

Queer school students and staff need better protection in law and practice.

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Under federal law, religious private schools in Australia have the ability to expel or fire students, teachers, and staff on the basis of their gender, sexuality, or romantic orientation. There have been multiple efforts to change this piece of legislation, but none have passed, with the creation of the Religious Discrimination Bill only making further action more difficult.

The main issue the government has with changing laws regarding LGBTQIA+ students and staff of religious private schools is determining exactly how much action should be taken, and how far religious discrimination extends into queer rights.

The fact that there even needs to be discussion surrounding whether allowing queer people to exist unconditionally in religious environments is a breach of religious rights, shows plainly why religion and religious upbringings can be such a painful topic for LGBTQIA+ people, when religion and religious education is supposed to impart the importance of virtues such as mercy, acceptance, and fairness.

It also brings into question whether the schools who take advantage of this law are fulfilling their duty of care to their students, as they make no secret of their belief that queerness is inherently bad. This invites a social stigma and encourages queer students to feel shameful and guilty about a part of their identity they cannot change, and which should not be considered in need of changing.

Australian law *also* states that all school staff hold the responsibility to "implement[...] strategies to prevent reasonably foreseeable injuries, whether physical or psychological, to students". Condoning discrimination against students, including on the basis of their sex, gender, sexuality, or romantic orientation, directly contradicts this. In addition, Child Safe Standard 5 requires that in schools, "equity is upheld and diverse needs respected in policy and practice." As a show of respect for your diverse needs, we have decided that you may be kicked out of school because of your diversity!

It's unreasonable to argue that queer acceptance is not a "diverse need" when these laws extend to *all* students, including *all* minorities. Queer people are not getting "special treatment" if their identities are accepted and supported, and they are not "faking" for attention. When being queer puts us in the firing line, it shows no part of our community is fabricated, invalid, or "not a real thing".

If no school has the right to expel or fire students and staff based on uncontrollable, unchangeable parts of their identity that may also cause discrimination, such as race, ability, and body type, it's plan to see that their gender, sexuality, or romantic orientation should be no different.

"Heterophobia" and "cisphobia" are two words that have begun popping up on the internet: myths spun by queerphobes that attempt to victimise cisgender heterosexual (cishet) people and give queer people a guilt trip for talking about their rights. These terms are based on LGBTQIA+ protest against underrepresentation met with response that queer people are trying to "overtake" or "erase" straight people or invalidate binary genders. Considering the fact that queerphobia continues to be an issue that takes lives, these concepts aren't dissimilar to the argument that

people are using LGBTQIA+ rights as a front for religious discrimination, when the opposite is in fact true.

Unlike "heterophobia" and "cisphobia", religion is valid, but it should not be abused as a cover-up for discrimination, and queer rights are not a matter of religion. They are a matter of equality and the basic admission that no person is automatically good or bad because of something they cannot control.

There are many religious private schools that do not discriminate against queer people. The problem is the ones who do - the schools run by principals who explicitly and publicly condemn homosexuality or send out contracts certifying that prospective students are not transgender prior to enrolment, even if that requirement is subsequently retracted. These are both issues that have cropped up before – the latter, perpetrated by Citipointe Christian College in Brisbane, was recently covered in the news.

The simple, undeniable, and humane truth is that people should not be taught to hate and discriminate against others because of the god/s they believe in. Nor should schools encourage this kind of behavior, even if it is dictated by a religious text's teachings. Acknowledging that queer people exist and not teaching people that queerness is bad is not a breach of religious rights, it's the bare minimum.

Nor is expelling queer students from religious schools - which are often single-gender - a matter of safety. If the concern is sexual harassment or assault, that is the issue that should be addressed. There is also no excuse to be found in arguing that trans students invalidate or jeopardise single-sex schools when non-religious single-gender schools have been working through students' transitions for years without the additional "protection" afforded to religious schools.

The clear conclusion is that the law should be changed, even if it takes significant time and effort, because it is a necessary step towards combatting discrimination and queerphobia. Once new legislation has been implemented, further steps can - and must - be taken to ensure LGBTQIA+ staff and student wellbeing.

The truth is that banning automatic expulsion isn't enough. High schools can be minefields of discrimination, with n-, r- and f-slurs bandied about freely whenever a teacher's back is turned. I and many others have witnessed slurs being used in the schoolyard and I know people who have been the target of queerphobic slurring.

The truth is that LGBTQIA+ students face bullying 14.9% more often than their cishet peers, and that 11.9% more queer students consider dropping out of colleges. Two thirds of queer college students have experienced sexual harassment, and unaccepting families, landlords and employers cause queer youth to be over twice as likely to become homeless than cishet people of the same age bracket.

The truth is that 16% of LGBTQIA+ people aged 16-27 have attempted suicide in their lifetimes, at five times more likely than the general population, and at *fifteen times* the likelihood of cisgender 14-25-year-olds, so have 48.1% of transgender-spectrum people - *nearly half* of the total trans community.

I turned fourteen this month. I may yet still be in that half.

These people are all high school students, or newly graduated young adults. Clearly, these numbers can't just be due to expulsion, as most of these people would not have attended religious schools, much less those that would kick them out because of their identity. The issue runs deeper, and the education system simply is not doing enough.

The only way to kick off wide-spread action is by recognising the gaps in queer rights and actively working to stop queerphobia. This means reporting bullying and harassment and building more safe spaces in school communities as well as amending the law, and as regular people, that's all most of us can do. Our leaders need to take the larger steps we can't; it's in their job title. When the issue comes back into focus - and it will - have a think about who you're voting for, and who will break the pattern of systematic discrimination that is still supported by our laws. If queer people have to suffer, we'd rather it not be for nothing.