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Mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse students in schools: a systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This systematic literature review (SLR) investigates the effects school environments have on the mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse students. Current literature highlights the need to support the mental health of transgender and gender diverse students in school, however the research synthesizing the existing research is limited. This SLR brings together existing literature exploring the school experience and mental health outcomes for this cohort in schools.

Methods: The review followed PRISMA Guidelines and included JBI quality appraisal tools of included studies. Four electronic databases were used, with literature searches conducted on 31 July 2023. Included studies were assessed against predetermined inclusion/exclusion criteria, with included studies written in English, no date or geographical limitations, online full-text availability, peer-reviewed, and relevant to the research question. Abstract, full-text review, and quality appraisal were conducted by two independent reviewers. Collected data were synthesized using a revised and three-levelled socio-ecological framework and further thematic analysis within the three categories.

Results: 15 studies were included for final synthesis with four using qualitative methodologies, and 11 being cross-sectional studies. The final synthesis comprised three themes, exploring structural level, interpersonal level and individual level barriers to optimal mental health outcomes for transgender and gender diverse students in school settings. Findings highlight and support previous findings of an alarmingly high rate of mental health concerns, including self-harm, suicide and suicidal ideation in transgender and gender diverse youth in school settings.

Conclusions: The current literature highlights the need to explore how denominational affiliations of school environments affect the experiences, challenges and mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse youth. Further research needs to comprehensively unpack the unique structural, interpersonal and individual needs of transgender and gender diverse youth in these diverse school environments, to then provide adequate and affirming support enhancing their overall health and wellbeing.



KEYWORDS

Mental health outcomes; religion; school; transgender and gender diverse youth

Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasize that all humans regardless of race, gender or ethnicity are born with freedom and equality, and everyone has inherent dignity and right to education (United Nations, 1948). Transgender and gender diverse individuals encounter multifaceted challenges that impact many aspects of their life, including in educational settings (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Coleman et al., 2022). This systematic literature review (SLR) explores the mental health

outcomes experienced by transgender and gender diverse students within schools. This investigation is underscored by the increasing prevalence of mental distress, self-harm, and an increased risk of suicidality among this demographic (Sava et al., 2021). These challenges are often exacerbated by systemic and structural discrimination, violence, and engrained transphobia prevalent within educational environments (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Bedford et al., 2023; Coleman et al., 2022; Rasmussen et al., 2017).

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In the lives of transgender and gender diverse children and youth, cisgenderist and heteronormative societal structures and educational systems underpin their early development and transition to adulthood (Almeida et al., 2009; Allen et al., 2020). These conventional frameworks often uphold traditional binary gender expectations and norms, which may conflict the diverse experiences and identities of transgender and gender diverse individuals. Almeida et al. (2009) highlight how these environments impact the formation and acceptance of gender identity among transgender and gender diverse youth, potentially leading to feelings of exclusion/isolation, discrimination, dysphoria, and a loss of identity. Such preservation of cisgenderism and heteronormativity within educational environments can potentially restrict the expression of various gender identities, thereby influencing the psychological health, wellbeing and identity development of transgender and gender diverse youth (Allen et al., 2020). Educational settings often add an additional layer of complexity with deep historical links to cultural and religious identities which are upheld through school traditions and culture. A major factor that can influence the overarching values and ethos of a school is the religious affiliation (Sadler, 2022). Religious schools are expected to uphold the tenets of their belief system, however this can at times result in conflicting ideals (Jones, 2023). More specifically, religious schools are often affiliated with a founding religious order of brothers or sisters and hold a 'charism' which reinforce the dichotomous view of gender (Jones, 2023; Mathews, 2015). The religious affiliation of a school may intensify conflict for transgender and gender diverse students not just through incompatible value systems, but also due to a potential lack of shared understanding. This lack of mutual comprehension may lead to misconceptions, biases, and insufficient support systems, contributing to a further challenging environment, including conversion therapy, for transgender and gender diverse youth navigating their authentic identities while attending school (Jones et al., 2022).

It is challenging to provide an accurate estimation of the prevalence of people identifying as transgender or gender diverse, due to factors

rooted in self-identification, social acceptance, lack of inclusion in standardized population surveys and changes in cultural attitudes toward gender diversity (Cheung et al., 2018). There is not a universally consistently reported figure for the global transgender and gender diverse population, however individual countries can provide estimates of the population. The World Health Organization have acknowledged that statistics on transgender and gender diverse populations are often limited and vary across regions (Reisner et al., 2016) and are thought to make up a small percentage of the global population. In a recent study by Cheung et al. (2018) the rate of referrals within the health industry for gender affirming treatment was rapidly rising. This increasing statistic is largely related to a shift in society where there is a growing acceptance for gender non-conforming individuals. Within the Australian context, where the authors are located, the latest available statistics estimate that almost 3% of the school age population identify as transgender or gender diverse (Fisher et al., 2019). It must be highlighted that this is likely to be significantly underreported due to the rapid rise in social acceptance in the past five year (Fisher et al., 2019). The deeply engrained stigma in society effects the ability to accurately determine the prevalence of gender diversity globally. However, steps such as that by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health in their 7th edition of *Standards of Care* (2011), the American Psychiatric Association (2013) with their 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders*, and the World Health Organization (WHO; 2019) with their 11th edition of the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* collectively and formally addressing the pathological and binary perspective of gender diversity have informed how transgender and gender diversity are viewed and perceived in and by society.

The imperative to delve into the mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse students within educational settings stems from the critical need to comprehensively understand their challenges to develop targeted supportive interventions. To provide a supportive, inclusive, and affirming learning environment more needs to be

known about the current experience of transgender and gender diverse youth in educational settings. This thorough approach is designed to provide a rigorous foundation to structurally inform future policy and practice to enhance the mental health outcomes for transgender and gender diverse youth in schools.

Theoretically, this SLR draws on a revised and dynamic socio-ecological model adapted by Clark et al. (2017) and White Hughto et al. (2018) exploring the complex interplay of structural, interpersonal, and individual barriers influencing the mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse youth in educational settings (Figure 1).

At the structural level, the systemic constraints of educational institutions significantly influence the experiences of transgender and gender diverse students (Clark et al., 2017; White Hughto et al., 2018). Frequently, policies, curricula, and institutional frameworks exhibit inadequacies in inclusivity, often overlooking the diverse needs of

these students. There is often a significant delay between advancements in research and this resulting in changes within the education setting. Recognizing and seeking to address these structural shortcomings are crucial steps toward cultivating educational environments that are supportive, inclusive, and affirming to the needs of transgender and gender diverse students.

At the interpersonal level, the interactions occurring among the school community, including peers, educators, and administrative staff, significantly influence the welfare of transgender and gender diverse students (Clark et al., 2017; White Hughto et al., 2018). This interpersonal domain includes a spectrum of issues that deeply impact these individuals. Here, discriminatory behaviors, instances of bullying, harassment, and the pervasive adherence to binary gender classifications within school environments are complexly woven within social dynamics. These factors collectively contribute to exacerbating the vulnerability of transgender and gender diverse students,

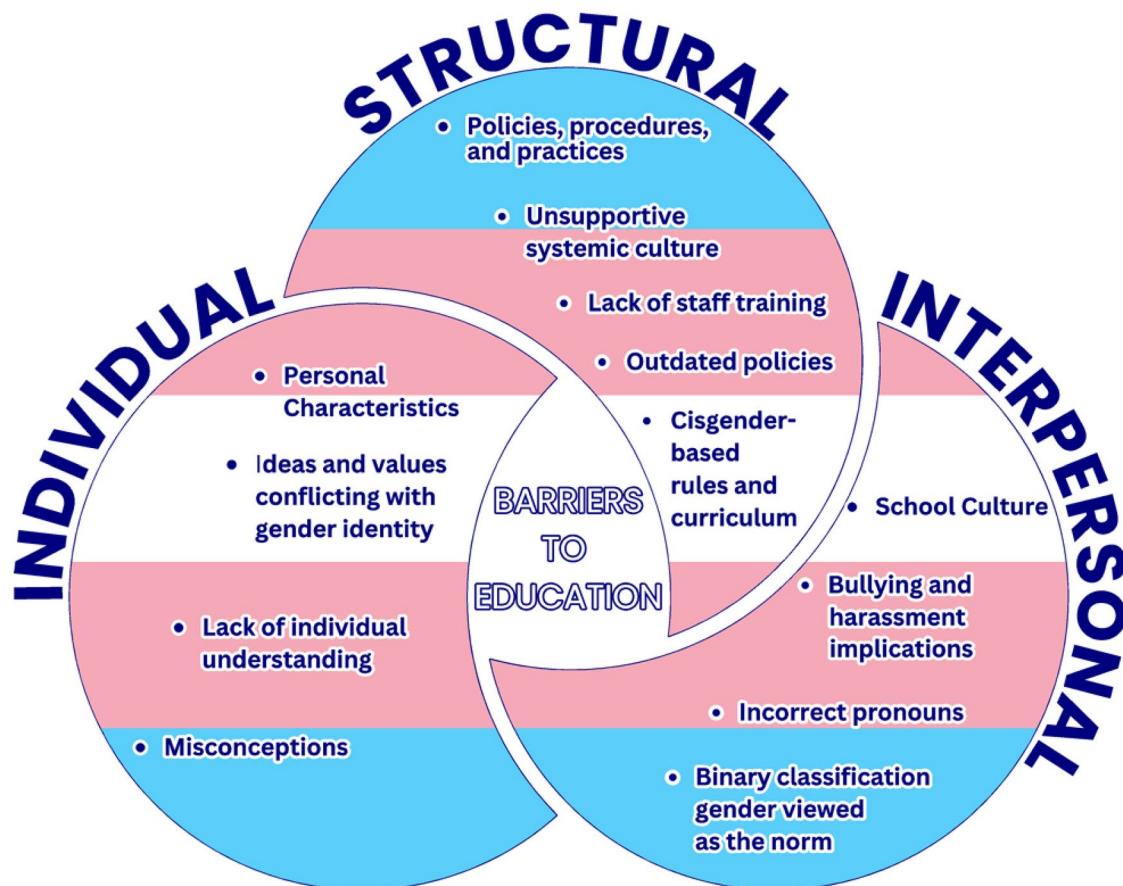


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of structural, interpersonal, and individual barriers to transgender- and gender diverse-supportive educational institutions.

creating an environment with obstacles that hinder thriving wellbeing, mental health outcomes and academic experience for transgender and gender diverse students.

Furthermore, at the individual level exists a collection of internalized stigmas; the ongoing struggle for self-acceptance (Clark et al., 2017; White Hughto et al., 2018). The complexities involved in navigating one's identity within educational environments predominantly adhering to cisnormative standards significantly influence the experiences of transgender and gender diverse students (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). The internalized stigma involves negative beliefs and attitudes individuals may hold toward their own gender, compounded by societal norms. This can instigate feelings of shame, isolation, and a profound sense of disconnect from the educational community (Zwickl et al., 2021). This level of stigma heavily influences the mental health outcomes for these students. Beyond internalized stigma, the preconceived ideas and misconceptions of staff also heavily influence the treatment and support provided to transgender and gender diverse students at this level (Mathews, 2015).

Additionally, the challenging path toward self-acceptance, particularly emphasized in environments that may lack complete recognition or validation of gender diversity, presents significant hurdles affecting the psychological health, overall wellbeing, and academic involvement and outcomes of transgender and gender diverse students. Negotiating one's sense of self within settings predominantly influenced by cisnormative and cisgenderist viewpoints amplifies these obstacles, creating an atmosphere where students encounter societal pressures and predetermined gender norms that may conflict with their authentic identities (Clark et al., 2017; White Hughto et al., 2018).

As such, this SLR seeks to identify patterns in the literature highlighting disparities between the experiences of transgender and gender diverse students in schools that in turn affect their mental health outcomes. As youth spend a significant portion of their lives at school, it is imperative that these educational settings are across and equipped to deal with the barriers hindering these students to experience optimal mental health in the school context—now and into the future.

Review question

As an emerging area of research with most studies published in the last six years, the following research question was developed in consultation with a transgender rights and health scholar and a research librarian: *What is known about the mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse students in schools?*

Method

This SLR adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Narrative Analyses (PRISMA) statement and guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). The protocol for this review was registered with Open Science Framework (registration link: https://osf.io/7wurx/?view_only=399c3413dba54c088cfd72145c692179). To ensure a thorough selection process, articles were screened and reviewed at various stages following Cohen's (1990) method of Preview, Question, Read, and Summarize (PQRS) by two independent reviewers, MD and AB; and when discrepancies arose, they were discussed between the reviewers to reach an agreement. Both reviewers identify as transgender rights and health scholars, with one author identifying as non-binary and pansexual, and the other as cisgender and heterosexual. Both authors were integral to the review process from protocol development to the final draft and authorship of the manuscript.

Eligibility criteria

Articles with various study designs were considered eligible if they were peer-reviewed (e.g. journal articles, book-chapters, and peer-reviewed editorials) with full text available online and written in English. There were no filters placed on the date of publication or geographical location of study. In addition, articles had to have thematic relevance to the research question and also meet the following criteria: (1) The participants identified were transgender or gender diverse and were school aged (no specific age filter was applied due to the global nature and variance of the definition of school aged—participants were included if they were attending school or talked about lived

experiences when having attended school); and (2) The study had to explore mental health outcomes of the target population in school settings. Literature reviews, theses, magazines, newspaper articles and conference proceedings were excluded from this review, including studies exploring LGBTQIA+ students' mental health outcomes in school settings where mental health outcomes unique to transgender and/or gender diverse students could not be distinguished.

Search strategy

The search period for this study occurred on 31 July 2023 and used a Boolean search strategy. Employing the PICO protocol for qualitative research assisted in refining the research question, and inclusion/exclusion criteria were designed to investigate mental health outcomes among transgender and gender diverse students in school settings (Wright et al., 2007). A preliminary database search was performed across four databases: EBSCOHost Megafire, Scopus, Informit, and Eric with search strategy refined to maximize search outcome (see Table 1). The nature of a school (e.g. religious, private, public, primary, secondary) was explored when screening the journal articles.

Screening

All articles were screened using the PRISMA three-stage screening process: the first stage of the process seeks to identify and remove duplicate

articles, the second stage of this process is to screen the title and abstract, and last pursue a full-text screening (Moher et al., 2009). Duplicate articles were identified and removed in the first initial screen of the database hits, providing 1704 articles. These articles were then screened following Cohen's (1990) approach involving previewing, questioning, reading, and summarizing to assess the eligibility of articles. This method entailed examining the abstract and title to evaluate each study against the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Cronin et al., 2008). In cases where the eligibility status remained unclear based on the title and abstract, a thorough examination of the full text was conducted. Additionally, if any uncertainties arose regarding eligibility criteria, both reviewers discussed these until a consensus was reached. This process resulted in 1676 articles being excluded, and a total of 28 articles being assessed for eligibility. These full texts were independently reviewed by both authors, and both authors confirmed eligibility for inclusion of the final 15 articles in the review, and the reasons for the thirteen articles which were deemed not to meet the inclusion criteria (see Figure 2).

Quality appraisal

The quality of the studies was assessed using The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Tool (Joanna Briggs Institute, 2020). This tool provides a comprehensive evaluation of the methodological quality and reliability of SLRs (Joanna Briggs Institute, 2020), allowing for an explicit consideration of the risk of bias in the included studies, while also permitting for all eligible and relevant studies to be included in the final review and synthesis. To ensure the process was rigorous, the quality appraisal was undertaken by both researchers MD and AB in a blind review, where any discrepancies were discussed, reviewed and agreed upon. The agreed quality appraisal review scores are outlined in the results section (see Table 2). As indicated in Table 2 most of the SLRs studies were of high quality with three studies scoring modestly (Jones, 2023; Reisner et al., 2020; and Sava et al., 2021). All studies were included regardless of quality appraisal review scoring.

Table 1. Search strategy.

| Database | Search Terms |
|------------------------------|---|
| Scopus | ("gender diversity" OR "non binary" OR "transgender") AND ("Mental health" OR "psychological health") AND (Adolescen* OR teenage* OR "school age") AND (School OR "education facility" OR "educational institution") |
| Informit | ("gender diversity" OR "non binary" OR "transgender") AND ("Mental health" OR "psychological health") AND (Adolescen* OR teenage* OR "school age") AND (School OR "education facility" OR "educational institution") |
| Eric | ("gender diversity" OR "non binary" OR "transgender") AND ("Mental health" OR "psychological health") AND (Adolescen* OR teenage* OR "school age") AND (School OR "education facility" OR "educational institution") |
| Ebscohost Megafire Ultimate; | ("gender diversity" OR "non binary" OR "transgender") AND ("Mental health" OR "psychological health") AND (Adolescen* OR teenage* OR "school age") AND (School OR "education facility" OR "educational institution") |

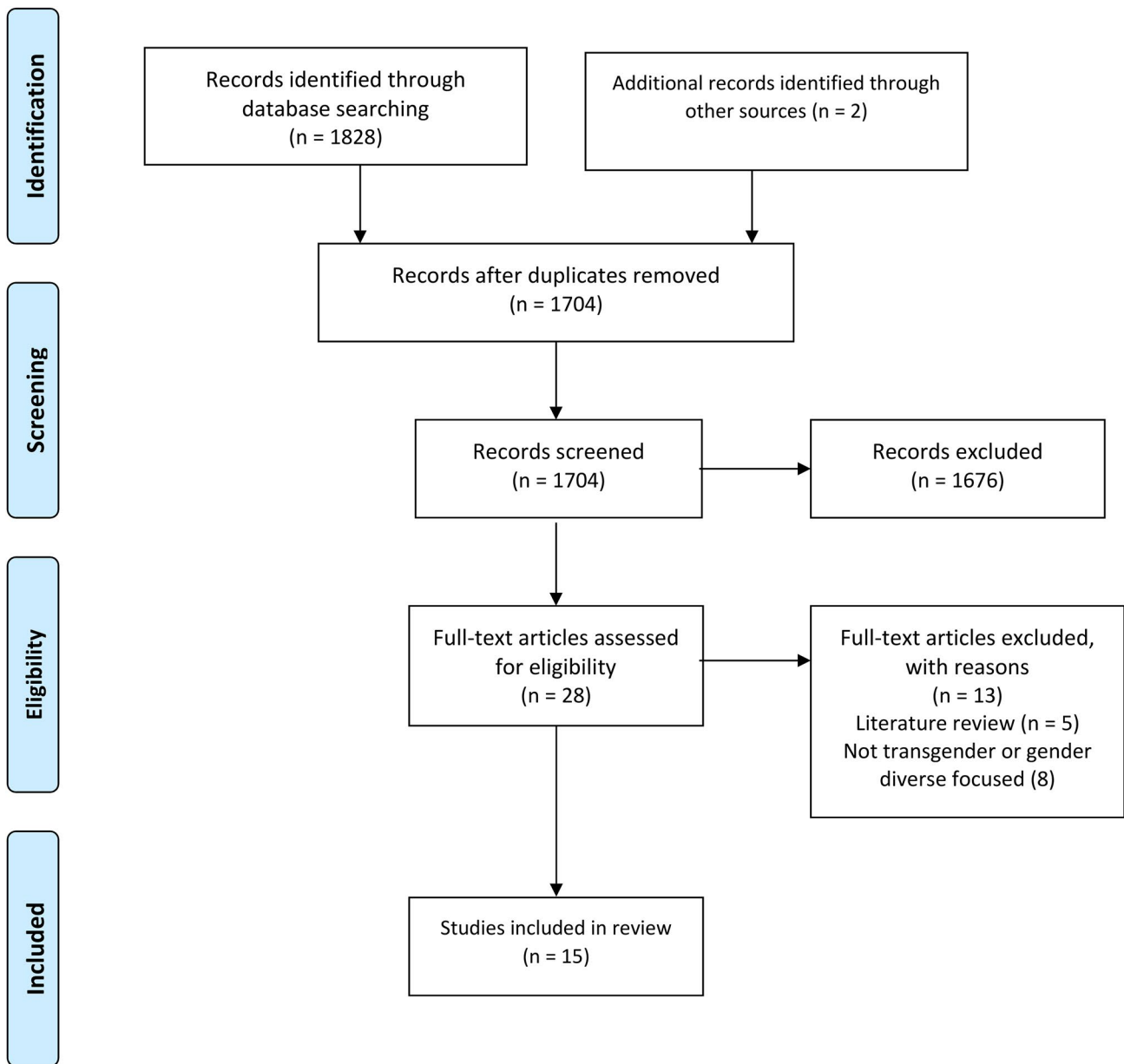


Figure 2. PRISMA flow diagram of review search for research question.

Strategy for data synthesis

The findings from the articles were synthesized using a matrix tool to categorize themes, relationships, and key discoveries related to mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse students in school settings (Wright et al., 2007). The SLR synthesis comprised of 15 articles. As a meta-analysis was not feasible for this heterogeneous study (Shamseer et al., 2015), both deductive and inductive analyses were applied instead. More specifically, drawing on the revised and dynamic socio-ecological model adapted by Clark et al. (2017) and White Hughto et al.

(2018) we first set out to exploring the complex interplay of structural, interpersonal, and individual barriers influencing the mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse youth in educational settings. This involved engaging in deductive categorizing of the data into three levels: 1) structural; 2) interpersonal; and 3) individual levels. Then we pursued an inductive analysis with the help of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework within those three levels (2006; 2019). More precisely, thematic analysis was drawn upon in "generating" and "defining" themes within the three

Table 2. Characteristics of reviewed studies ($n = 15$).

| Author, year and country | Study design, and quality of study | School type | Aims and objectives | Participants | Key findings |
|--|------------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Allen et al., 2020 Wisconsin, United States | Cross-sectional 8/8 | Not specified | The study aims to investigate and compare the school experiences of transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming young people, specifically focusing on the differences between those with binary and nonbinary gender identities. | 287 students met the criteria and were included in the study | The study indicates that there were significant differences for school safety for transgender students, however what was most interesting was when controlling for factors like race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and student status, nonbinary and binary-identified transgender young people in Wisconsin generally report similar experiences of school safety and belonging. Disparities initially identified between the two groups were less significant when considering these other social experiences. The study contributes to understanding the relationship between self-reported non-binary gender identity and mental health issues, school adjustment, and community engagement among adolescents. It highlights the vulnerability of non-binary youth in certain aspects and suggests potential areas for further exploration, especially in terms of mental health support and school environment adjustments to better cater to the needs of non-binary adolescents. |
| Durbeej et al., 2021 Sweden | Cross-sectional 8/8 | Not specified | The aim of this study was to investigate the association between self-reported non-binary gender identity and various aspects including mental health problems, school adjustment. | 6527 participants were included in the study including students in grades 7, 9 and 11. | |
| Hatchel et al., 2018 California, United States | Cross-sectional 8/8 | Not specified | The study aimed to investigate the interrelationships between peer victimization, mental health issues, and school belonging among transgender adolescents, highlighting the dynamic and complicated nature of these factors. The study also examined the ways in which ethnic minority played a role in this interrelationship. | The study included a total of 4778 participants who identified as transgender youth. | The research explored the interpersonal impact of ethnic minority status as a potential moderator in these relationships. While being a transgender youth of color did not necessarily alter the negative effects of peer victimization on mental health and school belonging, slight differences were observed. Transgender youth of color showed slightly higher levels of distress associated with peer victimization compared to their non-minority counterparts, indicating small but significant group differences. Limitations included the study's cross-sectional nature, potentially limiting the ability to establish causal relationships, the reliance on self-reported victimization measures. |
| Heath & Keene, 2023 United States | Cross-sectional 8/8 | 'Faith Community' – denomination not specified | This study aimed to investigate the association between school enrollment, community activities, and psychosocial health outcomes among Black and Latinx LGBTQ youth. The study sought to explore the relationship between these activities and LGBTQ connectedness, happiness, and health among Black and Latinx LGBTQ adolescents and young adults. It aimed to identify potential sources of support, such as social activities for LGBTQ people, LGBTQ-POC, and religious service attendance. | 472 Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ adolescents and young adults for their analysis, with 11 persons identifying as Black TGD, and 11 persons identifying as Latinx TGD. | The study revealed significant associations between interpersonal factors and the psychosocial health of Black and Latinx transgender youth. Despite a small sample size of 2.3% for both Latinx and Black transgender there were clear statistics highlighting lower mood and scores in happiness. Notably, black TGD scored lower happiness (B 1/4 0.92) which highlights the need for a large study to identify the factors that are contributing to such disparities in happiness when compared to non-transgender individuals. |
| Horton, 2023 United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales) | Qualitative 10/10 | Primary and secondary schools | This study aims to comprehensively investigate the challenges experienced by transgender children within educational settings. It acknowledges the documented harassment, discrimination, and abuse faced by trans pupils and delves into the ongoing stresses they encounter in schools ill-prepared for their inclusion. Specifically, the research seeks to understand the mental health disparities affecting trans children and explore the concept of Gender Minority Stress (GMS) as a contributing factor to these disparities. | In total, there were 30 parents or carers who participated in the interviews for this study. All of the parental interviewees were cisgender individuals. Among these parents, there were 10 transgender children who were attending primary and secondary schools, and interviewed. Therefore, out of the 30 participants, 10 were transgender children, who had socially transitioned and ranging from 6 to 16 years of age in the UK. | The study investigating Gender Minority Stress in schools for socially transitioned transgender children under eleven uncovered significant themes. Discrimination, including denial of facilities and isolation, saw parental advocacy as key in challenging it, highlighting disparities based on parents' ability to confront discrimination. Rejection, both from peers and teachers, led to isolation and discomfort, influenced by transphobia and parental discouragement. Victimization, encompassing bullying and abuse, varied in school responses, leaving some children vulnerable and forcing others out of mainstream education. The findings stressed the crucial role of parental advocacy in combating discrimination, emphasized the necessity for proactive measures in schools to ensure safety, and underscored the impact of transphobia on the educational experiences of young transgender children in primary and early secondary education. |

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

| Author, year and country | Study design, and quality of study | School type | Aims and objectives | Participants | Key findings |
|--|------------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Jadva et al., 2021 United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales) | Cross-sectional 7/8 | Not specified | The study's primary aim was to explore the prevalence of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts among adolescents in the LGBT community aged 11 to 19. Through a national cross-sectional survey, without specifying the number of participants, the research investigated the influence of various factors such as demographic indicators (gender identity, socioeconomic status), bullying experiences (both traditional and online), and the impact of positive or negative school encounters on mental health outcomes. Its objective was to reveal connections between these factors and mental health issues like self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts among LGBTQ+ adolescents. | In the study, there were a total of 3713 LGBT participants. Among these participants, 594 (16%) individuals identified as transgender, and 467 (12.6%) persons identified as non-binary of the total sample. | The study revealed alarming rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts among transgender and non-binary youth, with prevalent experiences of bullying. Trans and non-binary individuals faced significantly higher risks, reporting elevated rates of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts. This report highlighted "trans adolescents, compared with non-trans young people, were almost four times more likely to report self-harm, over three times more likely to report suicidal ideation and two and half times as likely to report an attempted suicide." Experiencing transphobic bullying, both traditional and online, strongly correlated with higher risks. Conversely, positive school experiences were linked to reduced risks. The findings underscore the urgent need for supportive school environments and targeted interventions to alleviate mental health challenges trans and non-binary individuals. |
| Jones, 2023 Australia | Cross-sectional 6/8 | Schools of all denominations were included in the study with majority of faith-based schools being Catholic. | The study's objective is to examine experiences related to religious freedom, gender, and sexuality among LGBTQ+ students in various Australian schools. Using data from the 2022 'Gender and Sexuality Expression in Schools' survey, the research aims to understand connections between students' encounters within different educational institutions, comparing religious and non-religious settings. Findings indicate that attending religious schools is linked to facing anti-LGBTQ+ policies, efforts to change sexual orientation and gender identity, and adverse outcomes. Educators, especially teachers, often propagate anti-LGBTQ+ messages in religious schools, while in government schools, students tend to unofficially spread such messages. | The study involved 2276 respondents aged 14–25, aiming to examine gender and sexuality expression among Australian school students. A total of 153 respondents were transgender and 322 identified as non-binary. | While most Australian schools, especially government ones, maintained general religious freedom for cisgender heterosexuals, religious schools enforced anti-LGBTQIA+ policies and practices. Over two-thirds of students encountered SOGIECE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression Change) messaging, notably more prevalent in religious schools. The issues highlighted affecting transgender students included difficulty ensuring inclusive practices including access to toilets, involvement in sport and school safety particularly surrounding bullying and restrictive practices. For example, 58.9 % of transgender students in religious schools stated that they could only wear the uniform that assigned with the biological sex, this is significantly higher than government schools with only 21.4% of students noting uniform restrictions. What was similar difficulty in both religious and non-religious schools was sports restrictions which effected students in a similar way. Further investigations are required to understand the impacts of sports, bathroom and uniform restrictions in schools and the implications that this has on student wellbeing. |
| Mathews, 2015 England | Qualitative 7/10 | Christian religious schools | The study aimed to explore how the lives of transgender students were impacted during their formative schooling years. The study provided a retrospective analysis into the impact of the school environment on the outcomes for transgender students. | Four transgender/ transsexual participants were interviewed using a semi-structured process. | The findings focused on the importance of teacher perceptions and the influences these have on outcomes. There was a sense of urgency in educating teachers about gender diversity and seeking to be more inclusive through understanding. The religious ethos of the school was recognized as a contributing factor however there was a shift toward gospel values of inclusivity. |
| Parodi et al., 2022 United States | Cross-sectional 8/8 | Not specified | The study examined mental health differences in transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth, focusing on depression, anxiety, self-injury, and PTSD among individuals aged 14–18. It discovered elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and self-injury, particularly noting higher depression rates among nonbinary individuals assigned female at birth. | The study included 252 participants identifying as transgender and/or nonbinary. | The study revealed that school-connectedness significantly reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms among transgender and gender-diverse youth, although its impact varied across gender identities. State-level nondiscrimination laws did not significantly influence mental health outcomes. Notably, transgender and gender diverse adolescents, especially transgender females and nonbinary youth, reported higher mental health concerns. The findings underscore the importance of fostering school-connectedness and tailoring support for diverse gender identities to address mental health disparities among transgender and gender diverse adolescents. |

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

| Author, year and country | Study design, and quality of study | School type | Aims and objectives | Participants | Key findings |
|--|------------------------------------|---------------|---|---|---|
| Perez-Brumer et al., 2017 United States | Cross-sectional 8/8 | Not specified | This research explores suicidal ideation disparities among American youth concerning gender identity. Using data from the California Healthy Kids Survey and the Biennial State-wide California Student Survey, it examines disparities in suicidal ideation prevalence based on gender identity. It delves into whether established factors like depression and school-based victimization account for these differences. Additionally, it aims to pinpoint demographic and psychosocial factors related to suicidal ideation among transgender youth, aiming to offer comprehensive data on prevalence and underlying factors based on gender identity. | 7,653 students in the California Healthy Kids Survey and 280 students in the California Student Survey identified as transgender. | The study, encompassing a vast sample of transgender youth and a representative California-based population, revealed stark disparities in suicidal ideation. Transgender youth exhibited nearly double the rate of past-year suicidal thoughts compared to non-transgender peers, significantly surpassing national estimates. Psychosocial factors like depression and school-based victimization partly explained this association. However, they accounted for only about 14% to 17% of the link between gender identity and suicidal ideation, necessitating deeper investigation into additional societal and structural contributors. The study highlighted the heightened risk for suicidal ideation among transgender youth, sexual minority identities and emphasized the imperative for tailored mental health interventions and accessible gender-affirming healthcare services. Limitations included assessment methods and potential underrepresentation of non-school attending transgender youth. The study examined various facets of gender identity and expression among transgender youth, encompassing their depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, self-esteem, and social support. It revealed that while depressive symptoms and self-esteem did not significantly differ between transgender youth with and without chosen names, those with chosen names displayed higher positive suicidal ideation. The research highlighted predictors influencing chosen name use, indicating that higher parental support and being out to family correlated with increased chosen name use at home, while outness to teachers and perceiving the school as unsafe for Transgender youth affected chosen name use at school. Importantly, chosen name use at home, school, and work exhibited associations with mental health outcomes, suggesting that it was linked to fewer depressive symptoms, reduced negative suicidal ideation, and increased self-esteem. Moreover, the study emphasized differences between transgender youth with and without chosen names, such as higher binary gender expression among those with chosen names and younger age among those without. Ultimately, the findings underscored the role of chosen name use as a significant aspect of gender affirmation for some transgender youth, potentially influencing their well-being and support networks. |
| Pollitt et al., 2021 United States | Cross-sectional 7/8 | Not specified | The study investigates chosen name utilization among transgender youth and its influence on mental health consequences. It examines differences in sociodemographic characteristics and mental health outcomes between transgender youth with and without a chosen name. Additionally, among those employing a chosen name, the research explores the factors predicting and the mental health advantages associated with its use at home, school, and work. | 129 participants identified as transgender or genderqueer. | The study explored barriers and facilitators in addressing LGBTQ+ student bullying, revealing key thematic categories across individual, interpersonal, and structural levels. At the individual level, School Health Professionals (SHPs) showed varied knowledge about LGBTQ topics, indicating a need for training, particularly in understanding the needs of transgender and LGBTQ+ students of color. Both SHPs and LGBTQ+ youth highlighted the necessity for SHPs to develop intervention skills and emphasized the impact of SHPs' personal attitudes and biases on their willingness to intervene in bullying incidents. Interpersonally, LGBTQ+ students expressed concerns about the lack of follow-through from SHPs after bullying incidents, citing instances of inadequate support and dismissal. Structurally, the study identified a need for a more inclusive school culture, greater administrative support, and attention to issues of confidentiality. |
| Reisner et al., 2020 Massachusetts, United States | Qualitative 7/10 | Not specified | The aims of this study were to investigate the factors influencing the reporting and response of School Health Professionals (SHPs) – such as school nurses and psychologists – to LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning) student bullying in Massachusetts. Bullying victimization among LGBTQ+ youth is associated with various adverse physical and mental health outcomes, emphasizing the need for innovative strategies to address this issue. | The study initially had 88 individuals express interest, out of which 55 participants enrolled (21 School Health Professionals (SHPs) and 34 LGBTQ+ youth. However, eight of these enrolled individuals were unable to complete their participation, leaving a final total of 47 individuals who completed the study, comprising 19 SHPs and 28 LGBTQ+ youth. | |

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

| Author, year and country | Study design, and quality of study | School type | Aims and objectives | Participants | Key findings |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|--|--|
| Sava et al., 2021 Massachusetts, United States | Qualitative 7/10 | Not specified | The study aimed to investigate the unmet health needs of LGBTQ students in Massachusetts schools from the perspectives of both LGBTQ+ youth and School Health Professionals (SHPs). Conducted between August 2017 and July 2018, the research engaged LGBTQ+ youth and SHPs through online focus groups and surveys to explore the school health needs and experiences of both groups. | 28 LGBTQ youth and 19 SHPs (N = 47) in Massachusetts participated in online focus groups. 14 of the youth identified as transgender or gender non-conforming. | The study highlights the critical need for inclusive measures in school health to support transgender youth. Recommendations encompass inclusive sexual health education, mental health services with trained providers, gender-neutral facilities, and safe spaces. Creating an affirming environment is vital to meet the diverse health needs of LGBTQ+ students, emphasizing the role of schools in fostering inclusivity and support within their systems. 33% of transgender youth highlighted the importance of basic necessities including safe and gender affirming spaces such as, gender affirming bathrooms and locker rooms, access to school nurse's office or health clinics, in meeting their needs and upholding their dignity. The research delves into the impact of social transition timing (childhood, adolescence, or adulthood) on the mental health outcomes of transgender and gender-diverse individuals. Findings reveal that childhood social transition isn't linked to worse mental health outcomes compared to transitioning in adulthood, and it's even associated with lower lifetime marijuana use. Initially, transitioning during adolescence showed higher odds of suicidal behaviors, but this association became insignificant when adjusting for experiences of harassment during school years. Harassment based on gender identity during K-12 was prevalent among those who transitioned earlier, highlighting the need for supportive school environments. |
| Turban et al., 2021 United States | Cross-sectional 8/8 | Not specified | The study aimed to investigate how the timing of social transition among transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals, occurring during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, is associated with adult mental health outcomes. Analyzing data from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, the research sought to determine whether the timing of social transition correlates with various mental health indicators such as lifetime marijuana use, suicide attempts, severe psychological distress, and substance use. It aimed to discern potential differences in mental health outcomes based on when individuals underwent social transition and explore the influence of K-12 harassment based on gender identity on these associations. | The US Transgender Survey involved the recruitment of 27,715 transgender and gender diverse (TGD) participants aged 18 years and older, conducted collaboratively with the National Center for Transgender Equality and over 400 community outreach organizations. The final analysis included 9,711 transgender and gender diverse individuals. | The key findings of the study highlighted significant mental health challenges faced by transgender or gender nonconforming (TGNC) adolescents in mainland China. TGNC students reported more difficulties across various measures compared to cisgender adolescents. The study indicated that TGNC adolescents exhibited higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, along with poorer overall health and sleep quality. Additionally, TGNC youth reported a higher frequency of being bullied at school, having self-harm thoughts, engaging in self-harm behavior, experiencing suicidal thoughts, making suicide plans, and attempting suicide. The study also observed a relatively high prevalence rate of individuals identifying as TGNC within the sample, highlighting the significance of this population's mental health needs. Furthermore, the findings suggested a link between mental health issues and factors such as depressive symptoms, lower overall physical health, and experiences of bullying at school, underscoring the importance of addressing these issues in a school-based context for gender minority youth. |
| Wang et al., 2020 China | Cross-sectional 8/8 | Public secondary schools | The study aimed to evaluate the mental well-being of transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) adolescents in mainland China, contrasting it with their cisgender counterparts. It conducted a cross-sectional survey in 18 secondary schools in Suzhou city, China, focusing on mental health parameters like depressive symptoms, anxiety, sleep quality, self-harm, suicide risk, and bullying experiences. The research aimed to understand the mental health status of TGNC adolescents | The study involved a total of 12,108 adolescents from 18 public secondary schools in Suzhou, China. Of these 208 identified as transgender girls, 861 as transgender boys, 250 as nonbinary, and 792 as questioning. | The key findings of the study highlighted significant mental health challenges faced by transgender or gender nonconforming (TGNC) adolescents in mainland China. TGNC students reported more difficulties across various measures compared to cisgender adolescents. The study indicated that TGNC adolescents exhibited higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, along with poorer overall health and sleep quality. Additionally, TGNC youth reported a higher frequency of being bullied at school, having self-harm thoughts, engaging in self-harm behavior, experiencing suicidal thoughts, making suicide plans, and attempting suicide. The study also observed a relatively high prevalence rate of individuals identifying as TGNC within the sample, highlighting the significance of this population's mental health needs. Furthermore, the findings suggested a link between mental health issues and factors such as depressive symptoms, lower overall physical health, and experiences of bullying at school, underscoring the importance of addressing these issues in a school-based context for gender minority youth. |

Acronyms and abbreviations used in Table 2 are as follows: AMAB = assigned male at birth; GMS = Gender Minority Stress; LGBTQI+ = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex; GD = gender dysphoria; TGD = transgender and gender diverse; LGBTQ-POC = Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex – People of Color; TGNC = transgender and gender-nonconforming; GNC = gender nonconformity; GLBT Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender; TGD = transgender and gender diverse; SOGIECE = Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression Change; PTSD = Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; and SHPs = School Health Professionals

categories (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593) resulting in an additional five sub-themes. Braun and Clarke (2019) encourage scholars to make use of their revised six-step guide¹ when engaging in thematic analysis, which was “applied flexibly” to capture the “uniting idea” for each sub-theme within the three levels (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This was discussed and agreed by both authors.

Results

Table 2 summarizes the findings of the qualitative synthesis and identifies the key themes of each article. All of the studies investigated the challenges experienced by transgender and/or gender diverse students within varying school settings. Despite no limitations on geographical location, majority of the studies included in this review were from English speaking countries. Nine studies were conducted in the United States of America (USA), one in Australia, three in the United Kingdom (UK), and one in China, and Sweden, respectively (see Table 2). Four studies were qualitative in methodology, and 11 were cross-sectional in design. From the 15 studies only three discussed any notion of faith and religious affiliation (Heath & Keene, 2023; Jones, 2023; Mathews, 2015).

The studies part of this SLR were analyzed with the help of the adapted socio-ecological framework developed by White Hughto et al. (2018) and Clark et al. (2017), through structural, interpersonal, and individual level barriers. As can be seen in Table 2, some studies focused on the systemic and structural challenges exacerbating the distress experienced by transgender and gender diverse students, while other studies explored the individual mental health experiences of navigating being transgender and gender diverse in the school setting. These topics are further considered below.

Structural level barriers

Twelve studies from this SLR covered systemic challenges existing within schooling settings that impede the support and wellbeing of transgender and gender diverse students (Allen et al., 2020; Durbeej et al., 2021; Hatchel et al., 2018; Heath

& Keene, 2023; Horton, 2023; Jadva et al., 2021; Jones, 2023; Parodi et al., 2022; Perez-Brumer et al., 2017; Reisner et al., 2020; Sava et al., 2021; and Turban et al., 2021). These barriers operate at a broader societal level and include institutional policies, practices, and resources that lack adequate support for gender diversity (Jadva et al., 2021).

Mental health services

Structural barriers manifest as limitations in inclusive school policies, such as inadequate gender affirming healthcare access, absence of tailored mental health services for transgender individuals, restrictive or non-existent guidelines for gender transitioning, insufficient or unsafe restroom facilities, and the absence of supportive spaces within schools (Parodi et al., 2022; Sava et al., 2021). These barriers often reinforce societal norms, stereotypes, and discrimination against transgender and gender diverse youth, hindering their ability to access appropriate resources, feel accepted, and thrive within the educational environment. As such, Hatchel et al. (2018) and Parodi et al. (2022) stress the necessity of mental health services specifically designed to address the unique challenges faced by transgender and gender diverse students. Jadva et al. (2021) in their study with 3713 LGBT participants including 594 transgender and 467 non-binary individuals, demonstrated that transgender and non-binary youth were four times more likely to experience self-harm when compared to their cisgender peers. This cross-sectional survey highlighted significant statistical relationship between being transgender and non-binary, and self-harm/suicide attempts (Jadva et al., 2021).

Inclusive and affirming curriculum

An essential structural aspect identified across various studies is the urgent call for inclusive policies and practices within schools to cater to the diverse needs of transgender and gender diverse students through the curriculum. Inclusive gender and sexuality education was a key theme identified to addressing structural barriers to supportive school environments (Jadva et al., 2021). Heath and Keene (2023) and Durbeej et al. (2021) highlight the pivotal role of inclusive gender and sexuality

education in fostering supportive environments for transgender and gender diverse youth. Similarly, in the study by Sava et al. (2021) it was highlighted that, pending cultural dispositions to gender and sexuality at home, gender and sexuality education were primarily taught at schools within the Massachusetts district, rather than discussed at home and school. The youth included in the study by Sava et al. (2021) emphasized the necessity for transgender-inclusive gender and sexual education, calling for comprehensive lessons beyond traditional binary and cisnormative discourses. Strategies such as ensuring staff understand the importance of inclusive and affirming language and comprehensive education to include transgender and gender diverse students, can lead to improved outcomes for this cohort of students (Sava et al., 2021). A globally inclusive approach to transgender and gender diverse health education in schools is a tangible solution in seeking to break down some of the structural barriers that transgender and gender diverse students face in school settings.

Holistic structural transformation

Failure to meet the needs of transgender and gender diverse young people may result in further students being ‘forced’ out of mainstream education settings as highlighted by Horton (2023). As such, Horton (2023) stress the importance of addressing these structural obstacles through policy revisions, inclusive learning environments, and adequate staff training which seeks to improve the mental health and academic outcomes for transgender and gender diverse students. Similarly, Allen et al., (2020) in their study with binary and non-binary transgender youth in the USA suggest that schools should ensure they have anti-bullying, harassment and discrimination policies and guidelines in their schools that are sensitive to intersectional forms of oppression. The authors also stress how staff not only need to engage in cultural competence training, but supportive staff should be “visible and identifiable” to students and, importantly, informed about minority stress theory and intersecting transgender and non-binary identities to ensure school belonging and safety, in turn informing psychological health and wellbeing (Allen et al., 2020, p. 365). These findings emphasize the

critical need for holistic structural transformations within educational institutions to create a secure, welcoming, affirming, and supportive environment for transgender and gender diverse students. The following section seeks to identify the interpersonal barriers evident within the literature which may inhibit the mental health and overall wellbeing for transgender and gender diverse youth.

Interpersonal level barriers

Within this review, twelve articles focused on the interpersonal barriers that transgender and gender diverse students experience (Allen et al., 2020; Hatchel et al., 2018; Heath & Keene, 2023; Horton, 2023; Jones, 2023; Mathews, 2015; Parodi et al., 2022; Pollitt et al., 2021; Reisner et al., 2020; Sava et al., 2021; Turban et al., 2021; and Wang et al., 2020). Interpersonal barriers experienced by transgender and gender diverse youth within school environments may arise from additional challenges to social interactions and relationships. Interpersonal barriers are often exacerbated within the school setting and often evident through discrimination, rejection, and victimization faced by transgender and gender diverse students from their peers, educators, and deeply engrained structural barriers (Horton, 2023). These barriers may be embedded in societal attitudes, biases, and norms, leading to a lack of understanding, acceptance, and support for transgender and gender diverse students (Jones, 2023). Overcoming these interpersonal barriers involves fostering an inclusive and supportive school climate that promotes empathy, respect, and understanding among students, faculty, and staff. It requires efforts to address the deep-rooted stigma that exists within society and seeking to educate the school community about gender diversity, cisgenderism, cisnormativity and ensuring that transgender and gender diverse youth feel respected, valued, and included within their educational environment.

Schools as protective factors

Due to the increased rate of mental health disparities, self-harm, and suicide amongst transgender and gender diverse youth, Hatchel et al. (2018) and

Pollitt et al., (2021) highlight that a positive school environment can serve as a protective factor for this cohort of young people, such as the mental health benefits chosen name and pronoun use have on transgender and gender diverse young people. Furthermore, Hatchel et al. (2018) stress how self-compassion can also reduce suicide ideation and limit rumination. Creating schooling opportunities where self-compassion can be modeled and explicitly taught, may counteract the potentially fatal effects of self-judgement, isolation and internalized minority stress (Hatchel et al., 2018).

A school's religious or faith affiliation may also play a role in this discourse (Heath & Keene, 2023; Jones, 2023; Mathews, 2015). More specifically, Jones (2023) in their study suggests that attending religious educational institutions may come with a higher exposure to anti-transgender and gender diverse policies, messages, and practices, and educators in these religious settings tend to communicate more anti-transgender and gender diversity messages. Conveying these messages throughout the school environment, potentially leads to a less inclusive atmosphere for transgender students, impacting their feelings of safety, acceptance, and overall wellbeing (Jones, 2023). Similarly, Mathews (2015) in their study with four transgender people attending religious schools in England all suggested how the Christian affiliation of the school they attended negatively "influenced their educational experience and subsequently, their relationship with religion" (2015, p. 35). The participants in Mathews's study stressed the importance to deliver transgender awareness workshops, including the experience of transitioning while attending school, to staff and students in religious schools, as their schooling experience suggested religious schools are not well equipped in supporting transgender students transitioning. As such, religious education institutions may inadvertently be creating additional interpersonal barriers which need to be further investigated.

Creating supportive and affirming, and safe spaces (e.g. gender affirming bathrooms and locker rooms, access to school nurse's office or health clinics) within schools, as highlighted by Sava et al. (2021) is crucial in fostering inclusivity and

providing essential support for transgender and gender diverse youth, ultimately influencing their mental health outcomes. Investigations highlight the significance of gender affirmation, revealing the positive effects of using chosen names and exploring the association between gender nonconformity and mental health challenges (Parodi et al., 2022). Without adequately addressing the stigma associated staff may be reluctant or not understand the significance of addressing transgender and gender diverse students by their chosen name.

Furthermore, Allen et al. (2020) highlight the vital responsibility schools hold in challenging discrimination against transgender and gender diverse students, advocating for proactive actions within educational settings. Incorporating gender diversity education into the curriculum stands out as a potential and straightforward approach to diminish the instances of discrimination encountered (Horton, 2023). Furthermore Sava et al. (2021) suggest engaging external professionals to offer specialized training for staff, equipping them with strategies to foster inclusivity within school systems. This underscores the necessity for intervention to commence through educational initiatives. The final level explored seeks to identify individual barriers that contribute to the outcomes for transgender and gender diverse youth in schools.

Individual level barriers

Individual barriers for transgender and gender diverse students in educational settings can manifest in various forms. The lack of understanding and acceptance of transgender and gender diverse identities among peers and educators is a significant individual-level challenge. Transgender and gender diverse students often face isolation, and discrimination due to misconceptions about gender identity (Durbeej et al., 2021). This can lead to social exclusion, mental health concerns, and hindered academic performance. There were eight studies that highlighted the individual level barriers impacting transgender and gender diverse students experience (Durbeej et al., 2021; Hatchel et al., 2018; Horton, 2023; Parodi et al., 2022;

Perez-Brumer et al., 2017; Reisner et al., 2020; Sava et al., 2021; and Turban et al., 2021). Additionally, the absence of adequate support systems tailored to the unique needs of transgender and gender diverse students can exacerbate their struggles (Durbeej et al., 2021).

Tailored gender affirming health services

Limited access to gender affirming resources, such as counseling, hormone therapy, or appropriate facilities, presents another individual barrier. These students may encounter challenges in accessing essential services that cater to their gender identity, affecting their physical and mental wellbeing. Moreover, individual barriers, including misconceptions and personal characteristics, may significantly impact transgender and gender diverse students. Internalized stigma and the fear of repercussions for openly expressing their identity, stemming from potential backlash or a lack of understanding from peers and school authorities, can lead to considerable emotional distress. Consequently, these emotional hurdles demonstrate the multifaceted and diverse challenges faced by transgender and gender diverse students while navigating their educational journeys.

The challenges experienced by transgender students in educational settings profoundly affect their overall wellbeing. Hatchel et al. (2018) highlight the importance of tailored mental health services for transgender individuals, with the need for specialized services for this vulnerable group. Moreover, Durbeej et al. (2021) examine mental health outcomes among transgender and gender diverse high school students, highlighting the significance of comprehending factors influencing mental distress, such as the use of chosen names and gender nonconformity, which impact these students at a personal level. These studies underscore the necessity for targeted support and interventions that address the diverse needs transgender and gender diverse students, including gender affirming facilities and policies supporting mental health. Parallel to this, Reisner et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of individual level knowledge and skills among school staff, advocating for enhanced training to effectively address transgender and gender diverse-related issues. There are a

range of engrained misconceptions amongst school personnel which may lead to further individual barriers. It is important that evidence-based education programs exist not only for transgender and gender diverse student but for the whole school community to ensure that misconceptions are eradicated through education.

Discussion

This SLR explores the broad challenges experienced by transgender and gender diverse youth within school settings. The findings from this review can provide a foundation for future global research, guiding the development of policies, enhancing staff training and development, and improving the outcomes of transgender and gender diverse students through educative approaches. Article 28 in *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989) articulates children's right to education, and emphasizes the importance of ensuring education is accessible to all without discrimination. Despite education settings for the most part being informed by inclusive gender affirming policies, multifaceted barriers continue to exist and are exacerbated by the rigid structure of schools where cisnormative microaggressions continue to permeate classroom walls (Nadal et al., 2012). It is crucial that educators have the confidence and capacity to challenge the systemic and societal influences of education settings which negatively impact transgender and gender diverse youth (Ullman, 2022). Similarly, an education has the potential of contributing to better health outcomes, job prospects, housing and financial security; an overall improved quality of life over lifetime (Denny et al., 2016). However, it is well documented that transgender and gender diverse youth experience extreme disadvantage, that can translate into low school attendance rates, school dropout, and a lack of quality education; thus, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and discrimination that transcends into adulthood (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Cheung et al., 2018). Despite transgender and gender diverse students being a minority group in schools they account for one of the highest rates of self-harm, suicide ideation,

and suicidality in schools; therefore, provided targeted support is imperative (Austin et al., 2020). Within Australia suicide is the leading cause of death for youth however transgender and gender diverse youth experience a five-fold increase in suicide attempts (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020; National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2020). What is known is that gender affirming practices across all levels of society greatly increase the outcomes for transgender and gender diverse students (Cheung et al., 2018). Correspondingly, wellbeing initiatives need to be at the forefront of education, but the unique needs of transgender and gender diverse youth must be addressed to safeguard the wellbeing of young people. Collaboration in addressing systemic and structural ignorance, promoting inclusive and affirming teaching methods, and fostering a supportive global environment for diverse learners is imperative to reduce the challenges faced by transgender and gender diverse youth in accessing education and to promote their equal right to education as stipulated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Hill et al., 2021).

Three studies explored the nature religion or faith may have impacted the schooling experience for transgender and gender diverse students (Heath & Keene, 2023; Jones, 2023; Mathews, 2015). For example, Jones (2023) explored religious freedom in Australian schools, while Mathews (2015) explored how Christian affiliated schools affected the educational experience of four transgender persons in England. A notable finding from the study by Jones (2023) was that over two-thirds of students encountered explicit messaging regarding gender identity, and expression change, an occurrence markedly more prevalent in religious schools than in government schools. This highlighted the prevalence of anti-transgender messaging and practices specifically targeting transgender and gender diverse students within religious educational institutions. This exposure would inevitably have negative implications on these students' sense of belonging to a religious school community, including the negative quality of life outcomes they may have on the person. The research brought to the forefront collectively stress the urgent need to

reconsider and reevaluate exemptions that permit transgender and gender diverse discrimination within religious and faith-based educational settings. These exemptions, while aimed at upholding religious freedom, enable discrimination against transgender and gender diverse people, creating a hostile environment for these students (Callaghan et al., 2023).

Whilst there are religious and faith-inspired schools globally seeking to provide supportive environments for transgender and gender diverse students, the lack of structural support on a policy level needs to be addressed (Jones, 2023). For example, within the Australian context there are multi faith-based schools seeking to promote inclusive, safe and affirming schooling experiences for transgender and gender diverse students, and reduce the potential for religious based discrimination. The principal of a progressive Jewish School in Melbourne, and open about welcoming transgender and gender diverse students, has argued that students' identities is not up for debate, and that the existing Australian law that allows for discrimination toward transgender and gender diverse students is "unacceptable" (Om, 2022). The school has implemented guidelines that ensures expression of gender is affirmed through uniforms, all-gender bathrooms, and revised its use concerning gendered language; promoting the dignity of all students regardless of gender. A similarly affirming school setting is found in Wesley College affiliated with the Uniting Church in Melbourne, Australia (Om, 2022). Furthermore, researchers of Islamic faith have been advocating for the use of Islamic teachings to be used to uphold the concepts on respect and dignity (Mulholland et al., 2024; Sanjakdar, 2009). Despite being focused on sexual health in Islamic schools, Sanjakdar's (2009) research offers insight into the powerful potential of incorporating affirmative Islamic teachings from the Hadith and Quran when supporting gender and sexuality diverse students. Sanjakdar's (2009) study exemplify the importance of schools and educators permeating Islamic teachings into the curriculum to deliver culturally sensitive, inclusive, and affirming education which is aligned with Islamic values while promoting supportive environment for diverse students, including transgender and

gender diverse students. Last, Edmund Rice Schools Trust's position and vision statement (Edmund Rice Education Australia, 2020a), and accompanying resource for principals, school leaders, and teachers regarding supporting sexuality and gender diverse students in their Catholic schools (EREA, 2020b), stress the importance of education should be "aimed at liberating all young people, particularly the marginalized, where the dignity of each student was paramount...EREA schools seek to address the specific needs, and wellbeing of marginalized young people, including those who are same sex and gender diverse" (EREA, 2020b, p. 3). That being said, conflicting policies within Catholic education systems, as that reported by Wright-Maley et al., (2016), in Canadian Catholic schools, may impact teachers' willingness to create an affirming and supportive environment, further exacerbating negative school experiences for transgender and gender diverse students in different geographical settings across the world (Wright-Maley et al., 2016). Within this discourse, what needs further unpacking and exploration relates to how faith-based schools effectively uphold the teaching of their religion while providing evidence-based support for transgender and gender diverse students attending their schools.

Despite the numerous transgender and gender diversity affirming approaches faith-based school settings implement in policy and practice as suggested above, within the Australian context, religious and faith-based bodies are nevertheless under the *Sex Discrimination Act (1984)* still permitted to discriminate against an individual's gender and sexuality on the premise of religious ethos. The implications religious denomination has, including lack of protection, on a transgender and gender diverse students' wellbeing consequently needs to be further understood. Most religious schools do not overtly discriminate against transgender and gender diverse youth, however, by holding the power to discriminate against these students on the premise of religious ideology filtrates a message of transgender discriminatory acceptance to society. Similarly, the USA have numerous laws across states permitting schools to discriminate their students based on gender and sexuality, where the state of Iowa has laws

prohibiting transgender and gender diverse students from using school bathrooms that do not align with their presumed gender at birth, and the state of Florida forbids teachers from discussing transgender and gender diverse matters in their classrooms (Browning, 2023). Advancing as an inclusive and gender affirming society means actively understanding and addressing tensions that may arise between different groups (Franks et al., 2023), including those related to gender identity and religious beliefs. To make real progress, going beyond surface assumptions of antagonisms, and instead genuinely seek to learn about the complexities involved is required (Henry, 2024).

Measures such as legislating gender-neutral/all-gender bathrooms/toilets in schools, inclusive change rooms, revising gendered language and practices to inclusive language and practices, gender-inclusive uniforms, celebrating gender and sexuality diversity days, are steps toward 'normalising' gender diversity (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). Francis et al. (2022) suggest how resistance toward gender neutral toilets in schools is often influenced by external parental concerns related to cultural, safety, and privacy concerns. Policies need to be developed and be driven by existing evidence, demonstrating the positive outcomes gender affirming toilets and locker rooms, and other gender affirming measures have in schools (Francis et al., 2022; Porta et al., 2017; Sava et al., 2021).

The United Nations highlights the importance of inclusive access to education as a fundamental human right. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2024). There is a shared responsibility of policy makers, government leaders, educators, and advocates to work collaboratively to ensure that transgender and gender diverse students are able to access safe, inclusive and supportive education globally (United Nations, 2024). Educational institutions may demonstrate their commitment to supporting inclusive education, however it requires a concerted effort by all staff members and the broader community (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). The restrictions placed on transgender and gender diverse students in school, such as exclusion from physical education,

school sports, bathrooms, uniforms, learning and teaching material (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017), including picture books (Bedford et al., 2023) and the alike, jeopardize their innate human dignity. The current environment constitutes a crisis, that requires all stakeholders to work in collaboration to prevent further loss of transgender and gender diverse student lives.

Limitations

While the chosen methodology for this study is centered on comprehending the intricate experiences of transgender and gender diverse students within school environments, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations that persisted despite the efforts to address them. Such research-imposed limitations included the inclusion of English-only articles, the exclusion of existing literature reviews, and the focus on full-text and peer-reviewed sources. Although these measures were taken to ensure rigor, and accessibility they might have inadvertently led to the oversight of relevant articles due to language barriers or limitations imposed by specific publications. Furthermore, the deliberate concentration on established literature might have restricted the exploration of emerging or unpublished research, potentially limiting the scope and contemporary relevance of the study's findings. Despite these anticipated limitations, the research methodology was carefully designed to reduce the implications of these recognized limitations. The inclusion criteria, rigorous quality appraisal methods, and comprehensive data analysis aimed to further reduce these limitations, aiming to contribute to the growing body of research.

Data homogenization within research studies that use the LGBTQIA+ acronym without specifically differentiating the findings linked to transgender and gender diverse persons, was another limitation making it difficult to appreciate the unique mental health experiences, concerns, and outcomes of transgender and gender diverse young people in school settings. Without distinct data, the intricate and unique needs of transgender and gender diverse individuals remain unaddressed, impeding the development of targeted support, healthcare, and policies vital for their

wellbeing and inclusion. As such, this SLR would have included additional studies if a clear distinction was able to be made for the T in the LGBTQIA+ acronym in those studies.

This review has identified a notable gap in comprehending the prevalence and mental health outcomes of transgender and gender diverse students within school settings. To address this gap, three primary recommendations for future research are proposed: (1) conducting a comprehensive scoping review to delineate the breadth and nature of studies conducted, especially focusing on the secondary/high school landscape; (2) collecting data on the representation and experiences of transgender and gender diverse youth in independent and religious secondary/high schools through mixed-methods surveys and statistical sources and/or in-depth focus groups/interviews with transgender and gender diverse school students to ascertain potential disparities; and (3) conducting an extensive review of global policies affecting transgender and gender diverse students implemented in secondary/high school contexts to gather insights into their nature and potential ramifications. However, it is important to recognize that multiple barriers faced by researchers in this field contribute to the limitations of research in this area, which must be considered in future projects. The ethical complexity of navigating parental consent for their child to participate in research about their lived experiences, challenges and needs for optimal health can at times pose further risk to the child if they have not 'come out' to their parents, or their parents are cisgenderist and cisnormative in ideology (Pickles, 2019). Similarly, youth may be hesitant to disclose their transgender or gender diverse status due to fear of negative repercussions from peers, family, or friends, as evidenced by research (Mallon & Perez, 2020; Scarparci, 2019). This resistance to disclosure is compounded by the notion that despite adolescents establishing their gender identity early on, they might still be in the process of questioning and familiarizing themselves with their identity, further hindering self-disclosure and contributing to evidence-based research opportunities (Jadva et al., 2021).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this review has provided a comprehensive synthesis of 15 peer reviewed articles examining the multifaceted challenges faced by transgender and gender diverse youth in school settings and their resulting mental health outcomes. By applying the revised socio-ecological model adapted by Clark et al. (2017) and White Hughto et al. (2018), and subsequent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) this review has outlined the diverse structural, interpersonal, and individual levels at which these challenges manifest. A notable observation was the lack of literature examining the influence of religious affiliation within educational institutions, posing a significant avenue for future investigation. The work of Jones (2023) and Mathews (2015) suggests that the exemptions for religious educational institution that currently exist in the world, can create a potential for discrimination. The varying governance structures of independent and religious schools highlight the necessity for a thorough exploration of this aspect to better inform policy and practice. Moving forward, further research aimed at understanding the impact of religious school affiliation may have on the mental health and wellbeing of transgender and gender diverse students is imperative. This review lays the groundwork for future inquiries, emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive understanding of intersectional factors and intersecting identities influencing the experiences of transgender and gender diverse youth in educational environments, such as those with diverse disabilities, including that of transgender autistic school-aged young people (Manley et al., 2024), those of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and those of First Nations backgrounds (Hill et al., 2021).

Note

1. This six-phased guide of thematic analysis consists of (1) familiarizing your-self with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) generating (initial) [sub-]themes; (4) reviewing [sub-]themes; (5) defining and naming [sub-]themes; and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 593).

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