Australia's teenagers negotiating religion, sexuality and diversity

Australia's Generation Z Study

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The AGZ study:

Contemporary teenagers (members of the so-called 'Generation Z') are exposed to diversity in ways that are unprecedented, through social media, school and peers.
The Worldviews of Australia's Generation Z study (AGZ Study) provides a powerful insight into how teenagers are making sense of the world around them. Funded by the Australian Research Council, it explores teenagers' experiences and understandings of religious, spiritual, gender and sexual diversity and uses these findings to inform educational policy making.

The AGZ Study comprises **11 focus groups in three states with students in Years 9 and 10 (ages 15-16)**, a **nationally representative telephone survey of 1200 people aged 13-18**, and **30 in-depth, follow-up interviews** with survey participants.

The research directors are Professor Mary Lou Rasmussen (the Australian National University), Professor Andrew Singleton and Associate Professor Anna Halafoff (Deakin University) and Professor Gary Bouma (Monash University).

http://sociology.cass.anu.edu.au/research/projects/australia-s-gen-zs
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This project is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC): DP160102367. Australian Young People's Perspectives on Religions and Non-religious Worldviews. CIs: A/Prof Mary Louise Rasmussen (ANU) A/Prof Andrew Singleton (Deakin), Dr Anna Halafoff (Deakin), Prof Gary Bouma (Monash)

How to cite this document: Singleton, A, Rasmussen, M.L, Halafoff, A. & Bouma, G.D. The AGZ Study: Project report. ANU, Deakin and Monash Universities, 2019.

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Overview
A snapshot of Australia's teens

52% The majority of Australia's teens (52%) do not identify with a religion

91% agree with the statement: 'Having people of many different faiths makes Australia a better place to live'

74% Three quarters (74%) of Australia's teens have a positive attitude towards Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism

82% of teens support marriage equality

50% Half of Australia's teens (50%) think that people with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others

86% An overwhelming majority (86%) of teens support secondary school students' right to learn about LGBTQI people as part of their schooling

While participating in the life of a religious group is 'old-school' for most teens, belief in God (or something) isn't dead.

04 The AGZ Study

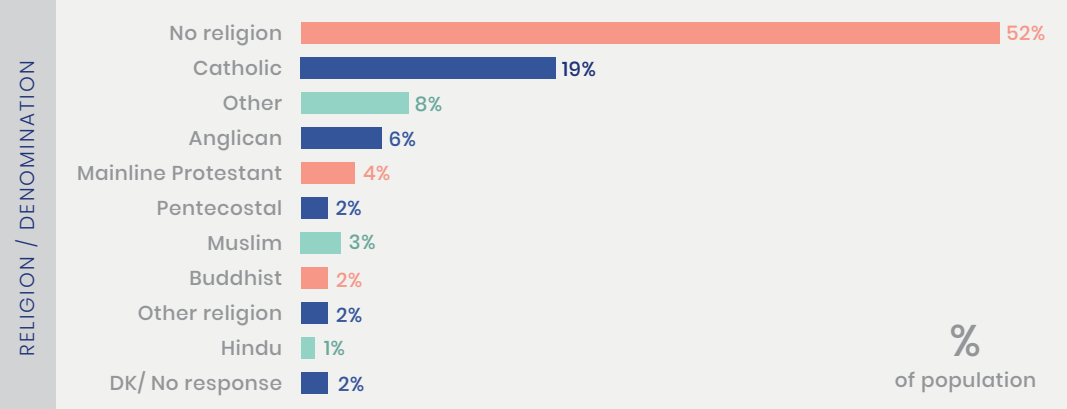
This report provides a basic snapshot of the project's findings. Keep an eye on the website for further publications. This report covers these topics in brief: teens, religion and spirituality; attitudes to religious diversity; experiences of religious education and attitudes towards education about sexuality and gender.

Teens, religion & spirituality

Australia's religious landscape has changed considerably in the past few decades. A shrinking proportion of the population identify as Christian and an increasing proportion don't identify with any religion. The Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim and Hindu communities have all grown much bigger.

Younger Australians, teenagers especially, are at the forefront of this change: for the most part, they do not believe or belong in the same ways as members of older generations. **The AGZ survey found that the majority of teenagers do not identify with a religion.**

This is a more accurate measure than the Australian census, because teens themselves got to have a say about how they identify, rather than having a parent or guardian filling out the census on behalf of the teen.



Note: May not add to 100% due to rounding.
Source: AGZ survey 2017

Figure 1. Australians aged 13-18: Religious Identification (% of teens)

The single largest group – more than half of Gen Z teens – have no religious identity (52%). Being a 'religious none' does not mean a person has no faith or spirituality: they simply do not see themselves as belonging to a religious tradition or organisation. Reflecting Australia's religious diversity, the survey respondents also included Muslims (3%), Buddhists (2%), Hindus (1%).

Among Christians (38% of the population of teens), the single largest Christian denomination are Catholics (19% of the total population), followed by Anglicans (6% of total) and other mainline Protestants (4% of the total population), which includes Baptists, Lutherans and Pentecostals, among others.

In terms of attendance at services of worship, 58% of teens never attend, and just 12% attend weekly or more often. Pentecostals, Muslims, conservative Protestants and other kinds of evangelical Christians are the groups mostly likely to attend with any kind of regularity.

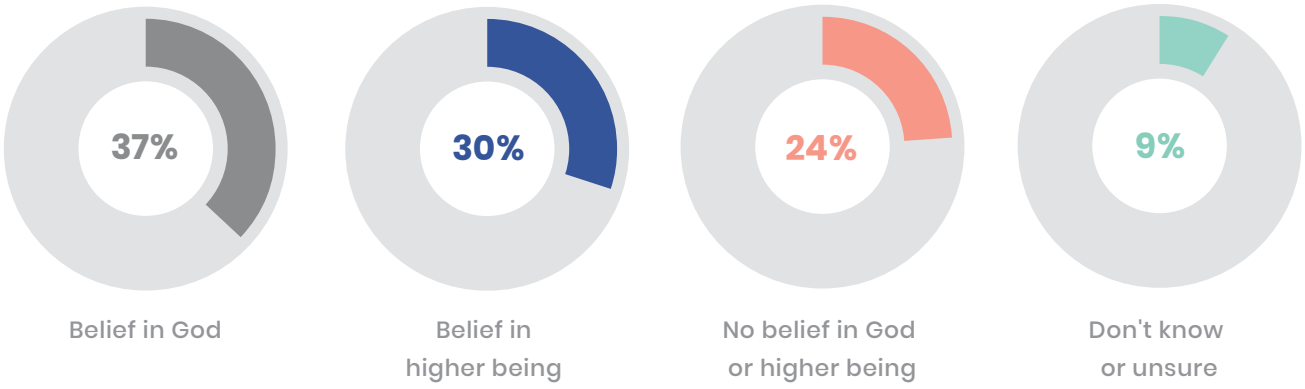


Figure 2. Australians aged 13-18: Belief in God/A Higher Power (% of teens)

While participating in the life of a religious group is 'old-school' for most teens, belief in God (or something) isn't dead.

Figure 2 shows that about a quarter of Gen Z teens have no belief in God or a higher being (24%); slightly more than a third (37%) believe in God; and just less than a third believe in a higher being or life force instead of God (30%). A small proportion are not sure (9%).

We see further evidence of this openness when it comes to spiritual, paranormal and supernatural belief among teens.

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In sum, only about a quarter of Australia's teens have no belief at all in a transcendent being or God; the rest accept some kind of belief or another.

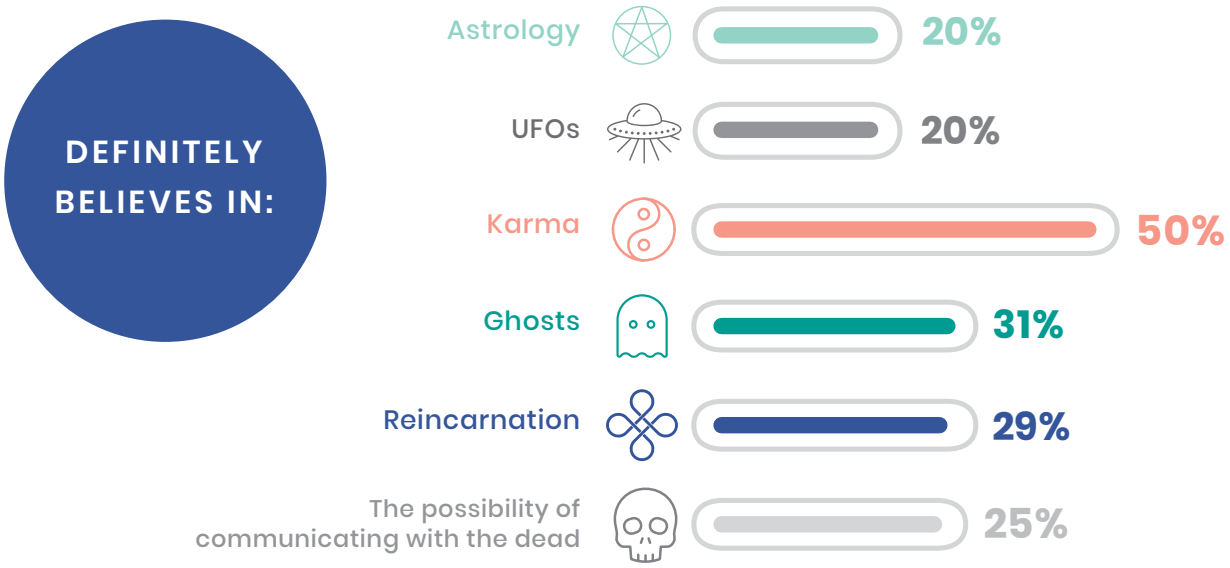


Figure 3. Australians aged 13-18: Spiritual, Paranormal and Supernatural Beliefs (% of teens)

Many teens have an interest in the spiritual and the supernatural, and particularly of beliefs derived from Asian religious traditions (see **Figure 3**). This is not surprising due to their prevalence in popular culture and Australia's geographical proximity to and long history of migration from Asia.

The most popular belief, by far, is karma (50% of teens believe in this), while about a third also believe in reincarnation (29%). Most of those who believe in karma and reincarnation are not Buddhists or Hindus, but the interest in these beliefs is evidence of a changing spiritual landscape, especially among teens. Karma has become a shorthand for 'what goes around, comes around' in this life.

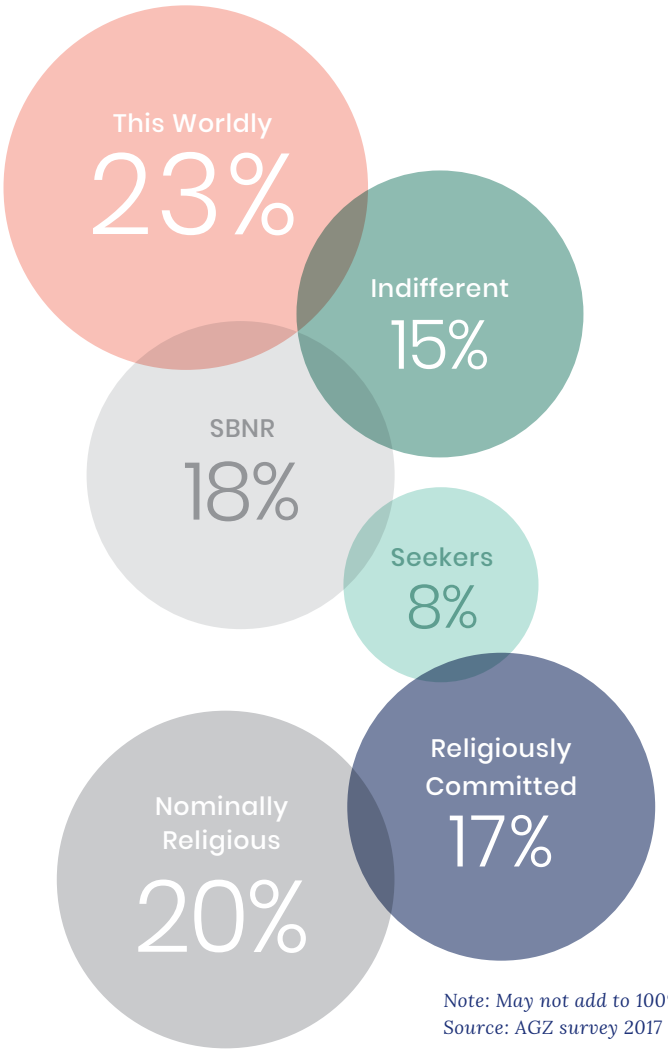
Taken together, our data suggest that while religious affiliation is no longer the norm for the majority of teens, they have not become abidingly secular (in a personal sense).

Now, using new methods, our project fills out this picture, demonstrating that teens largely fall into one of six different 'types' of worldview, variously religious, spiritual or secular.

The Worldview Types of Australia's Teens

This project has deployed a powerful form of statistical analysis to identify six different 'types' that move beyond conventional understandings of religious or nonreligious identity. The categories consider religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, self-understandings and attitudes to the universe.

To ensure the types were more than computer-generated assumptions, we interviewed at least five teens from each group, checking that it all made sense. The proportions in each of our six types is shown in **Figure 4**.



Note: May not add to 100% due to rounding.
Source: AGZ survey 2017

Figure 4. Worldview types of Australian Teens (% of teens)

Here is a description of the **six Worldview types** we found.

1

This Worldly

This largest group accounts for 23% of Australian teens. 'This Worldly' young people have no space in their worldview for religious, spiritual or non-material possibilities. They never or rarely go to services of worship and don't identify with a religion.

Because none of them believes in God, they might be called atheists. But not all of them identify with that label, nor do they see themselves as humanists or secularists.

They have no truck with other spiritual possibilities, whether that is belief in reincarnation or horoscopes. Most of them agree with the statement that the physical world is the only thing that exists. Their thinking is entirely 'this worldly', or as one of them put it: 'science-y'.

Noah:
Describes himself and most of his friends as being 'very science-y and not very religious'

2

Andrew:
'I went to this summer camp. It was called Jesus camp or something … And it was, you know, seeing the power of Christ and talking to people about God. And that started my journey my two-year journey on becoming what I call a conscious Catholic.'

Religiously Committed

Making up 17% of Australian teens, the religiously committed stand in stark contrast to the This Worldly teens. Religious faith is a big part of their lives.

The very large majority of this group attend services of worship regularly, report regular religious experiences, and believe there is life after death. Almost all of them agree that religious faith is important in shaping how they live their lives and make sense of the world around them.

3

Seekers

Intriguingly different from both these 'committed' groups are the exploratory Seekers, a small but vital 8% of teens. Their worldview is eclectic. They almost all self-describe as 'spiritual', but also identify as religious too. This finds expression in belief in life after death, and repeated experiences of a presence or power that is different from their everyday selves.

Seekers have a decidedly eclectic worldview, actively seeking out their spiritual truth. They most likely consult their horoscopes, have seen a psychic, or both. At the same time, they identify with a religion and believe in God or a higher being.

Rose:
'Maybe not religious exactly. I don't really have my own religion. I'm kind of interested in … maybe I'm kind of spiritual, I guess.'

4

Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR)

Sitting between This Worldly teens and Seeker teens are the SBNRs, representing 18% of teens in Australia. God, faith and religion are not important to them, but the door is open to spiritual possibilities, including belief in life after death, reincarnation, and belief in a higher being (but not really God).

Freya:

'Oh, more so on the spiritual side, but I don't really identify as anything. I believe we are a spirit and, you know go on to another life, and grow through human experiences but I haven't, you know, given my entire life over to trusting in that.'

5

Mitch:

'Well, it's not that I believe, I'm impartial, it doesn't bother me if there is or there isn't.'

Indifferent

As might be expected, one group is largely indifferent or undecided about all of it: religion, spirituality and atheism. Following the lead from scholars overseas, we call this group Indifferent. They comprise about 15% of Australian teens.

Nominally Religious

This group, comprising 20% of Australian teens, is largely culturally religious, following the religious identity of their parents, guardians or community (for example, a Catholic, Hindu or Islamic school). Certainly, they identify with a religion, and believe in God, but faith is not important in their daily lives and they don't often go to a temple, church or mosque. At the same time, they don't care for spiritual ideas either, such as reincarnation or horoscopes.

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Q: What other elements would you see as quite central to your practice of being Christian?

Annie:

Nothing really … I'm not an extreme … I just do what my parents want me to do.

In short, dig a bit deeper and **there is a lot of diversity among our teens on matters of faith and spirituality.** And that sits comfortably with them.

Attitudes to Religious Diversity

Teens are generally open and tolerant when it comes to religious diversity in Australia, with some reservations.

Their attitudes are shown in **Table 1**.

Teens overwhelmingly endorse the right of others to freely practise their religion. For example, 91% think that having people of many different faiths made Australia a better place to live; 90% agree that students should be allowed to wear religious clothes or jewellery to school; 88% think that all religious groups in Australia should be free to practise their religion the way they want to.

The AGZ survey also asked teens variously about their attitude to Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. A combined metric for these responses is also shown in **Table 1**. **They generally have very positive attitudes to these faiths, although a small minority do not**.

		% of teens
The government should ban any religious clothing that covers a person's entire face	Disagree/strongly disagree	**71%**
	Neither	4%
	Agree/strongly agree	23%
Local communities should be able to prevent the construction of mosques or temples in their area if they don't want them	Disagree/strongly disagree	**62%**
	Neither	5%
	Agree/strongly agree	32%
Students should be allowed to wear religious clothes or jewellery to school	Disagree/strongly disagree	9%
	Neither	1%
	Agree/strongly agree	**90%**
All religious groups in Australia should be free to practise their religion the way they want to	Disagree/strongly disagree	9%
	Neither	2%
	Agree/strongly agree	**88%**
Having people of many different faiths makes Australia a better place to live	Disagree/strongly disagree	5%
	Neither	2%
	Agree/strongly agree	**91%**
Attitudes to Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism	Negative	5%
	Moderate to Neutral	21%
	Positive	**74%**

Note: May not add up to 100% due to rounding or because small numbers of 'don't know' responses have been omitted. Source: AGZ survey 2017

Table 1: Australians aged 13-18: Attitudes to Religious Freedom (% of teens)

While teens support religious freedom, opinion is more divided, however, when it seems that religion might impinge on them or the rights of others.

This is evident in **Table 2.**

		% of teens
People of different faiths experience discrimination or abuse because of their religion	Disagree/strongly disagree	13%
	Neither	2%
	Agree/strongly agree	**82%**
People with very strong religious beliefs are often too intolerant of others	Disagree/strongly disagree	37%
	Neither	6%
	Agree/strongly agree	**50%**
Religion should have no place in our parliament or official ceremonies	Disagree/strongly disagree	**60%**
	Neither	3%
	Agree/strongly agree	33%
Religion causes more problems in society than it solves	Disagree/strongly disagree	**49%**
	Neither	5%
	Agree/strongly agree	44%

May not add up to 100% due to rounding or because small numbers of 'don't know' responses have been omitted. Source: AGZ survey 2017

Table 2: Australians aged 13-18: Views about Religion in Society (% of teens)

44%

thought that religion caused more problems in society than it solved;

50%

thought people with very strong religious beliefs were often too intolerant of others;

33%

thought religion should have no place in our parliament or official ceremonies.

Education about Religions

Typically, religion is taught in Australian schools in two distinct ways: **General Religious Education (GRE)** and **Special Religious Instruction (SRI)**. GRE involves teaching *about* religions in a non-doctrinal or non-partisan way, focusing on 'critical awareness'. The school subject, Studies of Religion, is such an example, but religions can be taught about in history, English or geography, among other units of study.

SRI is instruction in the beliefs and practices of a particular faith tradition, whether that is Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam or something else. In different parts of Australia, SRI is sometimes called religious education (RE) or religious instruction (RI). Its objective, in large part, is personal faith development.

Our pre-survey focus groups revealed that Australian teens have moderate levels of religious literacy, and that while it is quite broad it is relatively shallow.

This, we argue, is due to inadequate GRE in Australian schools. The prevalence of GRE and SRI in Australian schools is shown in **Table 3**.

School Type

Type of education	**Catholic** (n=265)	**Private** (n=290)	**Government** (n=636)	**Total** (n=1200)
GRE and SRI	**81%**	37%	0%	27%
SRI only	10%	9%	0%	4%
GRE only	8%	12%	44%	28%
Nothing	2%	**42%**	**56%**	**41%**
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: May not add up to 100% due to rounding or because small numbers of 'don't know' responses have been omitted. Source: AGZ survey 2017

Table 3. Australians aged 13-18: Education and Religion at Secondary School (% of teens)

As shown in Table 3, we found that 56% of students attending government (public) schools and 42% of those attending independent private schools have received no dedicated GRE.

Digging deeper, we found those students who have had GRE overwhelmingly endorsed the benefits of this education, no matter what kind of school they have attended: 93% agree or strongly agree that it was helpful in developing an understanding of other people's religions; 86% agreed or strongly agreed that GRE helped make them more tolerant of other people's religions; 82% agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that GRE was something important to study.

Notably, our data suggest that **GRE programs are associated with reduced negative perceptions of religious minorities**. Students who have received GRE have the most positive views of all the diverse religious groups in Australia.

By contrast, **students who have had *no* GRE are about twice as likely as those who have had GRE (whether on its own or with SRI) to hold negative or neutral views towards Australia's religious minorities**, even when controlling for factors such as age, gender, school type, socio-economic status and religious identity.

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These findings lead us to recommend that there be more education about diverse worldviews and religions included in the Australian Curriculum, across national and state levels, to increase both religious literacy and understanding among Australia's diverse religious and non-religious population and help boost tolerance of religious minorities.

Sexuality, and gender

One of our specific interests in this research was to learn more about how the worldviews of young people are mediated by gender and sexuality, in addition to their religious and non-religious perspectives. To be clear, we did not wish to look at these independently, but rather to consider them together in the same survey. To our knowledge, the AGZ survey is the first to systematically ask, using a nationally representative sample, young people of school age about the provision of education about religion, and education about sexuality in school contexts.

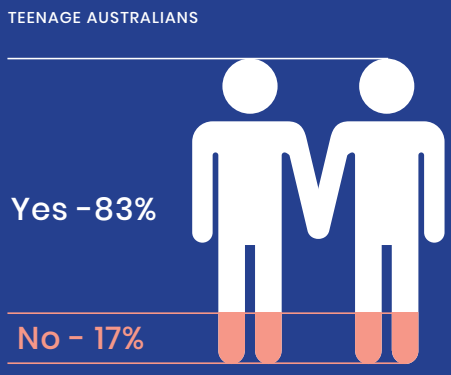

Figure 5a. Australian Support for Marriage Equality (% of population aged 13-17)

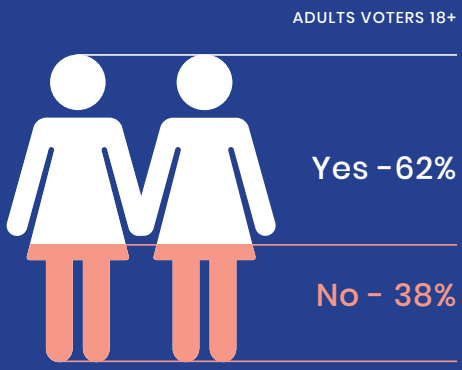

Figure 5b. Australian Support for Marriage Equality (% of population aged 18+)

Our study responds directly to tensions in the current Australian political climate between religious freedom and sexual freedom, specifically as they relate to LGBTQI inclusive school contexts and how these are experienced by young people.

Data collection for the AGZ survey coincidentally overlapped a little with the non-compulsory survey on same-sex marriage that was administered in the second half of 2017.

While the vast majority of our participants were excluded from voting on the survey, their opinions on marriage equality were explicitly sought as part of our study. In **Figure 5** we consider how the 13-17-year-olds in the AGZ survey compare with the results from the national 18+ postal vote (our chart leaves out those who were 18 at the time of the AGZ survey, as they had the opportunity to be part of the postal vote).

Despite employing different methods, and slightly different question phrasing, the postal vote and the AGZ survey are good barometers of sentiment. (The adult postal vote asked: 'Should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry?' The AGZ survey asked: 'Do you support marriage equality?')

Teens' support for marriage equality was significantly higher than that of the general population - over **80% of teens support marriage equality** generally, while only 62% of the adult population expressed support for the laws to change.

Among teens, the Religiously Committed group were half as likely as This Worldly or Seeker teens to support marriage equality.

The majority of teens agree that students should be allowed to **openly express** any **sexual or gender orientation.**

Source: AGZ survey 2017

83%

of teens support marriage equality

17%

of teens didn't support marriage equality

86%

Majority of teens agree that Secondary school students should have the right to learn about LGBTQI people

72%

Of teens disagreed that school is not the place to discuss issues related to sexuality

Young Australians' Views on the Provision of Sexuality Education

We were also interested in how young people's support for marriage equality might translate into ongoing debates about education related to LGBTQI young people in Australian schools. Clearly, and not surprisingly, there was strong support expressed by young people for schools addressing LGBTQI issues. We did not specify where this learning might take place – recognising the potential for education about LGBTQI issues to take place across diverse curriculum areas (History, SRE, Politics, Media Studies, Religious studies, Sociology).

Table 4 shows levels of support for education about LGBTQI matters.

Questions	Response	% of Teens
Secondary school students should have the right to learn about LGBTQI people	Disagree/strongly disagree	10%
	Neither	2%
	Agree/strongly agree	**86%**
Secondary schools should allow students to openly express any sexual or gender orientation	Disagree/strongly disagree	11%
	Neither	2%
	Agree/strongly agree	**84%**
School is not the place to discuss issues related to sexuality	Disagree/strongly disagree	**72%**
	Neither	4%
	Agree/strongly agree	21%
Sexuality education at school should include information that is relevant to LGBTQI people	Disagree/strongly disagree	14%
	Neither	2%
	Agree/strongly agree	**81%**
It is important for young people to learn what religions teach about gender and sexuality	Disagree/strongly disagree	19%
	Neither	5%
	Agree/strongly agree	**73%**

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding or because small numbers of missing are excluded from the table. Source: AGZ survey 2017.

Table 4. Australians aged 13-18: Attitudes to LGBTQI Education and Issues (% of teens)

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An overwhelming majority (86%) of survey participants supported secondary school students' right to learn about LGBTQI people as part of their schooling, while a similar percentage (84%) of respondents supported students' right to identify publicly according to their sexual or gender orientation.

At the same time, 21% of students were unsure whether school was an appropriate place to discuss issues related to sexuality. Young people were more mixed on their support for learning about what religions teach about gender and sexuality. Arguably, there is hesitation about whether religious perspectives have any relevance for education about gender and sexuality in government schools.

In our follow-up, post-survey interviews (done with 30 teens after the main survey) we asked young people what they thought about religious exemptions, and specifically whether schools should be able to

discriminate in relation to what gets taught at school – and hiring/firing of staff in line with their religious beliefs.

Many of the young people we spoke to were not aware of the existence of religious exemptions and surprise and shock was a common response to hearing about them.

Most young people interviewed did not support religious exemptions, and most/many were surprised they even existed. While a considerable number of respondents were strongly opposed to them, some expressed an 'understanding' for the position faced by religious institutions while still being personally against them. The most prominent element of religious exemptions that were raised and rejected by the young people were those relating to the right to discriminate against staff or students based on gender or sexual identity.

Study Details:

FOCUS GROUPS: 11 focus groups were conducted in three Australian states in March-September 2017. The schools were purposively sampled to include government and fee-paying schools, from high and low socioeconomic areas, and in major cities and outer regional areas. Respondents identified variously as Christian (different denominations), Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish, a combination of these, or nothing. Ninety-four students took part, mostly aged 15-16.

SURVEY: The survey data were collected by the Social Research Centre (Melbourne). The survey was conducted by telephone from 23 October – 6 December 2017. Respondents from all Australian States and Territories were selected randomly using both listed and unlisted telephone numbers and 1200 surveys were completed. The cooperation rate ('response rate') for the survey was 34.7%.

To improve the representativeness of the survey, data are weighted by age, gender, location and telephone status. In probabilistic terms, the maximum margin of error to apply to this survey is ± 2.8%.

Respondents ranged in age from 13-18 years-old. Fifty-three per cent of survey respondents attended a government school; 24% attended an independent school and 22% attended a Catholic school; 5% of respondents said they had an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

POST-SURVEY INTERVIEWS: 30 in-depth interviews were conducted by phone with survey participants who indicated they would be willing to do a further interview. Interviewees are drawn from every state and territory apart from Tasmania and come from major cities, and inner and outer regional areas. These were conducted between April and June 2018.

The AGZ Study

Thanks:

The research team acknowledges the following people for their valued contribution to AGZ project: Lisa Batten, Olivia Kinnear, Dr Kim Lam, Dr Sophie Vasiliadis, Dr Ruth Fitzpatrick, Dr Clare Southerton, Dr Sulamith Graefenstein, Dr Alan Nixon, Dr Paul Myers, Dr Daniela Iarossi, and the Social Research Centre.

Thanks to the project's international partner investigators at the University of Warwick: Professor Bob Jackson, Professor Leslie Francis and Dr Elisabeth Arweck.

Thanks to the different schools who allowed us to conduct the focus groups. Most of all, thanks to the many teens across Australia who kindly participated in the project.

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