



FREE2BE? :

Exploring the schooling experiences
of Australia's sexuality and gender
diverse secondary school students

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As always, this work would not have been possible without the generosity of the young people themselves. In sharing their schooling experiences, they have put their faith in us – the adults in their lives – who are their educators, their school leaders, the authors of their syllabi, curriculum, federal, state and school-level policies, and their departmental representatives. They have highlighted the need for institutional support and visibility and it is up to us to respond to that call.

The Centre for Educational Research

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Executive Summary

Design and Aims

This report details the findings from a 2013 nationwide survey of sexuality and gender diverse Australian secondary school students entitled the *Free2Be?* project. The name, while also intended to be catchy and easy for young people to remember, was designed to address the fundamental project question for participants: Is school a place where it is safe to be yourself? Are you *free to be you*?

The project's core aims were to 1) gain a better understanding of how sexuality and gender diverse students experience their school's ethos, referred to here as *school climate*, with regards to sexuality and gender diversity in the broad sense, and to 2) investigate links between students' reported school climate and various measures of their school wellbeing and associated academic outcomes. This research complements and extends numerous recent Australian studies which highlight both the structural discrimination experienced by some sexuality and gender diverse students as well as the positive impact of a supportive school environment, as experienced by others.

Demographics

Seven hundred and four young people between the ages of 14-18, representing every state and territory in Australia, participated in the online survey. In terms of sexual identity, the majority of participants identified as lesbian/gay (43%) or bisexual (24%), with a sizeable minority of participants identifying as pansexual (12%). The majority of participants identified as either a girl/woman (57%) or as a boy/man (34%), with just over 7% of participants identifying as either genderqueer or transgender. The term *sexuality and gender diverse* is used throughout this report to signify the array of sexuality and gender identities highlighted by the young people.

Schooling Experiences

The young people in this study attended schools from across the sector, with the majority of participants attending government schools (62%). Participants overwhelmingly depicted a secondary schooling environment in which marginalising (e.g. homophobic/transphobic) language was rife and where school staff did not respond with consistency. A startling 94% of students had heard homophobic language at school, with 58% of these young people reporting hearing this language daily. Of those who reported classmates using this language within earshot of school staff, less than 5% reported that these adults always intervened to put a stop to its use.

Although somewhat less commonly reported, 45% of participants indicated that they had witnessed school-based physical harassment of classmates perceived to be sexuality and/or gender diverse, with 12% of participants witnessing such harassment on a weekly basis. Only 12% of young people who witnessed such physical harassment occurring in front of school staff reported that these adults always intervened.

Participants depicted inconsistencies in adults' responses to school-based marginalisation ranging from purposive ignoring (and, in the worst cases, active participation in the marginalising behaviours) to addressing the discrimination and attempting to educate around the incident. Most participants who described an educative intervention highlighted specific teachers at their school who would respond in such a manner, in contrast to the majority of others who would not.

Similar inconsistencies were apparent in students' reports of related curricular inclusions. Approximately 40% of students reported that they knew where to go to locate information and support regarding sexuality and gender diversity and similar percentages of students could recall their teachers engaging with sexuality and/or gender diversity in a positive or supportive fashion at least "some of the time" or more frequently. However, only one quarter of participants' could recall classroom learning about topics related to sexuality and/or gender diversity in any kind of formal capacity, with a mere 3% of students reporting that it was "definitely true" that they had learned about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities during their Health and Physical Education instruction. Findings suggest that some school staff work intentionally to support sexuality and gender diverse students in a variety of informal ways, including general positivity with regards to related topics and the provision of inclusive resources, but that formal curricular inclusion is far less common.

Participants attending schools in which their school harassment policies explicitly included sexual orientation as a considered and protected cohort of the student population (16% of participants) were significantly more likely to report their teachers' intervention in instances of verbal and physical marginalisation of sexuality and gender diverse students, as well as their general positivity and support.

Relationships between School Climate and School Wellbeing

Participants' perceptions of the frequency of instances of marginalising language and/or harassment directed at sexuality and gender diverse students and their teachers' intervention during those instances were significantly correlated with their school wellbeing outcomes, particularly those related to their perceived teacher empathy/care, reported school safety and sense of connection to the school environment. Students attending schools with fewer instances of marginalising behaviours, and more consistent adult intervention when those behaviours did occur, were happier and more connected at school, safer and more likely to feel as if their teachers were invested in their personal academic success.

Likewise, reported teacher positivity and support for both sexuality diversity and gender diversity were significantly correlated with students' school wellbeing outcomes, with the strongest relationships present between teacher positivity and both student morale and sense of connection to school. Similar relationships were found between school wellbeing outcomes and students' reported formal inclusions (e.g. within health and physical education and elsewhere within the curriculum).

Academic Outcomes

Several self-report measures of academic outcomes were used to examine relationships between participants' sense of their own academic achievements and motivation and their reported school wellbeing and school climate. Participants with elevated school wellbeing outcomes also had higher reported academic outcomes, including higher academic self-concept, greater intentions to attend university and fewer reported incidences of truancy. Students' truancy behaviours were significantly correlated with their teachers' reported positivity with regards to sexuality and gender diversity, highlighting the links between school climate, school wellbeing and academic outcomes and behaviours for sexuality and gender diverse students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While a minority number of sexuality and gender diverse young people appear to be attending secondary schools in which inclusive pedagogical practices are the norm and in which homophobic and/or transphobic language and behaviours are not tolerated, this is not the reported experience for the majority of project participants. Most of the sexuality and gender diverse young people who contributed to this research attended secondary schools in which marginalising practices occurred on a weekly, if not daily, basis and where teacher positivity and formal inclusions of sexuality and gender diversity were the exception rather than the norm. Project findings highlight the relationship between sexuality and gender diverse students' perceptions of their school climate and their own school wellbeing, including connection to their peers, teachers and investment in the schooling environment more generally, and demonstrate how these key factors are linked to academic outcomes for this cohort.

Accordingly, at the level of the individual school, recommendations include a clearly-articulated whole-school plan for improvements to their school climate, namely:

- Training for school staff which addresses expectations for inclusivity of sexuality and gender diversity and provides guidelines for inclusive language and related resource integration across all areas of the curriculum;
- The drafting, communication and implementation of student wellbeing policies which explicitly name sexuality and gender diverse individuals;
- Clear, unequivocal guidelines for the consistent implementation of a whole-school approach to preventing and addressing bias-motivated harassment of sexuality and gender diverse students which includes provisions for educative, as opposed to strictly punitive, adult response.

More detailed recommendations are located in the concluding section of this report.

Are you...Free2Be?

The schooling experiences of sexuality and gender diverse youth

Project Background

The *Free2Be?* research project (2013) examined the schooling experiences of sexuality and gender diverse Australian secondary students, aged 14-18, from across the country. These young people were asked to report on their experiences of their secondary school environment in terms of inclusivity of sexuality and gender diversity within both their formal classroom learning as well as more informal, social experiences of school-based inclusivity. Young people were also asked about witnessing marginalising behaviours at school related to the target's real, or perceived, sexuality or gender diversity and asked to report on the responses of school staff members in these instances.

The aims of this research were:

- (i) To better understand the ways in which sexuality and gender diverse students experience their secondary school climate with regards to both inclusive and marginalising practices;
- (ii) To explore the relationship between students' reported school climate with regards to sexuality and gender diversity and students' school wellbeing outcomes.

The Need for “Free2Be?”

Sexuality and gender diverse identities remain marginalised in and by school education in Australia despite increasing national and global social acceptance (Guasp, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer & Boesen, 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011). In fact, a 2015 nationwide study of the prevalence of bullying across Australian schools found that teachers ranked “being or seeming gay” as one of the top three reasons why Australian students are bullied (Rigby, 2015). Several recent Australian studies illustrate disturbing and increasing rates of verbal and physical harassment of sexuality and gender diverse students (Hillier, Jones, Monagle, Overton, Gahan, Blackman & Mitchell, 2010; Robinson, Bansel, Denson, Ovenden & Davies, 2014; Ullman, 2015a) and while such marginalising practices are commonplace in schools, research demonstrates that teachers routinely fail to address them (Rasmussen, 2004; Robinson et al., 2014; Ullman & McGraw, 2014).

A school climate in which social and curricular marginalisation of diverse sexualities and genders flourishes has been linked to a suite of diminished school wellbeing outcomes for sexuality and gender diverse students. The current project sought to expand upon the findings presented across a number of Australian national research reports that have pointed to the implications of school climate on school wellbeing outcomes for sexuality and gender diverse young people (Hillier et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2014; Smith, Jones, Ward, Dixon, Mitchell & Hillier, 2014). In contrast to this national work which has included sexuality and gender diverse young people aged 20+ who are commenting on their secondary schooling experiences retrospectively, the target group for this research was secondary school-aged young people aged 14-18; this was an attempt to elicit the most current and fresh impressions of their school climate. Furthermore, a key goal of this work was to explore students' school wellbeing outcomes using validated, quantitative scale measures and to examine relationships with students' reported school climate both descriptively as well as via appropriate statistical testing.

Ethics Approval and Considerations

Approval for this work was obtained from Western Sydney University Ethics Committee (approval number H9979) in December 2012. Due to the sensitive nature of sexuality and gender expression for teenagers who may not want to, or feel that they are not able to, share such information with their parents/guardians, parental consent was waived for all participants. At the conclusion of the survey experience, young people were provided with a list of relevant national contacts, including general wellbeing support for teenagers as well as support services specifically for sexuality and gender diverse youth. State and local agencies were named within these sites to enable local and face to face support, if desired.

Names of participants and their schools were not requested and in instances where these were provided by young people within responses to open-ended survey items, these have been omitted from the reporting.

Survey Design and Recruitment

In line with the above project aims, the survey centred on the following content areas:

- Demographic information, including sexuality and gender identity(ies);
- School demographic information, including affiliation and composition (e.g. government, single-sex, etc.);
- Attitudes to school, including sense of connection to teachers, peers and the school environment more broadly;
- School climate with regards to sexuality and gender diverse individuals, including¹:
 - Negative (homophobic/transphobic) language;
 - Physical harassment of sexuality and gender diverse students;
 - Teacher intervention during instances of students' use of negative language and physical harassment;
 - Inclusion and positivity in curriculum, policy(ies) and via other formal support; and,
- Academic outcomes, including academic self-concept, truancy and future schooling plans.

Survey items included both closed-ended (multiple or dichotomous choice) and open-ended (text response) questions. The closed-ended items included a combination of author-generated and previously-used items; specifically subscales from the *Attitudes to School Survey* (DEECD, 2006), a measure of general academic self-concept from the *Academic Self-Description Questionnaire II* (Marsh, 1990) and a number of items from the author's previously-conducted national survey of sexuality and gender diverse students (Mikulsky², 2007). Open-ended items were used to provide students with a space to expand on their responses to select school climate and academic outcome items.

Given the near-universal levels of online access (ABS, 2014) coupled with the amount of time that young people spend in online spaces (ACMA, 2008) and the ways in which online spaces are viewed

¹ The survey also included an original measure of school "gender climate" (Ullman, 2015b), or the ways in which the school environment allows for inclusive, autonomous gender expression. Findings related to this element of project are currently in development and will be presented elsewhere.

² "Mikulsky" is the maiden name of the author.

³ Three items were used to investigate gender diversity: one which explicitly provided a transgender/gender diverse response category and two items which asked participants to describe their gender

as safe, informative spaces by sexuality and gender diverse young people (Robinson et al., 2014), online surveys provide an anonymous, safe method of understanding the experiences of sexuality and gender diverse teenagers. Furthermore, given the ethical challenges posed by recruiting sexuality and gender diverse students via their secondary school environment, targeting this cohort outside of school via online spaces is a logical alternative choice.

A targeted Facebook campaign was launched in June 2013, wherein Facebook users who fit a set of specific criteria according to their Facebook profiles: 1) aged 14-18, 2) 'interested in' people of the same (reported) sex and/or 3) had 'liked' Facebook pages for organisations which specifically service lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities, were shown an advertisement linking to a purpose-built Facebook page with the survey URL embedded therein. According to Facebook tracking, the recruitment statement was shown to 37,568 individual Facebook users with 1292 young people clicking through to the project page between June and October, resulting in a 3.4% response rate. Additional parameters built in to the online survey itself were used to ensure that only secondary school students aged 14-18 living in Australia were able to participate. Participation was further restricted in terms of sexuality and gender diversity; cisgender³ participants who identified as heterosexual and indicated their exclusive attraction to members of the opposite sex were taken to an early survey exit. Final numbers were reduced to 704 usable responses.

Data Analysis

The online survey was hosted by Qualtrics, allowing for simple downloading of the data into SPSS for quantitative analysis using both descriptive and inferential statistics for the closed-ended survey responses. Statistical analyses presented here include frequencies, mean comparisons (t-tests; ANOVAs) and correlations to explore key relationships of interest. Open-ended survey responses were moved into the NVivo program for ease of searching and organisation of the qualitative data. Various coding iterations were conducted as appropriate, moving from descriptive to thematic coding (Saldana, 2009) of the open-ended responses.

Limitations of this Research

As with all research which uses convenience sampling techniques to locate and recruit sexuality and gender diverse young people, it is possible that some selection bias occurred here, with project participants more likely to be open and comfortable with their sexuality and/or gender identity. Other young people who, due to their lack of connection to LGBT community support/outreach services via Facebook, or their non-indication of sex-specific romantic interest as part of their Facebook profile, may have missed out on participating in this study.

³ Three items were used to investigate gender diversity: one which explicitly provided a transgender/genderqueer response category and two items which asked participants to describe their gender expression in terms of masculinity and femininity. Responses from participants who indicated both exclusive heterosexual attraction and identity (n=58) were kept in the study provided they also indicated gender diversity across one or more of these items.

Participant Demographics

Age and Gender Identity

Seven-hundred and four (704) sexuality and gender diverse students participated in the online survey, with the majority of the sample identifying as a girl/woman (57%) and on the older end of the age continuum, with 56.7% aged 16 and 17.

Figure 1: Age of participants (n=704)

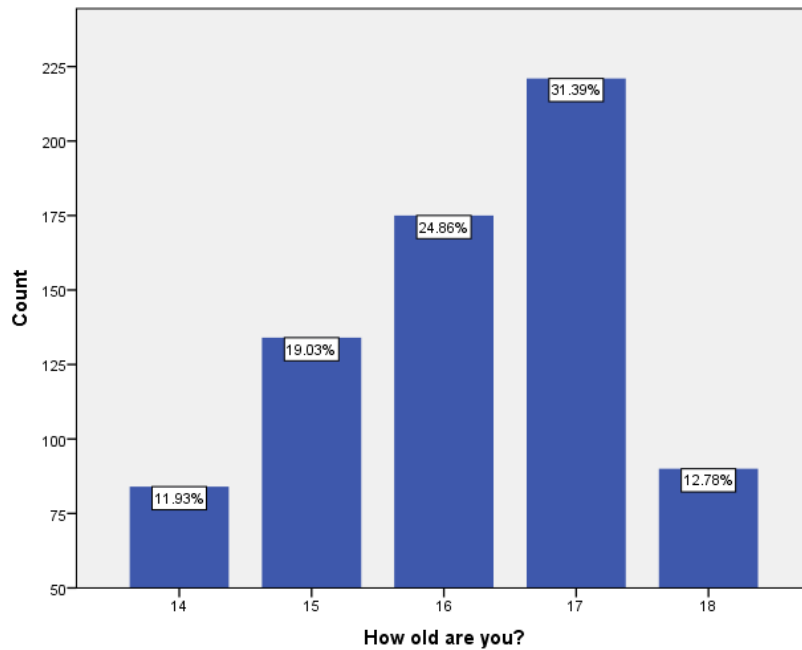
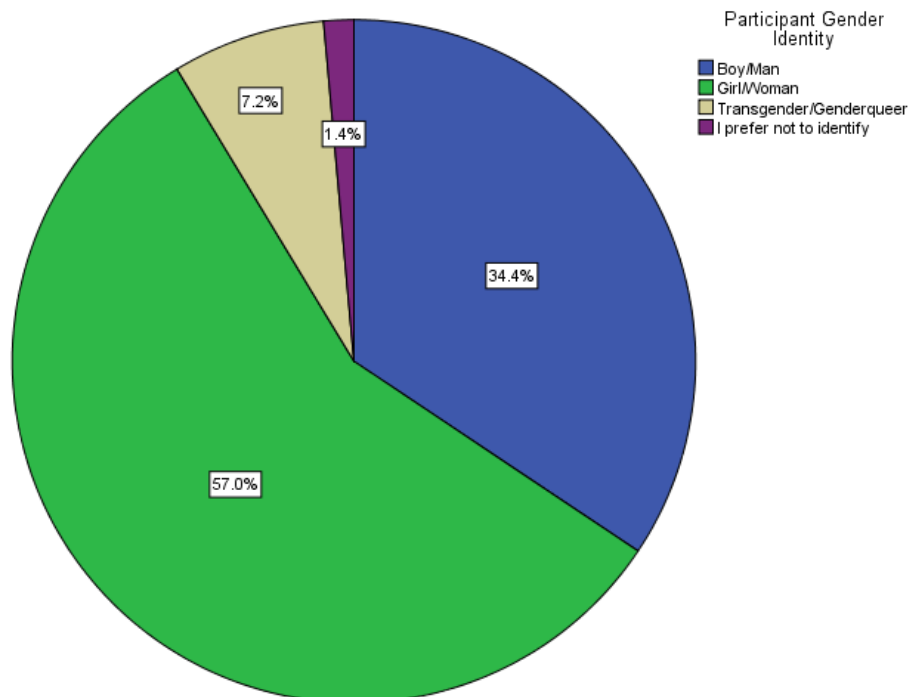


Figure 2: Participant Gender Identity (n=704)

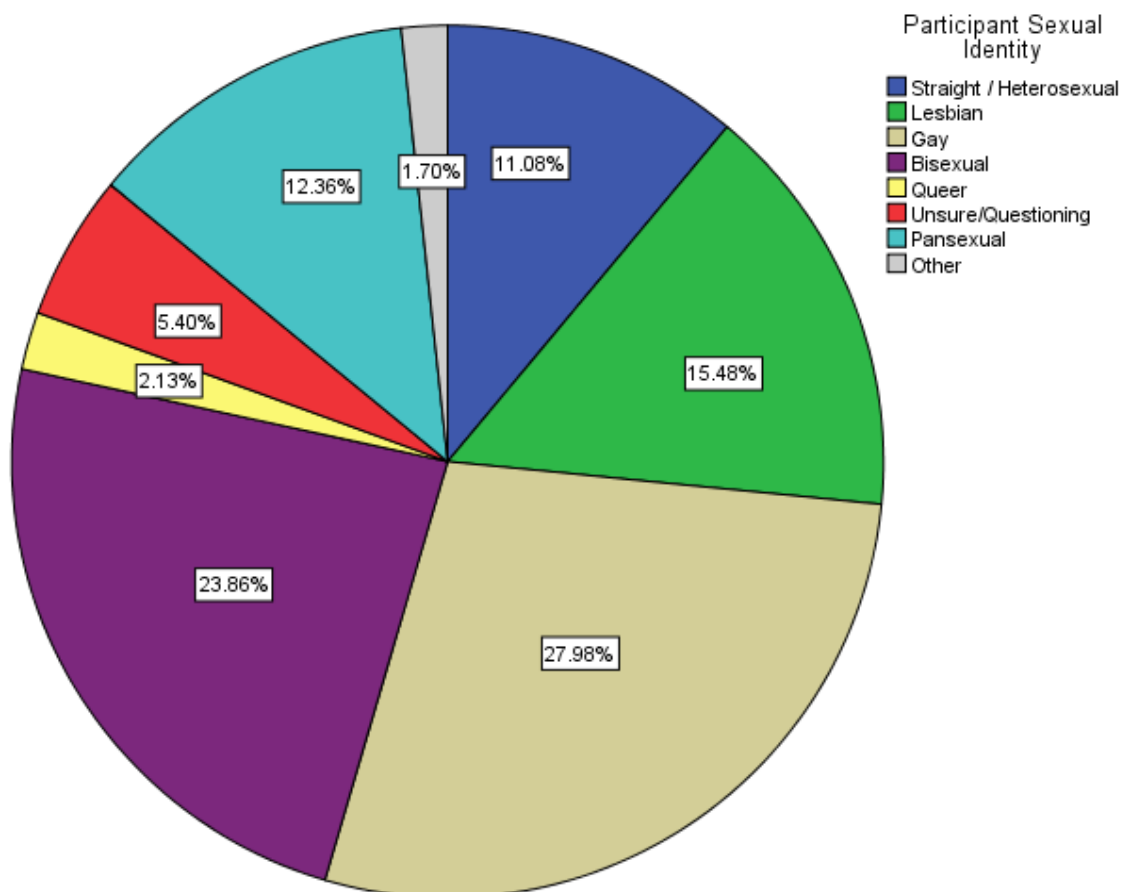


In line with recent Australian research with a similar population of young people (Robinson et al., 2014), just over 7% (n=51) of participants identified as either genderqueer or transgender. Participants in this group expressed a range of gender identities, including transgender female-to-male (n=16); transgender male-to-female (n=7) and an array of participant-identified identities including, genderqueer (n=5); no gender or agender (n=5); gender-neutral (n=3); gender-fluid (n=2); and bi-gender (n=1).

Sexual Attraction and Identity

When asked about their sexual attraction, the majority of participants indicated attraction to members of the same sex (n=302; 43%), with members of both sexes a close second response (n=282; 40%). Others indicated attraction to members of the opposite sex (n=71; 10%), uncertainty about their attractions (n=40; 6%) and no attraction to members of either sex (n=9; 1.3%). In terms of identification, 43% of the sample identified as either gay or lesbian (n=216) with another 24% identifying as bisexual (n=168). Participants who selected “other” (n=12) were given an opportunity to provide their sexual identity in an open-ended field, with additional identities including asexual (n=5) and those who preferred “not to label” (n=2).

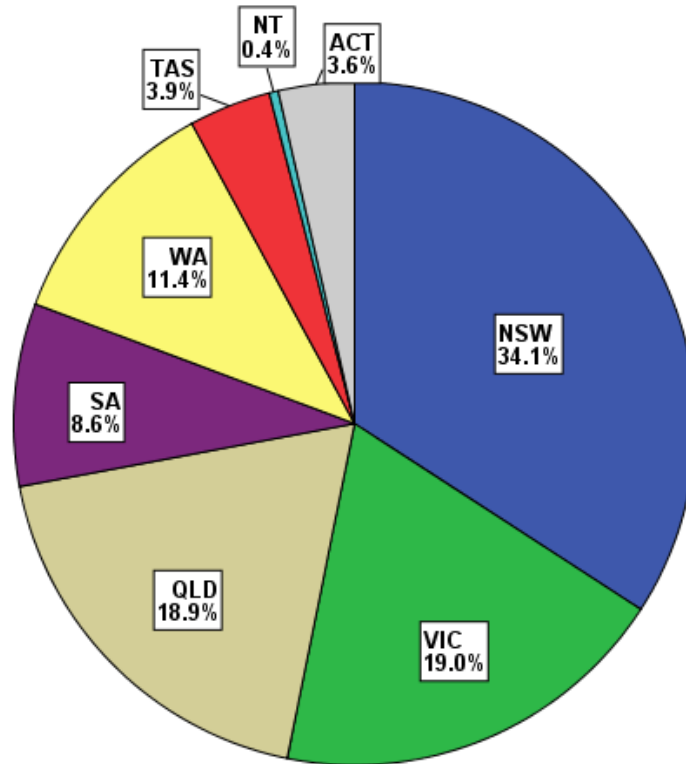
Figure 3: Participant Sexual Identity (n=704)



Location and Background

Young people from across Australia participated, with 30% of the sample (n=213) from locations in regional and rural Australia⁴. The distribution of participants' location by state and territory was a near-perfect match with population distributions for 15-19 year olds across Australia (ABS, 2015).

Figure 4: Location of Residence by State or Territory (n=694)



Eighty-four percent (n=591) of participants were born in Australia with other named birthplaces including countries in the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales), New Zealand, Indonesia, Japan South Africa, with 87% (n=615) indicating that their first language was English. Three percent (n=21) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, somewhat lower than Australian census data from 2011, which indicated an estimated 5% of the 15-19 year old population identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ABS, 2015).

Participants' School Demographics

Of the 704 participants, 9% (n=63) were no longer in school at the time of survey collection. Of these, 38 (60% of this sub-cohort) had completed year 12, with the remaining 25 students (40%) being early school leavers. These participants were asked to complete the survey retrospectively, writing about their most current secondary school experience. The remaining 641 participants were current secondary school students at the time of data collection, spread across years 8 – 12 of school.

⁴ Participants' postal code were used alongside the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (AIHW, 2004) to identify young people living in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia, based upon proximity to urban centres with a population of 5,000+.

The large majority of students attended government (public, state) schools (n=436; 62%) with a smaller number from Catholic (n=155; 22%) and independent (n=113; 16%) schools, in keeping with actual distributions across the schooling sector (ABS, 2011). Young people attending independent schools were asked a series of follow-up questions related to fee structure and religiosity of their independent schools. Accordingly, this cohort was further separated into *private, non-religious schools* (e.g. Montessori, Steiner schools; n=28), *elite, high fee schools*, some of which may have included a religious element (e.g. tuition more than \$10,000 per annum; n=62) and *non-Catholic, religiously-affiliated, lower fee schools* (e.g. Anglican, Jewish, Muslim schools; n=23).

Figure 5: Participant Year of School (n=704)

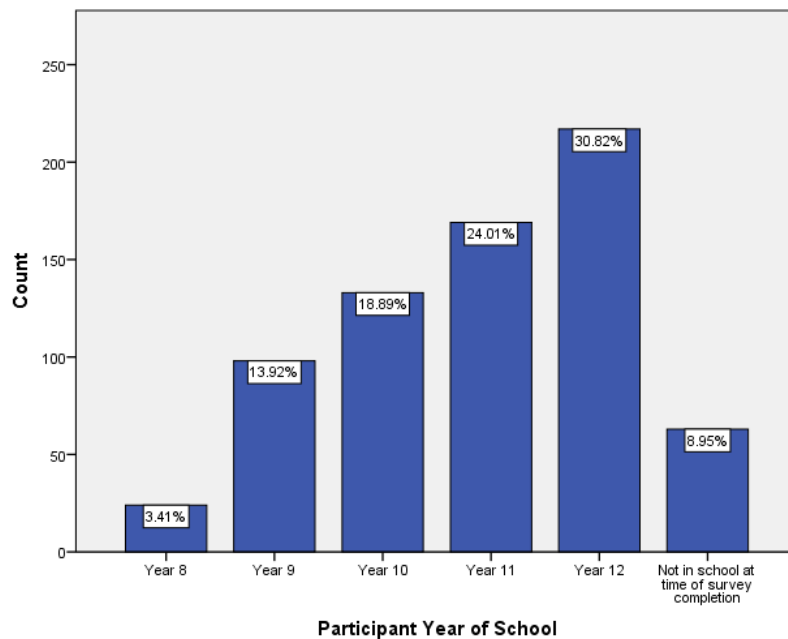
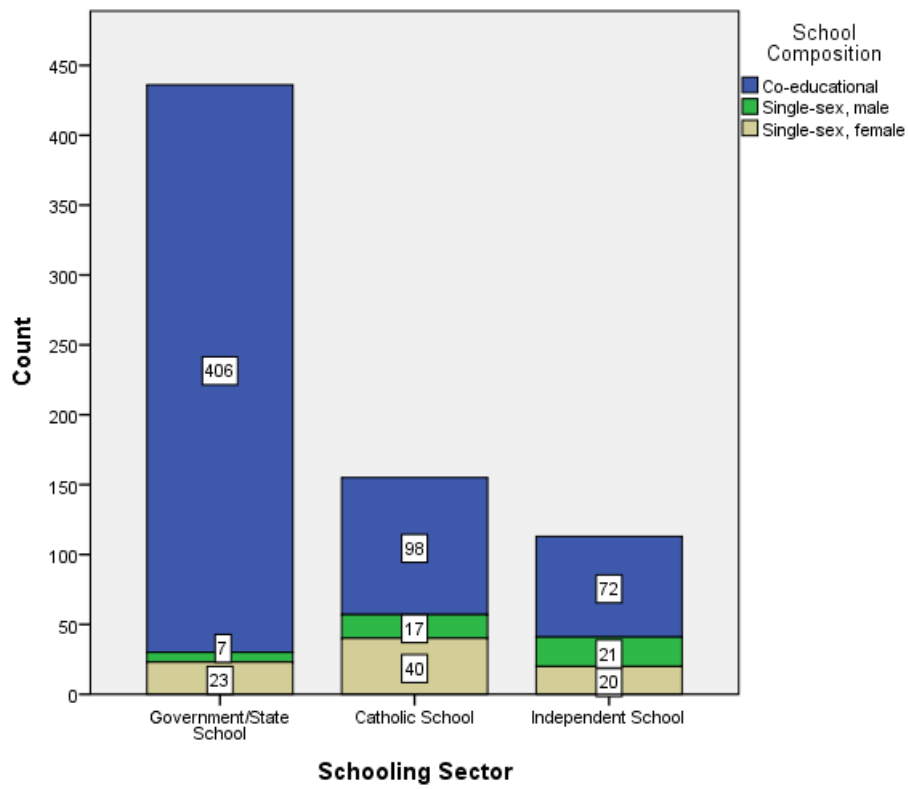


Figure 6: Participants' School Type, by Sector and Composition (n=704)



Attitudes to School

A growing body of international research has focused on the elements of perceived school belonging and attachment for sexuality and gender diverse students, illustrating links between school-based stressors and lowered levels of social and academic investment in school (Bos, Sandfort, Bruyn & Hakvoort, 2008; Galliher, Rostosky & Hughes, 2004; Pearson, Muller & Wilkinson, 2007; Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman & Riggle, 2003; Ueno, 2005). In order to investigate these and other key school wellbeing outcomes, a series of subscales from the Victoria state Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s *Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS)* (DEECD, 2006) were used to serve as a general marker of overall school wellbeing for survey participants (Table 1).

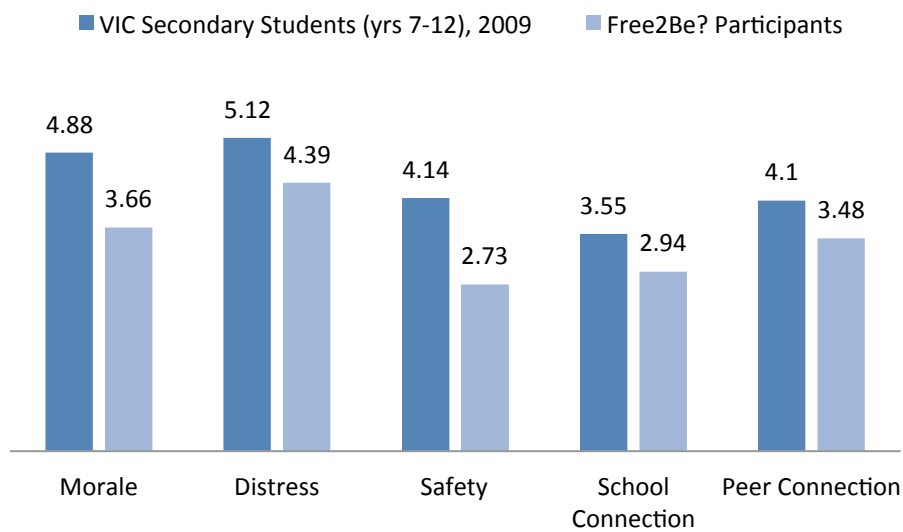
Table 1: Subscales of the *Attitudes to School Survey (ATSS)*

ATSS Subscale:	# of Items	Measurement Scale	Sample Item	Reliability Scores
Student Morale	5	7-point scale: 1=not at all; 7=all the time	“I feel happy at school.”	$\alpha = 0.91$
Student Distress	6		“I feel tense at school.”	$\alpha = 0.90$
Student Safety	5	5-point scale: 1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree	“I have been bullied recently at school.”	$\alpha = 0.91$
School Connection	5		“I feel I belong at this school.”	$\alpha = 0.93$
Connection to Peers	4		“I get on really well with most of my classmates.”	$\alpha = 0.86$
Teacher Empathy	7		“My teachers listen to what I have to say.”	$\alpha = 0.94$
Student Motivation	4		“I try very hard in school.”	$\alpha = 0.89$
Learning Confidence	4		“I find it easy to learn new things.”	$\alpha = 0.87$

As the state department encourages Victorian schools to collect and submit their school-level data on an annual basis, an additional affordance of choosing subscales from the *ATSS* was the ability to compare group mean scores from students across the state of Victoria and participants in the current project. While direct statistical comparison is not possible due to differences in cohorts, timing and circumstances of the data collection, these general comparisons, which are drawn from publically-available *ATSS* data from the state of Victoria, nevertheless highlight diminished school experiences for sexuality and gender diverse students. As can be seen in the two Figures which follow, students completing the *Free2Be?* survey fared poorer across every one of the seven subscales presented below⁵.

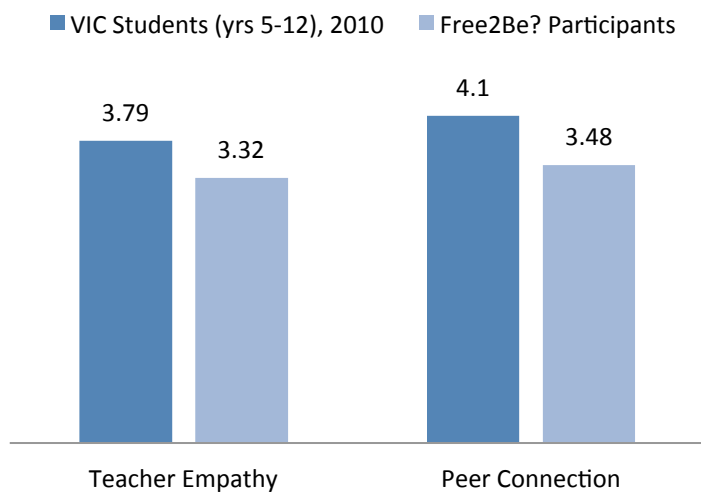
⁵ The two academically-oriented subscales of the *ATSS* (e.g. “student motivation” and “learning confidence”) are presented in the “Academic Outcomes” section of this report.

Figure 7: ATSS Subscale Mean Score Comparison, VIC Data (Yrs. 7-12)



Note: Safety and Distress have been reversed recoded; higher scores indicate a more favourable outcome. Victoria data source: Victorian Auditor General's Report, 2010.

Figure 8: ATSS Subscale Mean Score Comparison, VIC Data (Yrs. 5-12)



Note: Higher scores indicate a more favourable outcome. Victoria data source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (VIC), 2011.

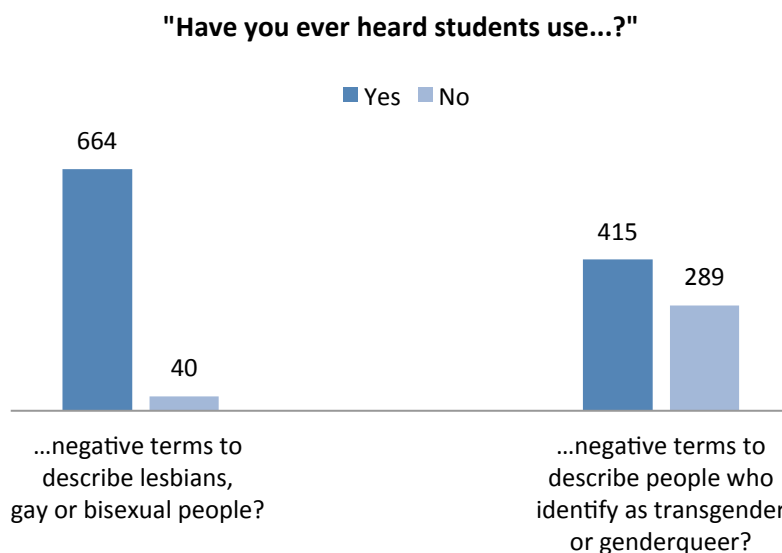
School Climate: Experiences of Marginalisation and Inclusivity

In line with other leading international research (Kosciw et al., 2014) for the purposes of this work *school climate* is defined as the general ethos and ‘feel’ of participants’ schooling environments with regards to treatment of diverse sexualities and genders. Accordingly, measures of participants’ school climate included both frequency and typology of marginalising experiences – both social and curricular – and experiences of overt inclusivity from teachers and peers.

Use of Marginalising Language

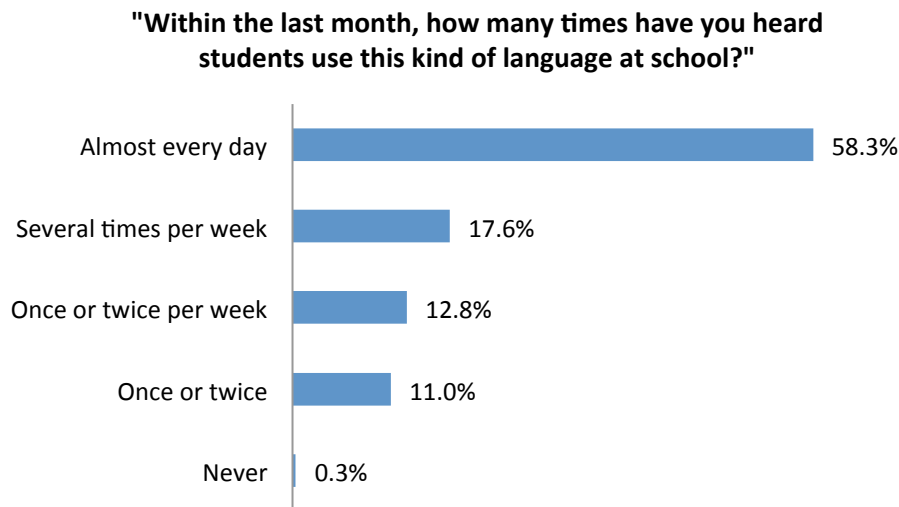
Participants were asked about the frequency of marginalising language used to describe sexuality and gender diverse individuals as overheard from their classmates and peers and their teachers’ responses in these instances. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, a startling 94% of students had heard their classmates use negative terms to describe lesbians, gay or bisexual people (examples provided included: “poofter”, “fag” and “dyke”). In comparison, 59% of students had heard their classmates use negative terms to describe people who identify as transgender or genderqueer or whose gender expression is more ambiguous (examples provided included: referring to someone as “it” or asking, “What are you – a boy or a girl?”).

Figure 9: Frequency of Reported Homophobic/Transphobic Language at School (n=704)



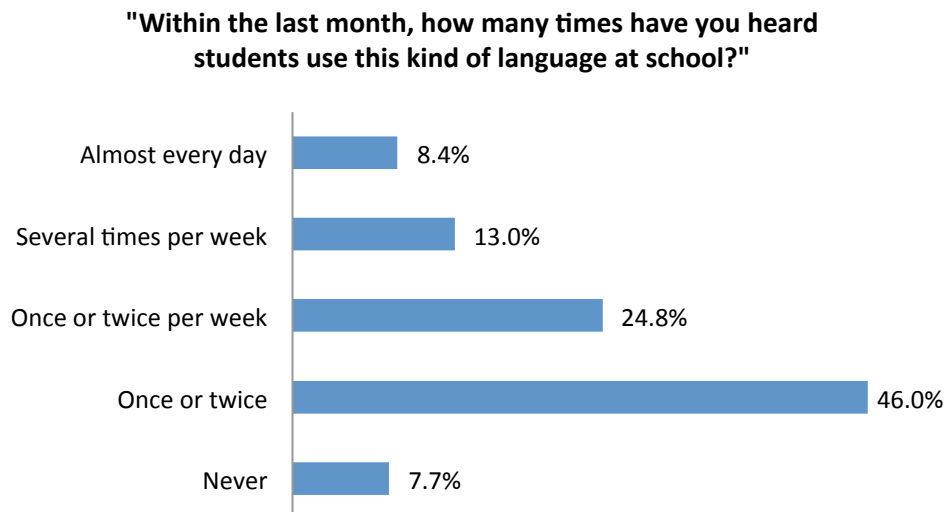
The everyday nature of homophobic language in the school setting was further illustrated through the second item in this series, which asked about the monthly frequency of such language. Three-hundred and eighty-seven young people (55% of all participants) reported hearing homophobic language almost every day at school, with nearly another 30% of the total participant cohort reporting hearing this language on a weekly basis (e.g. “several times per week” – 16.6% and “once or twice per week” – 12.1%).

Figure 10: Frequency of Reported Homophobic Language at School (n=664)



Transphobic language was reported with far less frequency; however, it is worth noting that 27.2% of the total sample reported hearing such language on a weekly basis (e.g. either “almost every day” [n=35], “several times per week” [n=54] or “once or twice per week” [n=103]).

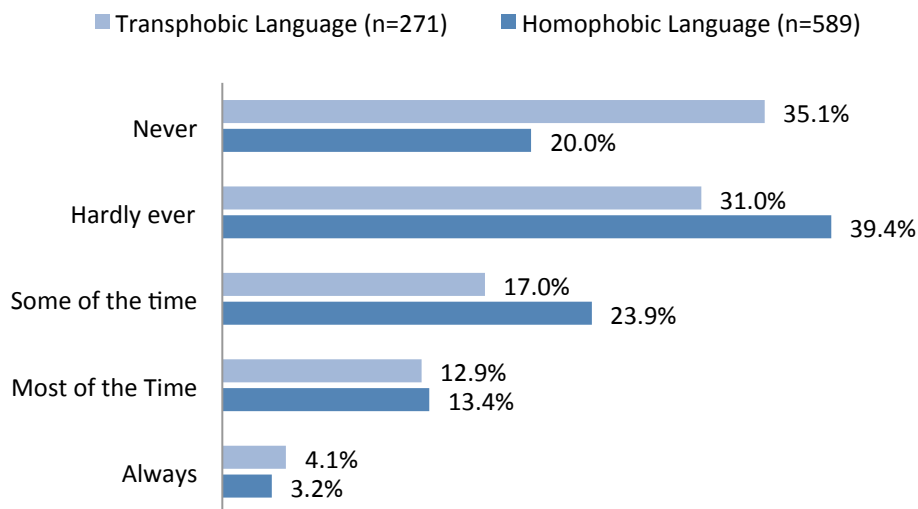
Figure 11: Frequency of Reported Transphobic Language at School (n=415)



While a number of students indicated that negative language used to describe sexuality and gender diverse individuals was reserved for student-only interactions (e.g. not used in presence of adults at school), where participants reported that this type of language *was* used in front of teachers and other school staff members, a series of follow-up questions asked students about the frequency with which these adults intervened to stop the use of this language. Participants were asked how often adults at school “do or say something positive, like stop the student(s) or talk to them about using this language”. Almost 84% of students (n=589) said that homophobic language was used in the presence of adults at their school; however, only 19 students (3.2% of the subsample) indicated that these adults “always” intervened in a positive manner. Much smaller numbers of participants reported their classmates using transphobic language in the school setting in front of adults (n=271).

While trends in the percentage of these young people who reported that school staff always intervened were similar to numbers in instances of homophobic language use (4.1% of the subsample, compared to 3.2%), it noteworthy that much larger numbers of young people reported that school staff members never intervened during instances of students using transphobic language.

Figure 12: Frequency of Reported Adult Positive Intervention, Marginalising Language



This line of questioning concluded with an opportunity for young people to tell a story of an incident of negative language use in the presence of a school staff member. Five hundred and twenty-five students recounted such incidences, with the vast majority of these describing instances of teacher inaction. Just under 40% of these responses included references to their teachers doing “nothing” (n=133) or “ignoring” (n=64) the use of homophobic language, with many other students describing teachers’ “indifference”: their walking away, not engaging with or acknowledging the language and turning a “blind eye”. In line with the reported frequency of this type of language as above, many of the responses here made it clear that this is everyday language (“It’s a pop culture thing”), seen as so endemic that teachers view it as near-impossible to stop or, worse, part of the normal teenage lexicon.

They just said it and everyone just accepted it as a usual everyday word.

The teacher just rolled their eyes and shrugged it off as “Teenagers being teenagers”.

Absolutely nothing [was done]. It was an off-hand comment to the teacher like, “That is so gay”. The teacher didn’t even seem to view it as negative language. It is not uncommon for teachers to use language like this as well.

Approximately a quarter of the responses (n=123) described some form of superficial response from staff (e.g. “They said to stop”; “The teacher told the student to watch their language”) wherein the negative language was acknowledged but the marginalising implications of the language were not addressed and no further conversation ensued.

A number of responses highlighted participants' impressions that it is easier for teachers not to draw attention to students using this language. A number of such responses employed the word "pretend" in their narrative (e.g. "Usually the staff member pretends that they have not heard"), indicative of a sense of teachers' active avoidance of engagement with sexuality and gender diversity.

Teachers usually avoid scolding students for using words like "fag" or "poofter". Usually students are actually jokingly making fun of their friends who AREN'T LGBTQ by saying, "You're such a fag" etc. I don't think teachers see that this can still hurt LGBTQ people, or if they do, they are not sure how to deal with it, so they don't say anything. At the times when the children have been scolded, it hasn't been for using homophobic slurs, it's for being loud or rowdy whilst using the slurs. [Participant's emphasis]

The staff member ignores this language rather than talking about the negative effects of it.

The teachers wanted to avoid it.

Many responses drew attention to inconsistencies across school staff members' responses, with a number of students identifying particularly supportive, often same-sex attracted, teachers as willing to intervene and address students' use of homophobic language. Sadly, these teachers were also framed as in the minority.

It really depends on the teachers. Some teachers (mainly that are LGBTQ) pull them up on them and tell them not to use that language. One or two actually full on lecture them about it. But, a lot of them don't even acknowledge the use.

I know of two teachers who are gay and told the kids to stop using that language because it is offensive. Other teachers don't usually say anything, just ignore it.

There is only one teacher I know of who every time this negative language is used stands up for it. She tells the students how it is hurtful and disrespectful regardless of how you mean to use it.

Such inconsistencies and inaction left many students commenting on their teachers' lack of compassion or interest in sexuality and gender diverse people and related subject matter, with clear emotional consequences.

One of my class members called me a "faggot poof". The teacher told him to stop disrupting the class; she then turned around as if he hadn't even insulted me. I was extremely hurt to not have teacher support. I have never felt so alone in a classroom before.

The students laughed but the teacher shrugged it off while my friend and I were hurting inside by the words said during the moment.

Us kids are left to suffer because the teachers aren't interested in getting jumbled up with us.

A number of students from religious schools pointed out a sense of conflict between the teachings of the religious institution and staff members' positive intervention in instances of homophobic classroom commentary. Teachers were framed as either unable or unwilling to address such language, with the implication that such language was condoned by the religious institution.

Sometimes the teachers stopped the kids but otherwise the teachers said they could get sacked for going against the Catholic Church and their beliefs.

Nothing [is done]. No one cares because I go to a private Lutheran school.

Most alarmingly, approximately 10% of responses to this item (n=48) described instances of school staff members' overt support of students' use of homophobic language. Most commonly, this took the form of their laughing along with students (e.g. *"The teacher laughed and was involved with the joke"*) or using the language themselves for, seemingly, humorous intent (e.g. *"English teacher constantly refers to things that are bad as being 'gay'"*). In a smaller number of these responses, teachers were described as victim blaming – further punishing the sexuality or gender diverse student as being the 'cause' of the issue.

I raised the issue with my teacher who then suggested I work in a room by myself if I was offended.

It [homophobic language] was towards me and the teacher just stayed there and blamed me for causing the argument to happen, all because I like the same sex. In turn, I have had to change every one of my classes, due to this girl and her rude comments.

This pattern was echoed in students' open-ended responses regarding staff intervention in instances of students' use of transphobic language (n=207), with 65 of these responses (31%) describing inaction and/or active ignoring on the part of the adults. The majority of instances that described adult involvement outlined minimal intervention, such as a disapproving look or instructions to students to be quiet (e.g. *"Teachers just say 'don't be rude' or say 'stop it'"*), as opposed to any acknowledgement of the marginalising and transphobic nature of the comments. Responses highlighted adults' discomfort with gender diversity, with a number of young people commenting on their teachers' lack of education regarding gender diversity as well as a near-complete silence on related topics.

[Neither] teachers nor students have been educated about how to properly respect trans or intersex people, so even teachers use the wrong pronouns, and I have never heard a teacher put a student down for using words like "tranny", "it", or anything like that.

The teachers at my school do not challenge these assumptions. I believe that the gender binary and gender roles are actually supported by many of the staff at my school, as opposed to challenged.

A minority number of responses (n=22) outlined instances of overt transphobia on the part of school staff members. In these responses, school staff members are described as joining in with the "joke" being made by students and perpetuating marginalising behaviour towards young people who were gender diverse and/or identified as transgender. In the worst of these, teachers are described as punishing such students in their efforts to encourage gender conformity.

My friend is questioning his gender and tried to tell the teacher that he didn't feel he could go into the male group. The teacher said he just wanted to be with his friends in the class (who are female). When my friend said that it was a bigger issue then that, the teacher just said that he could either go in the male group or get out of the class. So my friend had to leave and go to the Assistant Principal's office.

A girl was wearing male uniform pants and had short hair and a group of boys walked past and made remarks on whether she was a boy or girl. A teacher was present and went up to the girl and started yelling at her for wearing the boy's designated uniform and that she should wear skirts and she might not get teased so much.

There is one teacher who refuses to accept me as a man and will constantly call me by a feminine pronoun despite my trans status NOT being public knowledge. Usually I laugh it off but she constantly tries to out me so much so that I am terrified of her.

Associations with Marginalising Language and Teacher Intervention

In order to understand how the prevalence of homophobic and transphobic language in a school environment may be related to sexuality and gender diverse students' wellbeing, bivariate correlations of reported frequency of language use and reported teacher intervention were conducted with the six subscales of the *Attitudes to School Survey*, as presented earlier: student morale, student distress, sense of peer connection, sense of school connection, school safety and perceived teacher empathy/care. These investigations allowed for an examination of the strength of association between key variable pairs and the associated level of statistical significance of that association. Interestingly, while reported frequency of homophobic language use was significantly correlated with students' school safety ($r = 0.27, p=.000$), no other significant correlations were observed, perhaps due to the everyday nature of this language, as evidenced via the open-ended responses as detailed above. In contrast, for the 415 students who indicated peers' use of transphobic language at school, the reported frequency of such language was significantly correlated with each of the six ATSS subscales (see Appendix A for table of relevant statistics). In other words, students with a higher reported frequency of school-based transphobic language were more likely to report lower morale, higher distress, a less safe school environment overall, less sense of connection to school and their classmates and less perceived teacher care.

This pattern of association was reflected across both measures of teacher intervention (Appendix A). This finding was particularly interesting for reported homophobic language, where the frequency of such language was not significantly associated with five of the six school wellbeing measures, apart from school safety. It appears that, for the subset of students whose classmates use this language in the presence of teachers and/or other school staff ($n=589$), adult intervention still carries meaning and influence. It is perhaps not surprising then that the strongest correlation with frequency of teacher intervention during instances of homophobic language use was with reported teacher empathy ($r = 0.38, p=.000$). Students who reported frequent or universal intervention reported high levels of perceived teacher care, with the converse also being apparent. Given positive academic associations with perceived teacher care, including academic effort and motivation (Wentzel, 2009), this finding holds critical implications for inclusive practice.

Physical Harassment of Sexuality and/or Gender Diverse Students

As an additional indicator of school-climate towards sexuality and gender diversity, participants were asked about instances of “physical bullying or intimidation” of students who were perceived to be sexuality and/or gender diverse. Approximately 45% of the sample (n=316) had witnessed such bullying; however, reported occurrences were much more infrequent than instances of verbal harassment, with the majority of these students having witnessed such behaviours only once or twice in the month preceding the survey (51.7% of the subsample, n=163). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that 12% of the total sample (n=87) reported witnessing physical harassment of students who were “out” as, or perceived to be, sexuality and gender diverse at their school on a weekly basis (e.g. “almost every day”; “several times per week”; and “once or twice per week”) – a small, yet concerning figure, given the nature of the behaviour.

Figure 13: Reported Physical Harassment at School (n=669)

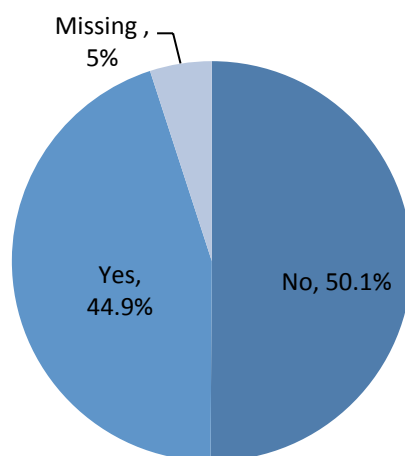
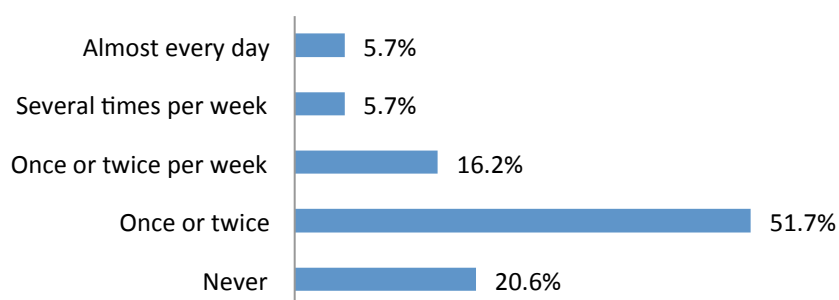


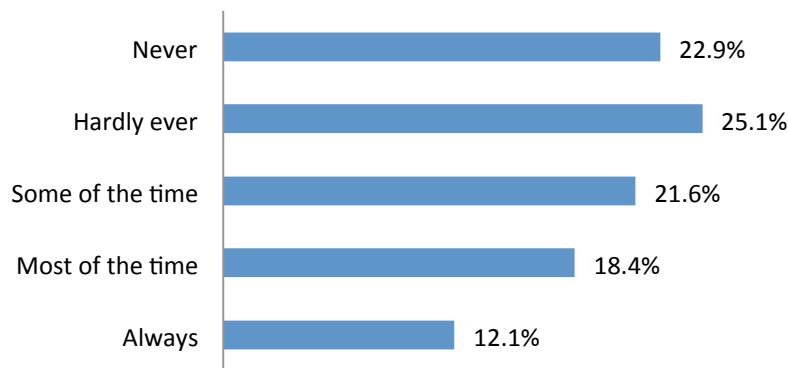
Figure 14: Frequency of Reported Physical Harassment at School (n=315)

"Within the last month, how many times have you seen this type of physical bullying or intimidation?"



A follow-up item asked the students about school staff members' intervention during instances of physical harassment of sexuality and gender diverse young people. Of the total number of young people who reported adult presence during these student activities (n=315), only 12% (n=38) said that their teachers “always” intervened to “do something or say something to try to prevent it”.

Figure 15: Frequency of Reported Adult Positive Intervention, Physical Harassment (n=315)



Participants were asked to provide a story about an incident where they saw this form of physical harassment; 106 participants (15% of the total sample) responding to this open-ended item with a story involving the presence of a school staff member. Of these, 25 responses outlined some form of adult non-response (e.g. *“The teacher did nothing”*), with an additional 14 reporting what was assumed to be purposive ignoring (e.g. *“Pretended she didn’t hear it”*).

I have a gay friend and we have SOSE [Studies of Society and Environment] together. In SOSE class this boy kept hitting my friend and calling him “faggot”, “fag” and “homo”. I told the teacher and she ignored it. The boy continued doing it for about 3 weeks, and I had enough so I told him to stop and had a go at him, and he stopped a little, but the teacher just watched.

They [staff member] “had to go”. They “had a meeting”. While they [students] sat there and drew “gayboy” on his uniform.

The majority of responses (52%, n=55) outlined what was read as a superficial response to the incident wherein the perpetrator was asked to “stop”, for example, but no further action was taken.

They said stop but didn't really follow up on it, they weren't too fussed.

I was with my girlfriend and a group walked past and pushed us around. The teacher only said “Stop pushing” and walked away.

The teachers just split the students and that was the end of it. No talk or discussion.

A number of students referred to ‘standard’ punishment that would be received by any students who engaged in physical bullying while at school, although most did not go into detail about what that entailed, and indicated that this sort of activity was handled just like any other fight. However, the implication here, which some students pointed out directly, was that school staff members were not checking in with students about the cause of the harassment or how they might support the young people involved.

I got punched in the face by a guy in the middle of a circle of his friends which I couldn’t escape and after a few minutes a teacher broke it up like any other fight. I got sent to

class and the student got suspended for fighting. There was no follow up as to why he hit me nor was there any mention of discrimination.

The teachers stepped in, stopped the violence and separated the kids. The consequences are always based on the violent act itself, and not the homophobic driving force.

Try to stop the person hitting the other student but not stopping the verbal attacks.

Accordingly, many responses implied that school staff members' engagement with the underlying issue was minimal, with little attention paid to the wellbeing of the student(s) being victimised.

Some girls were throwing things at me, and my teacher seemed more concerned about the mess than me.

Teacher pretended to care. Of course they didn't - they just didn't want to look bad. The bully got off with a tap on the wrist.

A minority number of responses highlighted further punishment of the victim as well as an apparent condoning of the physical harassment being portrayed by the students.

A boy who is gay and acts/is very feminine was playing soccer in PE and the boys deliberately kicked him in the back of the legs to make him fall over and stood on him. The teacher called the boys off to have a talk to them but they were still allowed to go back in and play. The other boy was called off and not allowed to play.

I was surrounded by almost everyone in my year level as well as year 8 girls and things got violent. There were three teachers around and they came in pretty much straight away but I'm the only one who got suspended.

While a number of responses did mention some form of active intervention on the part of school staff including conversation with the perpetrators, detention and/or suspension (20%, n=22) only three of the 106 responses (2.6%) specifically mentioned conversation which addressed either sexuality or gender diversity with students. While these responses point to efforts to educate the students involved, diffuse school violence and evidence a more inclusive school ethos, it is noteworthy how rarely student narratives included such a response.

The student got into trouble and was told not to harass other students because of their sexuality/appearance.

The school hosted a talk at the beginning of each chapel service for the next week entailing the disgust the school felt towards this behaviour and spread the school's positive outlook on homosexuality.

Associations with Physical Harassment and Teacher Intervention

In order to understand how the prevalence of school-based physical harassment of students perceived to be sexuality and/or gender diverse may be related to sexuality and gender diverse students' wellbeing, bivariate correlations of reported frequency of harassment and reported teacher intervention were conducted with the six subscales of the *Attitudes to School Survey* as presented in an earlier section: student morale, student distress, sense of peer connection, sense of school connection, school safety and perceived teacher empathy/care. As previously outlined, these

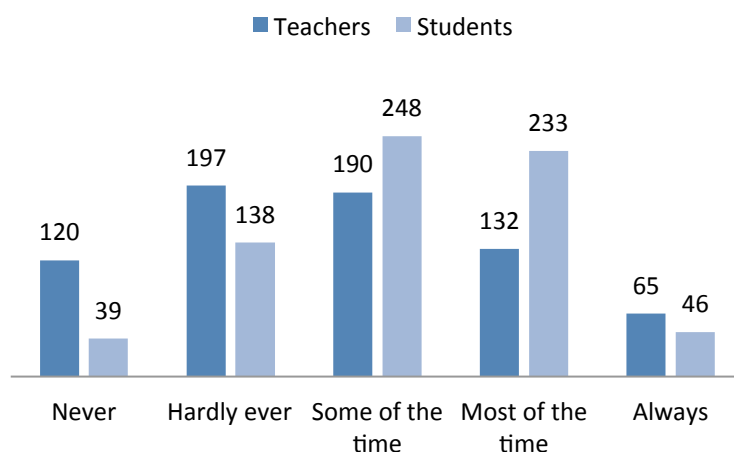
investigations allowed for an examination of the strength of association between key variable pairs and the associated level of statistical significance of that association.

For the subset of young people who reported witnessing such harassment (n=315), its frequency and reported teacher intervention were significantly correlated with each of the six subscales (see Appendix A for table of relevant statistics). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strongest of these was between reported frequency of physical harassment and perceived school safety ($r = 0.49, p=.000$), with sense of school and peer connection not far off in terms of strength of association (both $r = -0.40, p=.000$). As with the other markers of teacher intervention as outlined above, reported frequency of intervention for physical harassment was most strongly linked to students' reported teacher empathy ($r = -0.31, p=.000$). This finding further highlights the relationship between participants' sense that their teachers are generally invested in the care of sexuality and gender diverse students and their sense that teachers are personally invested in them.

Positivity and Inclusivity across Curriculum and School Policy

Given what is known about the importance of inclusive curriculum for sexuality and/or gender diverse young people in terms of perceived safety and increase sense of school connectedness (GLSEN, 2011; Toomey, McGuire & Russell, 2012) and the positive impact such inclusions have been shown to have on the school community at large (Russell, Kostroski, McGuire, Laub & Manke, 2006), participants' impressions of their school curriculum were queried as an additional indicator of their reported school climate toward sexuality and gender diversity. Towards that end, students were asked more generally how often their teachers and peers were "openly positive or supportive" about homosexuality and/or bisexuality in terms of sexuality diverse individuals or, more generally, in terms of related issues. While students did report that their teachers were "always" supportive more frequently than their peers, overall, students were more likely to report such positivity and support from their school-based peers. Reported teacher positivity skewed to the negative end of the response categories, with 45% of the sample reporting teachers were "never" or "hardly ever" positive or supportive, in contrast with only 25% of the sample reporting the same about their peers.

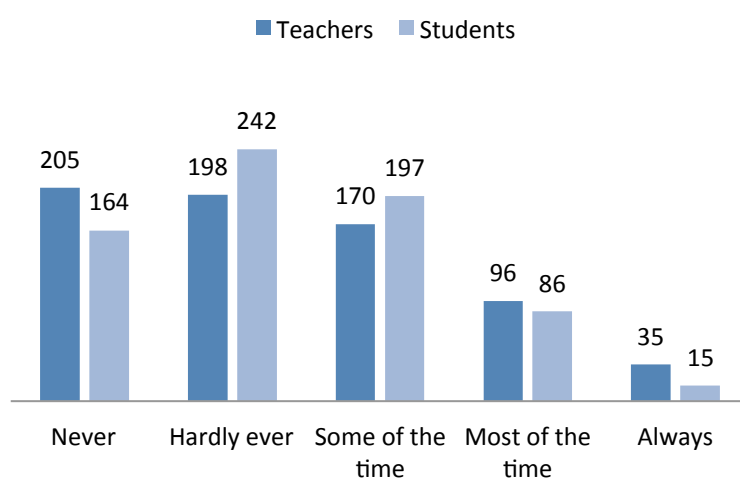
Figure 16: Frequency of Reported Positivity/Support of LGB People/Topics (n=704)



NB: Students' mean scores on this pair of items ($M=1.75/SD=1.2$, teachers; $M=2.15/SD=0.99$, students) were divergent enough as to be statistically significantly different ($t(703)=-9.50, p=0.000$).

Young people were also asked about perceptions of their teachers' and school-based peers' overt support of, or positivity towards, gender diverse individuals and related topics. Responses appeared to follow roughly the same pattern for both groups in question, with a decidedly negative skew. Fifty-seven percent of teachers and 57.6% of students were reported to be "never" or "hardly ever" positive about gender diversity or "supportive of transgender or genderqueer people or related issues". These findings, viewed in conjunction with responses from the previous set of open-ended items on teachers' reported responses to students' transphobic language, point to a definite institutional silence with regards to gender diversity in schools, potentially due to a lack of awareness or knowledge about gender diversity and gender expression more broadly.

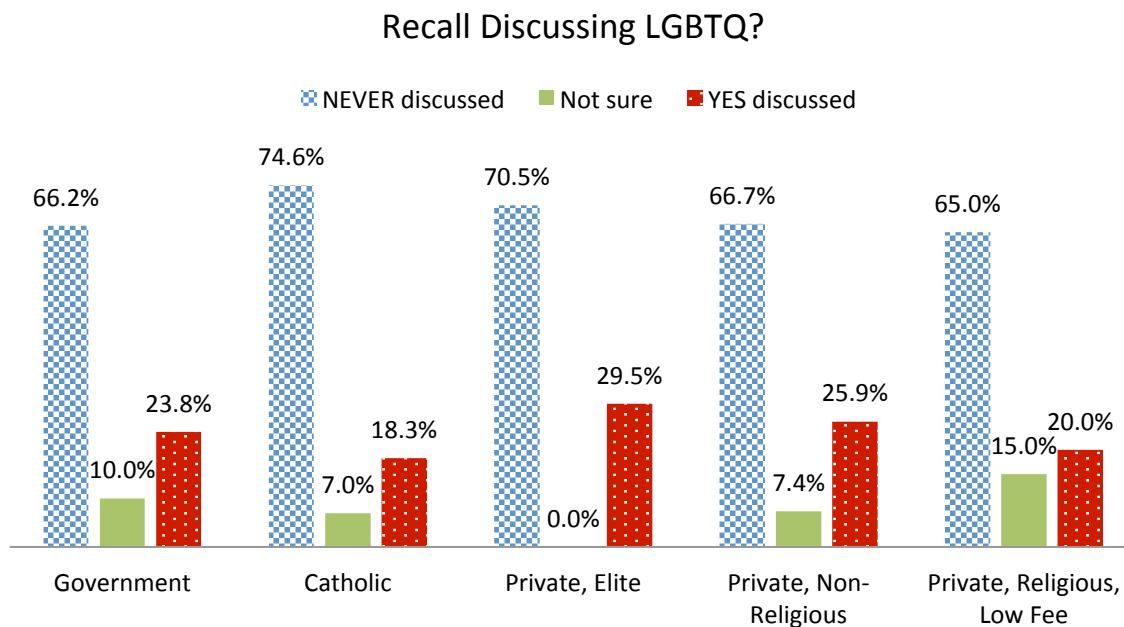
Figure 17: Frequency of Reported Positivity/Support of Gender Diversity (n=704)



A number of items asked students to comment on their recollections of curricular content which was inclusive of sexuality and gender diversity, both generally and specifically within their health and physical education classes, chosen as the key site for sexuality education in Australian schools. These responses were explored by participants' school type, to allow for a more nuanced indication of which conversations and resources are being mobilised in which areas of the schooling sector. As indicated in an earlier section, students who indicated that they attended private, independent schools were further separated into *private, non-religious schools* (e.g. Montessori, Steiner schools; n=28), *elite, high fee schools*, some of which may have included a religious element (e.g. tuition more than \$10,000 p.a.; n=62) and *non-Catholic, religiously-affiliated, lower fee schools* (e.g. Anglican, Jewish, Muslim schools; n=23).

Students were asked whether or not they had "learned about LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer] people or discussed LGBTQ history or current events", with response categories including yes, no and "I'm not sure". Across all schooling sectors, the majority of students indicated that they had not had classroom discussions of this nature, with students in Catholic or independent religious, low fee schools being the least likely to report having such discussions.

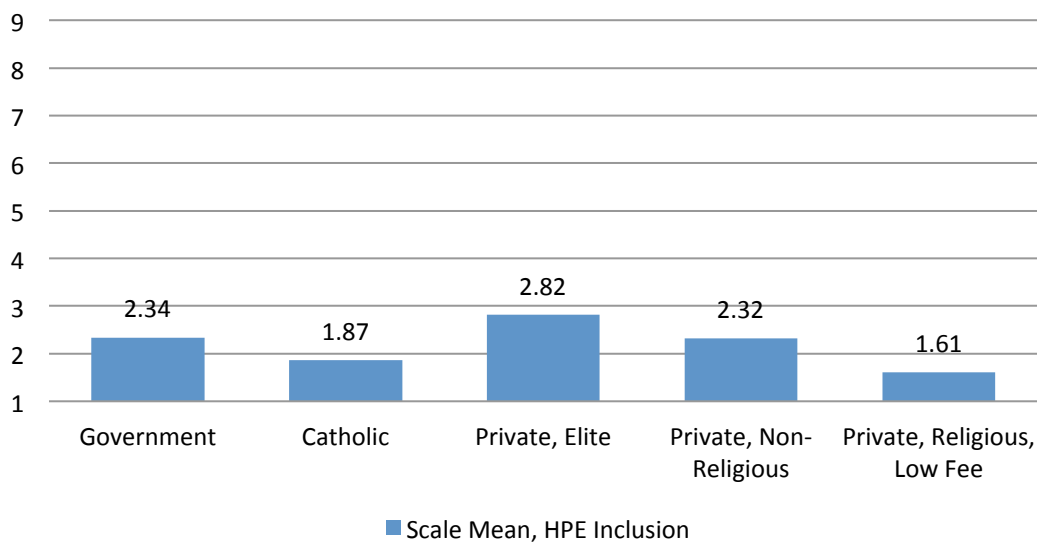
Figure 18: Frequency of Reported LGBTQ Curricular Inclusions (n=658)



Given, what appears to be a logical space for inclusion of sexuality and gender diversity within the Australian Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum, a series of items enquired specifically around inclusions within this curriculum setting. This four-item original scale (reliability, $\alpha = 0.94$) asked participants whether or not they had learned about (1) “lesbian sexuality”, (2) “gay male sexuality”, (3) “bisexuality”, and (4) “what it means to be transgender” during their health and physical education (HPE) classes at school. Responses were measured on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“definitely false”) to 9 (“definitely true”).

Across the schooling sectors, students’ reports of sexuality and gender diversity in their HPE classes were extremely low, with the sector wide mean score 2.26 (SD=2.07), hovering just one and a quarter scale points above the minimum of “definitely false” (e.g. 1). Students from private, religious low fee schools (n=28; M=1.61, SD=1.02) and students from Catholic schools (n=155; M=1.87, SD=1.75) reported the lowest mean inclusions in HPE overall.

Figure 19: Reported Inclusivity of Sexuality and Gender Diversity in HPE (n=704)



It is worth noting, however, that across all sectors (barring private, religious, low fee schools) the response range reached 8 of a maximum 9, an indication that a small percentage of students had access to a sexuality and gender diverse-inclusive HPE curriculum across most of the schooling sector. A recoding of the mean reported HPE inclusion scores into categories of “low” (1 - 3.5), “medium” (3.51 - 6) and “high” (6.01 - 9) revealed that 55 participants (7.8% of the total sample) attended schools with “high” reported HPE inclusion. While the numerical majority of these came from the government sector (n=35), in line with larger numbers of government student participants overall, it is noteworthy that the sector with the highest overall percentage of students reporting “high” inclusion was the private, elite (high fee) sector; 16.1% of these students (n=10) reported “high” inclusion.

In efforts to understand how formal curricular inclusivity of sexuality and gender diversity may be linked to student wellbeing more broadly, comparisons of group mean scores (ANOVAs) across each of the three categories (“low”, “medium”, “high”) of HPE inclusivity were conducted for several of the school-based wellbeing outcomes measured via the *Attitudes to School Survey* (DEECD, 2006)⁶. Results revealed statistically significantly more positive wellbeing outcomes for students indicating “medium” and/or “high” HPE inclusions of sexuality and gender diversity across each of the six subscales addressed in an earlier section of this report. Such students (n=132, 18.7% of the total sample) reported higher school morale, lower school distress, an elevated sense of school safety, greater sense of connection to their peers and to school more generally, and an enhanced sense of teacher care/empathy (see Appendix B for related statistics). Of the six measures, these latter two (school connection and teacher empathy) were the most greatly impacted by level of reported HPE inclusion. These findings support links between a school environment that is more inclusive and less silent on topics related to sexuality and gender diversity and a sexuality and/or gender diverse student body who feel safer and happier while at school, more connected to school and more cared for by their teachers.

⁶ This measurement instrument is discussed in greater detail in an earlier section of the report.

The survey contained two additional items investigating students' knowledge of the existence of school-based supports or sources of information in areas of sexuality diversity as well as gender diversity, reading: "If you wanted information and support from your school about [sexual orientation or LGBTQ issues/gender identity or gender expression] would you know where to go?" In contrast with the above findings on inclusions of sexuality and gender diversity within the HPE classroom, much larger numbers of the sample responded "yes" to these items: 41.6% of participants for information on sexual orientation and 38% of participants for gender identity. The largest cohort of participants who knew where to find information or support on sexual orientation and gender identity at school were attending government secondary schools (47.3% and 43.9%, respectively). Given the reported silences on related topics in HPE, it stands to reason that this subset of participants were able to access this information through some other means, via another teacher, curricular area or some other school-based support (e.g. within library resources, via the school counsellor or well-being officer).

Figure 20: Reported Availability of Information and Support, Sexual Orientation (n=658)

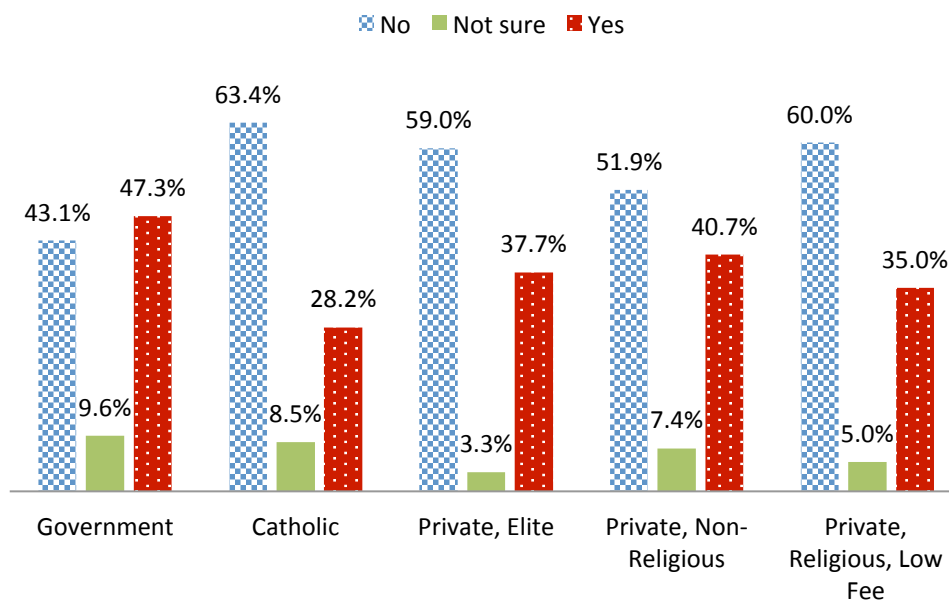
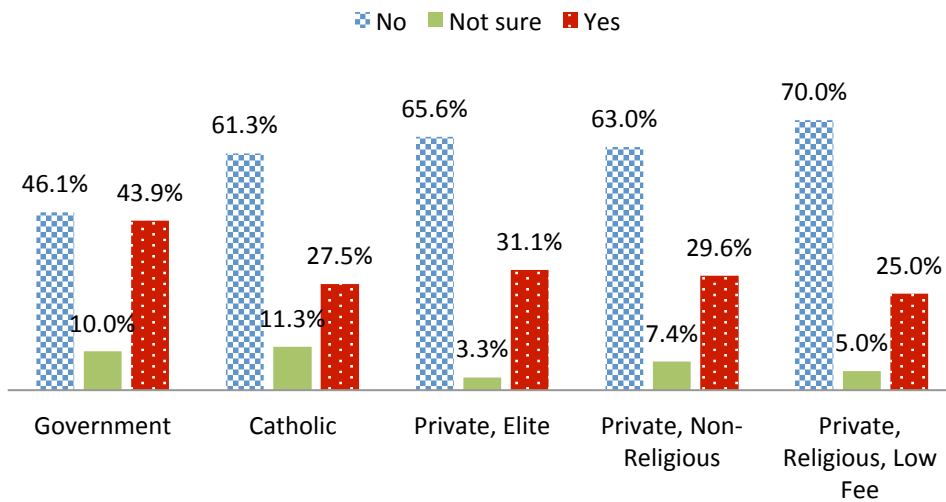
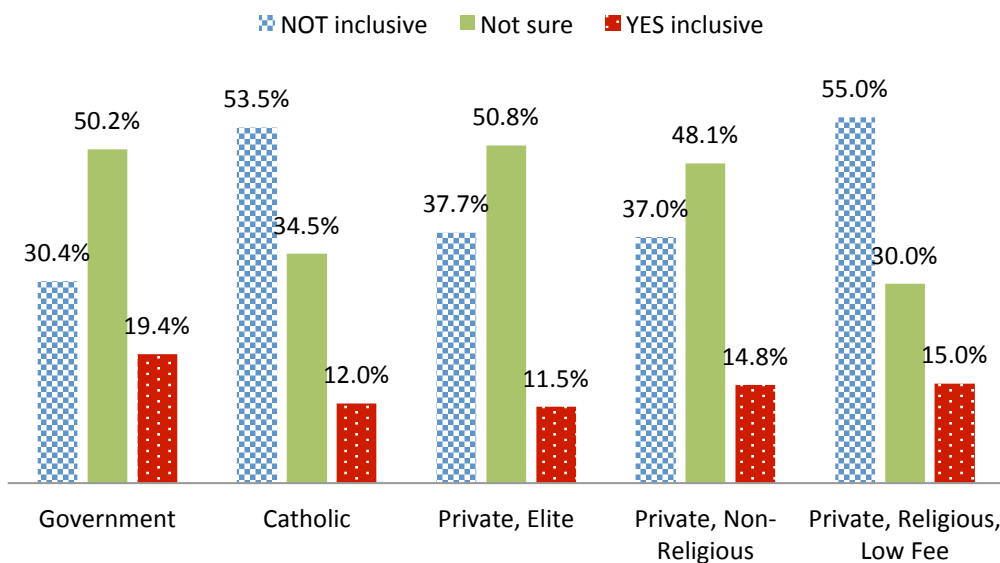


Figure 21: Reported Availability of Information and Support, Gender Identity (n=658)



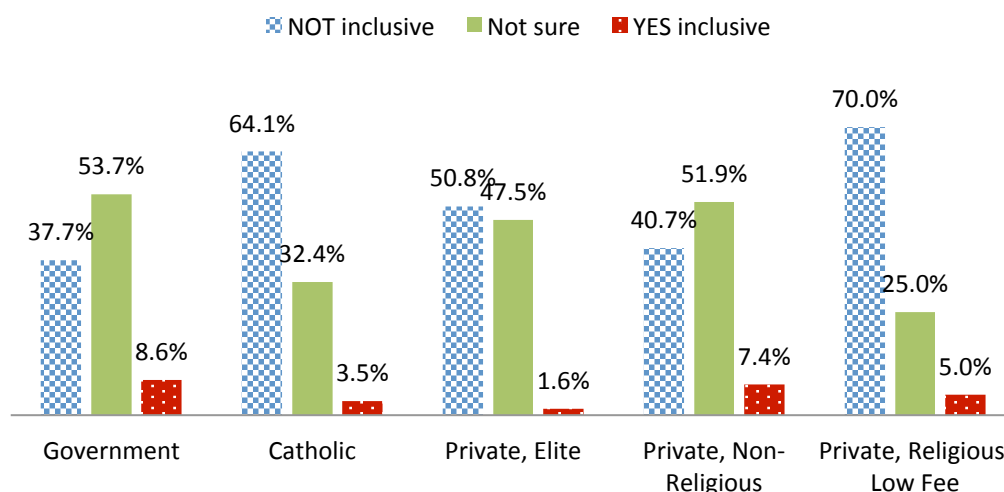
As awareness of homophobic/transphobic marginalisation increases globally, schools are encouraged to take steps to actively include sexuality and gender diversity as named, protected personal characteristics against which harassment or bullying will not be tolerated. Large-scale international research has shown that sexuality and gender diverse students who are aware of inclusive policy are more likely to feel safe and less likely to report school-based victimisation related to their sexuality and/or gender diversity (Kull, Kosciw & Greytak, 2015). While such inclusions are named at the federal institutional level (e.g. the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* [MCEETYA, 2008]) and within the new Health and Physical Education curriculum (ACARA, 2014), the extent to which Australian secondary schools have named sexuality and gender diversity is, as yet, highly variable. Furthermore, Australian schools’ proactive communication of these important policy inclusions remains unclear. Accordingly, two items asked students whether or not their schools had “a harassment policy that specifically includes sexual orientation” and “...gender expression”.

Figure 22: Reported Policy Inclusivity, Sexual Orientation (n=658)



Across both areas, students' reported low levels of inclusive policy, with 16.7% (n=110) of the total sample reporting that their school had a policy which included sexual orientation and 6.7% (n=44) reporting gender expression as an inclusion. As with the previous trend data, young people attending government schools were most likely to report a harassment policy that was inclusive of both sexual orientation (19.4%) and gender expression (8.6%). Across the schooling sector, students from both Catholic schools and independent, religious low-fee schools were most certain that their schools did not have inclusive policies.

Figure 23: Reported Policy Inclusivity, Gender Expression (n=658)



When compared to students who reported that their schools did not have a harassment policy which included sexual orientation, students who reported an inclusive policy were statistically significantly more likely to report teacher intervention across all forms of verbal and physical harassment⁷. Furthermore, these students were more than twice as likely to indicate that their teachers were openly positive about same-sex attraction⁸ and gender diversity⁹. These findings highlight an apparent relationship between institutional endorsement of inclusivity of sexuality and gender

⁷ Students who reported an LBG-inclusive harassment policy were significantly more likely to report teachers' intervention in instances of 1. *verbal homophobia* [M=3.90/SD=0.90, for students with non-inclusive policy (n=211), compared with M=3.27/SD=1.07, for students reporting an LBG-inclusive policy (n=84)]; [t(293)=5.10, p=0.000]; 2. *verbal transphobia* [M=4.16/SD=0.95, for students with non-inclusive policy (n=112), compared with M=3.12/SD=1.15, for students reporting an LBG-inclusive policy (n=34)]; [t(144)=5.35, p=0.000]; and 3. *physical harassment related to sexuality/gender diversity* [M=3.66/SD=1.21, for students with non-inclusive policy (n=144), compared with M=2.88/SD=1.34, for students reporting an LBG-inclusive policy (n=40)]; [t(57.6)=3.34, p=0.001]. Frequency of teacher intervention was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("always") to 5 ("never"), with higher numbers indicating less frequent intervention.

⁸ Students who reported an LBG-inclusive harassment policy were significantly more likely to report teachers' *open positivity/support for sexuality diversity*. [M=1.24/SD=0.99, for students with non-inclusive policy (n=244), compared with M=2.56/SD=1.16, for students reporting an LBG-inclusive policy (n=110)]; [t(352)=-10.93, p=0.000]. Positivity/support was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("never") to 4 ("always"), with higher numbers pointing to a more inclusive environment.

⁹ Students who reported an LBG-inclusive harassment policy were significantly more likely to report teachers' *open positivity/support for gender diversity*. [M=0.91/SD=0.96, for students with non-inclusive policy (n=244), compared with M=2.12/SD=1.25, for students reporting an LBG-inclusive policy (n=110)]; [t(352)=-9.95, p=0.000]. Positivity/support was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("never") to 4 ("always"), with higher numbers pointing to a more inclusive environment.

diversity, evidenced here via inclusive school policy directives which have been actively communicated to students, and a teaching staff that is more vocal on sexuality and gender diversity and related topics.

These two sub-cohorts of students were also compared on their mean scores for each of the six subscales of the *Attitudes to School Survey* as presented in an earlier section: student morale, student distress, sense of peer connection, sense of school connection, school safety and perceived teacher empathy/care. It is noteworthy that, compared to students who indicated that their harassment policy *did not* include sexual orientation (n=244), students indicating that their school *did have* such a policy (n=110), had statistically significantly better outcomes across every subscale measured (see Appendix C for associated statistics). The largest mean differences, of nearly a full point, could be seen across students' reported morale, distress (each measured on a 7-point scale) and sense of reported school connection (measured on a 5-point scale). This finding appears to reinforce the notion that when school leadership endorses visibility and inclusivity of sexuality and gender diverse individuals, students who are sexuality and/or gender diverse take notice and experienced enhanced levels of school wellbeing and identification with the schooling environment.

Associations with Teacher Positivity and Inclusivity

To investigate relationships between reported teacher positivity and inclusivity regarding topics related to sexuality and gender diversity and students' wellbeing, bivariate correlations of reported positivity were likewise conducted with the six subscales of the *Attitudes to School Survey* as presented in an earlier section: student morale, student distress, sense of peer connection, sense of school connection, school safety and perceived teacher empathy/care. Reported teacher positivity was significantly correlated with all six subscales (see Appendix D for full statistics), with the strongest associations apparent between positivity and sense of school connection ($r = 0.38$, $p=.000$ for sexuality diversity and $r = 0.37$, $p=.000$, for gender diversity) and student morale ($r = 0.33$, $p=.000$ for sexuality diversity and $r = 0.41$, $p=.000$, for gender diversity). These findings highlight the influence of teachers' positivity about the LGBT community for sexuality and gender diverse students, and its strong association with students' sense of perceived school belonging and happiness while at school.

Significant correlations were also apparent across each of the six subscales for curricular inclusions more generally and within the HPE curriculum specifically, although the strength of the relationships was much weaker. Nevertheless, as with findings related to teacher positivity as above, the strongest of these relationships were between curricular inclusivity and students' sense of school connection ($r = 0.18$, $p=.000$ for HPE-inclusions and $r = 0.16$, $p=.000$, for general inclusions).

Academic Outcomes

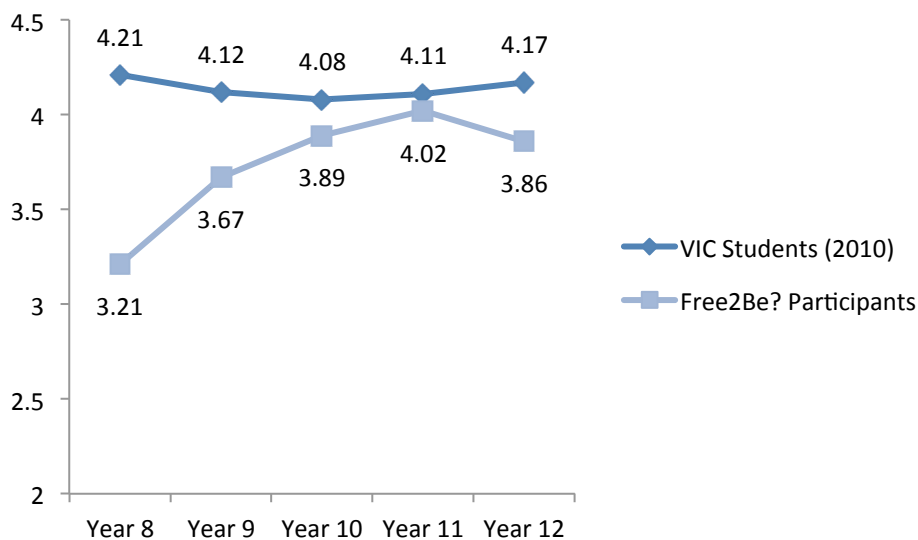
School climate has been linked to academic outcomes for sexuality and gender diverse young people across an array of international (Birkett, Espelage & Koenig, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2014; Murdock & Bolsh, 2005) and Australian research (Robinson et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014; Ullman, 2015a). In the current study, participants' academic outcomes were measured via five key areas: motivation, confidence, self-concept, university plans and self-reports of truancy.

Student Motivation and Confidence

These first two areas were assessed using validated subscales from the aforementioned *Attitudes to School Survey* (DEECD, 2006; see an earlier section for additional information about this instrumentation) which is employed in schools across the state of Victoria to assess student wellbeing and school connection. For these subscales, the response categories range from a minimum of 1 (lowest motivation/confidence) to a maximum of 5 (highest motivation/confidence).

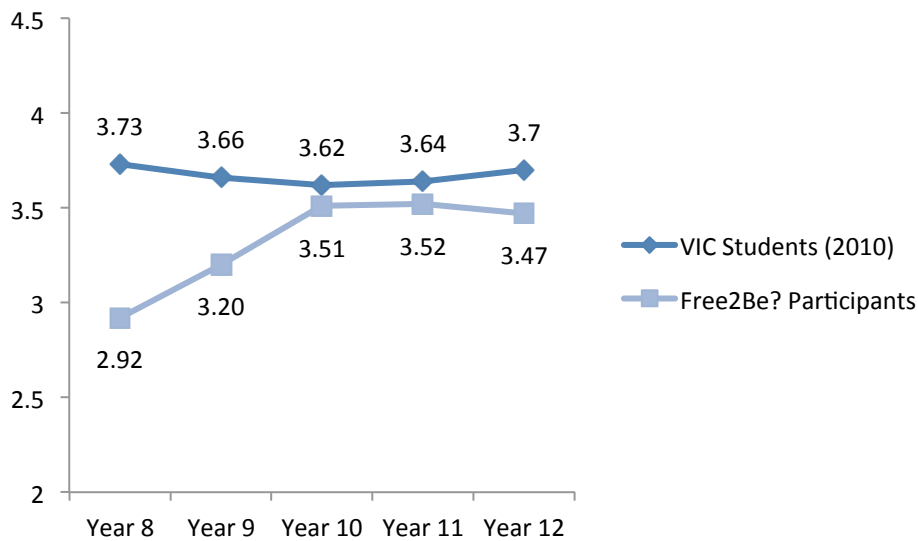
When compared to publically-available Victorian school data, participants' mean reported motivation and confidence were lower across every year school year measured. This gap was most pronounced during the early secondary school years (years 8 and 9), when research demonstrates homophobia/transphobia peaks within the school setting (Kosciw et al., 2014) and where physical changes and increased sexual attractions related to the onset of puberty present unique challenges for sexuality and gender diverse young people. Mean motivation and confidence scores improve for older participants, approaching, although never reaching, parity with the Victorian state data during the later years of secondary school (years 10, 11 & 12).

Figure 24: ATSS Student Motivation Subscale Mean Score Comparison, VIC Data (n=641)



Note: Higher scores indicate a more favourable outcome. Scale score range (1-5) truncated here for improved visualisation. Participants no longer in secondary school at the time of survey completion (n=63) were removed for ease of comparison. Victoria data source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (VIC), 2011.

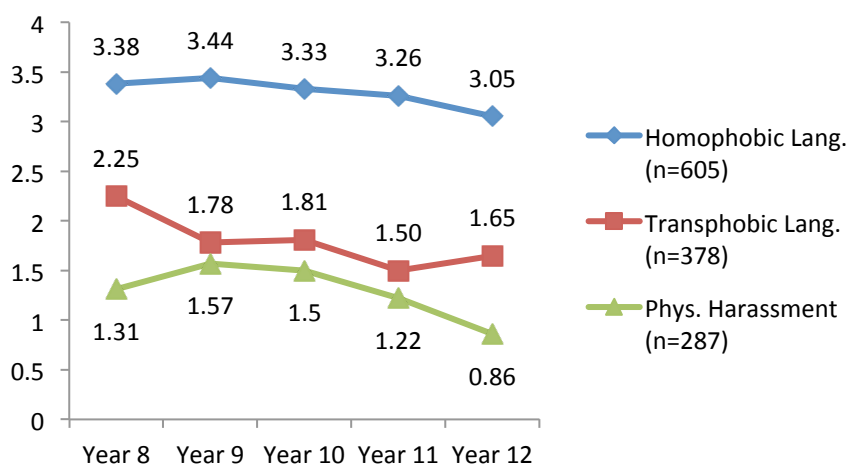
Figure 25: ATSS Learning Confidence Subscale Mean Score Comparison, VIC Data (n=641)



Note: Higher scores indicate a more favourable outcome. Scale score range (1-5) truncated here for improved visualisation. Participants no longer in secondary school at the time of survey completion (n=63) were removed for ease of comparison. Victoria data source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (VIC), 2011.

When participants' reports of marginalising peer practices (e.g. homophobic/transphobic language and physical harassment classmates perceived to be sexuality and/or gender diverse) are examined by year of schooling next to participants' reported motivation and confidence, a mirror image-like pattern can be observed. While reported student motivation and learning confidence start lower and increase during the latter years of secondary school, reports of marginalising peer practices start higher in frequency and decrease, at least somewhat, by the latter years of school.

Figure 26: Monthly Frequency of Reported Verbal/Physical Marginalisation by Year of School



Note: Frequency was measured on a 4-point Likert scale (0="never"; 4="almost every day"), with lower scores indicating a less marginalising school climate. Participants no longer in secondary school at the time of survey completion (n=63) were removed for ease of comparison with ATSS Victoria state data. Numbers of participants varied based on reported occurrence of behaviour, as outlined in an earlier section of this report.

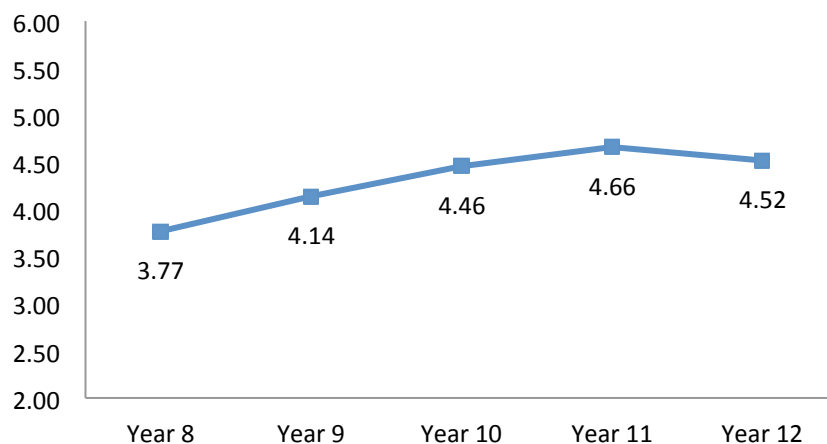
Academic Self-Concept

By way of exploring participants' self-assessments of their academic ability, the general academic self-concept scale from the *Academic Self-Description Questionnaire II* (Marsh, 1990) was included.

Students' academic self-concept has been shown to have a reciprocal relationship with their actual academic achievement (Valentine, DuBois & Cooper, 2014) and has been linked to reported school climate for sexuality and gender diverse secondary students (Ullman, 2015a). This well-established, validated 8-item academic self-concept scale (reliability, $\alpha=0.93$), measured on a scale from 1 ("definitely false") to 8 ("definitely true"), was used in the current project as a proxy measure for students' academic outcomes, which cannot be reasonably standardised for comparison across schooling environments. Items in this scale enquired as to students' perceived performance (e.g. "I have always done well in most school subjects") and the level of importance attached to such performance (e.g. "It is important for me to do well in most school subjects").

Participants' scores followed a similar trend to that observed in the previous measures of academic outcomes; scores were at their lowest in year 8 ($M=3.77$, $SD=1.66$; $n=20$), with an improved reported academic self-concept by the later years of secondary school, with a mean score of 4.66 in year 11 ($SD=1.44$; $n=152$) and 4.52 in year 12 ($SD=1.55$; $n=199$). As with measures of motivation and confidence, the trajectory of these scores was the mirror image of the three measures of peer marginalisation as outlined in Figure 26.

Figure 27: Mean Academic Self-Concept Scale Scores by Year of School (n=581)



Note: Higher scores indicate a more favourable outcome. Scale score range (1-8) truncated here for improved visualisation. Participants no longer in secondary school at the time of survey completion ($n=63$) were removed for ease of comparison.

Associations with Motivation, Confidence and Academic Self-Concept

In order to explore relationships across participants' school wellbeing outcomes and reported school climate, a series of bivariate correlations were conducted. Such investigations allow for an examination of the strength of association between key variable pairs and the associated level of statistical significance of that association. In terms of wellbeing outcomes, students' reported motivation and learning confidence were statistically significantly correlated with each of the six additional school wellbeing subscales as measured by the *Attitudes to School Survey* (see Appendix E for the full set of correlations referred to in this section). Notably, the strongest relationships were apparent between these two academic outcomes and students' perceived teacher empathy ($r = 0.50$, $p=.000$ for motivation and $r = 0.58$, $p=.000$, for confidence) and general school connection ($r = 0.48$, $p=.000$ for motivation and $r = 0.53$, $p=.000$, for confidence). Similarly strong, significant relationships were seen between students' academic self-concept and scores across the six school wellbeing subscales. Likewise students' sense of teacher empathy ($r = 0.45$, $p=.000$) and general

school connection ($r = 0.46$, $p=.000$) had the strongest set of relationships with their reported academic self-concept. Taken together with previously reported findings, results point to a complex relationship amongst reported school climate, school wellbeing and academic outcomes for sexuality and gender diverse students.

University Plans

A stand-alone item asked participants about the likelihood of attending university, originally measured on a 7-point scale from 1 – “very unlikely” to 7 – “very likely”, with the mean participant score hovering between “somewhat likely” and “likely” to attend university ($M=5.43$, $SD=1.97$; $n=640$). Despite the high overall mean, a number of young people indicated a low likelihood of university attendance. To better explore relationships between students’ reported university plans and measures of their school wellbeing, scores were collapsed into broader categories of “unlikely” (1 – 3, $n=114$), “neutral” (4; $n=52$) and “likely” (5 – 7; $n=474$). Comparisons of group mean scores (ANOVAs) were conducted for the three categories of perceived likelihood of university attendance across each of the six school wellbeing subscales of the *Attitudes to School Survey*. Mean scores across the three groups were statistically significantly different for every subscale measured, with the largest group differences between those participants who reported they were “unlikely” and those who reported they were “likely” to go to university (see Appendix F for the full statistical results). In real terms, sexuality and gender diverse students reporting enhanced school wellbeing outcomes – who were happier and less distressed at school, felt safer in the school environment and felt more connected to their classmates and teachers – were significantly more likely to indicate that they would go on to complete university study. Again, it is worth noting that these wellbeing outcomes, and in particular school safety and school connection, were strongly linked to students’ perceptions of their school climate with regards to marginalisation and inclusivity of sexuality and gender diversity.

Truancy

An additional stand-alone item asked participants how many times over the preceding three months they had “wagged or skipped a class without having an official reason (such as being sick or having an appointment)”. Of the 640 students who responded to this item, 45% had not truanted in the three months preceding survey completion ($n=288$), 22% had missed school only once or twice ($n=142$) and 33% had missed school three or more times ($n=210$), with a subset of these (12%; $n=79$) reporting missing school more than ten times in three months. Again, reported frequency of missing classes was significantly associated with each of the school wellbeing outcomes measured on the *ATSS* as well as with students’ motivation, confidence and academic self-concept. In terms of school wellbeing, students who reported higher levels of school morale were less likely to report missing classes ($r = -0.33$, $p=.000$), as were students with higher levels of reported school connection ($r = -0.36$, $p=.000$) (see Appendix E). Students’ reported truancy was also significantly correlated with a number of school climate measures, with the strongest relationships between reported truancy and students’ perceptions of teacher positivity with regards to sexuality diversity ($r = -0.22$, $p=.001$) and gender diversity ($r = -0.22$, $p=.001$) (see Appendix D). These last paired associations, in particular, hint at the complexities of the relationships between teacher positivity regarding sexuality and gender diversity as a marker of inclusivity and students’ sense of happiness and connection to school, pointing towards positivity and inclusivity as an important protective factor for sexuality and gender diverse students.

Conclusions

This research has highlighted significant concerns regarding the schooling experience of young people who are sexuality and gender diverse and foregrounded associations between these students' reported school-climate with regards to sexuality and gender diversity and their school wellbeing and academic outcomes. Project findings indicate that the majority of students are attending school in an environment which is, by and large, a marginalising one for individuals with diverse sexuality and/or gender identities. Such school environments are rife with discriminatory language, include limited representations of sexuality and gender diverse individuals and lack formal recognition of sexuality and gender diversity within school policy documents. School wellbeing outcomes for sexuality and gender diverse students in marginalising environments are impacted by these negative elements of school climate, reporting lower levels of school morale and safety, higher distress, and a lowered sense of connection to their peers, their teachers and school more generally.

The converse also appears to be true: young people in schools with fewer marginalising behaviours; greater teacher intervention; teachers who spoke in a positive and supportive manner about sexuality and gender diversity; and inclusive school policy reported enhanced school wellbeing. While these young people were in the minority, their experiences highlight the influence of institutional visibility on key outcomes for this population of students.

Open-ended responses pointed to students' sense that their teachers were reluctant to discuss sexuality and gender diversity with students, even in the face of overtly discriminatory student behaviours. These findings echo other recent research, wherein teachers have expressed discomfort with sexuality and gender diversity, a lack of institutional direction on related topics, and fears of becoming targets within their own school community should they cover this subject matter (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Leonard, Marshall, Hillier, Mitchell & Ward, 2010).

Sexuality and gender diverse students with elevated school wellbeing outcomes – those who were more connected to school, happier and less distressed while there, and who felt as if their teachers were personally invested in them – were more likely to report enhanced academic outcomes, including a stronger reported likelihood to attend university. Given the relationship between these students' school climate and their wellbeing outcomes, the findings reported here highlight both the direct and indirect links between marginalising and inclusive elements of school climate and academic outcomes.

While additional longitudinal research is needed to fully model the causal impact of school climate for this population of young people, the findings presented here nevertheless point to a series of evidence-based recommendations.

Recommendations for School Leadership Personnel

- Make a formal commitment to support the safety and wellbeing of sexuality and gender diverse students and communicate that commitment to teaching and other school staff, explicitly and regularly. Evidence that commitment via formal inclusions in publically-available school policies (e.g. student wellbeing; bullying/harassment) and communicate the rationale for, and implications of, those policies to teaching staff, students and carers.
- Design and implement a universal and consistent protocol for addressing homophobic and transphobic language and physical harassment within the school community. Ensure that

this protocol a) includes an educative, rather than a punitive, component and b) provides clear guidelines for the language to be used by teachers and other school staff during its implementation.

- Solicit, address, and work consistently to allay, teachers' concerns and fears about the parameters of relevant inclusions (e.g. which topics may be discussed, at which times and in what ways) and highlight the areas of the existing school curriculum in which there are clear provisions for inclusive material.
- Acknowledge that inclusive, relevant sexual health information is a right of all young people and provide inclusive sexuality and relationships education programs for all students.
- Ensure that uniform policies allow for gender diverse students to express their gender identity.
- Ensure the availability of private, safe, de-gendered toilet and changing facilities as an essential right of gender diverse young people.
- Source and promote professional development training for all school staff with a focus on developing a whole-school approach to supporting sexuality and gender diverse students. Additional training will be needed for staff teaching health and physical education to promote inclusive practices, language and content across sexuality and relationships education.
- Work to create a school climate in which sexuality and gender diverse students feel safe to report marginalisation, by students or by school staff, and to advocate for their needs.
- Ensure that counsellors and other school staff members responsible for students' emotional wellbeing are trained in inclusive practices and well-resourced to support sexuality and gender diverse students.

Recommendations for Teachers

- Attend local professional development sessions on sexuality and gender diversity across the primary and secondary years of schooling and share information and resources with colleagues.
- Investigate student wellbeing policies for inclusive language and explicit mention of sexuality and gender diversity. Where ambiguities, silences or oversights persist, communicate these to school leadership personnel.
- Address homophobia and transphobia in the classroom, or in any other school location, consistently and with an aim to educate. Encourage conversation on these topics and clearly outline the parameters of appropriate and inappropriate language to describe individuals, identities and actions.
- Work to establish a classroom climate where sexuality and gender diverse students feel safe to advocate for curricular inclusions and to report marginalisation from peers or adults in the school.
- Assess your curricular resources for inclusivity; where heteronormativity persists in this documentation, alert school leadership personnel and advocate for inclusions.
- Communicate with the school librarian, school wellbeing personnel and school leadership to ensure that students know where to go for additional information and support related to sexuality and gender diversity.

Recommendations for State and Federal Departments of Education

- Ensure that sector-wide policies, curriculum and syllabus documents provide unambiguous direction for teachers to speak in an inclusive, affirming manner about sexuality and gender diversity across all areas of the curriculum.
- Ensure that sector-wide policies outline explicit institutional responsibility for the entitlement of sexuality and gender diverse students to receive safe, equitable educational experiences, in which they are visible within the curriculum.
- Help promote teachers' professional development in sexuality and gender diverse-inclusive pedagogies for teachers at all levels of K-12 education.

About the Author



Dr. Jacqueline Ullman is a Senior Researcher in the Centre for Educational Research at Western Sydney University, a core member of the Australia Forum on Sexuality, Education and Health (AFSEH), and a member of the Sexualities and Genders Research Network (SaGRN). Dr. Ullman explores issues of school climate, school-based social relationships and belonging as they relate to motivation, academic self-concept and related school behaviours for diverse groups of secondary school students. Her primary research interest lies in representations of gender and sexuality in both the classroom and the curriculum and how these impact school climate, student self-beliefs and academic and social outcomes, particularly for sexuality and gender diverse youth. Dr. Ullman has published widely on these topics, with chapters in edited collections as well as articles in *Sex Education*, *Teaching Education*, *Australian Journal of Education*, and the *Journal of Youth Studies*. She is co-editor of *Understanding Sociological Theory for Pedagogical Practices*, (Cambridge University Press, 2015) and serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of LGBT Youth*.

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Statistical Analyses

Appendix A: Pearson's Product Moment Correlations between School Wellbeing and Reported Marginalisation

	Homophobic Language		Transphobic Language		Physical Harassment	
	Frequency n=664	Freq. Intervention n=589	Frequency n=415	Freq. Intervention n=271	Frequency n=315	Freq. Intervention n=315
Student Morale	0.00	-0.26**	-0.32***	-0.20**	-0.38***	-0.26***
Student Distress	0.08	0.24**	0.33***	0.18*	0.33***	0.21**
School Safety	0.27***	0.35***	0.38***	0.27***	0.49***	0.24***
School Connection	-0.09	-0.33***	-0.36***	-0.22**	-0.40***	-0.24***
Connection to Peers	-0.07	-0.22**	-0.35***	-0.18*	-0.40***	-0.20**
Teacher Empathy	-0.10	-0.38***	-0.27***	-0.26***	-0.36***	-0.31***

Note: For all marginalising practices reported here, higher scores indicate a more negative outcome (e.g. higher frequency of negative language; lower reported teacher intervention). For the "student distress" and "school safety" subscales, higher scores indicate more negative outcomes. For all other measures of the ATSS, higher scores indicate more positive outcomes. Negative correlations indicate an inverse relationship.

* = $p \leq .05$, ** = $p \leq .01$, *** = $p \leq .001$

Appendix B: Group Mean Comparisons on School Wellbeing for Students with Varying Levels of HPE Inclusivity

	High HPE Inclusion			Mid HPE Inclusion			Low HPE Inclusion			F (df)	η^2
	n	M	SE	n	M	SE	n	M	SE		
Student Morale	55	4.16	0.18	77	4.06	0.16	572	3.56	0.06	8.63*** (2, 701)	0.024
Student Distress	55	3.88	0.20	77	4.08	0.17	572	4.48	0.06	6.67** (2, 701)	0.019
School Safety	55	2.55	0.15	77	2.46	0.16	572	2.79	0.05	3.46* (2, 701)	0.016
School Connection	55	3.35	0.14	77	3.38	0.13	572	2.84	0.05	12.34*** (2, 701)	0.034
Connection to Peers	55	3.69	0.12	77	3.75	0.09	572	3.43	0.04	5.76* (2, 701)	0.016
Teacher Empathy	55	3.64	0.13	77	3.71	0.10	572	3.24	0.39	12.47*** (2, 701)	0.034

Note: For the "student distress" and "school safety" subscales, higher scores indicate more negative outcomes. For all other measures of the ATSS, higher scores indicate more positive outcomes.

* = $p \leq .05$, ** = $p \leq .01$, *** = $p \leq .001$

Appendix C: Group Mean Comparisons on School Wellbeing for Students with/without LGB-Inclusive Policy

	LGB-Inclusive Policy		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	YES (<i>n</i> = 110)	NO (<i>n</i> = 244)			
Student Morale	4.26 (1.18)	3.31 (1.43)	-6.45***	252.96	0.81
Student Distress	3.81 (1.33)	4.77 (1.42)	6.01***	352	0.64
School Safety	2.35 (1.04)	3.04 (1.23)	5.47***	241.61	0.70
School Connection	3.53 (0.97)	2.64 (1.16)	-7.50***	248.69	0.95
Connection to Peers	3.82 (0.76)	3.26 (0.98)	-5.92***	266.07	0.73
Teacher Empathy	3.75 (0.95)	3.10 (0.83)	-6.44***	240.10	0.83

Note: For the “student distress” and “school safety” subscales, higher scores indicate more negative outcomes. For all other measures of the ATSS, higher scores indicate more positive outcomes. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

*** = $p \leq .001$

Appendix D: Pearson’s Product Moment Correlations between School Wellbeing, Truancy and Reported Positivity

	Teacher Positivity Regarding...	
	Sexuality Diversity (<i>n</i> =704)	Gender Diversity (<i>n</i> =704)
Student Morale	0.33***	0.41***
Student Distress	-0.28***	-0.33***
School Safety	-0.21**	-0.26**
School Connection	0.38***	0.37***
Connection to Peers	0.28***	0.34***
Teacher Empathy	0.27***	0.29***
Reported Freq. of Truancy (<i>n</i> =640)	-0.22**	-0.22**

Note: For both measures of teacher positivity reported here, higher scores indicate a more positive outcome (e.g. greater frequency of teacher positivity). For the “student distress” and “school safety” subscales, higher scores indicate more negative outcomes. For all other measures of the ATSS, higher scores indicate more positive outcomes. Negative correlations indicate an inverse relationship.

** = $p \leq .01$, *** = $p \leq .001$

Appendix E: Pearson's Product Moment Correlations between School Wellbeing and Selected Academic Outcomes

	Learning Motivation (n=704)	Student Confidence (n=704)	Academic Self-Concept (n=640)	Reported Freq. of Truancy (n=640)
Student Morale	0.39***	0.51***	0.41***	-0.33***
Student Distress	-0.26***	-0.41***	-0.40***	0.26***
School Safety	-0.18***	-0.25***	-0.25***	0.21***
School Connection	0.48***	0.55***	0.46***	-0.36***
Connection to Peers	0.30***	0.41***	0.33***	-0.28***
Teacher Empathy	0.40***	0.53***	0.45***	-0.29***

Note: For the "student distress" and "school safety" subscales, higher scores indicate more negative outcomes. For all other measures of the ATSS, higher scores indicate more positive outcomes. Negative correlations indicate an inverse relationship.

*** = $p \leq .001$

Appendix F: Group Mean Comparisons on School Wellbeing for Students with Varying University Plans

	Likely to attend			Neutral			Unlikely to attend			F (df)	η^2
	n	M	SE	n	M	SE	n	M	SE		
Student Morale	474	3.87	0.06	52	3.34	0.22	114	3.07	0.13	18.83*** (2, 637)	0.056
Student Distress	474	4.24	0.06	52	4.61	0.24	114	4.87	0.13	9.56*** (2, 637)	0.029
School Safety	474	2.59	0.05	52	2.85	0.16	114	3.10	0.11	9.38*** (2, 637)	0.029
School Connection	474	3.17	0.05	52	2.57	0.17	114	2.37	0.10	30.78*** (2, 637)	0.088
Connection to Peers	474	3.60	0.04	52	3.33	0.14	114	3.20	0.09	11.51*** (2, 637)	0.034
Teacher Empathy	474	3.49	0.04	52	3.08	0.14	114	2.94	0.09	20.21*** (2, 637)	0.060

Note: For the "student distress" and "school safety" subscales, higher scores indicate more negative outcomes. For all other measures of the ATSS, higher scores indicate more positive outcomes.

*** = $p \leq .001$

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