



Introduction

This fourth booklet from the SSAFE in Schools Whole School Resource documents school based practice in supporting and affirming sexual and gender diversity. It includes copies of the speeches given by several of the schools who presented at the 'Class Act' conference organised by the SSAFE Project in May 2003. Participants at the conference included students, teachers, principals, student welfare coordinators, academics and parents representatives, youth and community workers. The purpose of the day was to facilitate ongoing communication between schools around working with same sex attracted youth and to model good practice in relation to supporting sexual diversity.

Sue Dyson was the official observer and note taker at the conference and here are some of the key themes she recorded that emerged in regard to school based practice-

- The work feels like it is breaking new ground
- Homophobia occurs not only in the student body, but in the staff, the system and in families
- Heterosexism and stereotypes are a concern
- Change can happen, but it is slow and incremental (often instigated by past or present students)
- Leadership by key decision makers is important in implementing programs in schools, but often it is driven by committed individuals and groups
- It can be hard, tiring work to establish a climate of support and acceptance
- Communication is important in bringing about the kinds of change needed to challenge homophobia
 - Teachers need skills to communicate with same-sex attracted students
 - Messages conveyed at the organisation level
 - Visible resources, brochures, posters, gay flag etc
 - Library displays that are inclusive of sexual diversity
 - Policies to eradicate homophobia need to be developed and communicated
 - Students encouraged to seek support and communicate
- Professional development is important to enable staff to understand and deal with issues (to prevent homophobia and support students)
- Collaboration with community agencies important – SSAY support groups, community health, counselling etc. Also gay/straight alliances
- Country schools may face difficulties due to lack of privacy and isolation
- Important to respond to homophobia when it happens (intervention) and have programs to prevent it by making harassment and bullying unacceptable at all levels
- Change in early secondary schools is important. Senior secondary is too late – behaviors entrenched

The following section includes copies of the speeches given by some of the young people and the parents who spoke about the experiences of same sex attracted students, along with speeches from most of the schools who presented on the day, and summaries of the main themes that emerged.

Hearing from young people and a mother of a young person about school experiences of same sex attracted students:

SSAFE recognizes the importance of giving same sex attracted students the platform to voice their experiences within the education system. While each story is unique, there are often common themes in the experience of same sex attracted students. Some of these that arose on the day of the conference are summarised below -

- Its not easy being different in a climate tolerant of homophobia
- Homophobia is hurtful to the people who are the target and those on the periphery
- It can cause disruption to education
- Same-sex attracted students can be invisible to others and suffer in silence
- There is a lack of support
- Lack of intervention and silence in the face of homophobic language or behavior is harmful. "People left me alone - so I was alone"
- There are implications for mental health. It can be a "dark, black and scary" experience that can result in depression or suicidal behaviors
- Negative behavior can be a defense against the pain and anger that results from being the victim of homophobia
- Same-sex attracted youth don't need to be out but they do need to know there is support if they need it.
- School can be a lifeline for young people whose families are not supportive

The section below includes copies of some of the speeches from the people who talked at the SSAFE conference.

CHRIS HALLAM is 17 years old. Chris left school largely due to the homophobia he was experiencing. He is returning to school later this year. His speech follows:

When I attended secondary school I had to change schools after my first year due to acceptance issues, and the lack of knowledge about homosexuals and homosexuality.

I knew I was different as did everyone else but none of us knew exactly what it was. Becoming a homosexual and believing within myself is what I thought the answer was. I truly believed that I could handle everything that came along with being attracted to the same sex such as the gay bashings, the thought of us being AIDS spreaders and us being looked down upon and being disrespected in the community. But the pressure and depression took over.

No matter what any same sex attracted youth tells you, you will never know how disgusting high school machos can and will make you feel. At the school I attended in Year 7 I know for a fact that there was not enough supports in the place and the teachers had no control and couldn't look out for all their students equally. With all the high school machos running around really made me think if I

could seriously complete my secondary school years at this school. I came to the conclusion that I had to change schools so I decided to change to a semi-private college that had more supports in place due to the extra funding.

Year 8: a new school a new beginning. Everything was great at the start of the year because, I was masking my true self. Hiding from the humiliation of being gay. I loved life and I wasn't thinking about who I really was. My marks were great and from the outside I looked like a normal teenage boy, but on the inside it was black, it felt as if the grim reaper had taken my soul. Semester two I couldn't handle leading a double life anymore. Acting differently towards my family was really hard because my family had no idea what I was going through and they didn't see the real me. This time I knew exactly who I was, yes I was different but I don't think any same sex attracted youth should be labeled as a freak.

My family and I knew that it was going to get worse from here. Not knowing if you want to become the person you are, is a very hard and emotionally time and for me it was self-destructive and as well as demoralising. My mood swings had become worse as did they thoughts of suicide, loneliness and love. I was thinking of:

- Suicide because I felt like I was disappointing my family and I felt so isolated from the world
- Was anyone out there who really cared? Loneliness took over as well as total numbness. Did anyone love me, did anyone care, did I have a purpose?
- All I wanted to feel was love and I didn't feel anything but dark and scary thoughts for the next 18 months

Year 9: the year of coming out but still not accepting it within myself. The teachers who had taught or known me from the previous year and three teachers in particular took me under their wings and supported me through the tough times and who I shared the happy times with. They were the teachers I was the nastiest too and the nicest too. They could handle my manic mood swings and accepted the fact that my behavior was a defense force. These teachers were so supportive they even came to watch a sporting event of mine.

I was getting bullied hard that year and terrible rumors about me were being spread. Some true and some were evil and really hurting. My marks were dropping dramatically I just didn't want to live anymore. So I decided to drop out. I was running away from what was a serious and potentially dangerous problem.

A lot of water has gone under the bridge since the December of 2001, and thanks to a few teachers, my family, my friends and the support I had already had in place for understanding me and helping to make my life something instead of non-existent.

Here is a short poem, which would like to share with you all, and helps to reflect upon those torturous years...

They can say anything they want to say,
Try to bring me down,
But I will not allow,
Anyone to succeed hang a cloud over me,
And they can try,
Hard to make me feel that I,
Don't matter at all,
But I refuse to fault,

In what I believe or loose faith in my dreams,
Cause there's a light in me that shines brightly.
They can try,
But they can't take that away from me,
They can do anything they want to you if you let them but they wont ever win,
If you cling to your pride and just push them aside,
See I have learned there's an inner peace I own,
Something in my soul,
That they cannot possess,
So I wont be afraid and the darkness will fade,
Cause there's a light in me that shines brightly,
They can try,
But they can't take away form me.

Now from my years of experiencing I have learnt that life is a gift even though it can be hard at times we must learn to love it, and that we are all actors of our lives and the director of our destiny so make peace with yourself and really start believing in other and most of all believe in yourself. I know that every same sex attracted youth out there can make it! So cling to your pride it will help you survive.

JEN BLYTH is 23 years old. She is studying Youth Work, works at Knox Youth Services and with the Purple Bus magazine, a magazine for and by same sex attracted youth. Her speech follows:

Like a lot of young people, the events that defined my secondary school life didn't happen in the classroom. They happened in the school yard - recesses, lunch times and waiting for the bus after school. For me, that's where the most significant lessons were learned.

I'd already lost any chance I ever had of being 'popular' by the middle of my first year at high school. Being 'teacher's pet', good at maths and in the school band was more than enough to ensure a lifetime ban from the 'cool group'. Did I care one tiny scrap that these shallow people who valued things like wearing the right clothes or make-up didn't want to know me? I sure did. For some reason, I wanted very much to be near the 'leader' of that group - to have her like me. In year 7, it would have been enough just to have her notice me.

I can't remember homosexuality being mentioned at all in any of my classes, most notably sex education in year 8 science. This was before my school had the resources to run a 'Health and Human Relations' subject which was introduced a few years later, of which my younger sister had the privilege of undertaking. On subsequent consultation with her, homosexuality wasn't mentioned in any capacity in this subject either. This science class was a memorable moment; not so much for the content that was discussed, but for the contraceptive demonstration, when our science teacher realised that she was short a few condoms and announced that it would have to be 'one between two'.

Of course homosexuality was mentioned often enough in the school yard; 'faggot' was a very popular insult when I was in year 12. It was a rare moment that some guy from any year level wasn't a 'faggot' for some reason or other. The use of this term generally invoked raucous laughter from the peer group and anyone within earshot, followed by a physical retribution from the poor 'faggot', to prove that he wasn't.

Girls who didn't fit the stereotype of how a young woman should look or act were automatically the butt of lesbian jokes, even if they had male partners. Socially, not having a boyfriend made you a target, not wanting one made you an outcast.

When I was in year 12, my girlfriend and my sister were both seeing the school counselor when I realised I was gay so I figured I didn't need to. I didn't have a problem with it - I was perfectly happy finally having the pieces fit.

I've spoken to students from that school who've come after me, that have been brave enough not to hide their sexuality. They've spoken of harassment, discrimination and assault, in terms of social interaction in the schoolyard, and within the classroom in terms of their work.

I was spared direct discrimination on the basis of my sexuality at secondary school. Sure, it was present in the heterosexism that is rife in our society today, but I avoided it personally, by the narrowest of margins. My sister didn't escape it - somehow people found out that I was gay, and she was labeled a lesbian by association. She faced verbal and threatened with physical assaults, discrimination by her peers and staff members, all in the presence of teachers who chose to turn a blind eye.

Homophobia affects everyone, not just same-sex attracted students. In a piece I wrote for the gay & lesbian youth magazine 'Purple Bus', I outlined some strategies for overcoming ingrained cultural homophobia that is largely perpetuated by the education system in this country. These included:

- Being inclusive of SSAYP's needs in the curriculum
- Include issues related to being same-sex attracted in class, and
- Provide a representation of being same-sex attracted as natural and healthy

I'm aware of some of the great work already being done around addressing homophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in schools. I urge the teachers sitting in this room to take this information back to their schools and use it.

As Nelson Mandela stated:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

SHARYN is the mother of Liam, a young gay person who attends school in Melbourne. Her speech follows:

I'd like you to know a little about what it has felt like to be a mum whose child's life has been turned around through a fantastic school.

In 1999 Liam finished primary school with a glowing report. We then moved to a rural area and Liam attended the local high school. In this environment, Liam's academic performance became very measured; in essence, he made sure that he performed only in those subjects, Math's and P.E, perceived to be 'blokey'. The content of his English work was often barely appropriate. Sometimes it was positively misogynistic, yet in the past he had long displayed a deeply held sense of justice concerning issues of gender.

I suspected that he was trying to conform to a particularly rigid masculinity code.

Unfortunately, I did not connect this suspicion with the hidden inner-turmoil Liam was experiencing (and there were other deeply grave and hidden issues which led to his eventual breakdown). It was not until the early weeks of Year 9 that he experienced Depressive crisis and I learned the depths of his despair.

Liam was hospitalized. We later made an attempt to begin to return to his local school. Liam became the first and only openly gay citizen in that school and town. The school welfare officer told us that the school had a considerable group of same-sex attracted students. Sadly, because of the climate of intense fear in the town, each was entirely isolated from the others.

Through his involvement in a suburban support-group for same-sex-attracted young people, Liam became aware of an outer suburban state school at which it was possible to be openly gay and unharrassed. At a time when the 'blackness' of Depression seemed almost absolute, Liam was able to identify a single ray of sustaining hope: this fabled school. I was taken aback by the smoothness of the resulting liaisons between the community health worker and the school welfare officer.

When Liam and I visited the school, Liam was still deeply depressed and barely able to make eye-contact with, must less display proper manners toward, the people in whom his single hope rested. I did not expect this well-regarded school to welcome by sick child. My understanding was that in today's climate, under pressure from parents seeking what they believe to be the best possible reputation for their child, schools are very fast to try to rid themselves of students with such unappealing characteristics as mental illness may bestow. I will never forget the sight of the school welfare officer bending down to my huddled and broken son and saying gently, "there is a place for you here."

I don't know how many of you come from schools that deal in delivering 'miraculous graces'! However, I wish to share with you what it is like to be the recipient of such compassion because I do think that the demonstration of such positive values as justice and tolerance is a very real measure of a school capable of truly great things.

Liam finished Year 9 with a glowing report, two academic awards for English and Drama, and an invitation to extend his Year 10 to some VCE. Which for me is the minor success of the story. What is far more priceless is that my young person belongs to an institution in which he has enormous faith (despite his childhood denying him faith in the protective value of the family, and his early adolescence denying him faith in the world as being friendly to his authentic self.) An institution that encourages and stimulates his intellectual and moral enquiry, which he loves passionately and with great pride. This is health promotion of the highest order.

Liam's class photograph is displayed in our kitchen and Liam enthusiastically introduces his classmates to visitors. The tone with which he describes these individuals fills me with pride – no physical characteristics draws his attention, and each person is described without reference to any social cliques or divisions. There are those individuals, like himself, who struggle with difficult life histories, and there are those who don't. What matters to them all, he says, is that each is respected by the others for their integrity, or in Liam's words, "Being" their own person. This tone of respect permeates the school. Almost a year since my first contact, I am still taken aback by the depth of courtesy and the deeply humane quality I meet there at every level of contact.

I suspect that the genuine academic vigor of the school lends itself to such positive values being imbued in the students. As I walk through this vibrant place it occurs to me what a one-dimensional thing bigotry is, and thus simply not that attractive to many of these engaged young minds. Of course, fabulous, experienced teachers are the major factor. In particular, the extraordinary effective work of the student welfare officer. And of course the school reflects a partnership with its community, in particular its parent-body and its health support agencies. It is a community this is educated, relatively artistic and affluent socially aware (although who can explain why they are such terribly rude drives or a motor care?)

I did some studies in adolescent health some years ago and I learned of the theory that young western nations like Australia are failing young people through an absence of shared cultural meanings. I believe it is schools like Liam's – schools who intellectual and moral vigor and vigilance extend to creating a community inclusive of compassion, justice, tolerance, diversity and individual integrity – which lights the future not only for an individual like my son, but truly, for us all

Someone needs to commission a study into the social wellness at my son's school!

Thanks to Chris, Sharyn and Jen for giving us permission to reproduce your speeches.

School based practice: the words from schools around Victoria

Copies of several of the speeches given by representatives from schools that presented at the conference are as follows. They are in the format given to us by each school, therefore the style or length are not consistent, but aims to capture what each school is doing to support sexual and gender diversity.

Bairnsdale Secondary College and the East Gippsland experience:

John Ireland from School Focused Youth Service, Lakes Entrance Community Health and Sandy Turvey the Welfare coordinator at Bairnsdale Secondary College presented around the work that is being done and the challenges faced in the East Gippsland area.

Factors Effecting East Gippsland:

- Isolation

East Gippsland consists of a number of small and very small communities spread over an area of 20,000 square kilometres. Almost 80% of the secondary schooling occurs in Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance, the smaller schools are at least an hour's drive from each other, and up to 3 hours from Bairnsdale.

- Community and School Attitudes

The small communities of East Gippsland, and to a lesser extent the larger ones tend to be mono-cultural, with little or no exposure to diversity and a limited understanding of those regarded as "different" from the community norm. In many ways, they retain an old fashioned perspective on the world which is seldom challenged. It is an anomaly that a number of openly gay and lesbian adult couples live in the area and are accepted but that gay and lesbian young people are not. Perhaps adults are judged more by what they do than who they are.

- Privacy in small communities

Small communities, while they may be supportive in times of crisis and need, also deprive citizens of personal privacy. This is not a malicious act, but a fact of life in a community where everyone's business is on show, and anonymity is impossible.

A visit to an individual by a gay or lesbian support worker would be around the town like wildfire.

- Transport issues

Public transport, when it exists, is usually a one bus per day schedule (we have no trains), and after hours travel is impossible. Young people are especially disadvantaged as they cannot drive, and the poor bus service is the only option. Leaving the local town for the evening to gain anonymity is not possible.

- Communication

Communication is improving, and is proving to be one of the few tools at our disposal for the support of sexually diverse young people. The advent of the internet has provided a means of young people getting in touch and seeking support from outside the area.

The result of all these factors is that most if not all same sex attracted young people live in their communities as unsupported outsiders, and tend to leave town at the earliest opportunity.

Strategies to support same sex attracted youth:

- Establishing a community/school network

Over the past few years, working group on adolescent sexuality was set up. This consisted of school welfare staff, community health and youth workers, and community members. This group has been active in promoting the issues of adolescent sexuality, and support for same sex attracted young people in schools.

- Working within the Schools Welfare network

In the past year, the work of the working group has been absorbed into the newly formed Schools Welfare Network.

- Raising the issues in other forums- community youth network meetings.

Outcomes:

- Whole School PD days in Bairnsdale Secondary College and Nagle College- the local Catholic College (70 % of secondary students in the Shire)
- Established links with Latrobe University and Family Planning Victoria
- Increased information into schools
- Increased resources into schools- books, posters etc.
- Issues raised in the context of school policy development eg bullying and harassment
- Information and guest speakers (eg Pflag) introduced to community networks

"On the ground" in the Bairnsdale Secondary College:

- Information has been collected following staff development day
- This will be analysed and strategies developed accordingly
- School bullying, harassment and sexual discrimination policies are being developed
- BSC welfare team providing access and support for students
- Students provided with resources developed by Wellington Shire sexuality project (Sale).

La Trobe Secondary College:

Desiree Smith (school nurse) and Geoff Allshorn (English co-ordinator) presented around the work La Trobe Secondary College is doing:

Project goal: To build, nurture and sustain an environment that supports sexual diversity.

How:

1. Challenging and demystifying societal beliefs
2. Addressing homophobia across the curriculum
3. Incorporating homophobia into bullying and harassment school policy

Background:

School staff observed the increased uses of language such as, 'that's gay' to bully, harass or to describe a negative situation. When students were challenged about the use of this language in this way it became clear that students had a clear lack of knowledge about same sex attracted issues or that their choice of language is in fact discriminatory.

From here concerned staff looked at how the school can address this issue. To increase awareness of same sex attracted issues a one off pilot session was held as part of yr 9 alternative health programs. The aim of the session was to observe the response of students when challenged about stereotyped views in the shape of a forum to openly discuss same sex attracted issues.

Project workers from the SSAFE project ran a 50min session that did just that. The response overall was positive (initially there was the uncomfortable behaviour – sniggering and comments etc) during and after the session. It appeared, by student responses, that they really had not had the opportunity to openly discuss or ask questions about same sex attracted issues. (One student was heard to say after the session 'those guys were all right') The purpose of this session was not to formally educate but start the ball rolling in terms of creating open dialogue around same sex attracted issues. It was not intended to formally evaluate this session but to simply observe and staff felt that the response of the students was enough to continue creating opportunities to address SSA issues.

From here:

- A focus group was formed and is made up at the moment of AP, SWC, SSN, teacher and health KLA teachers. We are looking to expand this to include a student and parent rep. Meetings are attended by SSAFE and SSA youth worker. This group meets once a term to discuss progress and forward strategies.
- Educating wider school community by means of regularly keeping parents a breast of work around supporting diversity via school newsletter.
- Information readily available for students and staff on health boards. In particular advertising SSA social and support youth groups such as Bit Bent and EGG etc. Also having 1 in 10 students SSA poster up around school.
- Teacher PD and support. This includes educating staff around SSA issues and strategies to challenge homophobic behavior.
- Sexual Diversity School audit, this included both staff and students. It was devised to assess how students feel the school has been dealing with homophobia and what areas need improving. Recommendations were then presented to the focus group for discussion and planning. Staff audit was taken from, Sexual Diversity School Audit, written by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society.

Addressing homophobia across curriculum:

- In 2002 LaTrobe implemented Mind Matters into their home group program. Within this framework students spent a term (1 period a week for 8 –9 weeks) working on issues around bullying and harassment. This gave rise to the opportunity to include homophobia and discussion of SSA issues. Although informally originally, due to the amount of interest this subject generated, in 2003 units from Talking Sexual Health were added to formally expand on some of the issues that came up the year before.
- Therefore this years bullying and harassment program expands on discrimination to include homophobia in the context of addressing diversity. See unit 3 Addressing Diversity, Talking Sexual Health.
- Within English KLA yr 11 students are reading Billy Elliot. Originally this novel wasn't chosen for the SSA discussion it evokes however it has opened the door for this to happen and has therefore been encouraged and supported by staff.
- Staff have had discussion around addressing SSA issues within the Health curriculum. Around being inclusive in language and action when studying health issues eg safe sex practices that include SSA safe sex methods etc

Incorporating homophobia into bullying and harassment school policy:

- Updating school policy to incorporate new legislation from the Equal Opportunity Act. This is work in motion and will be put forward at the next council meeting. Parents are updated on progress around the policy via the school newsletter.
- During sub school education of school policy around bullying & harassment, where staff go through the document and outcomes an activity from Talking Sexual Health has been added to hit home the impact of discrimination. The activity is called 'STEPPING OUT'

Success and brick walls:

So far so good!

The success of the work done so far has been a direct result of the dedication staff have towards combating this issue

- The support of upper management has made the suggestion and implementation of out there ideas a reality.
- The ability to access and utilise resources within the school. However this is something that didn't automatically happen it required persistence. For example advertising literature around SSA initially was torn down and would have to be replaced constantly now it is replaced with all the other literature.
- There has been an observed shift in culture. Students ask more questions and when challenged in the hallways about language. These are very subtle shifts but they are happening.

Issue of concern:

- Want it all done yesterday. Shifting beliefs not easy and is so time consuming. Slowly, slowly
- Teacher comfort levels. Teachers own values around homophobia may be challenged and if so how are they to advocate/educate when this is the case.

Saint Joseph's College, Geelong:

Terri Moyle the College Counsellor from Saint Joseph's College, an all boys Catholic Secondary School in Geelong talked about what her school had been doing to address issues of homophobia and support sexual diversity.

St Joseph's College has 1260 students from year 5 to 12. In preparing to speak at this conference I spent some time discussing, with our principal Paul Tobias, the history of how our school came to address the issues in focus today. It was a story I had heard when I first started at the College but after working for 3 years in the Joey's community it had a much deeper significance. I heard it with a different awareness which I have gained from the individual counselling work I do at SJC, from the boys willingness and openness to share their experiences.

Paul recalls that if there was one single event that truly kicked off the process of addressing proactively the issues of homophobia and the need to create a safe and friendly environment for all students, it was a letter received from a former student. The letter was addressed to the then principal Peter Cannon and was received in May 1998. I quote from this letter...

I started at SJC in grade 6 and graduated with HSC in 1980. Not many days passed during that time that I wasn't harassed, bullied, ostracised or generally mistreated due to what others perceived to be my sexuality. Even well before I reached puberty and started to gain an understanding of myself, of my sexual identity, I was labeled as the class poofter. Unfortunately, during this period I don't recall any time when the school effectively tried to deal with this situation, let alone help me come to terms with my sexuality.

...So I graduated from SJC a quiet ,conservative , shy man, confused about my sexuality and wounded by my experience at SJC...It was only 10 years and a nervous breakdown later that I finally came to terms with being a gay man.

Certainly the 1970's at SJC was a dark time and while I was totally uninvolved and unaware of the sexual molestation of boys that was going on at the time, I can also say that the school was at that time an extremely homophobic environment... There were probably 40-80 gay students, all of them experiencing the same oppressive, prejudiced and discriminatory environment during those formative years. My experience at SJC is unfortunate and has had a lasting impact on my life...

So I suppose the real purpose of this letter is to pose some questions. I have no inside information on how the school is currently performing on this issue. But I often wonder. I wonder for the sake of the students that are there at the moment, that they should not experience what I did. That they should not leave SJC emotionally damaged, confused, guilt-ridden and with an impression that their nature is essentially wrong, abnormal or second-class...

Please give some thought as to what SJC currently does to create an environment where every student, gay or straight, can grow naturally into a well-rounded happy individual...

Initial Response and Homophobia Taskforce:

This letter, very powerful in its' own right, also resonated with the experience of some staff at the time who were facing the reality of their own children being SSA. There was a general recognition, informed and highlighted by the bullying survey, that although physical bullying was not a frequent occurrence, verbal harassment was still a significant problem. It was recognized that boys who were perceived to be different were frequently the targets of this bullying and that the bullying often took the form of suggesting, in a disparaging manner, that the student was homosexual. The student body, to protect itself from these attitudes, developed a strong macho culture, which allowed only a very narrow definition of what it is to be male. The victims of the homophobic bullying were of course not necessarily SSA at all but those who did not fit the narrow definition. These boys included the academic achievers. Homophobic bullying was anti- academic; it was cool to be a fool, it was cool to be macho. With this understanding, and always trying to improve academic performance, the College was aware of yet another good reason to deal with this issue.

In response to this awareness the Homophobia Taskforce began meeting in November 1998. A group of interested people started meeting for breakfast occasionally. The purpose of the group was to gather information and resources, to talk about what was happening at our school, to look at policies, and to look at ways of tackling homophobia and raising awareness around homosexuality. Daniel Witthaus, who was at the time working with the Youth Services Unit at the City of Greater Geelong, began attending these meetings and provided fantastic information. He also expressed an interest in working with students. He developed a 6-week unit with a focus on difference, with a particular emphasis on masculinity and bullying.

In 1999 Daniel trailed a pilot of the program, *Pride and Prejudice*, with a Year 9 group at SJC. A member of our staff participated in these sessions. Daniel has since published and promoted this program. It has been evaluated and proved to make a significant difference to homophobic attitudes. Around this time Daniel was invited to speak to all staff. Having Daniel, a young, self-identified gay man speak to the staff about these issues was a powerful experience. Staff were clearly being challenged to confront their own prejudices. It became apparent that we did have an issue with the level of homophobia amongst staff. Paul invited Daniel to speak to other Deputy Principals in Christian Brother schools and Paul and Daniel together presented the work that was happening at SJC to meetings of Catholic DPs and Principals.

The taskforce continued to meet into 2000 and then the focus of SJC efforts moved more to Professional Development. Staff have attended a number of in-service activities and been challenged to look at their behaviors and attitudes and how these impact on the students. Insights have been developed and staff have had to move out of their comfort zones.

In November 2001 a small group of staff attended a conference called Sexual Identity, Diversity and Students in Catholic Secondary School presented by Dr. Maria Pallotta- Chiarolli who has worked for many years in Catholic Schools. In August 2002 the whole staff attended an in service presented on campus called *Safety in our Schools* presented by The Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society at La Trobe University. These PD s give staff not just ideas but the encouragement and support to tackle the issues. At the end of last term staff

from the College presented workshops to small groups of their peers. There were about 8 different workshops and Homophobic Bullying was one of those offered. Teachers discussed their experiences, what has worked for them, how they go about challenging inappropriate comments etc Keeping the issue on the agenda for staff has been an important part of our whole school strategy.

Strengths- Our Leadership, Paul and the Christian Brothers

I believe that the SJC community is extremely fortunate to have a Principal, Paul Tobias, and Deputy Principals who have been prepared to face the personal challenges that addressing these issues raises. Paul has acknowledged and explored his own homophobia. As a parent he has asked himself "How would I deal with the situation of one of my children being SSA?" His openness to contact with gay people and in particular his work with Daniel has influenced his perceptions and his attitudes.

Paul has been out there in his commitment to addressing this issue at our College. He has made many public statements about the inappropriateness of homophobic bullying and the consequences for young people. He has done this at school assemblies, at parent gatherings and in July 1999 sent a letter to all parents about Pastoral Care, which outlined specifically the concerns about homophobic bullying and the work of the taskforce. He explained that while Catholic teaching on homosexuality would be taught, the harassment of students who are different would not be accepted. The College has also been encouraged by the support and understanding shown by the Christian Brothers. They have acknowledged the damage being done to young people in our schools and are enthusiastic about our efforts to combat the problem.

Current Activities, Difficulties, Successes:

At the end of 2002 our year 9 HRT attended a two day in service to prepare them to present the Pride and Prejudice program. We are currently presenting this program to all our Year 9 students. Following a parent information evening recently where the P&P program was discussed some tensions have arisen. This comes as a result of a parent complaint and fear that the program promotes homosexuality. This is problematic within the context of our church community. However, our argument is strongly put that we are not interested in promoting lifestyles, we are however interested in promoting tolerance and that is clearly part of the Christian story. We continue in our communications with the church and with our local community to try to be open and clear about what we are trying to achieve. This problem is of course an example of the problem, as it exists in the community.

We constantly remind ourselves that the level of tolerance of homophobia in the community is quite high and that homophobia is perhaps a prevalent attitude in the homes of many of our boys. So expectations need to be realistic. We may never completely win the battle. In relation to the kids it is important for staff to remember that we are on about challenging beliefs and attitudes, not necessarily changing them, at least in the first instance. We feel it has been useful to take things slowly, to just chip away and to keep it on the agenda. Our College has been in active process on this issue now for 4 years. As a staff we have also developed an understanding that combating homophobia needs to happen every day and in every way, that it is not just about introducing a specific program. It is about how we talk to the boys, how we intervene when homophobic comments are made and how and what we teach.

There has been a very deliberate policy of introducing subjects, which don't fit the narrow definition of masculinity that had developed at the College. All students now take Music and Food Tech classes. The school has a number of bands that

tour and perform at events and assemblies. A musical is put on each year in cooperation with Sacred Heart College. These activities are given pride of place alongside other achievements in the academic and sporting fields and are recognized at award ceremonies and in school publications. The provision of other lunchtime activities apart from football or running around is an important message of acceptance of different needs and interests.

Counselling:

As the College Counsellor I have talked with many boys who have been hurt by bullying and some who are struggling with their sexual identity. Sometimes they are also suffering from homophobic bullying either at school or at home. I have been heartened by the level of acceptance and support that some SSA boys have described to me. They have found in the College a place where they feel they belong and they just get on with life at school.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would say that we still see too much homophobia acted out and sometimes we just feel tired from the work of challenging it. However more significant at SJC has been the development of the commitment and the confidence that we ought not to accept homophobia as a reality. We have worked with the belief that the best place to start the work is with your own staff, informing and challenging them. Our educative process means we are far more attuned to what needs to happen. Students know that certain behaviours are not acceptable. Staff know that they have an obligation to deal with such behaviours. There is a growing understanding that homophobic bullying is detrimental to all.

I believe that our biggest challenge at the moment is to incorporate the acceptance of sexual diversity into all areas of the curriculum; to develop teacher's awareness of how this can happen and to resource and share ideas. I believe the ground has been well prepared for this work and that staff and students will embrace the challenges involved.

Eltham High:

Brendan Monagatti (Student Welfare Co-ordinator) and Alexander Jenkins (student) spoke about the ways in which Eltham high is addressing the issues around sexual diversity.

Words from a gay student at Eltham High:

Queer. Poof. Dyke. Fag. Lesbo. Pillow Biter. Lemon. Muff Diver - all common pet names that my fellow homosexuals and I look forward to in everyday life.

I lived in Hobart up until eighteen months ago when I moved to Melbourne in pursuit of bright lights and superstardom. In Hobart, I went to an all boys public school – the largest of it's kind there, with 740 pupils attending daily. This school, while promoting individuality, was as close to a private school as you could get without actually attending a private school. A strict uniform policy, morals and decorum were heavily enforced to achieve an institution that the Department Of Education could be proud of.

Unlike the other students, I was gay - a solitary fag, right in the middle of a bunch of in denial athletes and in-the-closet chess players. Needless to say, my initial years at that school weren't too enjoyable – how could they be? Ignorant teachers and a lack of a sexual diversity policy in the curriculum just emphasised that nothing was going to change. When I left, teachers came to me; expressing

their concern that the gay 'ambassador' was hanging up his dancing shoes, and no-one would be around to fly the rainbow flag high.

The harassment never really bothered me, and staff members were personally supportive, but the students were another matter. Over time, I was the token gay guy that everyone came to, to 'try and experience' a bit of boy-on-boy action. Having found out a majority of the student population's deep, dark secrets, harassment ceased to exist as one of my ever-looming horrors of high school life.

They left me alone, so I was alone.

Then, I moved to Melbourne. And things were going to be different! My father searched for a gay-friendly school in the region. He found what he was looking for, and promptly discussed the suggestion with my mother and I. That school was Eltham High School - a school of over 1000, with no uniform and a reputable performing arts faculty, which is what I specialised in and was looking to further pursue a career in.

I was welcomed to Eltham High with open arms. I was so nervous, and my 'Agony Aunt' back in Hobart had told me to tone down the campy behaviour until I knew more about the student body. By the end of the second day of year eleven, I was the known gay guy who was to be all the girls' shopping pal, the drama department's prodigy and the guy that all the blokes actually embraced as a human being. I was so shocked - I was mates with the jocks, the commies, the geeks and even the goths! In fact, now, two of my best friends are gothic - a feat I never thought possible.

Eltham High School is so culturally diverse - broken down into so many different sub-groups. The school promotes individuality and through the hard work of a dapper, passive Assistant Principal and a freckle faced, God sent Student Welfare Coordinator, steps were taken to ensure that all were welcome at what has become the pioneer educational institution in GLBTI equality and acceptance.

I think the reason I've had no problems at Eltham High School is because of the policies in place. Students feel comfortable to be themselves. They're happier because of that, and therefore, are happier to embrace the social outcasts...like we homosexuals.

Teenagers need to know that being gay is OK. They need to know that as an adult, you will support them through all they will encounter in what are sure to be turbulent times in their life. Kids need someone to talk to - they need to feel safe. Acceptance, security and pride are all aspects that every school should embrace - Catholic, private, public, co-educational, whatever.

Adults have the power to make or break a kid - why stay silent or ignorant and watch them crumble in front of your eyes? Why not make a stand, and do something that could, ultimately change their life. They won't thank you for it - that will come when you see them walking down the street in ten years, holding hands with their partner. You will then know that you have helped to shape - and save - the life of one, single, gay kid.

Alexander Jenkins

The work of Eltham High:

Eltham High School is a mainstream school with 1300 students which has a reputation of being a tolerant school with a philosophy that promotes diversity.

We do not have a uniform to police, and we do not have to be concerned about jewelry, hair colors or school socks. We attempt to keep rules to a minimum and we have an enormous elective program at years 9 and 10.

The school, like other schools has a degree of homophobia. However, I believe that the staff and student body have in general become more supportive of same sex attracted people. Throughout the last ten years there have been several students at Eltham High who have felt able to come out as same sex attracted, and a couple of visible same sex relationships. More recently the school has had an increasing number of students who have felt they are able to be 'out' about their sexuality.

As a staff and school we have undertaken several things that have assisted this process of acceptance:

- We organised some professional development for all staff in which there were guest speakers and opportunity for staff to ask questions and create discussion.
- A library display on sexuality including a section focusing on same sex attraction, including books and posters. The display was set up in the school library, and maintained through the period in which parent-teacher interviews for every year level took place in the library itself. Overwhelmingly, parents responded positively to this.
- Brochures, pamphlets and details of support agencies displayed on noticeboards around the school
- School harassment policies make explicit mention of the fact that harassment on the grounds of someone's sexual orientation will not be tolerated, and the school is considering a specific homophobia policy, along the lines of their racism policy, which acknowledges the broader, systemic nature of these types of discrimination.
- Eltham High is an active organisational participant in the local area same-sex attracted reference group, providing strategic direction for the social support group for SSAY that exists in the area, alongside a number of other schools and community agencies.
- Since beginning collaboration with the SSAFE Project, Eltham High has had key staff complete an audit regarding the school's inclusion of same-sex attracted issues across curriculum, welfare and policy.
- Description of the SSAFE project and the schools involvement in the project in a parent newsletter
- Involved in local forums for teachers and workers in the area hosted by the local community support service for same sex attracted youth. These informal forums provide opportunities for the learnings of the local schools to be shared across the region

Professional development for teachers is available from Family Planning Victoria. Telephone (03) 9660 4704 for details.

Hawthorne Secondary College

Rhonda Crouch from Hawthorn Secondary College described the work being done by her school hinging around the Breaking Through Project.

In 2002 Hawthorne Secondary College (HSC) became involved in the Breaking Through Project. This project has been developed in response to the concerns of DE&T and the DHS in relation to the bullying and violence in schools, and the link between that a depression and suicide. The Breaking through Project involves schools, families and school community to work in partnership to support a greater acceptance of diversity, including sexual diversity, in all aspects of school community life.

As part of the project a group of year 10 and 11 students drawn from across all subject and curriculum areas came together for two weeks to develop, rehearse and perform a number of dramatic performances focusing on issues that students found difficult in their school community. Bryan Derrick, from Theatre of the Oppressed, directed the students. The students performed to the rest of the student and staff body and community. Each performance involved the audience in an interactive exploration of the gritty issues raised by the students.

In 2002 and 2003, the Breaking Through Project facilitated two professional development sessions for staff. The sessions dealt with the issues of discrimination, bullying and harassment in the school, including homophobia, and the challenges for teachers in tackling such behaviours.

As part of the project a booklet called 'Making a Difference' was produced as a resource for use in the classroom and as a stimulus for discussion in the social sciences and health areas. This compiled the responses of students to the performances of the student productions and the Swinburne University production, research around the issues facing same sex attracted students, along with essays and art concerning bullying and discrimination.

**For more information on the Breaking Through Project contact
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Bringing it together:

This booklet brings together some of the voices of the participants at the SSAFE Projects 'Class Act' conference. It documents the differing experiences of students, teachers and others working in schools. This booklet reflects the different tactics, successes, challenges and strategies that are currently being employed and experienced by schools around Victoria. The different schools described a variety of approaches which highlights a diverse range of ways that schools are implementing change and creating environments that support sexual diversity and tackle homophobia. Also reinforced by many of these schools is the fact that change is a slow and incremental process. The positive feedback from the conference highlighted the importance of sharing information and ideas and the value of schools coming together to address these issues.