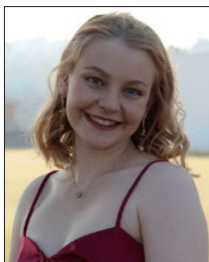


# Advocating for a More Inclusive Environment for LGBTQ+ Learners in Schools

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*Jessica Goulding is an undergraduate student in her final year of occupational therapy at the University of Pretoria. Her passion for inclusive education and LGBTQ+ health inspired this work and continues to drive her interest in the role of occupational therapists in non-traditional settings.*

## Why was the idea necessary? (Problem)

The use of language to refer to the LGBTQ+ community is evolving, with LGBT and LGBTQ+ being the most widely accepted acronyms. LGBTQ+ includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and other gender and sexual identities. Research indicates that LGBTQ+ learners often face significant challenges in educational environments, including verbal and physical abuse, unwelcoming atmospheres and social exclusion compared with their heterosexual peers.<sup>[1]</sup> These negative experiences can contribute towards the development of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and substance use disorders,<sup>[2]</sup> as well as chronic physical health conditions and disabilities.<sup>[2]</sup> Occupational therapists assist clients with health-related conditions that limit participation in activities of daily living, recreation, work and education. Occupational therapists advocate for and assist in inclusive education and could play a crucial role in schools by promoting health and preventing mental and physical health issues in LGBTQ+ students, potentially reducing future occupational therapy service needs.

## What was tried? (Solution)

I developed an evidence-based advocacy strategy using four information sources: personal lived experiences, observations, ethical decision-making guidelines from Willard and Spackman's Occupational Therapy<sup>[3]</sup> and relevant literature. I also reflected on my personal experiences and observations from school, which provided real-world examples of the challenges that LGBTQ+ learners face. A narrative literature review of journal articles, books and other credible sources was conducted to gather scientific information on the experiences of LGBTQ+ learners. Finally, the ethical decision-making guidelines and the literature review were used to structure the subsequent advocacy plan.

## What were the lessons learnt? (Outcomes)

I identified two primary recommendations for occupational therapists to advocate for to enhance LGBTQ+ inclusivity in schools: teacher-focused interventions and student wellness programmes. By advocating for schools

to implement these initiatives, occupational therapists will contribute to health promotion and limit the development of health-related conditions of LGBTQ+ learners.

**Teacher-focused interventions:** Teachers often contribute to the negative experiences of LGBTQ+ learners.<sup>[1]</sup> Therefore, educating teachers on LGBTQ+ issues is critical for them to set positive examples and create a more inclusive environment, making it easier for LGBTQ+ students to seek support. Topics such as understanding LGBTQ+ identities and language, the specific challenges these students face, recognising LGBTQ+ rights as human rights and creating inclusive classroom environments are suitable topics for teacher education. Occupational therapists can assist in delivering this information, as it falls within the scope of sensitisation and awareness training to create inclusive environments.

**Student wellness programmes:** A student mental health programme, with a focus on LGBTQ+ issues, led by staff and student leaders would support LGBTQ+ students. The staff implementing the programme should have LGBTQ+ sensitivity training. However, this programme should also be accessible to all students in primary and high schools. Occupational therapists are essential members of this collaborative team approach and could provide additional mental health support and interventions for students in need. Additionally, the formation of student-led, school-based LGBTQ+ clubs would offer safe, judgment-free spaces for discussing issues, promoting inclusivity and fostering alliances.

Advocating for teacher-focused interventions and comprehensive student wellness programmes can create more inclusive and supportive school environments for LGBTQ+ learners. Occupational therapists, especially those in school settings, should champion these initiatives to improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ students, fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

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