"Fix the system, not me!"*
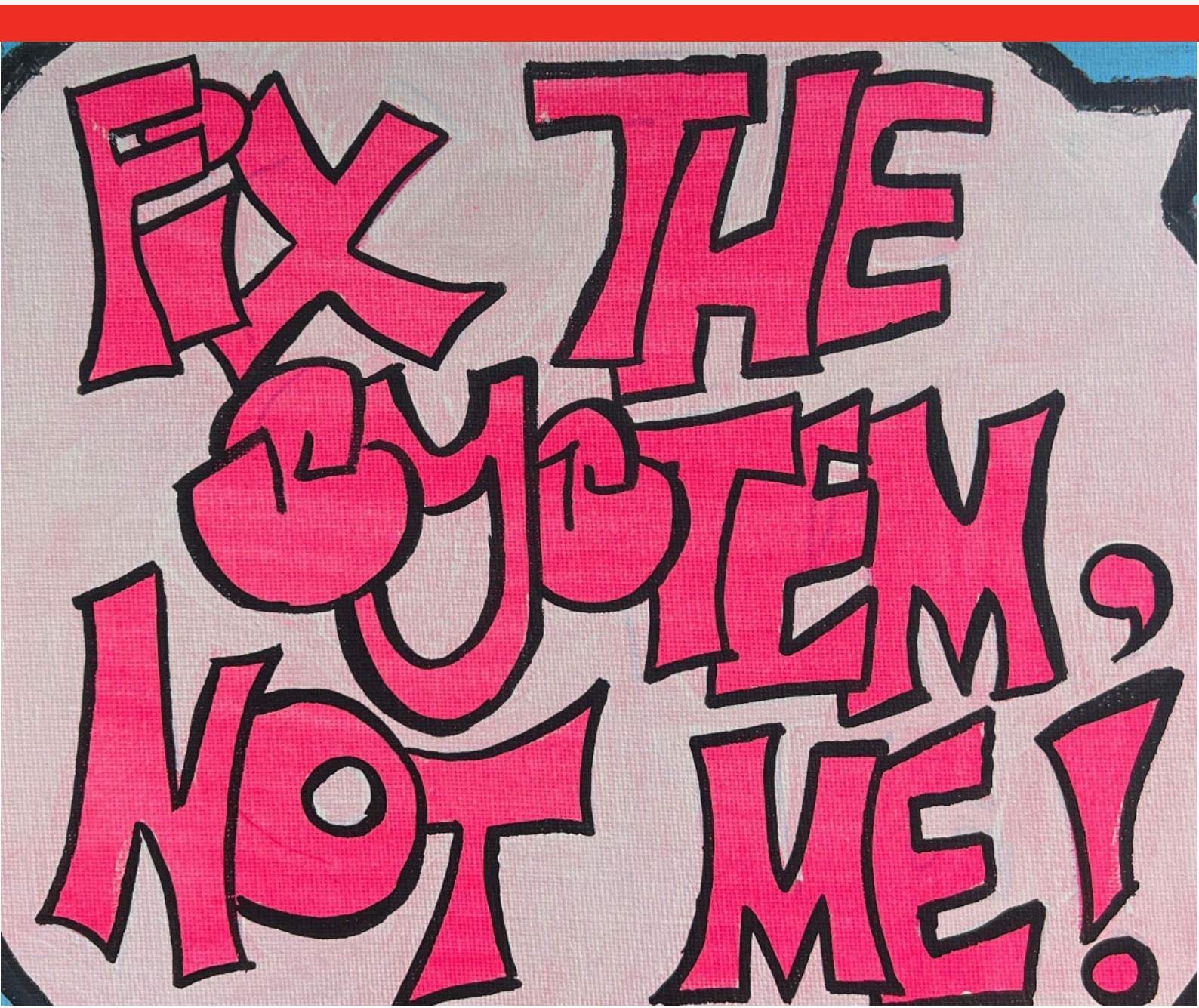
Evaluating the Impact of Working It Out's Programs in Tasmanian Schools

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Glossary

DECYP	Department for Education, Children and Young People (Tasmania)
GSD	Gender and sexuality diversity
LGBTIQA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer, and asexual
HPE	Health and Physical Education
PL	Professional learning
RAAC	Research Assessment and Approval Committee (DoE)
SSSGDS	Supporting Sexuality, Sex, and Gender Diversity in Schools
UTAS	University of Tasmania
WIO	Working It Out

Executive Summary

This report presents a qualitative study of Working It Out's (WIO) programs in Tasmanian government-supported schools, focusing on professional learning and support for pride groups. The study examines the effectiveness of WIO's initiatives in fostering inclusive practices for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer, and asexual (LGBTIQA+) students. It incorporates insights from WIO staff and school staff, as well as students engaged in pride groups, and considers the broader policy landscape shaped by the Tasmanian Government's *Supporting Sexuality, Sex, and Gender Diversity in Schools* (SSSGDS) policy and associated procedures.

Key findings

- The research found that school staff value the professional learning offered by WIO, recognising its role in building staff capacity to support LGBTIQA+ students and fostering more inclusive school communities. Staff also provided some suggestions for improving the professional learning offerings, including by making it more accessible through delivery of online modules.
- Pride groups supported by WIO were shown to have a highly positive impact for LGBTIQA+ students, helping young people attend school and providing spaces where they can "be themselves" and feel comfortable and safe, even while broader school environments remain challenging for LGBTIQA+ students.
- Ongoing issues of bullying, harassment, and discrimination faced by LGBTIQA+ students in Tasmanian schools were identified. While pride groups offer important safe spaces for respite, solidarity, and friendship, these groups often need to operate discreetly to shield students from external harassment. These findings underline the ongoing perception of broader school environments as unsafe for LGBTIQA+ students, despite the positive role pride groups play in supporting their wellbeing.

Compelling evidence that WIO's work is highly regarded by schools was found. In institutions where whole-of-staff professional learning sessions have been conducted, school leadership emphasised its integral role in driving culture change and aligning schools with contemporary understandings of gender, sex and sexuality diversity. However, this progress remains fragile, as outlined in the report's discussion, and is often undermined by systemic challenges such as understaffing, reliance on substitute teachers, and high staff turnover.

While the government's SSSGDS policy was not the focus of this research, nevertheless the findings signal that more work is needed to realise its stated aims in schools. WIO remains a vital resource for advancing this work in Tasmania, where schools' responses to bullying have been identified as "absent, inappropriate or insufficient" (Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2021, p. 24). However, the impact of WIO's support depends on schools' capacities to access and engage with the available professional learning programs. Current staffing issues further jeopardise the already tenuous supports available to students.

The report emphasises addressing systemic barriers, enhancing professional learning offerings, providing better resources for pride groups, supporting further research and fostering stronger leadership and allyship as critical steps in supporting LGBTIQA+ students effectively. Doing so will advance the necessary culture change to align schools with the DECYP's policy objectives and help create safer and more inclusive school environments for LGBTIQA+ students.

Key messages

Professional Learning

WIO's professional learning offerings provide vital support for school staff, helping to foster inclusive language and practices.

School staff reported increased confidence and capability in supporting LGBTIQA+ students, families, and colleagues as a result of the training.

Participants valued the development of a shared understanding of terminology and inclusive language, as well as the direct impact these had on improving school experiences for LGBTIQA+ students.

Challenges to the effectiveness of WIO's professional learning programs included time constraints and competing priorities for school staff, and the need for more practical resources, such as case studies and examples, to bridge theoretical knowledge and application.

Pride Groups

Pride groups serve as critical safe spaces for LGBTIQA+ students, enabling them to authentically express themselves and fostering a sense of belonging.

Students emphasised the significance of pride groups in their school experience, with some citing these groups as a key reason for attending school.

Challenges to the sustainability of pride groups were identified, including reliance on individual staff members and limited resources or scheduling support from schools.

Systemic Challenges

Exclusionary practices persist in some schools, driven by entrenched systemic issues, "business as usual" mindsets, and heteronormative perspectives that marginalise LGBTIQA+ students.

Uneven implementation of inclusive policies and limited capacity for professional learning exacerbate these challenges, while recent policy changes have constrained WIO's ability to directly support students.

Impact of Leadership

Leadership at both school and system levels was found to be crucial in fostering LGBTIQA+ inclusive cultures. The proactive involvement of school leaders and champions influenced the openness and perceived effectiveness of pride groups.

Section 1: Introduction

This report presents a qualitative study of Working It Out's (WIO) programs for Tasmanian government schools, focusing on two key areas: professional learning and support for pride groups. It draws on interviews with WIO staff, school staff and educators as well as with students in schools. While acknowledging the importance of continuous program assessment in understanding student wellbeing and outcomes (Grant et al., 2018), the evaluative research reported here focuses on how WIO's initiatives are perceived to support inclusive practices for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQA+)[1] students in school settings.

Research has found that LGBTIQA+ students experience disproportionate levels of bullying and discrimination in schools (see Section 2.2 of this report) which can negatively impact their experience of and success at school. The Peter Underwood Centre is committed to the advancement of educational success in Tasmania for all students and accordingly the Centre was enthusiastic to undertake this research commissioned by WIO.

1.1 Working It Out

Established in 1999, WIO remains Tasmania's only dedicated LGBTIQA+ support, advocacy and education service. WIO is primarily funded by the Department of Health Tasmania, with project funding from the Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) to provide support in and for schools to help create safe and inclusive environments for LGBTIQA+ students, staff, and families. WIO's *Valuing Diversity Framework* has four key priority areas in their support of schools including providing professional learning, resources, and research; affirmation planning with students, parents, and schools; supporting student-led pride groups (previously called diversity groups); and engaging with school associations and assisting with policy development. WIO has two part-time (0.8FTE) LGBTIQA+ School Inclusion Officers on staff who take primary responsibility for the delivery of school-based initiatives and support provision for all Tasmanian Government schools across the state, from early childhood to year 12.

| **Learning** | **Affirmation Planning** | **Pride Groups** | **Community** |
| Providing professional learning, resources and research | Working with students, parents and schools | Supporting student led groups | Engaging with school associations & assisting with policy development |
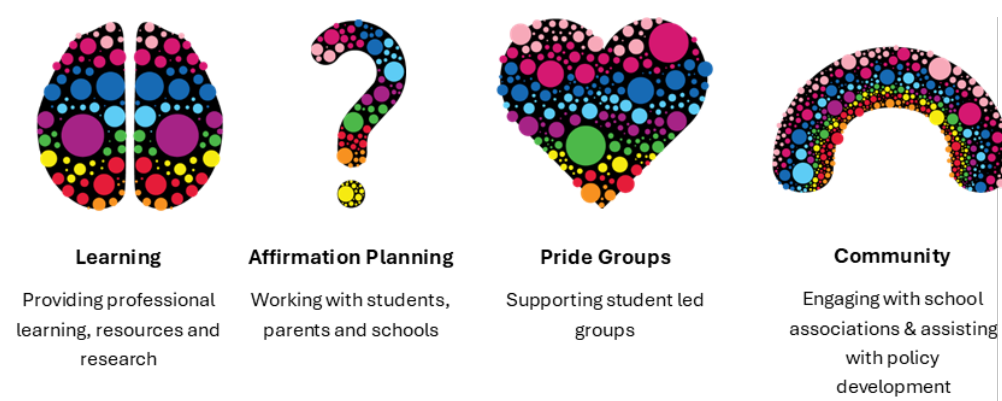
Figure 1 Working It Out's 'Valuing Diversity Framework' (Source: www.workingitout.org.au/forschools/)

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[1] As WIO commissioned this research, we are using WIO's convention of using LGBTIQA+ as an abbreviation for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer and asexual", rather than the (previous) convention in DECYP's SSSGDS policy of using LGBTIQ+ as an abbreviation for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Gender Non-Binary and Gender Diverse, Intersex, Queer and Questioning".

1.2 Research focus

WIO commissioned this research project to focus on two of the above priority areas of the Valuing Diversity Framework: (i) professional learning for school staff and (ii) supporting pride groups. The study employed multiple methods which are explained in greater detail in section 2 of the report:

1. **Interviews with Working It Out staff:** Gaining insights from the WIO leadership and staff who deliver programs in schools.
2. **Interviews with school staff:** Gaining insights from school staff who have participated in WIO professional learning, or who are pride group advisors or who have had some professional involvement with WIO in their school role.
3. **Focus groups with school-based pride groups:** Gaining insights from LGBTIQA+ students and allies to provide understanding of how pride groups support student wellbeing and outcomes.

This research was conducted between June and December 2024. In addition to providing an evaluation of Working It Out's programs for schools, the data may inform the work of the Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) in developing LGBTIQA+ inclusive practices in Tasmanian schools.

1.3 Ethics approval

This research project received approval from the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee (H0030807) and from the Tasmanian Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) Research Assessment and Approval Committee (RAAC) [reference number: 2024-23].

1.4 Outline of the report

Following this introduction, **Section 2** provides a brief policy overview and literature review to provide background context to this study.

Section 3 outlines the research approach including methods, participants and analysis.

Section 4 presents the study findings relating to Working It Out's programs for schools. The findings are presented in two parts: firstly, professional learning and secondly, pride groups.

Section 5 discusses the findings with reference to literature and policy

Section 6 offers a summary and implications arising from the study.

Section 2: Policy and literature context

This section provides a broad overview of relevant policy developments in relation to supporting LGBTIQA+ students in Tasmanian schools and a brief literature review to establish the context for the study.

2.1 Policy context

It is important to understand the policy landscape that supports organisations working in the area of LGBTIQA+ inclusion in schools. Research consistently demonstrates that LGBTIQA+ inclusive policies can alleviate staff concerns about engaging with LGBTIQA+ inclusive practice, guide proactive support for LGBTIQA+ students, and support students and families when raising concerns or assisting their schools in making adjustments (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2022; Ullman et al., 2024).

Previous research conducted with Tasmanian school staff suggested that explicit policy on LGBTIQA+ inclusion would lead to better support of LGBTIQA+ students (Grant et al., 2019). Without such guidance, educators felt limited in providing practical support and positive assurance (Grant et al., 2019). It is relevant to note that since this earlier research was undertaken, Tasmania has been the site of a Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings in 2023 (https://www.commissionofinquiry.tas.gov.au/home). In response to the Commission of Inquiry, the Tasmanian Government produced the *Change for Children Strategy and Action Plan* which states:

> "The Tasmanian Government should develop a whole of government child sexual abuse reform strategy for preventing, identifying and responding to child sexual abuse [which] should… set out considerations relevant to particular cohorts of children and young people, including… children who identify as LGBTQIA+" (Tasmanian Government, 2024, pp. 7-8).

The Tasmanian Government has progressed its LGBTIQA+ inclusion policy landscape through the release of the *Supporting Sexuality, Sex, and Gender Diversity in Schools (SSSGDS) Policy* (Department for Education, Children and Young People [DECYP], 2022), and more recently through releasing a Procedures document that supports the policy. The SSSGDS Policy and SSSGDS Procedure were developed to strengthen DECYP's commitment to providing inclusive education and supporting all children and young people to have equal opportunities for learning and wellbeing outcomes, replacing the Supporting Sexuality and Gender Diversity in Schools and Colleges Guidelines (2012). Feedback from LGBTIQA+ stakeholders and the then Department of Education's policy review processes were the drivers for replacing the Supporting Sexuality and Gender Diversity in Schools and Colleges Guidelines.

Specifically, the SSSGDS policy requires that:

> Schools must ensure that they create safe, inclusive, and relevant educational experiences for all students, including for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Gender Non-Binary and Gender Diverse, Intersex, Queer and Questioning (LGBTIQ+) students and children of LGBTIQ+ families. (p. 3).

It further asserts the aim that "all students receive a quality education in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment, free from discrimination, bullying and harassment regardless of sexual orientation, intersex status, gender identity or gender expression", and that "all staff understand and meet their obligations to protect the above entitlement." (p. 3).

According to recent research by Ullman et al. (2024)[2] Tasmania's LGBTIQA+ education policy context meets five of the eleven best practice criteria for supporting gender and sexuality diversity in schools. These criteria include:

- Anti-bullying and wellbeing policies that instruct educators to address homo/bi/transphobia.
- Clear guidance for educators to include positive and affirmative material on gender and sexuality diversity in the classroom.
- Support for and availability of training and professional development activities to help educators support gender and sexuality diversity (GSD) students.
- Direction to acknowledge and include GSD students in relationships and sexual health education.
- Links to external state/territory agencies focused on GSD young people and students.

In addition to the SSSGDS policy, Tasmania's DECYP provides *Inclusive language guidelines* (DECYP, 2024a), which include two and a half pages of practical advice for education staff and students on how to address LGBTIQA+ persons and topics appropriately. WIO makes these two government documents explicit on their website, providing links under the heading 'Key Resources for Schools' (https://www.workingitout.org.au/forschools/).

2.2 Understanding LGBTIQA+ young people and their school experiences

Recent studies have found one in five young people in Australia (approximately 20%) identify as part of the LGBTIQA+ community (Cutler et al., 2022; Higgins et al., 2024). Yet, research consistently shows that LGBTIQA+ young people face unique challenges at school (Cutler et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2021; Ullman, 2021), with wellbeing and academic success persistently undermined by high levels of bullying, harassment, and discrimination (Hill et al., 2021; MacAulay et al., 2022; McBride & Neary, 2021).

Data from the Youth Barometer survey reveals that LGBTIQA+ young people are 27% less likely than their cis-gendered and heterosexual peers to be satisfied with the health and mental health support provided by their educational institutions (Cutler et al., 2022). Compared to their cis-gendered and heterosexual peers, LGBTIQA+ young people face higher levels of stress in social interactions, with one in three reporting stress during peer interactions, and one in ten reporting stress when communicating with educators (Cutler et al., 2022). Ullman (2021, June 7) surveyed more than 2,500 young people in Australia and found that 93% reported hearing homophobic language—also referred to as microaggressions (Munro, Travers & Woodford, 2019)—at school, and over a third encountered it "almost every day" (para. 9). These findings collectively highlight the continued need to ensure schools are working proactively to support the wellbeing of LGBTIQA+ young people.

LGBTIQA+ young people also experience support differently across education sectors. For example, another national survey with young people aged 14 - 21 yrs[3], showed that those attending secondary schools (64%) were less likely to feel supported in their sexuality or gender identity than those at university (69%) (Hill et al., 2021). The same survey found that LGBTIQA+ young people want schools to teach that homophobia is unacceptable and should not be tolerated. They called for sexuality education to be more inclusive of same-sex attraction and gender diversity and wanted greater representation in the curriculum, requesting that content about same-sex attraction and gender diversity be included (Hill et al., 2021). In making these calls, LGBTIQA+ young people argue

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[2] In comparison, South Australia and Victoria meet ten criteria, while the Northern Territory meets none and Western Australia meets one. In their analysis, the authors reference Working It Out as a gender and education support service and note the range of support the organisation offers to schools.

[3] The survey conducted by Hill et al. (2021) had 226 Tasmanian participants, representing 3.5% of the survey sample.

that inclusive practices in schools need to go beyond individualised support and also address curriculum, teaching methods, and school culture.

2.3 Effective approaches to supporting LGBTIQA+ young people in schools

In this section, a condensed literature review is included to illuminate actions that schools and education systems can take to ensure LGBTIQA+ young people thrive in these complex environments. In the research literature reviewed, it was recognised that addressing the challenges faced by LGBTIQA+ young people requires comprehensive strategies in schools that extend across school culture, facilities and curriculum and include the whole school community. Where schools do this well, the whole school community can thrive (Mann et al., 2024). Across the research and practice literature, common implementable strategies to support LGBTIQA+ inclusion include the development of inclusive school policy, establishment of a pride group, professional learning for school staff, establishing safe spaces in the school environment, and ensuring LGBTIQA+ visibility in curriculum.

Pride groups are an initiative that schools can implement to support LGBTIQA+ young people that have a substantial evidence base. Kaczkowski et al. (2022) through statistical analyses that included more than 75,000 students in America, demonstrated that Gay Straight Alliances[4] (GSAs) significantly reduced LGBTIQA+ young people's exposure to violence and threats in schools and improved their mental health. In a Tasmanian study with school staff, Grant et al. (2019) similarly found a perceived positive impact on the experience of school for LGBTIQA+ young people where a pride group was present. This finding aligns with a growing body of research, which consistently shows that the establishment of pride groups or GSAs can create safer, more inclusive school environments not only for LGBTIQA+ students, but for all students (Day et al., 2019; Poteat et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2021).

Likewise, professional learning and/or education for school staff to enhance their understanding of gender and sexuality diversity fosters LGBTIQA+ inclusive practices (Beasy et al., 2021; Grant et al., 2018; Sadowski, 2016). While defining what constitutes effective professional learning is debated in the literature (Cole, 2023; Vare et al., 2021), there is agreement that it should develop self-efficacy of attending staff and lead to an improvement in student outcomes. Research illustrates that attending gender and sexuality diversity professional learning can prevent instances in classrooms that lead to students feeling unsafe (Dragowski et al., 2016; Rafter et al., 2023); for example, teachers misgendering students, not knowing how to use preferred names, or understanding the significance of preferred pronouns.

Building infrastructure too is important for creating inclusive and safe spaces for LGBTIQA+ young people. For example, gender neutral toilets provide physical amenity to LGBTIQA+ young people and are symbolically significant in their challenge to cis-normative, heteronormative[5] standards in schools (Colliver & Duffus, 2022).

Furthermore, research shows the importance of including LGBTIQA+ histories and culture in curriculum for LGBTIQA+ young people as well as for supporting an inclusive school culture. In America, students in schools with inclusive education report hearing fewer slurs, experience lower levels of victimisation, feel safer, and miss fewer days of school compared to students whose schools did not cover LGBTIQA+ topics in curriculum (GLSEN, 2019). In the Tasmanian context, teachers

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[4] While we have used the term pride group here, the work by Kaczkowski et al. (2022) uses the term Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) which is a popular term of similar meaning in America.

[5] Heteronormativity is the "socially constructed institutional arrangement" whereby heterosexuality is the default or "normal" sexual orientation, which divides people into binary genders (man and woman) with natural roles in life. It assumes that romantic and sexual relationships are only valid between "opposite" sexes, reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality (Dollar, 2017).

perceived limited opportunity to challenge heteronormativity in their teaching (Grant et al., 2018). Australian researchers more broadly advocate for mandating such inclusive education in curriculum and whole school strategies (Burns et al., 2022).

The literature review highlights that comprehensive strategies across school culture, facilities, and curriculum are essential for the wellbeing and outcomes of LGBTIQA+ young people. Effective actions include developing inclusive policies, establishing pride groups, providing professional learning for staff, creating safe spaces, and ensuring LGBTIQA+ visibility in the curriculum. Research shows that these measures improve the mental health and safety of LGBTIQA+ students and contribute to a thriving school community. Working It Out provides professional learning for school staff and support for pride groups, both of which are proven to effectively support LGBTIQA+ young people and promote inclusive cultures in schools.

Figure 2 Pride group student artwork contributed by 'Moony'

Section 3: Research approach

To determine the effectiveness of Working It Out's professional learning delivered in schools and the impact of pride groups, a qualitative research design was employed. A key aim of the design was to ensure that the voices of young people were central to data collection, as they are the intended beneficiaries of the programs being investigated. Providing opportunities for young people to share their experiences is in keeping with the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), particularly Articles 12-15 which emphasise the importance of young people's participation in civic life and having their ideas and their agency taken seriously. The research approach was designed to facilitate students' participation observing the principles of the UNCRC, as briefly outlined in the below section.

3.1 Methods

Semi-structured interviews: Interviews were initially conducted with WIO staff to gain contextual understanding about their professional learning programs and support for pride groups. School staff from government schools were interviewed to generate insights about how professional learning had influenced their understandings and implementation of LGBTIQA+ inclusive practices in schools, and the effect this had on student wellbeing and outcomes.

Focus groups: Focus group conversations were conducted with school-based pride groups from around Tasmania. Initially, a co-design focus group session was conducted with students from one school's pride group to inform the design of subsequent pride group focus groups in other schools. Informed by that initial session, semi-structured questions and activities were developed to facilitate conversations and data collection in subsequent focus groups. Young people who participated in focus groups were provided with a $30 voucher in recognition of their time spent in the project.

To give LGBTIQA+ young people who may not have participated in the focus groups the opportunity to share their thoughts related to the research, an invitation to submit visual or written reflections for the project was extended via pride group advisors. This invitation gave students options for choosing how they participated in the research (for example, they could contribute a drawing or a piece of writing that reflected their perspectives or experiences of pride group.)

All students participating in the research were given the option to choose their preferred pseudonym, a choice that was embraced by most of the young people.

There were multiple consent processes for school-based participants:

1. For school staff interviews:
   a. We contacted **school principals** of schools that WIO had provided professional learning for (either whole-of-school PL or PL for individual staff members) and sought their approval to conduct interviews with their staff.
   b. The principals provided our information sheet and consent form to their **staff** and invited them to contact the research team if they were willing to participate in an interview.

2. For pride group focus groups:
   a. First, **school principals** provided permission for the research to be conducted in their school and recommended a staff member to liaise with the research team to conduct pride group focus groups in schools that met ethics requirements.
   b. Second, with support from the **nominated school staff member**, students who participate in pride group were provided with an information sheet and consent form written in plain language that explained the project and the consent process.

    c. Third, active consent was sought from the **students** themselves. Students wanting to participate in the research signed the consent form, and the researchers reaffirmed students' consent at the commencement of the focus group.

Consent was also sought and received to voice record and transcribe interviews and focus groups. Two phases of inductive coding of the transcripts were undertaken: the first cycle focused on understanding themes emerging from the data analysis, while the second cycle aimed to refine and identify salient themes. The NVIVO software platform was used to manage the data files and support analysis. A process of 'sense checking' the data was incorporated, through sharing draft findings with WIO which helped to surface, discuss and resolve queries in the data analysis.

Reporting back to participants: We aim to make access to this report available to all the research participants. Where we have email addresses for participants, we will email them a link to this report. We will also provide the link to the report to principals of all participating schools. Pride group advisors will receive the link to the report and a PowerPoint summary of the report's findings (relating to pride groups) which they can share with the pride group (at their discretion). Further to these dissemination methods, we will publish the report on the Peter Underwood Centre website and related social media channels. Therefore, participants who we are unable to reach directly may be able to access the report through these other channels.

3.2 Participants

An overview of participants is provided in Table 1 and relevant details relating to the recruitment processes are outlined below.

Working It Out provided lists of schools where they had conducted staff PL and registered pride groups. The study included representation from regions in the north-west, north, and south of the state. There was no participation from the west or east coasts.

Interview participants came from a variety of educational settings, including city high schools and colleges in the major population areas of the state, a support school, and primary schools and district schools in regional and rural parts of Tasmania. Interview participants comprised principals, assistant principals (APs), advanced skills teachers (ASTs), teachers, and school nurses, including pride group advisors[6].

Focus group participants and those who submitted visual and/or written materials were school students aged 15 and over who attended pride groups[7].

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[6] For this research, school staff are referred to using general groupings as follows to maintain participant confidentiality: college staff member; high school staff member; primary school staff member; support school staff member; school health nurse.

[7] In two high schools where we conducted focus groups, pride group advisors indicated that students aged below 15 wanted to participate in the focus group. In consultation with the pride group advisors, parental consent was received to enable 4 students aged below 15 to participate.

Table 1 Data collection summary

Data collected	No. of schools	No of participants
WIO staff interviews	n/a	3
School staff interviews (total)	13	16
College staff	1	2
High school staff	9	9
Primary school staff	2	2
Support school staff	1	3
Pride group focus groups (total)	5	30
College	1	3
High school	4	27
Visual and Written responses	5	23* *21 of these were also pride group focus group participants

Section 4: Findings

The findings section is divided into two parts: professional learning and pride groups. Each part draws on insights from Working It Out staff interviews, school staff interviews, focus group discussions, visual materials provided by students, and researchers' reflections.

4.1 Professional learning

Staff from WIO explained how they structure their professional learning (PL) offerings, highlighting both an ideal model and the adaptations often necessary to accommodate the realities of school schedules. Ideally, the PL package comprises a three-hour program divided into two 90-minute sessions, colloquially referred to as *"LGBTIQA+ 101 training"*. However, time constraints in schools sometimes reduce this to two 75-minute sessions.

The first session focuses on cultural safety and valuing diversity, aiming to establish a shared base level of knowledge among all staff. This includes understanding language and definitions, exploring the LGBTIQA+ acronym and its components (gender diversity, sexuality, and bodily diversity), and sharing statistics from reports like *Writing Themselves In 4* (Hill et al., 2021) and the *Free2Be* (Ullman, 2021) national surveys. This session also incorporates young people's voices, often through videos, to provide personal perspectives, including those of transgender and gender-diverse individuals.

The second session builds on this foundation by addressing practical actions, policies, and curriculum adjustments. It emphasises responding to homophobic language and implementing inclusive practices in schools. This two-part structure allows schools to foster a deeper understanding of LGBTIQA+ issues while equipping staff with actionable strategies to create more inclusive environments. Recently, WIO staff restructured the second half of the PL to align explicitly with the *Supporting Sexuality, Sex and Gender Diversity in Schools* (SSSGDS) *Policy* issued by DECYP[8]. This revision is intended to ensure that the PL directly supports schools in understanding and implementing the seven key points from the policy, to make the training even more relevant and actionable.

WIO also offers professional learning sessions specifically for individuals who serve as adult advisors to school pride groups. These sessions, held two to three times a year, are designed to equip coordinators, teacher leaders, or other designated staff with the skills needed to effectively support and facilitate pride groups in schools. The training, typically a five-hour session, is conducted at least once in the north and once in the south of the state. Participants often include school health nurses, social workers, and strongly allied teachers. In some cases, teachers who are members of the LGBTIQA+ community take on the pride group advisor role sometimes out of a sense of duty, as pride group facilitation is frequently an additional responsibility they take on beyond their primary roles.

To further support these advisors, WIO developed an activities booklet at the start of 2024. The booklet consolidates activities from the Fostering Pride guide (a larger information resource developed by WIO) and two years' worth of newsletters, providing practical resources for pride groups. It is distributed in hard copy during training sessions where possible or sent as a PDF follow-up to PL participants and is intended to enhance advisors' capacity to create meaningful and engaging pride group activities.

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[8] The policy is available here:
https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Document%20Centre/Support-Sexuality-Sex-and-Gender-Diversity-in-Schools-Policy.pdf

WIO uses a newsletter as a key tool for ongoing engagement with its network, providing updates and resources to those who have signed up for additional information. The newsletter was introduced in 2022 to augment professional learning in schools by sharing valuable information and encouraging participation. A recurring theme in the newsletters is a call for feedback and examples of school activities, such as initiatives for Wear It Purple Day. Responses have been limited—acknowledged by WIO staff as a reflection of the busy realities of school staff—and WIO staff expressed some frustration about this because feedback on the usefulness of shared activities would help tailor future content to better meet school needs.

While the introduction of the SSSGDS policy was expected to increase school engagement with WIO PL, WIO staff reported that this has not been reflected in the numbers, which staff attribute to competing PL priorities and other policy mandates within schools (for example, related to updates in the safeguarding children policy and increased vigilance in its implementation).

WIO staff also noted resistance to PL among some school staff, describing a pattern where individuals may outwardly comply with the new SSSGDS policy but remain disengaged or unchanged in practice. As one WIO staff member explained, "sometimes we get that resistant questioning [from some school staff], usually they're like, 'I don't believe any of this, but I'm just going to shut up and keep doing what I've always been doing.'" This observed passive resistance suggests ongoing challenges in fostering genuine change in school environments.

WIO reported that with its professional learning and other support activities in schools being reduced (perceived to be due largely to the changed policy landscape outlined above), its staff have focused on engagement and visits with pride groups to help maintain a presence in schools.

4.1.1 Perceptions of WIO professional learning among school staff

School staff emphasised the importance of PL about gender and sexuality diversity in schools. They perceived such training helps staff better support students, families, and colleagues to feel comfortable and safe at school. As one primary school staff member noted,

> ...more young people are going through identity - it's not crisis - identity, you know, wonderings. I suppose it would be good to be equipped and to say it's all part of being an inclusive school and that that's where the department is heading and that a lot of our direction around inclusiveness of course, has been more about either disability or kind of trauma informed practice - so vulnerable students - and you know that this is one part of inclusion that we haven't really looked at in any real detail.

Another primary school staff member expressed strong support for continuing the professional learning and support offered by WIO, saying,

> Please, please, please continue to support Working It Out and all the work they do in schools and employ more people… It's just so important for our young people in schools, for the teachers to know how to support our young people, and just don't brush it under the carpet, because that's been happening for way too long.

All staff interviewed found the PL provided by WIO to be valuable for their schools. Staff highlighted that WIO adapted the PL to suit the specific contexts of each school, which greatly enhanced its effectiveness. As one support school staff member shared,

> [WIO] were great at seeking to understand our context from their nuancing their professional learning for staff, which is really valuable. It is really not helpful when people external come into our school and say I've got a package and deliver it their way. That always falls flat.

The value of the PL was further demonstrated by school staff who recommended it to others within their schools. For example, a school health nurse noted,

> I recommended some staff to attend the Health and Physical Education (HPE) professional learning that [WIO] ran this year. So, we got some Outdoor Ed and HPE teachers to attend that, because the feedback I've had from students was they were getting in trouble for not participating. And I said to the [HPE staff], "well have you asked why they're not participating? When you're splitting classes into male versus female" and they were like, "ohh!". So yeah, did a bit of work there as well.

Another primary school staff member explained,

> ...I invited Working It Out to join us to present the Valuing Diversity Framework here at school. I've been at a previous school and had [WIO staff member] come out and talk and saw the impact that had on the few staff that were present there. I identified a need here at our school, it was definitely lacking… Just the way the staff were talking to and discussing some of the students and it just wasn't okay… there is now, like zero talk behind children's backs.

The willingness to recommend the professional learning offered by WIO indicates that it is viewed as accessible to schools and effective for supporting staff to create more inclusive school environments.

4.1.2 Building school capacity through professional learning

The PL was regarded positively by staff for enhancing their capacity to support LGBTIQA+ students. A perceived benefit was the development of a shared inclusive language and better understanding of terminology. Staff reported feeling more confident in using appropriate and inclusive language, which improved their ability to communicate effectively with colleagues, students, and families. A primary school staff member reported that following the WIO PL, staff "feel comfortable that they've got the language now to talk about what they're seeing with kids and how we can work with families now to support them."

A key aspect of the training was the creation of a non-judgemental learning environment. Staff appreciated that the PL sessions accommodated varying levels of prior knowledge, allowing all participants to engage in building contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality diversity. A high school staff member commented,

> It was great in terms of they [WIO] provided an overview of terminology and things like that, I guess for people that maybe aren't as potentially across it as I came into it, which is really good. And there was a non-judgemental space, recognising that people have different levels of knowledge and understanding with the ever-changing terminology and that kind of thing.

The WIO PL also provided an evidence-based foundation for creating inclusive school environments. By presenting research insights and accessible information, the sessions empowered staff to develop shared understandings and practical strategies for fostering inclusivity. As one support school staff member observed,

> It certainly laid some really quality foundations for staff. We've been able to have that shared agreement, that shared understanding to move forward to practice parts of it. And I think that was probably the most valuable part that we got from [WIO staff member] was that really super accessible understanding and foundational knowledge backed with a lot of research, a lot of really accessible sort of facts.

Evidence of PL having a direct and positive impact on the experiences of school for LGBTIQA+ young people was also found. One pride group focus group student shared,

> A teacher used to be very like transphobic to a bunch of students. A person from Working It Out did come and try to educate all the teachers and it did seem to help him along because now he has a pride flag in his room.

Overall, the WIO PL was seen to develop staff capacity in practical ways and contribute to a more inclusive and supportive culture for LGBTIQA+ students across schools.

4.1.3 Establishing and sustaining pride groups professional learning programs

The *Establishing and sustaining pride groups PL* offered by WIO was reported as beneficial by some participants, and some participants suggested improvements to make it more useful in practice. The training was helpful for orienting staff about their roles as advisors and affirming the purpose of pride groups.

One school health nurse highlighted how the WIO training shaped their understanding of their advisory role in starting the pride group in their high school:

> I found it really useful... that they spoke about the role of the adults within the pride group, being advisors rather than organisers or facilitators … I think it really benefited me on the first day that we started the pride group. I was really able to go into that quite clearly and say to the group, this is your group and I want you to have ownership over it and for you to know I'm just here as the adult essentially in the room to help facilitate and because we have to have a safe person, and I guess just having that language and understanding to explain that to them.

An advisor from another high school reflected on the alignment between their school's pride group and the foundational goals of such groups as outlined in the PL. They told of the positive sense of reinforcement they gained from, "coming along to the Working It Out PL and hearing that our purpose did align with what a lot of the original intentions were for pride groups in schools... it was nice to hear that."

While all advisors emphasised the importance of the training for their roles, several suggested that more practical resources would be beneficial, particularly ideas for activities they could run during pride group sessions. Here we note that WIO introduced a new activities booklet in 2024, which appears to address this suggestion. This was highlighted by one pride group advisor who participated in the 2024 PL and commented positively on the usefulness of the booklet provided during the training.

There were calls for more targeted resources to support the practical aspects of running pride group sessions. This draws attention to some organisational ambiguity in schools around the role of the pride group advisor and may reflect the challenging conditions under which many staff operate. As one school health nurse noted:

> The hardest thing I've found with pride group is coming up with something new every single week for the students to engage in. And I know some of them would be saying, 'Oh, we never do anything fun, like, there's never events.' But you know, you do every week try and think of something, like what speakers can we get in? But then also juggling all the other work roles and the other spaces that you're working in.

Pre-prepared and easily accessible materials can help mitigate the limited mental energy available, given the resource, staffing, and time constraints prevalent in schools.

Some school health nurses who were pride group advisors noted that some training content, particularly regarding terminology and language, covered concepts and information they were already familiar with. Despite this, the majority of advisors interviewed agreed that the training provided valuable insights that were important to their roles.

4.1.4 Additional professional learning needs of school staff

School staff provided several suggestions for improving Working It Out (WIO) professional learning (PL) and identified additional supports that would enhance its impact. A recurring theme was the need for practical and accessible resources to complement the training. Staff interviewed emphasised the value of takeaway materials, particularly for onboarding new staff, which could help ensure continuity in inclusive practices across school teams. As one primary school staff member noted, "Probably a few takeaways would be good, and maybe some things, because obviously every year we have new staff, so a bit of material for onboarding new staff."

Staff also highlighted the need for more case studies and practical examples in the PL to bridge the gap between theory and real-world application. A district school staff member reflected,

> From memory, I feel like it was maybe just about our professional responsibility… laying out what must you do as an educator. But didn't perhaps go into necessarily too many like case studies or like practical examples to help when we come into our context, the issues that we face.

A high school teacher suggested that the PL should include strategies for supporting staff in addressing students who express intolerant or discriminatory views in the classroom or on school grounds.

> I have found that some students, usually those who are quite vocal and find empathy a challenge, to be very bigoted and in some cases quite offensive. Being able to challenge their strong views is something I would like to be better at.

Another suggested area for improvement involved embedding LGBTIQA+ perspectives more authentically into the curriculum. Staff noted that incorporating these perspectives into everyday teaching would help foster a more inclusive learning environment. Additionally, one school staff member suggested including strategies for engaging with school leadership in advocating for LGBTIQA+ inclusivity, such as how to discuss PL with principals and other decision-makers to encourage wider staff participation, or to develop more inclusive school sports offerings.

Staff identified several opportunities to make PL more accessible for themselves and other school staff. PL sessions are typically offered only in the north or south of the state or in whole-of-school settings, and staff suggested that offering online PL sessions, short "refresher" modules and self-paced materials could improve accessibility and uptake.

4.2 Pride groups

Pride groups exist in numerous colleges and high schools across Tasmania, primarily in the more populated areas and cities in the state's north, south and north-west. Training and supporting staff who run these groups, along with providing resources and ideas for activities, remain key priorities for WIO. WIO staff also work to maintain communication with advisors about available opportunities and, where possible, visit pride groups directly.

However, WIO staff noted that challenges persist with maintaining contact and support for pride groups in schools. At time of publication WIO had 23 pride groups in government schools and colleges that were formally registered, although WIO staff estimate that the actual number of groups may be higher. Some of the challenges relate to the way pride groups are staffed in schools and the frequent turnover of staff. School health nurses are frequently tasked with facilitating pride groups as part of their responsibilities. The transient nature of these roles - with nurses often being transferred between schools or being assigned to multiple schools - can hinder continuity. To help address this, WIO has introduced an online registration process for pride groups, helping to track active groups and maintain communication.

A WIO staff member explained that pride groups were often absent from schools in areas of the state where they were perceived as needed:

> Some of the schools where it's felt that a pride group is most needed and the students would benefit from it most strongly, are schools where the students are fearful of being seen engaging in a pride group, or walking into that pride group room, or being known as a kid who goes to the pride group.

The visibility of pride groups within schools was found to vary and ranged from open and visible to more discreet and hidden. At one end of the spectrum were some colleges where pride groups were "out in the open," with rooms that were accessible and welcoming for all students. At the other end were some high schools where the groups were located purposefully in more protected or discreet spaces, often due to concerns for safety and protection of pride group students. For example, one high school's pride group was previously located in a space where the group reported experiencing some harassment, with one student in the pride group focus group commenting "we used to be down the hall in [room number] but all the grade 10 boys used to come and bang on our windows and tear all our flags down". In an interview, a high school staff member, who was also the pride group advisor of that group, provided further details:

> We were in one classroom, [then] we were in the art room for a while, and now we're in the meeting room... The first classroom did have an issue with students banging on the windows… We needed to have a room where we could hang up the [pride] flags and stuff without people vandalising them. Which did happen when [pride group] was my classroom… Oh my God, it was so frustrating. I'd have to wash [the flag] and then they'd do it again.

While WIO aims for pride groups to be a place that empowers students and fosters agency through encouraging them to shape pride group activities, there were some contradictory findings in the experiences shared by school staff and students. For example, one pride group discussed the plans they made for Wear It Purple Day with support from their pride group advisor, with 'Toe Nut' commenting, "Sometimes with the group too, we get to participate in, like, we had the Wear It Purple Day. Me and 'Binji' were at a little treat stall." Another student added: "I did the stall that was next to those guys selling, like, trinket things… we had [pride group advisor] setting it up and supporting it."

While the comments from these students recounted a situation where their pride group advisor supported them to actualise their own plans, at another high school the pride group advisor spoke of how staff needed to organise activities.

> [The WIO pride group training had] lots of stuff about why we do it and why it's important… And [that] it always has to be student led and student run and you have to step back. That is not effective - if I'm not organising, it doesn't happen ever. So yeah, it has to be teacher led. I know it's not ideal, it should be student run, but unless I'm there cracking the whip, nothing happens. (High school teacher/pride group advisor).

The evidence was clear that pride group advisors serve an important role in the effective functioning of the group and in enabling the authorising environment within the school for the students' pride activities to take place. WIO asserts that student agency is an important objective of pride groups:

> We also emphasise the role of pride groups as empowering students to be agents of change in their own lives. For example, coming up with ways they can change the schools for the better. Giving students agency is very powerful. This is the hardest idea to convey... If this is not championed, then the groups can remain passive 'support' spaces. (WIO Staff)

Despite student agency being a central objective of pride groups, this project found little evidence of this occurring, although Working It Out staff indicated there have been many instances of student agency in pride groups that they have been made aware of previously. The students we spoke with referred more to the safety and comfort that pride groups offered as inclusive spaces as reported in the findings below. This may be related to the ongoing discrimination and bullying of LGBTIQA+ students in schools as identified in the research literature (Section 2.2). Safety may need to be the first step or foundation step, and once that is established, Working It Out's objective relating to student agency may follow. In focus groups conducted across five different schools and colleges, students shared their experiences of participating in their pride groups. The following sections prioritise students' voices, presenting their perspectives in their own words and using the names or pseudonyms they provided. Where relevant, insights from staff interviews are also included to provide additional context.

4.2.1 Pride groups are important to LGBTIQA+ students

Pride groups hold significant value for LGBTIQA+ students, providing a safe and affirming space where they can authentically express themselves. Students described these groups as places where they feel comfortable, don't have to explain their gender or sexual identities, and know there are people who understand their experiences. Pride groups also serve as spaces for forming friendships, making sense of their own identities through conversations with peers, and receiving support and understanding from the group advisor.

One student explained the importance of having a pride group where there are other students who can relate to their experiences:

> Because it's good to have people you can relate to, like experiences as well as trauma from being, like, bullied or whatever, but also relate in your identity so you know that you're not alone. ('Gastro', High school student)

Many students described their school's pride group as one of the few places where they could truly "be themselves". This is particularly significant for those whose gender or sexual identities are not accepted or celebrated at home. For some, the group offers a unique environment where they can lower their guard and feel a sense of belonging:

I'm generally quite a quiet person, and everybody else is very loud. But yeah, at home, I'm quite loud, and it's just harder to be myself at school. But I guess my walls come down a little bit more in pride group, because I know that if there's queer people there, and I know that they've probably experienced marginalisation because of their sexuality, so I know that I can be myself more, since those kinds of people know what it's like to be left out. ('Sky', College student)

Despite the overwhelmingly positive impact of pride groups, some students noted barriers that can make these spaces less accessible or beneficial. For instance, a student shared that while they valued the group and felt comfortable among peers who understood their experiences, the noisiness of the lunchtime sessions made it difficult for them to participate. When asked how they navigated this issue, they said that they simply did not attend. In another pride group focus group students pointed out that it was disappointing if the lunch time pride group sessions get cancelled, which they said happened from time to time.

Vignette 1. Pride group as a place away from the bullying

To gain a sense of LGBTIQA+ students' experiences of school in Tasmania, we share below one student's account recorded during a pride group focus group:

Researcher: How has your experience been here at the school?

Student: Mostly just like people screaming slurs at me ever since I've come out, and just not being very nice to me.

Researcher: How has having a pride group affected that experience for you?

Student: It's just made it much better, because I know I'm safe to, like, be myself in here. When I'm in the classroom, I feel really, it's like complicated to be myself in there.

Researcher: So how does that end up being for you in the class?

Student: Um, I usually go really non-verbal and just quiet.

Researcher: What are some of the aspects of pride group that make school better for you?

Student: Always, like, my friends are in here. Like the ones that I can actually talk to, and it's just really fun in here. It's good to get away from all the mean stuff people say to me.
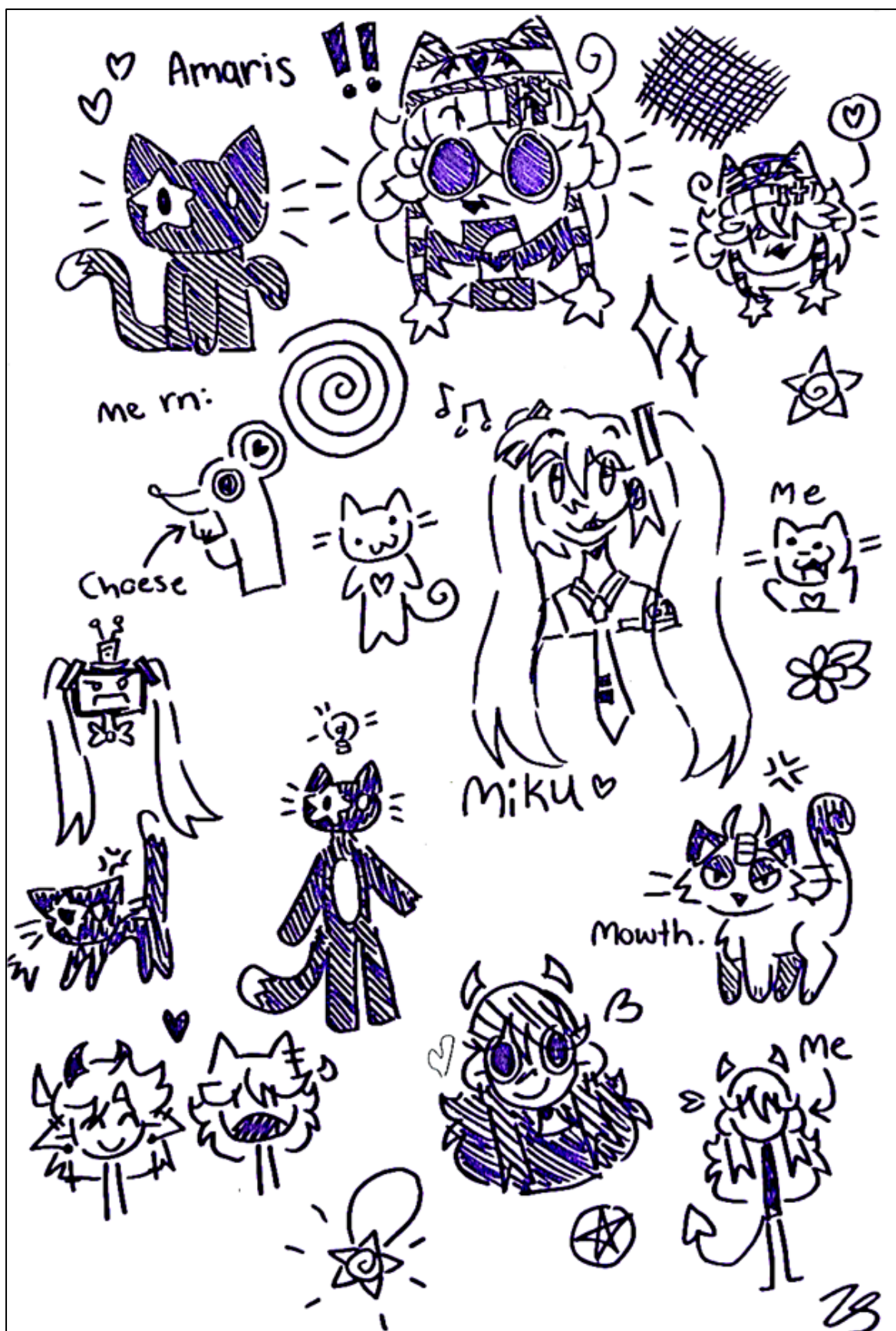

Figure 3 Pride group student artwork contributed by 'Typo'

4.2.2 Pride groups support school attendance

Findings revealed that pride groups play an important role in encouraging school attendance for LGBTIQA+ students, offering them a sense of belonging and safety that often transforms their educational experience. When asked why having a pride group was important, one student shared how it became a key factor in their decision to attend school. After transferring from a regional high school that did not have a pride group, their attendance dramatically improved:

> I genuinely go to school because I know that there's like, a group of people that understand me. When I went to [former school with no pride group] I think my attendance rate was 46%, and my attendance rate has almost, we're getting to double that. We're getting there. So, like the moment I got to the pride group, I was like, so I actually want to come to school now, because there's like, 10 plus people that actually don't mind talking about this sort of stuff. ('Willow', High school student)

This response prompted further discussion with other students about the connection between pride groups and attendance. Another student explained how the group became a refuge from the social challenges they faced after they came out:

> When I was first finding out about all the rumours that everyone was making about me, I like, didn't want to come to school, but then I started coming to school more because of pride group because I felt safe in here, and like got away from all of the rumours. ('Kayla', High school student)

The positive impact of pride groups on school attendance was echoed by a pride group advisor from a high school who conducted their own survey with students. This informal data collection revealed that, in contrast to broader school engagement and wellbeing data showing low levels of belonging and safety in their school, students in the pride group reported feeling comfortable, safe, and motivated to attend school. The advisor reflected:

> I did my own little survey with the students last week on the back of the school engagement and well-being survey that came out, which had some pretty not great results for the school and I just wanted to get a little bit of feedback from the [pride] group…we'd just gone through the other data where people were saying they didn't feel like they belong, they didn't feel safe. In contrast to that, the feedback I got was they're saying that they felt comfortable to be themselves, that they felt safe, that they felt like coming to school...So I guess that we know this is a vulnerable group that may have lower engagement, poorer attendance, all those things. So, to hear that they then had a sense of belonging, when it was really low for the school and… like a number of them said that they felt safe and [had] a reason to come to school and I was like, cool, that's a win for me. (School health nurse)

These findings highlight the transformative impact pride groups can have on fostering a sense of safety and belonging for LGBTIQA+ students, which directly supports their school engagement and attendance.

4.2.3 Precarity of pride groups

The operation of pride groups often depends on the availability of a single staff member, often a school health nurse, creating challenges in sustaining the groups long-term. Students in one focus group reported that their pride group could only meet on specific days due to staff availability, and other activities were sometimes scheduled during pride group sessions, meaning they missed out on pride group some weeks.

A school health nurse and pride group advisor working across three schools reflected on the precarious nature of nurses' school allocations:

> We're fairly fluid, we're not always at the same school. Whether I'll be at [school name] next year, I don't know…there needs to be a level of shuffling in order for all schools to be catered to and filled. And yes, sometimes for whatever reason, certain nurses want a change of context. I set [the pride group] up with a co-facilitator who's a teacher, and we have invited one other teacher who the students identified as another safe person. So, there's three of us now and I hope that if I'm not there that they will continue it.

To address sustainability, this nurse collaborated with two other staff members to share responsibility for the pride group. In another high school the pride group had dwindled down to just a handful of students when the advisor, a teacher, was away for several weeks on sick leave. Staffing issues present significant barriers to sustaining pride groups in schools. High turnover rates, chronic understaffing, and overworked staff contribute to these challenges. In some cases, pride groups are assigned to school nurses who often work across multiple schools, limiting their availability and capacity to sustain pride groups. In the most strained environments, staffing shortages have led to the discontinuation of pride groups altogether, highlighting the need for planning, support and leadership at higher levels of the school and education system to ensure the sustainability of pride groups in schools and colleges.

Figure 4 Pride group student artwork contributed by 'Willow'

4.2.4 Building connections: The role of WIO in pride groups

In addition to the provision of PL for pride group advisors, direct interactions with WIO were highlighted by pride group advisors and students, showcasing the impact of WIO's initiatives in fostering inclusive and supportive school environments. At one regional high school, WIO arranged for a badge-making activity with the pride group led by an adult who identified as part of the LGBTIQA+ community. The pride group advisor noted that the activity was well received, and this was a sentiment echoed by students in the focus group:

> We had pin-making stuff. Someone [from WIO] came in and made pins with us. That was really cool. ('Muffin', Regional high school)

When asked why this activity was particularly meaningful, students emphasised the sense of connection it fostered and its inspirational impact:

> Every time I meet a person who is an adult and is queer and had a couple of the same interests, I'm like, I'm going to get to grow up into that one day, and I won't have to be in a school anymore. ('Starman', Regional high school)

This reflects how WIO's involvement serves as a bridge between LGBTIQA+ inclusive practices in schools and the broader community. By facilitating meaningful activities, WIO not only supports LGBTIQA+ students in their current context but also provides them with a vision of a positive future outside the school environment.

Additionally, some pride groups have chosen to engage with WIO through fundraising initiatives, donating their proceeds from events such as Wear It Purple Day to support the organisation. When asked about this decision, a high school staff member who was the pride group advisor explained students were keen to support a local organisation whose work they were familiar with and trusted.

> This year's [pride] group were quite interrogative of some of the organisations and what their money is actually being spent on and what they do and whether they are affiliated with unknown things that [the students] don't support as well. So, I think [the pride group] picking Working It Out was kind of driven by it being a local known organisation.

These examples highlight the multifaceted role WIO plays in supporting pride groups, from fostering personal connections to building bridges for students between schools and the wider community.

Section 5: Discussion

Working It Out's activities cannot be examined in isolation from the broader societal and institutional contexts that shape how the organisation interacts with schools, engages with school staff, and supports students. This discussion explores the cultural and policy contexts that influence WIO's work in supporting schools to create safe, inclusive environments where LGBTIQA+ students can access education that supports their wellbeing and outcomes.

5.1 The importance of leadership

School leadership played a significant role in determining how "open" and "proactive" LGBTIQA+ initiatives were within schools and colleges. In some cases, school and college leadership and staff were proactively working to change the culture and environment of the school to normalise inclusivity. One primary school staff member explained that they had engaged WIO to provide whole-of-staff PL at their current school after engaging the program at a previous school where "the professional learning definitely had positive impact and started some big conversations among staff members and community."

Interviews with school staff indicated that some school leaders were hesitant to engage staff in PL focused on gender, sex and sexuality diversity. Instead, some adopted a "wait and see what arises" approach and engaged with WIO on an "as needs" basis. Sometimes such decisions were influenced by concerns about parental (or community) reactions, as conveyed by a primary school staff member:

> …Working It Out did send us some posters and things around being inclusive and we looked through them and chose ones that we thought suited a primary school setting where we wouldn't get parents sort of questioning what it was. Really just, you know, the ones that were much more about, you know, everyone's a little bit different and those sorts of things which we do have displayed.

WIO staff emphasised the critical role that teachers, school culture, and leadership play in fostering inclusivity and while the organisation aims to work proactively, much of the contact they receive from schools remains reactive, responding to specific incidents or events within the school community. These varied experiences reflect the challenges and successes of creating inclusive spaces for LGBTIQA+ students, depending on a range of extraneous conditions largely outside the control of those students with most to gain from having an inclusive and safe school environment.

5.2 A culture of limitation: Maintenance of heteronormativity

Findings revealed that exclusionary practices in Tasmanian schools continue to be perpetuated through entrenched systemic issues, "business as usual" practices, and heteronormative thinking that marginalises LGBTIQA+ students. This exclusion is characterised in the literature as a "culture of limitation" (Ferfolja and Ullman, 2020), where educational experiences and opportunities that should be available to all students are systematically withheld from LGBTIQA+ students. Of importance to note is that research conducted with school staff in 2018 with DECYP schools (then Department of Education schools) in Tasmania revealed similar systemic cultural barriers to LGBTIQA+ inclusive practice (see Beasy, Grant & Emery, 2021; Grant, Beasy, Emery & Coleman, 2018).

In the present study, the perpetuation of cis-gendered cultures of school was found to exist in school facilities, with some significant health impacts reported for LGBTIQA+ students. A district school staff member shared that they had multiple students experiencing health issues because of a lack of access to appropriate bathroom facilities: "...developing like UTIs [urinary tract infections] and such because they didn't feel safe going to the toilets at school and it's a very challenging thing to admit that students don't feel safe around their basic human needs". This staff member's comment draws

attention to the importance of schools providing gender neutral toilet facilities as a means of meeting the health and safety needs of LGBTIQA+ students and resonates with findings of research conducted by Colliver and Duffus (2022).

An increasingly contentious aspect of schooling is the continued practice of gendered activities, such as athletics carnivals and school camps, where students are traditionally divided into "boys" and "girls" groups. These practices can alienate or discomfort LQBTIQA+ students. In one pride group focus group, a student spoke about a PE lesson, exemplifying the ways teachers reinforce binary genders associated with dance:

> A couple of students were waltzing. So, there's a female and a male role, or a lead and a follower or whatever. And it was two girls dancing together, and [the teacher] came over and he was like, 'Alright, so you're the man.' She was like, 'No, I'm not.' And he's like, [sarcastically] 'You can be whatever you want to be if you're one of them.' ('Starman', High school student)

Traditional activities like winter sports and school camps, structured around binary gender norms, further hinder participation for LGBTIQA+ students. One high school staff member reported that some students have developed workarounds, such as opting out of winter sports to engage in fitness activities with others who feel similarly excluded:

> So, we have terms two and three - students can choose to do winter sport, or they can stay at school to do other subjects. And some of our kids were saying, while all the sporty kids are off site, can we go to the gym and work on our fitness? And then it kind of came out through that they don't feel included in the PE classes. Turns out that a lot of the students who ended up picking this subject, not all of them, but most of them are part of the pride group.

Examples of students encountering exclusions to their learning due to their LGBTIQA+ identity were also found in primary schools. One primary school staff member noted that a LGBTIQA+ student would not be participating in the school swimming program due to discomfort with the gendered arrangements:

> I mean, it's come up recently because students are about to do the swimming program, and I know this family have already sort of declined that she will go because there's obvious sorts of things around that.

The Tasmanian Government mandates that all children have the right to an education and to feel "safe in all environments" (DECYP Strategic Plan, 2024). Approaches and models for integrating LGBTIQA+ inclusive practices into PE and health education are widely available (Clark & Kosciw, 2020; Greenspan, Whitcomb & Griffith, 2018) and can help ensure that all children and young people receive a comprehensive education. Vignette 2 provides further insight into the ways that LGBTIQA+ exclusion can occur in schools.

Vignette 2. Recognition in the shadows: A struggle to celebrate inclusivity in schools

Two school staff members shared their frustrations with the systemic barriers in place for LGBTIQA+ students in the receipt of end of year awards. One of their students, a self-identified trans man, has not been able to fully participate in PE due to the gendered delivery of the curriculum which has, in their school, deemed him ineligible for the Dux award even though his performance is outstanding in all other curriculum areas.

"To get Dux, you need high marks across every subject, including PE. But [student] doesn't feel like he can participate as a male in PE, and his grade reflects that...The whole structure seems set up to exclude someone who doesn't fit into the traditional framework."

They explained that the student's contributions to the school extend far beyond academics. He was instrumental in the formation of the school's pride group, creating a safer and more inclusive environment for LGBTIQA+ students. Yet, the teachers deemed it too unsafe to openly recognise his efforts in this space because of conservative elements of the school community.

"There are protections in place for our students [that parents/guardians may not know that a pride group exists in the school], so we can't give [the student] an award specifically for the pride group...But we knew he needed to be recognised. He's made such a difference here."

As a way of to honour the student's contributions, a special award was being created as an acknowledgement. "We want him to know why we created this award, but we can't fully celebrate his role publicly. Wouldn't it be nice if the world were different, and he could be recognised for everything he has done?" This student's story highlights both the progress and the challenges of creating inclusive spaces in schools and the need for systemic change that brings about cultural change.

There were examples shared of LGBTIQA+ students not experiencing school environments as safe for them. For instance, while some high schools celebrate Pride Month or Wear It Purple Day widely and publicly, others have considered it necessary to take a more restrained approach. Such calendared events are intended to support inclusion, however in some places, they highlight the marginalisation that LGBTIQA+ students feel and the unsafe school environments that persist. In one case, students chose not to promote Wear It Purple Day, fearing that their posters would be destroyed as the school health nurse, who was also the pride group advisor, explained:

> We even talked about putting up some anonymous posters. Just, you know, like 'you're all welcome here', those kind of rainbow posters. And a couple [of students] said, 'yeah, but it's going to hurt us more to see them ripped down, than to just not put them up'.

When first establishing the group, that same pride group advisor had reflected on the question "how do [the students] safely put themselves out there in a school community?", recalling:

> Initially I said, well how about we just start by maybe putting up some posters to show a bit more inclusion within the school. So other people might see that around, and [the pride group students] didn't even feel safe to do that because they also said, 'well, you know, we don't want any kind of target on our back.'

This feedback that the pride group advisor conveyed from the students about potentially being "targeted" by other students reveals how tangibly the school environment is felt to be unsafe by LGBTIQA+ students.

In some schools, students reported that harassment primarily came from their peers, while in others, discussions centred around specific teachers who misgendered or 'deadnamed' students. Students in two of the focus groups shared their concerns about how other students may feel with these kinds of occurrences "I can handle it [the harassment] but worry about other people who can't cope with it. It's their [staff's] job to call out the homophobic slurs" ('Aradia', High school student). A strong sentiment came from the students in the focus groups that DECYP has a responsibility to students for slurs and discrimination to be picked up and acted upon, because to not do so fails to provide a safe environment for students to learn.

The solutions students proposed often reflected the unique challenges they faced in their context. Where peer harassment was prevalent, students suggested that staff PL should be accompanied by education sessions for students about gender, sex and sexuality diversity. Conversely, in schools where teachers perpetuated exclusionary behaviours—such as misgendering or making dismissive jokes about LGBTIQA+ students—students emphasised the critical need for targeted staff PL sessions with organisations like WIO. In contrast, some schools with younger staff who were seen as supportive allies (and where several staff members identified as LGBTIQA+) created environments students perceived as more inclusive, highlighting the positive impact of affirming school cultures.

Students also noted gaps in teacher knowledge about gender, sex and sexuality diversity. In one pride group a student shared that in their health class, they "ended up teaching the class" when a teacher was unsure of gender, sex and sexuality concepts ('Toe nut', High school student). Despite these challenges, students valued efforts by teachers to include LGBTIQA+ content and wanted more of it across the curriculum, making explicit content suggestions: "I think in history we could learn about, like Stonewall and stuff like that." ('Shoe', High school student).

Below is a visual assemblage of a high school student's perspective about the curriculum content they would like to see at school:
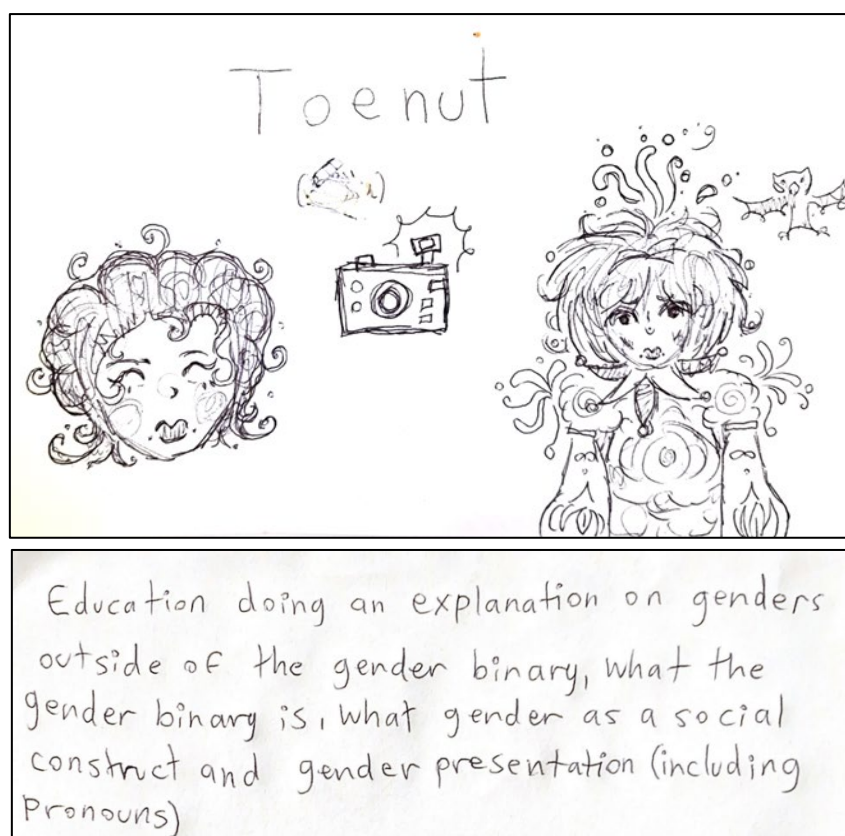
Figure 5 Pride group student artwork and written contribution by 'Toe nut'

Relatedly, a high school staff member who taught health shared their experience of encountering the curriculum materials and adapting them to be more inclusive:

> I was challenged. This is the first time I've taught [Health] this year, and some of the stuff, I just kind of said, the way that we speak, I'm like, 'Oh, that's not quite right.' So, I tried to really think about it. And then I changed some of the slides, and even some of the worksheets. And I was like, 'I can't give out that worksheet.'

While development of curriculum to reflect and include the lived experiences of LGBTIQA+ students is needed, equally, creating safe classrooms that do not reinscribe harmful heteronormative biases must be a priority. One pride group focus group participant quietly shared that the classroom was a "complicated" space for them, adding that they were "basically non-verbal in class" because they did not feel safe to express themselves (High school student, see vignette 1). Such an environment, where a student feels silenced and unsafe, inevitably raises important questions about how this impacts on their learning and overall educational experience.

These findings highlight the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities. While policies emphasise that schools must be inclusive and safe for all students, the lived experiences of LGBTIQA+ students reveal that achieving this goal remains a work in progress. In this context, the work of WIO in providing professional learning and supporting pride groups in schools emerges as crucial to helping bridge this gap and advancing the implementation of inclusive practices in Tasmanian schools.

5.3 Policy limitations and unintended impacts

Despite WIO being funded by DECYP to provide support to students in schools, recent changes to institutional arrangements have inadvertently limited WIO's ability to do this work. The *Working with External Support Providers in Schools Procedure* (DECYP, 2024b) means that parental consent is now mandatory before WIO can engage directly with students[9]. This shift has disrupted WIO's operational model, as it complicates the process of offering direct support to students who may not yet be "out" to their parents or carers. These new arrangements affect the dynamics that make possible WIO's ability to support young people and advocate for professional learning programs and pride groups in schools, creating challenges in sustaining the organisation's broader impact as a WIO staff member explained:

> [Before], a staff member at a school could figure that a student could benefit from meeting with us and with the student's approval, call us in and we could sign into the school office and go and meet with them…And then post the Inquiry[10] and the safeguarding practices[11], for a young person in school to meet with an external support provider, they need a parental signature. So, when I'm meeting with a kid who wants advice on how to come out to their parents or wants to share that they have to listen to their dad say horrible transphobic things on a daily basis, they're not going to be able to get those parental signatures for me to meet with them and support them. So that policy on paper to make young people safer, has put that category of young people at more risk.

We observed that, during the pride group focus groups, numerous students shared that their parents were either unaware of or unsupportive of their LGBTIQA+ identity. This likely means these students would be among those who, as the WIO staff member noted, may not be able to obtain parental consent to receive support from WIO staff.

The analysis of school staff interviews together with the experiences recounted by students in pride groups revealed an uneven landscape of inclusivity and support for LGBTIQA+ students in Tasmania. For instance, school health nurses who work across multiple schools highlighted discrepancies in how schools approach gender, sex and sexuality diversity education. While some of the schools they worked in embraced active pride groups and professional learning initiatives, others resisted implementing such measures. One school health nurse described the cultural challenges of introducing pride groups in certain schools:

> [School where the participant works] have never had a pride group that I'm aware of… I think I'd be having a bit of a battle to get [a pride group] into [school name] because of the culture there… LGBTQI+ people probably don't like come out there because of the environment and the parents, just the culture out there is so different, which is a shame.

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[9] The *Working with External Support Providers in Schools Procedure* document (DECYP, 2024b) states "In situations where parent consent has not been provided PSS [Professional Support Staff] members can seek specialist advice from ESPs [External Support Providers] through professional consultations, **but without direct contact with the student**." (p. 8, Section 5.3).

[10] The Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings concluded in 2023. The final report was released on 26 September 2023.

[11] Safeguarding practices are outlined in DECYP's Working with External Support Providers in Schools Procedure document which states that "the written consent of a parent must be obtained before the ESP [External Support Provider] can work with a student" (p. 6).

Another school health nurse noted similar challenges in proposing professional learning opportunities for staff:

> The other school that I'm at, I tried to get them to do the [Working It Out] staff PL on inclusivity, but I was told that they wouldn't have time. And in terms of the primary school [where the school health nurse works], I haven't actually even broached it. I don't think the principal would be into it.

These examples suggest an uneven implementation of inclusive policies across the state, further compounded by time constraints, staffing challenges and competing priorities for staff professional learning, echoed in this high school staff member's comment:

> The age-old problem would probably always be teacher burnout, being time poor and finding the space to have good roundtable discussions about how to integrate [LGBTIQA+] content.

It is important to recognise the growing challenges educators are facing in their roles. Teachers are increasingly pulled away from their core focus on teaching and learning, with a shift toward meeting compliance-related demands (Gavin et al., 2021). This trend creates significant barriers to addressing topics that fall outside mainstream curriculum priorities, such as LGBTIQA+ inclusion. As Gavin et al. (2021) highlight, the diminishing autonomy within education systems further restricts opportunities for educators to implement meaningful initiatives that promote inclusivity and support for diverse student communities. Yet, it is these initiatives that make a profound difference to LGBTIQA+ students' experiences of school.

Figure 6 Pride group student artwork contributed by 'Ivy'

Section 6: Summary and implications

Within challenging school environments for LGBTIQA+ students, Working It Out plays a vital role by providing the Valuing Delivery Framework into schools, including two of the cornerstone programs: professional learning for school staff and support for school pride groups. This research highlights the persistent challenges faced by LGBTIQA+ students in schools, where homophobic and transphobic slurs, bullying, and victimisation remain common. Beyond these immediate concerns, LGBTIQA+ students also contend with diminished educational opportunities, a phenomenon described as a "culture of limitation" (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020).

WIO provides important support to schools beyond professional learning and pride groups. When gender, sex and/or sexuality related challenges arise, school staff often turn to WIO as a trusted resource, valuing their expertise and informed perspective. For instance, a primary school staff member highlighted WIO's role in offering support to families navigating complex situations: "So it could be down the track that we could perhaps suggest Working It Out to this family, because they've come to a new state from Interstate and are possibly just doing it all themselves." This and similar comments reflect the broader reliance on WIO as a resource for schools in fostering inclusive and supportive environments.

Specifically, the PL offered by WIO equips school staff with the tools to better support LGBTIQA+ students, building understanding of how unsafe school climates and limited educational opportunities adversely affect their wellbeing. This training is essential for helping educators address and overcome these limitations, to ensure that the DECYP policy goal of education for all, includes LGBTIQA+ students. However, these supports remain fragile and face significant barriers. Staff shortages, overloaded schedules, competing professional learning priorities (such as child safeguarding and curriculum renewal), and occasional staff and/or school resistance to inclusion initiatives hinder the uptake of WIO's PL.

Pride groups were found to be sanctuaries in schools, providing spaces where LGBTIQA+ students can feel safe and supported. WIO's guidance helps school staff establish and sustain these groups, offering structures, advice, and resources to promote their success. Staffing challenges also compromise the continuity of pride groups, with some schools unable to offer them due to workforce constraints. The fragility of pride groups is further exacerbated by staff turnover. Several pride group advisors interviewed expressed concerns about leaving their current schools, emphasising the need for sustainability and succession planning to be an explicit focus of the training and ongoing support for establishing pride groups. Despite these challenges, students in all five schools and colleges where focus groups were conducted emphasised the critical role pride groups served in making them feel safe and comfortable attending school.

It is crucial to address workforce capacity and resource challenges to ensure that essential support services for LGBTIQA+ students are maintained, thereby safeguarding their wellbeing and educational outcomes. However, relying solely on pride groups to provide this support is insufficient. The broader issue of school inclusivity must be prioritised, as it remains an ongoing and unresolved challenge.

Based on the information collected with WIO staff, school staff, and pride group students, as well as insights from the research literature on LGBTIQA+ inclusive practices in school settings, we outline implications for Working It Out and for DECYP.

6.1 Implications for Working It Out

6.1.1 Expand access to resources for educators

Literature (e.g., Ullman et al., 2024) highlights the lack of readily available resources for educators on the WIO website beyond Department-sponsored guidelines. This gap limits educators' ability to access practical support for implementing inclusive practices.

➢ Develop and offer online materials, including virtual PL sessions, to increase accessibility and participation for school staff.
➢ Make pride group activities and additional resources available on the WIO website to support educators in fostering inclusive environments.

6.1.2 Foster leadership and allyship

Despite improvements, schools remain unsafe spaces for many students of diverse gender and sexual identities, particularly in regional areas where issues like bullying and homophobia persist. Leadership and allyship are critical to driving culture change and ensuring safe, inclusive school environments.

➢ Develop targeted professional learning resources/information for school leaders on establishing and maintaining LGBTIQA+ inclusive cultures. This should include guidance on mobilising funding and allocating time for pride group advisors to attend WIO training.

6.1.3 Enhance the pride group experience

Most pride group participants reported valuing their pride groups as crucial for their school attendance and overall wellbeing. Pride groups were described as safe spaces where students could feel comfortable, learn about queer-related topics, and envision their futures as queer adults.

While WIO aims to empower students by fostering agency and encouraging them to shape pride group activities, this was largely not reflected in the experiences shared by school staff or students in this study. The research evidence suggested that without the active support and organisation from pride group advisors, these groups often struggle to function effectively.

➢ Emphasise in pride group advisor PL the importance of a well-scaffolded process to help students gradually step into roles of agency and leadership of pride group activities.

6.1.4 Support continuity of pride groups

Some schools face challenges in maintaining pride groups, despite their demonstrated importance for the safety and wellbeing of LGBTIQA+ students and their broader positive impact on school culture. Culture change is ongoing but remains uneven, with backlash and systemic issues such as staff turnover occasionally hindering progress.

➢ Develop resources to support school staff transitions, including a pride group hand-over document to ensure continuity of these groups when staff changes occur.

6.2 Implications for the education system

Additional insights have arisen from this research which are beyond the remit of Working It Out and are of relevance to DECYP as well as the broader education system. Addressing these areas could substantially improve the schooling experiences of LGBTIQA+ students and all students.

6.2.1 Address systemic issues relating to school staff

Staffing challenges that impact professional learning participation: There is policy support and evident interest among school staff to participate in Working It Out PL. However, systemic challenges, such as staff shortages and high turnover, present barriers to engagement in PL programs and need to be addressed. It is understood that this is a complex and ongoing issue for DECYP which impacts many aspects of schooling, however this research found that these staffing issues have a direct impact on the quality and consistency of support for LGBTIQA+ students and their safety in schools.

Ensuring school staff are implementing LGBTIQA+ inclusive practices: All data sets in this research contained evidence that some school staff continue to engage in microaggressions and discrimination towards LGBTIQA+ students. Recommended actions for addressing this include:

➢ Develop guidelines for school leadership to address microaggressions and discrimination by staff, ensuring accountability and fostering a more inclusive school environment.
➢ Require professional learning on LGBTIQA+ inclusive practices for all Tasmanian school staff including principals.
➢ Collaborate with initial teacher education providers to ensure consistent training and skill development for future educators.

6.2.2 Ensure sustainability of pride groups

Pride groups provide an essential support for LGBTIQA+ students, however pride group facilitation often relies on passionate individuals volunteering their time and resources. This approach is not sustainable in the long term. Further, students often perceived that schools and school leadership did not value the pride group, evidenced by the provision of noisy or unsuitable rooms and inconsistent scheduling that sometimes conflicted with other activities. Recommended actions include:

➢ Recognise and value pride group advisor roles by allocating specific workload time for school staff to support these groups.
➢ Encourage school leadership to prioritise pride groups as essential supports for student wellbeing and emphasise the importance of providing appropriate resourcing and maintaining consistent schedules for pride group sessions.

6.2.3 Further research is required

This study identified the need for more research and data collection to better support LGBTIQA+ students in schools:

Improving data collection relating to LGBTIQA+ students: This study revealed gaps in data relating to the experiences of LGBTIQA+ students, highlighting the need for more targeted data collection. Including questions on gender, sex, and sexuality in the annual Student Wellbeing and Engagement Survey could provide valuable demographic insights and allow for a comparison between LGBTIQA+ students and their cisgender peers.

➢ DECYP should consider adding gender, sex, and sexuality questions to the Student Wellbeing and Engagement Survey to collect comparative data and better support LGBTIQA+ students.

Exploring the relationship between support groups such as pride groups and school attendance: Our findings suggest a connection between participation in pride groups and improved school attendance among LGBTIQA+ students, aligning with prior research findings (Day et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2021). This connection warrants investigation to deepen understandings of its impact and to inform policy.

➢ DECYP should support further research into the relationship between participation in support groups such as pride groups and school attendance for Tasmanian students.

Addressing professional learning needs in HPE and Outdoor Education: In this study we were unable to collect sufficient data in relation to WIO's staff PL for health and physical education (HPE) teachers. This is an increasingly complex area in relation to both curriculum content (about gender, sex and sexuality diversity) and how physical education, sports and outdoor education are offered in schools in order for these areas to be inclusive for all students, including LGBTIQA+ students

➢ DECYP should support research into the professional learning needs of HPE and Outdoor Education staff to ensure they are well equipped to create inclusive environments for all students, including LGBTIQA+ students.

6.2.4 Consider impacts of new policies on LGBTIQA+ students

Recent changes to institutional arrangements between WIO and DECYP schools resulting from the introduction of the *Working with External Support Providers in Schools Procedure* (DECYP, 2024) have created additional challenges for WIO staff to work directly with young people in schools.

➢ Reassess institutional arrangements to ensure LGBTIQA+ students have access to the support they need to feel safe and thrive. This may include granting principals the authority to allow DECYP-funded external agents (such as WIO staff) to engage directly with students. Drawing on the perspectives of LGBTIQA+ students to inform further policy developments respects their participatory rights under the UNCRC and can help prevent unintended negative impacts of new policies on these young people.
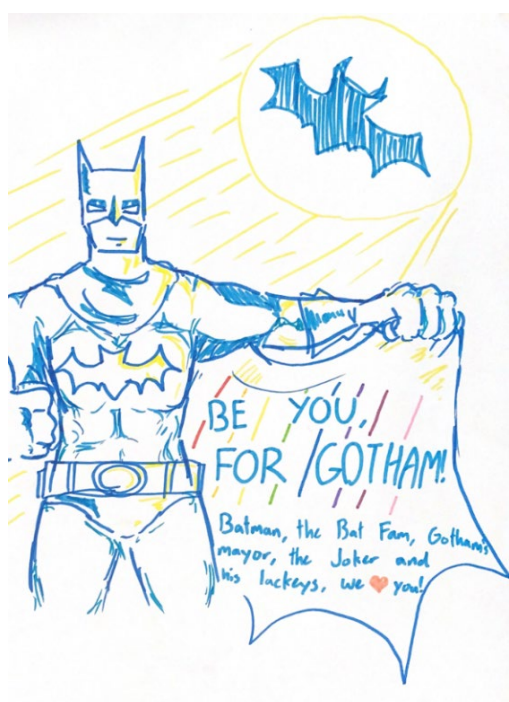

Figure 7 Pride group student artwork contributed by 'Batman'

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