

How are LGBTQ+ youth doing in Swiss German schools?

Summary of the research report
Project SOGUS – Sexual orientation, gender, and school

February 2024

What is it about?

Schools should be places of learning and development where all students feel comfortable. As part of the project “SOGUS – Sexual orientation, gender, and school” (2022–2024), a scientific study was conducted to explore how LGBTQ+ students in the German-speaking part of Switzerland perceive the school climate and their experiences with acceptance and exclusion. The SOGUS project is a collaboration between the University of Bern, the Zurich University of Teacher Education, and the Bern University of Teacher Education. It is primarily financed by the Mercator Foundation Switzerland.

How was the study conducted?

Participatory approach:
Workshops with LGBTQ+ students to gain a deeper understanding of their school experiences and refine the questionnaire

Survey:
Anonymous online survey in the fall of 2022, distributed by the queer youth organisation Milchjugend, among others

Participants:
569 LGBTQ+ students aged 14–19 from the German-speaking part of Switzerland



Feeling of safety and well-being at school

Over half of the participants (58.4%) felt uncomfortable or unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, gender, and/or gender expression. 68.8% of transgender and 52.5% of non-binary students felt **uncomfortable or unsafe** at school because of their gender identity.

Changing rooms (42.6%) and sports lessons (41.7%) were cited as the **spaces in school** where students felt most uncomfortable or unsafe. Particularly, transgender and non-binary students expressed concerns about the absence of **gender-neutral toilets**.

Due to discomfort or a lack of a feeling of safety:

- > 42.1% of respondents missed at least one school day in the last month, and one in seven (14.2%) missed four or more days.
- > 14.3% of participants have changed schools at least once. Among transgender students, this figure rises to 25.0%.

“In secondary school, I often felt uncomfortable, [...] in high school, I feel better than ever. I think the school contributes to a relatively large extent to my discomfort / well-being.”

15 years old, non-binary, queer

Answered by 538 students

“Do you feel uncomfortable / unsafe at your school because of...”

30.9%

Gender

33.8%

Sexual orientation

31.2%

Gender expression

4.1%

Race or ethnicity

8.6%

Financial situation of the family

2.8%

Nationality

2.2%

German language skills

34.8%

None of this

Classroom and school materials

The topics of sexual and gender diversity were perceived as having little presence in the classroom. 31.0% of LGBTQ+ students heard positive aspects about LGBTQ+ in [class](#) in the past school year, while for every fifth person (19.7%), the content of LGBTQ+ lessons had a negative connotation.

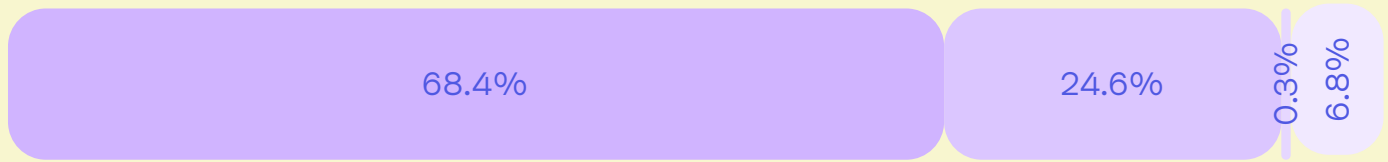
“As some of our school materials are rather old, the texts or pictures very often only feature white people and hetero couples.”

14 years old, genderfluid, omnisexual

43.2% reported that sexual orientation was discussed in [sex education](#) lessons. Information on transgender topics was included for 3 out of 10 (30.9%) of the participants.

Answered by 396 students

“How many of your textbooks / library books contain information about LGBTQ+ people, history, or events?”



Textbooks and other school materials



Books and other media in the library

● none ● a few ● many ● don't know

Support and acceptance in the school environment

Two-thirds of respondents (66.0%) could name at least one member of school staff who they perceive as **supportive** of LGBTQ+ students.

Approximately half of the respondents (46.0%) were aware of anti-bullying policies at their school. Of these,

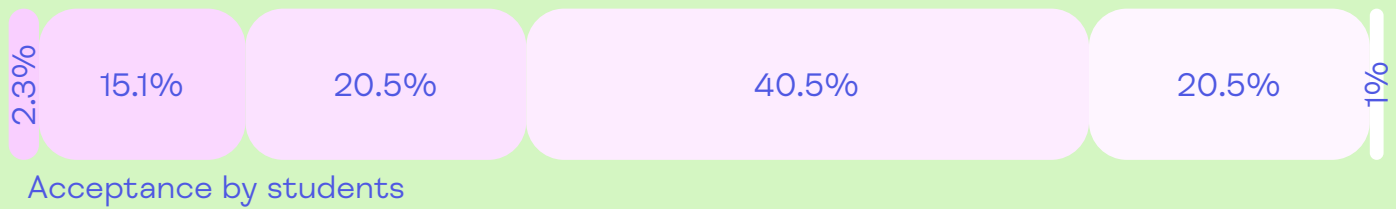
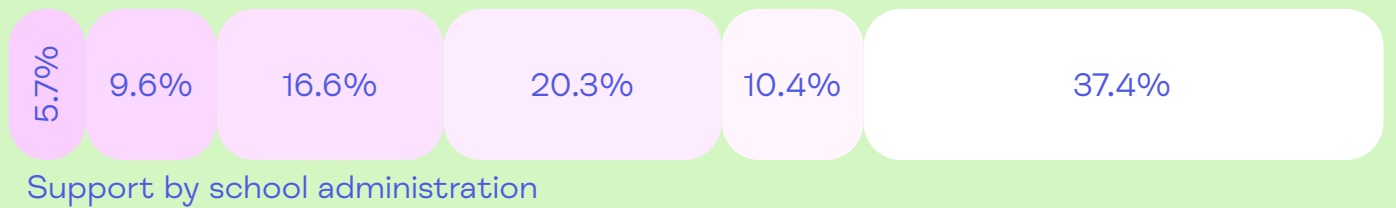
- > 20.3% reported that sexual orientation was mentioned there.
- > 10.4% reported that gender identity was mentioned there.

“Some teachers just have a hard time with gender stars and name changes, others are sooo supportive!”

17 years old, cisgender female, bisexual

Answered by 385 students

“How supportive of LGBTQ+ students is your school administration?
How accepting are the students at your school of LGBTQ+ people in general?”



● not at all ● rather not ● neutral ● rather ● very much ● don't know

Biased language, harassment, and assaults

Nearly half of the young people surveyed (49.1%) heard [anti-gay remarks](#) from school staff. 92.1% reported that their classmates made anti-gay remarks. However, according to 53.7% of participants, teachers did not intervene when such remarks were made. 15.4% stated that teachers usually or always intervened.

56.0% reported [negative remarks about gender expression](#) made by school staff. 91.2% stated that their classmates made such remarks. According to 59.4% of participants, teachers never intervened when negative remarks about gender expression were made. 9.1% reported that teachers usually or always intervened.

60.4% of students reported that they had been verbally harassed because of their gender expression. 6 out of 10 transgender (62.0%) and non-binary (60.3%) students reported verbal harassment due to their gender identity. Verbal harassment based on sexual orientation particularly affected cisgender homosexual students (42.5%).

“You often hear anti-queer comments. These make it difficult to be yourself.”

15 years old, cisgender female, lesbian

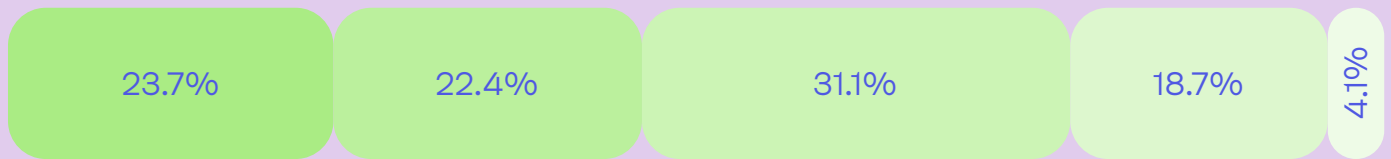
Three-quarters of students (74.2%) have [never reported](#) incidents of harassment and assault to teachers. The most common reasons include a perceived lack of success, fear of unwanted attention, and judging it as “not bad enough”. Of the students who reported an incident, almost half (49.0%) reported that the teachers [did not respond](#) afterwards.

“Reporting would probably reveal that I am transgender, and I don’t want that at the moment.”

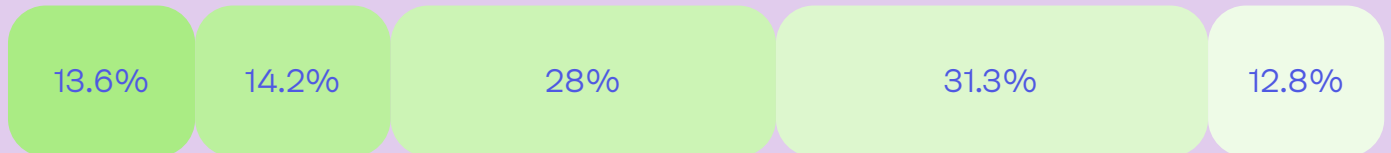
18 years old, transgender male, gay

Answered by 448 students

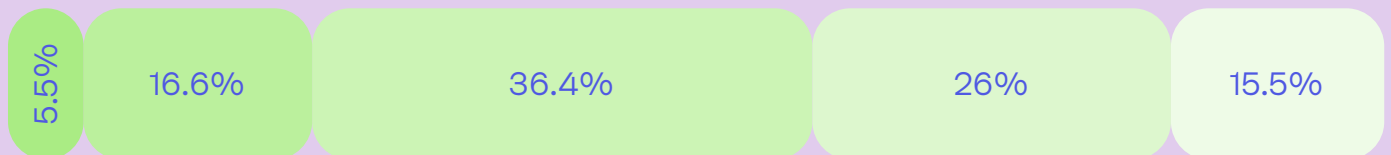
“At your school, how often do you hear...”



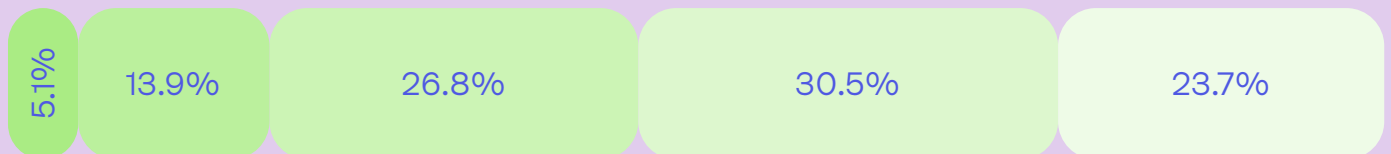
“Gay” used in a negative way



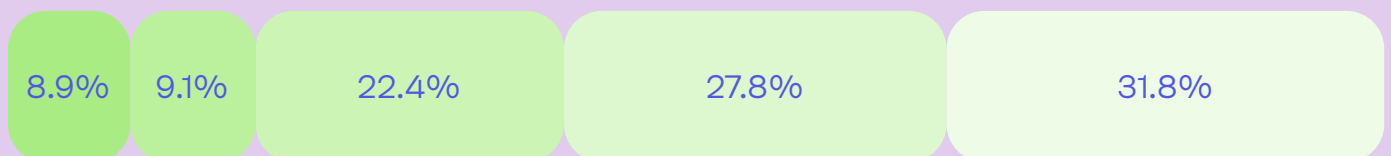
Anti-gay remarks



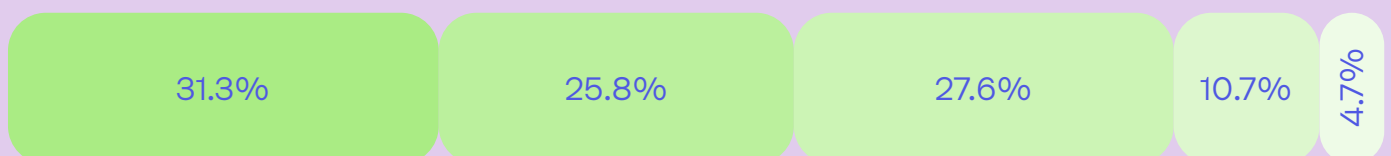
Remarks about not acting “masculine enough”



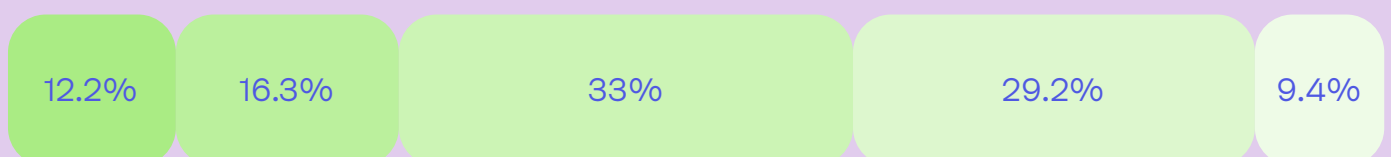
Remarks about not acting “feminine enough”



Anti-trans remarks



Sexist remarks

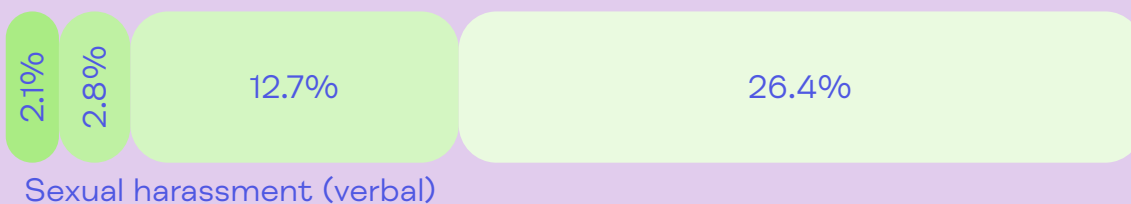
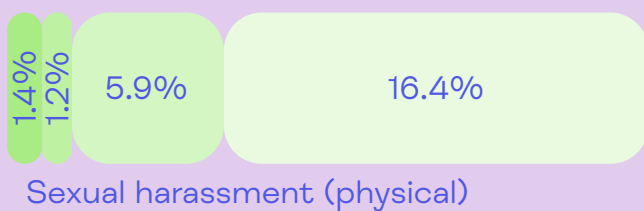
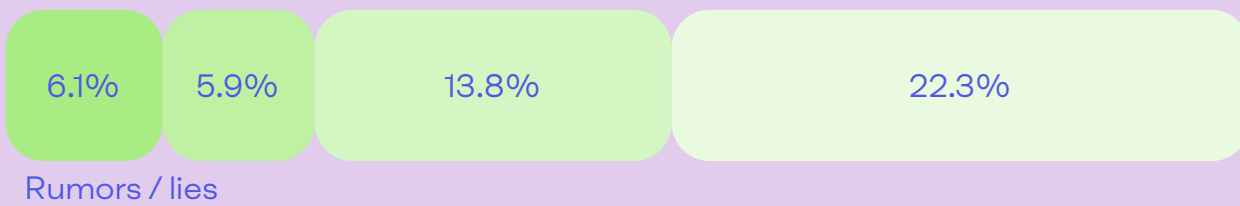
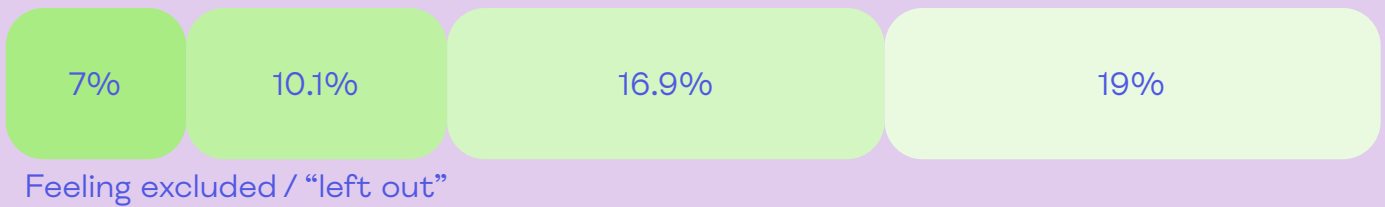
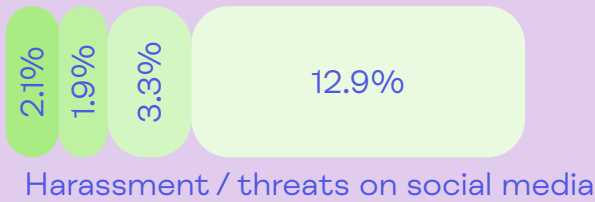


Racist remarks

● frequently ● often ● sometimes ● rarely ● never

Answered by 429 students

“How often has the following happened to you at your school in the last year?”



● frequently ● often ● sometimes ● rarely

“What is nice about being queer?”

When asked what is **nice about being LGBTQ+**, the LGBTQ+ students particularly mentioned the connection with the LGBTQ+ community and the feeling of self-determination.

“I’m learning a lot about myself and other people, their thoughts, and our society. I’m generally more enlightened since I’ve been dealing with my sexuality.”

14 years old, cisgender female, lesbian

“It gives me a very colourful view of the world that my heterosexual friends don’t have. Being queer has taught me how much acceptance can change things, and I am now someone who is much less prejudiced against others and tries to understand and accept first. It also gives me a community that can give me a lot and in which I feel comfortable.”

19 years old, unsure, pansexual

Conclusion

Many LGBTQ+ students reported experiences of devaluation and exclusion at their school. These findings contradict the concept of the school as a **place of learning and development** for everyone. The results of the study highlight the need to think about the school as an LGBTQ+ friendly place and to take measures so that everyone can feel as comfortable and safe as possible.

More information on the SOGUS study? The detailed research report (in German) is available at the following link: <http://doi.org/10.48350/190611>

Suggested citation:

Ott, Ad J.; Lüthi, Janine; Kappler, Christa; Hofmann, Monika; Amacker, Michèle (2024). How are LGBTQ+ youth doing in Swiss-German schools? Summary of the research report. Project SOGUS – Sexual orientation, gender, and school. Universität Bern, PH Bern, PH Zürich. <http://doi.org/10.48350/192121>