



# | Staff Supporting Rainbow Diversity Groups

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Inside  UT

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## Section 2. Setting up a group

*Start it! It's really important for rainbow kids to have a safe space at school, especially since they might not be afforded that at home. However, bear in mind that you and the kids might be harassed a little, so make sure that there are some safeguards in place (e.g., location).* – Kate, student

This section discusses how you can partner with students to create groups that build from their strengths, interests, and needs.

### Feel the fear and do it anyway!

Setting up a new rainbow diversity group can be an exciting project, and it can sometimes create significant change in a school environment over the course of one year. But this doesn't mean that it's always easy. InsideOUT is committed to supporting schools that are just starting this journey and helping them establish their priorities. We encourage you to reach out and ask for advice.

Working out how to make a QSA succeed in a particular school culture benefits from brainstorming and listening to diverse perspectives. That might involve conducting a survey, as described in the section on identifying and responding to issues (see pages 26-28 and page 47). Where appropriate, we can help you to anonymise the information gained from these conversations and use it to guide the development of your school's QSA. In some instances, people from well-established groups at other schools can help by sharing what has worked for them.

Positive working relationships and ongoing conversations between staff and students are essential for the group to thrive in the particular context of your school. The resource offers suggestions on how to set up the group so that it meets everyone's needs and reflects who they are and what they bring. (See especially the section on inclusion, pages 33-40).

Challenges can arise from external pressures and resistance and the need to navigate the internal dynamics of the school environment. A new QSA can sometimes make homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic ideas more visible. Some people may question why a QSA is even needed and worry about the school's reputation. This resource deals with some of those challenges (see pages 22-23).

Students appreciate teachers and other staff members who are willing to support the development of the QSA and work with them to navigate the range of issues they face. In InsideOUT's experience, these negative reactions generally die down after a while and, over time, rainbow students' experiences at school improve. As the group gains confidence, students often support each other and respond in the moment to negativity, thus reducing its impact.





## Be yourself

*[A challenge has been] the stereotypes/prejudice others have towards the rainbow community. To respond, just keep being you. No one should feel discriminated against and 'less than' in the work space. Just existing and being queer is enough.* – Kevin, teacher, co-ed school

*My advice to teachers? To just be yourself, and do what you can to help others feel safe and comfortable in their own skin.* – Briana, Pākehā

If you identify as a member of the rainbow community, you may feel an affinity with the students in a QSA and may even be prepared to act as a role model by actively supporting the group. But you may also feel that supporting a rainbow diversity group is too 'outing' and makes you feel vulnerable. That is understandable – your journey is your own. You may wish to provide behind-the-scenes support and advice to another staff member doing this mahi.

If you identify as straight and cisgender, you may feel unsure whether you should be the one supporting a QSA group. Be assured that regardless of your identity, students will value any support and assistance you can provide to help them create a safe space. This may mean educating yourself further on rainbow identities.

A great place to start learning is to draw on the expertise of the young people in the group. You might ask for recommendations of shows with rainbow characters, or young adult literature with rainbow themes. This can help to provide staff and students with a shared cultural context.

The group context should be a place where everybody enjoys getting to know each other and growing warm relationships. Within obvious professional limits, you should feel comfortable to share who you are and the people in your life. If you are non-rainbow and have an opposite-gender partner, don't feel that you can't talk about them. Many rainbow students will value the opportunity to share and talk about relationships in an overtly safe space.

We have found that many teachers have a personal reason for wanting to support a group like this. This may be their own experience of schooling as a rainbow person or their affinity with a rainbow whānau member or friend. Sharing your story with the students is a great way of building trusting relationships. It helps them understand and connect with why you care.

Regardless of your personal gender or sexual orientation, we hope you enjoy your experience of supporting a rainbow diversity group.

## Initiate partnerships

*[The best thing is] seeing tentative young people grow into people who are confident about who they are.* – Guidance counsellor, co-ed school

*Just give it a go; it's better than nothing happening. You will learn as you go. Find an ally in student support or senior management and use them for guidance. Find some great queer students and support them to start the QSA. Some will need lots of support and encouragement and some will need slowing down. Knowing them and your school is key, there isn't one-size-fits-all...*

– Claire, teacher, co-ed school

The process of setting up a rainbow diversity group in any school needs to be done in careful consultation with students. Many schools will already be well aware of potential risks and will be able to work with teachers to develop safety measures. Some schools have started this process slowly, and with a high degree of privacy. Other schools have started publicly and with a large group, which can have a rapid impact on the overall culture of acceptance in the school.

InsideOUT recommends meeting with key staff and students to decide on the group's approach before initiating the group. You may be aware of colleagues who are likely to be supportive and know how to navigate school culture and rules, while students might have ideas about what would be the safest approach, and who would be the right people to speak publicly on behalf of the group.

*[The best thing is] seeing tentative young people grow into people who are confident about who they are.* – Guidance counsellor, co-ed school

## Create a group purpose

When starting a QSA, we recommend spending some time discussing the group's purpose. If you've spent time on identifying needs and opportunities, this information can help inform this discussion.

Bear in mind that each person will have a different idea of why they want the school to have a rainbow group, although not all students will have articulated this. Also, thoughts and ideas can evolve – part of the beauty of a well-functioning rainbow diversity group is that this is encouraged!

One way to begin the discussion is by thinking about the three functions discussed in the previous section: social, support, and action (page 9). Do they speak to the students? What might each entail? How important are these functions to students, relative to each other? Asking the young people to discuss the importance of each function can provide the group with guidance on how to balance the different kinds of activities they choose to undertake.

The group might decide that the best way to address the priorities and interests of all students is to have alternate meetings or two different group meetings. One might be a social space and the other an activism space. It's still worth identifying the shared purpose that connects these priorities and unites the group.

## Make a group kawa

As well as clarifying the group's purpose, it is also useful to discuss a set of group rules or a group kawa. This is a shared understanding of how things will run, and how students will treat each other. You may find it helpful to brainstorm this together with the group. See Section 5 of this resource for some ideas about how to go about this.

Members of the group may have imaginative ways of making the group's kawa visible and present. For example, they could create a kākāhu (cloak) representing the safe place created by the group, with feathers representing its values.

## Consider possible activities

Here are some activities that a group can do together. Have a think about them with the students. How might they align with the group's purpose? What are some other ideas that appeal to them? How will they choose what to do?

- Play icebreaker games.
- Learn to knit or crochet, make squares to put together into a blanket to decorate the space.
- Make rainbow pride crafts (for example, pins, badges, tote bags).
- Design a group logo or make a group t-shirt. T-shirts could be sold to older rainbow people who used to go to your school as a fundraiser. They will be excited to see there is a QSA at their old school.
- Ask InsideOUT to send a speaker on a topic that is of interest to the QSA.
- Ask a rainbow person from your community to come in and talk about their experiences.
- Watch relevant YouTube videos, television shows, or movies together.
- Make lists of your favourite rainbow media and write reviews.
- Play board or card games.
- Learn about rainbow history and literature.
- Make posters advertising your group, or posters that challenge bullying and celebrate the rainbow community.
- Plan events for Schools Pride Week.<sup>10</sup>
- Organise a meet-up with another school's QSA.
- Have a shared lunch.
- Make a plan together to support your friends through school events and activities that some rainbow people might find challenging (for example, swimming or athletics day).
- Make a directory of safe places and recommendations for younger rainbow people (for example, recommended doctors, counselling services, hairdressers, and clothes shops).
- Engage in political processes. This could include:
  - researching parties' policies about issues affecting the rainbow community
  - attending consultations
  - writing to the local council if there are services that do not suit rainbow people
  - writing submissions to parliamentary select committees that are considering issues relevant to rainbow young people.
- Have a name party to celebrate someone in your QSA deciding on their new name.
- Discuss issues in the school such as bullying and develop a plan of action.
- Workshop what the Te Tiriti o Waitangi means for how the group is run and what it should be promoting.
- Participate in school self-review and contribute to the development of inclusive policies and procedures and/or a more responsive local curriculum.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://pride.school.nz>

## Honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi

QSA groups draw on Te Tiriti o Waitangi in a variety of ways: to frame themselves as part of the broader narrative of justice in Aotearoa New Zealand; to understand the need to specifically include takatāpui people and identities; and as inspiration for creating their own group agreements. The creativity with which students can engage in this will depend in part on how much Te Tiriti o Waitangi is discussed in your school.

**Some specific ideas include for engaging with Te Tiriti o Waitangi include:**

- Discuss Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a group, potentially with help from iwi, hapū, or other experts in your rohe.
- Learn about the impact of colonisation on takatāpui identities.
- Learn about the history of activism, pushing for greater recognition for Te Tiriti o Waitangi. How can those stories guide rainbow people to be strong and work for change over time?
- Consider what the Te Tiriti o Waitangi covers, and how that might inspire the group's kawa or agreement.

InsideOUT periodically organises Te Tiriti o Waitangi workshops for our staff and volunteers. If your group's leaders are interested in attending a workshop, or being referred to a public one, please get in touch.



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