



Creating safer schools for gender diverse students

Australian Catholic University (ACU) research has revealed gender diverse students feel significantly less safe at school than their cisgender peers, writes IEU journalist Emily Campbell.

However, the study found gender diverse students trusted adults working in schools and other youth-serving spaces to help combat sexual harassment and provide support when students faced unsafe or risky situations.

Context of study

The study *Gender diversity and safety climate perceptions in schools and other youth-serving organisations*, published in *Children and Youth Services Review*, compared the safety perceptions of three cohorts: males, females and gender diverse youth, all aged between 10 and 18 years old.

Lead author Douglas Russell from ACU's Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) said the study emerged as a side project resulting from work the ICPS undertook between

2013 and 2015 for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

"Early on during the Royal Commission it was realised there was quite a huge gap within the research literature in that nobody had really asked children and young people about their perceptions of safety, specifically related to grooming and sexual abuse," Russell said.

"The ICPS was given funding to create and deploy a survey tool that would allow the collection of that data.

"More than 1400 children and young people aged between 10 and 18 responded to that broader Australian survey and we decided to use the data collected as a basis for this preliminary study," he said.

ACU researchers, including leading child protection expert Professor Daryl Higgins and social psychologist Dr Joel Anderson, worked with Professor Damien Riggs of Flinders University and Associate Professor Jacqueline Ullman of Western Sydney University on the study.

"We had collected information nationally, across multiple states, pulling together a multi-state team with backgrounds in relation to child abuse and maltreatment but also specific to gender and sexuality," Russell said.

"We decided to look at the data in regard to what differences might exist between those three groups, the male, the female and the gender diverse respondents," he said.

The group compared survey responses from the 27 male, 27 female, and 27 gender diverse youth, selected from the larger convenience sample of 1400 young people.

Faith in adults but not organisations

The results showed that despite facing greater safety concerns, gender diverse students were optimistic adults working in youth spaces would support them during times of concern.

"When we talk about safety in the context of the study, we are not talking about falling off play equipment or getting injured during sport, but specifically about interpersonal safety," Russell said.

"While gender diverse youth had less faith in organisations to help keep them safe, they were more likely to show confidence that adults within these organisations would properly deal with instances of sexual harassment and be supportive if they felt unsafe because of sexually questionable behaviour," he said.

Russell said an explanation for the contrasting result may be partly explained by the setting and demographics of a school that took part.

"The school attended by 44 per cent of the gender diverse participants was likely to have gender and sexuality diversity-affirming educational content, including advice on how to seek help when faced with gender-based harassment and support of gender and sexuality diverse students.

"This may have provided more confidence to this group that adults would try to help," Russell said.

Gender diverse students vulnerable

Unfortunately, the findings highlighted several barriers to help-seeking for young people experiencing sexual harassment, detailed by the respondents.

"These barriers are there as a result of the relationships these students have with their teachers and other staff at the school," Russell said.

"Things like not being comfortable talking to an adult, if something like this was to happen, thinking adults do not care or are too busy to deal with issues like this, were barriers identified by respondents," he said.

"We know that LGBTQIA+ young people are at risk of poorer outcomes regarding mental health and can face a lot of social stigma and marginalisation which can lead to poor school attendance, so it's very important for schools to foster safe and supportive environments for them.

"There is definitely a need for more professional development for school staff in this space, so staff can work out small ways they can try to make school a safer place for gender diverse students, ensuring they feel welcome and involved in the school community," he said.

Supporting students

Professor Damien Riggs said schools that create safe spaces are likely to benefit from the inclusion of affirming student clubs or societies focused on the needs of this diverse population of young people.

"Research has shown that the existence of such clubs or societies helps to reduce discrimination in schools, and hence foster a greater sense of school safety," he said.

"One of the ways school staff can help gender diverse students feel safe and respected is by using their preferred names and pronouns," Russell said.

"One of the key areas some of my colleagues would definitely agree with is seeing more transgender and non-binary people within their schoolwork and having more books in the library featuring stories about gender diverse individuals."

School staff speaking positively about gender diversity also has a positive impact on the wellbeing of gender diverse students and their sense of safety, as identified in previous research by co-author Ullman (2017).

"School leadership, teachers and other staff should make an effort to ensure gender diverse students are specifically and uniquely aware of an adult they can approach when they have a problem," Russell said.

"Someone who is a champion for gender diverse students, who can be a go-to person and is comfortable dealing with situations and can direct them the appropriate mental health resources or external support if necessary," he said.

GSAs and safe spaces

Establishing a gender and sexuality alliance (GSA) or similar group is a powerful way to ensure LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse students feel safe and included at school.

More nuanced findings

Russell said his research into this field is ongoing and the research team are continuing to collect data using a revised survey, which should yield more nuanced findings.

"It may be a couple of years yet before we get the number of participants, we would like to have a well powered study," he said.

"Essentially, with this new way we are collecting gender data, we hope that we will be able to do comparisons between non-binary individuals and individuals potentially who are trans masculine versus trans feminine and again versus male and female."

Resources

Readers wanting more information on these issues are encouraged to read the full study, which can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/2SkO0hn>

IEU QNT members should keep an eye out for an upcoming inclusive education professional development session, in conjunction with *True*, being held in the June/July school holidays. This session will assist members in providing support to students who may identify as or be questioning whether they are LGBTQIA+.

Additionally, the Queensland Human Rights Commission has excellent resources including the *Trans @ School* guide for trans and gender diverse students and a companion resource for school staff, found at: <https://bit.ly/3aZ4KB9>

IEU VicTas members can access a webinar on 31 August - designed to help teachers build a culture of acceptance and support LGBTQIA+ students. Register for the Safe Schools' program and the support it offers teachers through the Learning Hub at www.ieuvictas.org.au/webinars

The NSW/ACT Branch of the IEU recently partnered with several organisations including Wear it Purple and the NSW Teachers Federation to establish a committee who are creating resources to educate school staff about gender diversity and support them to build, shape and activate a GSA in their school. IEU members can sign up to receive a copy of *The GSA Guide* at <https://www.gsaconnect.org.au/>