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LGBTQ+ Inclusive School Policies and Practices and Students' Mental Health in Portugal

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**LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE SCHOOL POLICIES AND PRACTICES AND STUDENTS’
MENTAL HEALTH IN PORTUGAL**

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Resumo

Existe uma escassez de investigação sobre diferenças de perceção entre estudantes LGBTQ+ e cisheterossexuais, no que diz respeito a políticas e práticas LGBTQ+ inclusivas, e poucos estudos que analisam o papel de um currículo inclusivo de diversidade sexual e de género, em diferentes indicadores de saúde mental e bem-estar de estudantes LGBTQ+. No presente estudo, procurámos, em primeiro lugar, fornecer uma visão geral da perceção dos alunos (N = 989), que frequentaram escolas portuguesas do 7º ao 12º ano, relativamente à existência e implementação de algumas políticas e práticas LGBTQ+ inclusivas. Em segundo lugar, explorámos possíveis disparidades entre os jovens LGBTQ+ e cisheterossexuais, relativamente às suas perceções das respetivas políticas e práticas. Finalmente, analisámos possíveis diferenças nos níveis de depressão, ansiedade geral, resiliência e de autoestima dos estudantes LGBTQ+, em função da sua perceção sobre a existência de um currículo LGBTQ+ inclusivo. Em geral, os resultados revelaram que apenas uma minoria de estudantes mencionou que as suas escolas tinham políticas anti-bullying que mencionavam orientação sexual e identidade de género, e que o currículo incluía questões LGBTQ+. Para além disso, mais de metade dos estudantes percecionou que sabia onde se dirigir, na sua escola, para obter informações ou apoio relativamente a questões de identidade sexual e de género. Os resultados sugerem, também, que os estudantes LGBTQ+ são mais propensos a relatar uma perceção mais negativa sobre a existência de um currículo inclusivo e os estudantes cisheterossexuais, uma perceção mais positiva. Finalmente, os estudantes LGBTQ+ que consideram o currículo menos inclusivo têm maior probabilidade de relatar níveis mais elevados de depressão e níveis mais baixos de resiliência e autoestima. Os nossos resultados sugerem que a promoção das discussões LGBTQ+ no contexto escolar é um aspeto importante para o bem-estar das minorias sexuais e de género.

Palavras-chave: LGBTQ+, perceções, políticas e práticas LGBTQ+ inclusivas, currículo inclusivo, saúde mental, bem-estar

Abstract

There is a lack of research on exploring differences in perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices between LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual students, and few studies analyzing the role of a sexual and gender diversity curriculum on different mental health and well-being outcomes of LGBTQ+ students. In the present study, we aimed to, firstly, provide an overview of the perception of students ($N = 989$), who attended Portuguese schools from the 7th to the 12th grade, regarding the existence and implementation of some LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices. Secondly, we explored possible disparities between LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual youth, concerning their perceptions of the aforementioned policies and practices. Finally, we explored possible differences in LGBTQ+ students' depression, general anxiety, resilience, and self-esteem levels, as a function of their perception on the existence of inclusive curricula, regarding LGBTQ+ issues. Generally, findings revealed that only a minority of students mentioned that their schools had comprehensive anti-bullying policies and that the curriculum was inclusive of LGBTQ+ issues. Additionally, more than half of students perceived knowing where to go within their school for information or support concerning sexual and gender identity issues. Results also suggest that LGBTQ+ students are more likely to report a more negative perception on the existence of an inclusive curriculum, and cisheterosexual students a more positive perception. Finally, LGBTQ+ students who perceive the curriculum to be less inclusive are more likely to report higher levels of depression and lower levels of resilience and self-esteem. Our findings suggest that promoting LGBTQ+ discussions in the school context is an important aspect for sexual and gender minorities' well-being.

Key words: LGBTQ+, perceptions, LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices, inclusive curriculum, mental health, well-being

Résumé

Il y a un manque de recherche sur les différences de perception entre les étudiants LGBTQ+ et des hétérosexuels en ce qui concerne les politiques et les pratiques inclusives des LGBTQ+, il y'a peu d'études portant sur le rôle d'un programme d'études sur la diversité sexuelle et de genre sur différents indicateurs de la santé mentale et du bien-être des étudiants LGBTQ+. Dans la présente d'étude, nous avons tout d'abord cherché à donner un aperçu de la perception des élèves ($N = 989$), qui ont fréquenté des écoles portugaises de la 7ème à la 12ème année, concernant l'existence et la mise en application de certaines politiques et pratiques d'inclusion LGBTQ+. Deuxièmement, nous avons exploré les disparités possibles entre les jeunes LGBTQ+ et les jeunes hétérosexuels concernant leurs perceptions des politiques et pratiques respectives. Enfin, nous avons examiné les différences possible dans les niveaux de dépression, d'anxiété générale, de résilience et d'estime de soi des étudiants LGBTQ+ en fonction de leur perception de l'existence d'un programme d'études inclusif LGBTQ+. Dans l'ensemble, les résultats ont révélé que seule une minorité d'élèves a mentionné que leur école disposait de politiques de lutte contre le harcèlement mentionnant leur orientation sexuelle et l'identité de genre, et que le programme d'enseignement incluait les questions LGBTQ+. En outre, plus de la moitié des élèves ont indiqué qu'ils savaient où aller dans leur école pour obtenir des informations ou un soutien concernant les questions d'identité sexuelle et de genres. Les résultats suggèrent également que les étudiants LGBTQ+ sont plus susceptibles de rapporter une perception plus négative de l'existence d'un programme d'études inclusif et les étudiants hétérosexuels ont une perception plus positive. Enfin, les étudiants LGBTQ+ qui trouvent le programme d'études moins inclusif sont plus susceptibles de signaler des niveaux plus élevés de dépression et des niveaux plus faibles de résilience et d'estime de soi. Nos résultats suggèrent que la promotion des discussions LGBTQ+ dans le contexte scolaire est un aspect important pour le bien-être des minorités sexuelles et de genres.

Mots clés: LGBTQ+, perceptions, Politiques et pratiques inclusives LGBTQ+, curriculum inclusif, santé mentale, bien-être

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Introduction

During adolescence, one's sense of identity is profoundly influenced by multiple contexts (Curran & Wexler, 2017), namely the educational one (Cross, 2017). Ideally, school supplies youth with a learning environment which enables them to form meaningful social connections and develop new intellectual skills (Palmer et al., 2017).

According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1997), over the life course, an individual is shaped by the influence of the environment that surrounds them, resulting in a constant interaction between person, context, and time. The author provides a conceptual framework that defines context as multiple systems, related to one another, - microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. For Bronfenbrenner (1997), the microsystem constitutes a direct interaction or setting with specific roles, activities, and interpersonal relations, that are experienced by an individual, such as, the family, the peer group, the workplace, or the school.

The school microsystem can be particularly problematic for youth that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or as other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+). Given the presence of a cisheteronormative culture and associated victimization, discrimination, and harassment, many LGBTQ+ students spend a significant portion of their day in an environment that is detrimental to their learning, health, and well-being (Clarke et al., 2010; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2020; Santos, 2018). Cisheteronormativity may be defined as the way commonsense and everyday life provides more privilege to heterosexuality, that is considered as "normal", and to individuals that identify their gender accordingly to their sex assigned at birth (Goldberg, 2016; Okanlawon, 2021). This concept is embedded in schools' structure in a way that may be difficult to detect or recognize (Goldberg, 2016).

Even though bullying victimization can be experienced by all youth in school, research has shown that its prevalence is higher among LGBTQ+ students, in comparison to their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Myers et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2016). This is exemplified in the work undertaken by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, in one of their reports about school climate in US high schools (Greytak et al., 2016). Results showed that sexual and gender minority students were more likely to experience bullying or harassment, based on actual or perceived sexual orientation (67%), gender expression (59.7%), and gender (39.9%), in comparison to non-LGBTQ youth (13.5%, 17.6%, 17%,

respectively). Additionally, LGBTQ+ adolescents were similarly more likely to report sexual harassment and having rumors or lies spread about them (Greytak et al., 2016). In Portugal, the National Study on the School Environment (ENAE), carried out by ILGA and GLSEN, showed that, for many sexual and gender minority students, educational institutions are environments of insecurity and discomfort, where insults and negative attitudes are common (Gato et al., 2020; Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018). Namely, 36.8% of the participants in the study said that they felt insecure in school because of their sexual orientation and 27.9% because of their gender expression. In addition, about a quarter of the participants avoided going to locker rooms, bathrooms, or physical education classes as well as sport grounds, school canteen, and bar (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018).

This cisheteronormative context has a negative impact on sexual and gender minority students' well-being, resulting in higher rates of school truancy, lower educational expectations, lower academic performance (Aragon et al., 2014), a reduced sense of school belonging to their school, perceptions of unsafety (Kosciw et al., 2018), and psychological distress (Russell & Fish, 2016). A hostile school environment can also affect students' mental health, with sexual and gender minorities being at risk for higher levels of depression, anxiety, and personal distress (Almeida et al., 2009; Freitas et al., 2016; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Russell & Fish, 2016; Meyer, 2003; Meyer et al., 2015). Meyer (2003; 2015) offers an explanatory theory for this association, the Minority Stress theory. The author suggests that individuals from stigmatized sexual minorities experience an excess and chronic stress, in result of their minority social position. Such stressors are a consequence of social and cultural structures and contexts that, frequently, do not consider the characteristics of minority groups.

These findings call the attention to the importance of school systems in developing policies and practices that promote inclusion and improve the experiences of these youth. In fact, since the past decade there has been an increasing attention to the pivotal role of such initiatives implemented by the school microsystem (Day et al., 2019; Fernandes et al., 2022; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2013; Kull et al., 2016; Russell & Fish, 2016; Palmer et al., 2017). In the present study we aimed to explore what are the perceptions of students in Portuguese schools regarding the existence and implementation of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices. We further intended to explore if there was an association between perceptions of an inclusive curriculum and LGBTQ+ students' mental health and well-being. Next, we will discuss some LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices, its efficacy and current international and national barriers to their maturing. Then, we will provide a close

overview of the Portuguese context regarding LGBTQ+ issues in schools. Later, we will look at differences in perceptions of policies and practices, between LGBTQ+ students and their cisheterosexual peers. Lastly, we will review studies that have looked at the association between perceptions of an inclusive curriculum and mental health among sexual and gender minorities.

LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices in schools

Turning the leaf from a focus on risks associated with sexual orientation and gender identity, research has begun to identify what can be done in schools to improve the lives of sexual and gender minority students. Amongst others, these initiatives include the development of an inclusive curriculum, implementation of anti-bullying and discrimination policies, and providing access for information and support about sexual and gender identity issues (Day et al., 2019; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kull et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2010; Santos, 2020).

An important aspect in creating change within the school context is providing people with different beliefs and views, other than those that reproduce the status quo. In fact, a school curriculum should embrace all society groups (Bishop & Atlas, 2015) and, as such, incorporate historical events, reference to persons, and information about LGBTQ+ identities and community (Snapp et al., 2015a; Snapp et al., 2015b). There is evidence that a curriculum which is inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and which challenges cisheteronormativity, can have a positive influence in the school context (Palmer et al., 2017). Such curriculum can incorporate sex education classes inclusive of sexual and gender minorities' health, discussion of LGBTQ+ related issues and positive representation of LGBTQ+ people (Blake et al., 2001; Snapp et al., 2015a; Toomey et al., 2012). On the one hand, positively addressing these issues in the classroom allows cisheterosexual youth to obtain more information about other ways and realities of experiencing gender and sexuality, contributing to deconstruct stereotypes and reduce negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ youth. On the other hand, sexual and gender minority youth can experience a sense of validation, representation and become more informed about their possible identifications, sexual and reproductive health, and relationships (Santos, 2020; Snapp et al., 2015b). Studies have indeed found that sexual minority youth who report learning about LGBTQ+ issues in school feel safer, perceive less harassment, miss fewer days of school and perceive greater

peer acceptance (Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2020; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Snapp et al., 2015a).

Anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, within the school context, that specifically mention protections based on SOGI characteristics (comprehensive policies) can also have the potential to improve school climate and experiences of LGBTQ+ students (Poteat, 2017; Russell et al., 2010). From an ecological perspective, such policies should provide a positive impact on school's culture, affecting educators' behaviors and attitudes towards sexual and gender minorities (Kull et al., 2016). As a matter of fact, previous research has suggested that the implementation of comprehensive policies may have an indirect influence, affirming the message to school personnel that discrimination and harassment based on (perceived) sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression cannot be tolerated and should be acted upon (Day et al., 2019; Meyer, 2008). Data from some studies conducted in the US have shown that students in school districts with anti-bullying policies report less victimization, a greater sense of safety, and perceive more support from school staff, than those in schools without such policies (Kosciw et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2020; Kull et al., 2016).

Lastly, providing access to information and support services focused on sexual orientation and gender identity is another strategy aimed at improving the inclusion of LGBTQ+ youth (Russell et al., 2010; Russell & Fish, 2016). O'Shaughnessy and collaborators (2004) found that, when students know where to go, within the school context, for support regarding these issues, they perceive that their schools are safer places for LGBT and gender non-conforming peers.

Whereas the representation of SOGI issues in schools has been noticeable at improving gender and sexual minorities experiences, the support and inclusion of such groups in the school microsystem remains scarce (Poteat, 2017; Russell et al., 2010).

Despite the recognized importance of discussion of LGBTQ+ issues, in reality schools rarely address topics outside the cisheteronorm (Bishop & Atlas, 2015). The International LGBTQI Youth & Student Organization (IGLYO, 2022) developed its second "LGBTQI Inclusive Education Report", a document that provides an overview of efforts for inclusive education in European states, establishing a total score for each country. Findings suggests that LGBTQI inclusive curriculum is not mandatory in various states and that there is a lack of anti-discrimination laws regarding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and variations in sex characteristics in some countries. In Portugal, in a recent qualitative study, where secondary teachers were interviewed and asked about their

approaches on inclusive curriculum, Santos (2020) concluded that the discussion about issues related to sexual and gender diversity is scarce on sex education classes. In addition, the most recent National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2020) found that, according to students' perceptions in the United States, only 8.2% of respondents reported receiving LGBTQ-inclusive sex education, only 19.4% of sexual minorities perceived being taught positive representations of LGBTQ history, people, or events, and only 13.5% of students reported that their schools had an anti-bullying comprehensive policy, that specifically mentions sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

The Portuguese context regarding LGBTQ+ issues in schools

In Portugal, the last two decades have been characterized by profound legal changes regarding sexual and gender minority individuals' rights. These social and political advances were followed by considerable change in the school's microsystem. For instance, in 2009, the first sex education law, that specifically included sexual orientation and gender identity, was approved (Law no. 60/2009, 2009). In 2012, the new law regarding students' status and school ethics established an anti-discrimination policy on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (Law no. 51/2012, 2012). In 2018, a new law advocating for the self-determination for transgender people (Law no. 38/2018, 2018), stimulated schools to develop administrative procedures, to protect students' gender identity and expression. Such procedures should specifically embrace the adoption of students' chosen social name and use of bathrooms according to self-identified gender (Fernandes et al., 2022). More recently, in 2021, The National Strategy for Children's Rights, in place until 2024, brought awareness for equal opportunities for children and youth, regarding their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (Fernandes et al., 2022).

Although Portugal has developed legislation that vindicates for rights and inclusion of gender and sexual minority students, less is known about what is actually being done in schools to promote such inclusion. Some initiatives have been developed by ILGA Portugal and rede ex aequo, two NGO'S that implement activities in schools, focusing on an inclusive curriculum, teacher, school staff and parents training, raising awareness for sexual and gender diversity (Fernandes et al., 2022; Gato et al., 2020). Nonetheless, like in many other parts of the world, it appears to exist a dissociation between established national laws and

actual practices, maintaining the invisibility of LGBTQ+ issues in Portuguese schools (Fernandes et al., 2022; Gato et al., 2020; Santos, 2020).

Differences in perceptions of inclusive policies and practices between LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual students

The premise of influence of context, supported by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1997), can provide an explanation for possible disparities in perceptions between LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual students. Sexual and gender minorities are at a greater risk for victimization, bullying, harassment and negative consequences than cisgender and heterosexual students (Greytak et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2016; Taylor & Peter, 2011). For that matter, different experiences can instigate different perceptions (Mazer & Percival, 1989).

Prior research has indeed examined disparities in students' perceptions of school experiences as a function of their SOGI status (sexual and gender minority vs. cisgender and heterosexual students). These school experiences include verbal and physical harassment, bullying, feelings of safety, school discipline, educational aspirations (Crothers et al., 2017); Greytak et al., 2016; Taylor & Peter, 2011), support from school personnel, being comfortable in reporting bullying to teachers (Crothers et al., 2017), academic performance and outcomes (Aragon et al., 2014; Pearson et al., 2007), and sense of belonging and connectedness to school (Pearson et al., 2000; Greytak et al., 2016), confirming more negative perceptions from LGBTQ+ students.

However, research on possible disparities in perceptions between LGBTQ+ students and their cisgender and heterosexual peers on schools' inclusive policies and practices is almost non-existent. Although focusing on distinctive populations, Meyer and collaborators (2015) investigated differences between LGBTQ and heterosexual teachers, regarding their perceptions on curricula inclusive of gender identity and sexual orientation. It was more important for LGBTQ educators to include sexual and gender diversity content in the curriculum, due to their own experiences of victimization, reporting higher social justice and conscientiousness (Meyer, 2008; Meyer et al., 2015). Furthermore, in a study conducted by Crothers and collaborators (2017), the authors found no differences between heterosexual allies and LGBTQ students' perspectives, in what concerns schools' efforts to prevent

bullying of LGBTQ students, and whether school personnel enforced the schools' anti-bullying policies.

Nonetheless to our best knowledge, research has not focused on differences in perceptions about the existence and implementation of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices in schools, as a function of students' SOGI status.

Inclusive curricula and sexual and gender minorities' mental health and well-being

Adolescence is considered a critical period for mental health and psychological adjustment (Russell & Fish, 2016). During this time, the identity development and consolidation task is characterized by psychosocial changes, social regulation, and self-consciousness (Fish, 2020; Freitas et al., 2016). However, this developmental task is particularly challenging for sexual and gender minority groups, due to their stigmatized social position (Clark et al., 2010; Meyer, 2003).

As a result, the protective role of the school microsystem, in establishing and developing LGBTQ+ inclusive practices, is of utmost importance. An inclusive curriculum and sex education classes can be considered an important factor for LGBTQ+ students' mental health, especially in regards to sexual identity formation (Kaczkowski et al., 2022; (Keiser et al., 2019). However, there is little research exploring the association between perceived inclusive curriculum and mental health and psychological well-being. Based on a program developed in Massachusetts, Blake and collaborators (2001) found that LGB students' risk behaviors were lower in youth attending schools that were more inclusive of gay-sensitive HIV curricula, than those who attended less inclusive institutions. Additionally, in a recent US study, Kaczkowski and collaborators (2022), analyzed the associations between LGBTQ supportive school practices and psychosocial health outcomes. The authors concluded that, for LGB students, the increasement of policies and practices were associated with lower odds of attempting suicide. Nonetheless, no significant associations were found between perceptions of LGBTQ-relevant curricula and mental health.

In the same vein, using a sample of self-identified sexual and gender minority university students, Keiser and collaborators (2019) found that perceived inclusion of sexual minority related issues in the sex education curriculum was associated with lower levels of

depression and anxiety during and after high school. At the same time, perceived exclusion in the curriculum was associated with higher levels of mental health concerns.

Fish (2020) highlighted the need to expand the notions of mental health, including perspectives of well-being and resilience, when studying experiences of sexual and gender minorities. Resilience can be defined as a process of positive adaptation and development on a context that threatens an individual's life (Freitas et al., 2017), buffering the impact of minority stress (Meyer, 2015). It requires the existence of significant risks and overcoming its negative effects, facilitated by protective factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Freitas et al., 2017). Such mechanisms may originate from internal or external resources. Whereas research has provided numerous discussions about higher negative mental health concerns for sexual and gender minorities, due to the challenges of stigma and victimization (Freitas et al., 2016; Meyer, 2003; Russell, 2008; Russell & Fish, 2016), it is important noting the vast strength that these youth gather in the face of adversity (Fish, 2020). From an ecological perspective, external resources bring recognition to the influence of the context on youth development and characteristics (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

Another important aspect of resilience relates to a positive evaluation of the self. In fact, self-esteem and the integration of the sexual and gender minority status into self-concept become central in overcoming the negative consequences of victimization (Whidden et al., 2020). Contextual protective factors, such as social support and a positive school experience, may have a positive impact on youth's self-esteem (Werner, 2000). In a recent study, which explored the association between LGBTQ policies and resources on campus and the mental health of LGB college students (Woodford et al., 2018), the authors found that the presence of for-credit LGBTQ courses was associated with higher levels of participants' self-esteem.

To our best knowledge, although research has highlighted the role of contextual protection mechanisms for resilience and self-esteem (Parmenter et al., 2021; Plöderl et al., 2010; Woodford et al., 2015; Woodford et al., 2018), research has not yet explored the association between perception of an inclusive curriculum and resiliency directly.

The present study

The current research focuses on the perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices and its association with mental health, among a sample of Portuguese high school students. First, we aimed to provide a general overview of these perceptions, asking the following research question: What are students' perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices in their schools? Second, considering an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and previous research exploring differences in perceptions (e.g., Aragon et al., 2014; Crothers et al., 2017; Greytak et al., 2016; Pearson et al., 2007; Taylor & Peter, 2011), we aimed to assess disparities in the perception of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices, between LGBTQ+ students and their cisheterosexual peers. We expected LGBTQ+ students to report a more negative perception about LGBTQ+ inclusive school policies and practices relatively to their cisheterosexual peers (Hypothesis 1).

Finally, taking into account minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003; 2013) and reviewed literature about the importance of an inclusive curriculum as a protective factor for students' mental health and well-being (e.g., Blake et al., 2001; Keiser et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020; Snapp et al., 2015b), we explored differences in mental health and well-being indicators, such as depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and resilience, among LGBTQ+ students, as a function of their perception on the existence of an inclusive curricula regarding LGBTQ+ issues. We hypothesized that LGBTQ+ students who perceived a lack of an inclusive curriculum would be more likely to report higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem and resilience, than their LGBTQ+ peers who perceived an inclusive curriculum (Hypothesis 2).

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The present study focused on LGBTQ+ and Cisheterosexual students' perceptions of inclusive practices and policies, regarding inclusive school regulations and curriculum, as well as information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity in Portuguese schools. Respondents' ages ranged between 14 and 19 years old ($M = 16.2$; $SD = 1.3$). As part of a larger research project, the original database used contained a total of 1,604 individuals. For the present study, we excluded participants who failed to (i) provide consent for participation ($n = 44$), (ii) answer the questionnaire's trap question ($n = 25$) and (iii) answer instruments and items required to measure the variables of interest ($n = 546$). The final sample resulted in a total of 989 participants, of which 482 identified as LGBTQ+ (49%) and the remaining 502 as cisheterosexual (51%). As can be seen in Table 1, regarding participants sex assigned at birth, gender identity, and sexual orientation, most respondents were, respectively, female, cisgender women, and heterosexual. Concerning the topic of religion, most participants were raised in a Catholic household, where religion held a same level of neutral importance for both the youth and their family. The majority of the participants were born and lived for most of their lives in Portugal and attended between the 10th and 12th grade of secondary education. Lastly, participants reported a middle socioeconomic status. The remaining sociodemographic characteristics are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 989).

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Sex assigned at birth		
Male	238	24.1%
Female	751	75.9%
Gender Identity		
Cisgender woman	650	65.7%
Cisgender man	227	23%
Transgender woman/MFT	4	0.4%
Transgender man/FTM	17	1.7%
Non-binary/Gender queer	43	4.3%
Intersex	4	0.4%
Questioning/Not sure	33	3.3%
Other	11	1.1%

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	521	52.9%
Lesbian or gay	88	8.9%
Bisexual	162	16.4%
Queer	27	2.7%
Questioning/Not sure	81	8.2%
Asexual	16	1.6%
Pansexual	60	6.1%
Other	29	2.9%
Grade		
7 th grade	1	0.1%
8 th grade	12	1.2%
9 th grade	109	11.1%
10 th grade	254	25.8%
11 th grade	258	26.2%
12 th grade	349	35.5%
Country of origin		
Portugal	940	95.1%
Other	48	4.9%
Country lived in for most of one's life		
Portugal	954	96.7%
Other	33	3.3%
Parents' country of origin		
Both born in Portugal	732	74.5%
One born in Portugal	190	19.3%
Both born in another country	61	6.2%
Religion		
Atheist	245	26.7%
Agnostic	223	24.3%
Catholic	363	39.6%
Protestant – Evangelical	15	1.6%
Orthodox	2	0.2%
Jewish	1	0.1%
Buddhist	6	0.7%
Hindu	1	0.1%
Spiritism	15	1.6%
Other	46	5%
Religion raised in		
None in particular	187	19.7%
Atheist	27	2.8%
Agnostic	12	1.3%
Catholic	674	70.9%
Protestant – Evangelical	26	2.7%
Orthodox	9	0.9%
Jewish	1	0.1%
Hindu	1	0.1%
Spiritism	6	0.6%
Other	7	0.7%
Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Importance of religion to youth	4.29	1.47
Importance of religion to family	4.30	1.51
Socioeconomic status	4.95	1.76

1.2. Procedure

The present study was conducted with data collected in the context of the FREE (Fostering the Right to Education in Europe) project, a cross-national study seeking to investigate European schools' responses to issues of youth's sexual and gender identity. The project in question resulted from a partnership between the Department of Sociology at the University of Ghent (coordination of Salvatore Ioverno, Mieke Van Houtte, and Alexis Dewaele), and the Differential Psychology Centre and the Centre for Psychology at University of Porto (coordination of Jorge Gato). The data collected for the FREE project resulted from a questionnaire available online, that could be answered between September 2020 and July 2021. The informed consent was presented on the first page. Individuals were informed that their participation was voluntary, they could terminate at any chosen time, and the questionnaire involved some possibly disturbing questions about feelings, negative events, social support, substance use, self-harm behaviors, and victimization. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were presented with a list of support services related to COVID-19 and suicide hotlines, in case of need for support. Answering all the questions took approximately 20 to 30 minutes. This study was approved by the Ethics Committees of the University of Ghent and the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto. Youth under the age of 18 were able to participate without their parent's consent since it was a way of protecting their sexual orientation or gender identity - a waiver for participation of youths between 16 and 18 years old was obtained from both the Ethics Committees (see Appendix A).

1.3. Measures

Sociodemographic characteristics. Sociodemographic questions included information about participants' sex assigned at birth, gender identity, sexual orientation, grade in school, country of origin, country they lived in for most of their lives, parents' country of origin, their current religion, the religion they were raised in and the importance of religion to youth and to their family, with the last two being measured with a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*Not Important at all*) to 7 (*Extremely Important*). To assess socioeconomic status, the Family Affluence Scale II (FAS II; Boudreau & Poulin, 2009) was used. This scale is composed of four items: (i) "How many computers does your family

own?”, (ii) “In the past 12 months, how many times have you traveled on holiday with your family?”, (iii) “Does your family have a car, van or truck?” and (iv) “Do you have a room just for you?”. The first two items were measured in a scale ranging from 0 (*none*) to 3 (*three or more*), the third item ranging from 0 (*no*) to 2 (*three or more*), and the last item measured in a bicultural response, with “yes” and “no” options. A total sum score was calculated, with scores ranging from 0 to 9, with higher scores indicating higher affluence.

Sexual and gender identity. These identities were assessed using some questions by TheGenIUSS Group (2014). In order to tap into participants’ gender identity, a two-step approach was applied. Youth were asked to identify the sex that they were assigned at birth (male/female) and the term that best expressed their present gender identity (man, woman, queer, transgender woman, transgender man, intersex, questioning, or other). Since some transgender participants can identify their gender as male or female (as opposed to transgender) a single measure may be insufficient to include all transgender respondents (Tate et al., 2013). For that reason, incorporating a measure about sex assigned at birth can be useful to comprehend a greater number of transgender youth (The GenIUSS Group, 2014). Furthermore, the concept intersex can be understood as a medical diagnosis, attributed to or after birth, or as an identity label. Nevertheless, since the term “intersex” is not admitted on birth certificate forms, it was not included in the question regarding sex assigned at birth. Instead, it was placed in the measure related to gender identity. Respondents were also asked to identify the term that best described their current sexual orientation (heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, non-binary/ genderqueer, intersex, questioning, pansexual, asexual, or other). For data analysis purposes, participants who identified as cisgender and as heterosexual, were aggregated into the same group, designated “cisheterosexuals”; the remaining respondents were included in the “LGBTQ+” group.

LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices. In order to ascertain if schools have inclusive policies and/or practices, this section of the questionnaire included several questions, similar to some used in previous studies (Kosciw et al., 2012; O’Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Participants were asked about their knowledge about three main topics: (1) three questions about school policies concerning bullying, harassment, or aggressions and the inclusion in such policies of (i) sexual orientation and (ii) gender identity and expression (0 = *no/don’t know*; 1 = *yes*); (2) inclusive curriculum – two questions about discussion of LGBTQ+ issues in class, regarding (i) transgender people or related issues, and (ii) LGB people or related issues, both measured in a Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*more than once a week*); two questions about the way the respective topics were discussed,

concerning (i) transgender people or related issues and (ii) LGB people or related issues, where, in both questions, the items “mostly negative” and “neutral/equally positive and negative” were aggregated (0 = *mostly negative/neutral/equally positive and negative*; 1 = *mostly positive*); school learning about acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and/or bullying anti-LGBTQ+ (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*); school learning about gender identity (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*); attendance in sex education classes (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*); inclusion of different sexual orientations in sex education classes (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*); (3) information and support in school regarding sexual orientation and gender identity (0 = *no/I don't know where to go*; 1 = *I know where to go*).

Depression. The Patient Health Questionnaire 2-item (PHQ-2) depression screener (Richardson et al., 2010), one of the most used standard brief screening instruments for depression, was applied. PHQ-2 is the short form of a 9-item scale that uses DSM-IV criteria to assess mental health and evaluate the core depressive symptoms. Respondents are asked to select how often they have been experiencing depressive symptoms in the past two weeks, specifying the frequency they had (1) a depressed mood and/or (2) lack of pleasure in usual activities, employing a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*nearly every day*). The resulting scores are then summed to generate a total score that can range from 0 to 6. A cutoff point of ≥ 3 , defined for statistical purposes of the present study (risk for depression), was established in research (Richardson et al., 2010) as presenting the highest sensitivity and specificity for detecting possible cases of major depression in youth participants. A good internal consistency value was found for this scale ($\alpha = .82$).

General Anxiety. The Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2-item brief screener (GAD-2; Plummer et al., 2016) was used to measure this mental health outcome. GAD-2 is the short form of a 7-item scale based on DSM-IV criteria to assess mental health. Individuals are asked to indicate how often in the past two weeks they have been experiencing core anxious symptoms, using a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*nearly every day*). After summing all scores to create a total score, the interpretation suggests that higher scores represent greater anxiety symptoms, with total scores ranging from 0 to 6. A cutoff point of ≥ 3 , defined for the present study (risk for generalized anxiety), was established in research (Plummer et al., 2016) as acceptable, with the highest sensitivity and specificity for detecting possible cases of generalized anxiety disorder. The scale presented a good internal consistency value in the present study ($\alpha = .84$).

Self-esteem. We used a four-item version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965; Santos & Maia, 2003), to evaluate the extent to which respondents

feel about their self-attitudes, resulting in a measure of global self-esteem (e.g., “I take a positive attitude towards myself). The four items are assessed using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Two of the items used are expressed positively, while the remaining are negatively written. Taking this into account, the negatively expressed items were reverse coded, and an average score was calculated with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. The RSES presented a good internal consistency value in the present study ($\alpha = .88$).

Resilience. With the purpose of measuring this variable, The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) was used. This scale consists of six items, intending to assess the ability to bounce back or recover from stress. Since they are negatively worded, scoring requires reverse coding items two, four, and six. Respondents are asked to select the extent to which they agree with the presented statements, using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of resilience. The BRS showed a good internal consistency value in the present study ($\alpha = .86$).

1.4. Data analysis procedure

First, descriptive statistics were run to examine the distribution of scores for all continuous variables, as well as for categorical variables. Skewness values should range from -2 to +2, and kurtosis values from -7 to + 7 (Kim, 2013). Chi-square and Mann-Whitney tests were employed to explore (1) differences between LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual participants in their perceptions about LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices and (2) to identify differences in mental health and well-being outcomes between LGBTQ+ participants, as a function of their perceptions about the existence of an inclusive curriculum.

2. Results

2.1. Descriptive statistics

Before conducting our analyses, we inspected for outliers and did not eliminate any cases. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results suggests a violation of the assumption of normality of the distribution of all the scores. However, skewness and kurtosis values were within the normality range (Table 2).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the Continuous Well-Being and Mental Health Variables.

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	<i>Sk</i>	<i>Ku</i>	<i>KS</i>
Resilience	985	2.7	0.9	1	5	0.30	-0.28	<.001
Self-esteem	984	2.4	0.8	1	4	0.19	-0.59	<.001
Depression	986	2.9	2.0	0	6	0.23	-1.17	<.001
General Anxiety	985	3.1	2.0	0	6	0.12	-1.26	<.001

Concerning the composition of categorical variables, as described in Table 3, slightly more than half of the participants were at risk for generalized anxiety and about half were at risk for depression.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Categorical Well-Being and Mental Health Variables.

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Depression		
Not depressed	498	50.5%
Risk for Depression	488	49.5%
General Anxiety (GA)		
No GA	467	47.4%
Risk for GA	518	52.6%

2.1. Students' perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for the Perception of LGBTQ+ Inclusive Policies and Practices (N = 989).

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
School Policy – Bullying, Harrasment, and Assault		
No/Don't know	691	69.9%
Yes	298	30.1%
School Policy – Gender identity and expression		
Yes	76	25.5%
No/Don't know	222	74.5%
School Policy – Sexual Orientation		
Yes	59	19.8%
No/Don't know	239	80.2%
School Information and Support – SOGI		
No/I don't know where to go	309	31.4%
I know where to go	675	68.6%
Sex education classes		
No	371	37.6%
Yes	616	62.4%
Sex Education – Inclusive of Different Sexual Orientations		
Yes	262	43.2%%
No	345	56.8%
School Learning Experiences – Acceptance of LGBTQ+/ anti-LGBTQ+ bullying		
Yes	391	39.6%
No	596	60.4%
School Learning – Gender Identity		
Yes	282	73.2%
No	103	26.8%
How Topics are Discussed in Class – Transgender People		
Mostly negative	20	4.6%
Neutral/Equally positive and negative	201	45.8%
Mostly positive	218	49.7%
How Topics are Discussed in Class – LGB People		
Mostly negative	15	2.6%
Neutral/Equally positive and negative	253	44%
Mostly positive	307	53.4%
Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Topics Discussed in Class – Transgender People ^a	1.79	1.08
Topics Discussed in Class – Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual People ^a	2.07	1.19

Note. ^a Variables measured in a Likert-scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*more than once a week*).

Concerning our first research question, which focused on a general analysis of respondents' perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices, as can be seen in Table 4, more than half of the participants mentioned that either their schools do not possess policies or regulations about bullying, harassment, or assault, or that they are not aware of them. Furthermore, most respondents mentioned that these policies failed to mention gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, or that they lacked knowledge about these issues. Additionally, approximately only one out of four of those who perceived the existence of a policy in their school, reported that it targeted specifically gender identity and expression, and only one out of five perceives that it mentions sexual orientation.

When in class, respondents reported that topics associated with transgender people or related issues, and LGB people or related issues were never or rarely addressed. However, when they were, almost half of the participants mentioned that these issues were discussed in a mostly positive way. Although more than half of the youth indicated that they have had sex education classes in their school, when asked about the inclusion of different sexual orientations, most of those who answered "yes" considered that these classes were not inclusive of these issues.

Also, more than half of the participants reported not having learned anything about anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and/or acceptance of LGBTQ+ students. However, most of those who selected "yes" considered that, when learning about these issues, gender identity was included. Finally, more than 50% of the participants indicated that they would know where to go within their school if they ever needed information or support about sexual orientation, gender identity, or LGBTQ+ issues.

2.2. Perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices as a function participants' sexual and gender identity status

Table 5

Differences in Perceptions of LGBTQ+ Inclusive policies and Practices between LGBTQ+ and Cisheterosexual Participants.

LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices	LGBTQ+		Cisheterosexual		χ^2 (1)	phi
	n	%	n	%		
School Policy – Gender identity and expression						
Yes	30	20.4%	45	30%	3.13	.11
No/Don't know	117	79.6%	105	70%		

LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices	LGBTQ+		Cisheterosexual		χ^2 (1)	<i>phi</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
School Policy – Sexual Orientation						
Yes	28	19%	31	20.7%	.04	.02
No/Don't know	119	81%	119	79.3%		
School Information and Support – SOGI						
No/I don't know where to go	145	30.2%	162	32.4%	.45	.02
I know where to go	335	69.8%	338	67.6%		
Sex education classes						
Yes	278	57.9%	334	66.5%	7.40*	.09
No	202	42.1%	168	33.5%		
Sex Education – Inclusive of Different Sexual Orientations						
Yes	87	31.6%	174	52.9%	26.71***	.21
No	188	68.4%	155	47.1%		
School Learning Experiences – Acceptance of LGBTQ+/ anti-LGBTQ+ bullying						
Yes	141	29.3%	248	49.6%	41.63***	.21
No	341	70.7%	252	50.4%		
School Learning – Gender Identity						
Yes	99	70.2%	182	74.9%	.77	.05
No	42	29.8%	61	25.1%		
How Topics are Discussed in Class – Transgender People						
Mostly negative, Neutral/Equally positive and negative	105	52.2%	115	48.9%	.29	-.03
Mostly positive	97	48%	120	51.1%		
How Topics are Discussed in Class – Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual People						
Mostly negative, Neutral/Equally positive and negative	134	47.5%	132	45.5%	.16	-.02
Mostly positive	148	52.5%	158	54.5%		
LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices	LGBTQ+		Cisheterosexual		<i>U</i>	<i>r</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Topics Discussed in Class – Transgender People	1.75	1.07	1.83	1.09	114632	-.04
Topics Discussed in Class – Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual People	2.11	1.24	2.03	1.14	117682.50	-.02

Note. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$

As can be seen in Table 5, significant associations were only detected between participants' sexual and gender identity status and perception of (1) having had sex education classes, (2) inclusion of different sexual orientations within sex education classes, and (3) school learning experiences about LGBTQ+ acceptance or bullying anti-LGBTQ+. While cisheterosexual participants perceived more that they had sex education classes, LGBTQ+ participants perceived less that these classes were inclusive of different sexual orientations and that they had learned about LGBTQ+ acceptance. Overall, our hypothesis 1 was partially confirmed.

2.3. Differences in the well-being and mental health of LGBTQ+ participants as a function of their perception of inclusive curricula

Next, we explored differences in mental health and well-being outcomes as a function of LGBTQ+ students' positive and negative perceptions on the existence of an inclusive curriculum.

Table 6

Differences in Levels of Depression and General Anxiety of LGBTQ+ Students as a Function of Positive and Negative Perceptions of Inclusive Curricula.

LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum	Depression				χ^2 (1)	phi
	Not depressed		Risk for Depression			
	n	%	n	%		
Sex education classes						
Yes	122	44%	155	56%	5.67*	.11
No	66	32.8%	135	67.2%		
Sex Education – Inclusive of Different Sexual Orientations						
Yes	49	56.3%	38	43.7%	6.94**	.17
No	72	38.5%	115	61.5%		
School Learning Experiences – Acceptance of LGBTQ+/ anti-LGBTQ+ bullying						
Yes	56	40%	84	60%	.01	.01
No	133	39.1%	207	60.9%		
School Learning – Gender Identity						
Yes	39	39.4%	60	60.6%	.01	-.02
No	17	41.5%	24	58.5%		
LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum	General Anxiety (GA)				χ^2 (1)	phi
	No GA		Risk for GA			
	n	%	n	%		
Sex education classes						
Yes	111	41.7%	155	58.3%	3.35	.09
No	65	33%	132	67%		
Sex Education – Inclusive of Different Sexual Orientations						
Yes	38	44.7%	47	55.3%	.49	.05
No	72	40.4%	106	59.6%		
School Learning Experiences – Acceptance of LGBTQ+/ anti-LGBTQ+ bullying						
Yes	57	42.2%	78	57.8%	.84	.05
No	120	36.5%	209	63.5%		
School Learning – Gender Identity						
Yes	41	43.2%	54	56.8%	.09	.04
No	16	40%	24	60%		

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01

As can be seen in Table 6, statistically significant differences were only observed in depression, with those who reported not having had sex education classes being more likely to be depressed than those who reported having had these classes. Additionally, an association was also found between depression and sex education classes that were inclusive of different sexual orientations, with participants who answered negatively being more likely to be depressed than their peers who answered positively.

Table 7

Differences in Levels of Resilience and Self-esteem Levels of LGBTQ+ Students as a Function of Positive and Negative Perceptions of Inclusive Curricula.

LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum	Resilience		U	z	r
	M	SD			
Sex education classes					
Yes (n = 276)	2.55	0.83	26367	-1.01	-.05
No (n = 202)	2.46	0.83			
Sex Education – Inclusive of Different Sexual Orientations					
Yes (n = 86)	2.63	0.84	7310	-1.21	-.07
No (n = 187)	2.53	0.81			
School Learning Experiences – Acceptance of LGBTQ+/ anti-LGBTQ+ bullying					
Yes (n = 139)	2.64	0.88	20679.50*	-2.15	-.10
No (n = 340)	2.45	0.80			
School Learning – Gender Identity					
Yes (n = 98)	2.54	0.85	1549*	-2.13	-.18
No (n = 41)	2.88	0.90			
LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum	Self-esteem		U	z	r
	M	SD			
Sex education classes					
Yes (n = 278)	2.24	0.78	26749	-.62	-.03
No (n = 199)	2.19	0.71			
Sex Education – Inclusive of Different Sexual Orientations					
Yes (n = 87)	2.42	0.83	6680.50*	-2.45	-.03
No (n = 188)	2.17	0.74			
School Learning Experiences – Acceptance of LGBTQ+/ anti-LGBTQ+ bullying					
Yes (n = 141)	2.30	0.78	21835.50	-1.45	-.07
No (n = 338)	2.19	0.74			
School Learning – Gender Identity					
Yes (n = 99)	2.27	0.78	1949	-.59	-.05
No (n = 42)	2.35	0.79			

Note. For clarity purposes, we used mean scores and standard deviations when reporting the results of the Mann-Whitney test (Martins, 2011).

*p < .05

As can be seen in Table 7, statistically significant differences were only observed in resilience levels as a function of positive versus negative perceptions of (i) school learning about acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, and (ii) school learning about gender identity. Participants who perceived learning about the acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities in school presented higher levels of resilience than their peers who perceived negatively. However, those who reported that they had not learned about gender identity issues in school presented higher levels of resilience, than their peers who reported they had learned about these issues. Finally, those who perceived that sex education classes were inclusive of different sexual orientations presented higher levels of self-esteem than their peers. Overall, our hypothesis 2 was partially confirmed.

3. Discussion

The present work sought out to provide an overview of youth's perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices in schools, to investigate possible disparities in these perceptions between LGBTQ+ students and their cisheterosexual peers, and, lastly, to explore differences in the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ students as a function of their perception on the existence of an inclusive school curriculum.

Concerning our first research question, our results revealed that only a minority of students mentioned that their schools had comprehensive anti-bullying policies and that the curriculum was inclusive of LGBTQ+ issues. However, more than half of the students reported that they would know where to go for information and support about SOGI issues and, when relevant discussions about LGBTQ+ issues took place, it was mostly in a positive way. Although our first hypothesis was not entirely supported, LGBTQ+ students reported more negative perceptions about inclusion of different sexual orientations in sex education classes and school learning about acceptance of LGBTQ+ students or anti-LGBTQ+ bullying, than their cisheterosexual peers. Likewise, regarding our second hypothesis, LGBTQ+ students who perceived the school curriculum not to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ issues were more likely to be at risk for depression and present lower levels of resilience and self-esteem.

In line with our findings, previous studies have also demonstrated a lack of comprehensive anti-bullying and harassment policies that include explicit protections based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression in schools (Kosciw et al., 2020; Palmer et al., 2017; Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018). In fact, even if such policies exist, some students may not be aware of them. Thus, one important aspect for its effectiveness is information dissemination and advocacy to promote school safety, so that youth have a clear understanding of their rights (Russell et al., 2010). Additionally, our results are consistent with data obtained in previous research showing that most students would know where to go, within their school, for information or support related to gender identity or sexual orientation (Toomey et al., 2012). In regards to sex education, although more than half of respondents revealed that they had sex education classes, slightly more than half also perceived the exclusion of different sexual orientations within these classes. It is possible, therefore, that these findings represent the current state of sex education in most schools, matching results obtained in previous studies (Fernandes et al., 2022; Hobaica & Kwon,

2018; Santos, 2020). Although sex education is mandatory in Portuguese schools (Law no. 60/2009, 2009; Fernandes et al., 2022), the exclusion of relevant content concerned with sexual and gender minority issues seems to still be prevalent (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018; Santos, 2020).

Other findings, such as more than half of students perceiving that they have not learned about acceptance or anti-LGBTQ+ bullying in class, or that topics related to LGBTQ people were never or rarely addressed, also corroborate the invisibility of SOGI issues in the schools' context, addressed by previous research (IGLYO, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2020; Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018; Santos, 2020; Snapp et al., 2015a; Snapp et al., 2015b).

Although research has shown that an inclusive curriculum and discussions about anti-bullying are more likely to address issues related to lesbian, gay and bisexual people, rather than transgender youth, as well as lack representation of gender nonconforming students (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2008; Greytak et al., 2013; Schmitt, 2022), in our study, when students learned about acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, more than half reported that gender identity was included in these discussions. Therefore, the current findings may be considered somewhat encouraging in what concerns the inclusion of transgender and gender non-confirming youth in schools' curriculum.

Even though small effects were found, our findings raise intriguing questions regarding the nature of cisheterosexual students' perceptions. Why did cisheterosexual peers perceive more they had sex education classes? As previously stated, sex education and school climate are mostly centered on a cisheteronormative focus, reproducing the norms established by social structures (Goldberg, 2016; Hobaica & Kwon, 2018). Consequently, curriculum provides more attention to the needs of cisheterosexual youth. Considering the influence of context on youth's perceptions (Bronfenbrenner, 1997; Meyer, 2010) such evidence may be a possible explanation for cisheterosexual students' positive perceptions of attending sex education classes.

When studying differences in perceptions about an inclusive curriculum between LGBTQ and heterosexual teachers, Meyer and collaborators (2015) found that the former were more engaged and more sensitive to social justice, human rights and inclusion of sexual and gender minorities topics in the classroom, due to their own minority identities and experiences (Meyer, 2008, Meyer et al., 2015). It can thus be suggested that similar conclusions would be applied to the present study. Given the fact that LGBTQ+ students were asked about the inclusion of sexual and gender minority issues in the curriculum,

related to their own personal experiences, and the known invisibility of these discussions (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018; Santos et al. 2020), their perceptions were more negative than those of their cisheterossexual peers.

Furthermore, it can also be noted that no associations were found between participants' sexual and gender identities and their perceptions of schools' policies that mention sexual orientation and gender identity. Similarly, in a study conducted by Crothers and collaborators (2017), which focused on LGBTQ students, their heterosexual peers and teachers' perceptions of bullying, the authors found no differences in perceptions between LGBTQ youth and their heterosexual allies, concerning schools' efforts to prevent bullying and whether school personnel enforced the schools' anti-bullying policies.

In brief, even though hypothesis 1 was not fully supported, our results seem to be globally consistent with previous research that showed more negative perceptions of LGBTQ+ youth, concerning their experiences in school, namely their sense of belonging and connectedness to school (Pearson et al., 2007; Greytak et al., 2016), feelings of safety (Greytak et al., 2016; Taylor & Peter, 2011), support from school personnel (Crothers et al., 2017) and academic performance and outcomes (Aragon et al., 2014; Pearson et al., 2007), when compared to their heterosexual peers.

Hypothesis 2 was not fully supported as many of our results showed no significant differences in LGBTQ+ students' mental health and well-being, as a function of their perception on the existence of an inclusive curriculum. Nevertheless, consistent with our predictions, and similarly with Keiser et al.'s (2019) findings, LGBTQ+ participants who reported that they had not attended sex education classes, and that these classes were not inclusive of different sexual orientations, were more likely to be at risk for depression than their peers who answered positively to both questions.

Additionally, LGBTQ+ students who reported that they had learned about acceptance of LGBTQ+ people or anti-LGBTQ+ bullying were more likely to report higher levels of resilience than their peers; in turn, consistent with previous research (Woodford et al., 2018), LGBTQ+ participants who perceived inclusion of different sexual orientations in sex education classes were more likely to report a higher self-esteem. These findings may provide further support for the understanding of an inclusive curriculum as a protective factor for sexual and gender minorities' mental health and psychological adjustment. In fact, our results seem to be in line with previous research that shows the positive influence of an inclusive curricula in students' experiences, such as greater perceived acceptance from peers, feelings of safety, hearing less homophobic remarks and experiencing less victimization and

bullying (Kosciw et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2020; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Snapp et al., 2015a; Snapp et al., 2015b). Moreover, our results also seem to be consistent with previous research which shows that LGBTQ students who perceive a lack of an inclusive curriculum are less likely to report that their peers are accepting of LGBTQ people (Kosciw et al., 2020). Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003; 2015) can also provide an explanation for LGBTQ+ students who perceived a lack of inclusion in the curriculum being more likely to report negative mental health outcomes.

Lastly, contrary to our expectations, LGBTQ+ students who perceived the exclusion of gender identity in school learning experiences about acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, were more likely to report higher levels of resilience than their peers who perceived inclusion. A possible explanation for this finding may rely on students' internal resources or other protection mechanisms for resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Freitas et al., 2017). In Keiser and collaborators' study (2019), the authors found that their sample of sexual and gender minority adults reported high scores of resilience factors, such as hope, social support and emotional processing. Recently, Fish (2020) argued that, when studying mental health and psychological well-being for this population, it is important to note the strength that LGBTQ+ people display. Therefore, we can speculate that, in the face of adversity, namely when they perceived a lack of inclusion, LGBTQ+ youth were more likely to report higher levels of resilience.

3.1. Limitations and future directions

Despite its innovative character, the present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting results. First, we relied on self-report measures from students, which may introduce bias. Additionally, such bias may also be considered in regards to the use of single-item measurements to evaluate perceived inclusivity and exclusivity of policies and practices. Future research could focus on the development and validation of appropriate scale measures of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices, namely related to an inclusive curriculum.

Second, given the correlational nature of the study we cannot establish cause-effect associations in our results. More complex models can be tested. For instance, moderation analyses can be conducted in the future to investigate the buffering role of protective factors

(such as resilience and perception of an inclusive curriculum) on the relationship between stigma and mental health (Meyer, 2003, 2015).

Finally, since there is a lack of research on possible disparities in perceptions between LGBTQ+ students and cisheterosexual youth, concerning inclusive policies and practices, our conclusions must be interpreted with caution. In fact, there is abundant room to explore differences in perceptions and their nature. From an ecological perspective, we need to consider that LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices are a part of a large system that influences such inclusion or exclusion. For example, it would be interesting exploring disparities in perceptions, regarding different national regions or different subgroups of LGBTQ+ participants, to better understand LGBTQ+ students' experiences in Portuguese schools.

3.2. Practical implications

Given the data obtained in previous research, regarding the lack of visibility of LGBTQ+ issues in schools (Kosciw et al., 2020; Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018; Santos, 2020) and the results of the present study, it is important to bring LGBTQ+ discussions to the school context, promoting a more curriculum, that ultimately improves sexual and gender minorities' well-being. Such initiatives may be implemented, not only into the classroom, but also through lectures and awareness-raising activities (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018), that benefit both LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual youth (Santos, 2020). Additionally, to develop a more inclusive education, it is also crucial to promote training and awareness for teachers and other school staff, so that educators acquire competencies and knowledge about sexual and gender diversity (Fernandes et al., 2022; Plöderl et al., 2010).

Lastly, the reinforcement and information dissemination of comprehensive anti-bullying policies becomes central in establishing guidelines on how to act in situations of bullying and in developing youth's understanding of their rights (Fernandes et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2010).

4. Conclusion

The present study sought to gather knowledge about the perceptions of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and practices, to explore differences in these perceptions between LGBTQ+ and cisheterosexual youth, and to explore the importance of an inclusive curriculum in the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ students. Although exploratory, our results provide new insights about the invisibility of sexual and gender minority issues in school and the negative consequences of a cisheteronormative curriculum on LGBTQ+ students' mental health and well-being. Taken together, these findings suggest the importance of concrete actions and practices that improve the school climate for LGBTQ+ students.

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Appendix A

Approval by the Ethics Committees of the University of Ghent and of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto



COMISSÃO DE ÉTICA

PARECER (Refª 2020/06-1)

A Comissão de Ética (CE) da Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade do Porto, tendo examinado os documentos referentes ao projeto **"A cross-national study on risk and protective factors for minority stress, mental health and school achievement among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning students."**, apresentado pelo **Doutor Jorge Gato**, emite um **parecer favorável** à realização da pesquisa.

Parecer favorável

A CE é favorável à realização do projeto apresentado e recomenda a observação dos seguintes aspetos:

Prever no consentimento informado a possibilidade de os participantes solicitarem informação sobre os resultados globais dos estudos.

Uma vez que é pedida a identificação da escola, deve ser acautelado o anonimato da mesma.

FPCEUP, 05 de junho de 2020

A Presidente,

Profª. Carlinda Leite