

Muria Roberts



Friday, 30th August 2024

To: The Standing Committee on Government Administration Committee A
Parliament House
Hobart TAS 7000

Dear Members of the Committee,

Re: Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools

I am writing to contribute a teacher's perspective to your inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools.

Throughout my three-decade-long career as a teacher—first in Queensland, then in the UK, and for eleven years at international schools in Indonesia before moving to Tasmania in mid-2017 - I have always conscientiously worked to ensure that both students engaging in bullying behaviours, and those targeted, were compassionately guided and protected under my care. However, when I became a target of bullying myself - specifically a form of bullying called 'mobbing' - while employed at the Department of Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) in Tasmania, I was completely unprepared for it.

Mobbing is a form of workplace bullying where an individual is targeted by a group of colleagues through behaviours like exclusion, spreading rumours, undermining work, or constant criticism. The aim is to isolate, discredit, or force the individual out of the workplace. Mobbing can lead to severe emotional and psychological distress for the victim.

Before my own experience, I would not have fully understood the trauma this behaviour can cause, but it has been an awful experience, poorly handled by DECYP. As a result, even now, in August 2024, I am still fighting to clear the false allegations made against me at the climax of the mobbing campaign to drive me out. After seeking management support regarding the behaviour of two teaching assistants and a teaching colleague, I was subjected to a meeting where I faced a retaliatory attack, and my original concerns were forgotten. I left the school in distress, after which I was manoeuvred by DECYP HR into resigning. I was not provided with support and other staff were told not to communicate with me. An investigation has been denied to me, and statements produced by members of the DECYP HR team have deliberately misrepresented evidence and included factually incorrect information intended to influence the decision-maker.

While I am gradually navigating my way through this situation, it has been confusing and extremely damaging to my life and the life of my daughter.

Mobbing has many parallels with current societal challenges around the spreading of misinformation and the willingness of some members of society to believe and then perpetuate misinformation uncritically. It is similar to cancel culture. It involves bullies misusing processes designed to provide protection by using allegations as weapons to destroy careers and reputations.

My experience as a teacher mobbed within DECYP has revealed several key areas where systemic failures have resulted in significant harm to me, and I know to others in similar situations. The inquiry should make an effort to seek the voices of teachers who are no longer working within DECYP to access their experiences, rather than relying only on voices within DECYP. Many teachers may feel constrained to speak. Also, those who have been hurt may have received payouts and been forced to sign non-disclosure agreements. Without their input a clear picture of the situation may not be possible.

I hope my insights will assist the committee in addressing these critical issues.

(a) Direct and Indirect Discrimination, Prohibited Conduct, Unequal and Disadvantageous Treatment, Bullying, and Harassment in Tasmanian Schools

During my tenure with DECYP, I experienced workplace mobbing. The department's failure to address this behaviour (choosing instead to manoeuvre me into resignation and to support unfounded allegations) highlights systemic issues that allow such harmful conduct to persist unchecked within the school system.

(b) Measures Necessary to Prevent and Remedy Discrimination and Bullying

The inadequacy of measures to prevent and address workplace mobbing and similar behaviours within DECYP indicates a significant gap in the department's policies and practices. Despite clear indications that I was struggling and management's awareness of that, no professional development was provided on workplace bullying or mobbing that would have given me the confidence to clearly label what I was experiencing. To remedy this, I recommend the implementation of stronger safeguards against bullying - not just for students, but for teachers as well - including education on mobbing as a specific type of workplace bullying, clearer reporting mechanisms, enhanced support systems for affected staff, and thorough, **independent and transparent** investigations into all allegations of bullying and discrimination, or teachers who are identified as at risk, even if they have not yet spoken up. In my case, the fact that I was displaying meme posters in my classroom office stating that it was more humane to speak directly to a person than behind their back, was a red flag to management that there was a problem.

(c) Obligations and Duties Under the Anti-Discrimination Act 1998 and Other Relevant Statutes and Policies

DECYP has clear obligations under the Anti-Discrimination Act 1998 to provide a safe and equitable workplace for all employees. However, my experience suggests that the department may not be fully meeting these obligations. There is a pressing need for a more robust framework to ensure that all employees are protected from discrimination and that any breaches are dealt with transparently and effectively. Discrimination can take many different forms. I may have been mobbed because I was simply a new person, married to an Indonesian man, conscientious with my work, or applying different methods of teaching from my many years working overseas in progressive international education.

The fact that DECYP HR staff were able to break their own code of conduct without accountability is also a matter of concern. I will be taking my case to the Ombudsman if I cannot resolve it soon with DECYP. The role of the Integrity Commission in holding DECYP to account should also be clarified.

(d) Efforts Towards Meeting Obligations and Necessary Reforms

While there may be existing efforts to address discrimination and bullying, my experience indicates that these efforts are insufficient. I recommend a thorough review of current policies, the introduction of mandatory training for all staff on recognising and addressing bullying in all its forms - including workplace bullying and discrimination for adult staff - and the establishment of an **independent body**, rather than HR staff, to oversee complaints and investigations to ensure greater accountability.

(e) Legislative or Policy Reforms Required

To better protect both students and staff, there is a need for legislative reform that specifically addresses workplace mobbing and other forms of systemic bullying. This could include clearer definitions of such behaviours in relevant statutes and stronger penalties for those found to be engaging in or enabling such conduct, especially the making of unfounded false allegations.

(f) Impact on Staff Recruitment, Retention, Workplace Safety, and Career Development

The systemic issues I have outlined can have a detrimental impact on staff recruitment and retention, as well as on workplace safety and career development. Educators who experience bullying or discrimination are likely to leave the profession, resulting in a loss of experienced and dedicated teachers. Furthermore, the fear of retaliation or lack of support can discourage staff from reporting issues, perpetuating a harmful cycle within the education system.

Conclusion

I urge the committee to consider these points as part of its inquiry into discrimination and bullying in Tasmanian schools. Addressing workplace bullying and mobbing within DECYP is crucial to creating a safer, more supportive environment for all educators, which will, in turn, benefit students and the broader education system.

Please note that while I have refrained from providing extensive personal details in this submission, I would be more than willing to share the specifics of my experience should the Inquiry request them. I believe my experience provides important insights into the systemic problems that need to be addressed.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Muria Roberts