South Australian
Commissioner
for Children and
Young People

No Exceptions

Creating safer schools
for LGBTQIA+ Students

Commissioner
for Children &
Young People

The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016 ('the Act').

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

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'YOUNG PEOPLE ARE VULNERABLE, TEACHERS ARE SUPPOSED TO PREPARE THEM FOR THE WORLD AND RIGHT NOW LGBTQIA+ KIDS IN RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS ARE LEARNING THAT THE WORLD HATES THEM. AND WHILE IN SOME WAYS THAT'S QUITE ACCURATE, THEY SHOULD BE SAFE IN SCHOOLS AND THEY AREN'T.'

(19 year old)

Commissioner's Introduction

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my mandate is to promote and advocate for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. It is also my role to ensure that children and young people have a voice in decisions that affect their lives.

Through my engagement with South Australian children and young people, I have gained deep insights into student experiences of school and their views on teachers, relationships with peers, bullying, school discipline and attitudes towards students.

For children and young people across all ages, and schools, we must ensure that they experience positive and safe environments where:

1   They are **known**.
2   They are **valued**.
3   They have a **voice**.
4   They are **included**.

Young people and other stakeholders have raised concerns that particular groups of children face barriers to feeling known, valued, included and heard at school. LGBTQIA+ young people are one such group.

Today's young people are acutely aware of the diversity of their peers, both in South Australia and around the world. As the first truly global generation, our children and young people value inclusiveness and place great importance on personal identity. They understand there is no "normal Australian" and that there are thousands of ways to be a unique and valued member of a community.

I have had the privilege of attending many faith-based schools to consult with young people on a diversity of topics including bullying, kindness, hopes and dreams, and gender. In addition, students from religious schools have been active contributors to my various forums, summits, and advisory bodies.

Like all children and young people, they speak about the concerns they have in relation to religious intolerance, to racism, sexism, homophobia, and all forms of sexuality and gender-based bullying. They speak openly about their commitment to a multicultural and inclusive community and their desire for education that teaches respect and tolerance for differences alongside religious teachings that promote love, justice, and compassion.

I have heard and seen many examples of inclusion and respect for students attending religious schools who are sexually and gender diverse. I have also heard directly from young people who told me that peers who identify as gay and non-binary are being discriminated against and subjected to bullying at their school. Others have said they keep this aspect of their identity "secret" to avoid unwanted attention from teachers and peers.

Students have also reported that 'judgement' by others has a negative impact on their mental health, their motivation to participate, and their self-worth. These young people have told me that they live in fear of being punished and excluded, and not belonging.

In my investigation into the causes and impacts of school suspensions and exclusions, students in religious schools raised concerns that their peers were being treated unfairly and differently because of their sexuality or gender identity. They said the kind of exclusion they experienced was more than a formal disciplinary process. It included exclusion from in the curriculum, stereotyping in classrooms, and a tolerance of open discrimination and harassment that repeatedly went unchallenged.

One of the consequences of COVID has been broader acknowledgment of the role schools play as places that go beyond academic instruction. They also provide educational opportunities and relationships that are critical to young people's overall health and wellbeing. Educators play important roles in the lives of students and what they say and do matters. Beyond supporting academic learning, like all educators, those in faith-based schools must provide emotional and physical safety for all students, including cultivation of their identity nurturing environments.

At the end of 2020, the Attorney-General proposed changes to the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984 SA*. *The Equal Opportunity (Religious Bodies) Amendment Bill 2020* sought to clarify that essential service providers, including religious schools, cannot rely on religious exceptions to justify discrimination. To inform my submission to the draft Bill, I created an online tool to ask young people about their thoughts on the experience of LGBTQIA+ students, in religious schools, and what they believed would make schools more inclusive for LGBTQIA+ students.

Many young people told me that they feel unsafe in school environments, and that adults often don't show them the respect or protection they want or need. That any child should feel unsafe or insecure in their interaction with adults, whether at home, while in care, at school, or in other community settings, reflects directly on us as adults, and it is our responsibility to do something about it.

Context

When we make a commitment to provide child friendly and child safe environments for children and young people we must follow through in all environments, including schools. There are no exceptions. This is both a requirement under international conventions and State Legislation. Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognise the right of every child to an education which supports the development of their personality and talents, as well as their mental and physical abilities, so that they can reach their full potential.

In addition to these international obligations, the South Australian Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People states that all children should start well, grow strong, and experience a good life, now and in the future. A good life includes being physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy, being safe and involved, inspired and engaged, a successful learner, and an active participant in society. To do this we must take a proactive, preventative and participatory stance that involves building environments where all children and young people can thrive, feel respected and valued, and encouraged to reach their full potential.

All organisations in South Australia that interact with children and young people, including schools, are required under the *Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017* (Safety Act) , to develop policies and procedures that staff in their organisations must implement on a daily basis to create environments in which children and young people feel safe.

In addition, the Safety Act sets out the duty of every person in the State to ensure every South Australian child and young person is safe from harm, does well at all levels of learning, is taught skills for life, enjoys a healthy lifestyle, and is given opportunities to be an active citizen who has a voice and influence. This duty is consistent with Principle 4[1] of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations to 'uphold equity and respect diverse needs'. For organisations to say that everyone is welcome, valued and treated 'the same', is no longer a sufficient response to Principle 4. Organisations must take action in policy and practice to tackle bullying and go beyond accepting and move towards actively celebrating diversity, and providing inclusive and affirming support.

Furthermore the *Education and Children's Services Act 2019* states that students should not be discriminated against on the basis of their gender, mental or physical impairment, religion or race, nor that of their parents. A child's best interests should also be the 'paramount' consideration in the enforcement of this Act.

Australia's largest study of the health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ young people, the Writing Themselves In survey, shows that school is the most likely place for abuse and harassment to occur. Involvement in bullying – whether as a bully, victim or both – is associated with worse mental health and a higher risk of suicidality.[2]

Feeling safe at school is not only linked to educational engagement and positive learning experiences, but also to improvements in developmental and life outcomes. While many LGBTQIA+ young people lead happy, healthy and productive lives, research consistently shows that LGBTQIA+ people have disproportionately poorer mental health outcomes and are at higher risk of suicidal ideation and behaviours compared to the general population.[3]

The Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry largely attributes poorer mental health outcomes among LGBTQ+ people to their experiences of 'a higher likelihood of facing stigma, discrimination, social exclusion, homophobia, transphobia, stereotyping, ostracising and harassment'.[4]

LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to experience challenges in a number of areas, including homelessness, employment and education, and isolation from family and peers, 51% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual young people aged 14 to 21 years, and 71% of gender diverse young people aged 14 to 21 years, do not live at home with family.[5] They also experience barriers to accessing medical and other support services.

When LGBTQIA+ young people were asked what made them feel safe and positive about themselves, their answers were remarkably simple. They wanted acceptance and affirmation from peers, families and other significant adults, and the freedom to be themselves in the community, including in health services and settings, family

relationships and home environments, education settings, workplaces, and other public places.

This report captures the views of young people about their perceptions and experiences of discrimination against LGBTQIA+ students in religious schools. Obviously the negative experiences in this report do not reflect the environments in every religious school. There are noted examples of religious schools that actively promote and practice inclusivity.

The time spent at school and in school based activities, means it is one of the most critical environments in young people's lives. It is therefore important that when young people tell us their school environments are unsafe we must listen and advocate on their behalf for change.

Key Insights from Young People

- **Discrimination** based on sexuality and gender diversity takes many different forms in a school environment, and has short and long-term impacts on student safety and wellbeing, relationships, and educational engagement.
- School plays an important role in how young people navigate **social, emotional and physical changes** as they begin making sense of how those around them perceive them and accept who they are.
- When the **safety, confidence and comfort** of some students is compromised in the school environment, it impacts the safety, confidence and comfort of all students.
- The **support** children receive early in their education can promote positive health outcomes and prevent bullying and exclusion in later years.
- Young people overwhelmingly believe that promoting greater **inclusion** for LGBTQIA+ young people strengthens tolerance.
- Changes to school **environments and culture,** alongside structural changes to the curriculum and school policies, can make a significant positive difference to the lives of all students, particularly LGBTQIA+ students
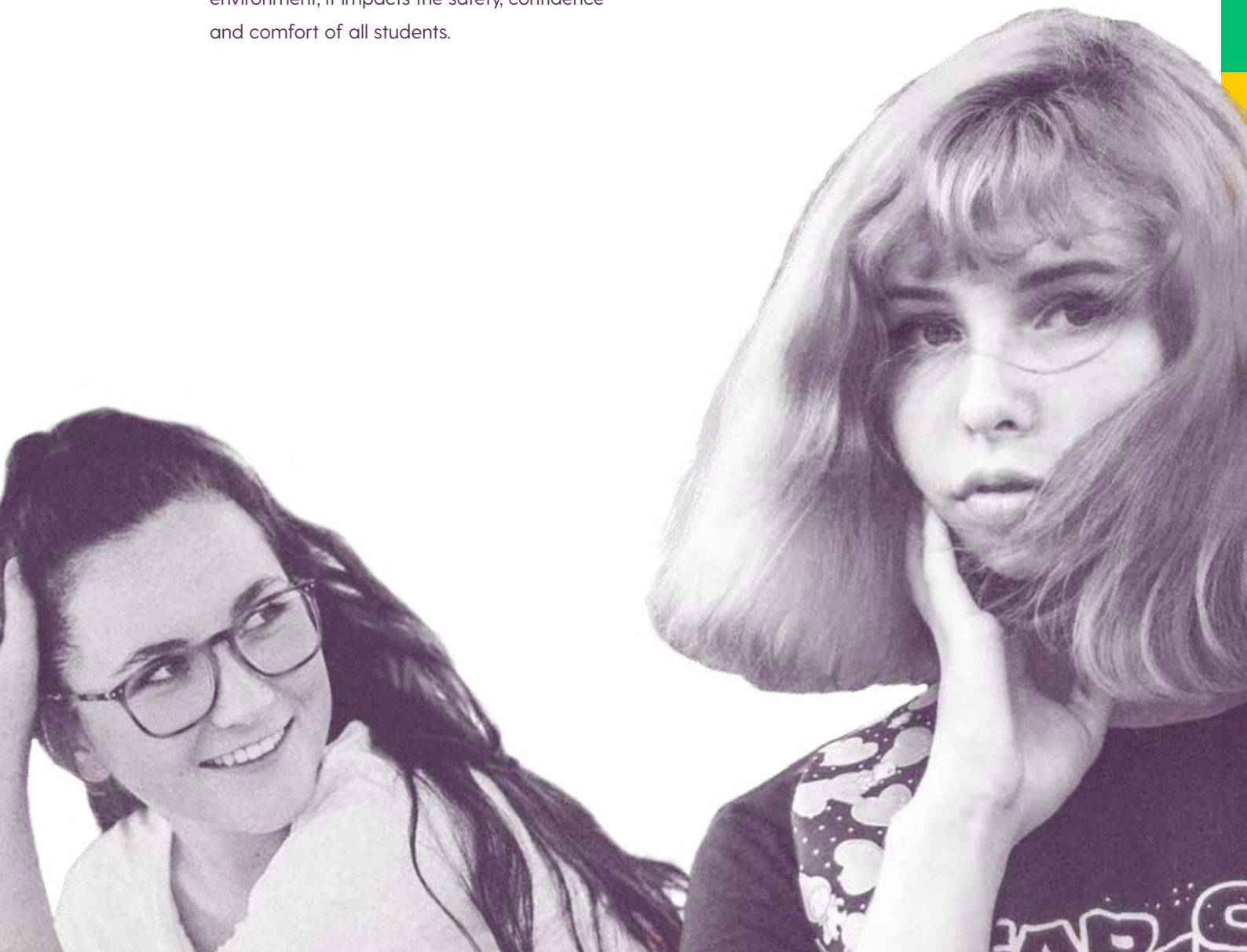
Key Recommendations from Young People

Young people who participated in the study identified several things that they believed would make schools more inclusive for LGBTQIA+ young people.

They made recommendations for action, both within the school environment and at a broader policy level. It was clear young people care about these issues and that they had spent a significant amount of time reflecting on how they might be addressed.

Young people recommended the following changes:

1
………..
Provide relationships and sexual health education that is respectful of gender and sexual diversity to promote respect and equality, reduce homophobia and address school based bullying and violence.
………..

2
………..
Address gender and sexuality based bullying within schools through a review of current policies, procedures and complaints mechanisms including assessment of the extent to which they promote safety for all students.
………..

3
………..
Support students through provision of links to community based youth health services and credible information sources beyond school.
………..

Who Informed Us?

A total of 86 young people aged between 13 and 22 years participated.

Of these:

— **78%** identified as being part of the LGBTQIA+ community.
— **57%** identified as female.
— **23%** identified as male.

— **20%** identified as gender diverse.
— **66%** were secondary school students
— **34%** were tertiary students.

— **10%** identified as coming from culturally and linguisti-cally diverse backgrounds.
— **17%** identified as living with disability.

What Young People Told Us

Almost all those who identified as being part of the LGBTQIA+ community reported that they believed their school discriminated against them and other LGBTQIA+ students. The young people also believed religious schools as a sector discriminated against young people on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Young people in the study reported that the schools that discriminate do so in many different ways. In some cases, students described bullying and discrimination as explicit. This included denying students enrolment, or full participation at the school on the basis of their gender identity or sexuality. Others described behaviour as happening 'behind closed doors'.

'IT CAN COME IN MANY DIFFERENT FORMS. A TEACHER DOESN'T HAVE TO BE SHOUTING HATE SPEECH AT A STUDENT TO QUALIFY FOR A DISCRIMINATING ACT. SUBTLE IGNORANT COMMENTS MAY NOT BE AS MALICIOUS BUT CAN STILL BE DAMAGING.'

— 17 year old

Young people reported experiences within classrooms and in the broader school environment, including interactions with peers, teaching staff and leadership staff that discriminated against their sexuality and gender identity.

Some young people described the actions of their peers and staff at their school as 'active' bullying of LGBTQIA+ students. Students mostly described verbal and emotional bullying, although instances of physical abuse were also reported.

'OUTING STUDENTS WITHOUT CONSENT, TEACHINGS THAT IT'S A SIN AND IMMORAL, FORCIBLY BREAKING UP LGBT COUPLES, VERBAL ABUSE AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION, MISGENDERING AND DEADNAMING, SOMETIMES PHYSICAL ABUSE.'

— 18 year old

They described how students are excluded, punished, segregated, 'disowned, shamed, ridiculed, bullied and/or belittled because of gender/sexual identity, or their opinions'. Some LGBTQIA+ students shared their experience of being 'outed' publicly by school staff without their permission. This included being 'outed' to parents. Young people described this as a breach of their trust and a significant risk to their safety.

'THEY DON'T MENTION THE TOPIC, STUDENTS ARE BULLIED FOR IT AND WHEN SOMEONE'S YELLING SLURS IN CLASS THEY DON'T CARE.'

— 15 year old

In many cases, young people reflected on how schools and teachers failed to intervene and protect students from bullying. They thought there was a lack of repercussions for bullying against LGBTQIA+ students. Some young people attributed this to a fear among school leadership that supporting LGBTQIA+ students would bring the school into 'disrepute'.

'I'VE HEARD STORIES OF PEOPLE FEARING FOR THEIR SAFETY AND RUNNING INTO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE FOR FEAR OF BEING BEATEN BUT ONLY BEING TOLD TO GET OUT.'

— 19 year old

LGBTQIA+ Identities and Experiences

Young people reported that what schools don't do is just as important as what they do. Many young people focused on the ways in which schools 'silenced', 'avoided' or 'pushed out' LGBTQIA+ students in conversations, school culture and participation opportunities.

Some students reported that their schools remained silent on gender identity and sexual diversity across key areas of the curriculum.

This lack of diversity was particularly evident in relationships and sexual health education, which is often taught as part of religious education.

> ## 'MOSTLY IT IS IN THE ERASURE. FORGETTING TO INCLUDE SEX EDUCATION, LIFE EXPERIENCES, AND STORIES FROM LGBT+ PEOPLE. THERE IS AN ASSUMPTION OF CISHET ORIENTATION.'
>
> — 17 year old

Others reported being taught explicitly that LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships were 'wrong', 'evil' or 'sinful'. This was considered to 'fuel a culture of stigma amongst students'.

> " *'In my own experience in religion class (where sex education was held), the LGBTQIA+ experience was completely ignored. There was an obscenely large focus on heteronormativity... I recall being prohibited from studying a homosexual couple for an assignment on 'healthy relationships' because it wasn't 'How God sees a healthy relationship' (18 year old)*

The lack of visibility of LGBTQIA+ identities and experiences in the curriculum was reflected in school culture, with many young people reporting lack of acknowledgement or support of significant dates in the LGBTQIA+ calendar, such as Pride Month, or other events, symbols, or initiatives perceived to be aligned with LGBTQIA+ communities. Others reported that their school allowed the existence of groups that supported gender equality and sexual diversity, but only if this was not public.

" *'Despite being a functioning club at my school the GSA (Gender Sexuality Alliance) was not allowed ever to advertise and when holding events, even when LGBTQIA+ centric were not allowed to be explicit about LGBTQIA+ people having to use alternate phrases like 'rainbow people' or generalised statements like 'people regardless of gender, sexuality, race or religion.' (18 year old)*

'DO NOT ALLOW THEM TO CELEBRATE PRIDE MONTH, PURPLE DAY, ETC. IN ANY WAY WITH EXCUSES THAT IT WOULD REVEAL PEOPLE'S IDENTITY AND CAUSE BULLYING, ALTHOUGH MOST STUDENTS SUPPORT THOSE IN THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY.'

— 16 year old

Other young people described LGBTQIA+ students as visible but treated 'differently' in their school environment. This 'different' treatment was commonly described as 'less favourable'. As one respondent noted, staff 'tend to be a lot harsher towards students that they know are LGBTQIA+'.

Many LGBTQIA+ students described feeling like they were being punished for who they are and not getting the same opportunities as their peers, particularly when schools failed to provide them with support services.

'TREATING THEM DIFFERENTLY TO OTHERS AND PREFERRING THE 'STRAIGHT' KIDS OVER THE ONES THEY KNOW TO BE A PART OF THE LGBT+.'

— 17 year old

Impacts of Stigma and Discrimination

Many LGBTQIA+ students reported how their experiences at school led them to internalise the message that their existence and relationships are 'wrong' or 'broken'. They described that 'learning that the world hates them' at school makes it difficult to feel valued and safe.

" *'Unhappy is because 75% of their time is spent at school facing this abuse and discrimination.' (17 year old)*

Whether young people described discrimination against LGBTQIA+ students as indirect or direct, 'blatant and outright' or 'subtle and insidious', many reported witnessing or experiencing the damaging impacts of discrimination.

It was often noted that even where the LGBTQIA+ community 'is not actively hatefully targeted against', schools ignoring the existence of LGBTQIA+ experiences has a 'strong impact on the mindset of students' and 'their emotional and physical wellbeing goes down immensely'.

" *'Young people are vulnerable, teachers are supposed to prepare them for the world and right now LGBTQIA+ kids in religious schools are learning that the world hates them. And while in some ways that's quite accurate, they should be safe in schools and they aren't.' (19 year old)*

" *'School never felt like a safe place for me. It's interesting because it's hard for people who have never experienced that to understand what I mean when I say that, and I know because from years 8 and 9 I was mainly fine but in years 10, 11 and 12 I felt it. Many days I could not eat properly, I couldn't sleep properly and most of the time I couldn't focus. Every day when I ran out the school doors and fell down on my bed i'd breathe a sigh of relief that it was over. I would regularly have nervous breakdowns in the bathroom and many days I thought about taking my own life.' (18 year old)*

'I WAS AFRAID TO COME OUT AS TRANS (NOBODY ELSE THERE WAS, TO MY KNOWLEDGE) AS I WAS AFRAID OF BEING EXPELLED ALTOGETHER AND LOSING MY ATAR PROGRESS.'

— 18 year old

When students do not feel safe it negatively impacts their sense of belonging at school, which in turn compromises trust and relationships with peers and significant adults This has flow-on effects for school attendance, engagement and attainment. There was a sense that the impacts on a child's development and mental and physical wellbeing were not only immediate, but long-lasting, and significantly affect a student's prospects for the future.

Many students also described feeling helpless and 'trapped' because they did not know what to do or where to go to seek support in this environment, either generally or in response to

bullying or discrimination. This may be partly due to a lack of information for students and their families about ways to raise concerns, as well as fears about the potential repercussions of doing so. In most cases where students reported voicing their concerns within the school environment, they reported being dismissed, avoided or actively excluded.

> 66 *'Another student had wanted to do a question around LGBTQIA+ discrimination in her Stage 2 Research Project. She sent out a survey to the school about discrimination against the community and began compiling information. The school promptly shut the survey down and called the student into the office where they were informed that they must change their question and that all the students' information would need to be filtered to ensure it was from a 'Christian perspective'. SACE disallows such intervention by the school, however, the school guilt-tripped the student into keeping quiet by telling her the media was already breathing down their neck.' (17 year old)*

There was a sense that when the safety, confidence and comfort of some students is compromised in the school environment, it limits the safety, confidence and comfort of all students.

Many young people noted that significant progress had been made in some schools to include and support LGBTQIA+ students. Some students noted that because society has overall made progress towards acceptance and respect for LGBTQIA+ people, identity-based bullying and discrimination is often considered to be 'solved' or only a problem of the past, and this can make it harder to raise concerns.

'WHEN I WAS YOUNGER I ATTEMPTED SUICIDE DUE TO A LACK OF REPERCUSSIONS AGAINST GAY SLURS AT A COUNTRY SCHOOL. MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE BEFORE KIDS DIE.'
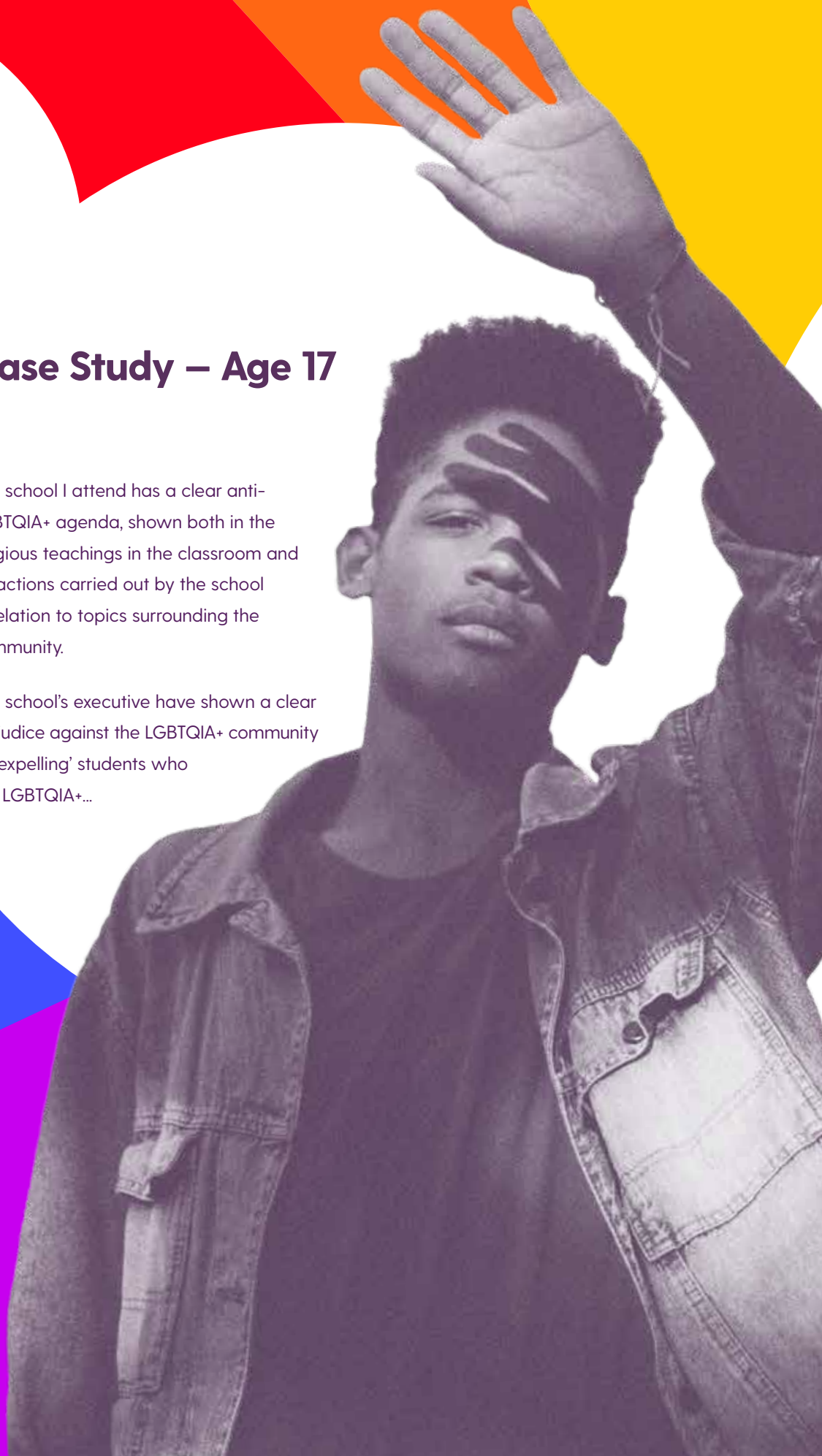
- 20 year old

"

Case Study — Age 17

The school I attend has a clear anti-LGBTQIA+ agenda, shown both in the religious teachings in the classroom and by actions carried out by the school in relation to topics surrounding the community.

The school's executive have shown a clear prejudice against the LGBTQIA+ community by 'expelling' students who are LGBTQIA+...

The school staff also totally ignore homophobic bullying. The only time 'gay' was told to be inappropriate was when a heterosexual student complained and the school found it unacceptable to call a student such a terrible word as it insinuated a 'degenerate lifestyle'.

When kids who are likely in the LGBTQIA+ community are bullied because of their sexuality, it often goes overlooked. However, there are a few members of staff who are very kind and don't accept any form of bullying at all and are fully LGBTQIA+ accepting. These teachers are, unfortunately, in the vast minority.

I was part of a team at my school in 2020 and hosted some charities and events. The Action Team was informed that headspace was not a viable organisation to support, as it was pro-LGBTQIA+. Despite Headspace providing a safe space for everyone, the mere fact that the organisation may potentially help one of the students at the school come to terms with their sexuality was far too much for the school to handle, so they refused any support of Headspace to any degree.

The sex education at the school is also extremely hetero-normative, not just evading the topic of LGBTQIA+ relationships, but also actively speaking down upon them and calling them dangerous.

For students in middle school who may be actively struggling with their sexuality, they are in an unsafe environment in the school, with many teachers perceiving mental illnesses as a sign of weak faith and that LGBTQIA+ is disgusting. This means that gay students suffering from depression will likely be seen as weak and disgusting by a large portion of the school staff (the well-being staff are very accepting though).

I am a prefect at the school and have been there since reception. Many of the teachers raised me and I love the school very much. However, even I am willing to say that the community and anti-LGBTQIA+ agenda is too far and I am in constant fear for the lives of many of the middle school students with years still to go before they graduate. I personally know a student who was self-harming due to the lack of support she had (she is bi-sexual). She constantly tells me that because I came along and befriended her, she is alive today. What about the students who won't have someone befriend them? There is a line where freedom of religion infringes on other fundamental human rights and this is beyond unacceptable.

What Would Make Schools More Inclusive for LGBTQIA+ Young People?

An inclusive and diverse curriculum

One of the most common suggestions was to improve the breadth of the curriculum. Many young people would like to see diversity openly discussed and normalised across key areas of the curriculum, including relationships and sexual health education, history, science, health, social studies and religion. They saw the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ histories and identities in education as strengthening rather than undermining religious tolerance.

❝ *'Making sure that we all know religion should not be used against each other and it should be used to spread love and acceptance instead.' (18 year old)*

❝ *'Acknowledging LGBT people's identities are valid in environments such as health classes could make school environments more inclusive.' (17 year old)*

There was a real sense that validating histories and identities in this way is important to young people's wellbeing, not only in the short term, but beyond the classroom and well into adulthood.

❝ *'There are gay kids who don't even know other gay people exist, and feel that they are broken. Education is super important so that kids don't think that they are broken.' (17 year old)*

❝ *'Having teaching about queer people as part of the curriculum regardless of school type as teaching at a younger age prevents bullying and 'otherness' in later years.' (15 year old)*

School culture and leadership

Many young people thought that changes to formal curriculum content would be most effective when accompanied by changes to school culture and leadership. Young people offered various suggestions for how schools could be encouraged to listen to students and ultimately treat LGBTQIA+ students 'as people and not sinners'.

❝ *'If religious institutions acknowledged that regardless of their standpoints, their schools are going to cater for non-religious students too, so they must be inclusive of all people.' (16 year old)*

❝ *'I think they need to make it clear that their school is 100% a safe place for these people and acknowledge that YES, a lot of religious communities can be homophobic/transphobic, & that despite this they are not that way.' (17 year old)*

Many young people suggested diversity and inclusion training for teachers and other staff, including the school leadership. They felt this could effectively raise awareness about diversity and homophobia and promote sensitivity and inclusion. There was a sense that this training would be consistent with religious teachings.

❝ *'Teachers undergoing further training in how to teach these classes well or bringing in experts to teach specific classes. Work with [the] student body to promote a culture of acceptance within a school. Allow trans students to use the bathrooms of the gender they identify with.' (17 year old)*

Education and training also came up in the context of the need for more proactive bullying prevention. A few reflected on positive experiences with teachers who are kind and don't accept any bullying. They wanted this to be the norm.

> *'If teachers accepted them, didn't punish them for who they are, and stepped in to stop homophobic and transphobic bullying from students and other parents.' (19 year old)*

Young people wanted teachers and school staff to be willing to engage in conversations, rather than ignoring or shutting down discussions related to LGBTQIA+ lives, experiences and identities.

Young people reported mixed experiences with chaplaincy services. They felt schools would benefit from offering students the option of accessing non-religious support services in addition to religious-affiliated services.

Alongside practical support, many stressed the importance of seeing symbols that represent and validate diverse identities. They highlighted the benefits to their wellbeing when schools recognised clubs, events, or special days like Wear It Purple Pride Month.

> *'Never underestimate the power of pride flags and other symbols of safety and acceptance for queer kids. For me personally, this is always something I look for in every new setting, whether it be at a school, university, café, or doctor just to have the reassurance that this is a welcoming space for my whole self, and I know many other queer kids share this thought.' (18 year old)*

'HAVING 'MALE' 'FEMALE' 'PREFER NOT TO SAY' 'OTHER' ETC. CHECKBOXES IN SURVEYS … WITHIN SEX ED, NOT KEEPING THE TEACHINGS NARROWED TO MALE/FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS AND EMBRACING EVENTS SUCH AS PRIDE MONTH.'

— 17 year old

Young people highlighted the significance of these practical and symbolic strategies to promote inclusivity and reflect the diversity of students. Seeing a flag, poster, or literature in the school library that is inclusive of LGBTQIA+ identities was described as strengthening young people's feelings of safety and sense of belonging in their school environment.

Several young people described their schools as 'quite inclusive', having shown some level of commitment to some of the above strategies and practices outlined above. The following positive case study highlights the benefits of fostering inclusion and prohibiting discrimination.

Case Study – Age 18

I got quite lucky with my experiences at a religious high school - the school chaplain was welcoming and accepting of students regardless of their sexuality or gender identity. We had old students come back to volunteer at the school and had their pronouns used correctly.

Teachers made an effort to be clear that they accepted all students. I can't explain how much that meant to me as a young kid coming to grips with my identity, but knowing that those around me wouldn't judge me was truly meaningful.

However, my experience was pretty unique, even within my school. A prominent Religious Education teacher at the school at that time made it clear she thought gay people were going to hell, specifically referring to one student's Aunt and disregarding the possibility there were gay students in her class at the time (there were two).

At my sister's religious school a Pride Club was established, but due to parent complaints only high school students were allowed to join, and they were forbidden from advertising in case they 'converted' middle school students, which is patently absurd. I've heard of students forced into counselling there too because of who they are.

I was incredibly lucky to go to an accepting religious school - if I had gone to my sister's school I don't know what I would've done. So many queer youths struggle enough with mental health issues on account of discrimination from family and friends, and school should be a moment of freedom for them.

While I can't speak about religions other than Christianity, I know that some bible scholars are adamant that the bible has been mistranslated especially pertaining to queer issues – why can't schools see that?

Where to Next

I have heard about schools developing whole school approaches to be inclusive and respectful within the constructs of religious tolerance. There is much to learn from these schools and how they have created the policies, staff support, and leadership needed to meet their legal, moral, and ethical obligations to all students.

The young people themselves highlighted that positive stories are not the norm. It is significant that some young people who responded saw 'taking gay kids out of religious schools' as the only solution. These young people believed 'children deserve better' than the treatment they may receive in some schools.

The onus should be on those providing education services to create safe environments for all students, regardless of their identity. All students need to be able to be themselves, reach their full potential, and safely access and participate in their right to an education.

A number of schools have the balance right and engage with their student and parent communities in ways that protect all young people from harm, promote their capacity to fully engage in their school and learning, and facilitate their participation in the broader community.

Cross sector sharing of best practice in inclusive faith based education could be a beneficial starting point. All schools have an obligation to ensure young people are kept free from harm. There are young people telling us they don't feel safe or valued, and that they don't feel they belong in the environments where they spend so much of their time. This impacts on self-esteem, mental health, academic success and school attendance. For some young people this impact can be significant and have long lasting effects into adulthood.

Given the level of discrimination being described by LGBTQIA+ children, religious schools must ensure the children entrusted to their care are supported to experience a learning environment that keeps them safe and nurtured, promotes their physical, mental, and emotional health, and maintains their engagement with their school and broader community.

Endnotes

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