LGBTQ-inclusive curricula: why supportive curricula matter

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There is growing attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) issues in schools, including efforts to address such issues through the curriculum. This study examines whether students' perceptions of personal safety and school climate safety are stronger when curricula that include LGBTQ people are present and supportive. LGBTQ and straight middle and high school students from California (1232 students from 154 schools) participated in the 2008 Preventing School Harassment survey. They reported their experience of LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, its level of supportiveness and perceptions of safety. Multilevel methods allowed for an examination of differences between individuals in the same school while controlling for differences between schools. LGBTQ-inclusive curricula were associated with higher reports of safety at the individual and school levels, and lower levels of bullying at the school level. The amount of support also mattered: supportive curricula were related to feeling safer and awareness of bullying at the individual and school levels. The implications of school- versus student-level results for educational policy and practices are discussed.

Keywords: curriculum; LGBTQ; school climate; bullying; inclusion; USA

A growing body of research has documented that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) young people experience worse outcomes in mental and physical health and education as compared to their heterosexual peers (e.g. IOM 2011; Robinson and Espelage 2012; Williams et al. 2005). In an effort to address these disparities and identify strategies to support LGBTQ youth, researchers have begun to explore the sociocultural contexts that young people find themselves in, such as schools, families and communities (Horn, Kosciw, and Russell 2009). Schools, in particular, have received considerable attention as reports of school-based victimisation of LGBTQ youth have persisted over time (Toomey and Russell 2013), and there has been growing public and academic attention in recent years to identifying and implementing strategies that may create safe and supportive school climates for LGBTQ students (Horn, Kosciw, and Russell 2009).

To date, most research on school-based victimisation and its associated costs has assessed these factors at the level of individual students, comparing students to one another without directly accounting for systemic differences between schools. Yet emerging evidence indicates that there is variability across schools in the degree to which they are safe and supportive of LGBTQ students (Russell and McGuire 2008). One factor that may contribute to a safe and supportive school climate for LGBTQ students is

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a curriculum[1] that gives attention to LGBTQ people and issues (Russell et al. 2006), especially if that inclusion is perceived as supportive or affirming for LGBTQ students (Snapp et al. 2015). In this study, we consider the role of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula for reports of bullying and perceptions of safety at the individual as well as the school level. We first review research specific to LGBTQ students and their experiences at school, including existing research on inclusive curricula. We then review relevant literature on students' experiences as it relates to the overall climate of schools.

LGBTQ students and schools

Studies in the USA have found that between 59% and 84% of LGBTQ students experience verbal abuse at school (D'Augelli, Pilkington, and Hershberger 2002; Kosciw et al. 2010; McGuire et al. 2010). Results from a nation-wide sample also indicated that 63% of LGBT students felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation, and 82% of all young people sampled were verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al. 2012). The school-based victimisation of LGBTQ young people may have profound consequences for students' school success, health and well-being. LGBTQ students skip classes (13–30%) and miss full days of school (20–32%) at alarming rates because they feel unsafe (Adelman and Woods 2006; Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig 2009; Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer 2006; Kosciw et al. 2012). Furthermore, LGBTQ students are at higher risk for dropping out of school compared to their gender-conforming and straight peers (Russo 2006). Research from population-based studies has found that young people who experienced biased-based harassment (e.g. harassment based on sexual orientation or factors biases such as race) reported higher rates of mental health concerns and drug use, as well as lower grades and higher rates of truancy (Russell et al. 2012; Sinclair et al. 2012). Similarly, in a longitudinal study, homophobic victimisation predicted higher ratings of anxiety, depression, and lower levels of school belonging among middle school students (Poteat and Espelage 2007) and higher rates of suicidality among LGBTQ-identified students (Poteat et al. 2011). Thus, the evidence for the disproportionate victimisation of LGBTQ youth within a US-based population is clear, as is the research that has documented the associated costs.

Several school-based strategies have the potential to minimise health and educational disparities for LGBTQ students and create supportive school climates. These include non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, supportive teachers and the presence of gay–straight alliance clubs (GSAs), all of which are linked to the establishment of positive school climates for LGBTQ students (e.g. Griffin and Ouellett 2003; Grossman et al. 2009; Mayo 2007, 2013; Poteat et al. 2013; Russell et al. 2010).

Another strategy to improve the climate of schools for LGBTQ students is the inclusion of a curriculum that reflects the lives and histories of LGBTQ people (Russell et al. 2010). In the past 10 years, research has consistently documented that LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum has the potential to create a safe and fair learning environment for all students (Burdge et al. 2013; GLSEN 2011; Kosciw et al. 2012; Quinn and Meiners 2011; Russell et al. 2010; Snapp et al. 2015; Szalacha 2003a; Toomey, McGuire, and Russell 2012). For example, when schools taught LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, students on average reported a greater sense of safety, heard fewer homophobic slurs and experienced less victimisation (Kosciw et al. 2010; O'Shaughnessy et al. 2004; Russell et al. 2006). The presence of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula has also been associated with greater peer support: 67% of LGBTQ students reported that their classmates were accepting of LGBTQ people when the school taught inclusive curricula (Kosciw et al. 2012). Similarly, one

study with college students found that when heterosexual students were exposed to positive or neutral portrayals of the LGBTQ community, they experienced a reduction in prejudicial attitudes towards LGBTQ people (Fuentes et al. 2009). LGBTQ-inclusive curricula not only offer a sense of validation for LGBTQ students, but also they provide other students with an opportunity to understand experiences that may differ from their own (McGarry 2013), which may in turn help reduce intolerance and prejudicial attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals (Kosciw et al. 2012).

Despite the apparent benefits of a LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, fewer than 20% of LGBTQ students report having been exposed to positive representations of LGBTQ people in their classes (Kosciw et al. 2012), with social studies/history, English and health classes as the most likely contexts for LGBTQ-inclusive lessons (McGarry 2013; Snapp et al. 2015). Other educational settings, such as physical education (PE), are viewed as particularly unsafe spaces for LGBTQ students wherein verbal harassment is common and the needs of transgender and genderqueer students are not respected (Snapp et al. 2015). Similarly, courses such as health and sexuality education often fail to include information that is sensitive and supportive of LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al. 2012; McGarry 2013). In sum, LGBTQ issues may be included in curricula in ways that are perceived as neutral, supportive, or unsupportive by students, but little is known about how the supportiveness of curricula may be associated with school and student outcomes.

Student experiences and perceptions of school climate

The term 'school climate' has emerged in the literature on LGBTQ youth as a global notion referring to the safety and well-being of LGBTQ students at school, as well as the degree to which schools enact policies and programmes that are supportive of LGBTQ students. Yet this construct has multiple meanings in educational research and scholars have used it varyingly to refer, for example, to interactions among students and teachers, organisational structures and culture or policy conditions of schools (Anderson 1982). Although some objective indicators may be relevant to school climate (e.g. school size or type), much discourse on school climate relies on information about the character of a school, often measured through student self-reported data on experiences and perceptions (Eliot et al. 2010). As such, data on the 'school climate' for LGBTQ students imply a concern both for student-level everyday experiences, as well as for school-level indicators of the culture and milieu of the school.

Among self-reported measures there may be subtle differences for interpreting meaning and implications at the student-level compared to the school-level. Students' reports of experiences at school, such as victimisation or learning about LGBTQ issues, represent discrete events that take place at school. Such indicators are likely to have high variability among students (notwithstanding significant differences in rates across schools). Thus the strongest associations should be found at the individual student level. On the other hand, data on students' perceptions of the school climate, such as safety or perceived supportiveness of curricula, are likely to depend on both individual differences (i.e. some students may be more attuned or sensitive to safety than others) as well as differences between schools (Anderson 1982) that have to do with meaningful aspects of the character or 'climate' of a school (Russell and McGuire 2008). Data related to students' perceptions may be more likely to show school-level differences. Essentially, schools with supportive curricula should have students who, on average, report a more supportive climate.

The current study

In this study, we examine the association between LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, students' reports of bullying and their perceptions of school safety. We consider the implications of inclusive curricula for individuals in the same school and for students across schools. To this end, we examine whether the presence of inclusive curricula is associated with bullying and perceptions of safety for individual students and in aggregated measures of school climate. We consider not only whether students report exposure to curricula that include LGBTQ issues, but also curricula that support LGBTQ people and issues. Because inclusion in different subject areas may have distinct implications for safety, we also take into consideration different classroom contexts in which LGBTQ-inclusive curricula may be presented (e.g. comparisons between social studies, English, health or PE). Finally, previous research indicates that many heterosexual students are members of GSAs (Goldstein and Davis 2010; Szalacha 2003b) and as an ally may have more in common with LGBTQ students when reporting on school curricula or safety than with heterosexual students who are not members of GSAs; we take into consideration identification as LGBTQ, or being a member of a GSA, in all analyses.

Students' reports of the presence of inclusive curricula should be most strongly associated with their personal bullying/victimisation experiences and their personal perceptions of safety at school, especially given that there tends to be more variability at the individual level than the school level for personal perceptions of safety and whether someone noticed if curricula were inclusive (see Russell and McGuire 2008 for an example). Yet for students' perceptions of supportive curricula, we expect the overall mean of supportiveness (at the school level) to strongly predict students' reports of bullying and safety. Specifically we argue that while an individual student may notice the presence of inclusive curricula in a pattern consistent with personal experiences, the supportiveness of curricula ought broadly to influence the climate in a way to reduce overall harassment and bullying at school.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were middle- and high-school students (ages 12–18; $M = 15.72$, SD = 1.21) in California who participated in the 2008 *Preventing School Harassment* (PSH) survey, which was developed by the California Safe Schools Coalition. At the time of data collection, there was no federal or state law mandating LGBTQ-inclusive curricula. However, the State Health Education Content Standards for California Public Schools in 2008 indicated that health classes should recognise and respect differences in health and development based on sexual orientation (as well as other individual characteristics), evaluate social and cultural perceptions about sexual orientation and respond appropriately to harassment due to actual or perceived sexual orientation (California Department of Education 2008).

The 2008 PSH survey was designed to assess students' experiences of gender- and sexual orientation-based harassment in schools and to identify correlates of reduced harassment. Because curricular inclusion had previously been identified as an important component of reducing harassment, the survey included questions about school courses that engaged with LGBTQ issues and how supportive the courses were of LGBTQ people or issues (see http://www.casafeschools.org/PSH_2008.pdf for a copy of the complete survey). Paper copies of the survey were distributed to high school GSAs in California; several school GSAs and youth leaders within GSAs administered the survey in one or

more classrooms in their schools. The National GSA Network also recruited participants through their email listserv, which consists of students and community programmes throughout the USA that support LGBTQ youth. The authors of the current study were granted IRB approval from the University of Arizona's ethics committee to analyse this secondary data-set.

Approximately 20% of the initial 1311 respondents filled out the survey online. For each respondent, we used the name of their school and town in which they live to identify students who attended the same school; students who did not provide school information were excluded from analysis. The online version of the survey included randomisation of question order to reduce missing data for any one section due to survey incompletion. Therefore, analyses were performed using all available data for respondents for any given analysis. This resulted in a final analytic dataset of 1232 students from 154 schools. Out of these 154 schools, 75% were public schools and 25% were continuation or alternative schools, which closely aligns with the representation of public versus alternative and continuation schools in the state of California.[2]

Although most students (80.7%) came from schools with GSAs, only 29.9% of students reported being a member of a GSA. Similarly, although recruitment efforts were designed to capture the experiences of LGBTQ youth, only 28.5% identified as gay/lesbian (10.3%), bisexual (11.2%), queer (1.5%) or questioning (4.0%); the rest (71.5%) identified as heterosexual/straight. For gender, participants mostly identified as female (62.1%), followed by male (35.6%), questioning ($n = 8$) and transgender ($n = 3$). Participants were racially and ethnically diverse, with 33.7% identifying as White/non-Hispanic, 26.5% as Hispanic/Latino/Latina, 17.1% as multiracial, 12.8% as Asian/Pacific Islander and 9.9% as Black/non-Hispanic; these statistics are similar to the racial/ethnic representation of students enrolled in public schools throughout California during 2008 (see kidsdata.org).

Measures

Presence and supportiveness of inclusive curriculum

Participants were asked whether they had '... learned about LGBTQ people or issues as part of a lesson in my classes at school'. If students had ever learned about LGBTQ issues as part of a school lesson, they were asked to indicate the courses in which this had occurred and to indicate if the lessons had been taught in elementary, middle and/or high schools. Course options included: English, social studies, math, science, sexual education, health, music, art, drama and physical education. Students who did not check any boxes were assumed to have not received LGBTQ-related lessons in their courses. Students who reported the presence of inclusive curriculum were then asked: 'How supportive was it of LGBTQ issues?' Response options included 3 (*mostly supportive*), 2 (*neutral/mixed*) and 1 (*mostly not supportive*).

Perceptions of safety

Participants responded to the prompt, 'My school is safe for ...' for several subpopulations of their school, including gender non-conforming students (e.g. '... guys who are not as "masculine" as other guys'), LGBTQ students and teachers and students with LGBTQ parents and straight allies. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Responses were combined using an average to indicate how much students felt LGBTQ people were safe in their schools ($M = 2.74$, SD $= .66$, $\alpha = .91$). Using identical response options, students responded to the statement, 'I feel

safe at my school' ($M = 2.80$, SD $= .87$). They also reported how many times in the past 12 months on school property they had been afraid of being beaten up. Response options ranged from 0 (*0 times*) to 3 (*4 or more times*) ($M = .36$, SD $= .80$).

School bullying/victimisation

Students reported how many times in the past 12 months they had been harassed or bullied on school property because they were 'gay or lesbian or someone thought [they] were' ($M = .45$, SD $= .93$), because they weren't 'as "masculine" as other guys' or 'as "feminine" as other girls' ($M = .35$, SD $= .79$) or because they had LGBTQ friends ($M = .33$, SD $= .79$) with response options ranging from 0 (*0 times*) to 3 (*4 or more times*).

Plan of analysis

Courses which contained similar patterns in level of supportiveness and logically related to each other (e.g. 'health/life skills' and 'sexuality education') were combined; ratings for supportiveness were averaged for these courses. Data were split into two groups: (1) heterosexual students who were not members of a GSA (Straight, $n = 581$), and (2) LGBTQ students and GSA members (LGBTQ/Ally, $n = 388$). The rates of reported discussions and supportiveness were similar within LGBTQ students and allies; thus, these students were combined for all subsequent analyses, and from here forward are referred to as LGBTQA students (the letter 'A' here representing allies).

Multilevel models were run separately by classroom subject area. The models included level 1 (differences between students in the same school) and level 2 (differences between schools) effects and controlled for sexual orientation and GSA membership. Mean responses for presence and supportiveness of inclusive curricula were calculated by school (level 2), and students' responses were centred on their school mean (level 1). We ran two sets of multilevel models, the first examining inclusion of LGBTQ curricula, and the second examining the impact of degree of curricular supportiveness among those with LGBTQ-inclusive curricula.

Results

Table 1 lists students' reports of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula as well as psychometric properties of study variables, including differences between LGBTQA and heterosexual students. We ran crosstabs to compare allies ($n = 124$) to LGBTQ ($n = 247$) students. The allies reported feeling safer overall, feeling less afraid to go to school and experiencing fewer incidents of harassment. However, reports of LGBTQ curricula across subjects were not significantly different between allies and LGBTQ students. Between 15% and 40% of students (full sample) reported being taught LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in various subjects. Both LGBTQA and heterosexual students provided similar reports of the presence of inclusive curricula. Students indicated that they most often experienced LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in sexuality education/health classes (40%), followed by English/social studies (27%). Mathematics/science, music/art/drama and PE were the least likely classes to include LGBTQ-inclusive lessons (15–16%). A series of crosstabs were run to determine if different racial/ethnic groups were more or less likely to report the presence of inclusive curricula. In most cases there were no significant differences, and the differences that did emerge were not in a distinct pattern, except for a slight trend for Caucasian students to report less

Table 1. Students' reports of presence of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula by subject and mean levels of supportiveness of curricula, school safety and victimisation/bullying.

	Full sample (n = 969)				LGBTQA students (n = 388)				Heterosexual students (n = 581)				
	Yes	No	M	SD	Yes	No	M	SD	Yes	No	M	SD	ANOVA
English/social studies	259 (27)	710 (73)			119 (31)	269 (69)			140 (24)	441 (76)			
Mathematics/science	155 (16)	814 (84)			49 (13)	339 (87)			106 (18)	475 (82)			
Sexuality education/health	386 (40)	583 (60)			170 (44)	218 (56)			216 (37)	365 (63)			
Music/art/drama	147 (15)	822 (85)			57 (15)	331 (85)			90 (15)	491 (85)			
Physical education	143 (15)	826 (85)			43 (11)	345 (89)			100 (17)	481 (83)			
Level of support													
English/social studies			2.34	.68			2.50	.54			2.20	.75	$F = 11.06$**
Mathematics/science			2.09	.68			2.30	.67			2.00	.67	$F = 5.01$*
Sexuality education/health			2.37	.65			2.40	.63			2.35	.67	$F = .41$
Music/art/drama			2.17	.76			2.56	.55			1.94	.79	$F = 20.31$***
Physical education			2.04	.74			2.25	.72			1.94	.73	$F = 3.88$*
Perceptions of safety													
LGBTQ people are safe			2.74	.66			2.75	.65			2.75	.67	$F = .00$
I feel safe			.69	.46			.68	.47			.71	.46	$F = .86$
Fears assault at school			.36	.80			.55	.93			.25	.69	$F = 34.26$***
Reason for victimisation/bullying													
Sexual orientation			.45	.93			.98	1.18			.14	.53	$F = 240.48$***
Masculinity/femininity			.35	.79			.57	.95			.22	.66	$F = 48.16$***
Having LGBTQ friends			.33	.79			.62	1.00			.15	.56	$F = 95.91$***

Notes: Percentages in parentheses. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

instruction on LGBTQ issues in mathematics/science and PE, but more LGBTQ-inclusive curricula in sexual health classes.

The level of supportiveness of inclusive curricula also varied by LGBTQA and heterosexual students with the exception of sexuality education/health. LGBTQA students reported significantly higher levels of support in curricula as compared to heterosexual students for all subjects in which LGBTQ-inclusive lessons were taught. LGBTQA and straight students had similar reports of the safety of LGBTQ people in school as well as their own personal overall safety; however, LGBTQA students were more likely to fear assault at school compared to their peers. Furthermore, LGBTQA students consistently experienced more bullying at school for reasons related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity or that of their friends as compared to heterosexual students.

Table 2 presents results for the multilevel analyses of the presence of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula predicting personal school safety at individual and school levels. At the individual level, the presence of inclusive curricula was strongly associated with more bullying (level 1). Students who reported inclusive curricula were more likely than students in the same school who did not receive these curricula to report being bullied due to sexual orientation, gender presentation or having LGBTQ friends. This pattern of higher reports of bullying by students who had received LGBTQ-inclusive curricula persisted across all subject areas. Additionally, students who reported inclusive curricula in mathematics/science and PE courses also reported more fears of being physically assaulted at school than students who did not receive these curricula. Because the questions ask only whether LGBTQ issues were addressed in those classes, we can only speculate that individuals, who experience bullying, may also be more likely to notice when such topics are raised in classes. It is also possible that topics are raised in a negative fashion, perhaps even in response to an individual being bullied, which would artificially inflate these correlations. In any case, noticing inclusive curricula was associated, for the most part, with specific individuals having more negative experiences at school.

At the school level, inclusiveness in sexuality education/health classes was associated with greater feelings of safety. We can expect that when the overall level at a school is reported as more inclusive, there is in fact a difference among schools, not due to an individual's sensitivity to a specific lesson. In sum, students who reported numerically more curricula were also more likely to have been bullied. In schools with inclusive curricula especially in sexuality education/health, students overall reported more safety and somewhat less bullying.

Table 3 shows the results of multilevel models for the associations between curricular supportiveness and perceptions of safety and bullying, only for students who received LGBTQ-inclusive curricula in each particular course (individual models vary from $n = 845$ to $n = 915$ based on missing data). For almost all courses, at the individual level students who reported more curricular support had greater perceptions of overall safety for LGBTQ people in comparison to students who reported less supportive curricula in the same school. However, those students who reported more curricular support also reported more personal bullying, particularly due to gender non-conformity, when supportive curricula were taught in mathematics/science, music/art/drama and physical education courses.

At the school level, schools with more supportive curricula in sexuality education/health and, to some extent, music/art/drama and PE, were safer and had less bullying than schools with less supportive curricula; again, results were strongest for LGBTQ student/teacher safety and personal safety. Schools with supportive LGBTQ-inclusive curricula also reported overall less bullying than schools with unsupportive curricula, particularly

Table 2. Multilevel models showing the effect of presence of inclusive curricula on school safety and victimisation/bullying.

		Perceptions of safety			School victimisation/bullying due to		
		LGBTQ people are safe	I feel safe	Fears assault at school	Sexual orientation	Masculinity/femininity	Having LGBTQ friends
English/social studies	Level 2	0.17 (0.12)	0.19 (0.16)	−0.26 (0.16)	−0.32 (0.20)	−0.11 (0.17)	0.03 (0.16)
	Level 1	0.03 (0.05)	0.06 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	0.25*** (0.06)	0.29*** (0.06)	0.22*** (0.06)
Mathematics/science	Level 2	0.23 (0.19)	0.34 (0.24)	−0.24 (0.27)	−0.60[+] (0.33)	−0.28 (0.28)	−0.29 (0.27)
	Level 1	−0.10[+] (0.05)	−0.08 (0.07)	0.22* (0.07)	0.31*** (0.07)	0.41*** (0.07)	0.41*** (0.07)
Sexuality education/health	Level 2	0.37*** (0.11)	0.33* (0.14)	−0.37* (0.15)	−0.16 (0.19)	−0.21 (0.15)	−0.26[+] (0.15)
	Level 1	0.01 (0.04)	0.10[+] (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.25*** (0.06)	0.24*** (0.05)
Music/art/drama	Level 2	0.18 (0.15)	0.20 (0.19)	−0.10 (0.20)	−0.08 (0.25)	0.01 (0.20)	−0.04 (0.20)
	Level 1	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.05 (0.08)	0.19 (0.07)	0.35*** (0.08)	0.44*** (0.07)	0.32*** (0.07)
Physical education	Level 2	0.26 (0.22)	0.28 (0.28)	−0.31 (0.30)	−0.84* (0.37)	−0.44 (0.31)	−0.51 + (0.30)
	Level 1	−0.05 (0.06)	−0.01 (0.07)	0.24*** (0.07)	0.33*** (0.07)	0.43*** (0.07)	0.34*** (0.07)

Notes: Models control for sexual orientation and GSA membership. $^{+}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 3.   Multilevel models showing the effect of curricula's supportiveness on school safety and victimisation/bullying.

		Perceptions of safety			School victimisation/bullying due to		
		LGBTQ people are safe	I feel safe	Fears assault at school	Sexual orientation	Masculinity/femininity	Having LGBTQ friends
English/social studies	Level 2	0.17 (0.14)	0.14 (1.17)	−0.24 (0.15)	−0.05 (0.23)	0.09 (0.18)	0.02 (0.19)
	Level 1	0.19** (0.07)	0.15$^+$ (0.08)	0.05 (0.09)	0.20$^+$ (0.10)	0.23 (0.10)	0.01 (0.10)
Mathematics/science	Level 2	0.20 (0.19)	0.30 (0.22)	0.01 (0.23)	−0.36 (0.24)	−0.47$^+$ (0.25)	−0.36 (0.25)
	Level 1	0.21* (0.09)	0.21$^+$ (0.13)	0.27$^+$(0.18)	0.27$^+$ (0.16)	0.34* (0.16)	0.16 (0.16)
Sexuality education/ health	Level 2	0.43*** (0.10)	0.34** (0.12)	−0.22$^+$ (0.12)	−0.68*** (0.19)	−0.45*** (0.10)	−0.23 (0.15)
	Level 1	0.25*** (0.06)	0.30*** (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)	0.07 (0.09)	0.11 (0.10)	0.09 (0.09)
Music/art/drama	Level 2	0.25 (0.16)	0.37* (0.18)	−0.02 (0.16)	0.40$^+$ (0.21)	0.03 (0.18)	−0.10 (0.18)
	Level 1	0.21* (0.09)	0.06 (0.13)	0.12 (0.15)	0.30$^+$ (0.17)	0.35* (0.16)	0.07 (0.16)
Physical education	Level 2	0.13 (0.21)	0.57* (0.22)	−0.30 (0.22)	−0.31 (0.24)	−0.60* (0.24)	−0.57* (0.24)
	Level 1	0.29** (0.09)	0.23$^+$ (0.12)	0.18 (0.14)	0.16 (0.15)	0.30* (0.15)	0.28$^+$ (0.15)

Notes: Models control for sexual orientation and GSA membership. $^+p < .10$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

when these lessons were given in sexuality education/health and PE classes. In sum, at the individual level, supportive curricula, much like inclusive curricula, were associated with safety, but also with more frequent bullying. At the school level, supportive curricula, again like inclusive curricula, were associated with more safety and less bullying across the school.

Discussion

Inclusive and supportive curricula are important, but are only effective in promoting a positive overall climate when they reach a critical mass within a school. That is, in schools with scarce inclusive and supportive curricula, individuals may notice inclusive and supportive curricula because they have personally had negative experiences, yielding a negative association. However, once inclusive and supportive curricula reach a critical mass within a school, the overall school climate is improved, evidenced by a positive association at the school level. On average, students feel safer and report less bullying when the overall school level of inclusive and supportive curricula is higher. The primary contribution of this study is the distinction of individual level versus school level differences in safety and bullying based on inclusive and supportive curricula across different subject areas.

Our analyses suggest that sexuality and health education is a particularly important setting for inclusive and supportive curricula within schools. LGBTQ-inclusive curricula were most common in sexuality education/health classes, and the results show that at the school level, school safety was higher for schools in which more students reported the presence of LGBTQ-inclusive sexuality and health education. Further, in schools where sexuality and health education was perceived as supportive of LGBTQ people and issues, there was more safety and less bullying; the same holds true at the student level as well. These results are encouraging and statistically stronger than the link between student-level reports of the presence of LGBTQ-inclusive sexuality and health education and higher bullying. Together, the results affirm the need for sexuality/health education to be inclusive of LGBTQ issues, as recommended by multiple organisations (e.g. SIECUS 2004).

To date no study to our knowledge has provided an examination of LGBTQ-inclusive and supportive curricula, how curricular inclusion may vary across subject areas, and whether the presence or level of supportiveness of LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum has implications for safety and bullying among students and across schools. In a diverse sample of California LGBTQA and heterosexual youth, we learned that LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are fairly infrequent and are most sparse in courses such as math/science, music/art/drama and PE. While LGBTQA youth may have reported similar rates of personal safety as heterosexual youth, they are more likely to fear assault at school and report bullying than their peers. Other research has documented the tendency for LGBTQ youth to report feeling safe when asked, but then when further prompted, to share experiences of hostility, victimisation and homophobia/transphobia in school (Snapp et al. 2015).

Our analyses of individual- and school-level experiences of inclusive curricula also have implications for safety. At the individual level, students who reported being taught LGBTQ-inclusive curricula also reported more bullying. While perceptions of safety were higher when students reported supportive lessons, reports of bullying also increased, particularly when supportive lessons were taught in mathematics/science, music/art/drama and PE courses. As previously noted, teachers who become aware of bullying due to sexual orientation or gender non-conformity may proactively incorporate LGBTQ issues

into classroom discussion. It is also possible that even when curricula are considered supportive of LGBTQ people, particularly when within subject areas that typically do not teach LGBTQ lessons, students may still experience bullying outside of those courses. For example, a teacher in math/science may teach an LGBTQ-supportive lesson to be inclusive of LGBTQ students or as a pathway to address bullying behaviour; however, bullying may not necessarily cease as the frequency of inclusive lessons in math/science is relatively low. It is also likely that students who are bullied are more attuned to inclusive messages in curricula, and thus more likely to report both. Another study (Burdge et al. 2013) has suggested that the presence of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula in schools may make students more aware of biased-based bullying due to sexual orientation and gender identity. Such awareness may result in more reports of school bullying, which existing research has shown is often under-reported (Mishna et al. 2009) in part due to students' confusion about what behaviour constitutes bullying (Watson et al. 2012). The increased reporting of biased-based bullying, taken at face value, may seem problematic, but is similar to increased reports of gender-based harassment after students have been exposed to a prevention programme aimed to reduce gender-based harassment and sexual violence (e.g. Taylor, Stein, and Burden 2010; Taylor et al. 2013). These findings highlight the potential role of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula as an intervention or prevention strategy. In effect, inclusive curricula may raise awareness about LGBTQ issues in schools and motivate bystanders to speak out about the forms of harassment they see in schools.

At the school level, when schools teach inclusive curricula, especially in sexuality education/health, students report less bullying and more safety. When lessons are viewed as more supportive, in sexuality education/health, music/art/drama and PE, safety increases and bullying decreases. These results are encouraging and consistent with several prior studies (Burdge et al. 2013; GLSEN 2011; Kosciw et al. 2010; O'Shaughnessy et al. 2004; Russell et al. 2006), though they speak to differences in individual and school-level experiences. While inclusive and supportive curricula may not reduce bullying for individual students when compared to others within their own school, they do have broad positive effects through the reduction of bullying across schools. For example, it appears that the school-level effect of supportiveness is consistently associated with less average bullying in any given school and generally outweighs the student-level effect. There are also notable results related to several distinct subject-matter areas.

Sexuality and health education are discussed above; however, a second subject-matter area that deserves further attention is PE. This is a subject area where LGBTQ inclusion was least common, and when included, most likely to be unsupportive. However, LGBTQA students rated PE (as well as mathematics/science) curricula as more supportive than their heterosexual peers, which follows the trend of the other subject matters in this study. It could be that LGBTQA students are likely more sensitive to inclusiveness in PE given that PE is often viewed as a particularly toxic context for LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students (Toomey and Russell 2013). Thus any mention of LGBTQ issues that is not discriminatory may be viewed as supportive (though we cannot directly assess what students mean by supportive with these data). At the student level, the presence of LGBTQ curricula in PE was clearly linked to more bullying and fears of assault at school. At the school level the results were more encouraging and suggest that there was less bullying due to sexual orientation in schools where LGBTQ curricula were taught in PE. Schools are more personally safe and have less bullying (due to gender non-conformity and having LGBTQ friends) when curricula are supportive. Our results suggest that proactive, affirmative inclusion of LGBTQ people and issues in PE classes can counteract an otherwise generally unsupportive context.

In sum, findings suggest there are unique differences between individual and school outcomes when LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum is taught. At the level of the student, the presence of inclusive curricula may heighten students' awareness of bullying and safety, which is associated with more reports of bullying and fewer reports of safety. In contrast, schools may teach inclusive curricula in schools where the climate for LGBTQ youth is already unsafe, perhaps in an attempt to intervene in a hostile climate.

At the level of the school, the presence and supportiveness of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula reduce students' reports of bullying and have positive implications for safety, which suggests that the overall school climate improves when inclusive curriculum is taught and is supportive. These findings appear to be stronger than the effects at the student level, suggesting that implementing supportive LGBTQ-inclusive curricula has broader implications for school climate that may outweigh any negative associations found in the variability of individual students.

Limitations, conclusions, and future directions

While this study contributes to the literature on LGBTQ-inclusive curricula and school climate, there are some limitations. First, we are limited to cross-sectional data and, as such, there may be more complex processes at play than our explanations for these patterns can disentangle. Qualitative and longitudinal studies could help illuminate the dynamics of students' classroom experiences related to LGBTQ inclusion and support, and peer bullying and harassment.

Our sample, though sizable and diverse, was limited to young people in California, and many young people were recruited via GSAs. Thus, these students may have been more aware of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula than students in a population-based study. We controlled for sexual orientation, gender identity, and GSA involvement to improve generalisability, but future research should consider a variety of sampling methods to maximise school-wide participation.

Relatedly, the experience of youth in California may be unique given that the state is considered to have a more liberal approach to LGBTQ-inclusive curricula (and sexuality education) than states mandated to teach abstinence-only curriculum (as the latter often excludes reference to LGBTQ youth; Fields and Hirschman 2007; Fisher 2009). Additionally, since these data were collected, California passed the FAIR Education Act in 2011, which requires that teachers include factual and positive information about LGBTQ people in social studies and history. Given this shift in the policies and practices regarding LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, there is the potential to explore ways in which LGBTQ-related curricula may be related to student and school outcomes beyond safety. Further research is also needed to understand the extent to which this policy has been implemented in California schools. In order to implement the FAIR Education Act, teacher training and professional development are clearly needed (Burdge et al. 2013); however, the Act does not currently mandate this or provide funding to support it. This is a clear barrier to successful and widespread implementation.

Future work should include young people from other states to document not only the influence of state and local policies but also the variations found within diverse school climates. Within the scope of our data, we were unable to identify the association between school climate, culture, and curricula. Given school curricula are only one school-based strategy that can improve safety and well-being for students (Fisher 2009; Horn, Kosciw, and Russell 2009), it is likely that other factors not assessed in this study (at the school and individual levels) are also influencing the associations found in our data. Assessment of

multiple school-based strategies (e.g. Horn, Kosciw, and Russell 2009) is a necessary next step to understand if some strategies hold more potential to improve the overall school climate and related outcomes for youth.

Additionally, this study is limited in its understanding of the scope of the curricula presented to students. For example, students may have had a brief conversation about sexual orientation or gender identity, perhaps in response to bullying in the classroom; they may have been taught a stand-alone lesson that was inclusive of LGBTQ people, as is often the case in sexuality education (Fields 2008); teachers may have included a series of discussions about LGBTQ people or issues over the course of the year; or an analysis of sexuality and gender may have been infused throughout coursework on a regular basis. Such discussions may have addressed homophobia alone or also included conversations about transphobia, although based on current research and data collection for gender-diverse and trans* students, it is less likely that lessons were inclusive of trans* students (McGuire et al. 2010; Robinson et al. 2014).

Based on our data, we are limited in our understanding of how students interpret the word 'curriculum' or 'lesson' and its level of frequency, as well as the meaning of 'supportive'. Our measure of support was limited by three options ('mostly supportive', 'neutral/mixed' and 'mostly not supportive'), and it is likely that support may be interpreted in a variety of ways by students. Past research has found that LGBTQA students failed to equate verbal slurs as markers of an unsafe or unsupportive school climate and instead considered only threats of or actual physical harm to be 'unsafe'. Thus, as with safety, students may also have a relatively 'low-bar' for the curricula they label as 'mostly supportive' (Snapp et al. 2015). These limitations point to the need for future research that clarifies students' understanding of constructs used to measure school climate and that cross references the actual practices and policies implemented within schools.

Future work should also aim to understand whether the LGBTQ-inclusive curricula taught are also critical and culturally responsive and perceived as relevant. Much of the research on culturally relevant curricula assumes a critical pedagogy that not only includes the lives and histories of underrepresented people but also uses a critical lens that challenges hegemony (e.g. Ladson-Billings 1995). The literature on culturally relevant curricula, namely ethnic studies, has shown that when curricula included representations of underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, attitudes about racism marginally improved, but when curricula also discussed racism, prejudice and systems of oppression more directly, the change in students' racial attitudes was more dramatic (Sleeter 2011). In this vein, the next necessary step for those in the safe schools movement appears to be exploring the ways in which LGBTQ-inclusive curricula do or do not address and challenge homophobia and transphobia (as well as racism and sexism) directly. This step may result in a disruption of the disproportionate school-based victimisation of LGBTQ youth, as future generations focus on affirming the lives of LGBTQ people.

In spite of these limitations, this study offers an initial assessment of the association between LGBTQ-inclusive curricula and students' reports of safety and well-being at the individual and school levels. While it is unlikely that students experienced broad-based inclusion across subjects, being taught even one 'lesson' has positive implications across multiple outcomes. This should be enough to encourage researchers and educators to continue to assess and implement broad-based inclusive curricula that speak to the lives of all students.

Disclosure statement

Notes

1. We use the words curriculum and curricula broadly throughout this paper. We recognise that LGBTQ-inclusive curricula may vary from a single lesson that mentions LGBTQ people or issues to an entire class (e.g. LGBTQ History).
2. For more information about the types of schools and enrolment in California, visit the California Department of Education's website: http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/ceffingertipfacts.asp

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