

**YOUTH PRIDE
NETWORK**

LGBTIQA+ SUPPORT GROUPS

**HOW AND WHY EVERY
SCHOOL SHOULD HAVE ONE**



Acknowledgement of Country

This project was conducted on the unceded lands of the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation and I wish to pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Credits

This project was put together by Hannah Sorenson, with assistance from Kai Griffiths.

State of things for LGBTIQ+ Youth

In Australia, LGBTIQ+ young people face many challenges at school, at home, and in the wider community. The statistics paint a grim picture, with LGBTIQ+ young people being more likely to face homelessness, mental health issues, suicidality, and discrimination. This is one of the many reasons why it is crucial for school administrators, teachers, leaders, and wider school communities to work together to create a safe space for LGBTIQ+ young people to attend school. While this may not prevent LGBTIQ+ from the discrimination they might face at home or outside of school, by cultivating a safe space, educating other students and teachers to become true allies, and having a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination and abuse, it can provide a much-needed reprieve for LGBTIQ+ students. With LGBTIQ+ Health Australia reporting that as of 2021, at least 25.6% of LGBTIQ+ young people aged 16 to 17 had attempted suicide in their lifetime, and 48.1% of transgender and gender diverse people aged 14 to 25 had attempted suicide in their lifetime, it is clear that this is an urgent and necessary matter (LGBTIQ+ Health Australia, 2021).

Situation and Context

This school is a Western Australian coeducational public school that provides education for students in years 7 – 12. There is a very small population of students that are Aboriginal, and the majority of the school population sits in the low to bottom socio-educational range. As the school is a public school, it does not qualify for any of the religious exemptions as outlined in the Equal Opportunity Act 1984. While there is not yet a school policy in place that ensures that the students are protected against prejudice and discrimination due to their sexuality or gender identity, the vice principal is passionate about changing this. The school has a weekly support group in place for LGBTIQ+ students and their allies to gather, receive support, and education, and come up with ideas on how to make the school a better place for LGBTIQ+ young people. The group is run by two teachers that are openly queer and has a high attendance of students ranging from ages 12 to 17. The group was formed in 2020 at the request of several year 11 students. At this stage, this group is largely informal, with a handful of interactive activities being held at the group, and the students seem to value the group largely for its sense of community and safety.

The group's presence within the school meets two of the AITSL standards. Initially, AITSL Standard 4: creating and maintaining supportive and safe learning environments. Also, AITSL Standard 1: Know students and how they learn. The presence of this project also achieves AITSL Standard 7: engage professionally with colleagues and the community. The group has provided a unique situation wherein it is made possible to gather the testimonies of several students of varying backgrounds to share their experience of an LGBTIQ+, what makes it so important, and how it makes them feel safe and valued.

The project falls within two categories: inclusion, and student and staff wellbeing. There is a wealth of evidence that states that LGBTIQ+ support groups (sometimes referred to as Gay-Straight Alliances or GSAs) are hugely beneficial for LGBTIQ+ students and the wider school community. Typically, these groups play four major roles (Sears, 2011). First as counselling and support for students, a safe space, a means of raising awareness, and as a broader means of raising awareness within the school. This group appears to be achieving all four of these roles as evidenced by the survey that was conducted.

Action

A survey was conducted at the school and comprised 25 questions. A total of 11 students volunteered to participate with ages ranging from 12 to 15. The students completed the survey online during a Rainbow Club session and their answers were then anonymized by one of the teachers that runs Rainbow Club to ensure confidentiality.

The purpose of the questions was to ascertain how successfully Rainbow Club was running, what areas needed improving, and to gather information as to what advice Rainbow Club could provide to other schools looking to set up a similar group. The questions were designed to give the student of Rainbow Club the opportunity to have a voice and to take advantage of the unique situation that Rainbow Club provides: a well-resourced support group for LGBTIQ+ students in a school.

The questions were the following:

1. How do you identify within the LGBTIQ+ community ? (E.g. Lesbian, gay, ally etc.)
2. How many years have you been at this school?
3. If you've had a previous high school, did they have any support group for LGBTIQ+ students?
4. How did you hear about Rainbow Club?
5. How long have you been attending the Rainbow Club?
6. Have you contributed to the Rainbow Club with an activity or presentation? If so, what?
7. Do you have many friends that attend the group?
8. If so, did you meet these friends through the group, or did they come with you?
9. What activities have you participated in that have been provided to you by the Rainbow Club?
10. What are some things you've learned about the LGBTIQ+ community from the Rainbow Club?
11. How safe do you feel at the Rainbow Club on a scale of 1 to 10?
12. How safe do you feel at school in general on a scale of 1 to 10?
13. How has the Rainbow Club helped you feel safe?
14. Is the Rainbow Club important to you? If so, why?
15. How has the Rainbow Club supported you as an LGBTIQ+ person?
16. Would you like to make any changes to the Rainbow Club? If so, what?
17. On a scale of 1 to 10 how important do you think it is for all schools to have something similar to a Rainbow Club? Please provide a reason.
18. How would you recommend starting something like this at another school?
19. What are the most important aspects of the Rainbow Club to you?
20. What advice would you give someone setting up a group like this?

The questions were curated in collaboration with one of the teachers that runs Rainbow Club. For example, the question "what activities have you taken part in at Rainbow Club" the teacher provided a list of the activities that have been hosted at the Rainbow Club since its inception. The students were provided with both multiple choice and short answer options for answering the series of questions.

Results - Students

- 80% of the students participating in the survey identified as genderqueer or trans.
- None of the students had attended any other school than the one they were attending.
- 80% of the students had come to Rainbow Club after hearing about it via word of mouth.
- 50% of students have been attending Rainbow Club for less than 6 months, and only one of the students that was surveyed had been attending since its inception.
- For activities, the students had a variety of responses. Many of them had participated in the Wear It Purple Day crafts wherein students made hair ties and wrist bands, raising awareness for Wear It Purple Day. 95% of the students had used the space as a place to spend time with their friends and socialise. It appears that the most popular activities involved craft: badgemaking, beading, etc.
- As socialising was noted as a major activity at Rainbow Club, it's no surprise that students 95% of students answered the question of how many friends attend Rainbow Club with a number upwards of 5. Of these large groups of friends, the students outlined that they came as a group to attend Rainbow Club.
- When it came to the question of whether students had learned anything from Rainbow Club about the LGBTIQ+ community, surprisingly it was an even 50/50 split of responses. One student reported having learned that there were "more sexualities" presumably referring to learning that there was more to sexuality than just gay and straight. Another reported "I have learned how to respectfully handle LGBTIQ+ issues" while the two other responses talked about learning about the modern history of LGBTIQ+ people, specifically the Stone Wall Riots.
- For the question regarding whether students feel safe, all the responses were that students feel safe at Rainbow Club. When asked to elaborate, the majority of students mentioned that the group gives them an opportunity to be themselves, talk about their sexuality and gender identity, and receive support. Some of the students also mentioned that bullies and "homophobes" are not welcome at the group which makes it clear that while the group exists, prejudice still exists at the school and is an issue faced by many of the students. This further emphasises the importance of the groups existence within the school.

- When asked about how safe the students feel in the general school population, 95% of the students gave a neutral response. This is intriguing as the aim for teachers is for students to feel safe at school, this neutral response sparks many questions as to why that is. However, students did report in the following question that the presence of the Rainbow Club at their school has made them feel safer.
- 90% of the students stated that the Rainbow Club is important to them. Their reasoning being that the group is supportive, allows them to participate in community support through charities, that it raises awareness of LGBTIQ+ issues, and it's a safe space.
- When asked how the group has supported them, the responses were varied. The most common response was that the group made them feel safe to be who they are and to explore this.
- When asked if they'd like to make changes to the group, a majority of the students said no. Their only suggestions were more days to attend the group, more Pride days, more Pride flags in the rooms, and making the group more obvious to other students that might need it.
- A majority of the student reported that they believe it's extremely important for other schools to have a support group for LGBTIQ+ students. They outlined the importance of a safe space for these students as they come to terms with their identity and that the group provides education and acceptance, and that the group provides education for the wider school community as well.
- The most important aspect of Rainbow Club to all the students was the community and have a connection to people with a shared experience.
- The advice that the students gave in regard to setting up a similar group at another school was to distribute flyers and posters and ensuring that the process is respectful and gentle to ensure the students feel safe to approach. They elaborated on this in the next question saying that good communication, maintaining a public presence within the school, patience, confidentiality, and consistency. One student emphasised the importance of the group within a school and to ensure it is as inclusive as possible.

Results - Teachers

The two teachers that run the group also answered the survey questions. While many of the questions didn't directly apply to them, they did provide a unique insight into the group.

For example:

- They advised being conscious of your position as an ally, to provide “solidarity not charity”. They aim to facilitate rather than “educate”.
- They emphasized that the group has provided a significant step forward for the school's diversity policy.
- They both stated that the group is very important to them as it signals the importance of safety and well-being for students and staff.
- The staff outlined that their presence in the group has made them somewhat of a go-to for students for questions and that it has influenced school culture for the better. The group's presence has also allowed other teachers to be more open about their own identities.
- In the future, the staff hope to add some structure to the group or bring in speakers to address the group but admit that they are limited by time and resources at this stage.
- Their perspective on the importance of creating a similar support group at other schools is that it greatly reduces the mental health issues of LGBTIQA+ youth in schools. They've found that the Rainbow Club's presence has created a ripple effect within the school wherein other teachers see that queer issues matter. Things such as using the correct names and pronouns. The presence of a group within a school makes it clear that the school values the safety and presence of LGBTIQA+ youth within the school.
- Their recommendations for setting up a similar space are to ensure that you have the school business plan, strategic directions of the Department of Education, and present documents and legislation that outline the benefits of inclusivity on the wellbeing of students.
- Their advice for other schools in starting a similar group is to be ready for pushback and be patient. Be sure that the benefits outweigh any perceived risks and be ready to outline this.

Outcome

The results of the survey have provided the information necessary to outline best practices for setting up an LGBTIQA+ support group at a school that does not already have one in place.

Based on the recommendations of both the students and the staff as provided in the survey, the school should begin by approaching the school executives to ensure that the group is permitted within the school and establish a line of communication between the executives and the teachers running it. Putting a call out to any teachers that may like to participate in setting up the group and vetting any questions or concerns of fellow staff and school executives. After this, setting up a time and a space within the school that is safe, somewhat isolated so that students feel protected, and with posters in it that advertise the support and acceptance of LGBTIQA+ young people. Proceeding this, distributing flyers and posters throughout the school to advertise that the group is available and that students are safe to attend without being concerned about being outed to their parents or other students.

The group would begin a largely unstructured, informal space for young people to spend time socialising and sharing their experiences with one another. The teachers could provide resources in the form of information sheets, flyers, or website recommendations for students to look at in their own time. Once the group has begun to maintain a regular group of young people in attendance, the group could be surveyed about their hopes for the future of the group. The group could also introduce activities, and crafts, or begin to establish their presence within the greater school community by hosting events or speaking at assemblies.

The most important aspect of an LGBTIQA+ support group in a school as outlined in the results of the survey is to ensure that all the students feel safe. That there is an open environment for communication, relationship building, and learning.

Research around support groups state the importance of ensuring the group is inclusive for all students regardless of their background. LGBTIQA+ people of colour are so often overlooked when it comes to LGBTIQA+ issues and needs and this should not be the case in a school environment (Mayo, 2017).

This outcome could be further strengthened by conducting a similar survey at another school with a support group already in place and a different survey with similar questions at a school with no support group.

Outcome Checklist

So you want to start an LGBTIQA+ Support Group.

Follow these steps to ensure success.

- Gather evidence, policies, and recommendations regarding the importance of the group's presence within the school.
- Meet with executives, pitch the group, vet questions and concerns.
- Reach out to other teachers and establish group leaders.
- Develop plan to ensure group is safe, confidential, and supported.
- Set time, day, and place for group. Ensure the room has posters, symbols, or flags signalling inclusivity.
- Advertise group throughout the school using flyers, posters, newsletter announcements, etc.
- Maintain loose structure for group focussing on the safety, inclusivity, and social aspects of the group.
- Provide information sheets, websites, and other resources to support students and their journey to understanding their own and others identities.
- Survey students to gather suggestions for improving the group and future of the group.
- Introduce craft activities, projects that raise awareness, advocacy.
- Ensure the group maintains safety, inclusion, and a focus on relationship building.
- Utilise the success of the group to implement and improve school policy to eradicate discrimination.

References

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