

Engaging peers to promote well-being and inclusion of newcomer students: A call for equity-informed peer interventions

Claire V. Crooks  | Nataliya Kubishyn  | Amira Noyes  | Gina Kayssi 

Centre for School Mental Health, Faculty of Education, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence

Claire V. Crooks, Centre for School Mental Health, Faculty of Education, Western University, 1137 Western Rd, London, ON N6G 1G7, Canada.
Email: ccrooks@uwo.ca

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Abstract

Although newcomer youth demonstrate high levels of resiliency, many experience challenges in emotional, linguistic, academic, and social functioning. Over the past decade, some promising school-based psychosocial interventions for newcomer youth have been developed. These interventions are necessary, but not sufficient to promote well-being. Without attention to the larger context, focusing solely on the skills and adjustment of newcomer youth could potentially stigmatize students further. There is a need to engage non-newcomer peers for two reasons. First, peer relationships and inclusion are important predictors of well-being. Second, from an equity lens, there is a need to create environments that promote youth well-being; at the very least, these environments must engage non-newcomer youth in recognizing and combatting discrimination. This study outlines the need for peer-focused programming to support newcomers and describes existing research on interventions developed to promote peer relationships (e.g., mentoring) or reduce discrimination (e.g., teacher-led discrimination reduction approaches). We identify other intervention models that could inform how to add an equity lens to school mental health intervention, including how a gender-sexuality alliance model

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could be adapted, and how equity considerations could be integrated into bystander approaches. We conclude with specific implications and recommendations for embedding equity into school mental health.

KEYWORDS

intervention, peers, refugee, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although newcomer youth demonstrate high levels of resiliency, they also face elevated challenges in the areas of emotional, linguistic, academic, and social functioning (Aghajafari et al., 2020; H. Ellis et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2019; Igoa, 2013). Pre-arrival trauma, conflict, and violence can cause severe stress for refugee children and affect their cognitive functions and academic performance (Aghajafari et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2016). Even in the absence of trauma, conflict, and violence, the migration itself inherently means the loss of important friendships and social connections, separation from many cultural experiences, and if the migrant is not fluent in the language of their destination, isolation, and disconnection from their new setting (H. Ellis et al., 2020; Morantz et al., 2011; Rossiter et al., 2015; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In addition to premigration and migration stressors, refugee children and youth continue to experience challenges upon arrival in Canada due to lack of inclusion and racism. Accordingly, there are increasing efforts to develop the resilience and coping strategies of newcomer youth to increase their adjustment (Agić et al., 2016; Crooks et al., 2020; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014).

Because newcomers may face many barriers to accessing services, it is advantageous to embed these services in existing infrastructure (Brymer et al., 2008); schools are a particularly good fit because they are accessible, and one of the first systems encountered by newcomers (Fazel et al., 2016; Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). School-based mental health intervention for newcomer youth is an emerging field and there are not many well-controlled studies to date; however, existing evidence suggests that interventions that utilize cognitive behavioral therapy principles most consistently promote positive functioning and reduce negative symptoms (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). In contrast, creative therapies are the most widely used and least consistent in leading to positive outcomes (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). While these interventions show promise in promoting individual strengths and resilience, they do not typically engage peers as part of the process.

Given the importance of peers in youth adjustment (H. Ellis et al., 2020; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009), we see peers as an untapped resource to improve the inclusion and adjustment of newcomer youth. However, beyond simply being seen as a resource for newcomer youth, peers are also an intervention target in their own right, as there is a documented need to decrease racism and othering. Current initiatives focus on increasing the social skills of newcomer youth, but alienation and isolation cannot be ameliorated through skills training alone. Adjustment and acculturation require strong relationships to be built in the new setting, and skills training can only go so far.

The purpose of this study is to promote a shift from focusing on the skills and adjustment of newcomer students alone to a peer-engaged approach that looks at the role of other students and adults in the social ecology of schools. In some ways, the argument we are making echoes the shift we are witnessing in the field of social and emotional learning, whereby we are widening our focus beyond individual competencies to a more extended notion of transformative SEL. Transformative SEL recognizes the role of the larger context, and positions SEL as a tool for social transformation (Elias, 2019). This approach explicitly aims to promote equity (Jagers et al., 2019). As such, transformative SEL encompasses concerns about appropriate professional development for the adults implementing programming. We argue that a similar shift is needed in how we promote well-being among newcomer youth.

We begin this study by highlighting some of the findings showing the importance of peers for newcomer youth. Next, we summarize the limited research on peer-involved interventions for newcomer youth. We looked at literature that included newcomer immigrant and refugee youths aged between 8 and 20 years old, and who had resided in their host country for 6 years or less. This definition of newcomer is similar to the definition provided by the Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2010) and utilized in previous studies (e.g., Horenczyk & Tatar, 1998; Teja & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). We mostly included literature in a North American context, and specified the cases in which we drew on literature beyond those borders. We then turn to other existing models of peer intervention that could be adapted for this context. Finally, we identify a number of recommendations for the next steps in embedding equity in programming and research.

2 | PEERS AS A MECHANISM FOR INCREASED RESILIENCE AMONG NEWCOMER YOUTH

Peer group acceptance is an important predictor of newcomer adjustment. For newcomer youths, peer support plays an important role in the development of a sense of belonging, social inclusion, and new relationships, as well as enhances their mental well-being and resiliency (Oxman-Martinez & Choi, 2014; Sirin et al., 2013; Teja & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). For example, Teja and Schonert-Reichl (2013) found that psychological adjustment was largely predicated on peer group integration, rather than the quality of individual friendships. Their findings indicated that the Chinese adolescent newcomers who lived in an urban Canadian city for 6 years or less reported greater peer group integration also reported lower levels of anxiety and depression compared to their peers with lower self-reported peer integration.

Similarly, Du and Field (2020) examined the association between peer friendships and anxiety or depressive symptoms in immigrant ($n = 26$) and nonimmigrant adolescents ($n = 36$) from the United Kingdom (mean age = 14 years). The authors found that the lack of friendship closeness was more strongly associated with separation and social anxiety for immigrant adolescents than for nonimmigrant adolescents. Other studies have also found that close peer friendships are important in the development of positive self-esteem, empathy, and psychological adjustment (Pontari & Glenn, 2012). These authors concluded that more efforts are needed to help to foster immigrant adolescents' friendship quality given that this seems to have a positive impact on their adjustment and well-being.

In a longitudinal study, Sirin et al. (2013) examined the role of social support in the relationship between acculturative stress and mental health problems in 135 first-generation immigrant adolescents (mean age = 16.23 years) from a large urban city in the United States. In their findings, social support played a moderating effect between acculturative stress and anxious/depressed symptoms for newcomer youth. In general, it was found that social support acted as a buffer against the development of anxious and depressive symptoms over the course of 3 years for these youth.

In sum, these studies show that strong peer relationships and peer support have the potential to promote numerous positive psychological outcomes in newcomer youth. However, more research is needed to better understand how peers and peer support can be utilized in the context of intervention programs that aim to foster newcomers' adjustment and resiliency.

3 | PEERS ALIENATION, RACISM, AND BULLYING PREDICT NEGATIVE OUTCOMES FOR NEWCOMER YOUTH

While peer acceptance and belonging can facilitate positive outcomes, alienation, discrimination and racism, and bullying lead to negative outcomes for newcomer youth. In their mixed-methods study, Guo et al. (2019) interviewed 18 Syrian refugee children (ages 10–14) and 12 parents to better understand their perspectives on school integration. Fittingly titled "I Belong to Nowhere," their research outlines the layered challenges of many school-aged newcomers as they seek to forge friendships with non-newcomer peers. In this study, participants' sense of belonging in schools was greatly diminished due to ongoing bullying and racism from both peers and teachers. The authors emphasized the significant role of schools, administrators, and teachers in the adjustment of newcomer students.

Similarly, across a large sample ($n = 1053$) of three Asian newcomer child populations in Canada, Oxman-Martinez et al. (2012) found that between 25% and 37% of recent immigrant youth (ages 10–13) who are ethnic minorities reported unfair treatment by their peers and by teachers within the preceding month. It was also found that one in five youth experienced psychological isolation, with boys reporting these symptoms to a greater degree than girls. The authors indicated that the perception of discrimination by teachers predicted a decrease in self-esteem, academic performance, and social competence in peer relationships.

Bullying is a negative experience for all youth, but one may be both experienced more frequently, and with more detrimental impacts among newcomer youth (Fandrem et al., 2009; Rutter, 1994). Refugee students often experience acts of bullying as actions committed in response to their skin color and non-Christian religious affiliation (Abada et al., 2008). Bullying can exacerbate acculturation challenges and lead to low self-esteem, stress, depression, poor academic performance, school dropout, substance abuse, and behavioral problems among refugee children (Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

Collectively, the emerging research on newcomer youth and their relationships with non-newcomer peers shows that there is the potential for peers to improve adjustment. The bulk of this study has focused on the other end of the spectrum, and the ways in which bullying and exclusion by peers exacerbate the challenges of newcomer youth.

4 | THE TENSION BETWEEN FOCUSING ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT VERSUS CHANGING THE ENVIRONMENT

In our experience, school-based approaches to promoting well-being among newcomer students often treat mental health and equity as mutually exclusive targets with minimal integration between the two areas. Often, equity and mental health are assigned to two different portfolios (i.e., overseen by different superintendents or consultants within a school district), and there may be little collaboration or understanding between the adults responsible for those portfolios. Concern with focusing on newcomer youth as the target of intervention is understandable and there is a danger that the youth themselves internalize these messages of being the ones who need to make all the changes and adapt to their new setting. Similarly, youth in the majority group can internalize the message that newcomer youth are the ones that need to improve or adjust.

We believe that promoting mental health among students and addressing larger equity issues are not mutually exclusive approaches, and indeed we *must* address both perspectives. Individual students are experiencing distress and isolation, and need support. Systems need to be challenged and changed to reduce discrimination and other structural barriers. Peers have the potential to be a powerful force for newcomers; they need to be conceptualized not merely as a resource for newcomers, but as an intervention target in their own right. The potential positive influence of peers has been operationalized mostly in the context of mentoring programs. Peers as targets of change have been approached through prejudice reduction strategies. We now turn to a description of these two approaches and summarizing the existing outcome literature.

5 | MENTORING INTERVENTION WITH NEWCOMER YOUTH

Mentoring relationships have positive benefits for youth at risk of negative psychosocial adjustment and those from marginalized backgrounds (DuBois et al., 2002, 2011). Research shows that mentoring interventions and programs also benefit immigrant and refugee youth (Oberoi, 2016; Roffman et al., 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Mentoring relationships can serve as protective factors in newcomer youths' transition to a new school and/or country. A recent literature review of mentoring projects with newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth suggests that school-based peer mentoring relationships can facilitate a range of positive outcomes, such as social integration, sense of belonging, acculturation, and academic performance (Oberoi, 2016). Peer mentoring

focuses on the relationship and connection between the mentor and mentee, and this relationship can be structured or unstructured (Karcher, 2013). Peers who are the same age or slightly older can serve as mentors. Ideally, the mentor is someone the mentee can look up to and model (Karcher, 2013). Although most of the evaluation studies have mainly focused on the mentoring relationships between newcomer university students and adults or peers (e.g., Vichers et al., 2017), several studies have also evaluated the impact of peer mentoring relationships among elementary- and secondary-aged newcomer students (Oberoi, 2016). These studies have used a variety of mentoring models.

Cross-age peer mentoring is mentoring that takes place between a child or an adolescent and an elder peer (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services [BRYCS], 2010; Karcher, 2013; Oberoi, 2016). The cross-age peer-mentoring model is one of the most researched models with immigrant and refugee youth. In some programs, youth who have been in the arrival country longer are paired with youth who are newly arrived (Karcher, 2013). The mentoring relationship may be one-on-one or in small groups, either in a school or community-based setting (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services [BRYCS], 2010; Karcher, 2013). For a cross-age peer mentoring relationship, there is much interest in the program to impact both the mentees and mentors (Karcher, 2013). Steinman (2006) created a group mentoring with cross-age and cross-culture mentors to ease the transition, belonging, and attachment to school of newly arrived immigrant children (who resided in the United States for 1 year or less) in grades 3–5. A group of nine newcomers and five middle school and high school students met in small groups for a period of eight sessions and engaged in a variety of semi-structured activities: homework, group-based games, field trips, and service projects (e.g., working in a community garden). The author noted several observable changes in children's attitudes, such as increases in self-confidence, desire for fostering new peer friendships, and decreases of traumatic memories related to migration. Similarly, Yeh et al. (2007) conducted a pre-and-post evaluation of a cross-age mentoring program with 23 Chinese immigrant students who resided in a large urban city in the United States. Results reveal that Chinese immigrant youth reported more feelings of trust and attachment toward their same culture peers after the program ended. However, students did not show changes from the pre to post on academic, career efficacy, and social connectedness measures.

Group mentoring occurs in a small group context, with one or more mentors and a group of youth (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services [BRYCS], 2010; Pryce et al., 2018, 2019). Mentors can be older adolescents, university students, and/or adults who demonstrate an interest in helping newcomer youth (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services [BRYCS], 2010; Pryce et al., 2018, 2019). Group mentoring is a strengths-based model that focuses on fostering belonging, cultural identity, language development, and general integration into a new school or community context (Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014; Pryce et al., 2018, 2019). Most group mentoring programs follow an open format, whereby youth and mentors were free to try out new activities or behaviors, and work on whichever skills youth wished to develop. Conversation club (CC) is a type of school-based group mentoring program that was developed by the Canadian Branch of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBSC) for newcomer adolescents, between the ages 12 and 18 (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Peel, 2020; Pryce et al., 2018, 2019). Mentors (ages 16–24) who lived in Canada for 5 years or more offered social support and mentoring to a group of newly arrived immigrant and refugee adolescents. The CC group had weekly meetings for 90 minutes after school for the entire academic year (from September to June) and focused on fostering social skills, academic achievement, and adjustment to the Canadian school and life among newcomer youth. To increase the benefits of the mentoring relationships, the group engaged in a variety of semi-structured activities, such as homework tutoring, workshops, sharing and communicating with group members, as well as other fun activities and fields trip where newcomers were learning about Canadian culture and history (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Peel, 2020; Pryce et al., 2018, 2019). Two quasi-experimental design studies have examined the effects of CC on youths' social and emotional adjustment. In both studies, 67 newcomer youth participated in the CC program, and 25 newcomer youth participated in the control group. Both studies revealed that youth who participated in the CC program experienced increases in sense of belonging, school connectedness, as well as gained more confidence to communicate in English and build relationships with peers both in the program and outside of the program compared to the control group (Pryce et al., 2018, 2019).

One-on-one mentoring is the classic model wherein mentoring is provided one-on-one with one peer mentor who is the same age or a few years older. School-based one-on-one mentoring can promote school integration, peer relationships, and academic performance among newcomer children and adolescents (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Messiou & Azaola, 2018; Yeh et al., 2007). In a school setting, a fellow peer mentor, especially one of the same age or in the same school, can help welcome new youth and “teach the ropes” of the school institution (Oberoi, 2016). In this one-on-one relationship, the pair can meet independently at a designated time and area within their school—during lunchtime and/or after school hours, and engage in semi-structured, academically, or socially stimulating activities (Messiou & Azaola, 2018; Yeh et al., 2007). Our review identified only one evaluated example of same-age individual mentoring. The Intercultural Tools to Support Immigrant Schoolmates (INTO) is a type of one-on-one peer mentoring program that proactively targets supporting the adjustment and belonging of newcomer students to school in the United Kingdom (Messiou & Azaola, 2018). In a single-subject experimental design, Messiou and Azaola (2018) examined the impact of this programming on mentees' and mentors' social adjustment. In this programming, 16 peers (ages 12–16) with an immigrant background were trained to become mentors, and subsequently supported newly arrived mentees (ages 12–16) one-on-one in their schools. The pairs were matched based on age and cultural/linguistic background, and mentors received formal training on how to support newcomers at school. Pairs met once a week during lunchtime for 5 months and focused on helping their newcomer peers with academics, acculturation, and bicultural issues. In some cases, the pairs also communicated in the same native language to help with fostering a sense of integration and friendship. The authors found several positive impacts on mentees and mentors, including increased sense of belonging, confidence, and more friendships.

Overall, the evidence shows that these mentoring models can produce positive changes in newcomer youths' mental well-being and social adjustment and are one potential mechanism through which peers can be mobilized to support newcomer resiliency. To date, most of the research has focused on benefits for those being mentored and has not evaluated benefits or unanticipated negative effects for mentors.

6 | TEACHER-LED PREJUDICE REDUCTION APPROACHES

Youth who attend schools where positive intergroup interactions are prioritized report overall increased feelings of connection and belongingness (Ülger et al., 2018). Moreover, additional benefits, including greater academic performance, have been associated with improved school climate (Bifulco et al., 2012). A relatively small body of literature has examined the efficacy of teacher-facilitated prejudice-reduction interventions (Ülger et al., 2018). Of these studies, a majority have been conducted by social psychologists informed by vicarious contact theory. Vicarious contact theory contends that prejudice reduction can be facilitated by observing the interactions between cross-group members in-person, or through audio-visual and written mediums (Liebkind et al., 2019; Vezzali et al., 2014).

A number of interventions have been developed to reduce discrimination and prejudice and increase students' positive attitudes toward one another (see meta-analysis by Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014) and, in recent years, a small number of studies have investigated classroom-based interventions targeted at decreasing outgroup prejudice (e.g., Liebkind et al., 2019; Mäkinen et al., 2019). Interventions consisted of activities, such as youth reading aloud narrative, first-person stories to their class, followed by intergroup collaboration, such as creating a video based on the story, or discussions in small groups where students were invited to share their experiences (Liebkind et al., 2019; Mäkinen et al., 2019). A recent meta-analysis of interventions aimed at enhancing outgroup attitudes in schools ($n = 50$) found that teacher-led interventions to improve outgroup attitudes were not associated with significant improvements in children and youths' attitudes toward outgroup members (Ülger et al., 2018). In contrast, researcher-led interventions were associated with positive outcomes, including improved attitudes toward outgroup members (Ülger et al., 2018). This discrepancy between teacher-led and researcher-led approaches raises the possibility that implicit teacher biases might have been modeled during the intervention negatively affecting the

outcomes. Of note, this meta-analysis investigated a broad range of outgroup attitudes, such as those aimed at improving attitudes toward diverse youth (e.g., ethnic, religious, or cultural minorities), children with disabilities, and people of diverse ages (Ülger et al., 2018).

A recent study from Finland conducted by Liebkind et al. (2019) delivered a short, teacher-led intervention to improve attitudes toward outgroup youth ($n = 639$) and consisted of students reading aloud 12 narrative stories about youths' change in attitude following an intergroup friendship between a majority and minority group member. Results showed that youth attitudes toward outgroup members unexpectedly declined from pre- to post-study, such that they were less positive overall. However, in one subgroup, the researchers found positive outcomes; girls who held more negative outgroup attitudes pre-intervention saw an overall improvement in attitudes post-intervention.

Similarly, in a teacher-led intervention study conducted by Turner and Brown (2008) in the United Kingdom with 87 children ages 9–11, directed at improving attitudes toward refugee youth, findings showed that while improvements were present post-study, they were not maintained at follow-up. The researchers posited that this might be due, in part, to methodological issues, for example, using a measure of social/emotional functioning that is too brief to capture more complex feelings such as empathy (Turner & Brown, 2008). Moreover, most interventions are relatively brief (i.e., a 45-min lesson once per week for 4–8 weeks), which may not provide enough frequency or intensity needed to produce long-lasting benefits. Given the current evidence, there is a clear need for further research examining school-based interventions, particularly with minority youth participants (Ülger et al., 2018).

When we consider initiatives, there is a need to address possible bias and training gaps for those who implement interventions. A major focus of transformative SEL, for example, has been on recognizing the implicit biases of educators (Jagers et al., 2019). Studies using the implicit association task (IAT) have found negative implicit attitudes toward ethnic minority youth among teachers in the United States and Germany (Chin et al., 2020; Glock & Böhmer, 2018; Glock & Klapproth, 2017). In some cases, these negative implicit attitudes are consistent with negative explicit attitudes (i.e., Chin et al., 2020); however, negative implicit attitudes have also been found among teachers who endorse positive explicit attitudes toward ethnic minority youth (Glock & Böhmer, 2018). Consequently, addressing negative biases, attitudes, and judgments toward newcomer youth need to be prioritized as part of teacher training, particularly for those implementing interventions with youth. Because adults are often unaware of and unable to strategically control such beliefs (Jagers et al., 2019), appropriate professional development requires more than a workshop on biases, and likely requires ongoing self-reflection. Implicit bias is not confined to educators and has been documented through nearly 20 years of research with mental health clinicians as well (Merino et al., 2018).

7 | KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR EMBEDDING EQUITY INTO SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH

Throughout this study, we have argued that an equity-informed approach to supporting mental health among newcomer students should extend beyond intervention strategies that focus solely on developing competencies of those students. Similar to transformative SEL, there is a need to look at the systems within which these students go to school, including the role of peers. In reviewing the literature on mentoring, prejudice-reduction strategies, GSAs and bystander intervention, and how these might inform peer-involvement in intervention to support newcomers, we have identified ten considerations for embedding equity into both school mental health practice and future research. These considerations are identified in Table 1.

7.1 | Provide group-based peer interventions

Numerous lines of research suggest that focusing on groups of peers might have benefit. The limited research on newcomer mentoring suggests that group mentoring may offer greater benefits to newcomer youth than

individualized approaches (see Kuperminc & Thomason, 2014; Pryce et al., 2018, 2019). Previous work with a structured program in GSAs found that the group-based milieu enabled youth to develop collective social capital (in addition to individual coping resources and strategies; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Groups may also help to offset the risk of isolation and inadequacy that newcomers feel upon relocating to a new country (Oberoi, 2016). The GSA model presents an intriguing opportunity to assess whether peer interventions can go beyond social skills and inclusion, and address noxious processes such as alienation, discrimination, and bullying.

7.2 | Offer interactive peer training activities

Any future approaches to including peers should include interactive training activities. In bystander programs, youth enjoyed learning about bullying awareness and the strategies of the different types to choose from when intervening in bullying situations (Johnson et al., 2018; Midgett et al., 2015, 2017). Allowing bystanders to practice their learned strategies through role-playing exercises will likely increase their confidence in utilizing those skills when needed (Midgett et al., 2015, 2017). Furthermore, facilitating practice in front of peers helps to generalize the skills to real-world settings.

7.3 | Align interventions to level of service

Bystander approaches sometimes differentiate activities and targets based on the goals. If the goal is to prevent bullying at the whole-school level and teach all students on effective bystander strategies, delivering the intervention as part of a classroom-based curriculum would be the choice (e.g., Kärnä et al., 2011); however, if the goal is to promote skill development among a qualified group of peers to support victims in bullying situations, then a shorter, bystander intervention would be appropriate (e.g., Midgett et al., 2015). Similar, mobilizing peers to better support newcomer youth might require school-wide or classroom-level approaches, coupled with leadership opportunities for a smaller group of youth.

7.4 | Select peers intentionally for leadership roles

Research points to selecting bystander peers who are socially competent, prosocial, and have strong leadership skills. Incorporating peers who are friendly and easy to get along with would also likely make the intervention go

TABLE 1 Key considerations for embedding equity into school mental health

1	Provide group-based peer interventions
2	Offer interactive peer training activities
3	Align interventions to level of service
4	Select peers intentionally for leadership roles
5	Ensure peer-involved approaches are supported by well-trained adults
6	Target systemic change
7	Evaluate outcomes for both newcomer youth and peers
8	Study the broader school-level impacts
9	Engage youth voice in future research
10	Address implementation issues in research from the outset

easier (Kärnä et al., 2013). Teachers may be well-positioned to identify peers who are influential leaders and socially competent within their classroom environments (Kärnä et al., 2011). These high-status peers might be most able to disrupt racism and bullying. In addition, bystanders of all social status can be encouraged to promote inclusion in their peer groups.

7.5 | Ensure peer-involved approaches are supported by well-trained adults

Although peers are the primary intervention agents in mentoring approaches, the practitioners (e.g., teachers, counselors, or program directors) are the ones who develop, implement and monitor the progress of the peer programs. Effective peer mentoring interventions have clearly articulated procedures and that the programming should be flexible and adaptable (Oberoi, 2016; Pryce et al., 2018). Similarly, for most of the bystander programs, practitioners (i.e., teachers or counselors) are responsible for the delivery of the interventions. Close collaboration among students, teachers, and school clinicians may be necessary for increasing engagement as well as facilitating long-term sustainability. Furthermore, the adults involved in the programming need to have a strong understanding of anti-oppressive practices and self-awareness, consistent with the trend toward transformative social and emotional learning approaches (Jagers et al., 2019). Transformative social and emotional approaches are rooted in justice-oriented citizenship and highlight the importance of adult professional development in maximizing the benefit of these approaches for diverse children and youth.

7.6 | Target systemic change

For targets of microaggressions, feeling responsible to address every macroaggression can lead to emotional burnout; however, not addressing experiences of discrimination at all may lead to negative self-evaluations, or feelings of powerlessness (Sue et al., 2019). Either approach, in their extreme, is not sustainable. Strategies, such as seeking external support or reinforcement, might be the most adaptive approach for targets, allies, and bystanders, particularly, if experiencing outright acts of hate, or where there would be a significant personal risk to intervening (Sue et al., 2019). In this scenario, reporting acts of racism to authorities (e.g., school administrator) or engaging in a formal complaint process (e.g., at the school board level) might be the optimal approach, particularly, if the micro or macroaggression is indicative of a need for greater system-level change (Sue et al., 2019). In addition, other research has highlighted the importance of clear diversity-related policies including those that foster equality and inclusion as well as those that acknowledge cultural pluralism (Schachner et al., 2016).

7.7 | Evaluate outcomes for newcomer youth and peers

To date, equity-oriented approaches (such as prejudice reduction strategies) and youth development approaches (like mentoring) have focused on reducing stigma of non-newcomer youth or increasing adjustment of newcomers, respectively. For example, most intervention studies of prejudice reduction approaches have sought to improve the majority youths' attitudes and perceptions of their newcomer peers rather than investigating newcomer youths' own experiences with classroom-based interventions (Ülger et al., 2018). There is a need for future interventions to include both. It is not enough to know that a cross-cultural mentoring program is increasing mentees' feelings of inclusion, if it is also increasing stigmatizing and othering beliefs among the mentors. The bystander literature provides an instructive example here. Although the primary goal of bystander interventions is to support the victims and ultimately make their social life easier, the peers themselves also experience benefits from participating in such programs. After participating in peer-based bystander programming for anti-bullying,

youth reported gaining knowledge more positive attitudes toward bullied victims (Midgett et al., 2015), and some of them also maintained their impact within their broader communities (Johnson et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is a need to be vigilant to unanticipated negative impacts, as has sometimes been noted in the vicarious contact interventions (e.g., Liebkind et al., 2019).

7.8 | Study the broader school-level impacts

Consistent with a social ecological approach, it might be worth evaluating impacts of peer engaged approaches to supporting newcomer youth on larger school climate or related beliefs among the entire student body. In a recent innovative study, well-functioning GSAs were found to play a protective role for all students, *particularly* in schools with poor school climate (Ioverno & Russell, 2021). Specifically, there were lower school-wide reports of homophobic bullying. The mechanisms through which these clubs can offset poor school climate are not clear, but it raises the possibility that small groups that create sites for resistance and create belonging and advocacy can offset a negative climate.

7.9 | Engage youth voice in future research

Presently, there is limited research on newcomer youths' voices and experiences in the development of intervention and prevention programs. Several scholars have suggested that including youth voice in program evaluation studies could help to improve program outcomes (Edwards et al., 2016; B. H. Ellis et al., 2010). Future research should consider including and exploring both newcomer *and* non-newcomer youths' perspectives and experiences when aiming to develop and evaluate peer-based interventions. When including newcomers in research it is important to use methods that are youth-centered and nonlanguage-based techniques (e.g., arts or photo-based) to allow them to express themselves and become more involved in the research process (Due et al., 2014).

7.10 | Address implementation issues in research from the outset

The literature reviewed highlights the importance of implementation factors in obtaining positive youth outcomes. Mentoring programs do best when mentors receive adequate training and support. Prejudice-reduction interventions in schools seem to be effective when implemented as part of a research study, but ineffective (or even harmful) when implemented by teachers. The degree of functioning of a GSA changes the impact on the whole school. All too often intervention researchers develop and test an intervention under ideal and well-funded conditions, and then expect it to have the same impact when transferred to real-world settings. Future research on interventions to involve peers and newcomers would benefit from including a focus on implementations factors from the outset.

8 | IMPLICATIONS FOR EMBEDDING EQUITY IN SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH

It is undeniable that peers play an essential role in newcomer youths' adjustment and well-being. For newcomer youths, peers (either other newcomers and/or non-newcomers) are natural and active agents of change and can be leveraged to promote newcomers' adjustment and resiliency. Without attending to peer influences, we may be adding a burden on newcomers' mental health and increasing the difficulties that come with acculturation and adaptation. Furthermore, without attending to equity considerations and greater structural factors like racism and discrimination, there is the potential for peer-involved interventions to reinforce attitudes of superiority among

students who are members of the majority group. To date, there have been few interventions that focus on the importance of peers and research has focused either exclusively on benefits for newcomers, or attitude changes among non-newcomers. There is a need to conceptualize peer-involved interventions that could benefit all youth, and to ensure our research approaches capture the full range of anticipated and unanticipated effects.

9 | PRACTITIONER POINTS

1. Mentoring approaches may have benefits for newcomer youth and promote their adjustment.
2. We need to go beyond mentoring and skills development approaches for newcomers and target peers to reduce alienation, discrimination, and bullying of newcomer students.
3. GSAs and bullying bystander approaches can be adapted to provide peer-involved intervention to support newcomer youth.

10 | OTHER PEER-BASED APPROACHES THAT COULD BE ADAPTED FOR NEWCOMERS

We turn now to other approaches that have not been specifically utilized with newcomer youth and peers, but that could inform peer-based inclusion in programming. For example, gender/sexuality alliances (GSA's) were originally formed with the purpose of bringing gay and straight students together to confront sexuality-based bullying and harassment (Collin, 2013), but today they may provide or promote: counseling and support, safety, visibility, education, and/or advocacy (Lapointe, 2015). The GSA approach to including allies to both support LGBT2Q+ students and advocate and change the environment provides an instructive parallel to what a similar undertaking with newcomer and non-newcomer peers could look like. Another potential strategy is the domain of bystander intervention, which has arisen from bullying prevention programs with school-aged children and sexual assault prevention programs with postsecondary students.

10.1 | Gender sexuality alliances (GSAs)

GSAs are school-based, extracurricular clubs for gender, sex, and romantic minorities (GSRM) youth and allies. In such groups, students can socialize, find support, create and distribute GSRM-positive materials; organize school-wide events (e.g., The Day of Silence, queer and trans-themed assemblies); and/or connect with other GSRM-based groups in the wider community (Collin, 2013; Griffin et al., 2004). With the lack of queer pedagogy and representation in educational institutions, GSAs are critical spaces affirming and celebrating sexual minorities while providing the support and space to challenge heteronormative discourses (Elliott, 2016). As such, GSAs prove to be a strong conduit for advocacy, education, and social support for GSRM students.

Similar to GSRM, newcomer students are often navigating complex structural systems and divisive socio-political climates, marked by xenophobia and discrimination (Abada et al., 2008). Whether implicit or explicit, newcomer children and youth are subject to bullying and harassment in schools, causing them a great deal of distress (Guo et al., 2019; Igoa, 2013). Newcomer children and youth can have a hard time identifying spaces where they can feel safe and fully seen (Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012). Due to similar experiences of exclusion and discrimination as GSRM, there is a pronounced need to further equip newcomer students with the same tools for advocacy and ensure space for social belonging and support (Guo et al., 2019). Furthermore, the strengths-focused and affirming stance of GSAs could be transferred to this context where newcomers' experiences could be shared and celebrated (Elliott, 2016). As some newcomers will also be members of the LGBT2Q+ community (and

experience microaggressions and oppression related to multiple aspects of their identity), these spaces might be extended to create safe and inclusive spaces for these youth. A club that creates a space for newcomer youth and allies to undertake similar functions of social support and advocacy is one possible avenue worth exploring.

10.2 | Bystander intervention approaches

Another model that could be adapted for the purpose of changing peer behavior and increasing positive peer involvement is the bystander approach used extensively in bullying prevention programming, whereby children are taught to recognize bullying and provided with age-appropriate skills to disrupt these interactions (e.g., Johnston et al., 2018; Polanin et al., 2012). The research on anti-bullying and intervention programming shows promising evidence of the implementation of peer bystanders in reducing bullying and peer victimization. It has been well-documented that much of the bullying takes place in the presence of “bystander peers” (Polanin et al., 2012; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012), who fulfill neither a bully or victim role in a particular interaction, but who observe a bullying incident and can have a significant impact on the incident (Midgett et al., 2017; Padgett & Notar, 2013; Polanin et al., 2012; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012).

In bullying situations, bystander peers can engage in several responses. They can assist or reinforce the bully, defend the targeted victim, support the targeted victim after the incident, or do nothing (Salmivalli et al., 2011). Researchers have found that when bystanders defend or intervene on behalf of victims, the bullying behavior decreases significantly (Midgett et al., 2017; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012; Salmivalli et al., 2011).

In the last two decades, numerous bystander anti-bullying prevention and intervention programs have been developed for youth at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Most of these bystander programs have either taken a school-wide preventive approach by delivering the training to all the students as part of a classroom-based curriculum (e.g., Kärnä et al., 2011, 2013), or a narrower approach in which training is provided to highly qualified peers (i.e., those who are prosocial in nature or have strong leadership qualities) who are able to intervene on behalf of the targeted peers (e.g., Midgett et al., 2015, 2017). The common goal of these programs is to raise awareness around peer bullying and equip potential bystanders with practical strategies that they can eventually use when witnessing bullying or other unjust behavior toward vulnerable peers within their social and/or school environments (Polanin et al., 2012; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012).

Given that newcomer students are at risk of experiencing a whole range of psychosocial challenges, such as peer isolation, bullying, and racism (Guo et al., 2019; Igoa, 2013), relying on bystander peers (i.e., nonimmigrant peers or acculturated immigrant peers) to intervene may be a helpful strategy in alleviating these adverse outcomes. There are currently no bystander intervention programs available for peers interested in helping and supporting newcomers in their psychosocial adjustment to school. A range of activities and learning tools have been utilized to keep bystander peers informed and engaged in bystander programming. Research suggests the content of bystander peer interventions should incorporate a didactic and an interactive component (e.g., Johnston et al., 2018; Kärnä et al., 2011, 2013; Midgett et al., 2015, 2017; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). The didactic component allows youth to learn about bullying, peer influence, healthy peer relationships, emotions (i.e., empathy), help-seeking, and strategies of practical ways to intervene as bystanders. The interactive component allows youth to engage in role-playing exercises where they can practice and apply their skills. Research has also identified some of the effective bystander-based strategies that can be taught to bystander students. Some of the effective strategies are (a) using humor to displace the attention from victims, (b) seeking help from adults, (c) befriending or supporting the victim, or (d) confronting the bully (Johnston et al., 2018; Midgett et al., 2015, 2017; Moran et al., 2019).

Research shows that both curriculum-based and short-term programming has demonstrated consistent positive impacts (Johnston et al., 2018; Kärnä et al., 2011, 2013; Midgett et al., 2015, 2017; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). Studies also show positive outcomes for both students who participated in bystander interventions and those who have been impacted by bullying. Youth who participated in bystander interventions showed increases in knowledge

of anti-bullying and bystander-based strategies (Johnston et al., 2018; Midgett et al., 2017), defended peer victims more often (Kárnä et al., 2011), and reported increases in confidence and a sense of empowerment to support peer victims (Johnston et al., 2018; Midgett et al., 2015, 2017). Findings indicate that youth who were victims of bullying report decreases in bullying and victimization (Polanin et al., 2012). Studies also show that training is more effective for older students (i.e., in grades 6–12; Johnson et al., 2018; Midgett et al., 2017). Last, bystander interventions are cost-efficient, time-saving, and easier to implement compared to school-wide, universal programming (Midgett et al., 2015; Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012).

Although these approaches have not typically addressed racism or microaggressions, they could potentially be enhanced or adapted to empower youth to intervene effectively in these situations as well. Sue and colleagues (2019) reviewed the literature for microinterventions or daily actions (e.g., explicit or implicit behaviors and words) that support the well-being of those targeted by microaggressions and seek to reduce their occurrence. Several strategies that address microaggressions and macroaggressions were recommended for allies and bystanders and fall into four overarching categories: (1) make the “invisible” visible, (2) disarm the microaggression/macroaggression, (3) educate the offender, and (4) seek external intervention (Sue et al., 2019). These microintervention strategies are applicable to bystander interventions; for example, undermining or making clear the metacommunication is one strategy that seeks to point out a biased or discriminatory remark and communicates to the individual that their action was not acceptable (Sue et al., 2019). These actions are especially impactful when used by those in positions of greater privilege, such as an ally who belongs to the majority group, as it makes clear what was offensive to the perpetrator and communicates to the target that they are not alone nor irrational for feeling targeted (Sue et al., 2019).

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ORCID

Claire V. Crooks  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8868-3181>

Nataliya Kubishyn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8785-3772>

Amira Noyes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2254-4570>

Gina Kayssi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4794-9590>

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