



Introduction

In many schools, same-sex attracted young people are completely invisible. The invisibility of these students in schools is reinforced by an absence of discussion on and engagement with the issue of homosexuality. This is despite recent Australian studies (Hillier, Warr and Haste: 1996; and Lindsay, Smith and Rosenthal: 1997) that have identified that 11% and 8-9% of secondary school students (respectively) are not exclusively attracted to people of the opposite sex.

Despite the invisibility of the majority of same-sex attracted youth, direct and indirect homophobic harassment, prejudice and violence is a common experience of many. These experiences can lead to a range of significant negative impacts, including alienation from school and community, mental health concerns, and other health consequences. This resource provides a brief overview of the research and issues pertaining to same-sex attracted young people and their experiences of schooling. It forms the first part of a package of resources from the SSAFE (Same-Sex Attracted Friendly Environments) in Schools Project, and is aimed at supporting schools in developing whole-school approaches to health and well-being of students that are inclusive of the needs of those students who are same-sex attracted.

The research and issues presented in this document must be understood in conjunction with the legislation, principles and policies pertaining to education in Victoria at this time. Victorians want and expect that every young person have the right to a relevant, affirming education in a safe, supportive learning environment, free from prejudice and discrimination. These rights are enshrined in a raft of laws and policies that are described in the second booklet of this resource. Faced with the evidence presented below, it is incumbent on all those who work in and with schools to ensure that these laws and policies are upheld.

The school experiences of same-sex attracted young people

It is important to note at the outset that there are gender differences in the way that homophobia, and indeed homosexuality, are experienced in schools. Hillier *et al* (1998), for instance, found that young men experienced more verbal abuse than young women (52% versus 39%), and that young women experienced a greater lack of appropriate safe sex information than young men. The similarities in the experiences of these young women and men, however, outweigh the differences, and the solutions required in schools are similar for both sexes.

Harassment, violence and abuse

Hillier *et al* (1998), in the largest Australian study on same-sex attracted young people (SSAY) to date, found that they were exposed to 'extreme' levels of verbal and/or physical abuse because of their sexuality. The major findings in relation to this are summarised below:

- * 46% had been verbally abused (including threats of violence)
- * 13% had been physically abused (single incidents to "systematic abuse")
- * 69% of this abuse happened at school
- * 3% said the abuse came from teachers (60% from other students)
- * 14% felt unsafe or very unsafe at school

(1998: 33)

Many SSAY felt as unsafe at school as they did in the street, and part of the reason for this was that schools were not seen to adequately challenge homophobia. Consider the quote below:

"There was evidence that if assault or harassment occurred, procedures and practices would not be set in motion to ensure justice or to prevent such behaviour recurring. A number of students commented on the inconsistencies between their schools' dealings with racism and sexism as opposed to heterosexism. In many cases, little was seen to be done by school authorities to address the hostility that was directed at gay, lesbian or bisexual students. One student asked: "Why isn't gay hatred educated against like racism in schools?" (Hillier et al 1998:38)

Similarly, in another study into the experiences of gay and lesbian Victorians, 'Gay Men and Lesbians Against Discrimination' (GLAD, 1994) found that:

with regard to discrimination in education, (that) younger people were more likely to report harassment or homophobic behaviour than older respondents and...that this suggested that schools and universities were condoning and even promoting unfair treatment. 47% of respondents aged under 20 reported being harassed during their education, as did 21% of those aged between 20 and 29. (1994:9).

The Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (VGLRL), in a follow-up study to the GLAD report published in 2000, found little change in the reported level of harassment and discrimination occurring in schools.

In related research Plummer (1999) states that homophobia is "learned" in the primary school playground. Whilst drawing a distinction between the extreme violence of the schoolground and the milder harassment occurring in the classroom, he found homophobia to be endemic to both areas of the school.

Discrimination

Of the 750 respondents in the Hillier *et al* study, 29% felt they had been unfairly treated or discriminated against as a result of their sexuality. A further 33% said discrimination on these grounds was not possible *because no one knew that they were not heterosexual* (Hillier *et al*, 1998:33).

Anecdotal data from the SSAFE project and elsewhere informs us that a number of young people have been forced to change schools as a result of homophobic experiences, or have dropped out of school altogether.

Curriculum

GLAD (1994:9) reported that respondents under the age of 20, and between 20 and 29, were most likely to report being given materials containing statements hostile to gay men or lesbians. The range of unfair or discriminatory treatment was wide, generally consisting of teachers or other students targeting the respondent as "effeminate" or "butch" and ridiculing their "difference". Again the VGLRL follow-up study (2000) found little change in the reported levels of discrimination occurring in education environments.

Respondents in both the Hillier *et al* and GLAD studies reported experiencing an almost total absence of discussion about homosexuality in the formal school curriculum.

Several writers have noted that where homosexuality is discussed in curriculum, it is generally in the context of HIV/AIDS education (Harrison and Hay, 1997; Seal, 1999; VGLRL, 2000). Whilst it is clearly appropriate that discussion of sexuality takes place as part of a comprehensive approach to HIV/AIDS prevention, relegating discussions of homosexuality only to this arena runs the risk of conflating homosexuality and AIDS. For those young people coming to terms with a non-heterosexual orientation this framing of their sexuality within a discourse of disease may have damaging consequences.

It is likely that the approach to discussion of homosexuality in curriculum is generally presumptive of the heterosexuality of students. Seal (1999) describes the experience of a young gay man whose Human Relations teacher at school had asked "Any gay or lesbian people in the room could you put up your hands please?" When no hands were lifted, the teacher said "Well, we don't have to talk about that then do we?" Even well-meaning teachers attempting to challenge homophobia amongst students may unwittingly victimise same-sex attracted students in the classroom by generalising about the experience of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals as victims of prejudice, who are at higher risk of suicide and other self-harming behaviours, or by bringing to the surface the homophobic attitudes of other class members. An inadequately resourced teacher's attempts to challenge homophobia in the classroom may exacerbate both the finger-pointing and insinuation same-sex attracted students experience and their sense of isolation from other students.

Health, Welfare and Student Support

Hillier *et al*, GLAD and VGLRL all document inadequate and inappropriate responses from teachers and other staff members to the homophobic experiences of same-sex attracted students. These ranged from "turning a blind eye" when other class members displayed derogatory attitudes towards gay and lesbian issues or participants (VGLRL:2000) and not taking the experience of anti-lesbian or anti-gay harassment seriously, even where counsellors were available to help students experiencing difficulties (GLAD:1994), to active participation in the abuse (GLAD:1994).

Hillier *et al* (1998) found that a minority of same-sex attracted students disclosed their sexuality to staff members at their schools (5% to a student welfare co-ordinator, 14% to other teachers, 1998:56). Three-fifths of teachers and two thirds of student welfare co-ordinators were found to be supportive when a disclosure was

made. Whilst it is clearly positive that the majority of school staff approached were supportive, this must be balanced with the disappointingly low number of disclosures being made. Making disclosures of this kind may be perceived by same-sex attracted young people as taking a risk because staff are rarely seen to be proactive on the issue. Hillier *et al* (1998:56) noted that "School counsellors and welfare officers, who are officially there for this type of support, and other adults in the school system generally had the reputation of not keeping a confidence".

With the release of the Suicide Prevention – Victorian Taskforce Report in 1997, and the subsequent creation of the Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Government Schools (Department of Education, 1998) and funding of School Focussed Youth Services, schools have been recognised as a major site for the prevention of youth suicide, and the identification, assessment and support of at-risk individuals. There is now a large amount of indisputable evidence linking the difficulties that young people have in developing a positive gay, lesbian or bisexual identity in a homophobic culture with an increase in suicide risk (Gibson, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1994; Rotheram-Borus *et al*, 1994; Ryan and Futterman, 1998; Remafedi, G., 1994; Bagley and Tremblay, 1997, Remafedi *et al*, 1997; Howard and Nicholas, 2000). The data from Hillier *et al*, GLAD, and VGLRL, as well as from my own experience and the anecdotal data, suggests that not only are many schools failing to fulfil their role in suicide prevention with these young people, some are implicated in increasing the risk for a group of isolated and vulnerable students. A respondent in the VGLRL study stated,

"Throughout high school I was severely bullied by other students and teachers. I was identified as a 'fucking poofter' and verbally and physically assaulted every day for years which included threats with knives and severe bashings. This misery had a severe effect on my school work and led to constant thoughts of suicide and a suicide attempt. In all that time, I had no assistance from the school authorities. Several teachers actively participated in the abuse and the school view was that it was all my own fault" (2000:32).

Invisibility and Isolation

It is important to note that whilst many young people experience bullying and harassment at some stage in their school career, the majority are likely to be able to talk to parents or other trusted individuals in order to receive support and understanding. In the case of those young people harassed on ethnic, cultural or religious grounds, for instance, family members may be able to directly empathise with their experiences.

In many instances, lesbian and gay students are made more vulnerable than other young people because parents and other trusted adults may not be aware of the sexuality of the young person, and may indeed display homophobic attitudes or behaviours themselves. This increases the likelihood that prejudice experienced in the school environment will impact negatively on their mental health.

Resistance

Whilst the experiences of gay and lesbian young people in schools appear to be overwhelmingly negative, there is also clear evidence that many young people can minimise the impact of homophobic experiences on their lives by framing homophobia as the problem in their lives, rather than homosexuality per se. Hillier *et*

al (1998:36) found some young people used quite sophisticated discourses around homophobia to achieve this, and to deflect negative attitudes and behaviours back to their homophobic source.

Outside school

The experiences of same-sex attracted young people in schools and elsewhere are implicated in a host of other health concerns. These include higher levels of homelessness (Hillier, Matthews and Dempsey, 1997), higher levels of drug and alcohol use (Lindsay, Smith and Rosenthal, 1997), higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation (see above), and lower levels of safe sexual practice, leading to higher levels of STI infection (Lindsay, Smith and Rosenthal, 1997).

Other members of school communities

Thus far, this paper has focussed on the experiences of same-sex attracted young people in schooling. We know that the majority of these young people experience school as a homophobic environment, in which they are either on the receiving end, or are invisible with regard to their sexuality. We know that the majority of the homophobia comes from fellow students, and that some comes from teachers. And we know that these young people feel that the response of their schools is generally inadequate. Now we'll look at the experiences of others in the school community.

Students

Rich (1980) coined the term 'compulsory heterosexuality' and has argued that through curriculum and elsewhere schools teach, and enforce, heterosexuality amongst students. The term is also useful to describe the pressure on all young people in schools to demonstrate their heterosexuality in order to 'fit in' in the school environment. In Plummer's 1999 study, homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual young men all identified schools as homophobic environments, and all said that at one time or another they had experienced homophobia whilst at school (1999:89). This was evident across Catholic, other independent, and government schools, co-educational and single-sex, in urban and rural areas.

Whilst there is ample evidence of this type, there is also significant research from evaluations of anti-homophobia programs to show that the homophobic attitudes of students can be challenged and changed. Harrison and Hay (1997) found that whilst students in the four schools they studied "generally articulated quite firmly entrenched homophobic attitudes, particularly towards gay men" (1997:16) there was "encouraging evidence" that a comprehensive approach to sexuality education that included appropriate discussion of homosexuality enabled students to rethink some of their previous attitudes towards homosexuals. They also found that it was useful to equate homophobia with other forms of discrimination, and that many students wanted further discussions of, and information about, homosexuality from classroom teachers.

Both Harrison and Hay (1997) and Harrison and Dempsey (1998) found that while the process of engaging students with issues around sexual identity was new, students engaged well in such activities, often demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the issues. Harrison and Dempsey also found that students had

particular views about the types of teachers who made good health educators. The qualities they looked for were tolerance, understanding, and the ability to cope with a wide range of views in discussion.

Teachers

Teachers are a part not only of school communities, but also of the general community, and their opinions and attitudes towards homosexuality are as complex and diverse as those expressed anywhere. The expectations on teachers to have a *particular* opinion, and to express that in particular ways (or perhaps not at all) are, however, much higher than for the majority of the community. Teachers may struggle with offering support to same-sex attracted students and challenging homophobia in the broader student body when the majority of people in the community either ignore the problem of homophobia, or appear to support the inequity. Harrison and Hay reported that teachers struggled with teaching against homophobia because of students' negative attitudes (1997:17), and found that whilst 'catering to individual needs of all students' was perceived by teachers to be a commendable goal, this was difficult to achieve in practice (1997:36).

Talking Sexual Health (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 1999:59), the national framework for education about sexual health, notes that many teachers feel inadequately prepared for dealing with the complexity of issues involved in delivering comprehensive sexuality education.

Parents

With issues such as homosexuality, many schools err on the side of conservatism, in the belief that this is taking parents opinions into account, or respond to a small number of complaints rather than asking for the opinions of all parents. Engaging parents in discussion provides the opportunity to focus on safety and welfare issues in schools, on homophobia as a suicide risk, and on real research to counter fears that young people can be 'recruited' to sexuality, and to educate around diversity.

In 1994, the then Victorian Federation of State Schools' Parents Clubs (now Parents Victoria) included action items of policy in their VFSSPC Policy and Procedures Manual that lend support to schools wanting to work around sexual diversity. Consider the special action item below:

Special Action Items.

5. Homosexual Students.

That Federation enter into discussion with Gay and Lesbian groups and other relevant organisations to ascertain the problems of homosexual students with the aim to: -

- a. Pass on information and promote discussion.
- b. Formulate appropriate policy.
- c. Make suitable recommendations to the Minister for Education.

(VFSSPC, 1994)

Parents Victoria have been active participants on the SSFAFE in Schools reference group, working to support schools in developing comprehensive programs that support same-sex attracted youth and challenge homophobia.

Creating Safe School Environments : What's Working In Australian Schools, the report from a conference held by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) in May 1998 states "There is a clear need for schools to develop and implement policies and programs to promote acceptance of same-sex attracted school community members and to eliminate homophobia" (ACSSO, 1998:20).

ACSSO, as the national peak body of school councils, "recommends this publication as a resource for parents and members of school councils and boards to stimulate discussion and promote awareness of the importance of social processes in creating safe and supportive school environments" (1998:4).

Talking Sexual Health: A Parents Guide (Jones, Mitchell and Walsh, 1999), was written and developed in consultation with members of ACSSO, the Australian Parents Council, the Association of School Councils in Victoria, and several other organisations, as a resource for schools implementing the new national framework for education about sexual health. The booklet explains the negative impact that discrimination and prejudice can have on a young person who is gay, and provides advice on how parents can support a daughter or son who is gay, as well as contact details of support services.

Discussion

The research discussed in this document demonstrates clearly that same-sex attracted students exist in Victorian schools, and that for many of them school is a negative, even dangerous, environment, in which they are actively disadvantaged.

Key issues arising from the research that must be addressed by schools are as follows:

- as well as being "invisible" in curriculum, same-sex attracted young people's experiences of prejudice and harassment are minimised or ignored;
- invisibility in curriculum means that same-sex attracted youth do not receive important information that would support their health and well-being;
- the negative experiences of same-sex attracted students are implicated in their increased risk of suicide;
- schools have a responsibility towards the prevention of youth suicide;
- students respond positively to curriculum that is inclusive of discussion around sexual orientation, and many students want more such discussion;
- teachers feel inadequately prepared and resourced for implementing inclusive curriculum;
- organisations representing parents expect that same-sex attracted students are provided with safe, supportive learning environments free from harassment and prejudice.

Rather than being a problem of any particular population within school communities, the inability of schools to adequately cater to same-sex attracted students seems to be a systemic one, and to demand a systemic response. Part Two of the SSAFE in Schools resource will begin to explore the options available to schools wishing to develop a systemic response, by outlining the policy and legislative frameworks extant in schools today.

This paper is an adaptation of the Masters of Social Science thesis –

Seal, I. *Abused, Ignored or Included? Developing Supportive Environments for Lesbian and Gay Students in Victorian Secondary Schools* RMIT, 2002.

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Further research

A more detailed summary of relevant research is available at Family Planning Victoria's SSAFE in Schools website at

www.ssafeschools.org.au

The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society continue to produce research focussed on same-sex attracted youth. Visit them at

www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay