

Everyday Mainstream (LGBT) Resistance: Invisibility, priorities and systemic failure

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

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FOR THE HEAD

FIRST, the good news: there has never been a better time to be a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) young person in rural, regional or remote (rrr) Australia. In 2010 rrr Australia boasted more LGBT and LGBT-friendly supports than at any other time.

NOW, the bad news: this fact is misleading given that most rrr communities still did not have LGBT or overtly LGBT-friendly supports. Even in those rrr communities that did, few, if any, mainstream services were supporting LGBT young people nor referring them elsewhere.

As explored in Part One (Modern Day Snapshot) and Part Two (Schools) of this Summary Series, LGBT young people and those that work with them are unanimous in their assessment: things are not better these days for the overwhelming majority of them. Having supported young LGBT people who have ultimately taken their life, one rural counselor observed: "It's a tough road...It's probable rather than possible that they will experience abuse, harassment and discrimination."

With few exceptions, mainstream services had not had conversations about supporting LGBT young people or challenging homophobia. Nor were they aware of basic research evidence on LGBT young people's experience. Alarming, most could not identify an appropriate state or territory-wide organisation that could provide information, support and/or secondary consultation.

A rural youth worker summed up a common response: "I haven't seen anything about this...The best I could do is probably get online if I had a young person come out..."

At best mainstream services said they would work out what to do if a young person "came out", yet honestly don't expect any to do so anytime soon. In rrr mainstream Australia LGBT young people are largely invisible. The audit in most rrr locations was clear: "There are no support mechanisms for young gay and lesbian people [here]..."

Not that it's just about LGBT issues for rrr Australia. Generalist youth services are lacking full stop. As one rural worker said: "There are no generalist youth services and I think that is a real issue...So that makes it really hard for there to be any focus on these issues..."

Perhaps unsurprisingly supporting LGBT young people is not a high priority, despite the available, glaring research evidence. In modern day Australia, LGBT young people are, with few exceptions, only being supported when individuals go above and beyond (and sometimes outside) their role description. One rural worker explained: "It's because [Moir] and I have decided it's important and have lobbied our organisations to do the work...We've done that because nobody else is, not because we have particular knowledge and skills..."

As with schools, it's the 'occasional worker' rather than the mainstream service itself that is making all the difference for LGBT young people. It's sobering that this was exactly the case 10 to 15 years ago.

Whilst there were examples of mainstream services doing well, in modern day Australia they were few and, quite literally (geographically), very far between.

Thankfully it's clear from 100s of 'cuppas' that the overwhelming majority of places are one small investment of time, energy and resources away from providing basic support for LGBT young people and challenging homophobia. And the motivation is there. Lives are at stake. Quite literally: young people's lives.

In 2010 young people and rrr communities reported "it's about bloody time", that we "pulled our finger out" and just started.

Quick Facts

- Despite some exceptions, the overwhelming majority of mainstream services do not support LGBT young people, or know how to.
- At best support workers said they would "deal with it" if a student came out, not before.
- Most mainstream services reported wanting to know more about what they could practically do, yet not honestly knowing where to start.
- For more on the Modern Day (LGBT) Snapshot of Australia and/or Schools go to: www.thatssogay.com.au/findings
- For the latest research evidence about same sex attracted and gender questioning young people's experiences go to: www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay

The reality: services want to know more!



“...not on the radar...”: Missed (mainstream) opportunities

“But generally they are pretty straight places and they don’t want to deal with anything that’s not heterosexual...”
Rural worker, Queensland

FIRST, the good news:
the overwhelming majority of places are one small investment of time, energy and resources away from providing basic support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people and challenging homophobia.

NOW, the bad news:

Most mainstream services are not likely to make such an investment without prompting by an extraordinary staff member and/or client (typically LGB or T) or from an outside source (e.g. funding guidelines, sector leadership).

Virtually every mainstream service believed that, in theory, an LGBT young person could access their service. If they did, it would be entirely up to them and without encouragement. Over a Beyond ‘That’s So Gay’ “cuppa” most assessed themselves as “fairly gay (and lesbian) friendly”. Yet most reported not supporting LGBT young people, nor expecting to anytime soon.

So why then, aren’t mainstream services supporting LGBT young people right now?

THE HETEROSEXUAL ASSUMPTION

Most mainstream services assumed that all of their clients were heterosexual. Known as ‘heterosexism’, this practice means workers believe they’ll “know one when [they] see one” and/or someone’s L, G, B or T-ness will be announced to them.

One rural worker summed up the view of many others as to why LGBT support was virtually non-existent:

“Because the people who hold the power and the money for services are heterosexual...So it’s not a priority for them...The people who create the programs and have the funding don’t even think about [LGBT young people]...It’s not in their paradigm of thinking...”

INVISIBILITY (YOUNG PEOPLE)

Mainstream services are waiting for young people to come out as L, G, B or T before they will “do anything”. This approach is problematic given that most young people will not come out at school or in generalist services. Nor are they likely to be asked about it. When gently challenged, one rural worker summed up a common response:

“Maybe they are that way inclined and haven’t said it...I don’t ask any questions...”

Another said:

“It’s not something that comes up on the radar...Young people don’t identify any of their sexual stuff with us...”

(See Schools Summary on the dangers of ‘Waiting For Disclosure’)

INVISIBILITY (DATA COLLECTION)

Time and again those in positions of service influence pleaded ignorance based on their “available evidence”, as selective as that was at times. This continued, even when recent Australian evidence was offered. One non-east coast politician exclaimed frustration at statewide data collection:

“That level of invisibility [shakes head solemnly]...It’s not even a box that gets ticked: ‘have we considered LGBT people’...”

Yet those relying on data collection invariably admitted that, anecdotally at least, the quality of life for LGBT young people was a very real issue in their region.

NOT A PRIORITY

Especially in those areas where there was a general lack of services, mainstream services were clear this was not an issue for them. Each had a unique list of higher priority local issues, for example in rural WA:

“We have sexually abused kids, Muslim girls being abused, pregnant teens...The kids have to come to us if they need help...We need to see that there is a need, a sounding or a rumbling...”

This approach remains despite evidence showing LGBT young people are overrepresented in the higher priority areas they invariably describe. Many felt that LGBT young people would need a specific service anyway.

WORKER DISCRETION

Mainstream workers also talked of a hopeful assumption that supporting LGBT young people would be up to the discretion of each individual worker, referring to some diversity, respect or bullying policy. In practice they report that this is an approach that is failing, especially when every mainstream service could identify pockets of internal and unhelpful homophobic resistance.

Convincing mainstream services that they have a role to play in supporting LGBT young people in all parts of Australia is urgently necessary AND possible. Yet be warned: at times you just might feel like an Amway Salesman in doing so.



Mainstream (LGBT) Exceptions: Knowing Me, Knowing You...

"I think it's a total cop out if people say, 'We're not a gay and lesbian organisation so we can't do the work'... I personally think it's everyone's job... You don't have to be gay or lesbian to understand the issues..."

Regional mainstream worker, NSW

Again, the good news:

There are mainstream services that are meaningfully providing basic support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people and challenging homophobia locally.

NOW, the bad news:

This necessary work is happening almost exclusively because of an extraordinary staff member, volunteer or young person. Typically they are LGBT themselves.

So what separated mainstream services who did this work and those that didn't?

LGBT STAFF

Whilst many mainstream services can boast openly LGBT staff, very few can report LGBT staff who have managed to successfully progress and create ongoing attention and support to LGBT issues. Not that LGBT workers have not tried and failed all over Australia. Yet sometimes institutional homophobia is too big for one person. Says one regional worker:

"A couple of staff members had dabbled over the years in this area... But it kind of died because the energy wasn't there... I came in with a lot of passion and energy..."

Perhaps soberingly these staff invariably express surprise, almost as if they have gotten away with something. The same worker continues:

"As an organisation [they've] been surprisingly, for me, supportive of me and my role, and it's gradually becoming more and more enshrined in the machinery... to the point where I'd be confident that it would continue when I left..."

LGBT CLIENTS

Young people who are LGBT are also sometimes the catalyst for a mainstream service to support LGBT young people, typically in the form of a support group. For example, this regional worker explains:

"[Two young gay men] came up with the idea... I don't know why but they chose us... Those two guys facilitated for the first 5 years..."

In some cases this lasts as long as young people energy. Other times the mainstream service takes the young person's lead. The same regional worker again, post-original LGBT young people:

"I think it the past staff haven't been accepting of gay and lesbian people, because it didn't fit in with their own belief system... Where as now I'd say the staff are much more into advocating for gay and lesbian kids..."

LGBT LOVED ONES

Occasionally a mainstream worker will change their practice and be clear it is because of an LGBT loved one. For example, this regional educator:

"My brother's gay... He's about 10 years older than me... He came out when he was a teenager... So that's how I know about that [LGBT 'stuff']..."

In rural Victoria, the manager of a proactive mainstream service admitted:

"I think there's a whole lot of people who don't think it's an issue... But [there is little hope] if you don't have any personal connection to it..."

POCKETS OF MAINSTREAM SUPPORT

In many mainstream organisations workers have made a conscious effort to create pockets of LGBT support within an otherwise unsupportive, or ambiguously so, service. For example, this regional worker describes a common scenario:

"There is no homophobia in this part of the building... But..."

FACING 'OVERWHELM'

A fear of being the overwhelmed minority voice within a mainstream service or community, time and again, was identified as a reason for not taking LGBT action. One rural worker describes her fear:

"Mainly that the group who is homophobic would be too big and too strong... There is just enough of them that they can support their own views and drown you out..."

Those that don't assume they will be drowned out and challenge the silence and ignorance around them are getting results. For example this same worker post-Beyond 'That's So Gay' after minimal investment:

"This really works, what you are doing... it's great!... You are open, friendly, you have personality and energy and it just works..."

Although they reported being under-resourced, and often ill-equipped, to handle demand, LGBT-friendly supports were doing their best and making a difference. If every mainstream service took their simple, modest and humble lead then LGBT young people would have a vastly different quality of life. Not when it gets eventually, perhaps inevitably, better, but right NOW.

