Western
Centre for School Mental Health

Peer-Based Interventions for Newcomer Children and Youth: A Systematic Review

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INTRODUCTION

Newcomer children and youth are at greater risk of experiencing social, emotional, behavioural and linguistic challenges in their new county. [1-4]

Research from numerous sources shows the important influence of peers on youths' behaviour and social functioning, suggesting that peer-based intervention strategies may provide a unique opportunity for promoting youth well-being and inclusion in this population. [5-6] Peer-based strategies have the potential to benefit both peer recipients and peer leaders. [6]
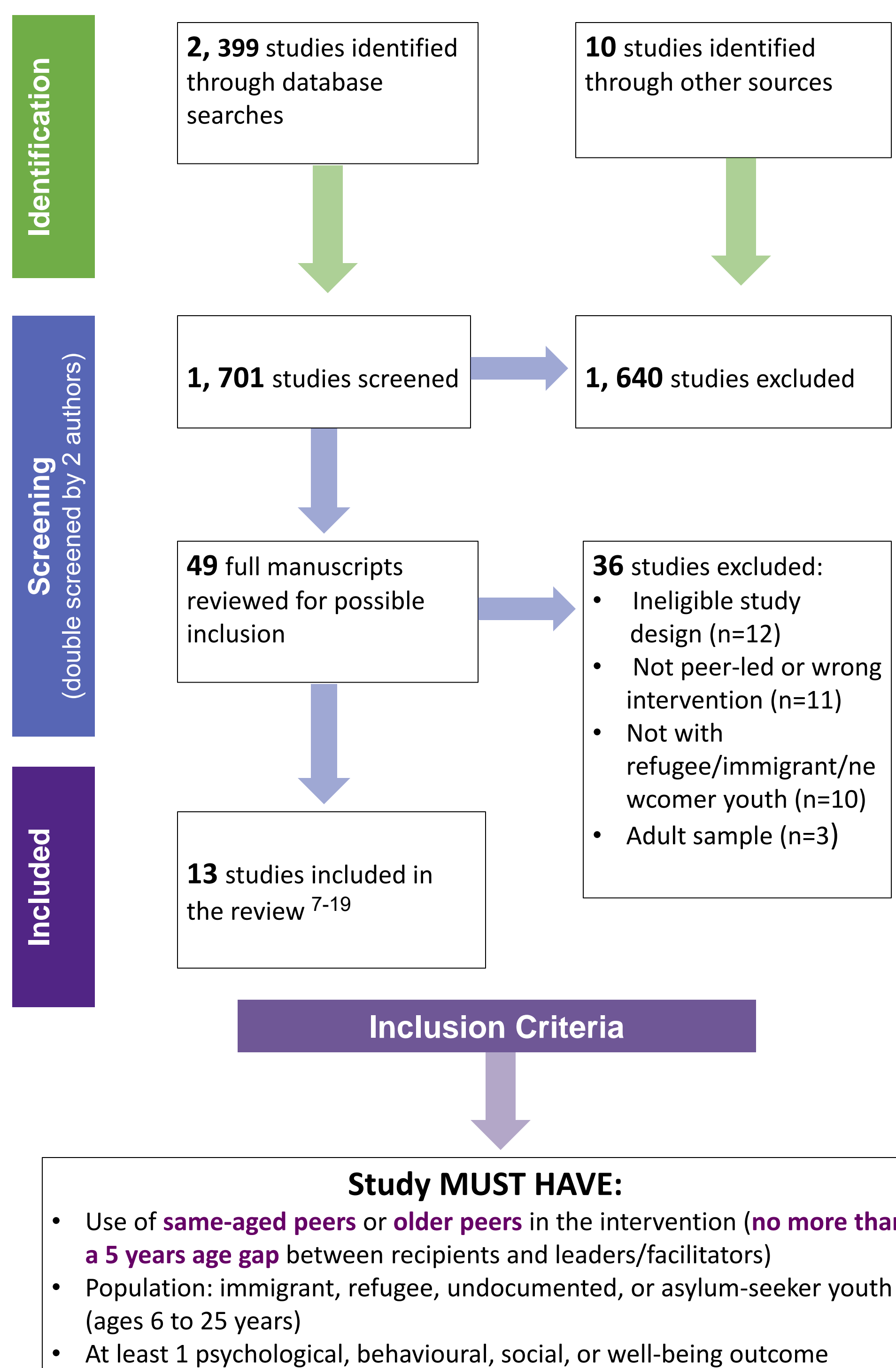
Schools and community organizations around the world are beginning to implement peer-based prevention and intervention strategies with newly arrived child and youth populations. [12-14, 16]

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this review was to describe the current evidence on the effectiveness of peer-based mental health interventions for newcomer children and youth.

METHODS

Figure 1. Study Retrieval Process and Inclusion Criteria

Identification
- 2,399 studies identified through database searches
- 10 studies identified through other sources

Screening (double screened by 2 authors)
- 1,701 studies screened
- 1,640 studies excluded
- 49 full manuscripts reviewed for possible inclusion
- 36 studies excluded:
  - Ineligible study design (n=12)
  - Not peer-led or wrong intervention (n=11)
  - Not with refugee/immigrant/newcomer youth (n=10)
  - Adult sample (n=3)

Included
- 13 studies included in the review [7-19]

Inclusion Criteria

Study MUST HAVE:
- Use of same-aged peers or older peers in the intervention (no more than a 5 years age gap between recipients and leaders/facilitators)
- Population: immigrant, refugee, undocumented, or asylum-seeker youth (ages 6 to 25 years)
- At least 1 psychological, behavioural, social, or well-being outcome

Also see registered systematic review protocol on PROSPERO (CRD42021256190).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

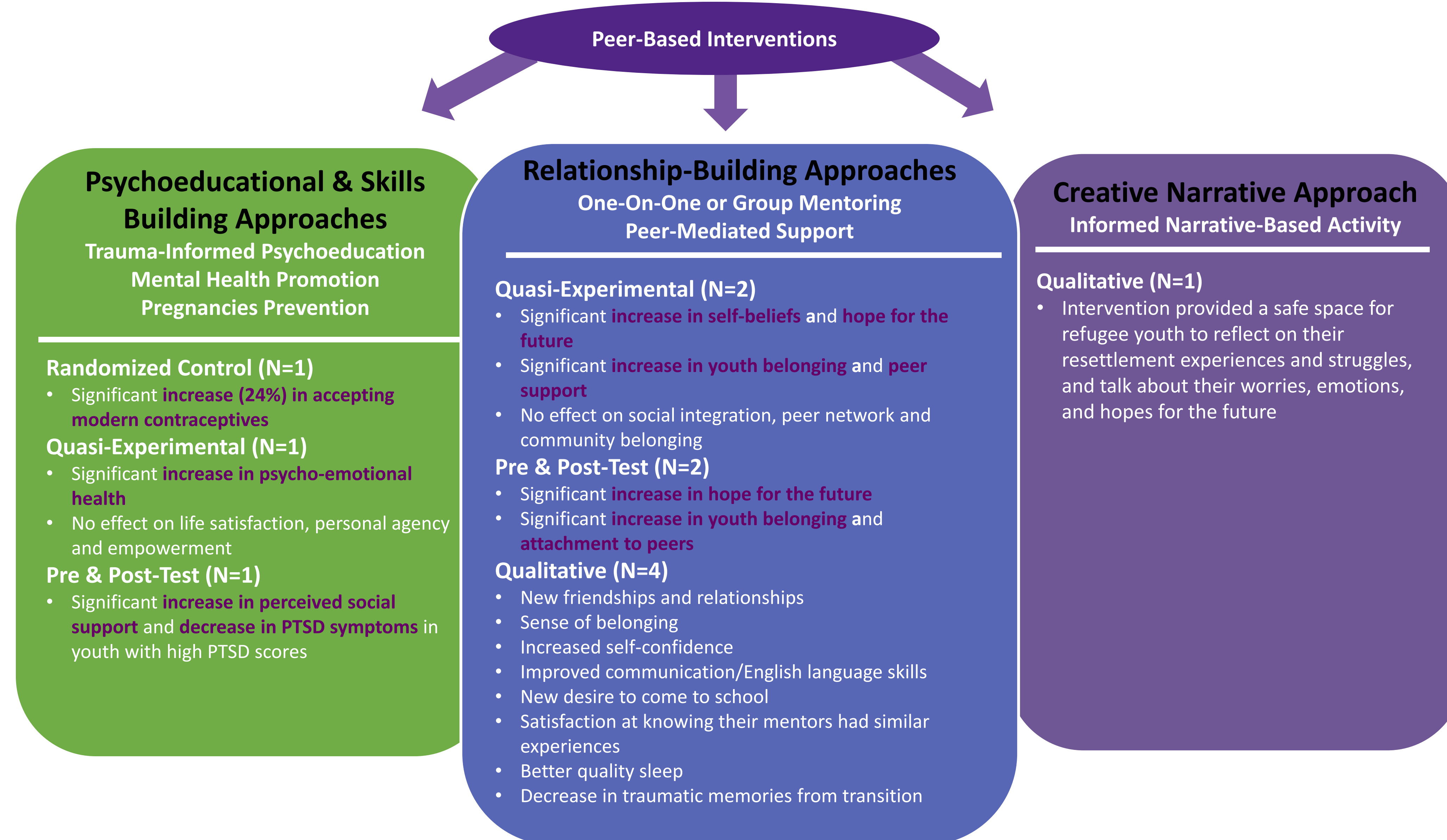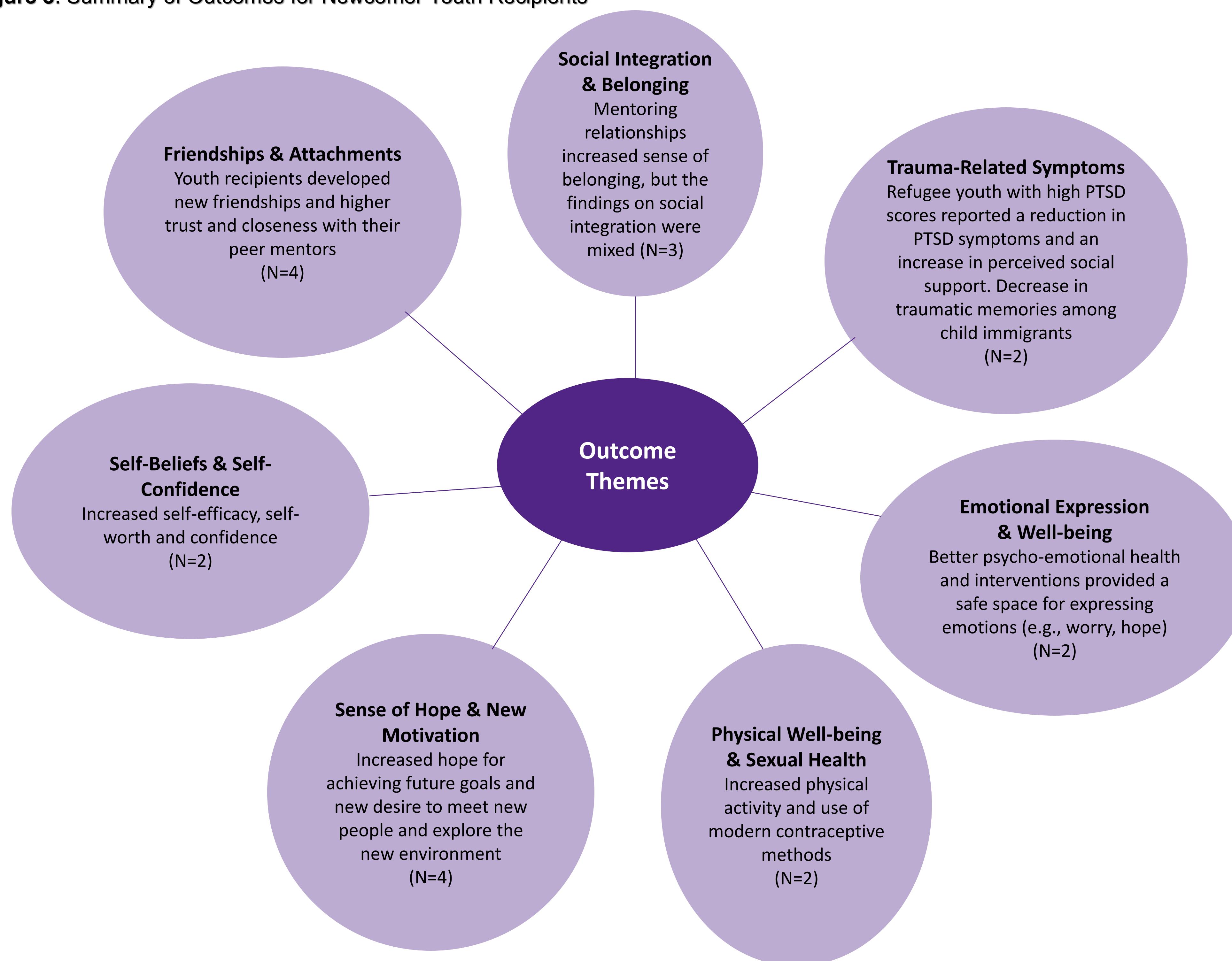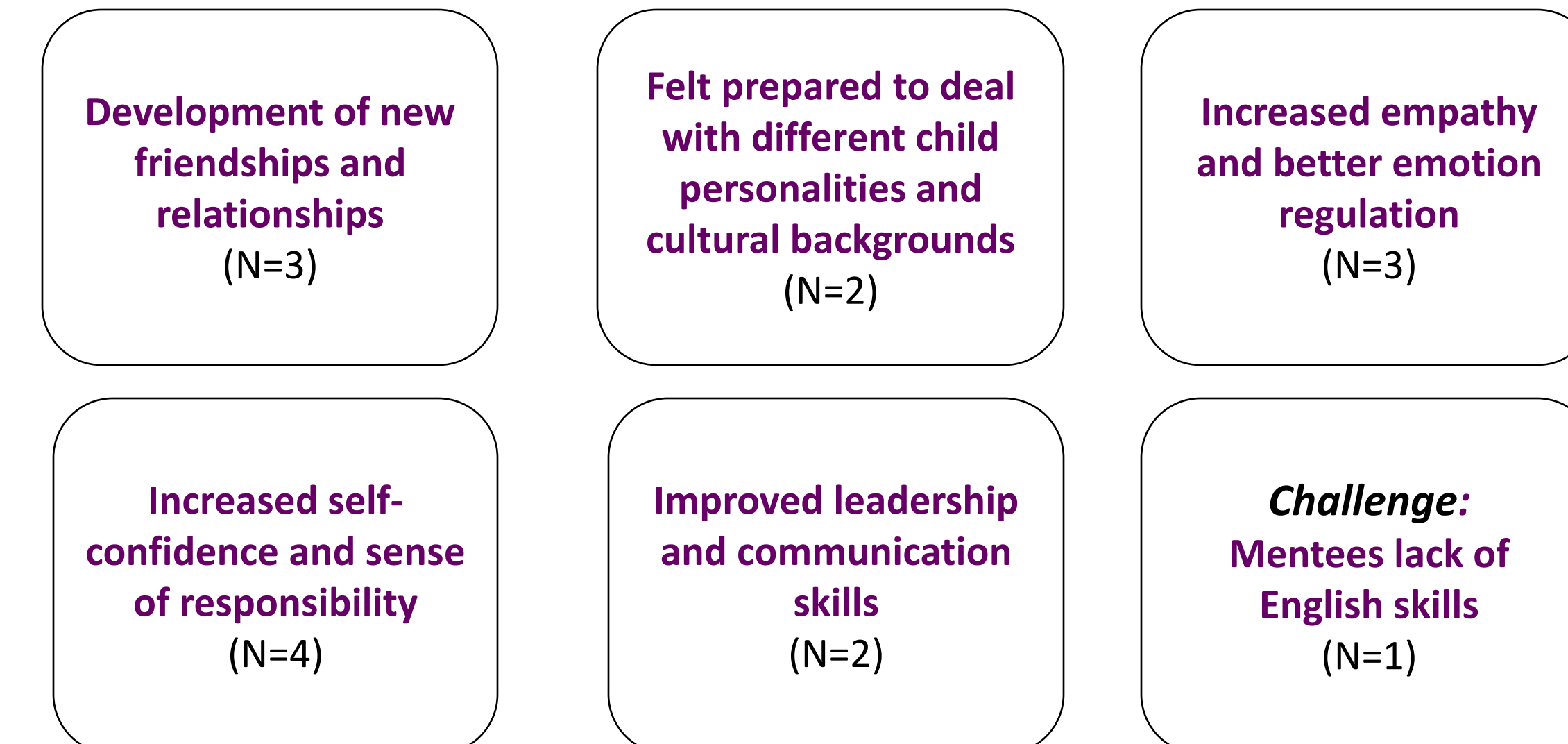**Figure 2**. Summary of Intervention Type, Research Design and Outcomes

Peer-Based Interventions

Psychoeducational & Skills Building Approaches
Trauma-Informed Psychoeducation
Mental Health Promotion
Pregnancies Prevention

Randomized Control (N=1)
- Significant increase (24%) in accepting modern contraceptives

Quasi-Experimental (N=1)
- Significant increase in psycho-emotional health
- No effect on life satisfaction, personal agency and empowerment

Pre & Post-Test (N=1)
- Significant increase in perceived social support and decrease in PTSD symptoms in youth with high PTSD scores

Relationship-Building Approaches
One-On-One or Group Mentoring
Peer-Mediated Support

Quasi-Experimental (N=2)
- Significant increase in self-beliefs and hope for the future
- Significant increase in youth belonging and peer support
- No effect on social integration, peer network and community belonging

Pre & Post-Test (N=2)
- Significant increase in hope for the future
- Significant increase in youth belonging and attachment to peers

Qualitative (N=4)
- New friendships and relationships
- Sense of belonging
- Increased self-confidence
- Improved communication/English language skills
- New desire to come to school
- Satisfaction at knowing their mentors had similar experiences
- Better quality sleep
- Decrease in traumatic memories from transition

Creative Narrative Approach
Informed Narrative-Based Activity

Qualitative (N=1)
- Intervention provided a safe space for refugee youth to reflect on their resettlement experiences and struggles, and talk about their worries, emotions, and hopes for the future

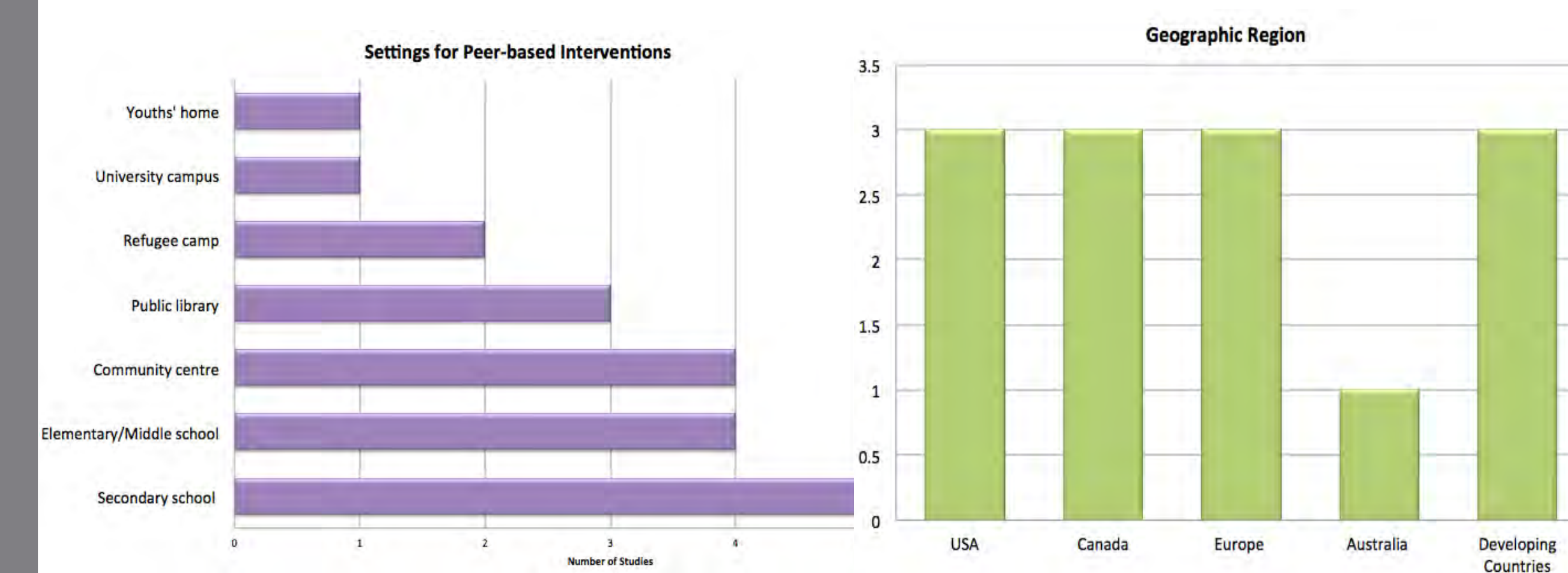**Figure 3**. Summary of Outcomes for Newcomer Youth Recipients

Outcome Themes

- **Friendships & Attachments** Youth recipients developed new friendships and higher trust and closeness with their peer mentors (N=4)
- **Social Integration & Belonging** Mentoring relationships increased sense of belonging, but the findings on social integration were mixed (N=3)
- **Trauma-Related Symptoms** Refugee youth with high PTSD scores reported a reduction in PTSD symptoms and an increase in perceived social support. Decrease in traumatic memories among child immigrants (N=2)
- **Self-Beliefs & Self-Confidence** Increased self-efficacy, self-worth and confidence (N=2)
- **Emotional Expression & Well-being** Better psycho-emotional health and interventions provided a safe space for expressing emotions (e.g., worry, hope) (N=2)
- **Sense of Hope & New Motivation** Increased hope for achieving future goals and new desire to meet new people and explore the new environment (N=4)
- **Physical Well-being & Sexual Health** Increased physical activity and use of modern contraceptive methods (N=2)

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Summary of Preliminary Outcomes for Peer Leaders/Mentors

- Development of new friendships and relationships (N=3)
- Felt prepared to deal with different child personalities and cultural backgrounds (N=2)
- Increased empathy and better emotion regulation (N=3)
- Increased self-confidence and sense of responsibility (N=4)
- Improved leadership and communication skills (N=2)
- *Challenge:* Mentees lack of English skills (N=1)

Figures 4-5: Synopsis of Settings and Geographic Regions

Settings for Peer-based Interventions: Youths' home, University campus, Refugee camp, Public library, Community centre, Elementary/Middle school, Secondary school

Geographic Region: USA, Canada, Europe, Australia, Developing Countries

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The search was based on studies prior to August 2021, and there are further studies to be screened and analyzed.

Preliminary findings from this review indicate that peer-based interventions provide a **promising avenue for facilitating resilience and psycho-social well-being in both newcomer youth and their peer facilitators**. The findings show that peers can be utilized in various ways to support newcomers' adjustment. However, the research in this area is **underdeveloped** and **more rigorous quantitative and qualitative studies are needed** to determine the effectiveness of these interventions.

Relationship-building approaches (i.e., one-on-one and/or group mentorship interventions) have been **most commonly implemented** and show **both intrapersonal** and **interpersonal benefits for both newcomer youth and their peer leaders**, but most of these outcomes were discussed in a qualitative manner (via interviews and/or focus groups) and many of the qualitative studies lacked research rigor (e.g., omitted information about sample size, peer leader characteristics, peer selection process, trustworthiness, analysis, etc.). Research is needed on creative and arts-based methods to explore the benefits of these approaches, as there is a need for implementing creative and innovative strategies in order to engage non-newcomer peers with newcomer youths.[5]

Future research needs to explore the potential challenges and risks of peer-based interventions, as one study reported challenges for peer leaders in a mentorship program (i.e., youth mentees' language barriers). Exploring the mechanisms by which these interventions facilitate change is also needed.

REFERENCES