

## 'Growing Up Queer' study findings: implications for gender and sexuality diversity and sex education in Australian schools

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**YOUNGANDWELL**  
Corporate Research Centre

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University of Western Sydney

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## Aims

Gain an understanding of the experiences of young people who identify as gender and sexuality diverse across a broad range of issues such as identity, health and wellbeing, education, technology, and access to services;

work creatively and collaboratively with a group of these young people to begin to develop innovative, relevant, and engaging resources based on research findings that would contribute to increasing professional and community awareness of their experiences and needs;

provide the participating young people with a valuable and socially engaged experience of documentary-style video production using hand-held technologies – in this case, iPods; and to

develop a performed ethnography, which is a play script developed from research participants' experiences, to be used as a professional development resource with teachers/health/medical professionals focusing on homophobia, transphobia, harassment, and bullying.

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## Methodology

**Phase 1: Online survey**

- Nationwide online survey for gender variant and/or sexuality diverse (or LGBTIQ) young people, aged 16–27 years n=(1032).

**Phase 2: Focus groups and interactive workshops**

- Focus groups/skill development workshops with young people on their experiences of identity, education, health and wellbeing, technology, and accessing services (n=3).
- Interactive video interviews with young LGBTIQ people (at Twenty10). The workshops were conducted over three successive weekends (n=5).
- Focus group/interview with Twenty10 staff to discuss the challenges facing and needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people (n=2).

**Phase 3: Collaborative development of education resources**

- A dramaturge/scriptwriter and video-artist collaborated with the researchers in the development of video and education resources.

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## Key Findings: Education

Participants frequently watched and learned from other young people 'coming out' within their secondary school environments. More often than not, out young people were bullied, and this meant that other young people decided not to reveal their sexual orientation or preferred gender identity.

Participants identified PDHPE as a specific curriculum area in which homophobic/transphobic practices were often played out by teachers and students.

Geography was identified as significant in terms of suburb/regional/rural and schooling sector. Focus group and survey data suggest that teachers in government schools were more accepting and supportive than students, but that in religious affiliated schools students were more accepting and supportive than teachers.

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## Key Findings: Education

Participants identified the impact of current exemptions of private/religious affiliated schools from anti-discrimination legislation relating to sexuality meant that the sexuality diverse students did not have the same rights as their peers in government schools.

Transgender students at single sex schools were not able to wear a uniform that reflected their gender identity, policed by teachers who feared that they might engage sexually with other students; experienced homophobic violence from their peers; were sent to 'anger management' courses to 'adjust' their behavioural responses to ongoing violence; attended multiple schools and had disrupted educations.

None of the participants in the focus group/workshops had experienced Ally Programs in their schools. Ally Programs aim to develop support systems between students who identify as heterosexual and those who are gender and sexuality diverse.

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### Sex Education in Schools

At school I received no information about lesbian relationships or lesbian safe sex. To this day I still don't know much at all about

There is such poor information available to the LGBT young people of Australia. It should be compulsory that sexual education in school focuses on relationships as well as sex, and within this BOTH heterosexual and same sex relationships/partners/activities must be included.

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### Key Findings: Sex Education

Participants indicated that sex education at school was heteronormative and focused on reproductive sex only. It was perceived as irrelevant to their needs. Whilst sex education focused on heterosexual reproduction, it did not address issues of passion, desire, or intimacy.

Participants noted the mixed and confusing messages received at school – sex is an expression of love, but very dangerous. Nor did it adequately address issues of sexual health and care for oneself and one's partner, or increasing risks of STIs.

Participants noted that whilst they received no/minimal education about queer sexualities their identities were often 'sexualised', with teachers and peers making assumptions about their sexuality and treating them differently on the basis of these assumptions.

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### Key Findings: Sex Education

Participants identified learning 'myths' as part of their school sex education. In some cases gay men who were HIV positive came in to speak to students as an example of what not to do/be. Participants were regularly told that 'gay sex' would lead to AIDS.

Students noted that sex education was frequently out-sourced to other organisations, which they considered problematic.

Few participants identified receiving sex education at home from parents/guardians; when it did occur, it was often homophobic and transphobic.

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### SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

A: Where have you received information about the following areas? (N = 1032)

Topic	School	Internet	Family	LGBTQ support services	Media	Friends (heterosexual)	Gay community	Gay media	Friends (LGBTQ)	Support services
Homophobia and discrimination	~45%	~35%	~25%	~15%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Transphobia	~35%	~25%	~15%	~10%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Transgender issues	~25%	~15%	~10%	~5%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Gender variance	~20%	~15%	~10%	~5%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Gender questioning	~15%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%

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### SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

B: Where have you received information about the following areas? (N = 1032)

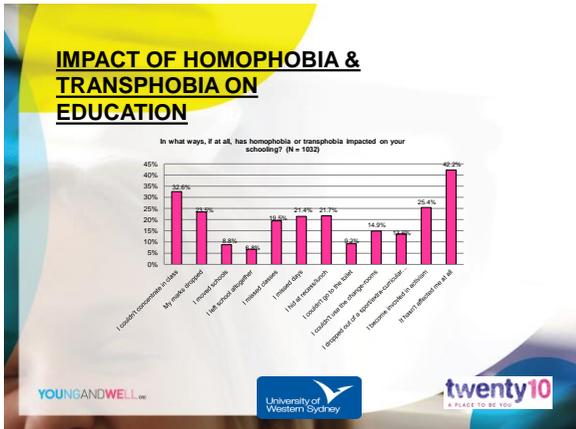
Topic	School	Internet	Family	LGBTQ support services	Media	Friends (heterosexual)	Gay community	Gay media	Friends (LGBTQ)	Support services
Heterosexual relationships	~55%	~45%	~35%	~25%	~15%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Heterosexual safe sex	~50%	~40%	~30%	~20%	~15%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Gay relationships	~45%	~35%	~25%	~15%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Gay safe sex	~40%	~30%	~20%	~10%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Lesbian relationships	~35%	~25%	~15%	~10%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%
Lesbian safe sex	~30%	~20%	~10%	~5%	~10%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%	~5%

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### The sex education classes at my school teaches students (tick all that apply) (N = 1032)

- That different cultures have different views on sex: 21.6%
- That males don't have to be 'manly' and females don't have to be 'girly': 17.1%
- That transphobia is wrong: 14.4%
- That homophobia is wrong: 12.9%
- That experimenting with sexualities and pleasures is okay: 12.2%
- About women's rights: 9.6%
- About making your own choices on sexual issues: 6.1%
- About creating healthy and good relationships: 4.7%
- About protecting against sexual dangers (STIs, pregnancy): 3.7%
- About transgender identities: 1%
- About bisexual identities: 2.9%
- About same-sex identities: 12.7%
- About sexual rights and responsibilities: 42.0%
- That gay people should become straight: 4.4%
- That sex before marriage is wrong: 12.7%
- How people experience different genders from their sex: 3.7%
- How humans reproduce: 32.8%
- How the body changes at puberty: 34.1%
- Nothing: my school doesn't provide it: 3.9%

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### IMPLICATIONS: SEX EDUCATION

- Specific tailored training of educators and health professionals focusing on the relevant needs of gender and sexuality diverse children and young people. University/other courses need to be audited and reviewed.
- Current exemptions of private religious affiliated schools from anti-discrimination legislation relating to sexuality need to be repealed so that gender variant, intersex, and sexuality diverse children and young people have the same rights as their peers in government schools.
- All educational settings should have policies, programs, strategies, & practices that actively affirm all diversity, including sexuality and gender. This includes affirming diverse constructions of family, gender & sexuality in addition to ethnicity, cultural background, ability & so on. Policies need to name and affirm gender and sexuality diversity, and explicitly outline strategies and practices to address homophobia & transphobia.

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### IMPLICATIONS: TAKING ACTION

- Submission to the National Children's Commissioner examining intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in gender and sexuality diverse children and young people;
- Developing recommendations from the research to inform policy and practice to be presented to the Australian Federal Parliament;
- Trialing and refining resources to be used with educators and health professionals around issues specific to gender and sexuality diverse young people;
- Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to research issues specific to gender and sexuality diverse young people.

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### THANK YOU

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