

Everyday Schools:

Homophobic hostility with few exceptions

An overview of interviews conducted with hundreds of teachers, health professionals, homophobia-curious others and non-heterosexuals, adult and young, across the country.

FIRST, the good news:

modern day Australian schools have more examples of openly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students and teachers than ever before.

NOW, the bad news:

"more" is a deceptive description because there weren't that many to begin with. Despite dazzling exceptions, the overwhelming majority of LGBT students do not feel safe and supported to "come out" at school. This is the same for every metropolitan centre. Yes, Sydney too.

The notion of an explosion of "out" students in Australian schools is an unhelpful myth. One regional lesbian educator summed up her own formal research:

"It's probable rather than possible that [LGBT young people] will experience abuse, harassment and discrimination...Young people keep it very quiet and hide the fact that they are gay in school..."

One rural mental health worker shared her observations:

"Young people don't come out as gay or lesbian in school, and I find that cause for reflection in itself..."

In many ways the focus on LGBT students coming out distracts schools from what is most important: making schools safe and supportive for all students, especially those LGBT students who can't or won't come out. And it seems there is some work to do, despite seeming improvements in the last decade.

One experienced rural teacher reflected on over a decade of teaching:

"If a kid was to come out nothing overtly violent would happen but their lives would be made so miserable that they would leave or commit suicide...Life would be relentless and merciless...It's hard enough as it is...I don't think there's

any difference in how they treat the gay kids now than they did 10 years ago..."

A lesbian academic backed this up: **"Basically school system, you're still not catering, you've still got work to do...The evidence 10 years ago said these young people were experiencing [abuse and harassment] and they still are..."**

Language is the typical example that everyday teachers give of homophobia. Every tour location reported that the use of "gay" instead of "crap", "lame" or "sh*t" was commonplace. Said one male rural teacher:

"'Gay' is the flavour of the day... It's become a derogatory term..."

Young men and women appear to experience everyday homophobic hostility differently. It is almost universally accepted that young men will, and do, experience more harassment and abuse, of all forms, than do young women. Yet as a regional teacher pointed out, **"[young women] still get bullied and verbally abused..."**

Despite hopes that modern day schools would respond "better these days", the overwhelming majority of teachers and schools reported that they did not have any gay students, or that they "had one" previously, typically adding that the student had soon moved away to the city. At best support teachers said they would "deal with it" if a student came out, not before. Every excuse for not doing anything "in the meantime" was given, usually with a qualifying statement about how good the school's bullying policies and values around diversity were.

The heartening news is that although "things [in schools] are [not] better these days" and there is a pattern of resistance to challenging homophobia, every school reported wanting to know more about what

they could practically do, typically adding that they honestly didn't know how to get the knowledge, skills and confidence to do so.

The opportunity lies in resourcing schools so that LGBT young people feel safe and supported in their school environment, rather than them surviving and thriving in spite of it. Young people and those that teach them say that unless there is a significant sexual diversity earthquake across the Australian educational landscape, that is "yonks" away.

Quick Facts Box

- Despite dazzling exceptions, the overwhelming majority of LGBT students do not feel safe and supported to "come out" at school.
- At best support teachers said they would "deal with it" if a student came out, not before.
- Every school reported wanting to know more about what they could practically do, yet not honestly knowing where to start.

The reality: every school said they wanted to know more!

That's so gay!:

'Soft Discrimination' and the "Occasional Teacher"

"It's funny this [tour and book] is called 'That's So Gay' because young people are saying it all the time..."

Just about every teacher across the country

The good news: the "occasional teacher" is challenging and interrupting homophobic language and behaviour in everyday regional, rural and remote (rrr) Australian schools despite an unnecessary lack of time, resources and energy expended by schools and educational authorities on this very issue.

Now the bad news: the majority of homophobic language and behaviour in school environments goes unchallenged by teachers.

Perhaps this lack of challenge explains why students and teachers agree that homophobia is "rampant" in Australian schools, including the metropolitan schools. One regional teacher explained:

"Every single sentence has 'That's gay' in it...It's absolutely rife..."

Another rural worker noted it's absurdity:

"It's commonplace...That chair's gay' and all that stuff..."

Interestingly, that homophobia is so commonplace is one reason why many teachers say they don't challenge or interrupt it. Being part of popular culture does not make something right. Teachers and students often protest that they "don't mean it like that". Yet simple questioning of any young person using "that's so gay" elicits the response of "well when you put it like that, it sounds really bad".

Teachers observed that young people know that homophobia "pushes people's buttons...regardless of your sexuality". One regional teacher shared:

"I know that particularly with the boys...The biggest insult that you can chuck is 'faggot'...For girls it's 'slut'...'Faggot' I find is the one..."

The first step in challenging homophobic language is identifying that it's wrong.

One rural male worker put it best: **"I'd say amongst young people it's what I'd call 'soft discrimination'... It's not quite as harsh as the word 'poofta' or 'faggot', but it's still a problem...You'd be battling to call it vilification...It's not quite shaming, but it's a put down...It's dangerous...By not challenging it, from there it's a springboard to other inappropriate stuff..."**

Some educators believe it might have something to do with the relaxing of some teachers' beliefs around what is inappropriate language. Says one rural teacher: **"[They'll use 'gay' or 'faggot' but] they won't say 'That's f*cked' because they know they'll get in trouble..."**

One regional deputy principal observed:

"Of course there are some [teachers] that won't [challenge it], but they will walk past anything... 'Gay'?...No, they probably throw it around themselves...'F*ck'?... No, they throw that around too... Most teachers will draw a line in the sand and work on what crosses their own line...Ten years ago 'f*ck' was on the other side of the line... Not now..."

Drawing parallels to other

discriminatory language shows homophobia is seen as a different form of discrimination, as this regional teacher explains:

"If a teacher in a classroom situation overheard a student saying something to an Indigenous or Asian student, they'd crack down on it...Even girls in trade classes if they get a hard time... But you hear, 'faggot', 'that's gay', 'suck my d*ck', sh*t like that because it's OK..."

Teachers are clear they need support. **"It would be great to have some tangible, non-threatening tools for teachers to use..."**

Whilst many spoke of the impact of homophobic language on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students, some teachers reflected on the cost to ALL students, gay or not, and teachers. One rural teacher, for example, talked about her fellow staff:

"Some of the biggest impacts for our staff is around homophobia, for example, 'You're a fucking lesbian'..."

Despite what is 'hard' for us, for every excuse that a teacher has not to interrupt and challenge homophobia, a young LGBT student has a reason for not being engaged, feeling supported or being safe in their educational environment. Research and anecdotal evidence suggests witnessing a teacher challenging and interrupting homophobia might just change their entire educational experience.

Out in Australian schools: Waiting for Disclosure

"What are the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students at [this school]?"

When asked this question most teachers, health professionals and "homophobia-curious" others understandably focus on students being "out" in their schools. If a student is openly not straight in their school, then the thinking is that everything is OK and "things are much better these days". Yet the overwhelming majority of schools reported that they did NOT have any out students and weren't expecting any soon.

Stories of young people coming out as L, G, B or T rely on them publicly identifying in spite of a generally unwelcoming, hostile school environment. By this fact alone openly LGBT young people are invariably extraordinary in terms of their support systems (e.g. family, friends, school staff), strength of character (e.g. humour, attractiveness, personability) and/or talent and abilities (e.g. sporting, academic, creative).

Although being surrounded by supportive people negates the need, openly LGBT young people invariably were "not really condoned" yet "not condemned" where they contributed to the school community in a palatable, often entertaining way. An all-too-common example came from this male rural teacher in a creative select-entry school:

"[Male student] has made no secret of the fact that he's gay... In fact, he celebrates it...[At last year's concert] he had his kinky boots on...He got up and did Lady Gaga stuff with an entourage of girls behind him...He's got a fairly

confident type of personality...He'd be out there if he wasn't gay..."

It seems, for the most part, that out students can not be plain, mediocre or boring. Not once did a teacher say "s/he just goes about their schooling, we don't hear from them much, they're not particularly popular, smart or funny". And too often openly LGBT young people are at risk of being "pushed" into advocacy and "fixing" a school by a "stage mother" (i.e. teacher).

Interestingly young men and young women were "out" in different ways. Young women invariably were openly lesbian or bisexual in a relationship with another young woman at the school. In contrast, young men were invariably "gay islands". Whilst young women found social safety in a relationship and social danger if "single" at school, young men found the exact opposite. One rural teacher talked about her school:

"We had two girls, they identified themselves, it was admittedly only to a few friends, but...The boys, never at all...Not when they're at school because it's not safe...If [a young man] comes out, it will be long after they've gone, or if they do it's when they're comfortable coming back..."

Talking to LGBT young people, it seemed that many had different ideas on what it meant to be "out" at school. One "out" bisexual young woman in rural Western Australia mentioned, "you really get to know who your true friends are when they know one of your big secrets...". Asking her to clarify "secret", I heard her definition of "out":

"Most people and teachers don't know, except [one Year Level Coordinator] who sees clients for

'headspace'..."

Not that this isn't an achievement in itself. However this helps make sense of the seeming explosion of students "coming out" in our schools. Young LGBT people are typically navigating their school environments and expertly finding pockets of safety and support but far from bursting from their closets in a cloud of glitter.

Educational experience is best if young LGBT people feel safe and supported regardless of whether they are "in" or "out" as non-heterosexual. While not as salient as their 'out' counterparts, the educational experience of non-'out' students is no less importance.

By waiting for disclosure, teachers say they hope to support LGBT young people when they are most at-risk. Yet according to research (e.g. Nicholas & Howard 2001) young people are most at-risk of suicide before those around them know anything of their sexual identity. Simply waiting for them to come out to us (and letting them do all the hard work) is a flawed strategy. This flawed strategy looks even worse when it becomes apparent that the alternative (i.e. challenging and interrupting homophobia and affirming sexual diversity) is so straightforward.

With a small investment of time, basic resources and some discussion, small and immediate, yet significant, changes can be made in young LGBT students' lives.

For the support of LGBT students see Part One (i.e. For The Hand) of this Summary Series at:
www.thatssogay.com.au/findings