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Supporting the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in schools: Auditing Australian education departmental policies

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Abstract

While school policies are not a panacea, gender and sexuality diversity-inclusive policies have the potential to relieve educators' concerns about what they are 'allowed' to engage with in respect to GSD inclusivity and to guide their proactive efforts to support gender and sexuality diverse (GSD) students. Unfortunately, policies enabling educators' proactive, positive support for GSD students are far from systematised in schools across Australia's eight states and territories. This paper presents an audit of publicly available policy guidance for educators in Australia's government schools, analysing these against an original evaluative set of best-practice criteria developed from research recommendations from the field of GSD-inclusivity in K-12 schools. Analyses for each state/territory are provided. Results from this audit highlight the unevenness in articulated policy support available to Australian educators and illustrate the criticality of developing Australian federal policy mandates with respect to GSD inclusivity and professional development for educators, including both articulated expectations for the creation/maintenance of a safe and affirming environment as well as pragmatic support for how to create school cultural change.

Keywords Gender and sexuality diversity · Education policy · School policy guidance · Australia · Inclusivity

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Background

While Australia's *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and *Fair Work Act 2009* clearly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2023) and its federal Department of Education acknowledges the role that the inclusion and affirmation of diversity has to play in creating safe schools that promote student wellbeing (Education Services Australia, 2020), policies enabling educators' proactive, positive support for gender and sexuality diverse (GSD) students are far from systematised in schools across Australia's eight states and territories. Coupled with the lack of uniformly GSD-inclusive initial teacher training (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020), it is perhaps unsurprising that Australian teachers report feeling uncomfortable with and/or avoiding GSD-inclusive topics (Ezer et al., 2020). Given the high rates of homo/transphobic harassment and victimisation reported by Australian students (Hill et al., 2021), and low reports of consistent intervention by school-based adults (Ullman, 2021, 2022), it stands to reason that educators often do not have the necessary supports or guidance in relation to addressing GSD biased-based bullying or providing relevant curriculum content inclusions.

In lieu of education for pre-/in-service educators, GSD-inclusive policies have the potential to relieve concerns about what they are 'allowed' to engage with in respect to GSD inclusivity, and to guide proactive efforts to support GSD students. Australian educators report wanting such policies, both at the school and the state/territory Departmental level, since policy 'sends a clear message to staff about school culture and empowers them to actively support' GSD students (Grant et al., 2021, p. 403). Without such guidance, educators report feeling limited in the ways they can provide practical supports and affirmation for this cohort (Grant et al., 2021). GSD-inclusive policies and guidance benefits educators' sense of personal capacity, comfort, and willingness to address discrimination and engage with GSD-inclusive curriculum content (Greytak et al., 2016; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).

Research consistently highlights the positive impact of schools' GSD-inclusive policy and/or guidance resources for classroom teachers on schooling outcomes for GSD students. One recent large-scale survey of nearly 7000 GSD high school students in the United States used school principals' reports of the prevalence of GSD-inclusive policies to investigate the relationship between the existence of educators' GSD-focused supportive directives and a set of outcomes as reported by GSD students (Day et al., 2019). Regression modelling used in Day et al.'s study illustrated the protective, positive impact of such policies on reducing peer-to-peer homo/transphobic bullying and discriminatory behaviour and increasing academic outcomes for this cohort. Results echo previous large-scale international research documenting the tangible impact of GSD-inclusive policies on GSD students' schooling outcomes (Kosciw et al., 2014; Sandfort et al., 2010).

Such findings are echoed within the Australian context, where a 2021 national study of 2376 GSD high school students found that participants attending schools with articulated GSD-inclusive policies reported statistically significantly higher

school-based wellbeing and school-climate outcomes, including their sense that school-based adults were able to effectively manage bullying at their school (Ullman, 2021). The flow-on effect of a school environment which specifically acknowledges GSD students in its policy documentation on GSD students' reported school-based wellbeing, specifically their feelings of safety and support at school, has been likewise reported in other large-scale Australian survey research (Jones & Hillier, 2012).

Recent Australian research has also highlighted how publicly available policy and guidance documents can be mobilised for parents/carers of GSD young people to advocate for school-based support (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2022; Ferfolja et al., 2023). Indeed, parental desire for inclusive GSD-related curriculum and support for GSD students in schools is evidenced in recent national Australian research; over 80% of parents of school-age children attending a government-funded school want GSD-related material included in school curricula, with 59% supporting whole-school inclusions, inclusive of policy articulation (Ullman et al., 2022). However, without critical government/departmental support through appropriate policy/guidance, such inclusions are challenging to implement. The seemingly ad hoc nature of policy/guidance development and circulation renders it difficult to know what is available to help educators to support GSD students.

Through an analysis of policy/guidance in publicly available web material, this paper seeks to respond to the question, 'What department of education policy/guidelines are available to support educators in the broad inclusion of GSD students in schools?'.

Methodology

Between 2022 and 2023, the Department of Education[1] websites for each Australian state and territory were systematically examined for their inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in public-facing documentation.[2] This process involved following weblinks across policy libraries and resources for teachers, parents, and students. Where this process of following linked material took the researcher off the Departmental site and onto another organisation's site identified as a resource for educators working to support GSD students, this was noted in line with the criteria outlined in Table 1. The central aim of this audit was to ascertain what policies, materials, and resources were specifically endorsed by the state/territory government Departments, rather than what guidance exists for educators who may be searching more widely. No limit was placed on the length of time spent exploring any given site; rather, all best efforts were made to locate any supports available to guide educators' work. All

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[1] There is slight variation in the naming conventions for these across the country; however, for the purposes of ease and consistency, these are simply referred to as the 'Department(s) of Education'. Relevant sources for each location show the accurate Department name as at the time of writing.

[2] Material for educators which required Departmental login credentials to access was not audited for the purposes of this review.

weblinks and materials were current at the time of investigations; however, as GSD-focused inclusions in schools are a heavily politicised area and consequentially subject to broader political interference, some changes may have occurred in the time since writing.

While the authors tend to work with the terminology of gender and sexuality diversity, the more commonplace acronym of 'LGBTQ' was used as a starting point for all relevant searches. Materials referring to 'diversity' or 'diverse' students/community members without specifically articulating gender and sexuality diversity were not considered to have met the requirements of the audit, the parameters of which are outlined in greater detail below.

Evaluation of publicly available materials

Once publicly available policies, guidance documents, and other state/territory-sponsored resources were identified, these were evaluated against a set of 'best-practice' criteria developed from empirically informed recommendations published within relevant literature from the field. This literature included reports from large-scale national surveys of GSD young people, both in Australia (Hill et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014; Ullman, 2021) and abroad (Bradlow et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2020), as well as international technical guidance for sexuality education (UNESCO, 2018). Further, recommendations from large-scale research into educators' perspectives and experiences of school climate with respect to gender and sexuality diversity were also incorporated (Taylor et al., 2015; Ullman & Smith, 2018).

As shown in Table 1 below, the evaluative criteria designed for this review are inclusive of: clear policy guidance for educators, impacting both school culture and instructional practices; targeted training/professional development opportunities; and direction for upgrading of facilities, both physical and administrative. An underlying minimal expectation for these criteria is that the Departmental site and/or linked, downloadable resources drafted by the Department(s) articulate their acknowledgement of the existence of GSD students within their schools and the need to provide targeted support for this cohort to ensure their access to a safe and affirming environment, conducive to learning. A brief description of each criterion is presented below:

- *Anti-bullying/wellbeing policies which instruct educators to address homo/bi/transphobia:* Resources make an unequivocal statement that educators are meant to proactively address and/or work to prevent peer-to-peer homo/bi/transphobia.
- *Articulated direction for educators to include positive/affirmative material referencing gender and sexuality diversity within the classroom*: Resources make an unequivocal statement that educators are meant to proactively include positive representations of gender and sexuality diversity in their teaching.
- *Articulated support for and availability of training/professional development activities for educators to build knowledge and capacity with respect to supporting GSD students*: Resources articulate the benefits of educators' professional

development to guide their support of GSD students and point to availability of such training (either internally or externally provided).

- *Articulated direction to acknowledge/include GSD students within relationships and sexual health education*: Resources make an unequivocal statement that educators are meant to acknowledge/include GSD students within this area of the curriculum.
- *Guidance for schools' provision of suitable facilities for gender diverse students*: Resources provide clear, inclusive guidance for school leadership personnel and educators regarding these students' use of toilets and change facilities at school. 'Inclusive' here refers to either allowing students to use the facilities that correspond to their gender identity or providing a single-use facility.
- *Guidance for schools' provision of necessary administrative supports for gender diverse students*: Resources provide clear, inclusive guidance for school leadership personnel and educators regarding these students' choice of uniform, and recognition of name/pronouns within administrative systems at school. 'Inclusive' here refers to allowing students to wear the elements of the school uniform that feel best for them and having administrative processes in place to ensure colleagues are aware of any name/pronoun changes and that these are reflected in administrative communication.
- *Guidance for educators to take a student-focused stance to supporting the inclusion and wellbeing of gender diverse students and facilitate student-led supports*: Resources provide clear guidance for school leadership personnel and educators to acknowledge that every student is different and may desire different provisions for support and acknowledgement within the school community. Further, guidance is provided which acknowledges that not all gender diverse students come from supportive families, and that decisions about the provision of supports and communication should centre student wellbeing.
- *Intervention policy enabling the identification of, and suggested response to, educators who contribute to a hostile school environment for GSD students*: Resources: (1) acknowledge that some educators contribute to a hostile school environment for GSD students through communicated homo/bi/transphobia and/or resistance to recognise and affirm GSD identities and (2) provide policy guidance for school leaders to respond to these individuals.
- *Links to external state/territory agency which has GSD young people and/or GSD students as its brief*: Resources link educators to their local and/or state/territory-based support services for GSD young people; if such services cover multiple concerns (e.g. *headspace*, an Australian national mental-health organisation for young people), such links are accompanied by text which unequivocally frames this organisation as offering support for GSD youth.
- *Links to Student Wellbeing Hub (*https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/*) as an available reference for educators to support GSD students*: Resources link to the federal-level Student Wellbeing Hub, specifically acknowledging the available GSD-inclusive resources provided on this site to guide educators' work.
- *Links to an independent RSE curriculum resource (supplement) as an available reference for educators to support GSD students*: Resources point educators to an external (e.g. not created/produced by the Australian Curriculum Authority)

independent RSE curriculum resource package that provides practice guidance for educators to include GSD identities in this area of the curriculum.

Results

Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the 'Safe and Supportive Schools Policy' (ACT Education Directorate, 2016, November 9) recognises that diversity includes sex, gender identity, and sexuality. In the same line, they talk about the need for 'active support and celebration of difference' in schools. However, while this document includes language about 'modelling and *explicit* teaching' (emphasis added)—ostensibly meaning clear and direct language with regards to diversity—to 'enable generational change in reducing inequality and discrimination', no specific areas of diversity are outlined; thus, this directive is not definitively linked to the explicit teaching of GSD inclusivity.

The ACT's state-specific curriculum framework which supplements the national curriculum materials ('Every Chance to Learn'; ACT Education Directorate, n.d. a) mentions gender and sexuality diversity and articulates the need for teachers to act 'to promote the inclusion of all' (p. 48). Nevertheless, the most overt inclusions are related to homophobia, or society's negative framing of same-sex attraction. Transphobia or transgender individuals are not mentioned. In terms of articulated support of gender diverse students, while the 'Fact Sheet for Schools Offering Student Equitable Uniform Options' (ACT Education Directorate, n.d. b) is designed to 'promote freedom of choice…by categorising options by clothing type, rather than gender' (p. 1), this document does not acknowledge the existence of transgender, gender diverse students, or students who may be questioning their gender. Accordingly, the utility of this document for educators seeking departmental guidance to support this cohort is limited.

Resources associated with the territory's *Safe and Inclusive Schools* initiative (SAIS) speak to several of the best-practice criteria as outlined in Table 1. However, while the Directorate links to SAIS (and other external programs), these resources are not positioned as obligatory for educators'/school leaders' consideration. The Directorate acknowledges that GSD students 'report school as a significant site where they experience prejudice, discrimination, harassment and violence', but they go on to clarify that, 'The [SAIS] Initiative is *not mandatory* and schools do not need to become members. Schools simply access the support they need, if and when they need it' (emphasis added) (ACT Education Directorate, n.d. c, para 14). Such framing situates these resources as fulfilling a reactive need—to counter discrimination/violence as noticed by adult educators—and as suitable for GSD students only (e.g., unnecessary if no GSD students are known to educators).

In a similar fashion, while the Directorate does provide links to the federal Student Wellbeing Hub resource on their pages for 'Inclusion and Wellbeing' (ACT Education Directorate, n.d. d) and to promote 'Safe and Supportive Schools' (ACT

Table 1 Evaluative best-practice criteria

	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA
Anti-bullying/wellbeing policies which instruct educators to address homo/bi/transphobia;	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Articulated direction for educators to include positive/affirmative material referencing gender and sexuality diversity within the classroom;	O	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	O
Articulated support for and availability of training/professional development activities for educators to build knowledge and capacity with respect to supporting GSD students;	O	X	X	O	✓	✓	✓	X
Articulated direction to acknowledge/include GSD students within relationships and sexual health education;	X	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	X
Guidance for schools' provision of suitable facilities for gender diverse/transgender students (e.g., use of facilities that align with their gender identity; single-occupant/all-gender toilets/change rooms);	O	✓	X	✓	✓	X	✓	X
Guidance for schools' provision of necessary administrative supports for gender diverse/transgender students (e.g., uniform flexibility; recognition of pronoun/name changes through administrative systems);	O	✓	X	P	✓	X	✓	X
Guidance for educators to take a student-focused stance to supporting the inclusion and wellbeing of gender diverse students and facilitate student-led supports;	O	✓	X	X	✓	O	✓	X
Intervention policy enabling the identification of, and suggested response to, educators who contribute to a hostile school environment for GSD students;	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Links to external state/territory agency[a] which has GSD young people and/or GSD students as its brief;	✓	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓[a]	X
Links to Student Wellbeing Hub (SSCA resources) as an available reference for educators to support GSD students;	X	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	X
Links to a supplemental/independent RSE curriculum resource as an available reference for educators to support GSD students;	X	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	X

✓ = yes, apparent; O = positioned as optional; External provider/advice; P partial; X not apparent/not linked

[a] In the state of Victoria, this agency is located within the Department of Education and Training, where its sole focus is on working with schools to support GSD students

Education Directorate, n.d. e), these materials are not directly presented to educators as a source of guidance or inclusive curricula for GSD students.

New South Wales (NSW)

The state of New South Wales (NSW) does not provide any overview policy or guidance for educators which specifically alerts them to the presence of GSD students in their schools or identifies GSD students as a cohort requiring additional support, understanding or resources. Their 'Code of Conduct' policy document for educators refers to characteristics of 'transgender' [sic] and 'sexual orientation' as a reason for 'unfair' treatment and requires educators to 'take all necessary steps to prevent, address and report harassment, bullying and discrimination', making reference to compliance with federal anti-discrimination policy (NSW DOE, 2022a, October 19, p. 21); however, no additional guidance or links are offered. While lessons on anti-bullying and the importance of recognising and affirming diversity are provided as resources on the Department's 'Student Wellbeing' site, no specific identity characteristics or cohorts are mentioned in this material. A single resource on 'Bias-based bullying' acknowledges that people can be bullied based on identity characteristics including being 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or intersex' (para 1) and encourages educators to challenge this, to identify 'at risk' groups, and to 'specifically educate' (para 5) students about discrimination and power (NSW DOE, n.d. a). Once again, however, no resources or further guidance is provided for educators who may need more support to enact these directives.

Within NSW's state-specific version of the curriculum, no mandates stipulate coverage of GSD-inclusive material beyond general acknowledgement of student diversity and an acknowledgement of anti-discrimination policy (NSW DOE, 2023). While the Stage 5 (Years 9–10) sexuality education curriculum provides educators with the option of discussing homo/transphobia and the marginalisation of GSD individuals, there is no indication of a GSD-inclusive/affirming orientation to content in this area of study (NESA, 2018). Linked professional development materials/courses address the need to create a supportive environment but do not mention gender and sexuality diversity.

Notably, sexuality is directly positioned as a 'sensitive or controversial' topic by the Department. The state's RSE resources are linked to their 'Controversial Issues in Schools Policy', which instructs educators that controversial issues 'create a difference of opinion, causing contention and debate within the school or the community' (NSW DOE, 2017, December 12, p. 4) and outlines the need to request permission from the school principal and informed consent from parents to discuss proposed 'controversial' content. Given the dearth of articulated instruction to educators offering Departmental permissions to discuss gender and sexuality diversity in the classroom, it would stand to reason that these signposts would dissuade educators from engaging with these topics.

With respect to the specific support of transgender and/or gender diverse students, a legal bulletin ('Transgender students in schools') suggests 'structure[ing] any support specifically to the individual needs of the student'

(NSW DOE, 2022b, para 4) and acknowledges that there are occasions where it may not be in the student's best interests for educators to involve the student's parents/carers in the school's support activities. At the time of writing, the bulletin's link to a factsheet written by the state's external support organisation for transgender and gender diverse individuals (*The Gender Centre*) is a dead/broken link. Notably, while GSD-inclusive teaching resources are available on the federal Student Wellbeing Hub, including lesson plans on gender diversity and the experiences of transgender students, this legal bulletin specifically states that these resources are 'not to be used in NSW public schools' (NSW DOE, 2022b, para 50).

Northern Territory (NT)

A review of the publicly available resources for educators in the Northern Territory (NT) revealed not a single document which acknowledged the existence of GSD students or provided any tangible guidance to assist with their support or wellbeing. Further, no external organisations with expertise in working with this cohort, or in the delivery of comprehensive relationships and sexual health education, were linked to Departmental materials. While the Department does provide a 'Code of Behaviour' for educators (NT Government, Department of Education and Children's Services, 2013), it is written in broad strokes, with no specific mention of student diversity. The NT's 'Student Wellbeing and Positive Behaviour' policy (NT Government, 2019, November 27) outlines that schools should employ a 'whole-school approach' to ensure that 'all members of the school community [are] active participants in the creation of a school culture that values wellbeing, diversity and inclusion' (p. 4). However, no specific diversity characteristics are described, and no practical advice is provided to develop an inclusive classroom or school culture. This policy refers to the federal Student Wellbeing Hub (pp. 8, 10), but no diverse groups of students or student identity markers are acknowledged. While the NT Code of Ethics for Teachers outlines 'respect[ing] the uniqueness and diversity' of their communities and 'develop[ing] by example the principles of social justice and equity', again no specific guidance is offered for how this might be accomplished for GSD students or other diverse student cohorts (Teacher Registration Board of the NT, n.d.)

   While current online materials suggest a dearth of support for GSD students in the NT, it is heartening that in late 2022 the NT Department of Education (DOE) produced a draft 'Statement of Commitment' to guide educators' support and inclusion of GSD students (NT DOE, n.d.). This document, available for public consultation and not finalised/implemented at the time of writing, speaks to many of the criteria in Table 1, including directives for educators to 'Design[ing] teaching and learning to represent the diverse sexuality and gender identities of all children and young people' (p. 7) and the promise of resources to guide educators' support of GSD students and their families.

Queensland (QLD)

The Queensland Department of Education (QLD DOE) has a page dedicated to 'Students with diverse needs' on their 'Student health, safety and wellbeing' site. Here, the subject of 'LGBTQI + students' receives its own heading with Departmental 'fact sheets' written for students, parents, and principals, as well as an associated 'policy template' (QLD DOE, 2023). While these materials make it clear that GSD students are entitled to a schooling environment free from discrimination and in which they may wear a uniform that corresponds to their gender identity, the documentation is non-committal in terms of direction for school leaders to provide inclusive curriculum (QLD DOE n.d. a). Further, school leaders are instructed that student academic reports must use the student's legal name unless parents'/carers' permission is provided. While the state's associated policy template provides ideas to craft the 'Implementation' section of their relevant school-level policy document, inclusions are presented as a list of options, rather than directives. The implication is that both the implementation associated with GSD-inclusive initiatives and the creation of relevant school-level polices are optional (QLD DOE, n.d. b). An accompanying 'fact sheet' for GSD students suggests that *they* try to get their teachers to 'organise an activity for an upcoming LGBTIQ + celebration event' (QLD DOE, n.d. c); the existence of such events is not acknowledged in associated materials for QLD educators.

Curriculum materials (e.g., the 'P-12 Curriculum, assessment and reporting framework'; QLD DOE, 2022) reference the Respectful Relationships Education Program (RREP) developed in-state; unfortunately, RREP materials were not publicly available at the time of writing and could not be assessed within this review. Their GSD-specific materials, discussed above, also link to the external organisation *True: Relationships and Reproductive Health* ('True' for short), which has long offered targeted support for the GSD community. While *True* offers considerable support to educators who independently seek out information in the form of free professional development specific to GSD inclusive education (True, 2022) and associated GSD-inclusive curriculum packages ('Relationship Ready' and 'All School'), Departmental links to *True's* GSD-focused resources are tenuous at best. Except for the aforementioned policy template for QLD schools to independently draft and implement a GSD-inclusive policy, no other publicly available Departmental sites link to *True* nor offer any explanation for teachers of what support *True* might be able to provide.

South Australia (SA)

On their homepage for schools/educators, the South Australia Department for Education (DfE SA) has a 'Health, safety and wellbeing' page with a dedicated link for 'Gender diverse, intersex and sexually diverse children and young people' (DfE SA, 2022). Here, educators are linked to policy and procedure documents, communicating clear directives for the inclusion and support of GSD students and the means by which these can be accomplished. Materials include direction for educators to

attend to homo/bi/transphobic harassment and to proactively address this through positive curricular representation. Curriculum resource documents draw attention to the broad directive in Health and Physical Education (HPE) for teachers to 'affirm diversity in relation to sexuality and gender' in this key learning area (DfE SA, 2023a, May 3, p. 7) and point to available associated teacher professional development through the Department's intranet. These documents stipulate that practical decisions for how best to support gender diverse students should be student-led, even in instances where parents are not supportive of their child's transition, with the Engagement and Wellbeing Directorate named as a contact to assist educators in such situations (DfE SA, 2023b, May 3).

Departmental pages link educators to external resources in the form of the Student Wellbeing Hub, which houses a suite of GSD-inclusive lesson plans and resources, as well as to SA non-government organisation *Sexual Health Information Networking & Education, South Australia* (SHINE SA). *SHINE SA* has a long history of supporting the GSD community in the state and offers multi-day professional development courses for primary educators and HPE teachers in secondary schools ('Teaching It Like It Is!'). *SHINE SA* also produces their own detailed, comprehensive RSE curriculum and associated professional development courses—both notably inclusive of GSD identities—advocating for a whole-school approach to this area of study (SHINE SA, 2023a). While *SHINE SA* is an external organisation, they operate in clear partnership with the Department, with this articulated in the materials for their 'Focus Group Program' for secondary schools, covering gendered violence and suicide in GSD young people (SHINE SA, 2023b). This connection sits in contrast to some of the other states/territories (e.g., ACT; NSW) where external providers do not appear to be officially endorsed or connected to Departmental sources.

Tasmania (TAS)

Through a menu item located under 'Students', Tasmania's Department of Education (DOE) homepage links educators to a dedicated page for 'LGBTIQ+Equality and Inclusion in Education' (TAS Department for Education, Children and Young People, n.d. a). The page definitively articulates their commitment to supporting GSD students and hyperlinks educators to a variety of resources to guide their work in schools, including: practical guidance for GSD inclusivity; the Department's strategic plan and values documentation; and links to external organisations providing further support and training. Further, the Department provides a Parent Fact Sheet detailing their commitment to 'LGBTIQ+equality in Tasmanian Government Schools' (TAS Department for Education, Children and Young People, n.d. b) as additional evidence of their commitment to educating members of the school community on these topics and assuring accountability for school staff.

In terms of practical guidance, the 'Supporting Sexuality, Sex, and Gender Diversity in Schools Policy' (TAS Department for Education, Children and Young People, 2022, December 28), in combination with the 'Inclusive Language Guidelines' (TAS DOE, 2022), spell out the Department's commitment to ensuring the positive visibility of GSD students across RSE and other areas of the curriculum.

These documents further articulate the Department's opposition to the use of homo/bi/transphobic language in schools while linking educators to professional development resources to support GSD inclusivity. A stand-out feature of these resources is the Department's obvious commitment to upskilling Tasmanian educators in this area; every document provides definitions, clear rationale, and engagement with relevant empirical literature in the area. These documents also provide educators with the necessary links to state/federal policies to support their inclusion in the face of opposition.

Despite this proactive signalling to educators and the broader school community, no public-facing resources or guidance is provided detailing how to practically support a transgender/gender diverse student, particularly individuals who may be socially transitioning while at school.[3] Tasmania's 'Professional Learning Institute' offers a four-hour professional development session on implementing a student's 'affirmation plan' in partnership with the Department (TAS Professional Learning Institute, n.d.); however, at the time of writing this training was closed for enrolments. Similarly, no publicly available supplemental information or curriculum resources are provided to enable educators' curricular inclusion of gender and/or sexuality diversity. Tasmania, like many other states/territories, implements the federal Australian Curriculum for all core learning areas, including HPE. This is supplemented by the Departmentally sponsored Respectful Relationships Education resources, designed for state-wide implementation from birth to Year 12. While both the primary and secondary school resource documents discuss the importance of affirming and valuing diversity, no direct references to sexuality or gender diversity are included, except for a single scenario for high school students in which the term 'lesbian' is used in a derogatory fashion (TAS Department for Education, Children and Young People, 2023, p. 111).

The Department is a primary funder and articulated partner of the GSD community-focused organisation *Working it Out*. In accordance with its mission to 'achieve inclusive understandings for LGBTIQ + Tasmanians', *Working it Out* (n.d.) offers numerous services for schools, available by application, including professional development sessions for educators; running community education for the broader school community; and providing practical guidance for gender affirmation for individual students when the need arises. No further resources for educators are provided on their website for educators' immediate use beyond the previously mentioned Departmentally sponsored 'guidelines' documents (TAS Department for Education, Children and Young People, 2022; TAS DOE, 2022).

Victoria (VIC)

An educator in Victoria looking for information on how to support GSD students will likely first come across the Victorian Department of Education policy on

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[3] The relevant policy document does link to the 'Supporting Sexual and Gender Diversity in Schools and Colleges Procedure'; however, this requires a Departmental login to access and was not able to be audited for this review.

'LGBTIQ Student Support', which succinctly details educators' responsibilities towards this cohort of students as a matter of education policy and Australian law (VIC DET, 2020). Educators are instructed to ensure that their 'policies, practices and activities are inclusive' and to take 'positive action to eliminate discrimination of harassment of students on the basis of their sex, gender or sexuality' (para 4). This policy continues by addressing gender affirmation/transition for gender diverse students, inclusive of clear, instructive guidance enabling schools' accommodations of both binary (transgender) and non-binary student transitions. Importantly, this documentation centres the student in this process and acknowledges the challenges which may be faced if parents are not willing to support their child's transition.

This policy links educators to Victoria's Safe Schools Unit, which operates with the singular purpose of providing access to professional development and targeted assistance for schools to ensure GSD students' inclusion and wellbeing. While schools' engagement with these resources is not framed as mandatory, the site details the state-wide expectation that 'schools across Victoria…ensure the safety and inclusion of all students in their care including LGBTIQ + students' (VIC DET, 2023, para 17). Here, educators are linked to the 'Guide to making your school safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ + students' (VIC DET, n.d. a), which instructs educators to include diversity in teaching across the key learning areas and links to targeted curriculum content. Additional curriculum resources are available via the Department's 'FUSE' database of linked/sponsored teaching resources for Victorian educators teaching in government schools, with ample evidence of resources addressing gender and sexuality diversity linked to key learning areas beyond HPE.

The Department hosts a series of webpages specifically for teachers of sexuality education in both primary and secondary schools. These materials frame the respectful recognition and inclusivity of gender and sexuality diversity as 'essential' and link educators to research detailing the experiences of Australian GSD students and professional development opportunities specific to supporting this cohort (VIC DET, 2022). In terms of teaching resources, educators are directed to the 'Catching On' materials which articulate the importance of positive framing of sexuality and gender diversity in RSE across both primary and secondary classrooms, inclusive of activities and other supplemental materials for how to do so. Additionally, the Department's FUSE resource database houses the state's 'Resilience Rights & Respectful Relationships' package of resources (VIC DET, n.d. b), which, likewise, instructs educators to deliver GSD-inclusive content across primary and secondary classrooms and links to multiple key learning areas across the Australian Curriculum. This suite of resources includes activities for all stages and links to research which articulates the importance of GSD curricular inclusivity.

Western Australia (WA)

A search of Western Australia's Department of Education (WA DOE) website reveals no linked pages for a variety of search terms associated with gender and sexuality diversity. Under a heading of 'Accommodating Special Needs', the Department's 'Equal Opportunity, Discrimination and Harassment Procedures' references

the existence of federal legislation prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity but offers no further guidance to educators on how to prevent or address such discrimination in the classroom (WA DOE, 2018a, May 8).[4] An attached Appendix includes links to a document provided by the state's Equal Opportunity Commission addressing the support of GSD students (2013). While these guidelines, now over a decade old, feature research making the link between educators' facilitation of a positive, inclusive school environment and positive wellbeing outcomes for GSD students, the included approaches are positioned as 'strongly recommend[ed]' rather than as obligatory (Equal Opportunity Commission of Western Australia, 2013, p. 2). The Department's 2021 guidelines for meeting the needs of students with suicidal behaviour and self-harming behaviours provides a dedicated section on the increased prevalence of suicide, suicidal ideation, and self-harm for GSD students. However, even under the auspices of preventing suicide and self-harm, educators are merely instructed to 'consider' inclusive practices; no definitive directives or links to further guidance, lesson plans, or professional development are provided to educators looking for practical ways to support this cohort (WA DOE, 2021, pp. 12–13). Regarding provisions for trans/gender diverse students in WA, the Department's dress code policy requires that all schools include gender neutral options for students (WA DOE, 2018b, January 1); however, no mention is made of gender identity or the existence of trans/gender diverse students in schools.

While various non-government organisations (NGOs) offer training around supporting GSD young people in WA, including the *Western Australia Aids Council* (WAAC), which at one stage was linked to the DOE through their *Inclusive Education WA* initiative (since defunded), there is no current evidence of their links to the Department or the Department's official endorsement of these NGOs on publicly facing webpages. Likewise, while other external sources of support for teachers of RSE appear to exist in the state, such as the 'Growing & Developing Healthy Relationships' initiative from the Department of Health or the 'Talk Soon, Talk Often' resources, these do not appear to be linked to, or officially endorsed by, the DOE.

Conclusion

As outlined, public accessibility was specified as an element of the analysis for this audit. On one hand, this may be viewed by some as a limitation of the analysis, as various states (e.g., WA and TAS) may have offered additional support for educators not reflected in the reported results. It is important to articulate that we do not view this as a project limitation, since policy documents are not important simply for policy enactors—in this case, educators and Departmental personnel. The significance of GSD-inclusive policy resources being outward-facing, clearly labelled, and linked cannot be underestimated. Positive and GSD-affirming policy communicates the ethos around gender and sexuality diversity in these institutions. Restricting public

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[4] This policy document does link to a document titled 'Support Gender and Sexually Diverse Students'; however, this requires a Departmental login to access and was not able to be audited for this review.

access to policy resources positions GSD-inclusive content in schools as private, secretive, and taboo, even if the Departmental rationale is to protect from external scrutiny.

Results from this audit highlight the unevenness in articulated policy support available to educators across Australian states/territories, with flow-on effect to the schooling experiences of GSD students in these jurisdictions. Accordingly, these results illustrate the criticality of developing federal policy mandates with respect to GSD inclusivity and professional development for educators, endorsed by Ministers of Education across every state/territory. These materials must not only include expectations for the creation and maintenance of a safe and affirming environment, but also pragmatic support for how to create school cultural change. In this regard, currently available guidance from states like Victoria and South Australia prove useful as examples. Further, federal directives would enable bureaucratic intervention and external monitoring of expected protocols, as currently enacted overseas (McBrien et al., 2022).

While GSD-inclusive policies and associated guidance documents can go part of the way to supporting educators' efforts in this space, how policy/guidance is enacted is complex. Ball and colleagues highlight the often-vague nature of policy and the messiness of policy implementation. Although policies 'rarely [tell] you exactly what to do' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3), they can 'support change, illuminate expectations, increase equality, highlight future directions, and address problems' (Ferfolja, 2013, p. 5). However, policy is only productive when put into practice (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2022). In the case of GSD-inclusive school policies, additional challenges are posed by a range of socio-cultural and political issues (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020), as well as the history, context, population, and ethos of the school and its community. Even with everything in place for action, policy can still be resisted by the actors involved (Ball et al., 2012). Furthermore, in Australia, which does not have a Charter of Human Rights, GSD-related policy and inclusion is subject to the vagaries of those with state power and is often used as a stimulus for social division (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). These factors contribute to the vulnerability of GSD-supportive policy and guidance in education.

GSD-inclusive policy is, thus, not a panacea; however, it is a vital foundational element in the support of GSD students. Such documents are a crucial resource for GSD students and their families to draw upon when raising concerns or assisting their school to 'make adjustments' (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2022, p. 305). Further, when GSD-inclusive policies are not visible, school leaders may be prompted to act in a reactive manner: responding to individual students and their families as they make themselves known, rather than developing sustained 'institutional knowledge' about how existing policies and procedures can be implemented to better support this cohort (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2022, p. 305). Likewise, it is important to acknowledge that policy implementation must be monitored and understood by school leaders (Ball et al., 2012) to ensure policies are 'translated' into practice as intended and to create an environment where potentially oppositional adults who could impede or distort policy enactment can be identified. Broad and inclusive policies are required, but room should be present for student-level variation and differences in implementation in efforts to best support student and family diversity.

Considering the social and legal developments inter/nationally related to equity for gender and sexuality diversity, and the extensive research undertaken on the experiences of GSD young people in schools which demonstrates their ongoing marginalisation, it is imperative that policy supporting gender and sexuality diversity in schools is developed (where it does not exist) and actively implemented. In the twenty-first century, it is unconscionable for Departments of Education to remain silent when the education and life trajectories of thousands of GSD youth rests with them.

Declarations

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