positive impact of GSAs in schools; however, there is still a gap in research when it comes to studying which aspects of GSA membership are the most beneficial for both LGBTQ+ students and their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Ioverno et al. 2016; Marx & Kettrey 2016; Porta et al. 2017; Poteat et al. 2016).

As researchers design studies to fill in these gaps in knowledge, there are several suggestions that might improve the quality of the data collected in the future. First, the larger the sample size, the more accurate and reliable the data. Second, there should be a question on every survey about gender identity in order to home in on interventions for genderqueer and non-binary folks. Third, participants should represent rural, suburban, and urban areas to get a better sense of positive interventions that might be successful for the entire country. Finally, there needs to be more mixed-methods research conducted instead of relying almost solely on qualitative studies, which rely on a participant's honesty and, at times, faulty memories.

Conclusion

One of the key findings of this article is that LGBTQ+ youth have been suffering for a long time. In the last ten years, research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth struggle more often than their non-LGBTQ+ peers with the negative effects of bullying (Allen et al., 2012; Day et al., 2020; Hobaica et al., 2021; Ioverno et al., 2016; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Seelman & Walker, 2018; Williams & Chapman, 2011). The other key finding of this literature review is that tested interventions exist to help these students overcome social,

emotional, academic, and mental issues that stem from bullying. Schools must implement these interventions to have a positive impact on the lives of LGBTQ+ youth.

The purpose of this literature review was to investigate interventions for LGBTQ+ youth and decide which interventions are the most effective in supporting these students in the areas of social, emotional, academic and mental health. In the area of social and emotional health, the literature reviewed consisted of three interventions that researchers have proven lower rates of homophobic bullying and promote well-being. The first is adult intervention programs. In order to be most effective at curbing bullying, programs must require all adults in a school building to pay attention and enforce anti-bullying measures (Cross et al., 2011; Espelage et al., 2014; Hobaica et al., 2021). The second proven intervention is an established SEL program. SEL programs work best at undermining bullying when all adults are well trained and held accountable for teaching the curriculum during the regular school day (Coehlo & Sousa, 2017, 2018; Wigelsworth et al., 2013). The third positive intervention is to start a GSA club. An effective GSA club encourages allies to stand up for LGBTQ+ youth by intervening in bullying situations and applying social pressure on peers to omit homophobic slurs from their vocabulary (Heck et al., 2011; Ioverno et al., 2016; Marx & Kettrey, 2016).

LGBTQ+ victims of bullying often struggle academically as a result (Watson & Russell, 2016). The literature reviewed covered three interventions that researchers found to be effective in increasing the academic performance of LGBTQ+ youth. The first intervention is adult mentors. When adults, especially teachers, take an active interest in the success of an LGBTQ+ student, that student earns higher grades (Bird et al., 2012; Fruht, & Wray-Lake, 2013; Johnson & Gastic, 2015). The second positive intervention is LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum. In order to

be most effective, this intervention demands that teachers plan and implement lessons based on LGBTQ+ topics and culture (Page, 2017; Schey, 2019, 2021). The third intervention is a GSA club. When strongly supported, GSA club members receive higher grades (Porta et al., 2017).

In addition to social emotional problems and lower grades, LGBTQ+ victims of bullies also struggle with suicidal ideation more than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Bregman et al. 2013; Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Wagaman, 2016; Williams & Chapman, 2011). The literature reviewed relayed three interventions that can help alleviate mental health obstacles for LGBTQ+ youth. The first intervention is community-based programs. These programs connect LGBTQ+ youth to supportive and caring adults (Allen et al., 2012; Fish et al., 2019; Wagaman, 2016). The second positive intervention is family support. Researchers have shown how crucial family acceptance is to the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth (Bregman et al., 2013; Pearson & Wilkinson, 2013; Rothman et al., 2012; Snapp et al., 2015). The third intervention is an active GSA club. GSA clubs provide a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth to express themselves and meet like-minded peers; actions that promote strong mental health (Poteat et al., 2017; Porta et al., 2017).

Research on positive interventions for LGBTQ+ youth has existed for many years. However, this literature review aims to categorize interventions according to areas of concern so that professionals can target specific students who have unique needs. Articles on positive interventions for LGBTQ+ youth struggling with academic performance proved challenging to find, so this literature review includes interventions meant for all types of students who are struggling academically. Ultimately, the findings of this literature review fit in with the larger

body of work on this topic, proving that LGBTQ+ youth need help and then providing ways to help this population.

More research is needed in this field in order to conclude which interventions are the most effective for the most students. Bullying seems to be at the root of the problem; more research needs to be done to determine which anti-bullying program is the best at combatting homophobic bullying. There are also dozens of SEL programs that need to be studied to see which one is best to support LGBTQ+ youth. In addition to intervention programs, more research must be done on family outreach. Family support is essential to the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth; schools must find a way to encourage parents to support their LGBTQ+ children.

LGBTQ+ youth attend every school in the U.S. Even if this population is a minority, LGBTQ+ students are in more danger of being victims of bullies, dropping out, and committing suicide than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. These students belong to a high-risk group, and all adult stakeholders must acknowledge this fact. If LGBTQ+ students are ever going to thrive, adults need to intervene by implementing the proven interventions discussed in this literature review. When implemented with care, these interventions can have a positive impact on the social, emotional, academic and mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. The limitation to this literature review is that it treats the LGBTQ+ population as a monolith. Schools must investigate which interventions would be best for certain groups within the LGBTQ+ student body.

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