Somewhere under the rainbow: LGBTQ youth and school climate in Portugal

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Abstract:
This article presents a narrative review about the situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) youths in Portuguese schools. The Portuguese context and social climate towards LGBTQ people were presented and a review of existing legislation, policies and interventions focusing on LGBTQ youth was conducted. Results from social science research with this population were examined and complemented with data from a recent survey. Pervasiveness of prejudice and discrimination and the concurrent need to manage the visibility of LGBTQ identities both in school context and in the family were confirmed. Support from school is not always guaranteed, and evidence of anti-bullying policies that explicitly mention sexual orientation and gender identity is still scarce. Some implications for future practice and research are drawn.

Keywords:
adolescence; education; bullying; inclusive policies

Introduction

Themes such as the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) youth and the inclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or sex characteristics (SOGIESC) issues in the agenda of education policies have been at the centre of

an emerging public debate, both at the international level and in the Portuguese context. Homophobic and transphobic bullying affects the life of LGBTQ youth in school context in an almost universal way (UNESCO 2016a) and should therefore be considered an urgent concern for different stakeholders, such as policymakers, education and health professionals and researchers in social sciences.

This article aims to portray the experiences and challenges currently faced by LGBTQ youths in Portuguese schools. To respond to that goal, an overview of the public policies in this respect was carried out, followed by an outline of intervention strategies that have been created to tackle discrimination, both by public institutions and civic society organizations, in particular LGBTQ community-based services, as well as a summary of research in the domain of social sciences conducted in Portugal about this subject. Preliminary data from a recent and ongoing study focusing on school climate and the well-being of LGBTQ youths in Portuguese schools was presented as an updated portrait of the situation. The article ends with a short reflection on the findings and their implications for both practice and future research in this field.

Portuguese Socio-Historical Context and Curent Social Climate Towards LGBTQ People

Apart from some knowledge about the lives and work of queer authors in the domain of art and literature, such as Antonio Botto, Judith Teixeira and Mário Cesariny (de Almeida 2010; Klobucka 2018), little is known about sexual and gender-non-conforming citizens' lives in Portugal for most of the twentieth century. Evidence of what Foucault perceived as 'sex technologies', that is, the control of sexualities by the state via prisons or psychiatric institutions (Foucault 1976), can still be found in recent testimonies shared by older gay and lesbian individuals who reported episodes of persecution and violent corrective therapies during the period of the so-called Estado Novo (New State), a dictatorial regime that lasted from 1926 to 1974 (Afonso 2019).

After the 1974 democratic revolution, which put an end to decades of authoritarian policies that isolated the country, Portugal is now on its fifth decade of democracy. This political shift was followed by profound economic, cultural and social changes that aimed to secure equal opportunities for everyone and social justice. Education, a privilege previously reserved to a minority, is now considered a fundamental and universal right. After the revolution, the struggle towards gender equality and the increasing access of women to the labour market had a significant impact in terms of how gender roles are perceived as well as in sexual liberation and individual self-determination (Wall et al. 2007; Torres 2008).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned social change, recognition of sexual and gender-non-conforming people's rights is much more recent. Except for the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1982, all significant changes to the legal framework in this regard occurred during the last two decades. The first key moment dates to the 2001 civil partnership law, which recognized same-sex relationships for the first time. In 2005, sexual orientation was included in the principle of equality on the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (1976, amended 2005, Art. 13[2]). In 2010, access to marriage was extended to same-sex couples, in what might be considered a pivotal sociological moment for the Portuguese society (de Almeida 2010). The first law referring to gender identity and the rights of trans people was approved in 2011 (Law 7/2011), later updated in 2018 to include self-determination and gender recognition and change of legal name for transgender youths over the age of 16 (Law 38/2018); parenting rights, including access to adoption and medically assisted reproduction, for same-sex couples (as well as for single women regardless of their sexual orientation or fertility status) are also a possibility

since 2016 (Law 32/2006, updated with Law 26/2016). These legal changes have placed the country in the group of leading nations in respect of the protection of LGBTQ human rights and the fight against discrimination on grounds of SOGIESC. In 2021, Portugal ranked number eight in a list of 49 countries in Europe regarding LGBTQ equality.1 Looking back at the country's history over the last half a century, a significant shift in the way the state and the law frames LGBTQ individuals can thus be noted.[1]

Notwithstanding these legal advances, discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation is perceived as very common in Portugal (EC 2019). Many LGBTQ people in this country avoid public disclosure of their identity, such as holding hands in public with a same-sex partner or walking through certain places or locations, and frequently experience harassment (EU FRA 2020). Adding to this conjuncture, the rise of the extreme right movement with the election of its first member of parliament in 2019 has brought visibility to an anti-LGBTQ rights agenda in the media and public debate.[2]

According to the Global Acceptance Index (Flores 2019), which measures the level of social acceptance towards LGBTI and their rights, Portugal evolved from a 5.5 score in the 2000–03 report to a 6.4 score in the 2014–17 report, following the trend of countries with higher levels of acceptance. Despite this positive outcome, the country's position in the general rank dropped from 27th to 31st, which suggests that even though rights recognition is a reality, other countries are doing it faster and more effectively.

School Climate for LGBTQ Youth in Portugal

In 2010, the Portuguese Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (Comissão para a Cidadania e Igualdade de Género – CIG) commissioned the first report about discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in Portugal (Nogueira et al. 2010). The report featured a range of chapters focusing on social attitudes, discrimination and intimacy, and although relevant for its purpose at the time, it lacked an assessment of the specific reality of youths in schools. In 2022, a second edition of this report highlighted the need to promote schools that are more inclusive and respectful of LGBTI+ children and youths and that educate for active citizenship and human rights (Saleiro et al. 2022).

In 2017, data on the situation of LGBTQ youth was collected in the context of the National Survey on School Climate in a partnership between the Portuguese NGO ILGA-Portugal, Teacher's College of Columbia University, Centre of Psychology of the University of Porto, and Centre for Research and Social Intervention at the Lisbon University Institute.[3] Some of the results were broadcast in the media with a significant visibility, contributing to an increased

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[1] The annual review and report 'Europe Rainbow Map' can be consulted at ILGA-Europe (2021).

[2] In 2020, an extreme right member of parliament submitted a proposal to abolish the mandatory nature of the discipline of civic education in secondary education, which is affirmative of gender and sexual diversity. The request was joined by a public manifesto signed by the former right-wing prime minister and the former presidente of the republic along with prominente members of the Catholic Church, the main national religion. A counter-manifesto was launched shortly after that, collecting thousands of signatures from professionals with different backgrounds. The national federation of teachers (Fenprof) and the Secretary of State for Education issued public statements in defence of the mandatory status of these curricula in public and private schools.

[3] The study was a result of the translation and adaptation from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) school climate survey to the Portuguese context, and the initiative was advertised on social media during the summer of 2017. Only youths between 14 and 20 years of age attending basic or secondary level school and who identified as LGBTI (or questioning) could complete the survey.

awareness and public debate that resulted in several meetings between different stakeholders: LGBTQ organizations, CIG and the Secretary of State for Education. The results showed that more than one-third (36.8%) of youths reported feeling unsafe due to their perceived or actual sexual orientation; one-fourth (27.9%) felt unsafe because of their gender identity and avoided areas in the school considered insecure such as changing rooms and bathrooms; and nearly one in six students (15.4%) skipped at least one day at school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

The latest annual report for the Observatory on Discrimination against LGBTI+ People revealed that 17 per cent of the victims were under the age of 18, and 13 per cent of the incidents occurred in school context and were perpetrated by either their colleagues or school staff (ILGA-Portugal 2020). According to the 2019 report of LGBTQI youth NGO rede ex aequo, resulting from surveys distributed during visits to schools for awareness-raising sessions on LGBTQI issues, examples of prejudice and intolerance are still significant, even though the new generations of students seem to position themselves as more supportive and agree that sexual and gender diversity should be discussed more often in their schools (Rocha et al. 2020).

This evidence is confirmed by results from the LGBTQI European survey (EUFRA 2020), which surveyed 4345 people from Portugal. In fact, only one in ten of those aged between fifteen and seventeen reported being very open about their sexual and gender identity in school. Concurrently, around two-thirds of participants in this age group felt discriminated against in school and witnessed negative comments or conduct whenever someone was perceived to be LGBTI. Nearly half of the participants reported being bullied. On a more positive note, even though LGBTI issues seemed to be rarely addressed in school education, nearly two-thirds said that someone from school often or always supported, defended or protected their rights, which seems to endorse the idea that the number of school allies is increasing.

LGBTQ Issues in Portuguese Schools: The Challenging Bridge from Law to Practices

In 2021, International LGBTQI+ Youth and Student Organization (IGLYO) launched its second edition of the LGBTQI Inclusive Education INDEX, an attempt at mapping and assessing LGBTQ-inclusive education policies in Europe. In the report, each country is rated according to a vast number of criteria, including legislation, national and regional policies, monitoring initiatives, resources and good practices. Although Portugal was rated with a score of 71.5/100, reaching almost full score in criteria related with legal protection, it scored lower on concrete actions, such as the abovementioned specific training for teachers, inclusive national curriculum or data collection on discrimination (IGLYO 2022).

Framing of legal aspects regarding the well-being of LGBTQ youths

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, sexual and gender minority aspects and the prevention of homophobic and transphobic bullying have been included in Portuguese education policies. In 2009, after numerous years of debates and claims from activists, educators and health professionals, the first sex education law in the school context was approved (Law 60/2009, Art. 2[f] and 2[l]). This bill mentioned sexual orientation in a clearly inclusive way and decreed that the subject should be addressed within the context of sex education activities. Since 2012, the new Status of the Student and School Ethics (Law 51/2012, Art. 1[a]) mentions the protection of students from violence, bullying and discrimination, including acts that result

from prejudice on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, and compels schools to adopt supportive and monitoring measures to prevent and deal with these situations.

In 2016, along with 55 other countries, Portugal signed UNESCO's Call for Action, a formal agreement aimed at reinforcing responses to tackle homophobic and transphobic violence and the provision of monitoring activities, the creation and dissemination of resources and best practices as well as training programmes for the school staff (UNESCO 2016b).

Agreeing with the government's intent to recognize and protect the rights of trans and gender-non-conforming youths, a new ruling established that schools in every level should implement administrative procedures in accordance with Law 38/2018, providing ways to protect students' right to self-determination of their gender identity and gender expression and protection on grounds of sex characteristics, including adoption of the social name and use of bathroom or other facilities according to one's gender identity (Despacho 7247/2019). Another recommendation was issued in 2018 by the Secretary of State for Science, Technology and Higher Education, encouraging higher education institutions to adopt all the necessary measures to accomplish the same inclusive policies within their settings.

Also, since 2018, the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination (Council of Ministers 61/2018) includes a specific Action Plan to Combat Discrimination on Grounds of SOGIESC (PAOIEC). In this action plan, some measures target specifically the education context, including 3.2.1 – promoting the inclusion of SOGIESC themes in the Education for Citizenship National Strategy, in resources and curricula, in school staff training activities and in superior education curricular and extracurricular programmes. These measures engage stakeholders such as CIG, NGOs, the Ministry of the Presidency and Administrative Modernization, teachers' associations, teachers' training centres and the Ministry of Education. Since 2021, the National Strategy for Children's Rights 2021–24 signalled a concern for the well-being and equal opportunities for the more vulnerable children and youths, including on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics.

School interventions and practices

According to the proceedings from the *2020 International Conference on School Bullying* promoted by UNESCO, it is essential to consider different aspects on education sector responses, such as teacher training and monitoring, as well as the role of different stakeholders, from public bodies in education and equality to NGOs and including school staff and student participation.

While the schools in Portugal have a certain degree of autonomy to decide which type of anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies should be implemented, the prevention of homophobic and transphobic bias has been mainly addressed by NGOs, either through volunteer projects and services or state-funded initiatives. Activities that explicitly mention LGBTQ issues are often developed by teachers on their own, often as extracurricular activities conducted by volunteers or members from LGBTQ organizations. As an example, since 2002, the youth NGO rede ex aequo has invested in initiatives in schools such as Projeto Educação LGBTI (LGBTI Education Project) using peer learning classes, storytelling and other non-formal education activities. Other organizations have also been providing informal awareness-raising sessions on bullying and LGBTI issues through a human rights education approach.

On its 2019 monitoring report for the PAOIEC, CIG reported that 1653 teachers had already received training under the guidelines of the Education for Citizenship National Strategy, 34 per cent of which consisted of three to six hours of training on SOGIESC issues. A new guide

to prevent homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and interphobia is also due to be released soon by this state department. Teacher training was also addressed by LGBTI youth NGO rede aequo with the Inclusion Project, which consisted of short training sessions for teachers and other school staff. Casa Qui, a charity focused on the support of LGBTQ youth, promoted the Ed-Sex Project, an awareness-raising campaign that included short training sessions with teachers and parents as well as a competition that rewarded best practices in inclusive sexual education with a special mention to gender equality and SOGIESC issues.

Inclusive curriculums are another way of integrating LGBTI issues in schools. As mentioned above, this topic is addressed through sex education in school context as well as in the guidelines for education for citizenship. In an attempt to facilitate the inclusion of LGBTQ topics in school practices, in 2013 ILGA-Portugal launched It Takes All Kinds, a project that created resources allowing to explore different subjects related with discrimination and human rights, with a special focus on gender and LGBTQ rights. It was directed at students, teachers and school administrations. The resources are no longer available through the project website. ILGA-Portugal is currently involved in a new project called School's Out, aimed at developing knowledge and resources for youths and school staff. Associação Plano I, another NGO based in the northern region, also developed resources within the scope of a bullying prevention programme in 2020. In the same year, the Portuguese branch of the It Gets Better project launched 'Come to the Rainbow School', a new resource for teachers, featuring LGBTIQ-inclusive strategies onto the school context.

Some authors question the impact of these fragmented and occasional approaches when compared to strategies that have proven to have an effective positive impact on school climate, such as gender–sexuality alliances (GSAs) that are based on youth participation and empowerment, enabling a more lasting effect on the local level (Cruz 2015; Ioverno et al. 2016). In an effort to distribute resources on a wider range of school communities in the national territory, a pilot project called Alianças Da Diversidade (Alliances for Diversity), inspired by the GSA model, was launched in 2017. Its aim is to empower LGBTQ youths and their allies, either colleagues or school staff, and to promote support and awareness on gender and sexual diversity in their communities.

Monitoring of homophobic and transphobic bullying is another important dimension. In Portugal, rede ex aequo collects reports from homophobic and transphobic incidents in school context in its Observatório da Educação (Observatory on Education) and releases a report every two years.

School climate and well-being for Portuguese LGBTQ youth: Outputs from social science research

Social science research about Portuguese LGBTQ youth is recent and comprises a variety of strategies and focuses. As an example, one study used thematic analysis of youths' online chats about their school context and identified concerns about discrimination (Ferreira 2011). Other studies used a quantitative analysis to explore experiences of homophobic bullying among LGBT youth, revealing that victimization is more common for boys (António et al. 2012) and that transphobic attitudes are correlated with negative views on gays and lesbians as well as with conservative views on gender roles (Costa and Davies 2012). A different study used interviews with teachers and revealed that their knowledge on lesbian students is scarce or non-existent (Rodrigues et al. 2015). Santos used focus group discussions to analyse students' perspectives

on sexual and gender diversity, revealing that discourses balance between conditional acceptance and intolerance (Santos et al. 2017, 2018). Another study with Portuguese LGB youth concluded that LGB students report being victims of bullying more often than their heterosexual peers; conversely, revealing one's sexual orientation in school was associated with more satisfaction with life and more evidence of adaptive skills (Freitas 2019).

While studying the realities and experiences of trans and gender-diverse people in education through in-depth biographical interviews, Saleiro (2017) identified specific challenges faced by this population, namely invisibility of positive models outside the gender binary, violent reactions to non-normative gender expression (in particular for children assigned male at birth) and the negative impact of these experiences on school achievement.

Using qualitative data from the 2018 National School Climate Survey, a thematic analysis revealed that Portuguese LGBTI youths feel highly affected by experiences of victimization, mostly perpetrated by male colleagues but also by the school staff. These experiences include verbal assaults, bullying, anticipation of discrimination, isolation and being outed. As a consequence, these students are forced to a selective disclosure of their LGBTI identity, choosing from positive support networks among peers, school environment, family and other LGBTI community members (Gato et al. 2019). A secondary analysis of the National School Climate Survey examined how certain school characteristics such as geographic location, number of students or type of school (basic, secondary or technical) and the presence of inclusive policies may be associated with the quality of LGBTQ students' experiences (Fernandes 2020). Results showed that students who attended schools with active anti-bullying policies that specifically target homophobia and transphobia reported fewer discriminatory incidents, witnessed more teacher interventions against bullying incidents and were less likely to conceal their sexual/gender identity.

Results from the Fostering the Right to Education in Europe (FREE) project

A study focusing on the school experiences of youths has been carried out in Portugal since 2020 as part of the European research project FREE, which is coordinated by the University of Ghent with the support of Research Foundation Flanders (FWO). This study is targeted at LGBTQ and youths who identify as heterosexual and cisgender, thus enabling comparisons between the two groups.

The study uses as a theoretical framework the minority stress model, which states that individuals from sexual and gender minorities undergo specific experiences due to prejudice and discrimination that affect their well-being and mental health (Meyer 2003). In addition to risk factors for LGBTQ students, this FREE project puts great emphasis on the construct of resilience and how it relates to minority stress in school contexts. Furthermore, the minority stress approach is applied using a socio-ecological perspective (Brofenbrenner 1992), and minority stressors are examined at different levels: individual; school micro- and mesosystem levels (interaction with peers, teachers and school climate); exo-system (community); and macro-system (which accounts for, in this case, the cultural and social differences across different countries).

Overall, the main research goals of this study are:

1. to examine the associations of LGBTQ students' characteristics on minority stress, mental health and school achievement outcomes;

2. to determine how school policies and practices and community characteristics influence the school micro-system, which in turn influences the incidence of minority stressors among LGBTQ students;
3. to cross-nationally compare the effects of LGBTQ-related risk and protective factors on minority stress and associated mental health and school achievement.

Methodological aspects

The study is being conducted using an online survey and received the approval of the ethical committees of Ghent University and the University of Porto. Youths aged between fourteen and nineteen years attending Portuguese schools were recruited, with no exclusion on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression or sex characteristics.

The link to the survey was disseminated mostly through the social media (i.e. Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) and the involvement of LGBTQ organizations. A formal invitation to disseminate the survey was also sent to all Portuguese school administrations, national and regional education directorates, youth group federations and CIG.

By the beginning of March 2021, 1495 youths had participated in this survey. The majority of them attended secondary school (only 12.4% were at primary school). Two-thirds of the participants are cisgender girls (66.8%), and nearly one in four are cisgender boys (23.1%). Of note, nearly one in ten participants identified as a gender minority: among these 3.6% identified as non-binary or genderqueer, another 3.6% as questioning, 1.2% as trans boys, 0.5% as trans girls, 0.3% as intersex and 0.9% as another.

In terms of sexual orientation, participants also showed significant diversity. A little more than half identified as heterosexual (50.5%), but nearly 45% identified as a sexual minority: bisexual individuals (15.5%) are more represented than gay or lesbian combined (8.7%), and more fluid identities such as questioning (8.6%), pansexual (5.9%), queer (2.3%) or asexual (1.5%) were very frequent. For the comparative analyses, we collapsed cisgender and heterosexual individuals into one group (*n* = 794) and LGBTQ in another (*n* =648).

Preliminary findings

Next, some preliminary findings regarding bullying, visibility of LGBTQ identity and school experiences will be highlighted.

Bullying

Descriptive analyses showed that nearly four out of ten participants (38.7 per cent) reported having seen students in their school being bullied because they are LGBTQ or perceived as such. When asked about experiences of harassment or bullying (e.g. hearing slurs or insults, having rumours and lies about oneself being spread, being set aside/excluded, being beaten or threatened, being sexually harassed or having property stolen or damaged), LGBTQ students reported being victimized more frequently (*M* = 1.70, *SD* = 0.70) than their cisgender and heterosexual peers (*M* = 1.54; *SD* = 0.57), *t*(1.21) = −4.86, *p* < .001.[4]

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[4] These items are featured in the California Bullying Victimization Scale (Felix et al. 2011). The scale includes eight items measuring bullying victimization. The response options include never, not in the past month, but it happened before, once, two to three times, about once a week, several times a week. The scale classifies victims as those experiencing bullying two to three times a month or more (Cronbach's alpha =.793).

Visibility of LGBTQ identity

Visibility in the family remains a challenge for these youths. Almost four out of ten LGBTQ participants reported that no one in the family knows about their identity, and in half of the cases, only some people in the family knew about it. Also, only 13.2 per cent reported that all family members accept their identity.[5] Not surprisingly, when asked about what it was like to have to stay home with the family during the COVID-19 pandemic, LGBTQ participants reported being in average more uncomfortable (M = 4.12; SD = 3.14) than their cisgender and heterosexual peers (M = 2.63; SD = 2.86), t(990) = −7.94, p= .001.[6] Visibility status seems to be experienced differently among the group of friends, since almost three out of four reported that either all or almost all of their friends are aware of their identity. Also, three out of four LGBTQ youths sustained that all their friends are supportive. Regarding visibility management in the school setting, four out of five LGBTQ students never disclosed their identity to any teacher or other school staff.[7]

School experiences

Schools can independently decide their action plan regarding equality and inclusion. Students were asked about the existence of inclusive policies in their schools. More than two-thirds (67.1%) said that subjects concerning minority sexual orientations were never or rarely mentioned at school. The proportion rises to three-quarters (75.6%) when asked about gender identity issues.[8] Almost two-thirds (60%) said they never learnt anything about anti-LGBTQ bullying, either in a class, a lecture or in a school programme. Teachers and other school staff were reported to intervene less when an LGBTQ student asked them for help after a bullying episode (M = 1.41; SD = .49), compared to their peers in the same situation (M = 1.23; SD = .43), t(66.05) = −1.580, p= .002.[9] Students' experiences also influence the way they see themselves in the school social system. In fact, when asked to place themselves on a social ladder that represented their place in the school social hierarchy, LGBTQ+ students were on average in a lower step of the school social status (M =5.82; SD = 2.05) compared to their cisgender and heterosexual colleagues (M= 6.55; SD = 1.80), t(1030) = 6.12, p <.001.[10]

Finally, school engagement was assessed through a group of items that measured how often students felt bored with school, were enthusiastic or showed interest in school assignments or felt like going to school.[11] LGBTQ+ students (M = 3.18; SD = 1.06) showed

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[5] The following two items were used: 'How many people in your family know that you are LGBTQ?' and 'How many people in your family accept that you are LGBTQ?'

[6] The question was 'How uncomfortable do you feel with your family, in the current social isolation situation?' Possible answers ranged in a scale from 1 – 'not uncomfortable at all' – to 10 – 'extremely uncomfortable'.

[7] The following items were used: 'How many of your friends know that you are LGBTQ?'; 'How many of your friends accept that you are LGBTQ?'; 'To how many of the following people have you said that you are LGBTQ? – Teachers and other school staff'.

[8] The question was 'How often the following subjects were mentioned in class in the last school year? (1) Lesbian, gay and bisexual people and related issues; (2) Trans people and related issues'.

[9] In this item, there were two possible answers: 1 – 'yes'; 2 – 'no'.

[10] The school social status ladder by Goodman et al. (2001) was used. Students were asked to choose from 1 – 'people no one respects and that everybody avoids' – to 10 – 'the most respected and visible in school'.

[11] For this, the School Engagement Scale by Bevans et al. (2010) was used (Cronbach's alfa = .829).

statistically significant lower school engagement scores than non-LGBTQ+ participants (M = 3.32; SD = .93), t(1.03) = 2.35, p = .019.

These preliminary findings from the FREE study are in line with results from previous research on the experiences of LGBTQ youths in Portugal. Bias victimization and homophobic and transphobic bullying previously reported in studies with adolescents (Ferreira 2011; António et al. 2012; Pizmony-Levy et al. 2018; Gato et al. 2019) remain pervasive and have impacted the well-being of LGBTQ youths in a negative way. Evidence that schools are not perceived as safe environments for gender and sexual minorities, thus forcing them to conceal their minority identity and contributing to their overall invisibility in that context (Freitas et al. 2017; Gato et al. 2019; EUFRA 2020), can still be found in this updated school climate assessment. Discrimination and bias are also noted by cisgender and heterosexual students, which may reveal an increased awareness of homophobic and transphobic behaviours including for those who are not directly affected by it. Nevertheless, support from colleagues, school staff and families might be increasing for gender and sexual non-conforming youths, as more accepting attitudes become more common in social interactions and that representation in the media is more inclusive, but in many ways, schools are not perceived as safe places, and many young people choose to remain closeted. In fact, visibility management (Lasser and Wicker 2014) is still a reality for most LGBTQ students.

Data also reveals that the new generation seems to be more embracing of diversity in different ways. Non-normative identities are becoming more frequent and more fluid, displaying more diversity outside of traditional labels, which confirms what other studies in different contexts have also revealed (Savin-Williams and Cohen 2015; Hammack et al. 2021).

Concluding Remarks

It is important to understand the role of cultural and social structures in the lives of individuals. Approaches that focus solely on the self often unwillingly contribute to the dynamics of power that underline interventions, namely in the context of psychological support and research (Kitzinger 1997; Aldred and Fox 2015). Under the bioecological model (Brofenbrenner 1992), human interactions are emphasized within certain contexts. School is a microsystem within which interactions can either work as protective or risk factors, but they cannot be perceived without looking at values and social paradigms, including attitudes towards gender and sexuality. It is also important to understand the role played by communities in the dissemination of central inclusive policies (Pizmony-Levy et al. 2019) as well as differential access to LGBTQ-inclusive resources and curricula, and to understand how it correlates with discrimination and its impact in the mental health, truancy and global academic performance (Kosciw et al. 2009; Kosciw and Pizmony-Levy 2016). While monitoring Portugal's implementation of measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, ILGA-Portugal reported a positive evolution in the last few years, but also an insufficient investment in education, in line with what IGLYO's report on inclusive education had already highlighted (ILGA-Portugal 2018). The claim for a more effective strategy to tackle discriminatory practices in school context has been in line with advocacy initiatives from LGBTQ organizations.

Future research should recognize the role of social sciences in matters of social justice, such as the discrimination of minorities, especially when their health, safety and overall well-being is at stake (Russell 2016). The impact of minority stress on youths, in particular the more vulnerable situation of trans and non-binary teenagers (Brill and Kenney 2016), should be a

subject of study and ongoing monitoring in Portugal. Because of their invisibility and vulnerability, access to the voices of LGBTQ youths is a challenge for research. It is a minoritarian and hard-to-reach population, and efforts from public offices and school communities should be made to facilitate the dissemination of studies on these subjects. Due to the specificities of this type of population, there is still no way to accurately identify the subjects unless they themselves decide to be included, and often under the safety of anonymity and data confidentiality (Meyer and Wilson 2009).

Recommendations to improve school climate should therefore include the reinforcement of anti-discrimination policies and measures that explicitly deal with LGBTQ issues in schools. It is important to invest in reporting mechanisms and create clear guidelines on how to proceed in situations of homophobic bullying and homophobic name-calling. Also pertinent is the development of strategies that enable the engagement of stakeholders, such as parents, school staff and the community. A solid assessment of interventions to understand how they can affect school climate is still missing and should be considered for the dissemination of best practices. Promoting school-based alliances is a way to capacitate youth to tackle prejudice and isolation and create a positive school climate, but also an adequate strategy to involve the whole school staff and other community actors. Training and awareness-raising activities for the school staff should be made available for all and would result in an effective inclusion of LGBTQ issues in school curricula and action plans. Finally, it is essential to improve sustainable mechanisms to monitor homophobic and transphobic bullying at school as well as guarantee a solid support network for minority youths.

Prejudice and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in Portuguese schools should be addressed to guarantee the safety, well-being and a positive school engagement for all students. LGBTQ organizations have been highlighting the absence of an in-depth and regular assessment on the experiences and well-being of these youths while, at the same time, stressing the need to accelerate the implementation of policies to prevent and tackle homophobic and transphobic bullying as well as promote safe and inclusive schools. Inclusive policies should also be followed by a change of paradigm in the way gender and sexualities are perceived and reproduced in educational settings to enable representations outside of the gender binary and free from heteronormative assumptions.

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