

Lexi Thornton Rockliffe

[REDACTED]

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The following is a submission for the 2024 inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools, referencing the Resolution of the House of Assembly, 12th June 2024. It concerns specific, relevant anecdotes regarding a former student of [REDACTED]. The submission is written by Lexi Rockliffe acting as an individual, not on behalf of any organisational body.

There is a glossary at the end of this letter detailing some terms which may be unfamiliar.

To the Secretary

My name is Lexi Rockliffe (she/they). I am a transgender woman, and have openly identified as transgender and bisexual from the age of 13. I have been diagnosed with ASD or Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as Tourettes Syndrome. From the years 2018 to 2022, I was a student of [REDACTED], TAS. During that period, I was subject to an extreme amount of bullying and harassment, directly and indirectly, from both students and faculty on the basis of my queer identity, which caused both short-term and long-lasting mental health disturbance, including trauma which still affects my daily life.

In the first year, from the ages 12-13, I had yet to begin transitioning in any way, thus identifying as a bisexual male, though closeted – not openly disclosing any queer identity – despite my conventional outwards identity, I was still the target of bullying and harassment by my cohort thanks to my academic inclination, ASD-related behaviours (such as difficulty in picking up humour and social cues), and body type. Most of this included verbal bullying or teasing, and there were no severe incidents, though it still strained my mental health and likely damaged my social development. Later in that year, I began identifying as transgender and using an alternate preferred name (though not the one I use currently).

In the second year, from ages 13-14, I was subject to an extreme increase in incidents of harassment, bullying, and some occurrences of assault. By my student cohort, I noticed an uptick in behaviour by my male classmates which I would describe as toxically masculine,

which included quite a lot of machismo, and policing of ‘the norm’ – gender roles. As a transgender woman, I was seen as male by these people, and thus ideas of masculinity served as the basis for the way my behaviour and presentation was policed. In essence, I was repeatedly harassed, verbally and physically, for my feminine presentation and “girly” behaviours. At some point that year, I came out as transgender and consolidated my identity.

One of the more striking incidents that occurred that year was in P.E. (gym) class. In this class, I had a teacher I will refer to as Mr A. This teacher was a strong believer in compulsory attendance of P.E. class lest somebody had an obvious physical disability. I never felt comfortable in P.E. classes at all, let alone in his class. This was mainly due to two factors – first, the behaviour of the boys in the class was consistently abhorrent and unactioned. Secondly, Mr A insisted on segregating the class by sex – not gender, but sex. This means that, as a transgender woman, I was forced to not only participate in class on the ‘male team’, but also use male changing rooms (as opposed to the readily available unisex disability changing room), where a massive amount of incidents occurred, including verbal and physical harassment, as well as minor incidents of sexual harassment / assault. Luckily, after some time, a second P.E. teacher (who will be referred to as Mr. R) had taken notice of my discomfort using these facilities, and granted me access to the unisex-disability changing rooms (despite the arguments of other faculty). Despite this, the incidents that occurred between those two periods of time were scarring, as it certainly would be for anyone in my position – a woman being forced to use a facility in which men who, at that stage had no real concept of sexual harassment, were freely permitted to bully, harass, and assault, without accountability or discipline.

Another incident which particularly stood out to me occurred during a ‘dance’ unit – where students (of the ages 13 or 14) were instructed to practise mainly partner dances with each-other. Of course, this being a class run by Mr. A, the partner dances were exclusively between 1 male and 1 female, and I was made to participate as a male. I particularly disliked this unit, as I didn’t feel comfortable making any physical contact with other students, or – at that point in time – anybody. This discomfort and anxiety was not taken into account at all. No student, including myself, was able to elect not to participate in these classes. If somebody were to refuse to participate, they were threatened with write-ups, detentions, and so forth.

As a side note, my reluctance to participate in an activity involving physical contact with a peer was – looking back on things – likely trauma related.

One clear memory I have is something that happened around the start of the dance unit, where the class was being instructed on how to perform the waltz. Mr A was explaining the proper posture and footwork for this dance, as well as the correct hand positions (for the boys, one hand on the waist, and one hand on the shoulder for the girls). He decided to make a joke along the following lines.

“Now boys, remember, hand on the *waist*. I know you’re unfamiliar with women’s bodies at this point, but no higher or lower than the waist.”

Some part of this statement could have been reasonable, but it was lost somewhere between the winking and chuckling. I very vividly remember the horrid grin on the man’s face, and the giggling between the boys. Then, there were the looks of sheer disgust and discomfort on the girls’ faces – alongside myself, and a handful of boys who were a little more socially conscious.

The last incident from this class I specifically remember happened sometime during late Year 8 or early Year 9. At this point, I had become quite cynical regarding Mr A, and was fully ‘out’ as a transgender woman. I had talked to Mr A after class at some point, asking him to consider using different methods to divide the class than segregating based on sex. To my surprise, this was met with amenability, or at the least, neutrality. He agreed to *consider* it after I explained my discomfort with sex-based groupings. The next day, I showed up for P.E. as per usual, feeling the tiniest bit more secure. Once a game of some sort started, Mr A had told us to line up in a random order. My first thought was “finally, my pleas to be given a break have been answered.” He then told us that he would go down the line alternating numbers, which would be a group. It was “one” or “two.” As he went down the line, I began to notice that Mr A was not *alternating* the number, but seemingly randomly assigning them. Then, I noticed that the “one” group was entirely made up of boys, while the “two” group was entirely made up of girls. As he walked in my direction, I felt dread set in. Looking him in the eye, I gave him my best glare.

“Do you seriously think I can’t see what you’re doing?”

...

“One.”

At that point, I was so emotionally strained that I simply walked away, leaving the class. I believe I spent the next thirty minutes walking home. I was awarded with an in-school suspension.

Something which I’ve been sitting on for quite some time is what happened regarding my chosen name. Often, trans people will choose an alternate name to use when socially transitioning. At this point, their old name becomes their ‘deadname.’ Using somebody’s deadname can be damaging to their mental health, and it’s often a source of trauma. This was true for myself as well. Of course, this being a Catholic school, my deadname was used by a large portion of people even up until the point I left the school, including not only my peers but faculty. However, when I first came out, I confided in a few teachers, who would use my preferred name. Eventually, word of this reached the principal at the time. A few days later, I was informed by one of my teachers that the principal had sent an email to every one of my teachers, telling them they cannot use my preferred name, despite my ask simply being for my preferred name to be used as a *preferred* name, something that every other student had the opportunity to do if they preferred using a nickname, middle name, et cetera.

In Year 9, my mental health was at an all time low. I had finally snapped, and made the step to walk into the on-campus uniform shop and buy the school dress. I had gone out of my way to check their uniform policy, and had found no clause on who can wear which uniform. The day after, I walked into school in the school dress. I was met *immediately* with jeers and verbal harassment from some other students (including the senior students, some of which were 18 years old), for which there was no intervention by the faculty. Upon walking into class, I participated for about fifteen minutes before I was pulled out and sent to the principal’s office. Once there, my conversation with the principal followed these lines;

“I can see that you’re making a political statement, but-”

“There’s no political statement here. I’m just wearing the school uniform.”

“You know what I mean. Listen, I’m willing to meet you halfway, you can’t wear the girl’s uniform, but I’ll give you special dispensation to use the (unisex) sports uniform. I also can’t use your preferred name, but I can call you by a more neutral nickname.”

“Then you can call me *Lex*. That’s neutral.”

“I can’t do that. The walls have ears.”

After the unproductive conversation, we came to the agreement that he would allow me to wear the sports uniform, and he would call me by my surname – to my chagrin. He also tried to specify that I wear the *male cut* of the sports uniform, which went something like;

“You can wear the sports uniform, but can you wear the male cut?”

“(laughing) no.”

I was sent home afterwards due to refusing to change into a loaned uniform for the rest of the day.

The principal also referred me to a “therapist” who supposedly specialised in treating gender dysphoria. I had a singular over-the-phone appointment with this person. Afterwards, I was informed that in a blatant act of breaching patient confidentiality, this “therapist” had written a report on me and sent it to the school principal. The report claimed that I did not have ASD (something which has been diagnosed by several professionals when I was a young child), nor was I transgender. Instead, I supposedly had abandonment issues surrounding a parent. After hearing this, I googled the “therapist”’s name, where I found that this person was a prominent advocate supporting conversion therapy practices, and was vehemently transphobic. After some consideration, myself and my family decided not to open a lawsuit, considering the catholic church would likely spend more money in protecting their assets than we could ever make.

For the record, conversion therapy is considered by the U.N. to be torture, on a similar level to sleep deprivation, starvation, solitary confinement, and other practices we now consider to be barbaric.

One of the most striking examples of physical abuse I had experienced at [REDACTED] occurred late in Year 9. Around that time, I had a bully I will refer to as B, with whom I shared several classes with. This person would repeatedly harass me in a targeted, intentional manner. Over the space of about a week, B became increasingly physical, attempting to goad me into “throwing the first punch” so that he could attack me with impunity. This was certainly motivated by my gender identity, seeing as most of B’s harassment consisted of screaming transphobic slurs in my face. Despite my complaints, nothing was actioned.

Then, things reached a boiling point. I was sitting around the front of a religious studies class minding my own business, which – this being a religious studies class – meant secretly scrolling on my phone, when B stood up and started to leave to use the toilet. After asking permission from the teacher, he walked past me. I felt a shock on my face, and my vision faltered. The next thing I saw was B sprinting down the hall, alongside the feeling of blood trickling down my now broken nose. I turned to the teacher and yelled,

“Did you not see that? He punched me in the ***** face!”

To which she replied,

“What? I thought he just slapped you?”

As if that was any better.

B was awarded with a 2 day suspension for assaulting me in broad daylight on the basis of my identity

I was also awarded with a 2 day suspension, for being ‘involved in a fight’.

B was placed back into my classes immediately afterwards.

Afterword

Writing this submission was difficult for me. I apologise if my tone was overly casual. After leaving [REDACTED], I enrolled in [REDACTED], where despite some casual bullying, I was generally – to my surprise – supported by most if not all of the faculty. My mental health has been stabilising over the past few years, but I still have trauma that affects my life today. With the support of my friends, family, and professionals, I've been able to make it years into a successful transition, and I can finally see my whole life ahead of me.

Ideally, I would like to see private schooling, especially religious schooling, entirely abolished, though I understand that that is unrealistic.

Less ideally, I believe that much stronger supervision and much higher standards must be implemented in both public and private schools. Only providing support for those affected by harassment and bullying is not adequate, especially for diverse people who are especially heavily targeted by vindictive results of the echo chamber that bigoted people are allowed to fester in.

Glossary

Transgender (trans) – an adjective describing somebody whose gender identity doesn't align with their physical sex.

Deadname – a name formerly used by a (most often transgender) person.

Bisexual – a sexual orientation defined by feeling attraction to more than one gender.

Coming out – revealing one's sexuality, romantic orientation, or gender identity to others.

(gender) Dysphoria – emotional distress caused by recognising one's own physical attributes i.e. behaviours and appearance which don't align with one's gender identity.