

INCLUSION AND SAFETY IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS: A VISION FROM LGBTIQA+ STUDENTS

Co-research report – VicSRC and Disha Awasthi

The findings in this report were gathered in consultation with Victorian students, and the recommendations were developed as a result of these consultations. As part of the consultations, participants were invited to draw their reflections for some questions. This artwork is included throughout the report. We have not included the name of the artist for reasons of confidentiality.

VicSRC is thankful for the support and expertise of everyone who contributed to this work.



VicSRC respectfully acknowledges and recognises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the custodians of this land. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria and across the wider continent.

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Glossary

Cisnormativity	The societal assumption that being cisgender—where gender identity aligns with sex assigned at birth—is the default experience. This perspective marginalises the experiences of trans and gender diverse people.
Deadnaming	The act of calling a trans person by the name they no longer use, such as the name that was assigned at birth ¹ . This term was used and endorsed by students consulted to describe this behaviour.
LGBTQIA+	An acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual and/or Aromantic, with the + representing other terms to describe identities beyond this abbreviation.
Queer	A common umbrella term representing anyone who is same gender attracted or gender diverse. While the term has been used as a slur in the past, it has also been reclaimed by some LGBTQIA+ people. The broadness of this term does not risk excluding groups, and it provides a sense of community without requiring a more specific label ² . This term was used by many students consulted.
Queerphobia	A general term used to describe forms of bigotry which focus on a person's sexual or gender identity.
Social Euphoria	Positive emotional responses to social events which affirm and support an individual's gender or sexual identity ³ .

¹ Koles, T. (2024). 'The Semantics of Deadnames.' *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 181/4, p.715–739

² Minus18 (2023). 'What Does Queer Mean Anyway?', <https://www.minus18.org.au/>, (accessed 25 November 2024)

³ Mann, T et al. (2023). 'Thriving Not Surviving.', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 21, p. 44–61

INTRODUCTION

As the peak body for primary and secondary school-aged students in Victoria, VicSRC exists to advocate for the interests of all Victorian students. VicSRC believes all students have a right to an inclusive education that fosters their wellbeing and personal development alongside their academic achievement. VicSRC recognises the importance of an education system that is tailored to the needs of students, embedding student voice at every level of decision-making to ensure the best possible outcome for students and the broader community.

This begins with hearing directly from students and empowering them to act as advocates for a more equitable and inclusive education system, recognising that their lived expertise is essential in understanding these challenges, and what the most effective and targeted solutions may look like.

That is why, for the first time, VicSRC chose to centre Victorian students in every aspect of its research by asking a Victorian student to act as co-researcher for this project.

This meant recruiting a student, supporting them in developing their own knowledge and expertise in the field, working collaboratively with them to determine the focus, methodology, and structure of the research. VicSRC's commitment to the co-research process was integral to this report. This involved both applying strong youth participation principles as well as building relationships with trust and integrity.

This resulting report, formulated in consultation with LGBTIQ+ identifying Victorian students, highlights elements of their education experience that affect their mental health, wellbeing and participation in school.

The research and student consultations spanned topics including teachers and teaching practices, students, as well as school facilities and resources. Through these discussions, students cited a range of areas that did not meet their needs, which could be improved to foster a more supportive and inclusive environment at school. This engagement process also made it clear that students are determined to be involved in building a better school environment for themselves and future students.

VicSRC's research found that students want teachers to be empowered in supporting them, through additional training and taking a more active role in promoting an inclusive classroom. Students also want their teachers to proactively respond to discrimination, ensuring students raising complaints feel heard.

Promoting active allyship among students is also key to creating a safer school environment according to students. This can be achieved through earlier education, as well as encouraging connection and advocacy through clubs and external spaces. Furthermore, students see the value of physical symbols of allyship in schools (e.g. posters and lanyards), as well as incorporating queer stories, histories and experiences within all aspects of the curriculum, while noting that these symbols alone are not enough to foster or maintain an inclusive environment.

Based on these findings and other research, this report includes a series of recommendations to foster a safer and more inclusive school environment for LGBTIQ+ students. VicSRC believes that this will make a meaningful and lasting difference to students' education experience, and their lives beyond school.

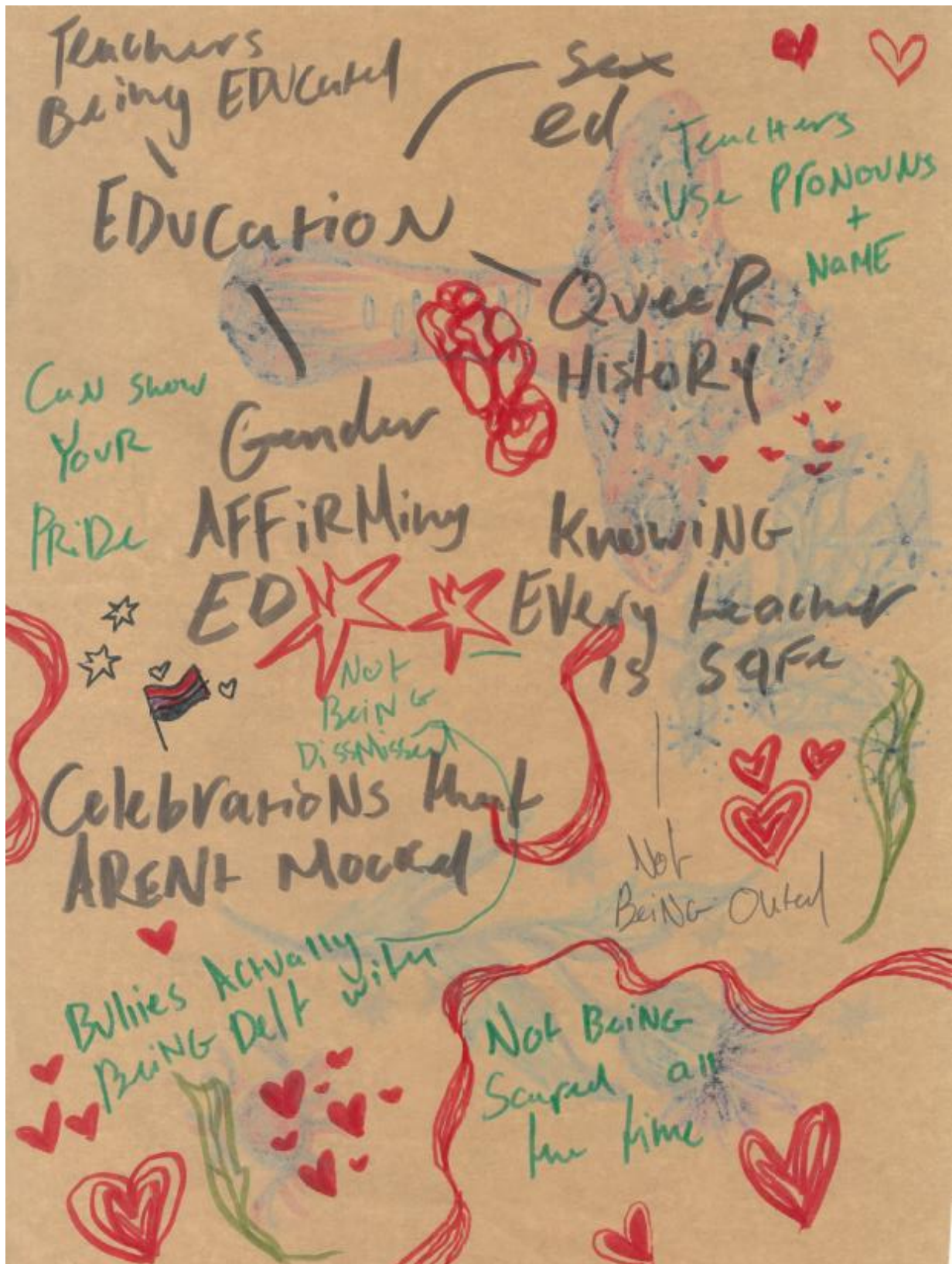
Message from the Student Researcher

As a student researcher, it has been a privilege to contribute to this report, which uplifts the voices and experiences of LGBTIQ+ students in Victorian schools. On a personal level, this project has been life changing. I have been awed by the vehement passion that students advocate with and their willpower to create change in their schools.

Regarding the research process, I truly see the value in co-research and its profound positive impacts. I have been mentored by my co-researcher, and through that process I have learnt how to undertake research, consult, advertise and create safe spaces for connection.

Furthermore, I have been able to build a strong co-research relationship, that has made me a better researcher. This work is deeply personal and necessary, because this project is not just a collection of data – it is a powerful reminder of the urgent need for action to create safer and more inclusive school environments. I urge you to take these findings seriously, and to ensure that every school is a place where all students feel safe, respected, and valued.

Disha Awasthi



A Victorian student's illustrated response to the question: "what would a safe and supportive school environment look, feel and sound like for queer students?"

Summary of Recommendations

Considering the findings from VicSRC's research, the Victorian Government should:

1. Empower students as co-designers, along with teachers, to create mandatory LGBTIQ+ inclusivity training for educators. This training should empower teachers to foster inclusive classrooms and effectively respond to homophobia and discrimination. This training should extend to both pre-service and current teachers.
2. Review practices regarding students' names, pronouns, and instances of misgendering to ensure that teachers have strong guidance on how to build and maintain inclusive classrooms.
3. Ensure students have clear and accessible advice about how to raise complaints at school. This advice should be regularly communicated to students. When students do raise complaints, outcomes should be clearly rationalised, and students should have a means to escalate their complaint if they choose.
4. Expand LGBTIQ+ education in primary years to foster active allyship from an early age and tackle discriminatory attitudes before they form. This education should be tailored by year level to ensure appropriateness and relevance.
5. Provide schools with greater resources to connect students with supportive spaces and communities both inside and outside school. This may include student mentorship programs, Pride Clubs or referrals to external LGBTIQ+ youth spaces. As part of this work, schools should ensure that staff support students to build those spaces themselves.
6. Ensure that schools have adequate resources in supporting parents and carers to understand school-based LGBTIQ+ programs and to engage with their children about queer identities in a positive way.
7. Expand queer representation within Victoria's curriculum to ensure that LGBTIQ+ stories, histories, and literature are represented across the width and breadth of a student's education.
8. Ensure that all schools are providing comprehensive and inclusive sex education, including education on sex and gender in health and science classrooms.
9. Remove gender binaries in schools by incorporating accessible inclusive bathrooms and non-gendered uniforms and displaying physical symbols of allyship while encouraging students to display them, too.
10. Encourage schools to invite LGBTIQ+ lived experience speakers and mentors into school spaces for advocacy and education events. Schools should also be provided with additional support in reaching students who are not already supportive allies, such as educational resources and training around challenging harmful attitudes.

BACKGROUND

Why this project?

Throughout VicSRC's work in advocating for a safer, more inclusive school environment, it was apparent that there is a remarkable lack of available data on the experiences of LGBTIQA+ students in schools. In conversations with students at VicSRC's 2023 Congress, VicSRC noted a trend in increased reports of discrimination and a lack of social cohesion at school⁴. This is reflected in data from *Writing Themselves in 4*, which found that almost two-fifths of Victorian secondary school students reported missing at least a day at their educational setting in the past 12 months because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable⁵.

This limited but crucial data makes it clear that any school which does not proactively build safety and inclusion into their environment will see the severity to which it impacts LGBTIQA+ students' wellbeing and learning. Building on this, data from the same report found that social connectivity and affirmation by self and others makes young people feel good and safe⁶. Through this research, VicSRC sought to understand what this looks like in schools.

LGBTIQA+ students in secondary schools share a diverse range of experiences and intersecting identities. A 2021 study into trans young people in secondary school highlights that their experiences are shaped by elements of privilege and disadvantage associated with disability, age, class, geography, race and sexuality⁷. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who identify as LGBTIQA+ have also been found to have poorer mental health outcomes than other LGBTIQA+ people and the general population, due to the compounded effects of intergenerational trauma and racism, in addition to homophobia, biphobia and transphobia⁸. These findings demonstrate the importance of considering how other aspects of lived experience impact LGBTIQA+ students' mental health.

While LGBTIQA+ student experiences are not homogenous, it is apparent overall that queer secondary school-aged young people experience psychological distress more than the broader population. Data from *Writing Themselves in 4* found that a larger proportion of participants aged 14 to 17 reported high or very high levels of psychological distress, compared with those aged 18 to 21⁹. Furthermore, a national survey of 859 transgender and gender diverse young people found that around 75% of participants reported being diagnosed with depression, and 72% with an anxiety disorder¹⁰. Of participants who reported a diagnosed mental health condition, 74% of participants had experienced bullying, while 89% of participants reported experiences of peer rejection¹¹.

It is clear that early intervention is critical to supporting LGBTIQA+ children and young people with their mental health needs¹². Given that school settings represent one of the most significant and

⁴ VicSRC (2023) '2023 Congress Report', Victorian Student Representative Council ([link](#)).

⁵ Hill, A.O et al. (2020), 'Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report', La Trobe University, p.34

⁶ Ibid, p. 52

⁷ McBride, R (2021), 'A literature review of the secondary school experiences of trans youth', *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 2/18, p.103-134

⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission (2015), 'Resilient Individuals: Sexual Orientation Gender Identity & Intersex Rights: National Consultation Report' cited in Department of Education and Training (Victoria), (2019), 'State of Victoria's Children Report', p. 144

⁹ Ibid, p.41

¹⁰ Strauss, P et al. (2017), 'Trans Pathways: the mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people, Summary of results', Telethon Kids Institute cited in Department of Education and Training (Victoria), (2018), 'State of Victoria's Children Report', p. 71

¹¹ Ibid

¹² McDermott, E (2021), 'Explaining Effective Mental Health Support for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Meta-Narrative Review', *SSM - Mental Health*, 1

influential social settings for most young people, early intervention and prevention strategies must include a robust understanding of school-based challenges and avenues for support.

Considering this, VicSRC sought an opportunity to explore the specific experiences of LGBTIQ+ students at school to understand how they could be better supported at school.

In seeking out support for this endeavour, VicSRC found an ideal partner through Youth Affairs Council Victoria's (YACVic) Healthy Equal Youth program, which aims to deliver support, services and opportunities for LGBTIQ+ young people in partnership with community organisations and the Victorian government. To this end, VicSRC sought to engage an LGBTIQ+ student to lead the project through co-research, while consulting a group of students about their experiences.

In approaching this project, we recognised the value of combining lived experience with existing research, especially through empowering a student to shape each aspect of the research process. Through this process of co-research, VicSRC aimed to work directly with a student to gather a comprehensive understanding of this research area in a way that is genuinely reflective of what students want and need.

Methodology

This report is supported by findings from consultations and a survey developed by VicSRC which engaged with LGBTIQ+ secondary school Victorian students. The objective of these consultations was to build a deep understanding of the experiences LGBTIQ+ students have at school as. These perspectives directly inform the recommendations VicSRC outlines in this report.

Participants were recruited through an open expression of interest process targeted at LGBTIQ+ secondary school students in Victoria, leveraging VicSRC's networks and partnerships to ensure diverse representation. Ten students participated in the consultation, and eight of these contributed to the survey. The survey also engaged an additional eight students. Participants included secondary school students from both government and non-government schools. Students who attended the consultation were reimbursed for their time and expertise.

The consultation process included both in-person and online sessions to maximise accessibility and ensure inclusive participation. Facilitators (including the Student Co-researcher and VicSRC staff) guided discussions on the impact of teachers, students, and school facilities on participants' experiences of school. A consultation handbook and pre-brief meetings were provided to support participants, and a social worker was present to offer additional assistance. A survey was also conducted, offering an alternative way for students to participate in the process.

Data from consultations and surveys were collected through notes and audio recordings (with consent) and analysed to identify key themes. Findings were processed using thematic analysis to reflect the authentic voices of students, which are presented anonymously in this report.

THE IMPACT OF TEACHERS AND TEACHING PRACTICES ON LGBTIQA+ STUDENTS

Teachers play an important role in supporting student wellbeing and inclusivity, both as role models and educators. While experiences with teachers differ across schools, students identified key actions from teachers that make a tangible, positive difference in their education. This is clearly demonstrated by recent data. *Writing Themselves in 4*, a national survey of the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQA+ young people in Australia, found that 68.4% of participants felt supported about their sexuality or gender identity by their teachers¹³. Other Australian research found that students who did not feel supported by their teachers were around four times more likely to leave school due to experiencing discrimination, than those who did feel supported¹⁴.

These findings were supported by VicSRC's own research. Through this project we found that only 44% of students felt that their teachers understood how to support LGBTIQA+ students and their unique experiences and challenges.



“Seeing teachers take initiative to keep you safe means a lot and really helps me to build respect for them” – Student participant

Discussions with students began by focusing on the role which teachers and classroom practices play on their inclusion and safety at school. These discussions covered many topics around how teachers engage with inclusivity measures, and what effective approaches look like for them.

Students reflected that the use of inclusive language in classrooms varied greatly among their teachers. In some circumstances, students said, staff did attempt to be more inclusive with their use of language, but in ways that were misinformed, sometimes having the effect of still being exclusionary. Students said this included the use of overly euphemistic language like ‘special’ or ‘different’ that had the effect of ‘othering’ queer representation, instead of taking a more straightforward approach which students preferred.

The use of pronouns was another key factor in informing queer students’ experiences in classroom settings. Students indicated that when teachers invited the class to share their pronouns and set an expectation of respect for those pronouns within that classroom, this had a strong, positive influence on their experience of inclusion in that space.

Students suggested that this practice of ‘pronoun rounds’ should be established at the beginning of the school year and maintained as an expectation throughout the course of that class.

The positive impacts on students of teachers setting this expectation and using correct pronouns is clearly demonstrated in *From Blues to Rainbows*, an Australian study of the mental health and wellbeing of 189 gender diverse and transgender young people, which found that students who did not have teachers who used appropriate language (i.e. correct pronouns) were more likely to have poor educational outcomes than those who did¹⁵.

¹³ Hill, A.O et al. (2020), ‘Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report’, La Trobe University, p.9

¹⁴ Smith, E et al. (2014), ‘From Blues to Rainbows’, La Trobe University and University of New England, p.12

¹⁵ Ibid, p.54

Existing research also affirms that respect for students' gender identities is a source of *social euphoria*, which describes positive emotional responses to social events which affirm and support one's gender or sexual identity, highlighting its importance to building a safe school environment¹⁶.

While some students experienced the benefits of this practice in the classroom, others did not. Students cited 'deadnaming' as a key concern. 'Deadnaming' describes the act of calling a trans person by the name they no longer use, such as the name that was assigned at birth¹⁷.

Students suggested that this behaviour was especially prevalent among substitute teachers, which students have separately reflected as being an emerging feature of their education as the Victorian teacher workforce faces ongoing challenges.

“Sometimes teachers use 'dead names' because they are still on the roll, especially with substitutes who don't know” – Student participant

Students suggested that there needs to be a standardised process for ensuring that students can elect a chosen name and that this name is readily accessible by teachers (including casual relief teachers) as a matter of standard practice, to avoid deadnaming and misgendering.

Other challenges surrounding the teacher workforce shortage emerged through conversations with students who reflected that building positive relationships between themselves and teachers was crucial to a safe and inclusive school environment. Students shared that this was increasingly difficult in circumstances where their teachers frequently changed, were absent, or were too busy to dedicate time to them.

Students explained that they appreciated when teachers checked in with them regularly and made an effort to form connections, but that this was becoming increasingly rare. Students at VicSRC's 2023 Congress had a similar reflection, that building relationships with teachers was becoming increasingly challenging because of high turnover, frequent substitute teachers, and teachers generally not having sufficient time available to dedicate to relationship building with students¹⁸.

Students also reflected on how teachers' perceived attitudes and biases surrounding gender impacted how they responded to instances of LGBTIQ+ related bullying. Students noted that some teachers responded with a wide range of strategies, while others chose not to intervene at all. This is reaffirmed further in other Australian research around bullying, with one study finding that attitudes and biases can shape teachers' behaviour in responding to bullying¹⁹.

This was a major concern for students, which is not surprising considering VicSRC survey data indicated that a majority of students (63%) had experienced discrimination at school as an LGBTIQ+ student, and were seeking appropriate and effective support in response. Furthermore, a separate survey of LGBTIQ+ Australian secondary school students found that 94% of participants had heard homophobic language at their school, with 58% of this cohort reporting that they heard this language daily²⁰, reiterating the urgency of ensuring that discrimination and bullying of queer students is properly addressed.

The degree to which this happens varies across schools and communities, with students consulted from regional areas indicating that their experiences were more acute. This experience is reaffirmed

¹⁶ Mann, T et al. (2023). 'Thriving Not Surviving.', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 21, p. 44–61

¹⁷ Koles, T. (2024). 'The Semantics of Deadnames.' *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 181/4, p.715–739

¹⁸ VicSRC (2023) 2023 Congress Report, Victorian Student Representative Council (link).

¹⁹ Parker, L., Webb, S., & Chonody, J. M (2022). 'Bullying toward LGBTIQ+ students in Australian schools: Understanding teachers' intentions to intervene.' *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 3/20, p.561–584

²⁰ Strauss, P et al. (2017), 'Trans Pathways: the mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people, Summary of results', Telethon Kids Institute cited in Department of Education and Training (Victoria), (2018), 'State of Victoria's Children Report', p. 71

by existing research, which highlights that 87.5% of LGBTQIA+ students surveyed in regional and rural Australia would like to see their teachers more frequently stand up to discrimination²¹.

Students emphasised the value of staff responding to queerphobia with real consequences, including structuring these as learning opportunities for those involved. Students also agreed that it was valuable for teachers to step in to address less overt or unintentional cases of discrimination, such as when someone is misgendered. Students explained that when this occurs, they prefer teachers to intervene in a proactive but straightforward manner.

“I like when my teachers correct misgendering, as long as they don’t make a big thing out of it” – Student participant

Altogether, these reflections make it clear that while equipping staff with the knowledge and tools they need to adequately support students is essential, efforts must also be made to address deeper attitudes and biases.

Students also reflected on the quality of classroom instruction when it came to important programs like Respectful Relationships. While students explained that they were seeking straightforward and direct conversations about these topics, teachers generally did not seem comfortable or confident in delivering the material. Students explained that the quality of the instruction is foundational in determining the success of the initiative among students in the classroom.

“[The] delivery [of any particular program] can make or break the whole initiative” – Student participant

In related reflections, students said that the way in which teachers allow discussions and debates to unfold in the classroom was a key determiner of their feelings of safety and inclusion. Students cited examples where discussions surrounding their human rights, including same-sex marriage and the rights of trans people, had been framed as open debates within their classrooms. Students said that when these conversations were not properly managed, and treated as debates rather than education and information sharing, student safety in the classroom was compromised and opportunities for bullying were opened.

“I feel incredibly unsafe when those debates come up in class” – Student participant

Students who were consulted also generally felt safer around staff who identify as LGBTQIA+, noting that LGBTQIA+ teachers often practiced inclusivity well. Furthermore, students indicated that they would often seek out support from these teachers before they engaged with designated support or wellbeing staff.

Not only do these findings reflect the need to ensure that schools are safe workplaces for queer staff, but also that more needs to be done to ensure that inclusion practices are embodied by all staff to ensure the responsibility of inclusion is not shouldered by LGBTQIA+ identifying teachers

“A lot of our teachers are queer ... they are a great support. None of them are wellbeing officers though, and they are not the ones who are supposed to be helping us. I can’t go to wellbeing because they don’t understand in the same way.” – Student participant

Students also discussed the role of physical symbols of inclusion and allyship such as pronoun badges, Pride flags and posters in the classroom. While students noted that these markers do have a

²¹ Minus18 Foundation (2020), ‘Queer Out Here Report: LGBTQIA+ Inclusion in Regional and Rural Schools’, p.10

positive impact in making them feel welcome and safe, they also agreed that these practices can easily become tokenistic when they do not exist alongside other forms of meaningful action and allyship such as those detailed in this report.

*“I always feel safer around people who show those symbols” –
Student participant*

With all of these considerations in mind, students agreed that in order to actively support queer students, teachers need further support and resources to ensure they can act confidently to build a safe and inclusive classroom. To do that, students said they must work together with teachers to co-design resources which meet the needs of teachers and respond to students’ biggest priorities in building inclusive school environments.

In considering other measures to help address these concerns, students expressed that they were eager to feel more empowered in raising complaints at school. Fifty per cent of students consulted disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt confident in raising discrimination related complaints, or that they would be treated seriously and with respect if they did so.

Students highlighted that when they wanted to raise an issue with their school, they often found the processes to be unclear and exhausting. Moreover, students were keenly aware of the burnout teachers were facing, and expressed that they may not feel comfortable raising additional issues with them for this reason.

These reflections support other findings made by VicSRC, where students in 2023 cited the stress teachers face as a major factor in determining whether they chose to seek out support from those teachers, sometimes choosing to keep issues to themselves instead²².

As such, students made it clear that improvements should be made to ensure the process of raising complaints within schools is clear, straightforward, and prioritises student safety, to ensure students are empowered to raise their concerns formally.

*“Even when I managed to make progress with my school by changing
the uniform code, it was exhausting, an uphill battle” – Student
participant*

Finally, students made it clear that they needed more information about the training teachers receive and relevant teacher behavioural policies, to better understand what the expectations are of staff. This information would, according to students, empower them to understand when behaviour is inappropriate, and what their rights are.

Recommendation 1: Empower students as co-designers, along with teachers, to create mandatory LGBTIQ+ inclusivity training for educators. This training should empower teachers to foster inclusive classrooms and effectively respond to homophobia and discrimination. This training should extend to both pre-service and current teachers.

Recommendation 2: Review practices regarding students’ names, pronouns, and instances of misgendering to ensure that teachers have strong guidance on how to build and maintain inclusive classrooms.

Recommendation 3: Ensure students have clear and accessible advice about how to raise complaints at school. This advice should be regularly communicated to students. When students do raise complaints, outcomes should be clearly rationalised, and students should have a means to escalate their complaint if they choose.

²² VicSRC (2023), 2023 Congress Report, Victorian Student Representative Council (link).

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL PEERS ON LGBTIQA+ STUDENTS

Like teachers and school staff, LGBTIQA+ students' peers have a significant impact on their experiences of safety and inclusion at school.

These impacts were consistently demonstrated throughout VicSRC's consultations, with supportive classmates being a key protective factor for LGBTIQA+ students.

*“When students use my pronouns and the preferred names of openly trans students, it makes me, and a lot of other students feel safe” –
Student participant*

Notably, data from *Writing Themselves in 4* demonstrated that less than two-fifths of participants in secondary or tertiary education reported their classmates as supportive about their sexuality or gender identity²³. This shares similarities with findings from VicSRC's research, where only 25% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their peers were contributing to a supportive and inclusive environment for them at school.

Throughout the consultations, it became clear that students need greater support in understanding and enacting active allyship for their LGBTIQA+ peers. Furthermore, students found real value in safe spaces for community connection, both inside and outside school.

As with teachers and school staff, visible allyship from peers is a core part of ensuring LGBTIQA+ students feel safe at school. Students reported that seeing their peers wear physical symbols of allyship, such as pride pins builds affirmation in the school environment.

*“Some of the students at my school make it clear that they are accepting and welcoming by wearing pride pins on their blazers” –
Student participant*

Like symbols, the use of inclusive language by students was another contributing factor to a safe school environment for LGBTIQA+ students. The greatest focus for participants in this discussion was around the correct use of pronouns and chosen names. Through this kind of positive affirmation, students described the strong positive impact this has on their feelings of inclusion and safety.

Beyond the use of specific language, students also reflected on the value of other students demonstrating empathy and curiosity in conversations about queer students' identities and lived experience. Students agreed that it was not uncommon or unreasonable for students to be interested in their peers' experiences, but it is important for these conversations to be approached respectfully.

Students said curiosity should be encouraged, emphasising the value in genuine interactions about LGBTIQA+ issues without stigma or discriminatory language, while maintaining a sense of safety, especially around potentially sensitive topics. Students also said that their peers should be encouraged in pursuing their own research and making an effort to expand their own understanding of LGBTIQA+ issues.

In contrast, students reflected on the negative impacts of some conversations with their peers who were not acting with good intentions. Namely, students reported that their peers sometimes made them feel unsafe by asking invasive questions or making insensitive comments about their identities. Students reflected that in some circumstances it seemed that peers took queerness as an invitation to pry into deeply personal aspects of their lives without their consent. This behaviour had the effect

²³ Hill, A.O et al. (2020), 'Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report', La Trobe University, p.8

of belittling LGBTIQ+ students, making them feel exposed or as though their identity is subject to unwanted discussion.

“Some students assume that it’s always their business or they have a right to know things” – Student participant

Students explained that these discussions could also escalate into students treating aspects of LGBTIQ+ identities as topics for debate, which is something students had reflected on in the context of what their teachers allowed to unfold in their classrooms. Students shared how this made them feel unsafe, describing how classmates engaged in harmful discussions about topics such as gender identity and sexuality, treating them as controversial rather than respecting their peers’ lived experiences.

These interactions can, according to students, be particularly harmful when other students make hurtful or dismissive comments. Without intervention, these harmful discussions can exacerbate feelings of isolation for LGBTIQ+ students, who feel increasingly othered.

“It doesn’t come from a place of hate, they’re just uneducated” – Student participant

These reflections are supported by existing research. *Writing Themselves in 4* found that around 60% of participants in secondary school reported frequently hearing negative remarks regarding sexuality in the previous twelve months²⁴.

To address this, students emphasised the need for clear avenues to report such incidents, with appropriate responses from both the wellbeing team and school leadership, tailored to the severity of the situation. This support, combined with earnest and safe interactions from peers, is crucial to fostering a safer and more inclusive environment.

Students also shared other strategies to foster allyship between their peers at school. Students suggest implementing mentoring groups, where older students could provide guidance and share their experiences with younger students, within in a supported environment.

Students also suggested measures which empowered them to organise clubs and groups based on their queerness and shared experiences, such as ‘Pride’ or ‘Queer-Straight Alliance’ clubs. However, data from *Writing Themselves In 4* showed that only 40.6% of secondary students were aware of an LGBTIQ+ alliance at their school²⁵.

These clubs, according to students, not only create an environment that fosters allyship and learning, but also affirms that queer students have a place in schools. Students also shared that these groups work to build a sense of community and support across different year levels. Other Australian



²⁴ Hill, A.O et al. (2020), ‘Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report’, La Trobe University, p.9

²⁵ Hill, A.O et al. (2020), ‘Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report’, La Trobe University, p.9

research affirms this, finding that queer-straight alliances in schools created new spaces of possibility for learning and fostered queer connection and allyship²⁶.

While these clubs can be central to students embracing LGBTIQ+ allyship, students shared that they were often subject to stigma. Students described having to take measures like drawing the blinds at their clubs in an effort to seclude themselves. Instead of being open and inviting spaces for students to contribute to, these gatherings could sometimes carry a sense of fear or shame. Though in some cases this seclusion could contribute to the privacy and safety of the space, it could also discourage new students from joining.

Though students had a variety of perspectives on this issue, it was clear that efforts to shift the broader culture around queerness within a school must involve a tailored and student-centred approach, to address each school's unique challenges.

“I wish the clubs were more public, if they're kept private and quiet, it feeds into the stigma of it being shameful or embarrassing” – Student participant

Finally, students also reflected on the value of community and connection with other LGBTIQ+ young people outside of the school context. Students agreed that schools should make a greater effort to promote and refer students to community programs, especially through school wellbeing teams. Students noted that existing community infrastructure can play a valuable role in supporting queer students alongside school-based support.

“It would be really cool if schools could help students to connect with community programs. This would encourage students to engage with likeminded people” – Student participant

Recommendation 4: Expand LGBTIQ+ education in primary years to foster active allyship from an early age and tackle discriminatory attitudes before they form. This education should be tailored by year level to ensure appropriateness and relevance.

Recommendation 5: Provide schools with greater resources to connect students with supportive spaces and communities both inside and outside school. This may include student mentorship programs, Pride Clubs or referrals to external LGBTIQ+ youth spaces. As part of this work, schools should ensure that staff support students to build those spaces themselves.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that schools have adequate resources in supporting parents and carers to understand school-based LGBTIQ+ programs and to engage with their children about queer identities in a positive way.

²⁶ Vicars, M & Van Toledo., S (2021), 'Walking the Talk: LGBTQ Allies in Australian Secondary Schools', *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, p. 1–13

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL FACILITIES, RESOURCES AND PROGRAMS ON LGBTIQA+ STUDENTS

Underlying students' experiences with both staff and their peers, is the impacts that their school's facilities, resources and programs have on informing their safety and inclusion at school.

While some schools are making genuine efforts to create a safer environment through these means, this is not true for all schools, and students made it clear that more can be done to improve outcomes in this space.

Across VicSRC's consultations and survey data, students raised key themes around their physical school environment, curriculum and advocacy events. It is clear that each of these areas requires further reform to be more inclusive of LGBTIQA+ students, and to meaningfully contribute to student safety and advocacy.



Students consulted believed that the curriculum was not inclusive of their identities and their experiences. VicSRC data found that the majority of students (75%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that LGBTIQA+ histories and stories were a part of what was learned in schools. Furthermore, within the context of sex education, many students reflected that LGBTIQA+ experiences were not included or were glossed over in a narrow or tokenistic way.

This is supported by existing Australian research, which found that topics such as homophobia, the gender binary, same-sex sexual expression and same-sex families were reported by under 10% of students surveyed about their education²⁷. Furthermore, topics directly about trans people were reported by under 3% of participants²⁸.

Students consulted by VicSRC explained that while resources with additional information might be present in other spaces such as the school library, they highlighted the importance of having these conversations in class.

"We did a one-hour worksheet on queer identities and then never talked about it again" – Student participant

Students also emphasised the importance of including LGBTIQA+ stories and histories in all aspects of the curriculum, beyond sex education. They reflected that when queer education is confined to sex education or related curriculums, this could maintain narrow or misinformed perspectives about queer people.

"Queerness isn't inherently sexual" – Student participant

These perspectives are supported by existing Australian research, which demonstrates the way in which the curriculum privileges heterosexuality and treats other sexualities as the hidden 'educational

²⁷ Shannon, B. (2022). 'Trans Youth Perspectives on Formal Sex Education', in: *Sex(uality) Education for Trans and Gender Diverse Youth in Australia* (Camden: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 81–100

²⁸ Ibid.

other²⁹. Students from some schools said that LGBTIQ+ people were not acknowledged at all in the curriculum, adding to stigma and serving to erase LGBTIQ+ experiences from the school community. Data from *Writing Themselves in 4* also found that 23% of participants reported never having any aspect of LGBTIQ+ people mentioned in a supportive or inclusive way during their secondary or tertiary education³⁰. Students reflected that when queer education is not sufficient, it leaves room for misinformation to run unchecked, fuelling further instances of discrimination.

Students indicated that a more holistic approach to queer education was needed, and they provided simple and intuitive recommendations to address this problem. These included having more English materials that centre stories featuring queer characters and learning about queer history in humanities classes.

Students also spoke to the positive impact that queer literature can have in other school spaces like libraries, both as a means to increase exposure and foster positive attitudes, while also making those resources more available for students who were seeking them out.

Students also generally agreed that their physical school environments did not impactfully promote inclusion for LGBTIQ+ students. While they agreed that physical symbols of allyship such as flags and Pride posters make difference in contributing to a safer school environment, it was clear that these symbols must go hand-in-hand with other actions and initiatives from schools to avoid tokenism.

“Posters up in the school gives me hope that things will get better and that there are people who understand and care” – Student participant

Students also reflected on the need for all-gender bathrooms in schools, noting that gendered bathrooms pose additional barriers for trans and gender diverse students who are often forced to use bathrooms that do not align with their gender.

Other research makes it clear that a lack of inclusive infrastructure like all-gender bathrooms are examples of cisnormativity in school settings which have the effect of erasing trans identities in secondary schools³¹. Students shared circumstances where trans students would face discrimination or physical danger from other students when using the bathroom that aligns with trans students' gender identity

In circumstances where students did have access to inclusive bathrooms, they appreciated these. However, these facilities were not always readily available, sometimes only accessible with a teacher's key, ultimately having the opposite effect of an inclusive bathroom's intention and re-enforcing trans students' 'othering'.

Previous Australian research has also indicated that trans people are twice as likely not to complete their formal required schooling years due to unsupportive environments, highlighting the negative impact of this³². Findings from this project made it clear that gender norms enforced through physical education settings are a contributing factor to this trend.

Students also reflected that their own advocacy to have inclusive bathrooms featured within their schools were met with stigma and discrimination, citing teachers' concerns that the requests were

²⁹ Vicars, M & Van Toledo, S (2021), 'Walking the Talk: LGBTQ Allies in Australian Secondary Schools', *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, p. 1–13

³⁰ Hill, A.O et al. (2020), 'Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report', La Trobe University, p.27

³¹ McBride, R (2021), 'A literature review of the secondary school experiences of trans youth', *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 2/18, p.103–134

³² Smith, E et al. (2014), 'From Blues to Rainbows', La Trobe University and University of New England, p. 49

'inappropriate'. These findings re-enforce students' other reflections that the personal views and biases of school staff can impact their decision-making in these circumstances.

Additionally, students cited their schools' uniforms policies as another barrier to their inclusion and safety at school, reflecting other research on this topic³³. Students stressed the negative impacts of restrictive uniform policies on their wellbeing, as the binary, gendered uniform can worsen dysphoria and discomfort.

When discussing the purpose and effectiveness of LGBTIQ+ focused events at school, students made it clear that they can provide strong, positive experiences which feel genuinely meaningful. Existing consultative research involving students in regional and rural areas also highlights the need for more of these opportunities within and outside of their communities³⁴.

While students generally agreed that these events increase visibility and provide opportunities for greater inclusion and acceptance, they also reflected that LGBTIQ+ events did not always have a meaningful impact on making school more inclusive.

Students suggested that in some circumstances, these events took place at their school without a proper effort to treat that event as a learning opportunity. In this sense, students reflected that LGBTIQ+ events were often celebratory but not educational.

More specifically, students found that these events generally did not have a positive impact on students who were not already allies, namely because these events were optional opportunities for engagement, and they usually did not reach students who needed that exposure the most. Students also reflected that events like these may also have the effect of instilling a false sense of safety among some teachers and school staff, who were attending out of necessity rather than genuine allyship.

"It can be hard to tell whether staff or students are participating in these events because they care or just because it's their job" – Student participant

When asked what students want to see in LGBTIQ+ school events, students emphasised the value in hearing directly from speakers with lived experience. Students shared that they are excited about interactive ways to learn about LGBTIQ+ issues and topics, including personal stories, which are an important component of their learning.

Additionally, students shared that LGBTIQ+ school events generally do well to engage queer allies, while missing an opportunity to educate students who may not be, as these events are optional. As such, students reflected on the need for schools to take a more proactive approach in reaching students who are not already allies through school events.

"Hearing from people in this space outside of school is really important" – Student participant

Recommendation 7: Expand queer representation within Victoria's curriculum to ensure that LGBTIQ+ stories, histories, and literature are represented across the width and breadth of a student's education.

Recommendation 8: Ensure that all schools are providing comprehensive and inclusive sex education, including education on sex and gender in health and science classrooms.

³³ McBride, R (2021), 'A literature review of the secondary school experiences of trans youth', *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 2/18, p.103–134

³⁴ Minus18 Foundation (2019), 'Young & Queer Report', 10

Recommendation 9: Remove gender binaries in schools by incorporating accessible inclusive bathrooms and non-gendered uniforms and displaying physical symbols of allyship while encouraging students to display them, too.

Recommendation 10: Encourage schools to invite LGBTIQ+ lived experience speakers and mentors into school spaces for advocacy and education events. Schools should also be provided with additional support in reaching students who are not already supportive allies, such as educational resources and training around challenging harmful attitudes.