



Better managing homophobia

SCHOOLS CAN BE DANGEROUS PLACES FOR SAME-SEX ATTRACTED YOUTH, BUT A NEW AUSTRALIAN SURVEY WILL MAP HOW POLICY CHANGES EMPOWER TEACHERS TO MANAGE HOMOPHOBIA, TIFFANY JONES AND KRISTY LEE TYRRELL REPORT.

School safety is a concern for any student. Despite years of research into bullying, some students remain bigger targets for bullying than others. Worse, some bullying remains more accepted. Homophobia is a common form of bullying, with 38 per cent of same-sex attracted youth reporting unfair treatment on the basis of their sexuality. With one in 10 students experiencing same-sex attraction nationally, this is a form of bullying that demands immediate attention from both school bodies and teaching staff.

Surveys conducted by the Writing Themselves In team, headed by Dr Lynne Hillier, at the Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University,

Melbourne, have provided startling evidence to support the need for greater intervention in schools. These surveys focus on the health and wellbeing of same-sex attracted youth aged between 14 and 21 across Australia, and allow the youth to describe their experiences in their own words. In 2005, 44 per cent of same-sex attracted youth reported verbal abuse and 16 per cent reported physical abuse because of their sexuality.

These figures are largely unchanged since the first national study in 1998. Perhaps most shocking is that 74 per cent of the youth surveyed who were abused experienced this abuse at school. Because of these experiences, school remains a dangerous

place for many same-sex attracted youth, particularly for young men.

As 14-year old survey respondent Jessica* reported, abuse included, 'Just people calling me names and saying I was gross and a freak and calling me gay or dyke.... And there's things written on toilet walls.'

Verbal abuse alone can be very damaging; however, in some cases, verbal abuse escalates to physical abuse. Overall, 15 per cent of young people reported being physically abused because of their sexuality, with 19 per cent of young men and 10 per cent of young women experiencing it. Reported abuse ranges from having clothes and possessions ruined to severe bashings, hospi-

talisation and rape, with reported abusers ranging from family members and fellow students to strangers.

In many cases abuse is part of an ongoing campaign of harassment by other students. School toilets are a particularly dangerous place for these young people. Andrew, aged 17 years, reported daily bashing and other humiliations. James, 18, reported, 'I was cornered in the school toilets and three guys took turns punching the s*** out of me.' Besides school toilets, abuse occurs in school corridors and stairways, the playground and even in classrooms.

The good news from the Writing Themselves In team surveys is that teachers have the power to make a big difference in the lives of same-sex attracted students. Many resources have been invested in schools, while targeted professional development and community development programs have helped teachers to promote the acceptance of diverse gender and sexuality expression and reduce homophobia in the school culture. Positive changes have included an increase in the number of young people reporting feelings of safety at school, receiving support from school staff and receiving useful information at school.

Unlike the 1998 study, in 2004 a number of young people gave examples of ways in which teachers helped them feel safe and supported, and reported many instances of teachers working to address homophobia in their schools. Paul, 18 years, reported the influence of 'the most excellent Ms Smith.' 'She opened my eyes, and studying queer theory gave me a lot of confidence, to the point where I can now brush homophobic comments off, and even retort with confidence.'

While such examples of support in the past were sporadic and often based on an individual teacher's sense of social justice, the provision of education in Australia for same-sex attracted and gender diverse youth is presently undergoing a change. Most striking is the recent release of the new national goals for education by the Ministerial Council on Education, Early

Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA). The first goal – 'Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence' – outlines a commitment from all governments to ensure an education service free from discrimination based on 'sexual orientation,' amongst a list of other traits.

State-specific education policies protecting youth with diverse sexualities are also starting to emerge. A standout is the Supporting Sexual Diversity in Schools policy of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The Supporting Sexual Diversity in Schools policy calls for an inclusive approach to supporting same-sex attracted students, and their families, in all Victorian public schools. As an active, explicit and multifaceted attempt to redress homophobia, it recommends:

- school leadership teams and teaching and student support staff model exemplary behaviour
- the fostering of a culture of openness and a celebration of diversity, and of expected behaviours, in the total school community
- immediate attention to issues caused by peer pressure, social stigmatisation or bullying, following existing school governance procedures
- the application of existing DEECD policies and support materials on bullying, discrimination and inclusive sexuality education
- recognition for same-sex attracted young people as an everyday part of the school's social mix, and
- respect for students who choose to remain unidentified, by making information and contacts related to support services readily available.

Teachers have often complained about having their hands tied when it comes to homophobic bullying. There's been uncertainty about the process for engaging with these sorts of issues – or indeed if they could be engaged with at all. Goals like MCEECDYA's and policies like the Victorian DEECD's empower Australian teachers

to deal with homophobia more directly in their classrooms and elsewhere while they're on duty. They also emphasise the importance of a school-wide consideration of the diversity of students an institution caters to.

The Writing Themselves In research team is about to launch the third national survey on same-sex attracted young people this month, with more questions on education and school experiences this year, in an effort to investigate the effect of such goals and policies. This survey provides the chance for students to have their say and for teachers to encourage them to 'write themselves in.' To find out how you and your students can participate in the third national study on the health and wellbeing of same-sex attracted young people, visit www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay **1**

* Names have been changed.

Kristy Lee Tyrrell is part of the Writing Themselves In 3 research team at the Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University, Melbourne.

Tiffany Jones is completing her PhD on education policy and youth sexualities, and was the 2006 Griffith University Medal winner.

Photo by courtesy of stock.xchng

REFERENCES

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2008). Supporting Sexual Diversity in Schools. Available at www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/supportsexualdiversity.pdf*
- Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs. (2008). Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation. Available at www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf*