

Data Brief: The Tasmanian Education Context

Submitted by Tiffany Jones

Introduction

The following Data Brief is submitted to Rodney Croome for viewing by The Tasmanian Department of Education and Training by Tiffany Jones, on the 4th of April, 2012. It provides a short overview of data relevant to the Tasmanian education context, collected for the PhD research project *Sexual Subjects: GLBTIQ Student Subjectivities in Australian Education Policy* (Jones, 2012). This research was based on a mixed methodology, including legal and policy analysis (over 80 national, state and sector education policies), key informant interviews and cross-analysis of new data on the education context for 3,134 Australian GLBTIQ students¹. The overview is intended to assist in underscoring the need for a distinct Tasmanian education policy that explicitly focusses on GLBTIQ² student issues, which would ideally provide detailed guidance around these issues for Tasmanian schools.

Legal Context

Tasmania prohibits discrimination on the grounds of ‘sexual orientation’– defined as ‘heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality or transsexuality’ (TAS Parliamentary Counsel, 2010). Thus, the legislative provision should be understood as applicable for both same-sex attracted *and gender diverse* students. This legislation does make some provision for exemptions around discrimination for cultural and religious places.

Education Policy Context

The Tasmanian Department of Education has achieved some disparate policy indicators of support for GLBTIQ student issues in indirect policies focussed on broader considerations around discrimination. For example, ‘sexuality’ was included in the list of traits not to be discriminated against: broadly in *Anti-discrimination and Anti-harassment Policy (TAS Government, 2008a rationale, 1.1, 1.2)*, regarding schooling access in *Equity in Schooling: Policy & Implementation Plan (TAS Government, 2008b introduction)* and regarding support materials in *Supportive School Communities Policy Framework 2003–2007 (TAS Government, 2003, p. 12)*. There were also resources and glossary entries on the Tasmanian Department of Education’s website that discussed sexual diversity inclusion issues (California Safe Schools Coalition, 1996; TAS Government, 2007, 2008c, 2008d, Various; TAS Government, Family Planning Victoria Action Centre, & Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2008). The Tasmanian Government also has a history of liaising with GLBTI people through advisory committees.

¹ Taken from the Writing Themselves in Three Study (Hillier et al., 2010); a project on which Tiffany Jones was responsible for the education questions and education policy questions.

² Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and otherwise queer or questioning students.

The policy review found however that the Tasmanian Department of Education does not currently have an explicit, separate policy document wholly focussed on GLBTIQ issues such as homophobic bullying or provisions for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and otherwise queer/ questioning students. In addition, there were no official relevant policies in this area found for Tasmania's independent sector. This is a significant gap in Tasmania's policy efforts against discrimination and bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The research showed that in the two sectors where distinct explicit policy documents wholly on the topic of homophobic bullying or GLBTIQ students existed (the Victorian and NSW Government sectors), GLBTIQ students were significantly more likely to report school-level policies were in place that provided them protections. In these sectors GLBTIQ students were also significantly more likely to report that their sexuality education was inclusive and that all students were taught 'that homophobia was wrong'. On the other hand, in sectors where there were only indirect policies in place, these benefits to GLBTIQ students were comparatively reduced. It appeared that general inclusion policies with little mention of GLBTIQ students (for example in Queensland) or general anti-discrimination policies simply did not carry a strong enough message to schools and staff that preventing discrimination and bullying on the basis of *sexual orientation and gender identity* (not just race, disability or other grounds) was indeed part of their legal and professional duty. The references made to GLBTIQ issues were to indirect, obscure and lacked the necessary detail to combat institutional homophobia.

The review found that, compared to some other states and territories in Australia, Tasmania was in a really good position for the development of a future policy solely on GLBTIQ student issues that gave schools the kind of detailed advice seen in Victorian policies that is associated with benefits for GLBTIQ students. Particularly, the state featured unique structural and partnership opportunities that should support swift and yet effective progress in this area, should the Tasmanian Department of Education choose to act. The history of drawing on GLBTIQ representation in committees for policy advice should allow for the smooth reinstatement of such a committee with a view to gaining insight into education issues. Further, the policy document could draw together details about the state's current anti-discrimination legislation and other more recent legislative changes around GLBTIQ issues, pre-existing (but currently disparate) anti-discrimination provisions in other education policies, and pre-existing resources and materials into one place to effectively launch a stronger and more visible leadership approach in this area. Should the Tasmanian Department of Education choose to act, it has every potential to join the Victorian Department of Education as a leader in this area.

School Policy Context

Only around *one third of Tasmanian GLBTIQ students* reported their school had a school-level policy in place protecting them against discrimination. This is a significant gap as GLBTIQ students who knew their school had protective policies in place were:

- More likely to feel safe (75% v. 45%).
- More likely to feel good about their sexuality (85% v. 78%).
- More likely to report a support feature at their school (84 % v. 41%), such as:
 - posters about sexual diversity (33% v. 8%),
 - students who speak up against homophobia (43% v. 16%),

- friendliness towards them regardless of their sexuality (57% v. 20%),
 - equal treatment at events like formals (40% v. 10%),
 - links with sexual diversity support services (32% v. 6%),
 - and access to library books about diversity (49% v. 16%).
- Almost half as likely to have been physically abused at school, and less likely to have suffered other forms of homophobic abuse (see Figure 1).
- Almost half as likely to attempt suicide, and at lowered risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation (see Figure 2).

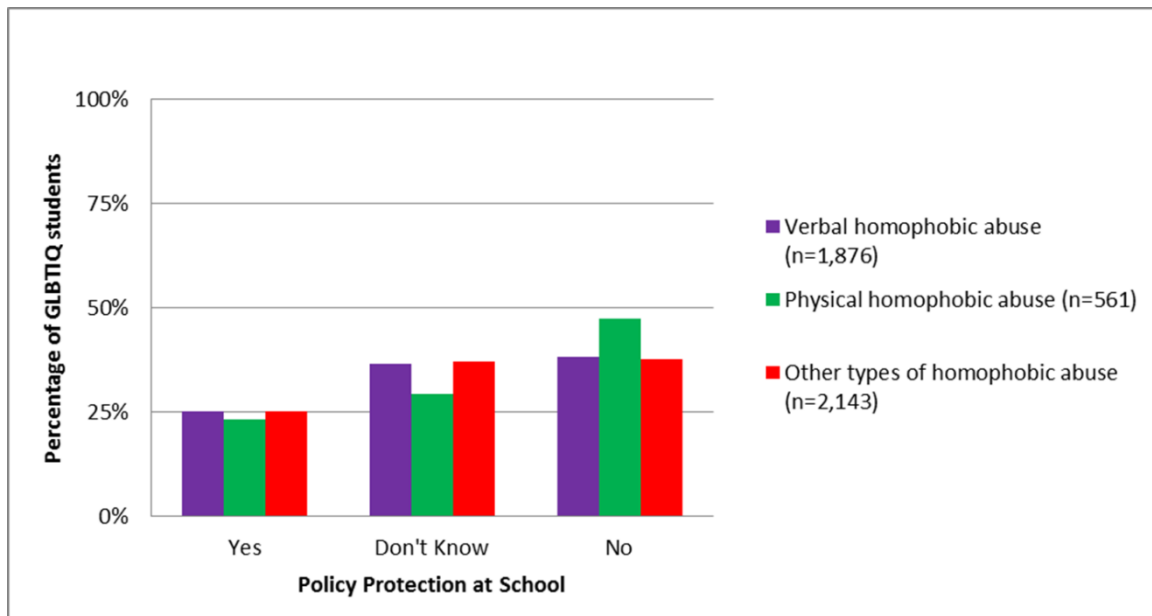


Figure 1: GLBTIQ students' perceived policy protection vs. homophobic abuse.

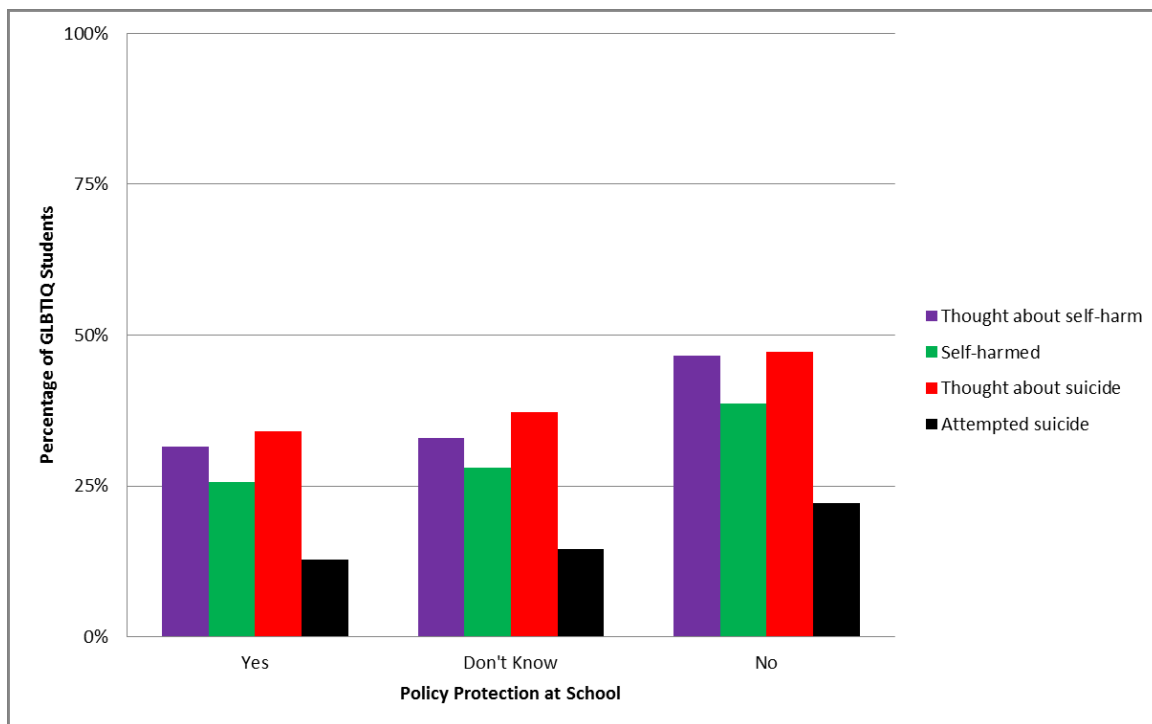


Figure 2: GLBTIQ students' perceived policy protection vs. self-harm and suicide risk.

School-based Teaching Against Homophobic Bullying:

Gregory* (16 yrs, gay male Tasmanian student) was verbally abused and physically beaten up at his Tasmanian Catholic school on the basis of his sexuality. He comments: 'I have had things thrown at me e.g Glass bottle, soft drink cans , rocks and sticks and i have been punched numeras times'. He also experiences social exclusion (being left out at school), rumours, cyber bullying and 'being humiliated' in the classroom. It has affected his ability to concentrate in class, his marks dropped, he hid at recess and lunch, dropped out of team sports, avoided using the toilets and change rooms (causing him considerable discomfort). He has even missed days and ultimately moved to a government school in an attempt to escape bullying, although it has not helped the situation. Neither school had policy protections in place. Gregory self-harmed and attempted suicide because he 'got so depressed and sick of have cruelty plassed upon me for no reasons, homosexuality is natural and is not a choice and yet people treat me as if i just got up one say and said " Im going to be gay"'.

Only **14% of Tasmanian GLBTIQ students attended a school where they were taught that "homophobia is wrong"**. This is a massive oversight considering how as GLBTIQ students have increasingly come out over the past decade (98% had spoken to someone about their sexual feelings in 2010, compared with 95% in 2004 and 82% in 1998), **their experience of bullying has significantly increased**. Specifically, of those who were abused on the basis of homophobia, 80% experienced the abuse at school (a figure that had increased from 74% in 2004 and 69% in 1998). These students are being **bullied more now than ever before**, a problem reflected in research from around the world (Hunt & Jensen, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; UNESCO, 2012). The problem has become so large that on December 8th in 2011, over 200 United Nations Member States attended the convening 'Stop Bullying – Ending Violence and Discrimination Bases on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity' at the New York UN Headquarters. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon released a statement condemning homophobic bullying, arguing:

Bullying of this kind is not restricted to a few countries but goes on in schools (...) in all parts of the world. This is a moral outrage, a grave violation to human rights and a public health crisis.

On the 6-9th of that same month, the UN's education sector arm, UNESCO, held the First International Consultation on Homophobic Bullying in Rio, Brazil. International leadership, research experts, government leaders, NGOs and education activists met and discussed the issue of homophobic bullying in an effort to develop best policy and practice positions to give guidance to educators around the world, documented in a recent report (UNESCO, 2012).

School-based Sexuality Education:

Lydia* (16yrs, bisexual female Tasmanian student) feels "very safe" at her government school which explicitly teaches about homophobia and discrimination. She also states

that it teaches about gay and lesbian relationships and safe sex issues, amongst a diverse range of other topics. She says homophobic bullying “hasn’t affected me at all” and her school library is stocked with a range of relevant resources around sexual diversity.

Tasmanian sexuality education is mainly heterosexual in nature. For example, 82% of students were taught about male/ female body changes at puberty, 79% were taught about protecting against sexual dangers such as pregnancy and 78% were taught about heterosexual reproduction. These were the three most popular sexuality education messages in the state. Yet little over a tenth of Tasmanian schools covered messages relevant to same-sex attraction. However, those who did receive a sexuality education that covered diversity issues were likely to rank it as “very good”. This kind of education was much more likely to occur in schools with a policy in place, where an active attempt was being made to make the school a safe and supportive place for GLBTIQ students.

Conclusion:

Whilst only a small sample of the data available on education policy and GLBTIQ students could be discussed here due to the deadline set, it is important to note the poignant difference that the right kind of policy statement at the state level can make to the development and implementation of policies at the school level. These policies have correlations with important benefits and protection against bullying for GLBTIQ students, and furthermore, contribute to a context in which these students are far less likely to engage in self-harm or suicide attempts. The Tasmanian Department of Education is encouraged to consider using the state’s unique structural supports and partnership opportunities to develop a distinct policy document on GLBTIQ issues, and to consider combining the current anti-discrimination frame with the type of “safe and supportive schools” approach and detailed guidance around provision for same-sex attraction and gender identity in schools seen across Victorian policies (VIC Government, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010).

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