



## RESEARCH: Key Findings

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students often feel invisible (or too visible) in their schools. Their invisibility is typically reinforced by heterosexism in their environment. On the other hand some students are the targets of violent and bullying because they are or have been labelled gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The following research and statistics vividly illustrate some of the reasons educators should be concerned about the experiences gay, bisexual and lesbian young people have while in school.

Research with young people in rural and urban areas of Australia (Hillier, 1997; Lindsay et al, 1997) has revealed that between 9% and 11% indicate that they are not exclusively attracted to the opposite sex.

*Writing Themselves In* (Hillier et al, 1998; Hillier et al, 1999) is a national report on the sexuality, health and well being of 750 same-sex attracted young Australians. Some of the findings are as follows:

### **Personal safety:**

Nearly one third of participants believed they had been unfairly treated or discriminated against, because of their sexuality. Same sex attracted youth are exposed to extreme levels of verbal/physical abuse:

46% had been verbally abused

13% had been physically abused

69% of the abuse happened at school; 47% in the street

10% of this sample were abused by friends; 3% abused by teachers

14% reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe at school

*I am most afraid about what will happen at school. I know that I will get verbally harassed a hell of a lot but I'm hoping physical abuse won't happen (Mei, 16) p35*

### **Issues around health:**

Higher drug use: same sex attracted young people in this study were 3-4 times more likely to report having injected drugs.

7% of the young men and 14% of the young women had injected drugs

5% drank alcohol daily; 46% weekly

27% had used party drugs; 7% weekly

8% had smoked marijuana daily; 21% weekly

7% had used heroin

*All this time I was smoking heaps of cigarettes and marijuana, taking lots and lots of acid, speed, alcohol. Just so I wouldn't think of things. (Rowena, aged 20) p49.*

### **Sexual Health:**

- 64% of the young people were sexually active.
- These young people often had sex with both sexes
- Protection levels were lower than for their heterosexual counterparts
- The 1997 national Schools data (Smith, Lindsay, & Rosenthal, (1999) revealed:
- Higher levels of Sexually Transmissible Infections among sexually active youth who were same sex attracted.
- Same sex attracted boys were ten times more likely and same sex attracted girls four times more likely to have an STI than their heterosexual counterparts

Additionally, information about heterosexual relationships is easily accessed and readily available with most young people learning about this topic from family, media, friends and school. Information about gay and lesbian relationships and safe sex information is far more difficult to access. Less than one in ten were able to get information about lesbian relationships and safe sex. Less than one in five were able to get information about gay safe sex and relationships from school and family. About half got this information from media and friends.

*There was nothing visible at school or in my community to help. No pamphlets at school, no posters, no safe homosexual sex lessons. I felt alone. (Lisa, aged 17)*

### **Risk of homelessness:**

The Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society has recently released a report titled "Living well? Homeless young people in Melbourne" that found 16% of the Melbourne homeless youth they surveyed identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. This is a notably disproportionate representation when compared to the 10% of the overall population identifying as same-sex attracted.

*A month before I was 16, I came out to my father and as a result I have moved out of home. I have been supporting myself since and am currently continuing my education. (Mark, aged 17)*

### **Suicide risks:**

A National study by Jonathan Nicholas and John Howard presented at the Suicide Prevention Australia National Conference revealed the following figures around suicide attempts:

Gay Male: 20.8% had attempted suicide

Heterosexual male: 5.4%

Bi/undecided male: 29.4%

Lesbian Female: 28%

Heterosexual female: 8.3%

Bi/undecided female: 34.9%

The study included same sex attracted young men and women up to 30 years old with the average age of 21. It also documents when the first suicide attempts occurred.

For gay males this was on average:

5.7 years after becoming sexually interested in men

3.5 years after self identifying as gay and

0.4 years before another person found out they were gay

0.3 years before they had their first same gender sexual experience

For lesbians this was on average:

1.9 years after becoming sexually interested in women

0.2 years after self identifying as same sex attracted, and

0.8 years before another person found out they were lesbian

2 years before they had had their first same gender experience

This indicates that most significant period of risk is at a time where those around the individual may be unaware of their sexuality. This highlights the importance of being proactive about supporting sexual diversity rather than waiting for young people to come out.

*'Everyday I feel an emptiness within me. I do not know others that are the same and am afraid to find them. At times I feel like killing myself because I am so lonely for love and friendship. If there were more support centers for teenagers I would definitely not feel so alone' (Boyd, 18years, 'Making a difference')*

### **Drop out/truancy rates:**

A 1995 American study showed that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (glbt) students were more than 4 times more likely to have skipped school during the past month because they felt unsafe or had been threatened or injured during the last 12 months. While such a study has not been conducted in Australia, we know from anecdotal evidence that glbt youth here share similar experiences.

*...the first person I told I was gay betrayed me by telling all my friends. They in turn verbally and emotionally abused me until I was feeling so low I thought I was having a nervous breakdown. I basically left school.' Ivan, 16*

### **Emotional well-being:**

Considering the overwhelming hardships ssa youth are facing, the fact remains that over half surveyed felt positive about their sexuality. This highlights that there is nothing intrinsically negative about being attracted to people of the same sex, rather it is society's attitudes towards homosexuality that lead to many negative experiences.

Of the young people surveyed in *Writing Themselves In*:  
10% felt bad or really bad about their sexual orientation  
60% felt great or pretty good about their sexual orientation  
30% felt OK.

Often people felt good about themselves while at the same time feeling bad about other people's attitudes.

**'Society makes it not so great so I don't feel great. If society accepted it, I would feel great (Matt, 17 years)'**

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