QUEENSLAND ACTION GROUP FOR LGBTIQ+ STUDENTS

May 2018

1. Introduction

We thank the Queensland Government for the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Queensland Anti-Cyberbullying Taskforce.

The Queensland Action Group for LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and questioning) Students supports children and young people of diverse sexuality, gender or bodies. Our goal is that LGBTIQ+ students and allies are welcome, safe and supported in reaching their full potential in all educational settings in Queensland.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (2014) tells us 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 LGBTIQ+. The number of same-sex families is also visibly increasing and consequently the number of school age children from those families is growing.

Our submission will focus on homophobic, transphobic and intersex bullying in Queensland schools.

2. Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the Taskforce consults academics and other authorities in Queensland to fully understand and address the greater risk of bullying faced by LGBTIQ+ students in Queensland schools.

Recommendation 2: That the Queensland Department of Education has visible comprehensive policies and guidelines to ensure that LGBTIQ+ children and young people are safe in all educational settings.

Recommendation 3: That a statewide program is delivered, 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 bodies, sexuality or gender.

Recommendation 4: That 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).

Recommendation 5: That all student health and wellbeing programs, including anti-bullying programs, should recognise and include representations that address the specific needs of LGBTIQ+ students.

Recommendation 6: That the valuable role that parents, students, teachers and other school staff can have in providing support, guidance and information for LGBTIQ+ students is acknowledged and welcomed by schools.

3. LGBTIQ+ children are at greater risk of being bullied

It is recognised that children who are LGBTIQ+ are at a greater risk of bullying in general and cyber bullying in particular (NOBullying.com, 2017).

Research in Australia has established that 80 per cent of homophobic bullying involving LGBTIQ+ young people occurs at school and has a profound impact on their well-being and education (Hillier et al., 2010).

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) due to ongoing bullying at school.

Rasmussen et al (2015) discuss the responsibility for homophobic and transphobic bullying, with cultural and religious differences implicated. Walton (2011) notes that: "parents' religious perspectives often clash with anti-homophobia initiatives. From an administrative standpoint, it therefore seems pragmatic as a strategy for evading controversy to draft policies that refer to bullying as generic behaviour. The problem, simply put, is this: Although masquerading as providing protection for all students, generic policies do not address the specific ways that particular children, and not others, are continual targets of peer violence" (p. 137).

Walton (2011) also writes that "anti-bullying in schools must acknowledge, address, and educate about notions of difference so that children who are vilified for being different (or perceived as such) are accorded safer learning environments" (p. 142).

Recommendation 1: That the Taskforce consults academics and other authorities in Queensland to fully understand and address the greater risk of bullying faced by LGBTIQ+ students in Queensland schools.

4. State education needs a strong comprehensive LGBTIQ+ policy

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 Victoria State Government Department of Education and Training (2018) 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 Safe Schools Anti-Bullying Initiative (2018) 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.

Tasmanian Government Department of Education (2018) is committed to providing a safe, supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students and staff, including those who are same-sex attracted, gender diverse or intersex.

Edmund Rice Education Australia, a group of Catholic schools, has published a Safe and Inclusive Learning Communities Statement (2018) 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.

The Queensland Government Department of Education (2018) has minimal information published on its website to demonstrate a commitment to support students and families of diverse sexuality, gender and intersex status. Some Queensland schools do provide inclusive and safe settings for LGBTIQ+ students. However, without public commitment by the education authority 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.

Recommendation 2: That the Queensland Department of Education has visible comprehensive policies and guidelines in place to ensure that LGBTIQ+ children and young people are safe in all educational settings.

5. Teacher education

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

Research in Australia shows that teachers do not feel confident to respond in an appropriate manner to issues such as homophobic and transphobic bullying, gender and sexuality identity and respectful relationships, intersex conversations and same-sex parenting, gender and sexuality (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.

The Federal Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) program 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 but not all schools or teachers received this training. The program was supported and valued by many reputable organisations across Australia. 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 ended in Queensland on 31 October 2017. There is a critical need for a replacement in-service educational program to ensure all teachers and staff in all schools across

Queensland 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.

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.

Recommendation 3: That a statewide program is delivered, 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 bodies, sexuality or gender.

Recommendation 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).

6. All student wellbeing programs should address the needs of LGBTIQ+ students

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).

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.

Recommendation 5: That all student health and wellbeing programs, including anti-bullying programs, should recognise and include representations that address the specific needs of LGBTIQ+ students.

7. Parents and carers should be involved

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 and prevent homophobic and transphobic bullying.

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.

Recommendation 6: That the valuable role that parents, students, teachers and other school staff can have in providing support, guidance and information for LGBTIQ+ students is acknowledged and welcomed by schools.

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