

# Evidence affirming school supports for Australian transgender and gender diverse students

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**Abstract.** *Background:* The United Nations (UN) and related UN bodies have recognised transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students' rights at the global level to full equitable access to education, and specifically sexuality education, repeatedly. *Methods:* This article explores the available support for this equal access in Australia. It discusses TGD student rights in a range of Australian laws and education policies. *Results:* It shows how the inclusion of TGD students, particularly in sexuality education, is reinforced in the current Australian National Curricula. Finally, it considers research on Australian TGD students' educational attainment, experiences of transphobic abuse and violence, and experiences in contexts where they do and do not have staff (and other) support. It also shows that contrary to the picture of TGD students as victims leading inherently negative lives often seen in research, this group is nevertheless capable of resilience and positive education activism, which promotes their wellbeing and social outcomes. *Conclusion:* It argues for a shift from harmful approaches of victimising TGD students or treating them only as victims, towards celebrating the contributions of these students to their schools and societies.

**Additional keywords:** education, resilience, violence.

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## Introduction

Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students' rights to equal access to an education, and equal sex education, have been repeatedly declared at the global level.<sup>1–3</sup> Further, in 2016, ministers from all over the globe launched a Call to Action against transphobia in educational contexts.<sup>4</sup> This call was a response to aggregated reviews of research from academics around the world that repeatedly showed TGD students were experiencing significantly disproportionate violence and discrimination in education contexts compared with other students.<sup>5,6</sup> It was also a result of cumulative and ongoing annual high-level United Nations (UN) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) meetings and policy consultations with governments, TGD individuals and education academics including myself since 2011.<sup>7,8</sup> Other contributing factors to this shift towards stronger human rights protection for TGD students in the education arena included, for example, the recent international transgender activism against the understanding of TGD people in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*; once construed as mentally ill under *Paraphilias and Sexual Dysfunction* with a 'Gender Identity Disorder'.<sup>9</sup> The manual now offers a less pathologising user-focused diagnosis 'Gender Dysphoria' (given

its own section), which can be used by TGD people wishing to access services, but is not applied when or if a sense of gender affirmation is achieved. This article responds to this global polity push, exploring the extent to which equal access to education and sexuality education is supported for Australian TGD students. It discusses TGD student rights in Australia, their inclusion in current Australian curricula and, finally, their experiences as reported in Australian research.

## Australian TGD student rights

The level of social visibility for TGD students in Australia has been greatly enhanced by the efforts of social networking groups, specialised government and non-government organisations (including Ygender and Safe Schools Coalition) and increased media coverage (such as ABC2 and *Four Corners* documentaries since 2014). TGD students are increasingly able to access puberty blockers and gender affirmation surgery in their teens with the support of Family Courts,<sup>10–12</sup> and in future, court approvals will likely become unnecessary to approve gender affirmation treatments.<sup>13</sup> The 2013 Sex Discrimination Amendment Act banned discrimination in Australian schools (except where religious schools can justify exemptions) on the basis of gender identity and expression, and discrimination in education around

transgender issues<sup>A</sup> is also prohibited in all states and territories.<sup>14</sup> Education policy guidelines have been developed to address TGD students' equal access in Victoria,<sup>15</sup> South Australia<sup>16</sup> and Tasmania.<sup>17</sup> These guidelines call on schools to tackle discrimination and ensure TGD students can contribute to their own schooling management plans. The focus is not on 'managing' the student, it is on 'managing' and guiding the educational context's *support* for the student so that their gender affirmation is supported in the least disruptive and most beneficial way for the individual (depending on their varying individual need or preference around such areas as privacy, change in documentation, amenities access and/or other adaptations as relevant). The South Australian policy particularly ensures transgender students can use their preferred first name and pronoun, such as she, he or they; access toilets and change rooms that match their gender identity; choose from all uniform options available at the school; share sleeping quarters on excursions corresponding to their gender identity; and take part in Physical Education lessons and most sports as their identified gender.

### Australian sex education curricula: transgender inclusion?

*Australia's Health and Physical Education (F–10)* national curriculum features a definition of 'Gender Diverse' people in the glossary:

*'Refers to people who fall outside the typical range of masculinity or femininity with regard to gender identity and/or physical sex characteristics (...) including transsexual, transgender, androgynous, people without sex and gender identity, and cross-dressers.'* (<http://v7-5.australiancurriculum.edu.au/health-and-physical-education/glossary>; verified 4 January 2017)

This definition shows clear differentiation of gender identity from sexual orientation, and is clearly distinguished from the glossary's definition of 'Same Sex Attracted' people as attracted to a person of the same sex '...physically, emotionally, sexually or spiritually', regardless of whether they are attracted to people of other genders. The curriculum is also prefaced with a statement on student diversity, which highlights both 'same-sex attracted and gender-diverse students' for special consideration within inclusive classrooms, including in sexuality education lessons:

*'As with other areas of student diversity, it is crucial to acknowledge and affirm diversity in relation to sexuality and gender in Health and Physical Education. Inclusive Health and Physical Education programs which affirm sexuality and gender diversity acknowledge the impact of diversity on students' social worlds, acknowledge and respond to the needs of all students, and provide more meaningful and relevant learning opportunities for all students. (...) All school communities have a responsibility when implementing the Health and Physical Education curriculum to ensure that teaching is inclusive and relevant to the lived experiences of all students. This is particularly important when teaching about reproduction*

*and sexual health, to ensure that the needs of all students are met, including students who may be same-sex attracted, gender diverse or intersex.'* (<http://v7-5.australiancurriculum.edu.au/health-and-physical-education/student-diversity>; verified 4 January 2017).

It also includes relevant content areas, such as the content description for ACPPS079 (Years 7 and 8) 'Contributing to healthy and active communities', which asks students to investigate the community and individual gains from valuing diversity and promoting inclusivity, including:

- exploring beliefs and values on sociocultural issues such as gender and sexuality; and
- investigating how labels and bias are challenged in local, national and global contexts (<http://v7-5.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Search?q=ACPPS079>; verified 4 January 2017).

These direct Australian efforts are particularly important as international studies have shown that TGD students were often managed with programs only developed for gay students, which overlooked transgender identities and needs,<sup>18</sup> and that TGD students were rarely provided relevant sexuality education.<sup>5</sup>

### Australian research on TGD students

Australian studies considering issues of gender diversity have mainly focused on adult participants.<sup>19–24</sup> There is, nevertheless, an emerging body of sociology of education work focused specifically on TGD student experiences.<sup>14,25–27</sup>

#### *Improving educational attainment*

A University of New England Partnerships-funded study of 273 Female-to-Male (FtM) transgender Australians aged 16–64 years showed transgender people did not precisely follow the broader population's educational attainment patterns.<sup>21</sup> A greater portion had completed post-secondary schooling compared with the general Australian population (69% vs 57%<sup>28</sup>), mirroring other studies finding that generally transgender people were well educated.<sup>19</sup> Increased levels of post-school qualifications were sometimes attributed by participants to the perspective that transgender people found post-school study sites (TAFEs, universities) 'safer' than the workforce. Conversely, the portion of respondents with no high school certificate (4%) was double that of the general Australian population (2%<sup>28</sup>). Considering that Australian law requires youth to stay in schools until 15–17 years of age (depending on the state), the high drop-out rate indicated that some transgender Australians might have experienced problems in schools. Asked what would have improved their school experience, most participants recounted a need for greater education provision on transgender-related themes: that transgender diversity exists, its meaning and range, its affirmation and protection in law and so on. Doc79, a participant, said for instance, 'If they can teach that some kids have two mums, or two dads, then surely they can teach that not everyone who was born one sex will remain that sex'. Australian transgender adults thus suggested that the type of inclusive efforts for transgender youth now emerging in the

<sup>A</sup>These grounds variably include transgender status, transsexuality, gender identity, gender history or chosen gender (Jones outlines the full state and territory protections, see ref 14).

Australian curricula might have improved their own educational attainment.

### *Responding to transphobic abuse*

A Buckland Foundation-funded Australian survey of 3134 same-sex-attracted students aged 14–21 years included a group of 91 TGD students.<sup>29</sup> The data for these two groups were contrasted.<sup>25</sup> TGD students were significantly more likely than same-sex-attracted students to have disclosed their diverse identity to a range of people in their lives, including at school (approximately twice as many had told their doctors, school nurses, youth welfare workers, counsellors and student welfare coordinators). They were also significantly more likely than same-sex-attracted students to have suffered discriminatory physical assault – being beaten up, punched or kicked by individuals or groups (31 vs 18%); for both groups, ~80% of their experiences of abuse occurred at school. Over twice as many of the TGD student group compared with the same-sex-attracted group reported that as a result of discrimination they had: been unable to use the change rooms at school for fear of attack (34 vs 14%), been unable to use the toilet at school for fear of attack (22 vs 8%), compelled to move schools (21 vs 9%) and compelled to leave school altogether (22 vs 7%). TGD students were further significantly more likely than same-sex-attracted students to self-harm (46 vs 30%) and attempt suicide (28 vs 16%). These findings echoed international research that showed spoken and corporeal abuse were common for TGD students and suicide risks were high,<sup>5,30,31</sup> and thus suggested that schools have an ethical onus to act to better protect these students – alongside existing legal, policy and curricula requirements.

### *Redressing the lack of appropriate sex education*

A beyondblue-funded Australian study, in which 189 TGD students aged 14–25 years were surveyed and 16 were interviewed, explored the identities expressed by the group.<sup>26</sup> Most participants were allocated a female sex at birth (72.5%) and some were allocated male (26.5%); two were not allocated any sex. Half reported having identities based on an ‘oppositional’ male–female binary to their assigned sex (13% woman/girl, 6% trans woman, 5% MtF, 13% man/boy, 6% trans man, 6% FtM, 1% brotherboy) and half had non-binary identities (16% genderqueer, 10% gender fluid, 7% agender, 5% trans\*, 4% questioning, 4% androgynous, 2% bi-gender, 2% ‘pangender’/other labels). Most participants (77%) were socially transitioning (changing or affirming their social presentation and role/pronouns), and 7% hoped to. Few participants (26%) were medically transitioning (changing or affirming their body using hormones and surgeries), and only 33% hoped to, suggesting that for some, a purely social transition was preferred. Under one-tenth of TGD students officially changed gender within school records, although a further 41% hoped to (those who *did not* want their gender changed on their records mainly linked their decision to their gender fluidity or safety concerns).

Analysis of the beyondblue study participants’ data was conducted to understand their school experiences.<sup>27</sup> The survey participants represented every school system in Australia; 47% attended Government schools, 19% vocational education and

other secondary provision institutions, 18% Christian, 10% general private and 6% ‘other’, including distance or home schooling. One-quarter of TGD students avoided their schools because they felt unable to conform to their school’s dominant gender stereotypes, including 50% of respondents enrolled in Christian schools. Two-thirds of TGD students rated their school’s sex education provision *mostly inappropriate*, and under 10% as *mostly appropriate*. TGDs enrolled at Christian schools most often reported that sex education was *mostly inappropriate* (85%); none found it *mostly appropriate*. Over half (55%) of TGD students rated their schools’ puberty education provision *mostly inappropriate*. Nathan (FtM, 21 years) explained, ‘*sex education class did not mention trans*’ and Boston (gender questioning, 18 years) noted, ‘*we are told to be ‘lady-like’*.’ Over 40% reported that their school featured an over-reliance on segregation by gender (e.g. single-sex lessons, division by male and female when lining up and so on). Over one-third reported that they were assigned mostly inappropriate toilets (44%) and changing rooms (41%). Bryce (FtM, 18 years) explained, ‘*I was made to use a disabled toilet instead of the male toilets*’; being transgender is not a disability. A positive finding was that more younger respondents (14–17 years) were provided with trans-inclusive counselling at school (67%; compared with 37% for 18–21 years, and 22% for 22–25 years) – possibly a result of improved psychology guidelines.<sup>9</sup>

### *Social support makes a difference*

The beyondblue survey showed that social support from staff and peers made a difference to TGD students’ outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Participants who received no teaching staff support were significantly more likely to drop out of school (23 vs 5% with staff support) and hide at lunchtime (50 vs 23%). They were also at an increased risk of experiencing bullying by mobile phone (27 vs 8%), written abuse (27 vs 11%) and discriminatory language from friends (62 vs 31%). Where teachers’ use of students’ pronouns/name/identity was ‘mostly inappropriate’, students were more likely to struggle to concentrate in class (54 vs 22% of those whose teachers used appropriate pronouns/name/identity), drop marks (54 vs 26%) or drop out (22 vs 6%). Bailey (trans boy, 16 years) discussed the difficulties he experienced in having his principal refuse to use male pronouns; ‘*It makes me depressed so much that a lot of the time I can’t focus at school. Sometimes I really hate myself for this, and I want to die*’.

More respondents without supportive classmates than those with supportive classmates reported being the subject of social exclusion (68 vs 30%), rumours (50 vs 36%), negative graffiti (27 vs 3%); social media bullying (47 vs 21%), public humiliations (53 vs 28%) or deliberately erroneous pronoun/name use (50 vs 26%). These unsupported respondents were also more likely to move schools (27 vs 7%), skip classes (47 vs 22%); and hide at recess/lunch times (50 vs 21%). Robin (genderqueer, 21 years), who was without supportive peers at school, was called ‘*dyke, fag, freak, shemale, shim... They’d just be yelling it to be cruel and try and shame me*’.



### *Activism improved resilience and wellbeing*

The Australian Buckland Foundation research showed that TGD students were over twice as likely to participate in school activism compared with same-sex-attracted students in response to experiences of abuse (28 vs 12%).<sup>25</sup> It was unclear whether this increased activism was due to their greater need based on their increased experiences of suffering and more public identities in comparison to same-sex-attracted students, their greater resilience or other factors. The beyondblue study further explored TGD students' engagement in activism.<sup>27</sup> Most (91%) survey respondents had performed at least one action for transgender rights; the majority had 'liked' a social media site dedicated to activism (83%), signed petitions (80%) and improved peoples' understanding through conversations (70%) and attended rallies or marches (52%). However, some had achieved even more independent or leading roles as activists: having created activist blogs (30%), written to members of Parliament (22%), created online videos (20%), given speeches at rallies or marches (10%) or even co-organised rallies or marches (9%). Of the 91% who engaged in any kind of activism, over half said it made them feel better about their gender identity (60%), that they had fun (57%) and experienced a greater sense of community membership (55%). Activism also helped students experience resilience (33%), eased depression (30%) and reduced self-harm (30%) and suicide (31%). Almost one-quarter of respondents reported that engaging in activism prevented their engagement in a specific act of self-harm or suicide. So, irrespective of the long-term 'success' of their activism for transgender rights, activism sometimes had an immediate short-term effect or contribution to students' wellbeing – even to the point of saving their lives. Riley (genderqueer, 17 years) explained that activism '*lifts my spirits greatly*'. These findings, emphasising the resilience and social contributions of TGD students, contrasted with the more negative lenses in international research on the group, which usually focused solely on victimisation, risk and psycho-medical intervention.<sup>32–34</sup> Such new data challenge dominant negative tropes of TGD students as enacting solely unfulfilling and risk-laden existences – emphasising what these citizens contribute, rather than only what they need.

### **Conclusion**

The international human rights legislation, national and state anti-discrimination legislation, various education policies and curriculum require Australian schools to better support equal access and sex education for TGD students than they do currently. The Australian research showed that adult transgender people felt affirming coverage of transgender topics would have improved their educational attainment, that there was an urgent need to respond to the increased physical transphobic violence and that there was a dearth in sexuality education and other support features in schools for TGD students. The data also showed that schools could make a difference for these students in several ways. Specifically, encouraging social support for TGD students from staff and peers (including correct language use, for example) can contribute to contexts in which these students are less likely to be bullied or drop out, and more likely to have improved educational outcomes. Professional

development, school-level policies and guidelines could greatly assist leadership and staff in understanding how to respond to TGD students individually, and to 'topics' of gender diversity where relevant to their curricula. Further, encouraging activism against transphobia could contribute to increased wellbeing outcomes for TGD students. Rather than requiring individual students to claim a transgender identity (which the data showed some individuals may not wish to do), activism could instead involve simple generalised whole-school activities such as engaging in Australia's annual 'Wear It Purple Day' (<http://www.wearitpurple.org/>; verified 5 January 2017) or involving student groups in updating gender diversity support features within the school (policies, posters, facilities, library books and so on), as needed. Such approaches could move away from more harmful approaches of victimising TGD students or treating them only as victims, and move towards celebrating their contributions to schools and societies. The studies suggest the need for multidisciplinary (sociological, legal and health-based) consideration of the barriers to, and effects of, different TGD activism approaches to improve understanding of the effectiveness of activism in supporting the groups' wellbeing. The findings on the value of school supports and activism may be transferable for the Netherlands, UK, Malta, Ireland, Japan, America and Canada, which have democracies, transphobic bullying rates and developing polity provisions increasingly commensurate to Australian provisions.<sup>5,6</sup> However, safety concerns and conservative backlash are commonly cited as prohibitive obstacles to school supports and activism for TGD students in other contexts – which is also the case in Pakistan, Egypt, Russia and Uganda.<sup>24</sup> Key informants from such contexts have suggested that legal, financial and capacity-building aid and virtual (online) supports were more urgent requirements.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conflicts of interest**

None declared.

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