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### Title

Affirming sexual and gender diversity in an elementary school after school program: a case study

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1sq6v3fj>

### Journal

JOURNAL OF LGBT YOUTH, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print)

### ISSN

2996-8992

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### Publication Date

2024

### DOI

10.1080/19361653.2024.2408235

Peer reviewed

**Affirming Sexual and Gender Diversity in an Elementary School After School Program: A Case Study**

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**Author Note**

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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### **Abstract**

Research demonstrates that programming and curricula that is affirmative and inclusive of sexual and gender minority (SGM) people is potentially lifesaving for students in middle and high school. There has been little examination, however, of SGM-affirmative programming at the elementary school level. Elementary school level programming has the potential to benefit SGM youth and families, as well as lead to more affirmative attitudes in later school settings. The study reports on the factors that create and sustain an elementary after school program that has implemented SGM-affirmative programming within a social justice and arts framework for over 20 years. We conducted thematic analysis of interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents in the program and the associated elementary school to identify factors that contribute to the program's success in affirming and including SGM people. Findings highlight affirmative policies and systems (inclusive mission statements, policies encouraging expression, and hiring diverse staff) and consistent enactment of inclusive and affirmative behaviors (affirming diversity, implementing inclusive curriculum, using inclusive language, and disrupting normativity and implementing restorative practices) as key components of an SGM-affirmative program with elementary-aged students. Results highlight that creating an SGM-affirmative elementary level program is possible and provide an exemplar of this programming in action. Implications and potential focus areas for policy and practice implementation are discussed.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ affirmative programming, elementary school programming, program development, policy development

## **Affirming Sexual and Gender Diversity in an Elementary School After School Program: A Case Study**

### **Introduction**

In this article, we reflect on factors that help to create and sustain sexual and gender minority (SGM) affirming programming in an elementary school context. We draw upon findings from a bounded case study of an innovative after school arts program that implements SGM affirming programming to elucidate policies and practices that serve to foster an inclusive culture and climate for students, staff, and families. This focus is important, as data suggest that Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) youth (i.e., youth who do not identify as heterosexual and/or cisgender) regularly experience schools as hostile climates and report identity-based harassment, bullying, and victimization at elevated rates (Kosciw et al., 2019; The Trevor Project, 2022). A large and growing body of evidence demonstrates the negative impacts these experiences have on SGM youth across a wide variety of domains, ranging from increased school absences and diminished post-secondary aspirations, to decreased self-esteem, higher rates of mental health symptoms, and suicidal ideation and attempts (Becerra-Culqui et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2019; Luk et al., 2018; Russell & Fish, 2016; The Trevor Project, 2022). Recent efforts have advanced developmentally informed understanding of minority stress among youth, with attention paid to unique experiences of stressors in this population, as well as sources of resilience, compensatory contexts, and coping resources (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017; Toomey, 2021). In the face of these findings, efforts geared toward promoting a safe, inclusive, and affirmative school environment for SGM youth have gained momentum, with studies demonstrating that SGM students may benefit from school-based programming dedicated to the affirmation and celebration of SGM individuals (Heck et al., 2013; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Poteat et al., 2013; Poteat et al., 2021;

Toomey et al., 2011). Most of this literature has evaluated interventions aimed at youth in high school and, in a handful of studies, middle school. There has been little investigation, however, about affirmative school-based programming at the elementary level and how it can be implemented to promote awareness and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity.

Understanding the possibility and structure of affirmative school-based programming for elementary school-aged children is particularly important, as evidence suggests that discussing diverse identities, promoting representation that runs counter to stereotypes, and cultivating perspective taking can help reduce prejudice and promote a positive sense of self-worth among children and youth (Human Rights Campaign, 2021; Pfeifer, Spears, & Brown, 2007). As such, the present study aims to provide an exemplar of one such program, with the hope that findings will provide a roadmap for other programs and schools interested in making elementary education more affirming of sexual and gender diversity.

In what follows, we provide a review of the literature that focuses specifically on the presence and impact of SGM affirming programming and curricula in K-12 schools to both contextualize the current study and to illuminate gaps in the field's understanding of affirmative programming with elementary aged students. We then present an overview of the current study, followed by an analysis and discussion of the data, including implications for future work in this area.

## **Literature Review**

### **Gender and Sexuality Alliances**

Much of the literature on affirmative programming for SGM youth has centered around Gender and Sexuality Alliances (formerly Gay Straight Alliances [GSAs]), which are student-run organizations focused on building community and promoting social justice activism among SGM

youth and their allied peers. These extra-curricular clubs are consistently associated with reduced risk for SGM students at the middle and high school levels, including lower levels of reported psychological distress (Heck et al., 2013), reduced experiences of school-based victimization (Goodenow et al., 2006; Marx & Kettrey, 2016), and decreased engagement in risk behaviors (e.g., risky sexual behavior, truancy, substance use) (Poteat et al., 2013). GSAs have been shown to have protective or promotive benefits for SGM students as well, with studies showing higher levels of perceived school belonging (Heck et al., 2013), greater civic engagement (Poteat et al., 2018), increased school engagement (Seelman et al., 2015), and a buffering effect against the negative consequences of identity-based cyberbullying (Wright et al., 2022). There is evidence that these benefits persist into young adulthood, with one study demonstrating increased self-esteem and greater educational attainment among adults who attended a high school with an active GSA (Toomey et al., 2011).

### **Skills-Based Programming**

Given the documented benefits of GSAs, coupled with the effectiveness of providing support within youth's natural ecologies, some studies have examined the feasibility, acceptability, and impact of structured, skills-based programming within these clubs to help reduce health disparities and to promote well-being among SGM youth (Heck, 2015; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Poteat et al., 2021). These programs have included psychoeducation about minority stress, emphasized affirmation of SGM identities, and focused on the development of cognitive coping, affective regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness skills in the context of ongoing distal and proximal minority stressors (Heck, 2015; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Data from these studies suggest that participating youth found programming of this nature to be informative and relevant (Heck, 2015), and that youth were able to access affirmation, support,

and social-emotional skill development through their participation (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Further, in a pilot study with sexual minority youth, Craig and colleagues (2014) found that participating youth reported increased self-esteem and engagement in proactive coping following completion of an affirmative, school-based program. While programs of this nature are still being developed and validated, evidence to-date suggests that extra-curricular school clubs are a feasible context for implementing affirmative, prevention-focused programming for SGM youth, and that this programming may help reduce health disparities among this population.

Notably, much of what we know about the presence, implementation, and impact of these supportive programs is specific to youth of middle- and high-school age. Indeed, national surveys of school climate and of GSA impact allow only youth aged 13 and older to participate (e.g., Kosciw et al., 2019; Truong et al., 2021). As such, there is a dearth of information regarding the rate at which these inclusive programs are being developed and implemented at the elementary school level. This is significant, as elementary school programming has the potential to benefit SGM youth, SGM families, and students of all minority statuses (Bartholomaeus et al., 2016; Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

### **Inclusive Curricula and Pedagogy**

In addition to the creation of GSAs and delivering preventative programming geared toward SGM youth in GSA clubs, scholars from education, psychology, and related disciplines have also noted the importance of attuning to curricular, pedagogical, and structural contexts as well. This includes both integrating sexual and gender diversity into academic curricula (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2019; Carlile, 2020; Human Rights Campaign, 2022; Leonardi & Staley, 2015; Page, 2017; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013;) and “queering” pedagogy itself, through disrupting heteronormativity and cisnormativity within educational contexts (Airton,

2019; Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Blackburn & Pennell, 2018; Leonardi & Staley, 2021; Toomey, 2021). More broadly, educators embracing a social justice orientation to education have highlighted the importance of designing curriculum that encourages students to grapple with injustice, “to nurture meaningful relationships of mutual obligation,” and to “develop a skill set that enables and inspires them to build a better world” (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2023, p. xiv). Inclusive pedagogy, from a social justice education orientation, includes standards focusing on identity, diversity, justice, and action (Learning for Justice, n.d.), with the belief that students need to learn how to critically examine systems of power and privilege that impact their own, and others’, lives (Allee-Herndon et al., 2021).

Despite a recent national school climate survey demonstrating that SGM-inclusive curricula at the middle and high school levels is associated with hearing fewer homophobic and transphobic remarks, reduced victimization, lower rates of absenteeism, and increased feelings of safety at school, authors found that only one-third of middle and high school students surveyed reported learning about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer (LGBTIQ+) people, events, or history in their classes (Kosciw et al., 2019). Even fewer (19.6%) indicated that they were assigned textbooks or readings that were inclusive of LGBTIQ+ individuals, events, or themes (Kosciw et al., 2019). This owes, in part, to the dearth of established, inclusive, curricular resources (although we note that limited LGBTIQ+-inclusive curricula exist for students in Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (e.g., The Every Teacher Project [University of Winnipeg]; Welcoming Schools [Human Rights Campaign]), and that most school districts in the United States do not require LGBTIQ-inclusive curricula in their teaching standards (Batchelor et al., 2018). Further, there are ongoing efforts to ban discussion of LGBTIQ+ identities in



classrooms across the country and a lack of engagement in systemic intervention to dismantle heteronormative and cisnormative pedagogical structures (Martino, 2022).

Here, we report on findings from a case study of an innovative elementary after-school program that implements SGM affirmative programming within a social justice and arts framework. In doing so, we aim to answer the overarching research question: What are the factors that help to create and sustain SGM affirmative programming at the elementary school level?

## **Method**

### **Program Description**

The Children's After School Arts Program, hereafter referred to as "the after-school program," is a tuition-based after-school program that serves a public school in San Francisco, California. Its mission emphasizes arts and social justice and includes the following: "[we] embrace LGBT families and children who express gender variance." At the time of the study, it provided education, enrichment, and after-school care, with a focus on social-emotional learning and arts education, for approximately 225 students in grades kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade and had been in operation for 20 years. Students are primarily in grade-based groupings with shared playground time. Programming takes place within school day classrooms, on the school playground, and in a designated after-school program-only classroom. A typical afternoon for students includes a community circle, free play, an art class, and assisted homework time. Arts programming rotates every 6 weeks allowing all cohorts to experience all art offerings. The after-school program has focal, mission-related, curriculum each year, and the curriculum centered around the theme "Build Bridges, Not Walls" during the year of data collection. In alignment with Toomey's (2021) developmentally informed model of minority stress for

transgender and gender diverse children, the program seeks to structurally change the experiences that occur within after-school programming for SGM children. Of note, while the program occurs within the San Francisco Unified school district, which has explicit policies mandating the structural and curricular inclusion of LGBTQ+ students, the program itself is an independent, non-profit organization.

### **Study Design**

We employed a qualitative case study design to generate an in-depth understanding of the specific policies, practices, and conditions that have contributed to the after-school program's long-standing success with implementing SGM affirming programming with elementary aged students (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Within the context of this particular afterschool program, we aimed to study participants' perspectives about the factors they believed contributed to the program's ability to create and sustain an SGM affirmative environment for staff, students, and families over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Our case study was bounded by place, context, and time, in that we investigated a singular program [CASA], with a particular approach to SGM-inclusive curriculum, at a particular point in time (Baxter & Jack, 2008, Creswell & Poth, 2016). This methodology allowed us to generate "a holistic understanding of a phenomenon within real-life contexts from the perspective of those involved" (Boblin et al., 2013, p. 2).

This case study was a collaboration between researchers and partners at the after-school program. A.F., the initiating researcher of the study, is a clinical psychologist whose research focuses on SGM health. L.E. is the Executive Director of the after-school program. Interested in the model the after-school program utilized, A.F. met with L.E. to design an examination of the factors that help to create and sustain an SGM-affirmative elementary-level after-school program. Together, they identified three key participant groups: parents, teachers (both for the after-school

program and the associated elementary school), and leadership (both of the after-school program and the associated elementary school). The research team created an initial structured interview guide, which was then tailored to create distinct interview guides for each participant group. The structured interview guides contained questions about the qualities of the after-school program and program staff, the after-school program's approach to diversity, and the perceived impacts the after-school program has had on belonging and school culture. While the interview guides were particularly focused on the program's approach to SGM-inclusive programming, participants were explicitly asked about the program's approach to racial and ethnic diversity as well. All interviewers received training in qualitative research and in conducting interviews with participants in ways that build trust and rapport.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from University of California, San Francisco. Prior to agreeing to participate, participants were informed that their responses would be de-identified and would remain anonymous in all products resulting from the study. With the permission of participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research team.

### **Positionality**

The authors hold various insider-outsider identities relative to the program being studied that are important to acknowledge (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). At the time of the study, the initiating researcher A.F. had two children enrolled in the after-school program and served on the program's board. K.K. was also a member of the board of the after-school program and had two children enrolled in the program at the time of data analysis. The rest of the authorship team had no relationships to the after-school program. To reduce bias, researchers not personally affiliated with the program (*e.g.*, S.S., J.M.B., M.C. among other non-authors) conducted nearly all of the

interviews with individuals in each participant group, except when scheduling conflicts required A.F. to conduct interviews.

### **Recruitment**

Potential participants were sent an email with contact information for the study and study staff recruited in-person by setting up tables during the after-school program hours. Interviews took place in-person in Spring of 2016. As this study was exploratory in nature, interviews were relatively short in duration and ranged from approximately 10-30 minutes in length. All program staff were invited to participate, though we did not explicitly recruit participants who identified as LGBTQ+ and/or BIPOC.

### **Participants**

Twelve parents, 10 teachers at the after-school program, 4 teachers from the elementary school, 2 administrators at the after-school program, and 2 administrators from the elementary school participated in the study. At the time of data collection, the after-school program employed 21 teachers and staff. Due to our decision to explicitly name the after-school program in this paper and the small size of the program staff, we do not report interviewee demographics either individually or in aggregate as such information could be identifying. Nonetheless, we can report that a majority of program staff identified as LGBTQ+ and over half identified as BIPOC at the time of the study. The program student body consisted of 56% BIPOC children and 25% were receiving free and reduced lunch.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis is a flexible method distinct from some other qualitative methodologies in that it is not tied to a particular ontological or epistemological

stance (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Members of the research team developed initial codes through review of a subset of interviews (at least one per participant group). A codebook was then developed by researchers with no pre-existing relationship to the after-school program through an iterative process of coding additional interviews and discussions with the research team focused on both inductive and deductive coding (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Deductive coding was primarily focused on identifying how the after-school program supported LGBTQ+ students and families, with attention to intersections with race and ethnicity as well. As the focus of this analysis became clearer, K.D., a graduate level researcher in psychology, reviewed existing coding and completed an additional round of thematic coding, homing in on interview content related to affirming policies and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

When her first round of coding was complete, K.D. summarized her findings in conceptual maps (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). K.D., A.F., and K.K. discussed the identified themes and their relationships, drawing both on the interview data and on A.F.'s and K.K.'s experiential knowledge of the after-school program through their board service and children's enrollment. Based on these conversations, K.D. returned to the data for a refined round of coding, clarifying some existing codes and adding emergent codes. Themes were then reexamined, revised, and checked against the coded excerpt units and the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Clarke & Braun, 2017; Macguire & Delahunt, 2017). As a check on the validity of the coding and analysis, L.E., A.F., and K.K. reviewed the themes based on their personal experiences with the after-school program to evaluate the believability and trustworthiness of the findings. All coding was completed in NVivo (Lumivero (2020) *NVivo* (Version 14)).

## **Results**

Below, we focus on two, over-arching themes found in participants' interviews: a) Affirmative Policies and Systems and b) Enactment of Policies and Systems. Broadly, participants discussed both the systemic components of an SGM-affirmative elementary-level program, as well as the ways in which program staff consistently "enact" affirmative practices in their daily interactions with colleagues, families, and youth. In discussing participant quotes below, we use gender-neutral pronouns in order to avoid assumptions about gender pronouns of any particular participant and to protect the anonymity of participants.

### **Affirmative Policies and Systems**

Across the interviews, participants pointed to the importance and impact of affirmative formal policies and systems in the after-school program. These affirmative policies and systems helped to build and sustain an SGM-inclusive and affirming program environment. Participants reported that the program's values around diversity were explicitly stated. They also observed the ways in which systems-level practices were intentionally designed with these values in mind, including in written materials and hiring practices. Here, we describe three key considerations of the policies and systems participants identified: a) inclusive mission statement, b) policies encouraging expression, and c) hiring gender and sexual orientation diverse staff.

#### ***Inclusive Mission Statement***

Participants identified the presence of an explicit, inclusive mission statement as instrumental to the program's success as an SGM-affirming environment. Participants described how the explicit centering of SGM individuals in the mission communicates the program's affirmative orientation and fosters an environment where sexual and gender diversity is both visible and celebrated. One program administrator asserted that having an SGM-inclusive

mission statement served as a signal to prospective families that the program was inclusive of sexual and gender diversity. They shared,

You know, we put it [embracing sexual and gender diversity] in our mission statement; it's on the homepage of our website. It's clear in the programming and events that we do. So, I think there are families who come to us even before they're in the community, when they're first applying because they see that that's a piece of who [after-school program] is.

This administrator explained that the program's clear messaging around SGM-inclusivity in its materials shows families what the program stands for and what they can expect when they enroll.

Other participants highlighted that the mission was not simply "lip service" and, from their perspective, represented the foundation of the program. One program teacher, for example, noted that the mission statement set the stage for SGM people and families to feel seen and celebrated within the program:

Well, they implement that mission—I mean, it's very-- it's like I said, it's built in, because a lot of the families are LGBTQ and then the kids, and a lot of the staff. So, and it's very like, outspoken and it's very encouraged or... it's a very proud thing.

Another teacher in the program echoed this observation, explaining that, in their experience, "I do feel like [the after-school program] follow[s] their mission." They pointed to their experience in which,

I feel like we are very mindful of the needs of those kids that identify, whatever it is they identify as. So, I think that [program] does, you know, advocate for that [affirmation of sexual and gender diversity] and does represent that for sure, and I have seen it.

In essence, by explicitly naming their affirmation of sexual and gender diversity, the program creates a virtuous cycle: by signaling affirmation and celebration, the mission encourages SGM staff and families to feel as though they can safely participate in programming, which then enables the program to fulfill its mission statement of embracing gender variance in its community.

### *Policies Encouraging Expression*

In addition to an inclusive mission statement, program teachers identified inclusive policies around expression and authenticity as integral to their ability to be themselves at work. Participants across groups reported that such policies served to normalize a wide variety of identities for students and families. For example, program teachers noted that the explicit encouragement in their employee handbook to “bring your full self to work” contributed to the development of a climate where SGM-affirmation is embedded into everything they do. This encouragement of expression started at the policy and leadership levels. As such, one program administrator discussed their encouragement of their teachers to be authentic at work:

We really encourage [program] staff to express themselves. Everyone comes to work dressed appropriately and if someone has a new color hair or some way they’re expressing themselves outwardly, I think that’s really great thing for the kids to see at a young age, to see there’s not just one way to dress, there’s not one way to express yourself with your appearance, with the way you speak, the way you carry yourself.... And we not only have a staff that expresses themselves across the gender spectrum, but we encourage them to show up to [program] with their appearance, with their personality, with their being, as themselves.

The program administrator, in other words, asserted that policies allowing and encouraging teachers to express themselves authentically expose students to a diverse range of identities and expressions, contributing to an SGM-affirming environment.

Interviews with program teachers demonstrate that policies like this one, and the respective support these policies receive from program leadership, are effective in allowing teachers to feel safe making their various identities and humanity known, which, in turn, allows them to both embody and implement inclusive and social justice-focused programming. As one teacher shared:

It’s very special to me because I am able to be myself around the children... It’s a really awesome program that allows not only the children to be themselves but allows the staff



to be themselves as well. I think that's the best part of this program... I'm originally from [location], and I used to work in [another district]. And working there, I was never told directly, but I was sort of hinted, they hinted I needed to tone down my gayness. And then I come here, and it's like the total opposite. They're like 'be as gay as you want.'

As this teacher described, the program's inclusive policies enable staff to not only be themselves but also to normalize their identities for their students. Separate from their instruction role, SGM-affirming policies also created the conditions under which this educator could have a corrective emotional experience. While their previous employment encouraged concealment and conformity, they describe this program as encouraging them to fully embrace and share who they are, which subsequently can encourage students to do the same. Indeed, another program teacher shared their observations regarding students' sense of safety and permission to explore, stating, "I've noticed that there's a little bit more of a stretching and available to like, gender difference in the students especially, at [program], cause teachers present all sorts of genders." Other program teachers offered similar comparisons to previous employment, noting the positive impact of being able to show up fully in their humanity at work:

For me, what makes [after-school program] special to work at in terms of a staff member, is getting to 100% fully be myself and express myself at work. This is something that I have not experienced anywhere else in any other jobs that I've had, where I feel totally comfortable to be myself in terms of my sexual orientation, myself as an artist, myself as a political activist, myself as a human being who's moody, who's all of those things, and to be supported and represented.... That's safety. That's the goal of when you do diversity trainings. That's the goal of most of them, is to be able to accept and allow all of your staff and employees to express and be themselves for who they are, and so I feel like we really do that. We actually manage to do that, and that's amazing.

Affirmative and intentional policies are a necessary prerequisite for hiring and retaining a gender and sexual orientation diverse staff—and, at the after-school program, they have subsequent benefits for teachers' interactions with students and families. One program teacher summarized, "It's almost like the curriculum is us. And it's hard to detach two things from each other [...] like

the background people are coming from, the [program] staff, and what they're contributing.”

Intentional, affirming policies allow staff both to teach and *to be* the curriculum. Their lived experiences, and the encouragement to fully embody and embrace these experiences with students, enable them to be more effective and successful in their roles.

### ***Hiring Gender and Sexual Orientation Diverse Staff***

The intentional recruitment and retention of a gender and sexual orientation diverse staff of educators also contributes to the effective delivery of SGM-affirmative social justice-oriented programming. The intentional aim for diversity across staff also included racial, ethnic, and age diversity as well. Such hiring practices ensure that students have many adults with varied and intersectional lived experiences with whom to engage. As a teacher in the associated elementary school explained,

[The executive director] has really gone out of her way to create an environment of teachers that really mirror what you can be as a grown up. Like it's not just, just like me: white, single...white, married, straight lady, where so much of [the elementary school's] teachers are of that population.

This teacher highlighted the effect of the program's intentionality in hiring decisions: that it produces an adult population with greater racial, gender, and sexual orientation diversity than the elementary school's faculty. A program administrator shared the impact of these hiring decisions on creating an SGM-affirming environment:

I've had parents say to me, you know, 'my child never would have had exposure to, you know, a trans person or a butch lesbian or'—and because of our staff, it's normalized [to] the point where it's opened their minds.

Their observations align with how one administrator described the program's hiring practices and reasoning behind them. They stated:

I would also say that [diversity is] a very active practice in [our] hiring decisions. It's really important for [us] to show diversity of gender expression and to have a lot of ethnic

diversity, age diversity, so that we're representing so many different kinds of people so the kids will both see something similar reflected in the staff—something that they can find that person they can relate to. And also, that they're exposed to a lot of different types of people that they may not encounter in their own communities.

In this way, diverse representation among program teachers provides students with both “window” and “mirror” opportunities (Bishop, 1990; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015), in that they gain a “window” into others' lived experiences and have their own experiences “mirrored” back to them as well.

Importantly, this intentional hiring of diverse staff also helps to create a program culture and climate where diverse educators do not grapple with the isolation of being “the only” racial, ethnic, sexual, and/or gender minority. Diverse hiring practices promote a sense of comfort and safety for program educators and minimize the experiences of heteronormativity and cisnormativity that are more commonplace in less diversity-oriented systems. One program teacher positively observed the effect of these hiring practices, stating,

Just like the amount of LGBT people that we have here on staff, racial diversity here, or ethnic diversity of the staff makes me comfortable. Like almost intentional, recruitment of those populations. So that within itself makes me comfortable being like who I am.

Another program teacher shared similar sentiments, saying,

I think the fact that there is a lot of queer people in [after-school program], that makes it, like, so great. Especially being a queer person myself, I feel like that, in some ways, is super needed. I've only worked in places where everyone was heteronormative, it was like, a heteronormative job. So, it's kind of nice to be in a space where you feel safe, and you can relate to people.

Program teachers recognize the commitment to diversity that begins at the policy and leadership levels and they feel comfortable being themselves within the program due to its ongoing commitment to hiring and supporting people with a wide variety of identities and lived experiences. This commitment is explicitly reflected in program job postings, which reference

inclusive policies and encourage BIPOC and LGBTQ+ teachers to apply. Thus, the hiring of diverse staff contributes to the creation of an SGM-affirming elementary program in that it provides students with opportunities to build relationships and community with many types of people and to see their own experiences represented among the adults in their lives, while simultaneously providing teachers with the requisite community and safety for them to thrive at work.

### **Enactment of Policies and Systems**

Policies and structures do not exist in a vacuum. As the above analysis illustrates, participants pointed to the program's policies as providing a fertile foundation for the program to be SGM-affirming. In this section, we examine participants' accounts of the enactment of those policies and structures. Here, we consider enactment to refer to the attitudes, skills, and practices that staff employ in implementing an SGM-affirmative after-school program at the elementary school level: how program staff bring the program's mission statement and policies to life. Enactment is broken down into four subcategories: a) affirmation, b) inclusive curriculum, c) inclusive language, and d) disrupting normativity and implementing restorative practices.

#### ***Affirmation***

Staff affirmation of SGM identities is a critical practice in creating and sustaining an SGM-affirming program, and participants provided examples of this practice and its impact. This affirmation takes several forms, including communicating openness and expansiveness, using students' pronouns, and validating students around their SGM identity, expression, and exploration. One program teacher described the importance of this affirmation and shared a concrete example:

We let kids, especially kids who don't conform to either [binary] gender or sexuality, we

let them be and we respect their journey and respect their choices. And that is not always the case at school or after-school programs, so I think that's our most important contribution for sure... I have a student who is somewhere on the gender spectrum... so we at [program], everyone on staff has gone out of their way to make the student feel accepted and make them feel safe by really respecting what gender pronouns they want to use and what bathroom they want to use...

As this teacher highlighted, affirmation involves explicit communication of acceptance and unwavering respect for each student's identity and expressed needs. They additionally noted the consistency with which this affirmation is provided—everyone on staff went “out of their way” to support this student; this practice was not enacted by only one or two select staff members but was collective, suggesting that successful programming requires affirmation across all teachers and program personnel. Program teachers and leadership have monthly staff meetings to ensure that the full teaching community is aware of specific student needs.

This dedication to supporting and affirming students is noticed by other stakeholders as well. For example, one parent shared their perspectives around this staff enactment, saying,

The focus at [after-school program] is really relationships and making sure everyone is included... Also I have to say, again in our daughter's kindergarten class, I don't know if this fits in here, but [peer] who is [assigned female at birth] and is more comfortable [being] referred to as a boy and only likes to play with boys, and what's been great about [after-school program] is every time they talk to [peer] they ask [him] if [he] would like to be referred to as a “he” or a “she” and really supporting [him] through that process... and also supporting the other kids in that process and educating them.

As this parent discussed, they noticed the dedication staff have toward affirmation and inclusion, both broadly and in specific scenarios. Importantly, they noted that staff are not simply supporting SGM students in isolation; they are modeling for the larger student peer group how to communicate with someone who may not conform to gender norms. The ultimate effect is that not only adults but also peers engage with this student with acceptance and without judgment.

The program's enactment of affirmation creates a space where students feel comfortable

and safe to be who they are. An educator at the associated elementary school noted,

I think that [program] makes a place that's safe for kids who are gender nonconforming or gender expansive. I think kids who are, as they get older...I [teach a younger grade] so I don't see as much of this, but I know as kids are entering into middle school, there's a space for children to feel safe coming out and feeling "I'm gay" and that's okay. And you'll get support and it's a safe place to be who you are.

When students learn, play, and socialize in an environment that consistently affirms and celebrates diversity, they believe that they can receive affirmation and acceptance of their full humanity, rather than select parts. This affirmation contributes to students feeling as though they can share their identities with others earlier in development as well; as one administrator shared, "I have heard for years from parents and from graduates is that it's such an open environment at [program] that kids felt safe to come out earlier because of how comfortable they felt."

Affirmative, SGM-programming during elementary school potentially prevents the well-documented stress associated with identity concealment in adolescence and adulthood (Johns et al., 2021; McKay & Watson, 2020; Pachankis et al., 2020; Meyer, 2003).

### ***Inclusive Curriculum***

Participants described the intentional incorporation of themes about sexual and gender diversity into the program's curriculum as another aspect of developing and sustaining an SGM-affirming elementary program. One teacher shared,

With the social justice focus, we're open and allowed and encouraged to use that in our curriculum in our classes. So that's how it translates from the safe space to the staff, to the students, and what we teach here.

Here, the teacher linked the "safe space" created by policies and systems to a sense of safety among the staff and, in turn, an ability for staff to teach a curriculum that creates a sense of safety among the students as well.

Others provided more concrete examples of this inclusive curriculum in action. For example, a teacher described the ways they intentionally infuse the exploration of sexual and gender diversity into their lessons and learning activities:

We also, for example, read a lot of books about... last year... I read a ton of books about kids who express their gender in different ways. So, the kids all got exposure and got to ask questions about why a boy would wear a dress. So, we actually have curriculum... The art teacher was teaching classes about all kinds of gender variance, and fishes, and nature, and watching videos about this, so they're actually learning it that way as well.

In cultivating an SGM-affirmative program, teachers integrate gender diversity-affirming books and content with their subject matter, rather than teaching gender diversity as a separate lesson. SGM-affirming curriculum is not parallel or slid in alongside literacy and art; literacy and art are taught through the lens of gender diversity affirmation.

To be clear, the program does not understand teaching SGM-affirmative curriculum as exclusively for SGM-identifying students. Through the curriculum, the program invites all students to think more expansively about gender. A program administrator discussed the plan to further integrate gender diversity into the curriculum in the future, with hopes of expanding awareness for all students:

Next year our theme is about identity, and we just got a grant... to explore gender identity with kids, so I think we'll be able to go much deeper with our kids who are more typically gendered to have them thinking in a more expansive way and beyond the binary.

As this administrator's quote highlights, effective SGM-inclusive programming is essential for all students, regardless of how they identify. It normalizes and fosters empathy in ways that are essential to recognizing the humanity of all.

### ***Inclusive Language***

Beyond a formal, inclusive curriculum, after-school program teachers also described the

importance of being intentional about their use of inclusive language and their advancement of social justice in every interaction with students. A program administrator described their own process with this intentional language, and shared:

How are those subtle pieces of language that are so embedded in us as educators and as people? [After-school program] has really taught me personally how to look at those things and to assess all those little interactions with kids during the day. How am I approaching diversity? And how am I teaching them to embrace diversity authentically in all those little interactions and not just in the bigger lessons?

This administrator recognized that diversity and social justice should exist in both curriculum and the “little interactions” as well. Affirmative programming requires staff to be constantly attentive to their language, their responses, and their behaviors, so that deep safety and learning can occur. As such, creating a culture of continuous learning and ongoing awareness contributes to the program’s success in being SGM-affirming. As a program teacher shared,

We’re very self-aware of the language we use... like I used the example of a teacher saying, “Good morning, boys and girls” or “Boys line up over here and girls line up here,” for a class activity. We’re very aware to not do that, which now to me seems obvious but when I started at [after-school program] four, five years ago, that was not obvious to me why that was problematic or that it was problematic. So, in small ways making sure our language is not inherently gendered.

As staff enact practices that foster an inclusive and affirmative relational context, they must be continually attuned to their own socialization and biases. This work is not static; it is ever in motion and requires moment-by-moment awareness. Thus, sustaining a program culture where this interrogation, growth, and ongoing learning is encouraged promotes the continued use of inclusive language and SGM-affirmative practices.

### ***Disrupting Normativity and Restorative Practices***

Central to the after-school program’s enactment of an SGM-affirmative after-school program is its teachers’ consistent commitment to disrupting normativity and implementing



restorative practices. When staff witness or hear about a bias-based incident of bullying or relational conflict, these comments are named as such, and teachers implement restorative practices to foster learning and relational repair. Pointedly, their interactions with students are not about punishment; they are about teaching and restoring relational connection. As an administrator shared, teachers are expected to interrupt incidents of bias and to engage with students in a relational and educational way:

So, you hear someone say, you know, ‘you run like a girl’ it’s kind of easy to pretend like you didn’t hear that, but [the after-school program staff] is managed in a way that they understand that they can’t let those things go... I think to the point to where the kids are kind of like, “Oh God, okay here we go again. We’re gonna have to sit down and have a restorative circle about me saying ‘you run like a girl,’” but it gets through to them and they start to really think differently.

As with other aspects of enactment, this approach is not applied by a single individual but, rather, across the entire teaching staff. One teacher shared:

Any type of bullying or talking badly about anyone who is of a different gender or expresses gender in a different way or talks about families in a different way, every single staff member is on top of that. There would not be a single staff member that would ever let something like that go by.

Naming bias-based incidents and addressing them through restorative practices is understood to be the responsibility of every adult in the after-school program. Because of this consistency in response, students receive clear messaging and are provided with opportunities to learn and repair when needed. Enactment of these practices help bring the program’s mission to be SGM-affirming to life; teachers embody the program’s commitment to affirmation through interrupting and addressing bias-based incidents and helping students think and behave differently around sexual and gender diversity.

### **Discussion**

Our analysis shows that affirmative policies and systems and the enactment of these policies are key to creating a long-running, SGM-affirming after-school program for elementary-aged students. Interviews with program stakeholders illustrate how the intentional creation and implementation of affirmative policies and systems (such as an explicitly SGM-affirming mission statement and gender and sexual orientation diverse hiring practices) enable program staff to intentionally engage in these social justice practices. Enactments of these affirmative practices, in turn, foster an SGM-inclusive context and serve to substantiate the inclusive mission statement and policies. These enactments included identity affirmation, inclusive curriculum, continuous attention to inclusive language, and restorative practices. Broadly, the policies and systems that stakeholders identified enable an emotional and relational environment where staff, students, and families can bring their full selves to the programmatic space. They delineate the program's values focused on SGM-affirmation, set expectations for how staff, students, and families will be treated and celebrated, and ensure that the right people are in place to move these values and expectations forward.

As discussed by Ferfolja and Ullman (2020), it can be alluring for systems to adopt inclusive policies in order to “tick the accountability box” and to “point to some visibility of gender and sexuality diverse topics in a safe, apolitical way” (p. 69), but literature suggests that adopting inclusive language in policies without any accompanying action toward challenging systems of hetero- and cis- normativity may be insufficient to effect real change (Luecke, 2018). In outlining a framework for “The Gender Facilitative School,” Luecke (2018) highlights inclusive policy as an important component of creating SGM-inclusive educational environments, but notes that a comprehensive approach is required to truly support the full humanity of students. Our results illustrate an example of one such whole-program approach,

and echo findings from the broader literature (e.g., Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Horton & Carlile, 2022; Luecke, 2018) focused on continual disruption of bias (Airton, 2019; Blackburn & Pennell, 2018; Johnson, 2023; Luecke 2018; Ryan, 2016), inclusive curriculum (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2019; Carlile 2020, Luecke, 2018; Ryan et al., 2013), and restorative practices (Fronius et al., 2019; Lodi et al., 2021; Lustick et al., 2024).

Findings from this study have direct implications for school and program leaders at the elementary school level. They provide an exemplar of what is possible when creating SGM-affirmative elementary-level programming and highlight potential focus areas for policy and practice implementation. The systemic factors and policies participants identified may serve as helpful guideposts for other program leaders hoping to make their programming more inclusive of sexual orientation and gender diversity. Additionally, our findings demonstrate specific, concrete SGM-affirming behaviors that school and program staff can implement in their own contexts. For example, educators and administrators hoping to apply these findings to their own respective contexts should pay ongoing attention to their use of inclusive, gender-expansive language in every interaction with students. They should also make a universal commitment to interrupting every incident of bias and addressing it through restorative practices (Fronius et al., 2019; Lustick et al., 2024). This active approach ensures that SGM affirmation is not only discussed and taught during lessons; it is embodied and modeled in the language staff use and the ways they interact with students outside of curricular content as well (Airton, 2019). Teachers and administrators must develop their own awareness of implicitly gendered language, work toward using inclusive language with students, and implement restorative practices as needed to ensure that SGM-affirmation is deeply integrated into all aspects of programming (e.g., Airton, 2019; Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2019; Horton & Carlile, 2022; Ryan et al., 2013). When these

behaviors are embedded into every aspect of programming, rather than being implemented solely in response to “exceptional situations” (Airton, 2019; Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Martino, Omercajic, et al., 2022; Martino, Kassen et al., 2022; Payne & Smith, 2014), they contribute to the creation of educational climates that celebrate diversity, foster belonging, and engender empathy through the continual disruption of pervasive hetero-and-cis-normativity in educational spaces. Lastly, results from this study highlight potential areas of focus for professional development, training, and technical assistance for elementary schools and programs aiming to become more SGM affirmative. As participants from this study highlighted, creating a safe and inclusive environment is not simply about the content being taught. It is also about the ways that staff attend to their students’ expression—specifically in inclusive and open engagement—and how they both name and navigate bias-based interactions through restorative practices (Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Meyer et al., 2018). Educators can learn these practices and behaviors through professional development and coaching. Indeed, they overlap significantly with current efforts toward supporting the development of educators’ social emotional skills more broadly (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 2022) and with currently available SGM-specific professional development resources (e.g., The Rainbow Owl; Welcoming Schools; Respect, Inclusion, Safety, and Equity (RISE); The Every Teacher Project).

### **Limitations**

While the present study begins to fill current gaps in the literature around SGM-inclusive educational programming with elementary-aged students, it has several limitations. Though not the goal of case study research, our findings cannot be considered exhaustive of factors that contribute to implementing an SGM-affirming program for elementary-aged students, due to our examination of a single program within a specific context. There may also be factors outside of

our data collection that contributed to the program's structure (e.g., ideology of geographical location, a local school district which explicitly mandates SGM-inclusive education) that limit the transferability of these findings. Of note, our data and analysis largely considered sexual and gender diversity on its own, but identities are fundamentally intersectional. Deeper investigation and consideration of race, ethnicity, and other identity characteristics, especially insofar as they intersect with sexual and gender identity, may offer further insights into the successful implementation of an SGM-affirming program for elementary aged-students. Additionally, our study did not include analysis of perspectives of program participants (i.e., students), so we cannot report on the experiences or effects of these program policies and enactments, nor can we report on potential differences in experiences among program participants in relation to their respective intersectional identities. Further, these data capture one moment in time in this program's 20-year history, and thus do not reflect the experiences of former staff and parents.

### **Future Directions**

Results from this bounded case study of an SGM affirming, elementary level, after-school program provide invaluable insights that may inform future scholarship and programming with elementary-aged students. Future studies should explore the impacts of SGM-affirmative elementary school programming, including the relationship(s) between SGM inclusive policies and affirmative behaviors in elementary schools and perceived school safety, school climate and culture, broader community climate and culture, and student-level variables (e.g., belonging, victimization/harassment rates, academic outcomes). Examination of additional SGM-affirming elementary school programs in different geographic locations and/or the inclusion of participant perspectives and additional artifacts may also serve to triangulate the data discussed in this article, to confirm the findings from this paper, and to identify additional factors that contribute

to the creation and implementation of after-school elementary level programming that affirms sexual and gender diversity. This scholarship may be additionally expanded by explicitly examining racialized experiences of LGBTQ+ students and staff within similar programs, particularly in light of existing literature that suggests the benefits of SGM-affirmative programs may be less robust for students of color (Baams & Russell, 2021). Further, whether by design or participant content, the present study did not yield content surrounding challenges and barriers when implementing an SGM affirming after-school program at the elementary school level. Given the current sociopolitical and educational context surrounding SGM youth and families, future studies should explore the challenges faced by similar programs and ways that programs have successfully navigated these barriers. Finally, given the clear importance of staff enactment in the present study, future research should also investigate the requisite training or supports for staff to implement an SGM-affirming program.

### **Conclusion**

A wide body of evidence suggests that SGM youth frequently experience schools as hostile environments (Kosciw et al., 2019). SGM youth in these spaces consistently report experiences of identity-based harassment, bullying, and discrimination that have documented negative effects on their functioning across a variety of domains (Becerra-Culqui et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2019; Luk et al., 2018; Russell & Fish, 2016; The Trevor Project, 2022). Available research suggests that the presence of SGM-affirmative clubs and programming, and the implementation of SGM-inclusive curricula, have powerful protective effects for middle- and high school aged SGM youth (Poteat et al., 2021; Snapp et al., 2015; Toomey et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2022). However, much of what is currently known has focused on these affirmative

programs in the secondary educational context, with much less being known about ways to create safe, inclusive, and affirmative spaces for elementary-aged students.

This study aimed to fill this gap and provides an in-depth examination of the factors that contribute to the successful implementation of an SGM-affirmative, social justice focused after-school arts program for elementary aged students. Results add to the literature on similar foci in programming for middle- and high school students (Craig et al., 2014; Heck, 2015; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Poteat et al., 2021). In alignment with developmental models of minority stress (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017; Toomey, 2021), findings demonstrated that the program employs both policy and systems-level factors and skillful enactment of affirming behaviors to develop and sustain inclusivity and affirmation of SGM educators, students, and families. It is possible that the implementation of SGM-affirming affirming program at the elementary school level could have immediate and long-term effects for SGM youth and may serve to buffer against the impacts of minority stress (Brooks, 1981; Meyer, 2003; Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017; Toomey, 2021). Specifically, programs that systemically disrupt cisnormativity and heteronormativity and infuse SGM affirmation and social justice into curriculum and programming may serve to reduce exposure to distal stressors and to reduce the incidence of proximal stressors (such as concealment, expectations of rejection, and self-stigma) as well. Further, program staff can model corrective feedback that affirms diverse gender expressions when distal stressors inevitably occur, thus interrupting patterns of identity-based harm that are well-documented in the literature (e.g., Kosciw et al., 2019). Results from this study add to empirical support for the feasibility of implementing SGM affirmative programming with young students and highlight several components of a successful elementary school program that can inform future programming that celebrates and affirms all students.

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