

# School-based Bullying Prevention Program in Australia: Safe Schools Program

## A Critical Review of Program Outcomes, Stakeholders, and Further Recommendations

Shiyang Zhu<sup>1</sup>, Haorui Zhang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. Email: syonbot@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. Email: haorui9717@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

Bullying among students at school has already become a rampant phenomenon and a wicked issue that haunts worldwide educational leaders. This article thoroughly analyzes the development of a bullying prevention program and its stakeholders involved in Australian education system. This program, initiated by Safe School Coalitions Australia (SSCA), aims to provide practical strategies to establish a safe and inclusive school environment where the diversity of each student's sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status could be recognized and respected. Some empirically proven solutions are also suggested based on the concept of 'Inclusive Leadership'.

**Keywords:** *LGBTIAQ+, Safe Schools Program (SSP), Bullying, Inclusive education, Safe School Coalitions Australia (SSCA), Anti-bullying education, Inclusive leadership.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is defined as the behavior by a person (bully) who seeks to harm, intimidate, or coerce another person (victim) who has less power. In general, it can result in a wide range of physical, psychological and social consequences for victims, such as depressive disorder and suicide attempt. In Australia, it was estimated that 70% of children (age 12-13) had experienced at least 1 bullying behavior in 2016 [1].

When it comes to people who are diverse along sexual, gender dimensions [1], it turns out that they are at higher risks of bullying. According to the report from LGBTIQ+ Health Australia (National LGBTIQ+ organization), almost 4 out of 5 (79%) LGBTIQ+ young people reported experiencing various degrees of homophobic bullying, 61% reported being abused verbally and remaining 16% have reported being harmed physically [2] [3]. In contrast to cisgender and heterosexual population, LGBTIQ+ Australians (age 16-17) have threefold suicidal attempts, fourfold self-harm and sixfold diagnostic rate of depression [3].

Based on the fact that most (80%) bullying cases towards LGBTIQ+ people happen at school [2], a

group of Australian schools in 2010 formed an alliance, namely, the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA), intending to establish a safe and inclusive environment for students who belong to LGBTIQ+ groups [2] [4]. The primary project 'Safe Schools Program (SSP)' is thus developed by SSCA to achieve its goal through providing professional training to teachers and school staffs and assistance to LGBTIQ+ students and their families. Initially, the SSP gained great success and was expanded nationally in 2013 with government's financial support. However, in 2016, due to waves of backlash arising from the public, Victorian government terminated its funding. Although the SSP has been adopted by Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) [2], its progress suffers a setback due to shortage of funds. This study aims to give a full analysis about SSP with its core curriculum, its supporters and its resistance. It also explores its application possibility in other regions that have low acceptance of the LGBTIQ+ community.

## 2. SAFE SCHOOL PROGRAMS

### 2.1. *The ‘All Of Us’ Curriculum*

The SSP was considered as the first educational project in Australia to provide support for LGBTIAQ+ students and their families. When it is applied in real world, there are four main steps in this process, that includes: 1. Excellence in teaching and learning (e.g. curriculum update and professional training) 2. A culture of professional leadership (e.g. promotion of LGBTIAQ+ images via the influence of leaders) 3. Positive climate for learning (e.g. establishment of all gender bathrooms) 4. Community engagement in learning (e.g. partnerships with LGBTIAQ+ services).

The operation of SSP can be localized and tailored depending on different schools [4] [5]. Simply put, the SSP, framed by ethos and histories of different schools is quite contextualized and specific, as it varies by situated context (e.g. school history), material context (e.g. staffing), professional context (e.g. teacher experiences) and external context (e.g. local authority support) [5]. In general, the SSP offers schools a variety of empirical evidence and age-appropriate resources, including four official guides, three official posters, a teaching manual developed in 2015 called ‘*All of Us*’ (AOU) [2] [4].

AOU is the core of the SSP and is designed to assist 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in comprehending gender diversity, sexual diversity and intersex topics [4]. Basically, the AOU curriculum is a collection of educational videos and teaching activities, which is categorized scientifically into 8 lessons (1. Establishing a safe space; 2. Same sex attracted experience; 3. Bisexual experiences; 4. Transgender experiences 5. Intersex experiences; 6. What can I do; 7. Standing out as an ally; A safe school for All of Us) [4].

According to AOU [4], the first lesson is a brief introduction about AOU resource and learning roadmap to help create safe and inclusive environment. The seven subsequent lessons revolve around themes and concepts that extract from the experiences of homosexuality, intersex and gender-diverse young students. Each was presented as a short film (ranging from 7 to 9 minutes in length). In addition, every lesson is fully consistent with the principles of Visual Auditory Kinaesthetic (VAK) proposed by Fleming, i.e. videos, presentations, group discussions, interactive exercises and writing activities. The entire AOU resource has also constructed upon Bloom’s Taxonomy, which means that this curriculum follows the progressive learning path from lower order thinking (remember, understand and apply) to higher order thinking (analyse, evaluate and create).

### 2.2. *The Supporters*

#### 2.2.1. *The Schools and The Students*

Based on the report from Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET), it is clearly that schools with SSP have a continual decline of bullying cases against LGBTIAQ+ and a phenomenal growth of diversity in enrolments [2]. Two notable SSP examples are Bendigo Senior Secondary College (BSSC) and Benalla P-12 College [2]. In the first case, after the SSP comes into force, there is a dramatic increase in enrolments from the LGBTIAQ+ community in BSSC. Especially for trans and gender diverse students, the enrolment rockets from 1 transgender student to approximately 20 each year. As for Benalla case, a year after SSP adoption, the number of cisgender and heterosexual students (years 7-9) supporting sexual and gender minority groups increased by 7%. In this situation, it is not surprising that these schools and LGBTIAQ+ students are considered as the biggest beneficiaries of SSP.

#### 2.2.2. *The politicians*

In an increasingly volatile political climate, the SSP has been a powerful drawcard. Even though it has been described negatively as political correctness, the SSP still plays a crucial role in gaining votes from LGBTIAQ+ students and their families for politicians (people sometimes tend to join parties on a single issue rather than on brand loyalty). Ironically, the SSP, that is supposed to support LGBTIAQ+ basic rights, was once coerced by Abbott government in 2015 to stay silent on sensitive issue of gay marriage, which further proves the SSP is being manipulated by politicians [6]. The trend of supporting LGBTIAQ+ groups to gain political advantages has become a norm across the globe. Taiwan politician Tsai Ing-wen, after she won the Taiwanese presidential election and was re-elected to a second term, had been suspected that her motive of pushing same-sex marriage was to ingratiate with the LGBTIAQ+ community for more votes [7].

### 2.3. *The Resistance*

#### 2.3.1. *The Religion*

Since the SSP is expanded nationwide, criticisms towards it have exponentially grown. The loudest dissenting voice in Australia comes from Christians. In Australia, above 70% of population express their belongingness to one of officially recognized religions and half (52.2%) of them declare their association with some faction of Christianity [8]. Some conservative Christians, who favor the view that only ‘natural’ family structure is a heterosexual marriage with the husband in authority, regard the SSP as a huge liability to traditional

heterosexual family model. In addition, they also insist that this special anti-bullying education has the potential to ‘turn’ any students into gay, lesbian, or other sexual and gender minority groups [9].

### 2.3.2. *The Parents*

The content of SSP has been slammed by parents as well. Some parents point out that the SSP attempts to ‘erase gender’ by imposing unsubstantiated concept of gender spectrum which might to some extent mislead children [4]. The introduction of SSP has resulted in a boost in the number of children identifying themselves as transgender. However, accidents of immature students who blindly seek sex reassignment surgery to fit in with ‘transgender fashion’ without adequate self-knowledge and professional advice are rarely reported [10]. Besides, misinformation from parents that the SSP educates students with excessive sexual content and cross-dressing at school has been hyped for a while and later was blatantly refuted by Safe School Coalition [2].

### 2.3.3. *Commercial Purposes*

Neo-liberalism has been seeping into Australian education system for decades. The inclusive image of school not only benefits LGBTIAQ+ students, but also serves the purpose of recruiting students, attracting funding, increasing schools’ rankings and etc. In this situation, some schools advertise themselves as LGBTIAQ-friendly or SSP-implemented for financial or social concern, but they fail to provide an LGBTIAQ-safe environment [11].

### 2.3.4. *The Government*

In October 2016, Victorian government terminated funding for the SSP, followed by New South Wales government and Tasmanian government in 2017. Instead, a more general anti-bullying plan was launched to replace the SSP [2]. Although SSP was later adopted by Education Department, this funding cut has caused a big problem for the maintenance of SSP, as lack of financial support could eventually hinder the updating of AOU and associated inclusive training for the school staff and students.

## **3. THE NECESSITY OF SAFE SCHOOL PROGRAM**

The facade of SSP is about bullying intervention, but actually, its core is aimed to create inclusive education. ‘Inclusion’ in education system is defined as promoting diversity and caring all students who confront learning or behavioral challenges in terms of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, cultural heritage, gender identity, and sexual orientation [12]. According to Australian and international research, around 10% of

people identify themselves as gay, lesbian and bisexual, around 4% identify themselves as gender diverse or transgender and around 1.7% are intersex [2]. Since these people are more likely to experience bullying (due to homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and interphobia) and wellbeing risks (self-harm, mental issues and suicide), the SSP as a form of inclusive education is supposed to become an indispensable part of Australian education system. In fact, Australia is one of the first nations to adopt the idea of inclusive education of all students. Australian Governments are committed to providing equal educational opportunities for all young Australians that enables them to fulfil their potential and achieve the highest educational outcomes [12].

On the other hand, inclusive education is also considered having economic advantage. For the cost of post-school outcomes (longer-term cost to society), it is statistically proven that inclusive education could reduce inequality gap, which is ‘good for economy’ [12]. Besides, study shows that students who have experienced bullying behavior at school, to some extent, are more likely to have lower incomes, higher crime rates and higher rates of health problems as adults [12]. In this sense, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been supporting for inclusive education both for ethical and economic concerns for decades [12].

## **4. THE APPLICABILITY OF SAFE SCHOOLS PROGRAM IN OTHER AREAS: HONG KONG**

In spite of the funding being cut off by Australia government, the influence of SSP still radiates. As one of the most successful inclusive education in Australia, it once let the whole Australia swept up in the LGBTIAQ+ movement. By September of 2016, the membership of SSCA peaked up to 545 [2]. Thus, consideration has to be given to how to promote this program in other countries. The result might be contingent on varying educational contexts, especially in regions where topics regarding sexual and gender diversity are still taboo. There is always an exception. Taking Hong Kong as an example, due to its long history of being colonized by British over centuries (156 years) and the ‘One country, Two systems’ Chinese national policy, Hong Kong, as a special administrative region (SAR) of China with both Chinese culture and western traits [13], has higher potential to operate the SSP compared with other Asian regions.

The introduction of SSP, however, could still be overwhelmingly challenging in Hong Kong. The hostility directed at the LGBTIAQ+ community is largely underestimated in Hong Kong. Based on the survey (2013), over half (53.1%) Hong Kong secondary school students identified themselves as LGBTIAQ+ among peers and had suffered from varying degrees of

bullying [14]. There are two main factors contributing to this.

The first challenge is religion. As opposed to mainland China which is the most atheistic place in the world, Hong Kong is a multi-faith place with almost half local population (45.7%) openly declaring their religious affiliations [15]. In educational sense, many secondary schools were founded by missionaries due to previous British colonial rule, leading to 52% of public schools affiliated with Christianity [15]. Including Christianity, these diverse faiths in Hong Kong are strongly heteronormative construct, which is apparently at odds with the concept 'inclusion' that the SSP delivers [9] [15], and could be explanatory for the institutionalized heterosexist prejudice towards LGBTIAQ+ groups [15]. Until today, there are no widely recognized religions in Hong Kong supporting LGBTIAQ+ rights blatantly. Nevertheless, as more and more religious dominations nowadays show positive attitude towards LGBTIAQ+ people, the introduction of SSP might be a rainbow lining in Hong Kong's cloud.

Another reason could be attributed to the thousand-year-long ingrained Confucian ideologies. Similar to religions in Hong Kong, Confucianism (also known as Ruism) promotes the idea that relationships between people are hierarchical and everyone was born with fixed roles (e.g. ruler and subject, husband and wife, father and son) [14]. In light of Confucianism, the roles of male and female in a family are structured and respected. It is built to maintain harmonious and stable relations between people, which is crucial to unite the society as a whole [15]. Confucian values, to some extent, also represents a typology of heterosexual cultural where non-heterosexual behaviors are denied, denigrated and stigmatized. For instance, '孝' (xiao, filial piety) as one of the core values could inflict enormous pressure on non-heterosexual students. Compared to LGBTIAQ+ students with western backgrounds, this places Hong Kong LGBTIAQ+ students in precarious situation, as they are reluctant to stain their families' reputations by exposing their gender orientation and sexual diverse identities [15]. Moreover, long period of self-oppression without proper counselling might intrigue students with negative behaviors such as self-sabotage, self-harm or even suicidal thoughts [15].

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article helps to develop a deeper comprehension about the benefits and shortcomings that the SSP has brought to Australia and explore the possibility of SSP operating in other regions where have low acceptance of the LGBTIAQ+ community. It firstly reviews the available information on SSP in detail. Then in the second section, the article has examined its core curriculum AOU, its supporters (students, schools and politicians) and its opposers (religions, parents,

governments and financial concerns). By emphasizing the concept of inclusion, the reasons for the SSP from economic and racial perspectives are explained in the third part. In the last section, another assumption about the applicability of SSP in Hong Kong is discussed. To sum up, all of these results more or less strengthen the necessity of inclusive education in contemporary society. The results, however, in this article are subject to at least two limitations. First, there is less data about SSP, which might lead to an incomplete analysis about it. Second, similar programs across the globe are supposed to be outlined in order to make comparisons with the SSP. It is expected that more related research can be explored in the future to promote an inclusive climate for gender diversity.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). *Australia's children*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children>
- [2] Department of Education and Training. (2021, March 18). *safe schools*. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/safeschools.aspx?Redirect=2>
- [3] LGBTIQ+ Health Australia. (2021, May 13). The 2021 update. <https://www.lgbtiqhealth.org.au/statistics>
- [4] Safe Schools Coalition Australia. (2021). All Of Us. <https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/media/9299/all-of-us-online-version-may-2016-v3.pdf>
- [5] Keddie, A. (2013). Thriving amid the performative demands of the contemporary audit culture: a matter of school context. *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(6), 750–766. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2013.768706>
- [6] Cook, H (2015, July 28). Safe Schools program ordered to stay silent on gay marriage. *The Age*. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/safe-schools-program-ordered-to-stay-silent-on-gay-marriage-20150728-gimdr.html>
- [7] Ho, M. (2019). Taiwan's road to marriage equality: politics of legalizing same-sex marriage. *The China Quarterly*, 238, 482–503. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001765>
- [8] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017, June 28). 2071.0 - *Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170919010053/http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Religi on%20Data%20Summary~25>

- [9] Jones, W.T. (2016, February 26). Safe schools coalition: what is the christian right afraid of? *The conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/safe-schools-coalition-what-is-the-christian-right-afraid-of-55296>
- [10] Devine, M (2017, April 16). An epidemic of transgender children is Safe Schools' legacy. *The Daily Telegraph*. <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/an-epidemic-of-transgender-children-is-safe-schools-legacy/news-story/085d5681f6bc3dae2357302ab2bee227>
- [11] Holloway, J & Keddie, A. (2019). 'Make money, get money': how two autonomous schools have commercialised their services. *Discourse (Abingdon, England)*, 40(6), 889–901. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2018.1451305>
- [12] Boyle, C., & Anderson, J. (2020). The justification for inclusive education in Australia. *PROSPECTS*, 49(3), 203–217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09494-x>
- [13] Tsang, S. (2003). The foundations of modern Hong Kong. In S. Tsang (Ed.), *A modern history of Hong Kong* (PP. 3-39). Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=677108>.
- [14] Tang, D. (2014). Perspectives on same-sex sexualities and self-harm amongst service providers and teachers in Hong Kong. *Sex Education*, 14(4), 444-456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2014.920249>
- [15] Kwok, D. K., Winter, S., & Yuen, M. (2012). Heterosexism in school: the counselling experience of Chinese tongzhi students in Hong Kong. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 40(5), 561-575.