

# “Absolutely it was not safe”: Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ experiences of education in Australia

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Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ individuals occupy a unique intersection of identities that inform their lived experiences and the ways in which they navigate colonial settler educational institutions. Despite a considerable body of evidence demonstrating the importance of inclusion, educational policies in Australia remain outdated. These policies are frequently informed by a deficit approach that justifies the absence of Indigenous and gender/sexuality diverse content within school curricula. This further acts to shore up discriminatory practices and policies. Using interviews and workshops held with young Indigenous LGTBIQSB+ people, this article reports on the ways participants experienced educational institutional settings. First, participants reported on the kinds of policies and curriculum content that discriminated against and marginalised them, as well as highlighting some positive aspects of school and university. Participants also revealed the potentialities for Indigenous and LGBTIQSB+ inclusivity that could be facilitated within educational spaces. The article demonstrates the need for safer and more inclusive educational environments, which could be achieved through the decentring of settler knowledges and heteronormativity, transforming educational spaces at an institutional level to facilitate safety at interpersonal and collective levels.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, LGBTIQ+, education, Australia

## Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter Indigenous) lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, sistergirl and brotherboy plus (LGBTIQSB+)<sup>1</sup> individuals occupy a unique intersection of identities that inform their lived experiences, particularly their sense of inclusion and exclusion. Although the terms sistergirls and brotherboys, which might be used instead of the word trans, are unique to Indigenous Australians, they are not the only terms used in Indigenous communities, with many using non-Indigenous LGBTIQ+ terms to identify themselves (Sullivan, 2018; Sullivan & Day, 2021). Communities

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in this article we only use the initialism LGBTIQSB+ for Indigenous people in Australia. For non-Indigenous LGBTIQ+ people, we use the LGBTIQ+ initialism, as they do not include sistergirls and brotherboys. At times we also use the authors' or their participants' own stated identities.

also use other terms in their own languages to reflect cultural meanings that cannot be directly translated into English. For example, the Koorie word *Wirgul* is used for women-identified LGBTIQ+ people in New South Wales (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2023), but does not necessarily directly translate as “lesbian”. The use of Indigenous terms to identify and connect with culture has been distorted by the influence of invasion and colonial settler violence. The colonial history of the country now known as Australia and white settler enforcement of Christian and heteronormative values have framed Indigenous individuals as the “Other” within society; this is especially the case for those who are both Indigenous and LGBTIQSB+. This has resulted in continued institutional discrimination against Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ people, including within educational institutions such as schools, colleges and universities.

While research on the intersections of Indigenous and LGBTIQSB+ identities within educational institutions is lacking, separate investigations of Indigenous students’ or LGBTIQ+ students’ experiences of educational spaces reveal aspects that can be applied to Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students. Indigenous people’s experiences of education in the country now known as Australia are intimately tied with the nation’s history. White settler colonisation of the country, along with their attempt to eradicate Indigenous culture through the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities (what is now referred to as the Stolen Generation), has embedded hegemonic whiteness that excludes and discriminates against Indigenous populations in Australian educational policies and practices (Herbert, 2012; Robinson et al., 2014). Educational institutions within Australia still reflect this racist, colonial legacy, with Indigenous students being alienated by systemic racism and white knowledge systems (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Brown, 2019; Herbert, 2012; Hogarth, 2018; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2018; Moodie et al., 2019).

One of the more obvious manifestations of this white centrality within educational spaces is the substandard Indigenous educational material within school curricula (Brown, 2019; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2018). While there have been attempts to integrate Indigenous learning materials into curricula, the content lacks the quality and substance that would allow teachers to facilitate learning experiences that encapsulate the depth of Indigenous histories and contemporarities (Brown, 2019; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2018). This epitomises educational institutions’ lack of willingness to engage with, and integrate, Indigenous content, instead perpetuating coloniser discourses and invisibility of Indigenous Australians (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2018). The insufficiency of Indigenous content within school curricula can also be attributed to the colonial framing of education policies (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Brown, 2019; Herbert, 2012; Hogarth, 2018).

Further, Indigenous education policies remain outdated and are often informed by a deficit approach that enables educational institutions and administrations to justify the absence of Indigenous content within school curricula and discrimination against Indigenous students in the classroom (Properjohn et al., 2023; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). Discrimination against Indigenous students is not limited to the institutional level; it is also experienced on an interpersonal level (Coffin et al., 2010; Moodie et al., 2019). Discrimination and racism are perpetrated by both students and teachers, manifesting in several forms, including exclusion, physical and verbal abuse, and teacher indifference (Coffin et al., 2010; Martino, 2003; Moodie et al., 2019). Experiences of discrimination result in various negative impacts, with Indigenous students reporting internalised discrimination, underperformance, disengagement and emotional distress (Moodie et al., 2019).

Research into LGBTIQ+ students’ experiences of educational spaces also reveals the prevalence of systemic and interpersonal discrimination. At the institutional level, there is evident exclusion and lack

of representation of LGBTIQ+ people within school curricula (Ferfolja, 2013). School curricula are predominantly heteronormative, with little to no sexuality and gender diversity within learning materials, including sexual health education or pleasure (Ferfolja, 2013; Robinson & Davies, 2008). Despite research indicating that inclusive sexual education has overwhelmingly positive results for LGBTIQ+ students, sexual and gender diversity has been treated as a taboo, and current school curricula continue to undermine the importance of sexuality and gender in students' identity development (Biddulph, 2006; Ferfolja, 2013; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017; Robinson & Davies, 2008).

This absence of sexuality and gender knowledge has negative impacts on LGBTIQ+ students, increasing their vulnerability to sexual exploitation or abuse, their lack of awareness of sexual wellbeing, and their feelings of social isolation and invisibility (Biddulph, 2006; Ferfolja, 2015; Robinson & Davies, 2008). Within Australia, an evident display of institutional discrimination against LGBTIQ+ students can be seen with the abolishment of the Safe Schools Program (McKinnon et al., 2017). The Safe Schools Program was an educational program that aimed to reduce LGBTIQ+ discrimination and heteronormative discourses within school environments by providing teachers with inclusive learning materials and strategies to support LGBTIQ+ students (McKinnon et al., 2017). Despite its objective of addressing LGBTIQ+ discrimination at an institutional level, the program received outrage from political opponents and the media (McKinnon et al., 2017). Although initial reports proved the program's success, government funding ceased in 2016 and the program was ended in 2017, revealing a systemic reluctance to create safer and inclusive educational spaces for LGBTIQ+ students (McKinnon et al., 2017). LGBTIQ+ discrimination in schools is also abundant, with experiences of homophobia and transphobia manifesting through physical and emotional abuse, exclusion, cyberbullying and gossip from peers (Jones, 2012; McKinnon et al., 2017). Interpersonal discrimination within schools has negative impacts on LGBTIQ+ students, such as depression, poor performance, disengagement from school, drug use as a coping mechanism and suicidal ideation (Ferfolja, 2015; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017).

While there exists a considerable amount of investigation into the separate experiences of Indigenous Australians and LGBTIQ+ individuals within educational institutions, there is almost no research that focuses on those who identify as both Indigenous and LGBTIQSB+, nor how their intersectional identities inform their experiences of education. Although there is some literature that explores Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ people's experiences within the high school context, Sullivan & Day (2021) have begun investigating the inclusion/exclusion of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students within higher education spaces. Findings of their research suggest that Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students continue to be underrepresented within higher education spaces, and, while universities superficially value cultural safety, there is a sense of inaction and lack of visibility that prevents inclusion of, and engagement with, Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students (Sullivan & Day, 2021). Although there are established Indigenous spaces within the identified universities in the Sullivan and Day study, little has been done to promote and communicate inclusion of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students within those spaces (Sullivan & Day, 2021). Spaces that are meant to be culturally safe for Indigenous students thus become difficult to navigate for Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students due to uncertainties of the reception towards their sexuality and/or gender diversity (Sullivan & Day, 2021).

As demonstrated, educational institutions remain a difficult space for Indigenous students *and* LGBTIQ+ students to navigate due to the institutional and interpersonal challenges that they present. For Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ youth, their experiences of exclusion and discrimination compound due to the intersections of their identities. Their perspectives on educational experiences will thus provide further insight on the systemic failures of educational spaces, and opportunities for improvements and inclusion of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students. This paper will investigate the educational experiences, needs and

aspirations of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ young people. In doing so, we will discuss their experiences of exclusion from the curriculum, the discrimination by other students and staff they experienced, their positive experiences within educational spaces, and hopes for future improvements in educational institutions for Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ people.

## Method

This article includes data from the Dalarinji research project, a large, New South Wales (NSW) based project examining the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ youth aged 14 to 25 living in NSW. Dalarinji means “Your story” in Gadigal language and was chosen to reflect the participants ownership and governance of their experiences. The project employs a strength-based approach, highlighting the resilience and agency of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ individuals instead of the more frequently utilised deficit-based approach that emphasises malfunction and disadvantage (Walter & Suina, 2019). The project was conducted in three phases, each generating a dataset that informed the content of the consequent phase. The first and second phases consisted of in-depth interviews and online surveys with young Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ individuals regarding their lived experiences, focusing on their wellbeing, supports and experiences of health services. The third phase involved three online workshops investigating the perspectives of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ young people, Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ elders and service providers. Workshop participants were asked about the challenges, obstacles and opportunities for Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ service provision. All three phases were co-designed and co-led by individuals who are both Indigenous and LGBTIQ+. The project received funding from the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) under its Targeted Call 2018 Indigenous Social and Emotional Wellbeing Funding Round (Grant ID: 1157377). The project has received ethics approval from the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (HREC ref. 1536/19) on 27 August 2019.

For this particular paper, data from 13 interview participants (phase one) and the young people’s workshop (phase three) were utilised for analysis. All participants are Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ young people aged 14 to 25. Recruitment of participants occurred through various networks, including LGBTIQ+ social networks, partner organisations (BlaQ Aboriginal Corporation and ACON-Aids Council of New South Wales), and service provider networks (such as Twenty10, Campbelltown City Council and Infant Child Adolescent Mental Health Service). Due to COVID-19 restrictions imposed in Australia during the data collection period, interviews and workshops were conducted online via Zoom. As per the Indigenous research mandates outlined by the NHMRC (2007), remuneration was provided to all participants.

Analysis was conducted utilising grounded theory as a framework, with data being thematically analysed for emergent themes and concepts (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1998). Different levels of open, axial and selective coding were utilised during analysis as foundational techniques to investigate the data (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1998). An initial read through of the transcripts was conducted to establish broader themes, before subsequent read throughs were undertaken for more in-depth examination. Conceptually relevant experiences and identified themes were organised into categories, highlighting key relationships and connection between participants and concepts (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1998). An iterative approach was employed during analysis and writing, with categories and themes building upon each other to formulate higher abstraction and conceptual levels to yield increasingly rich and significant accounts. Throughout analysis and writing, the original transcripts were referenced to ensure that themes and concepts maintained a close link to the original text and its meaning.

## Negative experiences of education

### School curricula and policies

Echoing the limited previous research (Rhodes & Byrne, 2021; Sullivan & Day, 2021), interview participants and workshop participants expressed criticism of the heteronormative school curriculum and educational policies, particularly the heterosexist sex education that they felt hindered their LGBTIQSB+ identity exploration. They believed that the lack of exposure to inclusive learning content contributed to their feelings of invisibility and suppression of same-sex attraction and/or gender diversity. The heteronormativity of the curriculum also impacted their life after school, with participants not having the proper knowledge that was applicable to their experiences when they were involved with same-sex partners. Information had to be sought externally, and participants conveyed it was a failure of schooling institutions in providing youths with appropriate and inclusive sex education.

It was compulsory sexual health education. That was mostly focused on male and female, cis-male and female partners. So, when I started having sex with cis-women or people with vaginas instead, that was a lot more different. I had to figure out what was going on. (Interview Participant 3)

Interview Participant 6 also expressed concern about how they did not know how to have safe relationships, and that, with no other information sources available, they struggled during their younger years without gender and/or sexuality appropriate information to guide them:

Like, everyone else is getting talks on heteronormative sex ed and I'm getting none of that. I don't have any information about how I'm being safe or what a healthy relationship looks like for me because I'm just seeing heteronormative styles of education in my schooling and there's no information at my local Aboriginal doctor that I go to. So, I think probably in a negative way in that there's information that I could have had that I would not receive until much later in life when I sought it out myself. (Interview Participant 6)

Participants recommended that the curriculum be overhauled, and, by extension, for educational policies to be changed in a way that would be inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people and experiences. They desired a new curriculum that extends beyond the incorporation of LGBTIQ+ sex education, one also containing learning materials about personal development and relationship navigation. Some suggested materials include resources for questioning sexuality and gender identity, as well as navigating family relationships during identity exploration. One workshop participant remarked that the curriculum is too focused on negative aspects of sexual life, such as sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy or sexual assault. Consequently, the participants recommended that sex education needs to shift focus to include healthy sexual encounters and dynamics, and how to engage in sexual relationships that are not just physically safe, but also mentally and emotionally safe.

I want the whole curriculum changed. Like, it was just ridiculous, we didn't even address that [same-sex relationship] was a possibility. We didn't even talk about orgasms or pleasure. It was just purely, you know, you need to be careful not to get pregnant and you should use a condom, and, like, don't get assaulted. And that was, like, the extent of our education. And, you know, if I had resources on questioning or on how to talk to my family about it or, you know, that I might not be the gender I was assigned at birth, like, that would've made a huge difference. But I had to go out and find those things myself ... You know, you want the school

to give you everything that's correct and safe, and that's gonna make you, you know, your wellbeing okay and not actually detrimental because of this curriculum. (Workshop Participant 5)

Prior research also indicates that LGBTIQ+ inclusive school curricula and policies have evident positive impacts. Inclusive learning materials not only benefit LGBTIQ+ students by providing them with relevant education, but also create a safer environment by normalising LGBTIQ+ presence and helping other students understand LGBTIQ+ perspectives (Day et al., 2019; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). The visibility reduces LGBTIQ+ victimisation and bullying, and helps LGBTIQ+ students in coming out to peers (Day et al., 2019). A safer and more inclusive environment also means that LGBTIQ+ students are more engaged with learning content, increasing their grades in school (Day et al., 2019).

Despite prior research highlighting the inadequate Indigenous learning material within Australian learning curricula (Brown, 2019; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2018; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009), participants did not mention this as an issue. A possible explanation for this lack of discussion on the Indigenous school curriculum is the participants' early establishment of their Indigenous identity, in contrast with their more recently developed LGBTIQSB+ identity during school. For many, high school was a time when they were actively questioning their sexuality and/or gender identity. Thus, the lack of resources that supported their coming out was much more evident, as they felt forced to internalise their struggles while navigating institutional homophobia and transphobia (referred to forthwith as queerphobia). Contrastingly, most participants felt secure in their Indigenous identity from childhood due to engagement with their families and communities, and, therefore, felt less impacted by the lack of Indigenous materials at school. However, they were highly aware of the racism that affected them, as epitomised by Interview Participant 1's experience of discrimination:

I think no matter how much racism I got, I was born Aboriginal, I can't help it. So, it never really affected me to a point where they were calling me half-caste, I just ignore it. But when they were calling me, like, a gay half-caste, that's when it affected me 'cause it was both, and it was both things I couldn't really control. But I think it was more so being queer and stuff, like, going through that transition. (Interview Participant 1)

While not explicitly discussed within the school context, workshop participants discussed their desire for more diverse representations of Indigenous culture. As highlighted earlier in this paper, discourses surrounding Indigenous communities have been deficit-focused, and this extends to Indigenous representation within media. Participants expressed that representation largely focused on dispossession and "Rabbit-Proof Fence narratives", referring to the 2002 movie that portrays the experiences and trauma of Indigenous children who were taken as part of the Stolen Generation. The prevalence of such "Rabbit-Proof Fence" framing, including the deficit approach that informs Indigenous education policies, reinforces views of Indigenous communities as dysfunctional, victims and one-dimensionally informed by traumas of colonisation (O'Brien & Trudgett, 2020). Participants therefore recommend more positive aspects of Indigenous contemporalities be displayed to subvert the predominantly colonial perspectives of Indigenous people and communities, including within educational institutions. The positive impacts of decentralising deficit discourses of Indigenous people and adopting strength-based approaches within educational institutions have been recorded, facilitating better educational engagement and outcomes (Uink et al., 2021).

## Discrimination from students and staff

Discrimination from people within educational institutions, including both queerphobia and racism, was commonly experienced by participants. School was the space where discrimination was most prevalent among interview participants; they discussed in detail their experiences of racism and queerphobia perpetrated by staff and other students. While other students were generally more overt in their bigotry, staff perpetuated unsafe environments through their inaction and enabling of discrimination.

Interview participants recounted the frequent anti-LGBTIQ+ discourses from other students, some of which were from other Indigenous peers. This resulted in educational spaces becoming unsafe for participants to engage in, with anxieties related to exclusion and violence being expressed during interviews. The experience of queerphobia had various impacts on participants, including disengagement from spaces, suppression of identity and self-harm.

So, in terms of the safety perspective, absolutely it was not safe, I believe, back when I was 14, to hold my girlfriend's hand walking to school—no way. We were definitely closeted ... Because my partner at the time, who was more masculine-presenting and is now a trans man, they had to finish school—they had a slip from the teacher to leave school 10 minutes early so that they can walk home before everyone else got out of school so they wouldn't get rocks thrown at them or abused because they were more masculine-presenting and obviously not straight. So, they would be bullied relentlessly. (Interview Participant 6)

Participants did not always get support from their Indigenous peers, recounting experiences with Indigenous students as not always positive, other Indigenous students sometimes reflected back the wider community's queerphobia, causing distress for participants.

Well, in high school, we had another Aboriginal girl, and the rumour just went around about me ... and she was actually quite judgy about it. She's, like, oh, you never hear of a gay Aboriginal, it's not a thing these days. And that shunned me a bit more. (Interview Participant 1)

The actual Indigenous student society at [university] was headed by a white fair-skinned Aboriginal person like me ... and they were identified as a homophobe. And it just didn't make sense for them to be in a black leadership program when ... [they] are in this position for black students but seriously neglected queer black students. (Interview Participant 9)

Participants who were parents echoed worries of queerphobia within schools, exhibiting fears of their children being discriminated against for having same-sex parents. Evidently, there was a belief that educational institutions continue to be dominated by heteronormativity, and there have been little to no changes to alleviate the problems they experienced during their time.

And it brings the fact that—like, my son's father's comments when it's, like, oh, [child] will get bullied if he knows that he's—if all his friends know that his mum is gay, and whatnot. So, it sort of brings it back to that. I guess that sort of stuck with me, like, is that what's gonna happen? Is that really what's gonna happen? (Interview Participant 5)

It was definitely challenging especially with, I guess—there was thoughts of, “Oh fuck, what if she goes to school and she gets picked on for having two mums”. (Interview Participant 13)

While less common, participants or someone they knew also experienced discrimination from other students due to their Indigenous identity, being excluded by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. Many young Indigenous people today, including participants, are considered white-passing, which refers to individuals who are Indigenous, but have physical traits, such as fair skin, that lead them to be perceived as white by others. Participants were rejected by other Indigenous students for not being Indigenous enough, while also being targeted by non-Indigenous students for being Indigenous.

I've gone to [one] high school and they would be, like, "You're not Aboriginal, you can't hang out with us". Because there was, like, an Aboriginal girls group. You're too white, blah, blah, blah. And then I'd go to [another high school] and they'll be, like, "You're Aboriginal, you're disgusting, get away from us". So, I was confused either way. (Interview Participant 1)

Some participants were surprised to find out that queer students were racist, simply reflecting the wider white colonial attitudes towards Indigenous Australians.

So, it hasn't happened to me, but it's happened to students, for me, that have interacted with the queer collective on campus ... So, they tried to go to this specific queer space that is on campus for queer people where you can go study, hang out, whatever. And going inside these spaces, they experience racism, discrimination. They were verbally told that they didn't belong here. (Interview Participant 9)

Staff were also complicit in the queerphobic and racist discrimination of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ individuals. Some participants conveyed that staff played a more passive role in sustaining the discrimination, either through providing inadequate support for participants experiencing discrimination or creating unsafe spaces by contributing to anti-LGBTIQ+ discourses.

I mean, I saw the school psych, once or twice because of my depression/anxiety being so bad. They were terrible. They were so bad, I just remember leaving crying, and I'm, like, "Why am I feeling worse?". (Interview Participant 2)

There's a[n] [Indigenous student] common room where students are allowed to congregate and whatsoever. And there were pride flags up, which was meant to signify that this is a safe space for queer mob. And it felt inviting. And then one day, I walked in, and they were all gone. And at first, I didn't really pay any attention, but then one of the cultural advisers, an Aunty, told me that the reason they're gone is because there were six formal written complaints to remove them from students. (Interview Participant 9)

Others indicated that staff had an active role in discrimination, reinforcing school as an unsafe space due to the culture of discrimination from both students and school authority figures.

We had an Aboriginal teacher. He was really lovely, and we went on Aboriginal camps and stuff with him. I found I was quite comfortable with him, that's why I'd speak to him a lot about the issues, and he would say, "I experience [racism] too in the staff room. All white teachers, they don't give a shit". (Interview Participant 1)

I came out when I was 12 to an Indigenous teacher's aide at my school, and then he goes, "You're not a rug muncher". (Interview Participant 11)

While discrimination from students and staff in educational institutions often manifests on an interpersonal level, it also reflects the culture of discrimination and racism within educational institutions (Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Carlson, B. (2016). This discrimination is sustained by a sense of ignorance of Indigenous and/or LGBTIQ+ experiences, as well as colonial understandings of identity. This notion is evident in both non-Indigenous and Indigenous perpetrators. As discussed earlier, a common suggestion to prevent bullying is to make changes to school curricula that will decentralise colonial knowledge systems and facilitate better understanding of Indigenous *and* LGBTIQ+ identities (Brown, 2019; Day et al., 2019; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2018; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). Another commonly utilised strategy to stop racist and queerphobic discrimination is school staff intervention, which includes both stopping the perpetrator and supporting the target (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Hillard et al., 2014). However, from the participants' experiences, staff were often complicit in the discrimination, and their inaction perpetuated the exclusion of participants. There is an evident need for staff members to be more understanding of Indigenous *and* LGBTIQ+ inclusivity due to their inadequacy in supporting and responding to participants' intersecting identities. As demonstrated through participants, the need for staff understanding of, and contribution to, Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ support extends beyond teaching staff, and should also include mental health, administration, facilities and faculty staff.

Research has proved the effectiveness of staff training on LGBTIQ+ matters, suggesting that training increases staff capacity to provide support for LGBTIQ+ students and respond to the bullying of LGBTIQ+ people (Greytak et al., 2013; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016; Szalacha, 2004). Students from schools with implemented LGBTIQ+ staff training reported an increased frequency of bullying intervention from teachers (Horn, 2006; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Despite the positive impacts of training, teachers report a lack of knowledge and professional development opportunities as the main barrier in supporting LGBTIQ+ youth, and are consequently uncertain about their obligations in relation to LGBTIQ+ bullying intervention (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). The lack of training that reinforces their obligations in protecting LGBTIQ+ youth means that some teachers also prioritise their discriminatory attitudes against sexuality and gender diverse identities above intervening to stop LGBTIQ+ bullying (Meyer, 2008; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Staff training and intervention are pivotal in preventing discrimination against Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students from both students and staff.

Research on teachers' roles in facilitating Indigenous support proposes a different approach, suggesting that staff can provide a better learning environment by acting as a conduit for the incorporation of Indigenous parents and community members into education-related decision-making and practices (Bishop et al., 2021; Lowe et al., 2019). McLaughlin et al. (2012) highlight the range of school approaches to engagement with Indigenous communities, noting "autonomy" to be the most successful form of school-community relationship. For autonomy to be achieved, non-Indigenous teachers and schools must relinquish their historical power and dominance over Indigenous people, and share the space with community members in such a way that includes them in the teaching and learning process as valued partners (Bishop et al., 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2012). This incorporation of Indigenous family and community members has shown positive impacts on both educational staff and students (Bishop et al., 2021). For teachers, partnerships with Indigenous community members leveraged complex and nuanced teaching of Indigenous content and knowledge, which have often been omitted in teaching processes due to fears of tokenising Indigenous communities or feeling unqualified to deliver Indigenous learning content to students (Bishop et al., 2021). Both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students also benefit from school-community partnerships, boosting engagement in better learning processes and facilitating a safer environment for Indigenous students by removing tokenistic and stereotypical understandings of Indigenous people and their communities (Bishop et al., 2021).

Particularly in relation to Indigenous perpetrators of discrimination, participants believed that discrimination is a result of intergenerational trauma and colonisation. The discrimination and racism of white-passing individuals by Indigenous and non-Indigenous perpetrators have been attributed to the continued oppression and marginalisation of Indigenous communities, and the enforcement of Western cultural values that utilise whiteness and proximity to whiteness as a means to undermine identity and culture (Bennett, 2014; Clark et al., 2016). The colonial roots of viewing skin colour as an indication of one's Indigeneity, with "breeding out the colour" being a strategy utilised by white colonisers to attempt to erase Indigenous physical appearance and culture through generations of regulated reproduction and forced assimilation, is apparent (McGregor, 2002). Similarly, anti-LGBTIQ+ discourse from Indigenous individuals has been observed to be the result of white colonisers' imposition of Christian values and beliefs on Indigenous communities (O'Sullivan, 2017; Soldatic et al., 2021a, 2021b; Sullivan, 2018). The enforcement of Christian norms has resulted in the conflation of Christian ideology and Indigenous cultural belief systems, causing sexuality and gender diversity to be viewed as a cultural taboo (O'Sullivan, 2017; Soldatic et al., 2021a, 2021b; Sullivan, 2018). Consequently, despite the discrimination they experienced from fellow Indigenous individuals, participants displayed a more understanding tone and aspirations for decolonisation within Indigenous communities; for example:

I think that personal experiences of black, queer people would be super informative and super useful for other black and questioning queer people. And more promotion, education and exposure of these resources, especially in communities, would be super useful.  
(Workshop Participant 6)

Education and exposure to Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ narratives within Indigenous communities were emphasised as methods to destigmatise LGBTIQ+ existence and facilitate Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ people coming out.

## Positive experiences of education

Although negative accounts of educational institutions were prominent among participants, positive aspects of school were also experienced, revealing possibilities for Indigenous *and* LGBTIQ+ inclusivity that could be facilitated within school spaces. Participants reported on the instances of receiving positive support from those within educational spaces.

### Self-expression and freedom

For some participants, school was not a restrictive and unsafe space, but instead an opportunity for self-expression and freedom.

If anything, school is my—not escape, but it was, like, a chance—because I went to a performing arts high school and so it was, like, I would just go to school and just let go of everything. I would have my chance to sing, dance, do everything ... It had a good effect on it all, I think. (Interview Participant 10)

I've got my family and friends behind me, friends at school, I was all supported through school with teachers. I've never had any dramas. I think I was just one of those lucky ones where I just never had to feel isolated or nothing like that ... Everyone knew me in school but I honestly don't know why I've never had to put up with any bullying or drama about my sexuality. It's a hard question actually. (Interview Participant 4)

While not explicitly expressed by the two participants, their experiences possibly highlighted a different school culture, compared to other participants, that allowed them to safely express and explore aspects of their identities. For Interview Participant 10, being in a performing arts school meant that he was within an environment where hegemonic masculinity was less enforced. Within wider heteronormative society, dancing has predominantly been assigned as feminine within the masculinity/femininity dichotomy, and, as such, men who dance have been stigmatised as effeminate and deviant from mainstream masculinity (Bassetti, 2013).

High school, in particular, has been recorded to be a space where gender is often enforced, with male youth who perform outside of the idealised or normative masculinity facing discrimination from others (Friedman et al., 2006; Risner, 2014). For same-sex attracted men, the performance of hegemonic masculinity is also largely associated with internalised queerphobia, which delays identity exploration and acceptance (Ramos et al., 2020; Sánchez et al., 2009; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). Thus, being encouraged to participate in activities that are traditionally considered feminine within school environments further disassociated Interview Participant 10 from the restraints of hegemonic masculinity. This lack of pressure to perform hegemonic masculinity allowed him to embrace his sexuality, something that is considered inferior within a heteronormative context.

### Culturally affirming environments

Interview Participant 4 had an overwhelmingly positive experience of school, stating that he had no struggles related to either his Indigeneity or sexuality, and that he was supported by both students and staff. He shared that having a dedicated, yet non-intrusive, Indigenous space and programs within school allowed him to feel respected. However, he was unsure what contributed to the absence of anti-LGBTIQ+ discourses within his school:

During school, we were all respected during school. All us Indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were all treated with respect. We had our own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander roll call. So, at the start of the day, instead of going to an actual roll call with other students, we've had our own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander on roll call, so we'll get together every day at the start, doing the roll, talk and stuff, that's when the bell would go and we'd be on with our days ... And they just had certain programs running that just supported us in every single way they could, I guess. (Interview Participant 4)

Relatedly, Interview Participant 4's school created an environment that was divorced from colonial and deficit-based understandings of Indigenous students, allowing him to connect with his culture and take pride in his identity. Research indicates that one prevalent reason for the educational discrepancy between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students is due to the cultural disconnect between Indigenous cultural norms and schools' Western values (McIntosh et al., 2014). To positively support Indigenous students in alleviating this dissonance, educational institutions need to make changes to school environments to be accommodating of their cultural needs, instead of attempting to force changes through individual discipline (McIntosh et al., 2014). The success of accommodating adjustment for Indigenous students can be seen in Interview Participant 4's experience. While Indigenous students within Interview Participant 4's school were given a dedicated space in the form of a roll call, it was not compulsory to attend, and students had the option to attend standard roll call. This gives Indigenous students a means to forge a sense of community with fellow Indigenous peers, while also ensuring they do not feel segregated from others or forced to partake. Interview Participant 4 also mentioned the

implementation of programs targeted at Indigenous students, which acted as supplementary support to affirm their Indigeneity and recognised the history of disadvantage within educational institutions.

Evidently, the deconstruction of heteronormative and colonial norms within school environments had positive impacts on these two participants, and similar changes to school culture beyond the curriculum that facilitate pride in identity need to be implemented.

Interview Participant 9 echoed this notion through the negative experience of his university's Indigenous spaces. He indicated that, while it was effective in boosting educational engagement, he desired a change and restructuring of the space to be more focused on healing and reconnecting with culture, which would help to decolonise higher education:

Honestly, it's a radical idea, but I don't think [the Indigenous student centre] should exist. I think it should be wiped and remade into something else that's—[that] actually helps students spiritually. Because although they do a good job at doing it academically—I'll give them that—spiritually, culturally, they're really lacklustre in that regard. (Interview Participant 9)

## Discussion and conclusion

Educational achievement deeply affects all aspects of a person's life, such as the kind of work they do, their lifetime burden of disease and ill-health, their social and emotional wellbeing, the levels of economic stability they manage to achieve, and the nature of the working conditions they experience (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). This study contributes to the limited research into the lived experiences of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ individuals (Rhodes & Byrne, 2021; Sullivan & Day, 2021), providing an insight into how educational institutions and their policies fail Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students. The educational experiences of Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ individuals reveal complex narratives of navigating institutional and interpersonal discrimination. Participants' intersectional identities were ignored and challenged by both colonial and heteronormative ways of thinking that marginalised their existence within educational institutions.

Participants reported that school curricula and policies excluded their LGBTIQSB+ identities and prevented them from obtaining accurate and appropriate information for identity exploration. This contributed to a culture of discrimination and exclusion within schools and universities, where discrimination from students and staff submission to anti-LGBTIQ+ discourses have created an unsafe environment for the Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ participants.

While discussed to a lesser extent, racism targeted at their Indigeneity from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals was also experienced, revealing the deep-rooted impacts of colonial knowledge systems that privilege whiteness. Despite other research demonstrating the inadequacy of Indigenous learning content with educational curricula (Brown, 2019; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2018; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009), participants did not raise this as a concern. We speculate this may be because adolescence and early adulthood are times of identity formation, with participants exploring and establishing LGBTIQ+ identities.

These negative experiences contrast with those participants whose school culture did not reinforce colonial thinking or hegemonic gender roles. These latter experiences reinforce the positive outcomes possible for Indigenous LGBTIQ+ students when they feel culturally safe, that is, when educational

spaces minimise “power imbalances, addressing issues of power, racism and discriminatory attitudes towards those who are from different cultures and cultural diversities” (Sullivan & Day, 2021, p. 3). These participants demonstrated the importance of safer spaces when experiencing more inclusive educational environments that embraced Indigenous cultures and provided a positive experience of inclusive educational institutions.

In addition to the ways discrimination manifested for Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students, participants also revealed aspirations for change in educational institutions. There is an evident need for a safer and more inclusive educational environment; this can be achieved through decentring colonisation and heteronormativity within educational cultures. The experiences of participants reveal the nature of discrimination in their daily lives, and how changes must be made on an institutional level to facilitate safety on an interpersonal level. The suggestions and wishes of participants reflected this notion, highlighting systemic changes that will benefit fellow Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ youths instead of focusing on individualised and interpersonal intervention.

Participant aspirations support Rhodes and Byrnes’s (2021) contention that “inclusive sexuality education remains highly politicised in Australia, and research indicates that where sex education is included in the curriculum, it is often very conservatively delivered, and often excludes sexuality or gender diversity” (p. 31). Other research demonstrates that inclusive educational curricula and policies have strong positive impacts benefiting LGBTIQ+ students and creating a safer educational environment where LGBTIQ+ students are respected and accepted by their peers and teachers (Day et al., 2019; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). Reducing discrimination and victimisation allows students to engage with learning, making them more likely to attend and engage with education, as well as achieve higher grades (Day et al., 2019). The synergy between inclusion, attendance and improved educational capabilities are also key aims of the Closing the Gap campaign to improve Indigenous learning outcomes and capabilities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).

Articulating their challenges and aspirations regarding educational practices, spaces and institutions in Australia, Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students play an important role in conversations about decolonising curricula in Australia. Participants aspired for a change in educational curricula and policies to be more representative of their identities, shifting away from deficit-informed representation of Indigenous identities and heteronormative learning materials. It was also apparent that changes need to be implemented for educational institution staff to better support Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ students in order to prevent discrimination from both staff and other students. However, possible solutions to overcome staff and student discrimination was not discussed by participants, and remains a gap in this particular study. Despite this, participants are acutely aware of how institutions and those within them reproduce colonial and heteronormative discourses and see a need for change to better accommodate Indigenous LGBTIQSB+ individuals. Centring Indigenous and LGBTIQSB+ experiences, cultures and understandings in educational spaces will be pivotal in any attempts to decolonise current colonialist educational curricula and policies, decentring white heteronormative approaches to educational coloniality in Australia.

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