

# 'That's So Gay':

## Challenging and interrupting Right NOW...

**"A lot of young people say they have teachers who won't say or do anything when other students say fag, dyke or whatever... A lot of people have that misconception that you need to be gay or lesbian to do work with the LGBT community... All you need is an open heart, to be non-judgmental and a bit of knowledge..."**

Youth support worker,  
regional Queensland

Teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others find that challenging and interrupting homophobia is not learning something new, rather them using existing skills in a different way. After all, these are invariably skilled educators of young people with a professional responsibility in their classrooms and schoolyards.



A typical conversation with a teacher questioning whether they should challenge and interrupt homophobic language such as "that's so gay" goes like this:

Teacher: What harm could it do?...

It's just a word, it's not like a gay kid has had his head kicked in or anything...

Daniel: Are students in these situations using 'gay' in a derogatory way?...

Teacher: But they don't even mean it...

Daniel: Are they associating the word 'gay' with something that is lame, crap or 'sh\*t'?...

Teacher: Well, yes... But...

Daniel: Would it be fair and reasonable to say that using the word 'gay' in this way is likely to make the school environment more hostile and unwelcoming for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people?...

Teacher: Well, um... Yes, yes it would...

Daniel: Given that the research evidence is beyond debate about how hostile and unwelcoming schools are for LGBT young people, would it be fair to say that this, as you put it, "widespread, commonplace use" of 'that's so gay' is contributing?...

Teacher: [Slowly nods and looks away because there is nothing more that can be said]

Daniel: Not challenging and interrupting homophobic language and behaviour contributes to schools being hostile and unwelcoming environments, and not just for LGBT students... But like we've been talking about, there are some practical, everyday strategies that you can use almost immediately...

In Beyond 'That's So Gay':

Challenging homophobia in Australian schools, everyday strategies for challenging and interrupting homophobic language and behaviour are described in detail.

Aside from teachers who ignore, encourage or laugh at homophobic language and behaviour in schools, there are two common approaches to challenging and interrupting homophobia: the disciplinary and the educational opportunity.

### 1. Disciplinary approach

Discipline the student for their homophobia. This sends a message to the student (and those others present) that homophobia is unacceptable.

This might sound like:

**(raised voice) 'How many times have I told you not to say that?! If I hear it again....'**

While this approach sends the message that homophobic language is unacceptable, it could act to antagonise the situation or silence the student (and perhaps even those with similar thoughts, ideas and feelings). It also doesn't explain WHY homophobia is unacceptable. This could mean that nothing at all is changed. Instead, if an educator sees homophobic language as an educational opportunity, then it may provide a means to address the actual causes of homophobia.

### 2. Personal approach

Reflect on your own experience and relationships, and communicate the impact of students' language on those around them.

This might sound like:

**'That's not OK. My brother (or sister, mother, friend, etc) is gay**



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and comments like that hurt him/her. Other people in this room could also have someone they care about who is [LGBT]. Would you say this if you knew it hurt someone you care about?'

### 3. Humorous approach

Make light of the use of the word 'gay' in that context, and question its appropriateness.

This might sound like:

**'Gee, you said your ruler was gay. I wonder if there are any other gay rulers in the room. I would hate for your gay ruler to feel isolated from other rulers. Research tells us that gay rulers are more likely to... Does anyone else have a ruler that is gay too? Maybe we could get all the gay rulers together, all the straight ones over here, and...'**

### 4. Correct language approach

Alert the student to their incorrect choice of language in conveying an idea, concept or opinion.

This might sound like:

**'Last time I checked, I was sure that gay meant something other than negative. In my dictionary gay means homosexual or happy. What do you really mean? Can you think of a more appropriate word?'**

### 5. Alternative minority approach

Investigate why lesbians, gays and bisexuals, and not other minorities, are used to communicate that something is bad, stupid or sh\*t.

This might sound like:

**'Why is it that you say "that's gay"? Would we let you say "that's so wog, spastic, abo..."? Would you be allowed to say these other words and not get pulled up?'**

### 6. Student(s) as experts approach

Acknowledge that the teacher

does not necessarily know what a student means.

This might sound like:

**'When you say "that's so gay" it seems like you mean it's not a good thing. Is that right? OK then, why is it that you choose gay and not another word? Do others use 'gay' in the same way? When I think of 'gay' I don't think it means something negative. Do you think that being gay is a negative thing? Tell me more...'**

### 7. NAC approach (Safety In Our Schools booklet, ARCSHS)

#### Name it

Name the problem ('you said that's so gay')

#### Agreement

Refer to an agreement ('we have a clear understanding in this class/school that there are no putdowns')

#### Consequences

Alert the student(s) to consequences of their behaviour

('as you know this means that...')

This of course assumes that an agreement has been set up and students are aware of the agreement.

The most important message I try to communicate to teachers across all the training I do is that they must act. In reality, the act itself doesn't have to be perfect; perfect rarely happens in classrooms or in the schoolyard.

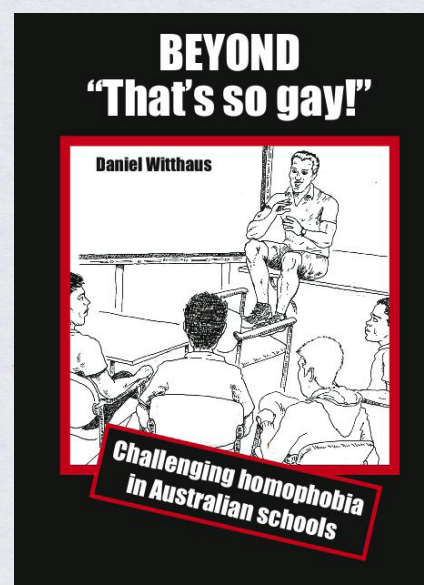
Some question whether them challenging homophobia is worthwhile if it is so widespread. Rather than thinking we have to do something extraordinary, instead we could think about what we can do with the people around us. If nothing else, a teacher can provide one dissident voice in a seeming educational sea of homophobia.

Research and anecdotal evidence clearly shows that such dissident voices are heard louder than most could expect.

With teachers challenging them, students are getting something valuable that they rarely get now: the message that the safety and well-being of all students is important enough for their teachers to interrupt common banter and jokes at the expense of over 9% of the student population.

I don't think that I am alone in thinking that all students will benefit from such a message - gay, straight or anywhere in-between.

**For an extensive discussion and exploration of strategies to challenge and interrupt homophobia, read Daniel Witthaus' Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools (Hawker Brownlow Education, 2010)**





# Are you all ready for this?:

## The Discount Model and School Community Readiness...

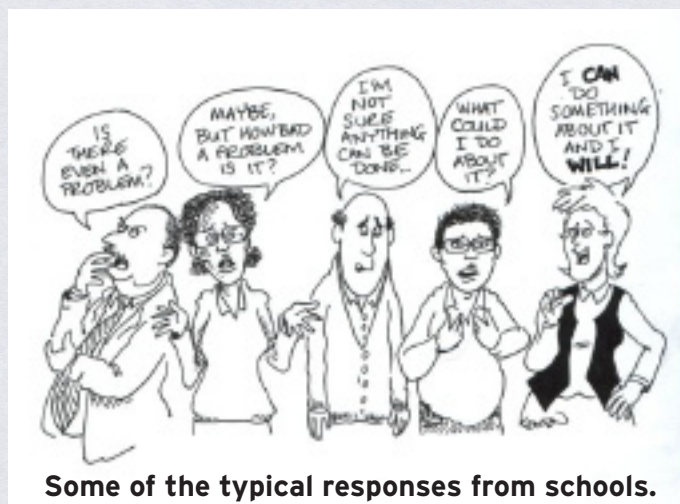
The first step on the road to sexual diversity educational utopia is knowing what step to take. Most schools will identify that they are "not ready" to affirm sexual diversity and challenge homophobia partially out of fear of the reactions in and outside of the school community, partially out of fear of doing the wrong thing and partially out of fear of not knowing where to start. Yes, that's a lot of fear.

One way to overcome these fears and make a start is to provide said school with the basic knowledge and skills, such as everyday strategies to respond to "that's so gay", to confidently support sexual diversity and challenge homophobia.

On the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour, every school was encouraged to assess how "ready" they were as a school community. Rather than relying on "we are ready" vs "we are not", schools were asked to rate themselves using The Discount Model. The Discount Model is an opportunity to begin thinking about how to quantify the resistance to supporting sexual diversity and challenging homophobia in schools. It not only explains an individual or group's resistance, it can give clues as to what information and strategies might be effective in 'moving' that individual or group from one stage of resistance to the next.

The Discount Model's five stages are: **Significance, Existence, Solvability, Self and Action.**

### Where does your school sit?



Some of the typical responses from schools.

### 1. Existence: 'I think there is no problem'

*"We don't have any gay students..."*

The starting point for the Discount Model is Existence, where teachers refuse to believe that an issue exists. To apply this to the current situation, stage one is characterised when it is not accepted that non-heterosexual students exist, and/or that their educational experience is problematic.

At the Existence stage, a school is ready to hear that a problem exists, perhaps through good quality professional development. Hence there is an opportunity to make it impossible for teachers to deny the existence of non-heterosexual students or that their educational experiences are significantly more problematic than for their heterosexual counterparts.

### 2. Significance - 'The problem exists but it's not very serious'

*"Why should we overreact for what is one or two students?..."*

Continuing with the Discount Model, in the second stage - Significance - teachers play down the seriousness of the problem at hand. For the purposes of the current situation, stage two is apparent when teachers believe that significant numbers of non-heterosexual students do not exist, and/or that the impact of their sexual identity on their educational experience is not really the school's concern.

The Significance stage sees a school ready to acknowledge that a problem exists. Opportunity lies in teachers seeing unambiguously that there are significant numbers of gay and lesbian young people and that their educational experience demands the school's attention.

### 3. Solvability - 'There is a problem but there is nothing we can do to stop it'

*"What difference could we make anyway given their parents/the media/society..."*

The third stage of the Discount Model - Solvability - sees teachers acknowledge that a significant



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problem exists, yet believe it is something that cannot be solved by the school itself, if at all (i.e. it's often in the 'too-hard basket').

Now in the Solvability stage, a school is ready to comprehend solutions. Teachers will be more prepared and open to being convinced that their school can solve the problem of gay and lesbian young people's negative educational experience and the impact of homophobic bullying.

#### 4. Self - 'I can't do anything; that's for the experts'

*"I'm not gay, nor am I a gay expert so I can't do this..."*

In the latter stages of the Discount Model comes the stage of Self. Now aware that affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia is an achievable and doable prospect, teachers abdicate responsibility to 'experts'. There is a strong belief that, as individuals, they are unable to contribute significantly to any solution.

At the Self stage, a school is open to the idea of teaching staff effectively supporting sexual diversity and challenging homophobia. Here there is an opportunity to assure teachers that they can do something themselves to improve the problematic educational experience of non-heterosexual young people, rather than relying only on 'experts'.

#### 5. Action - 'I can do something, and I will'

*"Thanks, I'm going to do this first thing tomorrow..."*

Action is the final and most exciting stage of the Discount Model. Teachers are now aware that they

personally can make a difference in the educational experience of same sex attracted young people, and therefore all their students. What this stage requires is that they now make a commitment to take action.

#### ***Based on what you've read, how ready do you think your school community is to support sexual diversity and challenge homophobia?***

Typically schools require good quality professional development as a starting point to improve their "readiness". Once a school has identified where they sit, they can confidently plan what will move them from their current state of resistance/readiness. Based on previous successes, there are clear steps a school can take to make a difference in support sexual diversity and challenging homophobia.

**For an extensive discussion and exploration of how to move a school community successfully through The Discount Model read Daniel Witthaus' *Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools* (Hawker Brownlow Education, 2010)**



# Staff Professional Development: Starting school conversations...

One useful way to get teachers talking and to change school cultures is to deliver good quality professional development.

**Exercise: If you were given 90 minutes with 100 teachers, what would you want to cover? Write down 10 points without reading ahead...**

**What were your points?**

In Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools, an outline for such a professional development session, with a sample running sheet, is described in detail. It accounts for any school, regardless of it's "school community readiness". It's basics are:



## Good Quality Professional Development

1. To have the presentation introduced by an authority in the school.
  2. To change the state of participants using a pattern interrupt (Chapter 3).
  3. To share an optimal amount of research, policy and legislation (Chapter 4).
  4. To model behaviour that is expected of teachers, i.e. homophobia interrupted respectfully (there is not one rule for students and one for the teachers) (Chapter 15).
  5. To allow a minimum of three opportunities for teachers to talk to one another:
    - once about their experiences
    - once about their practice
    - once about the information they have heard.
  6. To give three examples of effective practical strategies:
    - one example of how to interrupt student homophobia (Chapter 15)
    - one activity that students could experience in a classroom (and what students do and say in response) (Chapter 9)
    - one discussion of what teachers believe would work with their students.
  7. To share no less than three, no more than five useful, relevant resources (see Resources Section).
  8. To share examples of schools where things have worked (Chapters 7-13).
  9. To ensure that language is plain and accessible.
  10. To smile at least five times.
- Bonus: if teachers smile at least five times.

If you can achieve these things within 90 minutes, you have set the best foundation for creating a vastly different educational experience for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people. While you cannot change an entire school in one sitting, you can dramatically alter the atmosphere, perspective and motivation level of a staffroom.

Understandably schools can get excited and ask about what a "whole school approach" might look like. Possibly the three most overused and unhelpful words in the education sector are 'whole school approach'. Apart from 'parents will complain', no three words kill any challenging homophobia work quicker or stop any action in its tracks faster.

An alternative is to offer an achievable, practical and (relatively) pain-free approach to a safe and supportive school environment. One useful clue for what creates, supports and maintains a safe and supportive school is simple: if it has worked for schools, it's in; if it hasn't worked for schools, it's out.

Outlined in detail in Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools, a 10-point checklist of standards for a safe and supportive school that is a 'work in progress' is provided below. Until now, no school has met every standard, but outstanding results have been seen in those schools meeting a handful. None represent anything more than a small yet significant commitment of time, energy and resources.

They are as follows:



# Staff Professional Development: Starting school conversations...

1. All school staff have successfully undertaken, and is committed to continuing, professional development (PD) on affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia.
2. An audit of teachers using the 'How To Support Sexual Diversity In Schools' checklist has been undertaken and has a 'tick of approval' from teachers.
3. An audit of students using the 'How To Support Sexual Diversity In Schools' checklist has been undertaken, has the 'tick of approval' from students.
4. The school has a committed group that meets at least once a term to discuss the school's progress.
5. Methods are adopted that will ultimately make a positive impact on the well-being of young people in their school (i.e. practical and student-focused).
6. Teachers immediately and consistently interrupt and challenge homophobia - of staff or students.
7. Formally evaluated curriculum, such as Pride & Prejudice (see Resources), has been integrated in at least one year level.
8. The school openly promotes the fact that it affirms sexual diversity and challenges homophobia. The school is proactive in sending this message internally and externally.
9. External partnerships are developed.
10. The school acknowledges it is not perfect and that change takes time.

## sexual diversity school audit

> how is your school doing?

Changing the culture of a school is a large project, especially when it involves creating a school that is supportive and appreciative of sexual and gender diversity, a safe place for those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or who experience same sex attraction or who don't fit gender stereotypes.

This document offers a tool for checking the progress of your school from time to time as well. You can do it alone, informally with other staff members or schedule it for formal discussion at a school council or staff meeting. It provides opportunities to think about short, medium and long term goals and action steps to make your school a safe place for all students.

Research shows that approximately 10% of all students in your school community experience feelings of same sex attraction.

Write down the number of students that would be in your school \_\_\_\_\_

Example audit tool ([www.glhv.org.au](http://www.glhv.org.au))

For more on good quality professional development and student workshops, go to: [www.thatssogay.com.au](http://www.thatssogay.com.au)

It's the everyday conversations generated by the Beyond 'That's So Gay' Tour that lead to change. Rather than thinking we have to do something extraordinary, instead we could think about what we can do with the people around us. For 38 weeks worth of everyday rrr community examples, go to [www.thatssogay.com.au](http://www.thatssogay.com.au)

