

Sexual and gender diversity in schools: The impact of restrictive education policies on LGBTQ+ adolescent development

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Abstract

In this review, I examine the developmental challenges faced by LGBTQ+ adolescents around the world under recently enacted restrictive education policies, highlighting the impact of structural barriers and social stressors. I pay particular attention to how these policies (e.g., Florida's Don't Say Gay law) may limit access to supportive environments, and disrupt identity, autonomy, and social development, contributing to mental health risks. I also consider how intersecting systems of oppression can compound these challenges, especially for LGBTQ+ youth of color. Additionally, I explore the growing role of digital spaces as alternative sources of support, recognizing both their potential to foster resilience and the risks they may introduce. I conclude with policy recommendations for creating more inclusive educational environments and identify areas for future research, including cross-national and longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of restrictive education policies.

Keywords education policies, school, LGBTQ+, adolescent development

Around the world, schools are foundational to adolescent development, providing the social, emotional, and academic support that shapes young people's identities and well-being (Verhoeven et al., 2019). For LGBTQ+ students, the role of schools is even more pronounced because supportive schools offer opportunities for connection with peers and identity affirmation during adolescence—a period marked by developmental change (Branje et al., 2021; Marraccini et al., 2022). For example, supportive school strategies, such as facilitating Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs), teacher training, and LGBTQ+ -inclusive curricula, create the social and emotional conditions that foster belonging, reduce victimization, and promote mental health for LGBTQ+ students (Bailey et al., 2024; van Vliet et al., 2025).¹

Yet, despite this evidence, LGBTQ+ inclusion in education is increasingly under threat: For example, in the first half of 2025 alone, 260 anti-LGBTQ+ education-related bills were proposed in the United States (Translegislation, 2025), challenging the developmental safety net schools are meant to provide. While researchers have documented the negative impacts of structural stigma on LGBTQ+ youth broadly (Fish & Russell, 2022), in this review, I offer a developmentally informed synthesis that focuses on how restrictive education policies disrupt developmental processes

and outcomes during adolescence. I move beyond documenting disparities to identify how policies affect specific developmental mechanisms that are unique to adolescence.

Restrictive policies shape LGBTQ+ students' experiences, with U.S. surveys revealing widespread discrimination in schools. For example, the 2021 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2022) found that 58.9% of LGBTQ+ students in the United States faced discriminatory policies. Specifically, 29.2% were unable to use their correct name or pronouns, 27.2% were prevented from using gender-aligned bathrooms, and 20.6% were restricted from wearing gender-affirming clothing. Additionally, 25.2% faced unequal discipline for displays of public affection and 15.6% were prohibited from undertaking LGBTQ+ -related school projects. These findings from the United States underscore the systemic exclusion many LGBTQ+ students around the world experience in educational settings.

While some research has explored the immediate effects of restrictive policies, gaps remain in understanding their impact on adolescent development and how inclusive practices may mitigate this harm. Here, I address these gaps by examining individual and systemic influences on LGBTQ+ youth development; I do so by synthesizing empirical and conceptual research published since 2010 on the impact of restrictive policies on LGBTQ+ adolescents' core developmental processes and outcomes, such as identity, autonomy, and social development (Branje et al.,

¹ For the sociodemographic characteristics of the studies reviewed herein, please see Table S1 in online materials.

2021). Findings from these studies have broad societal implications, informing evidence-based policies that promote equity and well-being for LGBTQ+ students globally.

In my work, I prioritized studies involving adolescents or outcomes tied to, for example, the development of identity and autonomy, as well as belongingness and peer connectedness. These tasks are important for psychosocial functioning and are hypothesized to be disrupted by structural barriers and social stressors that constrain visibility, expression, and safety. I used this developmentally informed lens to guide my selection and organization of research, which distinguishes this review from prior work that has emphasized either adults, single types of policies, or broad structural analyses that overlook youth-specific developmental processes and outcomes.

In addition, I applied existing theoretical frameworks to examine the developmental challenges LGBTQ+ youth face under restrictive policies, integrating minority stress (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017; Toomey, 2021) and structural stigma theory (Hatzenbuehler, 2017). I also applied Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, recognizing how overlapping systems of oppression shape developmental outcomes, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth of color (Crenshaw, 2021). By considering these theoretical frameworks, I situate current policy trends within broader sociopolitical systems and developmental science, highlighting how hostile school environments undermine the conditions necessary for adolescents to thrive.

The global landscape of LGBTQ+ education restrictions

Around the world, LGBTQ+ youth grow up in policy environments that range from supportive to hostile. Adolescence is a period of heightened sensitivity to societal norms and structures, during which youth form beliefs about identity, fairness, and where they belong (Branje et al., 2021; Verhoeven et al., 2019). Therefore, restrictive education policies send powerful messages that may undermine identity development and mental health and limit access to peer and adult support (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024; Pollock et al., 2024).

Recent events in the United States illustrate clearly how restrictive education policies harm LGBTQ+ adolescent development. Bans on inclusive curricula, pronouns, and identity-affirming support reduce access to key resources. Laws institutionalize exclusion, and a 2025 executive order sought to defund schools promoting *gender ideology* (Translegislation, 2025). Similar efforts exist globally. Hungary's 2021 Child Protection Act banned LGBTQ+ content in schools, and Poland, Georgia, and the Netherlands have proposed or enacted similar restrictions aligned with so-called traditional values (Gera, 2023; Meyerhoefer et al., 2023; Segers, 2025). Russia criminalizes LGBTQ+ representation and Uganda imposes severe penalties for its "promotion." Malaysia and countries in Latin America (e.g., Paraguay, Brazil) restrict gender-diverse curricula and LGBTQ+ inclusion (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

By imposing restrictions on school curricula and banning visibility of sexual and gender diversity, these policies disrupt developmental processes and outcomes. For example, Hungary's 2021 law banning LGBTQ+ content in schools prevents youth from

learning about people like themselves, which can leave them feeling invisible, ashamed, and alone—without the language to make sense of their experiences or challenge injustice (Gera, 2023).

Parents' rights and religious freedom

Legislators and others proposing restrictive education policies often justify them by appealing to parents' rights or religious freedom. These arguments restrict adolescents' rights to explore their identity, access support, and engage in school (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024; Khonina & Salway, 2024). For example, policies requiring parental consent for students to use chosen names or access LGBTQ+ materials conflict with adolescents' needs for self-expression and identity exploration (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024; Pollock et al., 2024). Similarly, by permitting discrimination in schools, religious exemption policies prohibit school programs and practices known to support LGBTQ+ adolescents (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024), such as inclusive curricula and GSAs (van Vliet et al., 2025).

The consequences of restrictive education policies

Over the past three decades, developmental and educational research on LGBTQ+ youth has documented a significant shift—from early emphasis on risk and vulnerability to a growing body of evidence demonstrating resilience and well-being in affirming environments (Russell & Fish, 2016). Initial studies highlighted elevated rates of depression, suicidality, and school dropout among LGBTQ+ youth, particularly in hostile school climates (Russell & Fish, 2016). However, as inclusive school practices—such as GSAs, anti-bullying policies, and inclusive curricula—gained ground in the 2000s and 2010s, researchers found that LGBTQ+ youth in supportive school environments felt safer in school, experienced less bullying-related victimization and reported better mental health (Day et al., 2019; Marraccini et al., 2022; van Vliet et al., 2025). The recent proliferation of restrictive education policies represents a reversal of these gains, reintroducing systemic barriers that threaten the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth (Fish & Russell, 2022; Khonina & Salway, 2024).

Table 1 illustrates how specific restrictive education policies affect developmental processes and outcomes, and the mechanisms through which these policies are carried out. Where available, I drew on empirical studies that directly link these policy impacts to adolescent development. When empirical support for specific policy types was unavailable, I used theoretical work or indirect evidence to theorize policy impacts.

Overall, restrictive education policies have significant consequences for LGBTQ+ adolescents, disrupting key developmental processes and outcomes that typically occur in adolescence. When schools ban GSAs, correct pronouns, inclusive curricula, access to bathrooms, or sports participation, LGBTQ+ youth are denied opportunities for safe identity exploration—experiences that are essential for youth to develop a sense of self and authentically share with others (Horne et al., 2022; Renley et al., 2022; van Vliet et al., 2025). For example, laws that require parental consent for LGBTQ+ content or restrict student privacy threaten autonomy by forcing youth to conceal their identity and limit the

Table 1 Summary of restrictive educational policies, developmental disruptions, and supporting evidence for LGBTQ+ youth.

Restrictive policy	Developmental task or outcome affected	Mechanism	Illustrative quotes
Bans on pronouns, GSAs, inclusive curriculum, bathrooms, sports	Identity exploration, safety	Youth are forced to conceal identity, experience invalidation, and lack affirming spaces.	"[O]nce they realized they couldn't stop me, they would hide my uniform, send me to the other end of the field to practice kicking ... it was humiliating" (Diamond et al., 2011, p. 139).
Parental consent laws	Autonomy development	Youth avoid disclosure due to fear of being outed, diminishing self-determination and agency.	"My 13 yr old grandchild ... will not talk to any of her teachers or counselors as she doesn't want to get anyone in trouble" (Pollock et al., 2024, p. 45).
Lack of anti-bullying policies or inclusive school practices	Safety, belongingness	Allows and enables bullying and exclusion, leading to social isolation.	"Everyone bullies the gay kid. ... I don't get to know the good side of the gays because they are rarely around—they're off hiding so they don't have to hear about being gay" (Peter et al., 2016, p. 201).
Book bans and curriculum censorship	Critical thinking, belongingness	Limits exposure to diverse perspectives, erases identities, limits critical thinking.	"One of my friends wanted to become a politician, and hold government office, but then thought, 'Oh wait, I'm gay. They're going to bash me for that and nobody's going to elect me into office'" (Snapp et al., 2015, p. 258).
Forced outing or mandatory reporting policies	Trust, safety	Students may feel surveilled and betrayed, leading to withdrawal, anxiety, and loss of trust in adults.	"One of my friends got outed to her parents by a school guidance counselor and until I came out, I was afraid the same thing would happen to me" (Reisner et al., 2020, p. 414).
Legal surveillance and policy uncertainty	Stigma, chronic stress	Creates hypervigilance, feelings of shame, and sustained psychological distress.	"It feels like we have Nazis taking over our state and they are infiltrating our school system to instill hatred of others who do not fit into what they perceive as the 'correct' norms" (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024, p. 329).

diversity they see, thereby increasing social isolation (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024; McCauley et al., 2024).

In the absence of enumerated anti-bullying policies, LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience victimization and rejection, which can negatively affect their feelings of safety and belonging (van Vliet et al., 2025). Additionally, curriculum censorship and book bans may constrain opportunities for identity exploration by reducing exposure to diverse perspectives and limiting opportunities for critical thinking and social learning (Pickering, 2023; Snapp et al., 2015). Policies that permit or require forced outing, such as mandatory reporting of gender identity or expression, can leave some students feeling surveilled or unsafe, which might undermine their trust in adults, and disrupt identity and autonomy development (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024; McCauley et al., 2024; Reisner et al., 2020). The broader atmosphere of legal surveillance and policy uncertainty could also contribute to heightened vigilance, shame, or psychological distress among some LGBTQ+ students (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024).

These policy-driven impacts accumulate over time. When school environments invalidate identity, restrict expression, and remove safety, LGBTQ+ youth may become more likely to disengage from school altogether (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024). The psychological consequences are equally serious: Structural barriers and social stressors can result in anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Bailey et al., 2024; Fish & Russell, 2022; Marraccini et al., 2022). These harms are especially pronounced for transgender and non-binary youth, who are often the direct targets of restrictive laws

and school-based surveillance (Bailey et al., 2024; Horne et al., 2022; Renley et al., 2022).

The compounded marginalization of LGBTQ+ youth of color

The impact of restrictive education policies on LGBTQ+ youth may be especially pronounced for adolescents with intersecting marginalized identities, particularly LGBTQ+ youth of color. These students can experience compounded marginalization when policies restrict discussions of both LGBTQ+ inclusion and systemic racism. The anti-gender movement has further contributed to this pattern by framing diversity—whether racial, cultural, sexual, or gender-based—as a threat to traditional values, thereby motivating the enactment of policies that limit conversations about identity and social inequality (Kuhar, 2025).

For LGBTQ+ youth of color, this layered exclusion may disrupt developmental processes and outcomes. For example, Black LGBTQ+ girls often experience marginalization at the intersection of racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, which can limit access to affirming school environments and increase stigmatization (Schey, 2023). These institutional barriers do not simply overlook individual identities; they also communicate to students that their experiences are undervalued (Schey, 2023).

Therefore, considering these issues through an intersectional lens is essential to understand how structural oppression underlies these policies and their impact. Systems of racism, sexism,

and heteronormativity shape both the risks faced by LGBTQ+ youth and the resources available to them (Schey, 2023; Schmitz et al., 2019). For example, transgender and nonbinary students often face harsher restrictions (e.g., bans on pronoun use or access to gendered facilities) than their cisgender peers (Horne et al., 2022; Renley et al., 2022). Yet, these identities are not discrete: Many LGBTQ+ youth hold multiple marginalized identities and supporting one group strengthens inclusion for all.

Balancing compliance and support

As schools navigate restrictive education policies, they face the complex task of balancing legal compliance with ethical obligations to support students' well-being. Ensuring this balance assumes that school leadership is invested in fostering an inclusive climate—an assumption that does not always hold. Without institutional support, teachers must reconcile restrictive regulations with their responsibility to support adolescents' social and emotional development (Reisner et al., 2020). This tension is especially consequential during adolescence, when affirming relationships with adults are critical (Branje et al., 2021). However, even within constraints, educators can indirectly support students by promoting critical thinking and media literacy in discussions of history, literature, or civics, without explicitly referencing LGBTQ+ content. For example, they can introduce students to concepts like fairness, equity, and resistance in age-appropriate ways (Burson et al., 2024). These strategies may help students interpret exclusionary norms and build tools for resistance and self-advocacy, even when explicit inclusion is restricted.

Digital spaces: a new avenue for LGBTQ+ support

While LGBTQ+ youth have created and accessed online support since the beginning of the Internet, social media and digital platforms (e.g., Discord, TikTok) are omnipresent in adolescents' daily lives today, offering real-time peer support, identity exploration, and access to information—often outside the surveillance of adults (Maes et al., 2025). In the context of limited in-person support, digital platforms can foster key developmental processes, such as identity exploration, self-expression, and peer connection (Berger et al., 2022; Noon et al., 2024, 2025). For example, in one longitudinal study, sexual-minority youth who used Instagram to test authentic presentations of self had stronger identity coherence and reduced symptoms of depression (Noon et al., 2025). However, digital support should be understood as a complementary, not substitutive, protective factor within a broader socioecological system that includes peers, family, educators, and community supports.

Furthermore, while digital spaces offer support, they also present challenges. The digital divide—the gap between individuals who can readily access computers and the Internet and those who cannot—limits access, and anonymity can enable online bullying (Berger et al., 2022; Noon et al., 2025). To address these risks, platforms need moderation, clear guidelines, and effective reporting systems (Berger et al., 2022). Combining digital tools with physical safe spaces allows educators and policymakers to build a more comprehensive support network for LGBTQ+ youth.

Amplifying youth voices

As restrictive education policies limit institutional support, many LGBTQ+ youth are increasingly turning to resistance and advocacy to assert their identities and challenge exclusionary systems (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). These youth-led efforts do more than highlight injustice; they also support various developmental processes (Poteat et al., 2020). For example, in one study, participation in GSAs predicted increased sociopolitical efficacy and identity agency over time (Poteat et al., 2020).

Across the United States and globally, LGBTQ+ adolescents have led protests, built digital campaigns, and even developed alternative educational spaces in response to censorship and marginalization. For example, in Florida, some youth mobilized online to protest the state's Don't Say Gay law, while others created out-of-school programs to teach banned content. These acts of resistance may cultivate critical consciousness and a sense of empowerment, skills and insights often missing from formal school environments (Carey et al., 2021).

Recommendations

In light of increasingly restrictive policies, schools must navigate how to support adolescents' development while complying with external mandates. A developmentally informed approach can draw on evidence-based social-emotional learning programs, which foster mental health, peer connection, and emotion regulation for all students (Cipriano et al., 2023). At the same time, educators can be equipped with strategies for promoting critical thinking and resilience in constrained policy contexts (Burson et al., 2024). While social-emotional learning programs indirectly support LGBTQ+ youth (Marraccini et al., 2022), explicitly naming marginalized groups in anti-bullying policies remains essential for ensuring their visibility and protection (Day et al., 2019; van Vliet et al., 2025). Thus, school leaders must balance parallel strategies to create environments that are both compliant and inclusive. To further support students' development in hostile climates, professional development for educators is critical. Training must be ongoing, contextualized, and focused on building reflective capacity to support LGBTQ+ youth, particularly under politically restrictive conditions (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018).

Extending beyond school walls, local engagement is another important strategy. Involving parents, caregivers, and community leaders in advocacy and policy builds a broader system of support. These efforts showcase the potential of civic participation and ensure that LGBTQ+ youth see their identities affirmed not just in school, but also in family and community contexts (Burson et al., 2024; Poteat et al., 2020).

Finally, digital environments continue to serve as critical sources of connection and affirmation. Advocates should work to ensure that LGBTQ+ youth have safe access to online peer support, mentorship, and affirming content (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). Virtual GSAs, digital workshops, and out-of-school webinars offer important alternatives for identity exploration and belonging when in-person supports are limited (Berger et al., 2022; Noon et al., 2024, 2025).

Looking ahead

Methodologically, policymakers need longitudinal and cohort-based research to understand how restrictive policies shape

LGBTQ+ youth's ability to understand who they are, make personal decisions, and establish and maintain social relationships. Such studies should clarify how growing up with limited access to affirming resources affects developmental trajectories, including identity development, self-esteem, and mental health. Cross-national comparative studies are essential. Contrasting policy contexts can help isolate the institutional factors that support or disrupt development for LGBTQ+ youth. Furthermore, digital tools like ecological momentary assessments offer promising strategies to capture real-time experiences of social belonging, stress, and well-being (Kiekens et al., 2022) alongside actual changes in school policies. These tools allow researchers to map the immediate and cumulative effects of restrictive policies, offering knowledge to inform prevention and intervention strategies.

Additionally, examining the role of youth activism in promoting policy reform can illuminate developmental benefits tied to civic engagement (Burson et al., 2024; Poteat et al., 2020). Research on both digital and in-person activism could show how adolescents transform experiences of marginalization into pathways for empowerment and social change (Burson et al., 2024; Noon et al., 2025; Poteat et al., 2020). Finally, intersectionality must remain central to this work: Researchers should address how systems of oppression interact to shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, particularly for transgender and nonbinary youth, and LGBTQ+ youth of color. Exploring the impact of overlapping curricular bans, such as those that target critical race theory and LGBTQ+-related content, can provide deeper insights into the experiences of youth with multiply marginalized identities.

Conclusion

Restrictive policies in educational settings around the world affect LGBTQ+ adolescents profoundly by undermining their identity, autonomy, and social development. While LGBTQ+ adolescents face shared structural challenges, policies disproportionately affect those with multiply marginalized identities, underscoring the need for developmentally informed solutions that recognize both commonalities and differences within the LGBTQ+ community (Schey, 2023). Furthermore, as traditional support structures are restricted, digital spaces emerge as alternative contexts for social and emotional support (Noon et al., 2024, 2025; Robinson & Schmitz, 2021). However, while valuable, digital supports cannot fully replace the developmental significance of inclusive, affirming school environments. In centering adolescence as a sensitive developmental window, I hope my synthesis of research has highlighted how restrictive education policies do not just reflect structural stigma, but actively undermine the basic conditions needed for adolescent development by disrupting identity development, thwarting autonomy, and constraining peer relationships.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Child Development Perspectives* online.

Author contributions

Laura Baams (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [equal], Funding acquisition [equal], Investigation [equal], Methodology [equal], Writing—original draft [equal], Writing—review and editing [equal])

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