

IN CAMERA (APPROVED FOR PUBLICATION) PUBLIC

**THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE A
MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART, ON
WEDNESDAY, 4 SEPTEMBER 2024**

INQUIRY INTO DISCRIMINATION AND BULLYING IN TASMANIAN SCHOOLS

The in camera hearing commenced at 10.38 a.m.

CHAIR - Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms McKILLOP - Yes please. I do not have the expertise as Mark and Duncan do, because I am a BCA member, so I cannot really talk to the specific policies and the statistics. All I can really talk about is my experience as a person with vision impairment, but I think I would like to make clear, for lack of a better word, that people who are blind and visually impaired, that's not the whole disability they might have. I am speaking to you today as a BCA member, but also have a physical impairment and mental health which may have been confounded by bullying.

As you know, bullying and discrimination is not just disability, but I feel like every intersection should be heard and listened to independently in as much time as you are giving me today.

CHAIR - Thank you very much we appreciate you coming in and know that it takes courage to do this in this environment and coming to this place. It can be a bit intimidating. That's what we want to hear. People's personal experience and anything you can convey to us that will make life better for you and we can recommend to the parliament to change. Is there any particular experience you want to share with us or any recommendations for this committee?

Ms McKILLOP - Great question. This might open to further questions. Unlike Mark and Duncan, I lost my vision in grade 6. That was quite sudden. You could say bullying was marked by my loss of vision with the social models on inclusion and everything at the time. We've changed a lot more now. I can't report on what happens now and if my experience may or may not have been different. I think the only thing that would probably be different is the representation. I was the only one with a visible impairment in my school. The stigma around invisible disabilities is another thing, but you're more of a target if you look different, if you sound different, if you're from somewhere else.

You can bring me back, but I think that bullying is not just words. Bullying is actions. I'll give you one personal experience connected to what Mark said about blind cricket. I play blind cricket now, but because I had a vision impairment and was slow to react, I actually got hit with tennis balls quite purposefully and intensely. Now, I do not play any ball sports. If I see a ball, I walk the other way. But for some reason, I found that blind cricket was safe enough. I felt included enough. I think it might be the burden and the psychological cost of the bullying and the event. I feel like inclusion and acceptance and belonging buffer that. That might be the change we need.

IN CAMERA (APPROVED FOR PUBLICATION) PUBLIC

We were talking about systemic attitude change and how - I can't really remember - social support is a great buffer for everything. Informal and formal systems, so peers, teachers, support staff. I think another thing that plays into my story and I think it is last thing I want to say at this second, is that I did not have any friends growing up through most of my schooling. That isolated me further. I think that made me more a vulnerable target. If you had that group who are saying, 'Hey this isn't right,' the bullying may continue, but at least you've got someone to say you're okay, yes.

CHAIR - Having a support network around you or people that would stand up for you would have made things better for you, in your experience?

Ms McKILLOP - I think so, yeah.

Ms JOHNSTON - Nicole, obviously, the experience you just talked about there with the balls has had a profound impact on you. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of a culture of a school in terms of providing that supportive, inclusive environment? Would that have made a difference for you personally in that time of your life, grade 6 and onwards, if the school community and the culture of the school and leadership had provided that supportive and inclusive environment?

Ms McKILLOP - Yes, definitely. It is definitely about awareness and attitude change. Also, teachers and the curriculum and the whole system do not really have the resources. They're basically doing the best they can with the resources they have but, to be honest, for a developing child, some of that, if they're not getting their supports, they feel like they're kind of lacking later in life, if that makes any sense. I think when talking about bullying and school culture, it comes back to the early years of social and emotional development. I know I'm not really answering your question clearly because I do not know. But one of the reasons why I just previously got my Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, that was the exact question I wanted to ask and answer. It's a complex, multifaceted question.

Yes, it's in school as well as out of school. In a different role I have written an extensive submission, but that's not how I'm speaking right now, so those can be my terms because that's all my personal experience and what I would have benefited from. I suppose another thing is, yes, I can't - now I'm not doing uni - I would like to do some more reflection to ask: how would the culture improve and change and would be different and how that would benefit people.

Mr SHELTON - Thank you very much for your insight. My question is really only about the size of the school you went to and whether you believe larger schools versus smaller schools. To give you an insight, I have a little grandson with Down syndrome and he went to Bracknell Primary School and, of course, going through primary school, all the kids knew him. Him and his twin brother have just gone into high school and, as a grandparent, I am really concerned about what his future is and how he will associate at school. Frankly, it couldn't have been better, the kids around him and that sort of thing. As you said, if you have a group around you, you are supported.

But in your situation, was it a larger school or a smaller school? Larger ones might have more resources, but smaller ones have more contact, if you like. Any views on that?

IN CAMERA (APPROVED FOR PUBLICATION) PUBLIC

Ms McKILLOP - That's a really good question. I might, if I may, allude to the schools so then you can get the specific size and the demographic, if that's okay. First, because I lived in Margate, so kind of rural, regional, Margate Primary School. After my experience there, I actually drove the collective decision with myself and my parents to attend Mt Carmel, an all-girls school, because I believed at that time that, basically, if you take away the boys, you take away the bullies, that sort of thing. But that wasn't correct. Then I went to Guilford, and that's when Guilford was very good. UTAS was pretty much the same. Maybe bigger schools with more resources.

Mr WILLIE - Just on that, do you think that, perhaps, as kids around you are developing, their understanding is getting better and then more understanding of how their actions impact other people, it becomes more inclusive as you progress? It sounds like that's what happened to you in college and then into university.

Ms McKILLOP - Yes.

Mr WILLIE - Maybe there's more work to be done in the early years with kids in terms of their own education, anti-bullying policies and all those sorts of things?

Ms McKILLOP - Perhaps. But I'm 28 now. Primary school was a long time ago, so I can't really allude to what's happening right now. But if you're talking about policy standpoints, then I would probably agree with anti-bullying policy. But I feel that policies and attitude change go hand in hand. What I've personally learnt with, like I said, not knowing legislation and statistics, is that policies will only go so far if you don't have the attitudinal change. Both need to come hand in hand and that needs to start with an open dialogue. Specific policies, and if you're talking about anti-bullying, that starts an open dialogue. Listening and hearing stories of people with disabilities and other minority groups and just keeping that education and social change.

Instead of cracking down, I reckon we should raise everyone up, really. That comes with the education and it also gives resources and voice to everyone involved - not just who's being bullied, but who's being labelled as a bully. I think that's another thing, if I can keep going on this tangent. Labels are a big thing as well. With the policies and everything, we need to also be careful what labels we give to a child and how they grow up with those labels, because once labels are attached, they don't fall off very easily. Coming to that collective community, whole-education system, instead of a single-school, even a single-child kind of thing.

CHAIR - Thank you very much. Thanks again for coming in and speaking to us, it's been lovely to meet you.

Ms McKILLOP - Lovely to meet you too.

CHAIR - We do have to conclude now, unfortunately, as I think many of us could sit here and speak with you for most of the day. Thank you very much.

Ms McKILLOP - You're welcome.

IN CAMERA (APPROVED FOR PUBLICATION) PUBLIC

CHAIR - We're hopeful that out of this inquiry we are able to make some really strong recommendations, given the evidence you've provided on how we can make things better. Thank you and good luck with all your endeavours and your study.

I wanted to say before you leave this hearing is being covered by parliamentary privilege, which allows individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in a place outside of parliament. That's not accorded to you if statements that are made defamatory or repeated or referred to by you outside the parliamentary proceedings. What you've said here to us today is protected by those privileges, but once you leave the table you'll need to be aware that doesn't extend to outside the building, or comments you might make to the media or anyone else. I wanted to make sure you had a good understanding of that.

Ms McKILLOP - I appreciate that, yes.

CHAIR - Good on you, Nicole. Thank you. Have a great day.

Ms McKILLOP - Thank you. I really appreciate you hearing me.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you for coming in.

The witness withdrew.

The in camera hearing ended at 10.57 a.m.