

Markus, with Shane: Young, gay and “out” at school...

“Adelaide is more lesbian-friendly than gay-friendly....Lesbian friends have said that Adelaide is for lesbians what Melbourne is for gay men....I cannot say I’ve ever seen two men holding hands in Adelaide, yet in the time that we’ve been sitting here three lesbian couples have walked by holding hands....Had you noticed?”

I asked “Markus”, a young gay man (who had been out as gay in high school) whether he experienced Adelaide as “arty”, “open” and “OK” with gayness.

“No....Look, OK we are doing better than Whyalla, but that’s irrelevant...”

This was an answer I had not expected. My impressions of young gay and bisexual men’s experiences in modern-day Adelaide had been coloured by my dating “Shane” in recent years. Shane, a young gay man from the southeast of Adelaide, grew up on a farm with his mother and older brother. Before high school his mother had started dating women. Traveling longer distances to high school in a bus everyday, at 15 Shane was approached by a matchmaking young woman. She explained that her slightly older male friend, “Peter”, liked him and wanted to start dating. Shane and Peter would become a known, out gay couple at their area school
- a specialist school for academically gifted and oriented students. Shane can only remember one negative comment in his entire time at school.

The acceptance and support of Shane and his relationship to Peter on the rural outskirts of Adelaide gave me

the impression that such a life was more the norm for everyday gay and bisexual young men. Yet talking with Shane’s peers further in Adelaide’s borders, I wondered if perhaps his experience was the result of circumstances. Shane’s mother was out within her local community, something Shane grew up with. She came from a strong, loud and proud matriarchal family that celebrated family members’ strengths and individuality. Shane was, and is, an intelligent, confident and physically talented circus performer who went to a “very nerdy” school that valued intellectual abilities and character.

In my work with teachers, health professionals and “homophobia-curious” others over the years, most have been very focused on students being “out” in their schools. If a student is out as not straight in their school, then the thinking is that everything is OK and “things are much better these days”.

Markus’ experiences as an out gay student at his high school highlight the two main problems of the “out students mean it’s OK here” model, the apparent gold standard. The first is that such a model relies more heavily on the student than the school environment. The second is the assumption that one out student’s experience is an indicator of other “not out” students’ experiences.

I heard of a pivotal moment in Markus’ high school career that would be a turning point. In hindsight he believes this could have made him or broke him. In the early years of high school, not so long ago, he explains he “was the

effeminate student who got chased...kicked” and targeted for other forms of intimidation. Yet in Year 10 he was one of two people required to make a presentation at a year level assembly to his entire year level, teachers and the principal. Already “sh*tting [him] self”, Markus stood at the microphone. When the crowd settled and went quiet, Markus moved to speak. As he did so, a voice broke the silence. “Fag!”

Naturally taken aback, Markus looked around wondering what to do. The principal and the teachers did nothing. With everyone’s eyes upon him, Markus recalls he was “forced to continue”.

As the assembly finished the Year Level Coordinator stood and asked the offending student who yelled out “fag” to see him after. That student would eventually be given an internal suspension for disrupting proceedings rather than what he said.

Markus feels that this assembly changed school life forever. He “started getting positive attention” such as students asking if he was alright and telling him the offending homophobe was “an arsehole”. Comments followed like, “hey you are actually a nice, funny guy and not a bad person”.

Seemingly out at school from this point, Markus describes a life of spending a lot of time in the library for safety, “I never hated school, I just hated the bullshit...I spent my lunchtimes in the library because no-one ever went there and I liked to read”. Despite the support of the library staff, he still did not “feel

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OK to read [gay-related] books as there was still ‘schtick’ and he felt it was “not entirely safe”. Despite this some girls were supportive, sometimes dramatically so. One day a homophobic male student walked through a group of girls that Markus was in, purposefully bumping him. He laid the blame on Markus, “watch it fag”. The homophobe did not realise that his girlfriend was in the group, but that quickly changed. She would publicly announce to her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, “he’s my friend....we’re done”.

Markus describes the pressure that faced him at school and beyond: “From 5-10 [years of age] I was called a girl. From 10 I was called a fag”. Once out at school, he felt the pressure intensified. “I had to be happy, to be flamboyant”.

He describes being known for singing. But students and teachers expected Markus to be out in a narrowly defined way. “If I came to school and I wasn’t ‘up’ and ‘out’ on any given day, then it seemed intervention was required”. Markus would be asked if he wanted to go to the student counselor. He tells this with something that resembles frustration, resentment and anger.

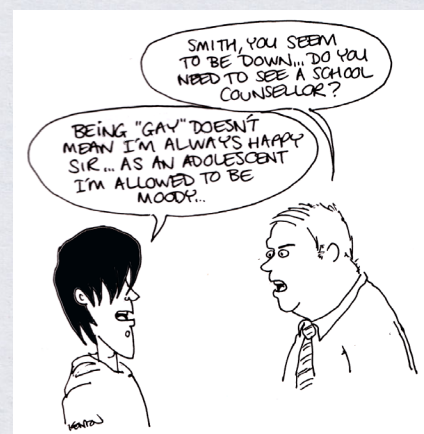
The pressure for Markus to conform to a lighter, happier and more flamboyant image seemed to send a clear message about being out and gay at his school. He felt expected to entertain and brighten other people’s day. Being out at school did not result in Markus feeling entirely safe and supported to be himself. Being out did not mean that he did not experience bouts of depression. Being out did not mean he fully embraced his sexual identity.

In this case the out model meant that it was more about Markus than the school environment he was educated in.

The impact that Markus’ outness had on other students at his school became clearer much later. Whilst his defining moment, a very public and homophobic comment during a year level assembly, changed things for the better, an incident for a fellow student changed things for the worse. Another student, around the same time, is said to have had his name and “dirty fag” emblazoned in graffiti on a school wall. He left school immediately and did not come back. “It turns out he was gay... but I was gayer than he was.” Markus shared that a number of students have since come out as gay, but did not feel safe to do so at school, partly because they were not like him and didn’t want a narrow, pressurised definition of themselves.

It seems my visit to Adelaide had an impact on Markus’ public self. Previously too self-conscious to pick up the local gay and lesbian newspaper, *Blaze*, or read gay-related material in public, Markus would sit on the train and calmly read *Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’* after my book reading.

“It’s the first [gay] book I have been able to read on the train, and I know it’s ‘big’. People sniggered at me and I don’t give a fk quite frankly. I have the right to read and know [about challenging homophobia and affirming sexual diversity]. Previously I would have put it away.”**



My visit to Adelaide seemed to coincide with, and complement, an awakening in Markus. According to Markus, reading about a homophobic type called ‘The Almost Ally’ in my book “put [him] in tears for a while”. Reading how subtle homophobia from those we call our allies can chip away, he suddenly felt angry with comments like “things are better these days, you should consider yourself lucky”. He continued, “people have not stopped being homophobic, I think they are just being quieter”. Markus spoke of wanting to stop being “a gay island”, “to share [his] story” for the first time with other gay men (see this interview), to find and be a role model as well as to contribute.

“When I die I’ll die knowing I was a part of making [change] happen. I don’t have to be integral or revolutionary, but I’ll know I was a part of the process...”

For Markus, it seems, there is no turning back.

Edward and David:

Young, gay and not “out”...

In Darwin, progress is needed in its schools. “Edward” describes his experience at a local Catholic high school.

“I had a pretty hard time at high school and faced a bit of discrimination...Some of it for being Indigenous, some of it for being gay, some of it for being overweight...My first day of high school, I came back from recess and someone had taped a sign to my desk which said something like ‘something smells, poof, poof’... I didn’t even know what that meant, only that it was bad...”

Whilst Edward took some time to come out, it was no journey for him.

“Journey is a funny word to use because it implies I went from somewhere to somewhere, when I was actually there all along...”

It would continue until his final year, when he arrived for the first day of Year 12 to find something in his communal file.

“One of the boys had left something in there, a note with something like ‘we’re going to get you poofa’...I then realised he must have left it in November for me to get it in February... So that was pretty calculated...”

This had an undoubted impact on his academic performance and school life.

“Most of the time I used to wag a lot...But I passed...The common theme through all of it was that



I didn’t know what those terms meant, only that they were bad... You become very secretive... I didn’t really talk to anyone about anything...We all have the benefit of hindsight...It’s not that I wasn’t sure, but I wasn’t out so to speak in terms of being able to stand up for myself, to the school, to other students...”

Unlike for most students, Edward’s Presentation Ball was not a great end to his school career.

“That was difficult for me to have a date with someone that was female...I remember that all the girls had a photo together and then all the boys had that photo all together and they asked me not to be a part of it...Yep, school was pretty sh*t for me...”

Not that Edward didn’t eventually thrive.

“Once I left school it was much better...I didn’t have the daily pressure...I spose it wasn’t part of my life anymore and I had good people around me...”

Edward wonders if him taking longer to work out what being gay meant to him.

“I have a very strong internal dialogue...Coming out to myself and making sure that was the right thing for me was important... Most people decided for me before I really knew what that meant...I like to make up my own mind...I think maybe when I talk to other people, they know about themselves sooner and are perhaps able to challenge the system [and others] more...”

A perfect example of this was when I met with “David”. David knew early who he was.

“I’ve always known I wasn’t what the TV was showing me...I knew for certain, I was maybe 10 or 11 when I had my first erection... I was sitting in front of the TV watching weightlifters and something happened...I started to enjoy it a fair bit...”

David seems to have had a very different experience to other gay students in school.

“I guess I was lucky...I was the bully who picked on bullies... It was very hard to be gay at high school...If there was an effeminate boy at school, then I’d be friends with them...If I got picked on [by bullies], I fought back, I belittled them...”

There were plenty of stories where he turned the tables.

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“I walked on the oval one day and this boy walked over and started pushing me, saying ‘So you’re gay? What, you find me hot?’...I just started humiliating him...I said, ‘Oh please, my grandmother would hit harder than you’...”

And by the end of it, his group and my group were laughing at him, so he walked off humiliated...”

And then boarding school.

“This Year 11 boy kept saying ‘You’re gay, you faggot’...So one day I picked up the vacuum cleaner and chased after him...He ran off...”

Given that David’s story was so different to most others that I had heard on this tour, I delved deeper and tried to understand why his experience was so wildly different.

“I felt like I was defending gay people, not just defending myself, that’s where I got my power to fight back...I was always alone, I was always pushed aside...It was

nothing I was taught...I was always told to be quiet, that I don’t have a choice...Maybe that was it, maybe that’s why...It was rebellion...”

David reflected for the first time on the link to his self-worth at the time.

“I guess deep down inside as much as I thought I was rubbish and I had nothing to offer the world, I knew I wasn’t a bad person... I knew I was not wrong...I was told all gay people were pedophiles but I knew I wasn’t attracted to children and I didn’t want to hurt anyone, so I thought ‘F*ck you’, I’m not any of those people... I always thought of myself as an unimportant person...I stuck up for gay people, nerds, anyone... When I think about it now, I had no respect for my own life so I would stick up for everyone else... Now you’ve made me think about it...”

Both David and Edward have different stories of friends betraying their trust after they revealed their sexual identity.

David told another gay student.

“He was the one that went out and told everyone I was gay, to take the attention off himself and put the focus onto me...”

Rather than getting upset, David sympathised.

“I thought, ‘How lonely must you feel inside to do that?’...”

Edward was outed to other students

after he told a female friend at school. Only recently this young woman approached him, relatively drunk at a Darwin nightclub.

“She said, ‘[Edward], I have been in counseling since high school because of the mean things I did to people...And most of that was about what I did to you’...”

Stunned, Edward felt it gave him a sense of closure. He had not expected she would have really thought about it much once school was done. Edward on the other hand finished school differently.

“I stepped off the school ground and did the biggest exhale of my life and never looked back...”



Joan and Mel:

Teacher challenge and change

ORIGINAL PROJECT QUESTION:

What happens when you give teachers, health professionals and homophobia-curious others strategies and resources to challenge homophobia?

"We would deal with [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students] on a needs basis... We haven't had anything surface... If we did we'd deal with it..."

There are times when I feel my life on my national challenging homophobia tour, Beyond 'That's So Gay', is like groundhog week. Did I not just hear this last week from the school chaplain at [other rural WA school]? Wait, should I be concerned that the above quote was from the school chaplain, "Joan", at [rural WA school]?

As has become standard, I contacted the Student Support Team at the local high school and spoken with the Manager of Student Support Services. Noting that her team would be meeting the next day, she said she would e-mail her team to see if I could join in on that meeting and get back to me. When she did call back it was to say that I would only be able to have 5 minutes of their meeting time, asking if this was enough despite the fact that earlier we had spoken about the minimum time would be 15-20 minutes. Instead she said she would meet with me personally after that meeting.

When I arrived the next day I would be greeted by the school chaplain who immediately gave her manager's apologies. I realised straight away that this was less about something "coming up

suddenly" for the manager. I had been thrown the equivalent of student support services scraps.

Joan, the school chaplain, was pleasant and seemed to search my face for any sign that I was not impressed. I'm not sure how successful I was at hiding my momentary annoyance, but I was soon following her to her office to talk about school life for LGBT students.

Offered a seat on a colorfully adorned couch that attempted to distract from the simple office it was situated in, I sat and waited for a quick brush off. Indeed that was how it seemed to start. After offering a brief introduction of my project - after doing this at least several times a day for the last three months I feel like I am almost of autopilot - Joan's response, as described at the start, was:

"We would deal with [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students] on a needs basis... We haven't had anything surface... If we did we'd deal with it..."

According to Joan, there wasn't really an issue at her school.

As is a theme in regional and rural Australia, teachers and health professionals will typically follow up such statements with an anecdote about "we had this one student once". Joan was no exception. This time I heard about "an Aboriginal boy...who used to sit by himself...and used to sit with the girls sometimes..."

What is not as typical is an anecdote about a current student. Joan again.

"There is one boy at the moment that we have been asked to keep an eye on...He might be gay... That's very rare...It hasn't come up yet, but as soon as there was a hint of it, then Student Services would be very supportive..."

Before I even talked about research evidence or my own work in schools, Joan was watering down any thought of doing something proactive.

"But I can see that an education thing before that is not needed... To suddenly go into classes and talk about it...No..."

When I asked if anything was done at the school, Joan replied, **"I don't think it would be..."**

I could have not predicted what followed. Joan on affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia in the school curriculum.



"If something is not delivered properly...kids could think, you know...there is something to try... if it was not done properly...If it was glorified...I know in our sex ed

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we tried something different once, but sometimes the wrong teacher can do a lot of harm...Because of their idea of what's OK... Especially when we are talking about Year 7s and 8s..."

Joan went on to say that she imagined older students, such as Year 10s, might be "more mature and able to handle it".

"They are too messed up in Year 9, I think it would be really damaging...They are too experimental in Year 9...There are all the ramifications if you have boys experimenting with boys... I think it's important for kids to not feel free to do what they want before they have their heads together...They seem to act before they think..."

The damage and harm Joan fears is that young men will have sex together. Sensing that teachers and health professionals would think affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia might "damage" or "harm" students, I asked Deakin University to factor this in when they originally formally evaluated Pride & Prejudice, the educational package I first piloted in an all-boys Catholic school.

The results when evaluating students from co-educational government and Catholic schools in regional Victoria? Were students more or less isolated from their peers as a result of doing "the gay program"? No. Was student self-esteem affected because they suddenly discovered they were homophobic? No. What about reports by teachers? No change. The only thing found to change was students' homophobic attitudes, and more recently when Deakin re-

evaluated the program, that students' "homoaggressive" behaviour.

There have been no reports of any same sex sexual intercourse as a result of the Pride & Prejudice program, yet I would not see that as a negative thing anyway. The likelihood is, just as with students subsequently coming out, that there is no observable change.

After I had finished asking Joan questions, I shared with her the Writing Themselves In Again research, highlighting some of the statistics relating to what had come up in our interview and adding in other research evidence as required. [N.B. since then Writing Themselves In 3 research was released: www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay] I explained the basics of my book, Beyond 'That's So Gay': Challenging homophobia in Australian schools, mainly that schools can now assess their readiness for affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia as well as do something at every point along that continuum of readiness to ensure better outcomes for all students, especially the LGBT ones. Yes, even whilst waiting for disclosure. I was giving a few examples of other schools I'd worked with that were similar to Joan's school when something unexpected happened.

Discussing how I engage teachers when faced with a sea of growling non-welfare staff, by encouraging them to move "Beyond 'That's So Gay'", Joan seemed very open to all teachers challenging and interrupting of students' homophobic language. This, she said, was something she would take to the next Student Support Services meeting. Joan was confident that

this would be a stepping-stone to bringing it up at a whole of school staff meeting and intended to a copy of the book.

I would leave the school grounds feeling like I had been on a challenging homophobia rollercoaster ride.

MEL

I wanted to get a sense of Sydney's outer suburbs. One clue came from a secondary school that I visited near Campbelltown. To get here required over an hour on a train, then a car ride. The decision to go to this school was not a difficult one after receiving an e-mail.

"My name is [Mel]. Im a [age] secondary teacher (fresh out of university) and I'm gay.... The university and the schools I have worked in are still riddled with homophobia from teachers and students. My current school in sydney south west has a huge population of gay students who are not only not being supported but are being bullied and traumatised. The school has not system or real policy in place to support and protect these students. I have personal concern for these students- I was lucky to survive school, my first girlfriend committed suicide at 16.... I understand this may be too late to organise during this tour perhaps we could meet the next time you are in sydney or through another means? We are ready, willing and eager to create change and would love your input."

When "Mel" picked me up from the train station, she half-laughed

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admitting that she expected not to hear back from the tour for months.

"I thought I'd get some standard, 'Thanks for your e-mail, but...'..."

This explained in part the energy that surrounded my arrival, which included four teachers, one Deputy Principal and Mel's lecturer from university. I was asked for my hot beverage preference so that the tea ladies could have it waiting (for the record it was a hot chocolate). Mel had also brought home-made chocolate cupcakes (for the record I almost ate a whole tray single-handedly).

Like many outer metropolitan schools, this secondary school claims a diverse student population that includes Indigenous and Islander students. In some schools the reputation precedes it, as explained by one younger female teacher.

"A lot of people told me not to come here [to teach] because it's housing commission, there's lots of Aboriginal kids, etc... There was just this stigma attached to working here..."

Insults such as "faggot" and comments such as "that's so gay" are said to be commonplace. Egged on by a gay male friend, another female teacher had found some success in challenging homophobia in her classrooms.

"I say, 'My friend is gay and when you say that you hurt him and you hurt me' and then they say, 'Awww, sorry miss'..."

For Mel it's about small, everyday wins.

"It's about what's appropriate and what's not...We can talk about being gay or bisexual or lesbian, but we can't use inappropriate words...It drives me to distraction some days...Last class we only said faggot twice...'Well done guys'...And I'm only with them 6 periods [per week]..."



"Ria", the deputy principal approached the meeting with some caution.

"I'm here to make sure no big decisions are made and that the school is not committed to doing anything major..."

Once we all were seated, and I'd downed my first chocolate cupcake, I explained my project and what I was wanting to discuss with them. I explained that they did not have to sign up for anything, and in any case, I had nothing really for them to sign up to. This led to some sighs and smiles.

After getting them to self-assess how ready their school was for affirming sexual diversity and challenging homophobia (e.g. see Lismore blog),

we discussed what steps the school could take next.

Them: "But we have, like, 50 staff..."

And we could only get five people here from staff..."

Me: "Think about what has happened here so far today...We have spoken for 90 minutes, and we could keep going...With only a simple framework and some simple questions, you have all come up with stories, experiences and ideas...Right?..."

Them: "Yes..."

Me: "Imagine if you multiply these 5 people by 10...Do you think you would have plenty of other stories, experiences and ideas?..."

Them: "Yes..."

Me: "Would it be possible to set aside an hour or two in the next 3-6 months where you start a conversation as a whole staff group, where you ask teachers to think about how ready the school is and what could happen next?..."

Them: "Yes..."

Me: "Could you get someone to come in and start that conversation if you didn't feel confident yourselves?..."

I think I actually saw relaxed, excited smiles. The biggest smile was on Mel's face. This had been on Mel's agenda even before she stepped into her current school, which is all the more remarkable given this was only her third (yes THIRD!) week in the school; her first school.