



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Queensland Action Group for LGBTIQ+ Students
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation
State: Qld

Summary

Summary of key points - QUEENSLAND ACTION GROUP FOR LGBTIQ+ STUDENTS

Educational excellence for children and young people who are same-sex attracted, gender diverse or have an intersex variation, can only be achieved once the first goal of the Melbourne Declaration (2008) promoting equity and freedom from discrimination (including discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation) is achieved.

Key recommendations are:

1. All educational authorities have published, comprehensive policies in place supporting LGBTIQ+ children and young people in educational settings.
2. A new national program is developed, building on the achievement of Safe Schools Coalition Australia, to deliver mandatory in-service training to all teachers and school staff providing them with a broad knowledge and understanding of children and young people of diverse sexuality, gender or intersex.
3. All student health and wellbeing programs, including anti-bullying programs, should recognise and include representations that address the specific needs of LGBTIQ+ students.
4. All universities need to include LGBTIQ+ themes and issues as compulsory units in initial teacher education courses, undergraduate and postgraduate (including early childhood, primary and secondary education courses).
5. The valuable role that parents, students, teachers and other school staff can have in providing support, guidance and information for LGBTIQ+ students should be acknowledged and welcomed by schools.

Main submission

Introduction

The Australian Human Rights Commission (2014) states that, “11 in 100 Australians are of diverse sexual orientation, sex or gender identity”. This means approximately 3 students in a school class of 28 and eleven in every 100 teachers may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or questioning (LGBTIQ+). The number of same-sex families is also visibly increasing and consequently the number of children in those families.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (2014) reports that, “80% of homophobic bullying occurs at school, resulting in many LGBTIQ+ young people finding it difficult to concentrate at school, missing classes, and in some cases dropping out of school altogether. Young children with gender dysphoria are experiencing marginalisation at primary level (Bartholomaeus, 2017) and LGBTIQ+ students in secondary schools report homophobic and transphobic language and physical harassment that staff did not respond to with consistency (Ullman, 2015). Some teachers report homophobic language in primary school contexts (van Leent, 2014).

LGBTIQ+ young people suffer higher rates of mental health issues, substance abuse, self-harm and suicidality (Headspace, 2011). They are also over-represented in home/alternative schooling contexts (pre-publication Queensland research).

Equity is an essential principle in education. The first goal of the The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians of 2008 (MCEECDYA, 2008) is that Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence. The declaration specifically identifies gender and sexual orientation as attributes for which students should not be discriminated against (MCEECDYA, 2008, p. 7).

The Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth) and its Sex Discrimination Amendment (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Status) Act 2013 (Cth) prohibit discrimination on the basis of a person’s sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status within educational settings.

There is a vast amount of potential being wasted and lives being damaged as a result of the discrimination, bullying and lack of support experienced by LGBTIQ+ students. Additionally, there is the loss when dedicated teachers and staff who are LGBTIQ+ leave their employment after experiencing discrimination within educational settings.

Equity and freedom from discrimination are essential before LGBTIQ+ children and young people stand any chance of achieving educational excellence.

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

An education needs to prepare a child to become a valued member of our society, expressing neither discrimination nor vilification towards others.

All students need the knowledge and capability to live and work alongside a diverse range of people in harmony. That knowledge should include a broad understanding of diverse sexualities, genders and intersex variations.

Students who identify as LGBTIQ+, need to be provided with opportunities to develop positive self-knowledge, to feel belonging and self-respect.

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

One measure of school quality is the wellbeing of the students, teachers and other school staff, whether they want to go to school each day and whether they feel their school is a safe place.

All pedagogy and classroom resources should include positive representations of LGBTIQ+ identity and community. This helps to create a sense of belonging for LGBTIQ+ students and encourages respect for diversity.

All student health and wellbeing programs should recognise and include representations that attend to the needs of LGBTIQ+ students. Not all LGBTIQ+ students are 'out' and schools should not assume they know the gender and sexual identity of students.

Anti-bullying programs must specifically address homophobic, transphobic and intersex bullying and abuse because:

- as well as other forms of bullying and abuse that all students may face, LGBTIQ+ young people also experience unique types of abuse (Australian Human Rights Commission, Violence, Harassment and Bullying and the LGBTI Communities). For example, transgender children may experience others referring to them in their past identity, using their past name, pronoun and photographs, thereby invalidating their gender identity.
- students may not have 'come out' to their parents, and may not receive any support from their parents or families at home; and
- research by both ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes, 2009) and Barnardo's (2016) has found LGBTIQ+ children and young people are specifically vulnerable and at great risk of sexual predation, a crime that often relies on the internet.

Respectful relationships programs in schools need to recognise diversity within relationships. Domestic violence and family violence occur in gay and lesbian relationships and relationships involving bisexual, transgender and intersex people

(Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria, 2015). Specialised resources should be developed to help students within the LGBTIQ+ spectrum.

Sex education delivered in schools needs to support young people who may find themselves in a non-heterosexual relationship. LGBTIQ+ people will need specific sexual health information. (Hillier & Mitchell, 2008).

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

- How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently?

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (2011) state that teachers should know and understand students and employ inclusive strategies that engage and support all students.

Funding is required to ensure all schools, principals, teachers and non-teaching staff are trained in understanding students of diverse sexuality or gender and those who have an intersex variation.

Research in Australia shows that teachers do not feel confident to respond in an appropriate manner to issues such as same-sex parenting, gender and sexuality identity, homophobic and transphobic bullying, intersex conversations, diverse sexualities and respectful relationships (van Leent, 2017; Brömdal et al., 2017; Rasmussen et al., 2015; Bartholomaeus et al., 2017). One of the reasons is a lack of compulsory training for teachers and all educational employees to position them to respond to LGBTIQ+ themes and issues in the classroom and the whole school environment, equitably and with confidence.

Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) has provided resources and support to equip school staff with knowledge, skills and practical ideas to create safer and more inclusive school environments for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, staff and families. Engagement with SSCA was voluntary and it was the decision of a school principal whether or not to access the support and resources on an opt-in basis.

The program was welcomed by many schools across Australia but not all schools or teachers received this training. The program was supported and valued by many reputable organisations across Australia:

<http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/our-supporters/organisations> However the reputation of SSCA was tarnished and damaged by rhetoric in the media, potentially impacting on the uptake of the program.

The SSCA program has now ended, resulting in a critical need for a replacement program to ensure all teachers and staff in all schools across Australia are trained in understanding and supporting LGBTIQ+ students. The training needs to be compulsory to help every child in every school. Clear understanding of the

differences, and therefore different needs, of the groups that comprise the broader LGBTIQ+ banner is required.

The Department of Education in the State of Victoria is delivering its own Safe Schools program in the belief that positive and inclusive school environments lead to better academic results, increased confidence and better attendance at school.

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/health/Pages/safe-schools-coalition.aspx?Redirect=1>

Other states and territories may or may not be developing a replacement program to provide in-service training for teachers to deliver support for LGBTIQ+ students.

Greatest efficiency would be achieved by reinstating a federal program to continue the excellent work of the SSCA program ensuring delivery across Australia.

In addition universities need to include LGBTIQ+ themes and issues as compulsory units in initial teacher education courses, undergraduate and postgraduate (including early childhood, primary and secondary education courses). Homophobic bullying and transphobic bullying should be explicitly addressed with compulsory training in best practice strategies. By making LGBTIQ+ themes and issues visible to pre-service educators as part of their teacher training, students themselves have the opportunity to raise questions about their rights and responsibilities, challenge normativity and heterosexism, transgender and intersex phobia, and feed back into institutional cultures.

- What works best for whom and in what circumstances?

Anti-oppression programs, including programs to eliminate all homophobic, transphobic and intersex bullying, work best for those who are currently suffering within schools, and all educational settings. Years of oppression against LGBTIQ+ students, their families, allies and those who are perceived to be gender or sexuality diverse cannot be reversed but governments can ensure the oppression does not continue by delivering best practise pedagogical methods nationwide.

- What institutional or governance arrangements could be put in place?

All educational authorities and individual schools should have clear policies to support LGBTIQ+ young people and deliver anti-bullying programs (Hillier et al., 2010). Policies reassure students and parents that they can expect a safe school environment. They also reassure teaching staff that they are supported in managing LGBTIQ+ issues in the classroom.

The Victorian Government have made a formal and public commitment that schools will create an inclusive and safe environment for LGBTIQ+ students, families and teachers. This commitment recognises that a safe, inclusive and supportive schooling environment is key to tackling bullying, discrimination and harassment at schools, particularly arising from homophobia and transphobia.

The South Australian Department for Education and Child Development has a policy entitled “Supporting same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students” that is mandatory for all staff and volunteers in educational settings. The policy outlines that schools and preschools have a responsibility for supporting all children and young people in their care and provide them ‘equal opportunities to optimum learning and wellbeing outcomes, regardless of sexual orientation, intersex status or gender identity’ in line with state and federal laws.

Edmund Rice Education Australia, a group of Catholic schools, has published a Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities Statement and is offering resources for principals, school leaders and teachers. These outline an approach based on safety, wellbeing and positive affirmation, with an aim of students “feeling good” about their sexual and gender identity.

Unfortunately many States, Territories and private educational authorities have made no such public commitment or developed such rigorous policy supporting students and families of diverse sexuality, gender and intersex status. It may be that some schools within these authorities do provide inclusive and safe schools for LGBTIQ+ students. However, without public commitment and formal protection, students continue to be at risk and feel unsafe while at the same time teachers feel unsupported and unsure about how to resolve these issues.

- How can system enablers such as targets and standards, qualifications and accreditation, regulation and registration, quality assurance measures and transparency and accountability provisions be improved?

There has to be the means to verify that ALL schools in Australia develop the safe inclusive environment that allows ALL LGBTIQ+ children and young people to achieve their optimal educational potential.

- Standards, accountability and reporting mechanisms should be developed to verify that:
- sexuality and gender topics are included in the curriculum for all initial teacher education courses;
- teacher registration in all states and territories requires evidence of study in sexuality and gender;
- all educational authorities have policies in place committing to support and inclusion for LGBTIQ+ students, staff and families;
- where applicable, educational programs delivered within and alongside the Australian Curriculum include references to sexuality, gender identity and intersex variations;

- health and wellbeing programs in schools should include content that specifically assists LGBTIQ+ students.
- wellbeing assessments of schools should include an evaluation of their inclusion policies and practices for LGBTIQ+ students and staff; and
- records are kept of students who drop out of main stream education including the reasons why, including bullying. Survey forms for students dropping out or going to alternative education should be sent to the parent/carer directly and not done through the school.
- Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

The value of engaging parents to improve student wellbeing and academic achievement is well-established and reinforced by research conducted for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau (Emerson et al., 2012). In a recent study, parents expressed support for sexuality and gender education, not only as a protective factor for LGBTIQ+ students but also to develop social cohesion and prepare all students for adult life in modern Australia (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2016).

Parents of disadvantaged and vulnerable children have often researched and collected information and may have joined support groups, online or within the community. Schools that welcome parental contribution and engage in a genuine exchange of information, can expect to enhance their support for LGBTIQ+ students.

Gay-straight alliances or other student-run organisations can provide a space for LGBTIQ+ students and their straight allies to come together. They can promote a supportive school climate for students of all sexual orientations and gender expressions, decrease bullying and provide students with a space to be themselves.

Teachers who are themselves of diverse sexuality, transgender or intersex could be valuable role models for LGBTIQ+ students, with the experience to provide support, information and encouragement. However this can only happen when their school is safe and supportive, and they know they will not be branded as “recruiters” to the LGBTIQ+ lifestyle, or worse.

School authorities and leaders should acknowledge the value gained from involving students, parents and staff in enhancing the equity and inclusivity in their schools. This should be reflected within policy and planning documents.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

Barriers to creating equity for LGBTIQ+ students in Australian education include systemic, cultural and societal barriers.

Homophobia, transphobia and intersex-phobia remain evident across Australian society, even within parliament.

Well-funded groups, often with religious affiliations, frequently express their belief that any education about gender and sexuality diversity is a problem and should be banned. But the right of LGBTIQ+ children and young people to achieve their full educational potential in a safe and welcoming environment should outweigh the unfounded fears of these very vocal groups.

To overcome these barriers strong leadership is necessary.

Political leaders who, by virtue of their position, are role models for all Australians, should stand firm against all discrimination and bullying.

Educational leadership is evident in the States of Victoria and South Australia where the governments are unwavering in their support of LGBTIQ+ children and young people in schools. They set an example that education departments in other states and territories should follow.

Support for the LGBTIQ+ community from human rights and anti-discrimination organisations across Australia is absolute and strong. However the negative experiences many LGBTIQ+ students still encounter in schools is in contrast to the support that is increasing over time in non-educational environments, for example medical and judicial. Therefore specific declarations condemning discrimination against children and young people who are of diverse sexuality, gender or intersex would greatly assist in combatting homophobic, transphobic and intersex bullying in schools.

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