

# Fighting homophobia and transphobia in schools

## A GROUNDBREAKING IMPACT ASSESSMENT

June 2023

<http://oe.cd/lgbti-rct2023>

Anti-LGBTI+ harassment in schools is a worldwide problem (UNESCO, 2016<sup>[1]</sup>). In 2019, 60% of LGBTI+ people surveyed in the EU said they had hidden their LGBTI+ identity in schools and 4 out of 10 said they had been assaulted, threatened or harassed at school as a result of this identity (FRA, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). Several OECD countries support civil society organisations working directly with students to raise awareness about LGBTI+ inclusion in classroom sessions lasting a few hours (IGLYO, 2018<sup>[3]</sup>). However, a rigorous impact assessment has never been conducted on any of these interventions so it is not known if they contribute to reducing anti-LGBTI+ harassment – and therefore whether they should be scaled up, given that they are currently only available in a handful of volunteer secondary schools. This policy brief presents the results of a groundbreaking randomised controlled trial (RCT) conducted in the Paris region of France from 2018 to 2022 with over 10 000 students aged 13-18 to measure the impact of sessions by SOS homophobie, the main French association in the fight against anti-LGBTI+ discrimination and violence.

### Key findings

- I. When there is no intervention, students' receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion is limited.
  - Girls are more receptive, as are students from "privileged" schools, i.e. where the average social background is higher than the national average. However, the age of students has no bearing on receptiveness.
  - There is less acceptance of transgender people than LGB people.
  - LGBTI+ people who were assigned male at birth (homosexual or bisexual men and transgender women) are more negatively perceived than other groups.
- II. SOS homophobie's intervention is transformative, with a positive impact on students' receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion that continues for at least three months after the session.
  - In lower secondary schools (*collèges*), the sessions increase the proportion of students who are aware of the full range of consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment by 20%.
  - In upper secondary schools (*lycées*), the sessions meet all their objectives, with improved awareness of the consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment, improved understanding of what it means to be LGBTI+, and better attitudes towards LGBTI+ people.
    - This improvement is significant: the proportion of students who are receptive to LGBTI+ inclusion increases by more than 10% on average (from 44% to 49%).
    - This is especially true for girls and boys from privileged schools.
  - Beyond the impact on receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion, the sessions remove a taboo and increase by almost 60% the share of pupils who talk about LGBTI+ issues with school staff (from 14% to 22%). This concerns all students without exception.
- III. Because they allow everyone to address a subject that is rarely discussed in the school setting, the sessions show students the prevailing norm in their class.
  - This insight strengthens or weakens the positive impact of SOS homophobie's intervention, depending on whether the class's receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion appears strong or weak to the students.
  - Negative group dynamics are less likely in schools that SOS homophobie has visited at least once in the last 5 years, which suggests the importance of repeated exposure of pupils to preventive activities.

## A groundbreaking randomised controlled trial

For almost 20 years, SOS homophobie has been going into secondary schools in mainland France that request its services and speaking to students aged 12-18. Over the past five years, an average of 30 000 pupils have been involved in its preventive activities, which are carried out within the framework of an agreement with the French Ministry of Education for "educational associations that complement public education".

By going into schools, the association aims to combat verbal and physical aggression aimed at students on account of their real or assumed sexual orientation or gender identity (see Box 1). Each session lasts two hours and is facilitated by volunteers who work in pairs after having been trained and certified by the association. The format of the session is designed to create a safe space in which students can express themselves freely. The volunteers sit in a circle with the students and all together they define the rules of the discussion, in a process of co-construction that establishes some simple rules (being kind, taking turns to speak, and the need for confidentiality) which allow everyone to express themselves without any fear of being judged. The students can also note any questions and/or reactions anonymously on pieces of notepaper provided by the volunteers, who read and answer some of them at the end of the session. Students often take the opportunity to ask the volunteers about their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity. As a result, many sessions end with at least one of the volunteers coming out to the students. This is an important moment that allows the students to confront their prejudices and the volunteers to give a moving account of the difficulties they faced in accepting themselves and being accepted by their friends and family.

### Box 1. The aims of SOS homophobie's sessions

SOS homophobie's sessions are based on a universalistic approach, grounded in respect for human rights. The aim is to engage students against anti-LGBTI+ harassment, i.e. to strengthen their *willingness* to help victims and to develop their *capacity* to provide the right kind of help, in particular by making them aware of risks related to outing<sup>1</sup> victims of harassment and thereby putting them at even greater risk.

To prompt this engagement, the sessions use two main methods:

- I. *Create a better understanding of what it means to be LGBTI+*, which involves presenting the different groups designated by this acronym, understanding the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity and challenging a number of common misconceptions:
  - *Being LGBTI+ is not a choice*: sexual orientation and gender identity are not chosen by individuals but are imposed on them. Attempting to "convert" LGBTI+ people to heterosexuality and/or cisgender identity is not only doomed to failure but also a serious violation of their human rights.
  - *Being LGBTI+ is not an illness*: it is not a perverse condition likely to corrupt the moral integrity of people who associate with LGBTI+ people nor is it a psychological disorder.
  - *The LGBTI+ population is diverse*: like non-LGBTI+ people each LGBTI+ person is unique. The typical stereotypes, about the appearance of LGBTI+ people for example, are therefore unfounded.
- II. *Raise greater awareness of the consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment*, by presenting real life cases of bullying that students can easily identify with and therefore empathise with. This process is reinforced by the structure of the session, which opens with a discussion on discrimination during which students realise that anti-LGBTI+ discrimination is no different from discrimination against other groups, in that it is based on prejudices and stereotypes (in this

case sexist) that have no other purpose than to demean the group being targeted, just like prejudices and stereotypes based on appearance (racism, fatphobia, etc). This step helps to create a sense of empathy with LGBTI+ people, especially among (the many) students who have experienced the same alienation as victims of anti-LGBTI+ harassment.

SOS homophobie's sessions also provide an opportunity to inform victims of anti-LGBTI+ harassment of the support that the association can offer them. At the end of the session, the volunteers distribute the information booklet "C'est comme ça" (<https://cestcommeca.net/>) which includes the helpline number and the e-mail address of the association's online chat service.

1. Outing is the act of disclosing an LGBT person's sexual orientation or gender identity without that person's consent.

In autumn 2018, the OECD and SOS homophobie, with the support of the French Ministry of Education and the Inter-ministerial Delegation for the Fight against Racism, Anti-Semitism and Anti-LGBT Hatred (DILCRAH), launched the first large-scale randomised controlled trial to assess the impact of school-based interventions aimed at fighting homophobia and transphobia. The trial took place between 2018 and 2022<sup>1</sup> in lower and upper secondary schools (*collèges* and *lycées*) in the Ile-de-France region<sup>2</sup>.

There were two stages to the trial protocol:

- I. Schools that contact SOS homophobie and ask the association to organise sessions with some of their classes were approached and asked to participate in the trial, which involved freeing up a 30-minute slot for pupils attending an SOS homophobie session so they could answer a short, anonymous questionnaire, administered in class by the OECD, on their perception of LGBTI+ people.
- II. Schools agreeing to participate in the trial were divided into two groups in a random draw:
  - o In the "control" group, the OECD questionnaire was distributed a few weeks *before* SOS homophobie's session.
  - o In the "treatment" group, the OECD questionnaire was distributed *after* the session, with two time frames tested: one month and three months after the session<sup>3</sup>.

A high proportion of the schools that contact SOS homophobie agreed to participate in the trial (69%). **A total of 10 356 students in 510 classes from 75 academic institutions<sup>4</sup> completed the OECD questionnaire<sup>5</sup>:** 5 794 before SOS homophobie's session (control group) and 4 562 after the session (treatment group). Only 18 of the 75 schools were upper secondary schools. This under-representation is due to two factors: (i) fewer than a third (31%) of the schools that contact SOS homophobie are upper secondary schools; (ii) the trial participation rate was lower among upper secondary schools (55%) than among lower secondary schools (76%)<sup>6</sup> as the preparation of the Baccalauréat exams in the two most senior classes limited the time that the upper secondary schools could devote to activities that were not strictly academic.

The purpose of the random draw used to distribute schools between the control group and the treatment group was to ensure that the characteristics of the students in each of these groups were similar before SOS homophobie's session, including their perception of LGBTI+ people. Once this has been established, any differences in the responses to the OECD questionnaire between these two groups can be attributed to the impact of SOS homophobie's involvement<sup>7</sup>. Table A1 in the Annex confirms that the random draw standardised the profile of the students, classes and schools in the control group and in the treatment group<sup>8</sup>.

## Limited receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion without an intervention

The OECD questionnaire<sup>9</sup> (Box 2) measures each objective of SOS homophobie's school-based activities. In particular, 17 of its 23 questions address the three main objectives of the session (see Box 1 for a reminder of these objectives)<sup>10</sup>.

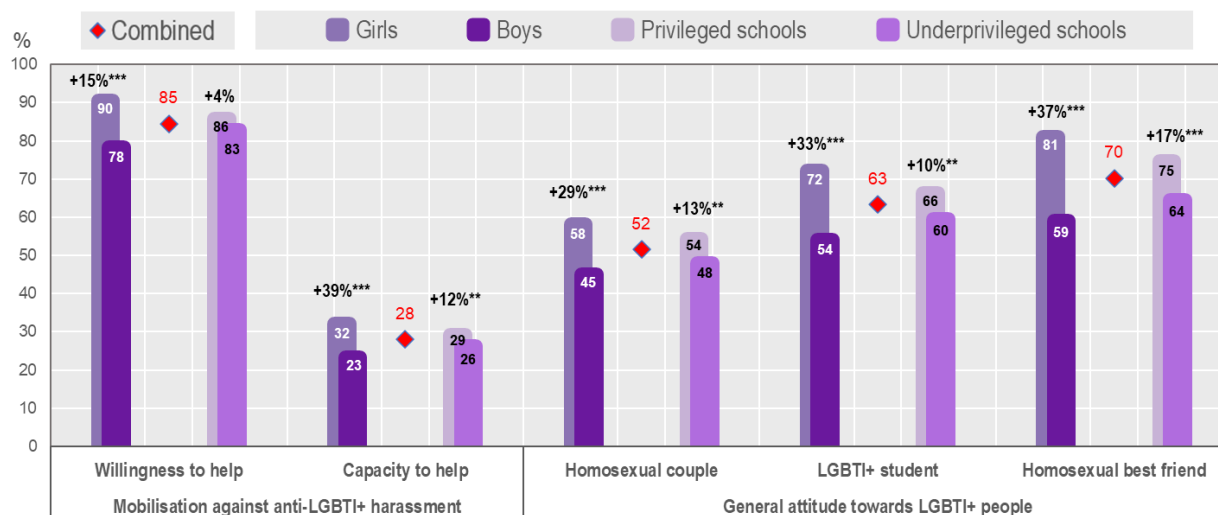
### Box 2. The OECD questionnaire

The 17 questions on receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion were divided into three categories.

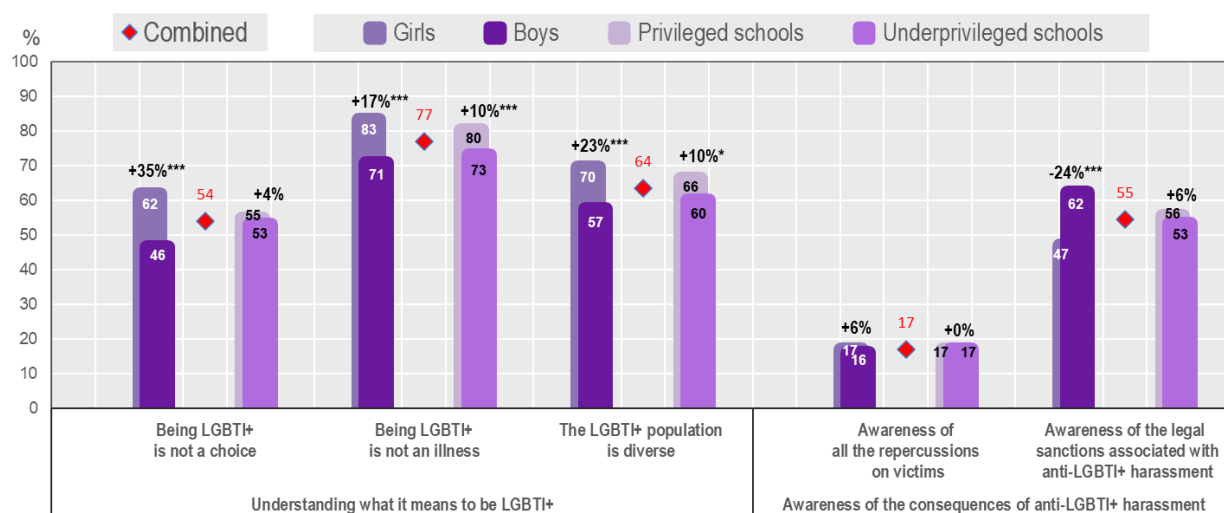
- I. Attitudes towards LGBTI+ people, whether they are victims of harassment or not:
  - Engagement against anti-LGBTI+ harassment covers two aspects:
    - *Willingness to help*, measured as of Q. 17 by the proportion of students who consider that the LGBTI+ student being bullied should be defended;
    - *Capacity to help*, measured as of Q. 18 by the proportion of students who believe that the best way to help an anti-LGBTI+ student who is being bullied is to talk to them, the bullies and/or school staff, rather than to talk to family and/or friends.
  - The general attitude towards LGBTI+ people is assessed in three questions:
    - *Attitude towards anonymous LGBTI+ couples displaying affection for each other in the street*, measured as of Q. 13 by the proportion of students who are as comfortable with a same-sex couple kissing as with a heterosexual couple doing the same thing;
    - *Attitude towards an LGBTI+ student*, measured as of Q. 14 by the proportion of students who are just as comfortable sitting next to an LGBTI+ student as a non-LGBTI+ student in the canteen;
    - *Attitude towards the best friend who reveals that he/she is gay*, measured as of Q. 15 and Q. 16 by the proportion of students who continue to be their best friend.
- II. Understanding what it means to be LGBTI+ as measured by "agree/disagree" questions:
  - *Being LGBTI+ is not a choice*, measured as of Q. 3 (being heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual is not a choice) and Q. 9 (being transgender is not a choice).
  - *Being LGBTI+ is not an illness*:
    - Homosexuality and bisexuality are not perverse conditions, measured as of Q. 4 (homosexuality is not contagious), Q. 6 (homosexual people are not less faithful than heterosexual people) and Q. 7 (bisexual people are not less faithful than heterosexual people);
    - Trans-identity is not a psychological disorder, measured as of Q. 10 (gender recognition of trans men) and Q. 11 (gender recognition of trans women).
  - *The LGBTI+ population is diverse*, measured as of Q. 5a (a lesbian woman is not identified by her appearance), Q. 5b (a gay man is not identified by his appearance) and Q. 8 (a bisexual person is not a closet homosexual).
- III. Awareness of the consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment, measured as of Q. 19 by the proportion of students who are aware of all the negative repercussions of such harassment. In addition, Q. 21 measures awareness of the legal sanctions associated with anti-LGBTI+ harassment (these sanctions are explained in detail during the session).

**Figure 1. Without SOS homophobia's involvement, student receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion is limited, and higher among girls and students from privileged schools**

Part A: Share of students with positive attitudes towards LGBTI+ people



Part B: Share of students who understand what it means to be LGBTI+ and the consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment



Note: In the key, "privileged schools" (resp. "underprivileged schools") refers to institutions where the average social background of the pupils is higher (resp. lower) than the national average (which happens to coincide with the average social background in the schools participating in the trial). The interpretation of the Figure is the same for each category of variables (see Box 2 for a definition). For example, for the category "Homosexual couple", 52% of the students are as comfortable with a homosexual couple as with a heterosexual one. This proportion is 29% higher for girls (58%) than for boys (45%), and 13% higher for students from privileged (54%) rather than underprivileged (48%) schools. \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* mean that the difference is statistically different from zero at the 99%, 95%, and 90% confidence levels respectively. No star means that the difference is not statistically different from zero.

Source: Data from the OECD-SOS homophobia randomised controlled trial.

**When there is no involvement by SOS homophobia, students' receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion is limited, i.e. in the control group (Figure 1).** This is particularly evident in questions where the answer that reflects kindness towards LGBTI+ people is not easily identified by students (e.g. because it involves

selecting several answer options and excluding others). For example, only 28% of students were able to provide informed assistance to an LGBTI+ student who was being bullied, while only 17% of students were aware of the full consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment. Moreover, a small majority (63%) were just as comfortable around an LGBTI+ rather than a non-LGBTI+ student in the canteen, noting that this proportion dropped to 52% when comparing how comfortable students were with a gay rather than a straight couple kissing. In comparison, receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion is higher when measured using "yes/no" or "agree/disagree" questions, which are better suited to the expression of "social-desirability bias", i.e. the tendency of individuals to want to present themselves in a favourable light. However, even for these questions, students' receptiveness can be low. For example, only 54% of students consider that being LGBTI+ is not a choice. Another sign of limited receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion in the absence of intervention is that only a minority of students (43% in both lower and upper secondary schools) stated that an LGBTI+ student would not be alienated in their class (a point we explore further in Figure 4).

### Figure 2. Without intervention, transgender individuals are less accepted than homosexual or bisexual individuals

Difference between the share of students receptive to the inclusion of homosexual or bisexual individuals and the share of students receptive to the inclusion of transgender individuals



Note: The interpretation of the Figure is the same for each category of variables (see Box 2 for a definition). In the "LGBTI+ student" category, 59% of students are just as comfortable with a student sitting next to them in the canteen when that student is transgender rather than cisgender. On the other hand, 68% of students (15% more) are just as comfortable with a student sitting next to them in the canteen when that student is homosexual or bisexual rather than heterosexual. In the category "Being LGBTI+ is not a choice", 50% of students consider that being transgender is not a choice, compared to 60% (20% more) who consider that being gay or bisexual is not a choice. In the category "Being LGBTI+ is not an illness", the average proportion of students who consider that the gender identity of a trans man and/or that the gender identity of a trans woman should be recognised is 68%. On the other hand, an average of 88% of students (29% more) consider that homosexuality is not contagious, that homosexual people are not less faithful than heterosexual people and/or that bisexual people are not less faithful than heterosexual people. \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* mean that the difference is statistically different from zero at the 99%, 95%, and 90% confidence levels respectively. No star means that the difference is not statistically different from zero.

Source: Data from the OECD-SOS homophobic randomised controlled trial.

In line with the findings of earlier work (Valfort, 2017<sup>[4]</sup>; OECD, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>), **receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion is higher among girls than boys, as well as among pupils from schools where the average social background of students is higher rather than lower than the national average**<sup>11</sup> (Figure 1). The proportion of students who believe that the law severely punishes anti-LGBTI+ violence (which is less a measure of receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion than of knowledge of the legal framework) is the only variable where gender correlation is reversed, as the proportion is higher among boys (62%) than among

girls (47%). This may reflect a higher exposure of boys to reminders about the law, due to their lower receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion. On the other hand, receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion is not related to the age of students: there are no differences between lower secondary and upper secondary students.<sup>12</sup>

A deeper dive into the data confirms two other recurring findings in the literature on LGBTI+ inclusion and its decisive factors (OECD, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>; OECD, 2023<sup>[7]</sup>)<sup>13</sup>. Firstly, **transgender people are less accepted than homosexual or bisexual people** (Figure 2), a pattern observed among girls and boys<sup>14</sup>. Secondly, **LGBTI+ people who were assigned male at birth (homosexual or bisexual men and transgender women) are more negatively perceived than other groups** (see Figure A1 in the Annex)<sup>15</sup>.

## SOS homophobie's involvement has a positive impact

**SOS homophobie's involvement improves receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion in both lower and upper secondary schools.** In lower secondary schools, it increases the proportion of students who are aware of the full consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment by 20% (this share rises from 15% to 18%, as shown in the first section of the "Lower secondary school" category in Figure 3), an effect that concerns boys (the impact is not statistically different from zero among girls, noting that it does not depend on the social background of the students either)<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, although it is not a measure of receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion in the strict sense, the proportion of lower secondary school students who consider that the law is tough on anti-LGBTI+ violence is also positively affected by the session (it increases by 13% at the 99% confidence level, from 55% to 62%).

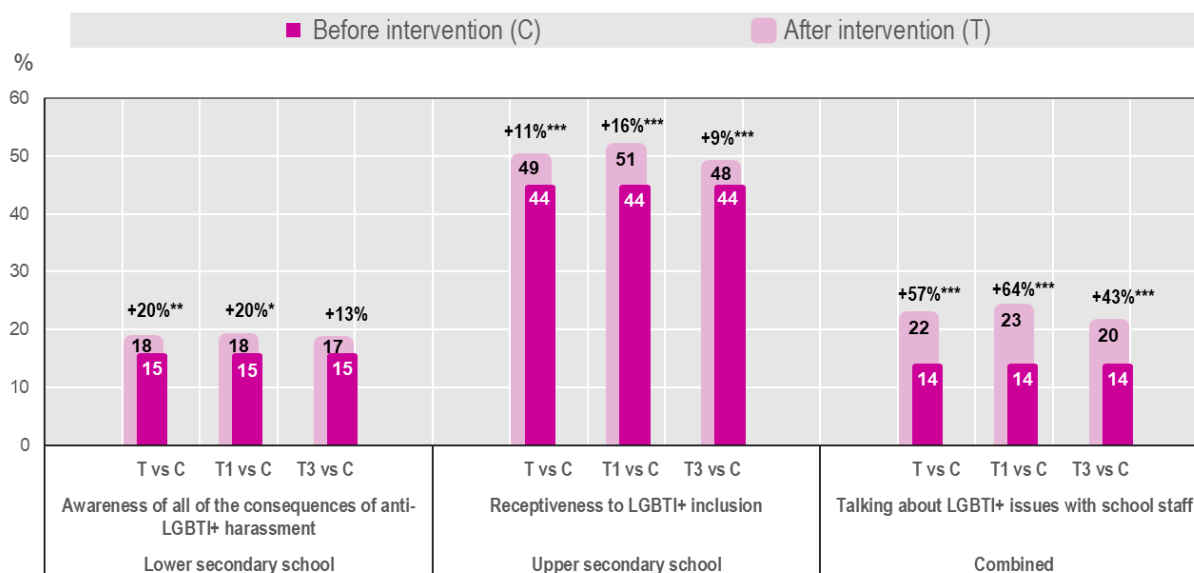
**In upper secondary schools, the positive impact of the session is more systematic as it achieves each of its three objectives** (Box 2). More specifically, the session improves the following four aspects: (i) in the "attitude" category, the share of students who are able to provide informed assistance to a bullied LGBTI+ student, and the share of students who are just as comfortable sitting next to an LGBTI+ student as a non-LGBTI+ student in the canteen; (ii) in the "understanding" category, the share of students who understand that being LGBTI+ is not a choice; (iii) in the "awareness" category, the share of students who are aware of the full consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment (see Figure A2 in the Annex). When averaged across all of these effects, it appears that the session increases the proportion of students who are receptive to LGBTI+ inclusion by more than 10% (from 44% to 49%, as shown in the first section of the "Upper secondary school" category of Figure 3). **This positive impact is equally as high for boys as for girls. However, it is more marked among students from schools where the average social background of students is higher than the national average, as well as among students enrolled in general academic pathways rather than vocational or technological courses**<sup>17</sup>.

**Over and above the impact on receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion, the session helps to remove a taboo:** it increases the proportion of pupils who talk about LGBTI+ with school staff by almost 60%, up to 22%, whereas this share is low without any intervention (14%) (see the first section in the "Combined" category in Figure 3). In other words, it encourages continued reflection on LGBTI+ inclusion in the school setting. This effect applies regardless of the gender and social background of the students<sup>18</sup>.

**Finally, SOS homophobie's involvement has a lasting impact.** More specifically, the increase in the share of LGBTI+ friendly students following SOS homophobie's session is statistically different from zero not only one month after the session (see the "T1 vs C" section in Figure 3), but also three months after the session (see the "T3 vs C" sections) – with the exception of the category "Awareness of all of the consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment" where the difference is only statistically different from zero at the 85% confidence level. The extent of this effect, however, decreases further with every month that passes after the session.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 3. The positive impact of SOS homophobia's involvement applies to both lower and upper secondary schools, and continues three months after the session**

Difference in the share of students who are kind to LGBTI+ people, based on whether they were exposed (treatment group) or not (control group) to SOS homophobia's involvement



Note: "Awareness of all of the consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment" in lower secondary school represents the share of lower secondary school students who are aware of the repercussions on victims. "Receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion" in upper secondary school represents the average of the four aspects of receptiveness that are positively impacted by SOS homophobia's intervention in upper secondary school: (i) the share of students who are able to provide informed assistance to an LGBTI+ student who is being bullied (ii) the share of students who are just as comfortable sitting next to an LGBTI+ student as a non-LGBTI+ student in the canteen; (iii) the share of students who understand that being LGBTI+ is not a choice (iv) the share of students who are aware of the overall negative consequences of anti-LGBTI+ harassment (see Figure A2 in the Annex for an analysis of each of these four aspects). Finally, "Talking about LGBTI+ issues with school staff" for all schools represents the share of combined secondary school students who have ever talked about the topic of homosexuality, bisexuality or being transgender with a member of staff in their school. The interpretation of the Figure is the same for each category of variables. For example, for the last category, the share of students who have already talked about LGBTI+ issues with school staff is 14% before SOS homophobia's involvement but 22% after the session (23% in classes where the OECD questionnaire was administered one month after the session, and 20% in classes where the questionnaire was administered three months after the intervention). \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* mean that the difference between the proportion in the treatment group and the proportion in the control group is statistically different from zero at the 99%, 95%, and 90% confidence levels respectively. No star means that the difference is not statistically different from zero.

Source: Data from the OECD-SOS homophobia randomised controlled trial.

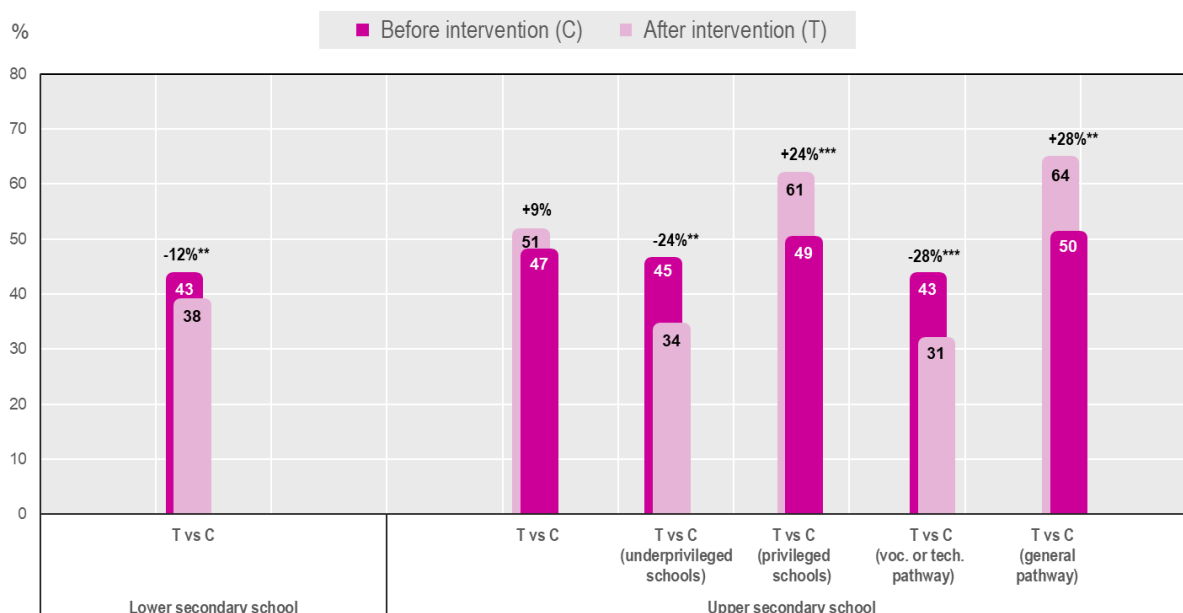
## The importance of group dynamics

Because it allows everyone to talk openly about an issue that is rarely discussed in schools (beyond the routine use of homophobic and transphobic slurs), SOS homophobia's session is likely to reveal to students the prevailing norm in their class, at least based on what their classmates say during the session. This information can strongly influence their receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion in a situation where individuals, especially young people, are subject to conformity bias. In other words, the discovery of the class norm may strengthen or weaken the positive impact of SOS homophobia's intervention, depending on whether the class's receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion is perceived by students to be high or low.



### Figure 4. SOS homophobia's session reveals a more negative class norm than expected to lower secondary school students and to upper secondary school students from modest social backgrounds

Difference in the share of pupils who consider their class to be LGBTI+ friendly based on whether they were exposed (treatment group) to SOS homophobia's intervention or not (control group)



Note: In the titles of the horizontal axis, “underprivileged schools” (resp. “privileged schools”) refers to schools where the average social background of the students is lower (resp. higher) than the national average (which coincides with the average social background in the schools participating in the trial). The interpretation of the Figure is the same for each section therein. For example, in the vocational or technological pathway, the proportion of students who consider their class to be LGBTI+ friendly is 43% before SOS homophobia's intervention, but 31% after the session. On the other hand, this share in the general education pathway is 50% before the intervention, but 64% after the session. \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* mean that the difference between the proportion in the treatment group and the proportion in the control group is statistically different from zero at the 99%, 95%, and 90% confidence levels respectively. No star means that the difference is not statistically different from zero.

Source: Data from the OECD-SOS homophobia randomised controlled trial.

The results are consistent with the assumptions. **In situations where the positive impact of SOS homophobia's involvement is high (privileged upper secondary schools and the general education pathway in upper secondary schools), SOS homophobia's session revealed a more positive class norm to students than they had expected, while the opposite is true in situations where the positive impact of SOS homophobia's involvement is more limited – lower secondary schools, regardless of the social background of their students, and, among upper secondary schools, underprivileged institutions and the vocational and technological pathway.** In lower secondary schools, the share of students who consider their class to be LGBTI+ friendly, i.e. who do not think that a gay, bisexual, or transgender person “could be alienated in [their] class” drops from 43% before the intervention to 38% after the intervention, a fall of 12% (Figure 4). This decrease was even greater in underprivileged upper secondary schools (-24%), noting that similar results were obtained if the focus is narrowed to upper secondary students enrolled in vocational or technological courses, who are characterised by a more modest social background compared to students enrolled in general courses<sup>20</sup>: within this group, the perception of the class norm deteriorated by 28% after the session. This reduction was independent of individual student gender and the gender composition of the class<sup>21</sup>. These results are diametrically opposed to those observed for privileged upper secondary schools and upper secondary students enrolled

in general education: the proportion of students who consider their class to be friendly *increases* from 49% to 61% in the first group (+24%), and from 50% to 64% in the second group (+28%).

In upper secondary school, the fact that the impact of the session on the perception of the class norm improves in line with the social background of the students is consistent with the findings of Figure 1. Indeed, there is an expectation that positive group dynamics are more likely to emerge in classes where the initial receptiveness of students to LGBTI+ inclusion, which is positively correlated with social background, is higher<sup>22</sup>. In lower secondary schools, the deterioration in the perception of the class norm following SOS homophobie's intervention, irrespective of the social background of the students, may reflect the fact that the secondary school years correspond to an age when there is a high propensity to oppose mainstream narratives, particularly when these narratives are communicated by adults. In other words, it is possible that some of the students who spoke during the session made hostile comments about LGBTI+ people out of sheer provocation, and therefore even when these students were not inherently malicious towards LGBTI+ people.

It is important to note that the negative group dynamics that emerge in lower secondary schools and among students in upper secondary education from more modest social backgrounds are less pronounced in schools visited by SOS homophobie at least once in the last five years<sup>23</sup>. This outcome suggests the importance of repeated exposure of students to preventive activities in order to maximise their impact.

## Conclusions

**It is possible to sustainably improve students' receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion during two hours of structured but totally open discussion.** This is the finding of the groundbreaking OECD-SOS homophobie randomised controlled trial, which refutes two common misconceptions: (i) no, these sessions are not too short to have any impact; and (ii) no, they are not counterproductive just because homophobic and transphobic opinions can be voiced. While it is true that negative group dynamics can emerge, they are neither systematic nor powerful enough to overshadow the positive effect of SOS homophobie's intervention.

**These results highlight the importance of awareness raising activities among lower and upper secondary school students to prevent anti-LGBTI+ harassment.** Associations like SOS homophobie are not large enough to be able to extend their initiative to all students and pupils. But they could play a major role in training teaching staff who could then be tasked with these activities. Given that homophobia and transphobia stem from sexist norms, the associations could play a role in the mandatory gender equality training for teaching staff in France (Republic of France, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>). However, these "trainer training" initiatives, which some associations have already launched, should not completely replace visits to schools, as putting students in direct contact with LGBTI+ people is a unique experience that cannot be totally replaced by awareness raising by teachers. In order to guarantee the benefits of this approach, students could have at least one session with volunteers from LGBTI+ organisations during their schooling, with priority given to schools where harassment is particularly pervasive.

**These suggestions for improving the prevention of LGBTI+phobia in schools require a better appreciation of needs and increased co-ordination with LGBTI+ associations.** Regular monitoring of both trained teaching staff and the school climate in the different secondary institutions, as well as increased support for associations to help them professionalise their actions, seem essential.

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## Annex

**Table A1. The students, classes and schools in the control group and in the treatment group have similar characteristics**

Comparison of characteristics in the control group and the treatment group

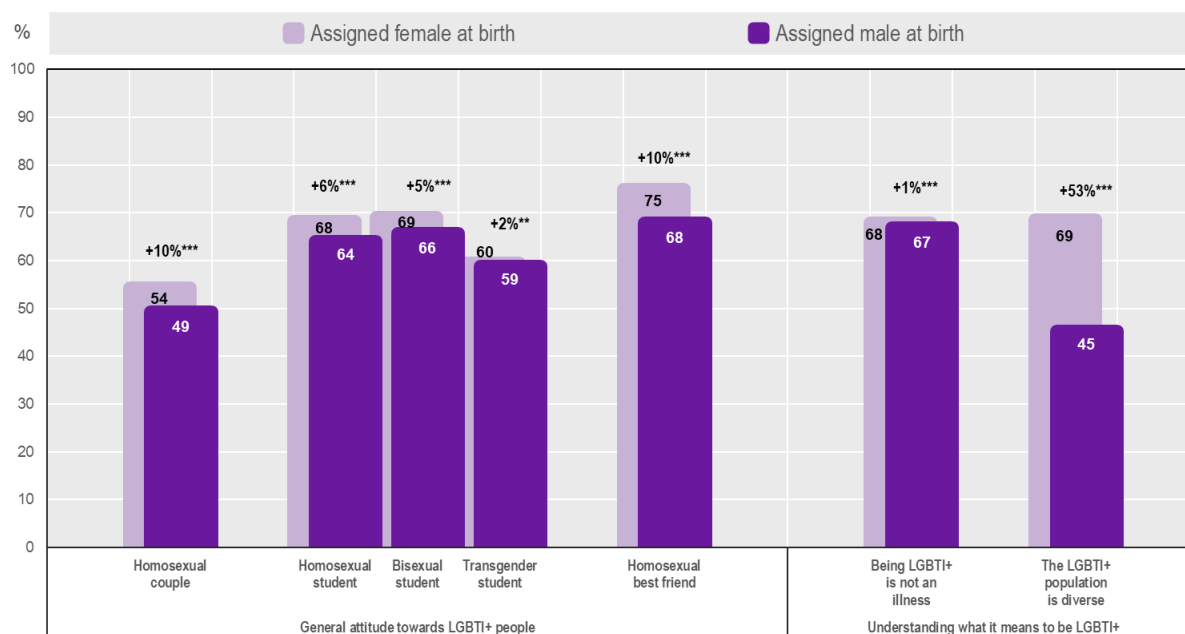
	Control group (C)	Treatment group (T)	Is the difference between C and T statistically significant?
<b>Variable characteristics for students: N=10 356 (N=5 794 in C and N=4 562 in T)</b>			
% of girls among students	49.9%	49.3%	No
Average age of students	14.9	14.7	No
<b>Variable characteristics for classes: N=510 (N=275 in C and N=235 in T)</b>			
% of girls in the class	47.1%	46.9%	No
% of classes that belong to the general education pathway rather than the vocational or technological pathway (upper secondary schools only - <i>lycées</i> )	55.8% (N= 95 upper secondary school classes)	47.1% (N= 51 upper secondary school classes)	No
<b>Variable characteristics for schools: N=75 (N=41 in C and N=34 in T)</b>			
% of upper secondary schools	29.3%	17.6%	No
Average social background of students in the institution	2.1	2.0	No
% of students of French nationality in the school	83.2%	81.8%	No
% of institutions located over 500 metres from a " <i>Quartier de la Politique de la Ville</i> "	46.3%	32.4%	No
% of institutions that are not in a " <i>réseau d'éducation prioritaire (REP)</i> " network or a " <i>réseau d'éducation prioritaire renforcé (REP+)</i> " network (lower secondary schools only - <i>collèges</i> )	48.3% (N= 29 <i>collèges</i> )	50% (N= 28 <i>collèges</i> )	No
Average number of years in the last five years during which SOS homophobie has visited the institution	1.3	0.7	Yes (at the 90% confidence level)
% of institutions that took part in the trial after the COVID-19 pandemic (2021-2022) rather than before the pandemic (2018-2019 and 2019-2020)	35.6%	47.1%	No
% of institutions that are part of the <i>Académie de Paris</i> rather than the <i>Académie de Créteil</i> and the <i>Académie de Versailles</i>	19.5%	14.7%	No

Note: In the first column of the Table, "*Quartier de la Politique de la Ville*" refers to an urban area that is particularly disadvantaged and therefore receives greater support from the authorities (there are about 1 500 of them in France representing 5.5 million inhabitants). "*Réseau d'éducation prioritaire (REP)*" and "*Réseau d'éducation prioritaire renforcé (REP+)*" refer to the priority education policy (*politique d'éducation prioritaire*), the aim of which is to reduce gaps in academic achievement linked to the social background of students. REP+ covers areas with the greatest social difficulties, while REP covers areas that are socially more mixed but nevertheless have more significant social issues than areas outside the priority education system. Finally, the social background of students is measured using the classification of professions and socioprofessional categories (PCS) of the students' legal representatives, based on the following classification: social background=1 if PCS is underprivileged; social background=2 if PCS is average (this corresponds to the average social origin in schools in mainland France); social background=3 if PCS is privileged; social background=4 if PCS is very privileged. In the last column of the Table, the correlation between the student/class/school characteristic mentioned in the first column and the probability that the student/class/school is assigned to the treatment group rather than the control group is studied. "No" means that the difference between the mean value of the characteristic in the control group (C) and the mean value of the characteristic in the treatment group (T) is not statistically different from zero. "Yes" (at the 90% confidence level) means that there is a 90% chance of being right when considering that this difference between C and T is statistically different from zero.

Source: Data from the OECD-SOS homophobie randomised controlled trial for all characteristics, except for the average social background of pupils in the school and the proportion of pupils of French nationality in the school, which are taken from the *Base centrale Scolarité* produced by the *Direction de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance* (Evaluation, Performance and Long-Term Planning Department or DEPP).

### Figure A1. In the absence of intervention, there is a more negative perception of LGBTI+ people who were assigned male at birth than other groups

Variation in the share of students who are receptive to the inclusion of LGBTI+ people, depending on whether the said LGBTI+ people were assigned female at birth (homosexual or bisexual women and transgender men) or male at birth (homosexual or bisexual men and transgender women)

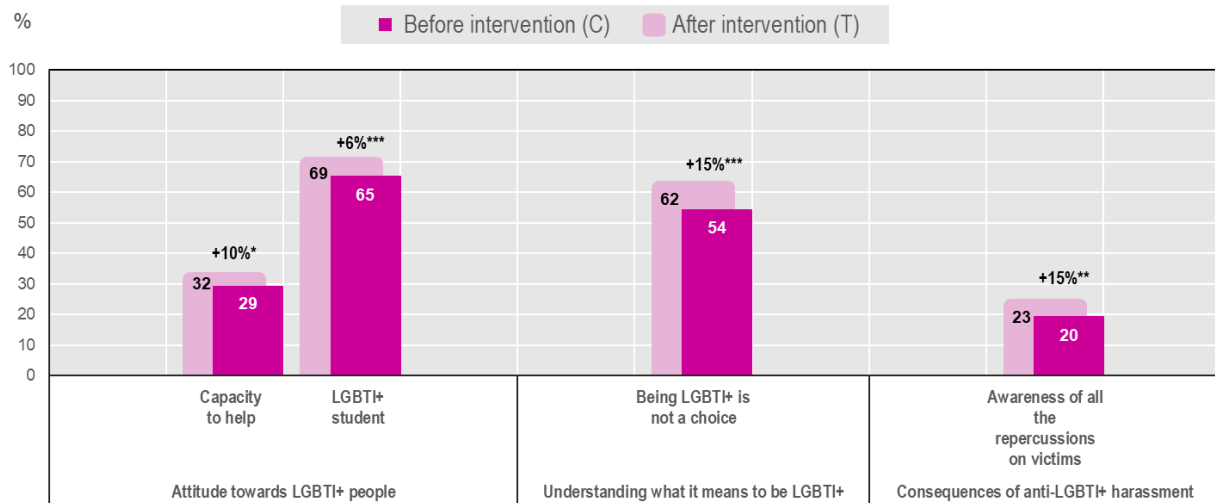


Note: The interpretation of the Figure is the same for each category of variables (see Box 2 for a definition). For example, in the category "Homosexual best friend", the share of students who consider that they would stay best friends with a best male friend who comes out as homosexual is 68%. In comparison, 75% of students (10% more) consider that they would stay best friends with a best female friend who comes out as homosexual. \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* mean that the difference between these two proportions is statistically different from zero at the 99%, 95%, and 90% confidence levels respectively. No star means that the difference is not statistically different from zero.

Source: Data from the OECD-SOS homophobic randomised controlled trial.

## Figure A2. Focus on the positive impact of SOS homophobie's involvement in upper secondary schools

Difference in the proportion of upper secondary school students receptive to LGBTI+ inclusion, depending on whether they attended a session by SOS homophobie (treatment group) or not (control group)



Note: This Figure shows the four aspects that are positively affected by SOS homophobie's session in upper secondary school. The interpretation of the Figure is the same for each aspect. For example, regarding the category "Being LGBTI+ is not a choice", the average share of students who do not consider that being homosexual, bisexual or transgender is a choice is 54% before SOS homophobie's session, but 62% after the session (i.e. 15% more). \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* means that the difference between the proportion in the treatment group and the proportion in the control group is statistically different from zero at the 99%, 95%, and 90% confidence levels respectively. No star means that the difference is not statistically different from zero.

Source: Data from the OECD-SOS homophobie randomised controlled trial.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The trial took place over the following three academic years: 2018-2019, 2019-2020, and 2021-2022. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the trial was suspended from spring 2020 to summer 2021 inclusive.

<sup>2</sup> To minimise the costs of implementing the trial, the decision was taken to focus on one region of mainland France. The Ile-de-France region was a natural choice as it has the highest annual number of students who attend sessions by SOS homophobie.

<sup>3</sup> These timeframes were determined in a random draw. It is important to note that schools where sessions with SOS homophobie were scheduled after 15 May of each academic year were not eligible for the draw and were automatically assigned to the control group given that it was no longer feasible to organise the administration of the OECD questionnaire after 15 June, due to the proximity to the end of the academic year (which, depending on the school and the academic level, is between mid-June and early July). However, these schools do not have any different characteristics from the schools where SOS homophobie's intervention took place before 15 May and which were therefore eligible for the draw (the results of this comparison are available on request). In other words, including them in the analysis does not induce any bias.

<sup>4</sup> Of these 75 institutions, 62 participated in one year of the trial, 11 in two years, and 2 in three years.

<sup>5</sup> The completion of the OECD questionnaire was taken seriously: in 88% of the classes (totalling 89% of the students participating in the trial), the research assistant responsible for administering the questionnaire did not notice any unruly behaviour, such as chattering, giggling or commenting aloud on certain questions. This attitude was the same in the control group as in the treatment group.

<sup>6</sup> The participation rates presented were produced from the following ratios: 75/108 (=69%) among lower secondary and higher secondary schools combined; 57/75 (=76%) among lower secondary schools; 18/33 (=55%) among higher secondary schools.

<sup>7</sup> To further support the interpretation of the differences in responses to the OECD questionnaire between the control and treatment groups as being indicative of the impact of SOS homophobie's intervention, measures were taken to ensure that students were not aware that they were participating in a randomised controlled trial (in which case they might be tempted to deliberately alter their response to the OECD questionnaire, depending on whether they were in the control or treatment group, with a view to generating results that confirmed or contradicted what they believed to be the research assumptions of the trial's organisers). Accordingly, the OECD questionnaire was presented as being unrelated to SOS homophobie's session, regardless of whether it took place before (treatment group) or after (control group) the distribution of the OECD questionnaire. In particular, in a letter to parents distributed by the schools before the administration of the questionnaire (in which parents could complete and sign a section if they did not want their child to answer the questionnaire), the questionnaire was clearly presented (as "a survey on the perception of discrimination" as part of the "actions carried out by the OECD to prevent violence at school"), but without mentioning the involvement of SOS homophobie.

The efforts to ensure that students did not make a connection between the OECD questionnaire and SOS homophobie's session seem to have worked. None of the students in the control group (where the OECD questionnaire was administered before the SOS homophobie session) mentioned the questionnaire to the SOS homophobie volunteers who led the session. This last point implies that differences in the responses to the OECD questionnaire between the control and treatment groups cannot be attributed to differences

in the behaviour of the volunteers (for example, volunteers engaging more with classes in the treatment group than with classes in the control group), since the volunteers did not know which classes belonged to the control group and which to the treatment group (as they were not given this information by the pupils or by any other stakeholder in the trial, precisely to avoid any bias).

Finally, the analysis of the acceptance rate of the OECD questionnaire (i.e. the proportion of students whose parents did not object to their participation) confirms that the administration of the questionnaire was perceived by the students as unrelated to SOS homophobie's session, as the acceptance rate was the same (98%) in the classes in the control group and in the treatment group.

<sup>8</sup> The only exception is the average number of years in the last five years that SOS homophobie has visited the school. This number is higher in the control group (1.3) than in the treatment group (0.7), and this difference is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. If not corrected, this difference could lead to an underestimation of the positive impact of SOS homophobie's intervention. Indeed, in the absence of any sessions, students in schools where SOS homophobie has intervened more often in recent years have a higher average receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion than others (the results of this comparison are available on demand). In order to avoid bias, the results presented in this policy brief are based on an econometric analysis that eliminates the effect of the characteristics reported in Table A1, and in particular the effect of differences in these characteristics between the control group and the treatment group.

<sup>9</sup> The OECD questionnaire is accessible here: <http://oe.cd/lgbti-rct2023>

<sup>10</sup> The six questions that are not directly related to receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion fall into four categories: (i) two introductory questions (Q1 and Q2) which allow a gradual immersion into the topic of LGBTI+ inclusion via references to the gender norms underlying the unequal division between men and women within heterosexual couples of domestic and family work (Q1), and paid work (Q2); (ii) a question (Q12) to assess whether the student has ever discussed the subject of homosexuality, bisexuality, or being transgender with different people, including school staff (iii) a question (Q20) that measures the perception of the group norm, including the likelihood that the student does not consider that "a homosexual, bisexual or transgender person [could] be alienated in [his/her] class"; (iv) two final questions (Q22 and Q23) on the student's gender and year of birth.

It is important to note that from the beginning of the trial (autumn 2018) to the end of January 2019, a test version of the OECD questionnaire was administered to students, which was therefore open to possible improvements. At the end of this pilot phase, which indicated that the students had a very good understanding of the questionnaire, only two modifications were made in order to allow the students to give more precise answers to the questions (a request made by several students during the pilot phase). These modifications concerned question Q5 and question Q18. Question Q5, which initially consisted of a single question (*Do you think you can tell a homosexual person by his or her "style", i.e. mannerisms, walk, or the type of clothes he or she wears?*), was broken down into two questions, so as to distinguish lesbian women (Q5a) from gay men (Q5b). In addition, the instructions associated with question Q18 initially only gave the option of allowing one answer. After the pilot phase, students were told that they could circle more than one answer. For questions Q5 and Q18, the results presented in this policy brief are therefore based on the post-pilot OECD questionnaire, i.e. the one administered to students from February 2019 to June 2022.

<sup>11</sup> The social background of students is measured using the classification of professions and socioprofessional categories (PCS) of the students' legal representatives, based on the following classification: social background=1 if PCS is underprivileged; social background=2 if PCS is average; social background=3 if PCS is privileged; social background=4 if PCS is very privileged. The average social



background in schools in mainland France is 2.09, which is not statistically different from the average social background of 2.06 in the schools that participated in the OECD-SOS homophobie randomised controlled trial.

The impact of gender and social background on all schools is also confirmed if we focus on lower secondary schools on the one hand and on upper secondary schools on the other. At the latter, the positive effect of a relatively higher social background is also maintained if the indicator used to establish the social background of students is not the average classification of the professions and socioprofessional categories (PCS) of the students' legal representatives at school level, but the pathway in which they are enrolled. The differences in social background between pathways are indeed very significant (see note 20 on this point). More specifically, receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion is significantly higher among students in the general academic pathway than among students in the vocational or technological pathway. These results are available on demand.

<sup>12</sup> The results of this comparison are available on demand.

<sup>13</sup> We cannot, however, confirm another well-known outcome, i.e. that receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion improves over time. In the absence of intervention by SOS homophobie, we do not observe systematically higher receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion when measured after the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. between autumn 2021 and spring 2022), rather than before the pandemic (i.e. between autumn 2018 and spring 2020). The results of this comparison are available on demand. This lack of outcome is probably due to the fact that the time span between the start and the end of the trial, i.e. three and a half years, is short.

<sup>14</sup> The results of this comparison are available on demand.

<sup>15</sup> This result is driven by the behaviour of boys: their greater reserve towards LGBTI+ individuals (relative to girls) is more pronounced when these individuals are homosexual men, bisexual men or transgender women. In comparison, the greater kindness of girls towards LGBTI+ individuals is not unequivocally dependent on the gender assigned at birth of these people (girls sometimes perceive LGBTI+ people more negatively when these people are assigned male rather than female at birth, and the reverse is true at other times). The results of this comparison are available on demand.

<sup>16</sup> These results are available on demand.

<sup>17</sup> These results are available on demand.

<sup>18</sup> At upper secondary school level, the intervention also increases by more than 10% the proportion of students who report having already discussed the topic of homosexuality, bisexuality, or being transgender with their family, best friend, and/or a student at school (up from 54% to 60%, a statistically different increase from zero at the 99% confidence level).

<sup>19</sup> This reduction in the positive impact of SOS homophobie's session when measured three months later rather than one month later is statistically different from zero only for the category "Receptiveness to LGBTI+ inclusion" (Upper secondary school) in Figure 3.

<sup>20</sup> At the start of the 2019 academic year, the proportion of students whose main legal representative was an office worker, a manual worker or inactive (excluding pensioners) was 37% in the final two years of general studies, 54% in the final two years of technological studies, and 70% in the vocational pathway (see Chapter 4 of the 2020 edition of "*Repères et Références statistiques*" produced by the *Direction de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance* (DEPP) and the *Sous-direction des systèmes*

*d'information et des études statistiques (SD-SIES): <https://www.education.gouv.fr/reperes-et-references-statistiques-2020-1316>*.

<sup>21</sup> These results are available on demand.

<sup>22</sup> Additional results confirm that the session does not run so smoothly in underprivileged upper secondary schools and with upper secondary students enrolled in vocational or technological pathways. The proportion of students who get up and leave during the session is 0.4% in the general academic pathway, but 3.7% in the vocational or technological pathway, a difference that is statistically different from zero at the 99% confidence level. Similarly, the share of students who get up and leave during the session is 1.6% (resp. 2.6%) in upper secondary schools where the average classification of the professions and socioprofessional categories (PCS) of the students' legal representatives is higher (resp. lower) than the national average (the difference between these two figures is however not statistically different from zero). These results come from the data on the session that volunteers were in the habit of reporting on the SOS homophobie intranet before it was shut down after an IT failure in spring 2020. The statistics presented are therefore drawn from the first two years of the trial, and cover only 267 of the 510 classes that participated.

<sup>23</sup> The beneficial effect of at least one SOS homophobie session in the last five years is statistically different from zero in all classes with negative group dynamics, with the exception of lower secondary school classes from schools where the average classifications of the professions and socioprofessional categories (PCS) of the students' legal representatives are higher than the national average (in these classes, the effect is not statistically different from zero). More precisely, while the session deteriorates the perception of the group norm in underprivileged lower and upper secondary schools (i.e. where the average social background is lower than the national average) by 21% in the absence of any involvement with SOS homophobie in the last five years, the session improves this perception by 6% in schools that SOS homophobie has visited at least once (the difference between these two effects is statistically different from zero at the 95% confidence level). Similar results are obtained if, instead of focusing on underprivileged lower and upper secondary schools, the situation in underprivileged lower secondary schools and in upper secondary school classes enrolled in vocational or technological pathways is studied. In this sample, while SOS homophobie's session deteriorates the perception of the group norm by 26% in the absence of any involvement with SOS homophobie in the last five years, the intervention has no impact on this perception in schools that SOS homophobie has visited at least once (the difference between these two effects is statistically different from zero at the 95% confidence level).

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