

# We Don't Have Any of THEM at Our School!

## Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Student, Teacher and Parent Invisibility and Issues

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### Introduction

Just because you think there are not any lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender students, teachers or parents at your school does not mean they are not there. With estimates of at least 10% of the population identifying as either lesbian or gay it just means they are invisible either by choice or by circumstances within the school which create an environment where it is not safe for them to disclose their identity.

Have you ever had to think about your sexual identity, question who you are attracted to and why? Have you ever had to change the gender or use gender neutral terminology when speaking about your partner, latest love interest, girlfriend/boyfriend? Have you ever had to censor or simply not speak about what you did on the weekend for fear of being found out or potential negative repercussions? Have you ever not participated in school events like semi and end of year formals because you could not take your same sexed partner? What about possible rejection from your friends and family because of who you love?

These are only part of the everyday realities faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adults and young people in an educational setting. In a report funded by the Faculty of Education, Equity Committee in a Queensland University a study was conducted to examine the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender undergraduate Bachelor of Education students (Burnett, Eastwood, Aspland, 2002). This study confirms these experiences as well as highlighting issues surrounding confronting homophobia in an educational setting, invisibility, religion, taking on extra responsibilities to avoid homophobic discrimination, development of effective coping strategies, disconnection between self and education setting either as a student or a

staff member (splintering of self), and job choices and prospects (eg, transfer issues within the education system and invisibility of same sex partners).

Issues such as the ones outlined above exist because of the invisibility, myths and unexamined stereotypes surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, school staff, and parents in the wider community. Beliefs systems which espouse ideas that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities or lifestyles are a personal choice which can be cured only seek to further alienate and stigmatise non-heterosexual members of our community and increase the incidents of suicide and low self esteem. Each of these issues will be explored further in the following section.

### Invisibility

Western society has a history of portraying and stereotyping the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in a negative way. This vision has a significant impact on, if, and how, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people come out (process of identifying and disclosing a non-heterosexual orientation), how they feel about themselves, their schooling (primary, secondary and tertiary) experiences, the occupations they choose and their relationships with, and acceptance by, their families and friends (Burnett, 1998; 1996; Kitinger, 1996a, 1996b, 1989; Perkins, 1996).

Research with a homosexual content has, with few exceptions, been limited to men and been American based. Funds available for research with a non-heterosexual focus have been limited or non-existent. Further, locating research participants is usually fraught with difficulties because of issues with access, participant fears over confidentiality, and ethic committee frameworks and guidelines (Bensimon, 1992; D'Augelli, 1991; Goldstein, 1997; Grayson, 1987).

Moreover, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals are not easily identified within the general population (Grayson, 1987; Kissen, 1993; Smith, 1993). And unlike people from other minority groups they usually do not have immediate family members who identify in the same way. As a result, there is a lack of support and understanding about what they are experiencing. "Most gay and lesbian teenagers carry the double burden of being part of an oppressed minority and knowing absolutely no one like themselves" (Kissen, 1993, 57). So not only do they deal with

issues of peer pressure, parental authority, sexuality and personal identity but they also have to negotiate a society that fears and rejects them (D'Augelli, 1989a, 1989b; Grayson, 1987; Kissen, 1993; Smith, 1993).

Myths and negative stereotypes which surround lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people need to be addressed through increased research and education in this area. Research shows that positive interactions with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people increases positive attitudes, breaks down stereotypes, and increases awareness and understanding (Douglas, Kalman, & Kalman, 1985; Eliason, 1996 ) Unfortunately to date attempts to address homophobia or provide positive non-heterosexual role models within educational facilities such as schools and tertiary institutions are often met with indifference or accusations of promoting a particular life-style or gay agenda (Beckett, Bode, Clark, Cox, Crewe, Hastings, Herbert, Martino, McLean, Page & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1997; Bickmore, 1999; Jennings, 1999; Martino, 2000, 1999, 1997a, 1997b; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2000, 1998, 1997, 1995; Sears, 1999, 1992; Smith, 1993). This is despite policy which dictates schools must provide a safe and understanding environment for all young people, regardless of their sexual orientation, and to educate by breaking down traditional stereotypical images.

Smith (1995) clearly shows, non-heterosexual students often describe class discussions during which the contributions of gay, lesbian and bisexual people are minimised. Further, Australian research by Burnett, Eastwood and Aspland (2002) highlights students also describing classroom experiences where a lecturer or tutor told jokes demeaning gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. Students, regardless of discipline area, did not want their sexual orientation to be insulted, denied, minimised or ignored in their textbooks or by faculty and students in their classrooms. They wanted the same freedoms that heterosexual students had to mention or focus on personal relationships in their writing and speaking.

School sites often have rigid sex role definitions which are, consciously or unconsciously, built into their everyday (word??/hidden curriculum/everyday practice??) (Grayson, 1987). Homophobia is usually a successful tool in controlling these sex role definitions and keeping everyone in their place, for example, appropriate sporting activities, and career options and choices. This is despite what is espoused by the State Education Department or the school itself particularly as policy is often not followed through into the everyday practice as it occurs in the

educational setting. Research shows that schooling systems and teaching practices constitute and perpetuate discrimination towards gays and lesbians, through the policing of hegemonic discourses of heterosexuality and gender (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). It is clear that homophobic slurs often go unchallenged by education authorities. And that homophobia is often seen as the last acceptable form of bigotry within our society (Kissen, 1993; Smith, 1993).

It has been recognised that sexual orientation has an effect on relationship building between individuals and other students and teachers within educational institutions (Beckett, Bode, Clark, Cox, Crewe, Hastings, Herbert, Martino, McLean, Page, Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1997; Hogan & Rentz, 1996; Martino, 2000, 1999, 1997a, 1997b; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2000, 1998, 1997, 1995). Educators have a duty of care to all students in their care, not just those who identify as heterosexual and/or conform to socially determined and accepted gender roles. Most non-heterosexual identified youth will at the very least question their sexual orientation privately whilst they are still living at home and attending some form of education (Anderson, 1995; Burnett, 1997; Elia, 1994; Epstein, 2000; Jennings, 1999; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Kissen, 1993; Rogers, 1994; Savin-Williams, 1995; Zemsky, 1991; Zephyr Cussen, 2000).

As a result it is imperative to address and counteract the homophobia which exists within educational contexts. Particularly as,

children learn prejudice from many sources - their families, the media, religious institutions - the list could go on But the fact remains that schools are the place where children spend more of their time than anywhere else between the ages of five and eighteen, and thus play a seminal role in either confirming prejudice or combating it It's the first public place our citizenry shares, and as such is the crucible where democratic values are put to the test. It's the place where we either learn to get along or learn to hate. Too often it's the place where prejudice becomes ingrained  
Jennings, 1999, x.

Implications

Within the context of education, victimisation in the form of homophobic attitudes and beliefs have “many consequences, including truancy and dropping out of school. Violence toward youths also is believed to be associated with violence towards oneself, manifested in the form of suicidal behaviour” (Hunter, 1990, 296). Moreover, in an American based study by Myers (1989, see Hunter, 1990), it was found that black gay youths were

more inclined to provoke others to kill them rather than to commit suicide; such victim-precipitated homicide may mask the frequency of suicide in this group. Lesbians and gay male youths are an invisible population. Many do not share their sexual orientation with family, friends, or peers because they fear rejection and violence. Consequently, documenting violence toward and suicide among them is difficult  
Hunter, 1990, 299.

It is not uncommon for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to feel disconnected from those around them (Ferfolja, 1998; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001) as well as a disconnection or splitting of self (Burnett, Eastwood, & Aspland, 2002;). If these feelings go unaddressed for long periods of time the potential for suicide, self harm, depression and long term physical and mental health increase (Eliason, 1996; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Ralfrey & DuRant, 1998; Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, & Goodman, 1999; Gibson, 1989; Gonsiorek, 1993; Hammelman, 1993; Hershberger & D’Augelli, 1995; Hillier, Dempsey, Harrison, Beale, Matthews, & Rosenthal, 1998).

Due to the stigma attached to non-heterosexual identities, and depending on how out a person may be, access to safe sex information can be difficult to obtain, particularly for young people (Baumrind, 1995; D’Augelli, 1991, 1989b; Deisher, 1989; Hunter, 1990). Skewed data collection about specific sexually transmitted diseases, for example, the way the Centre for Disease Control in the United States defines a lesbian as a woman who has not had sexual intercourse with a male since 1973 regardless of age and their subsequent (mis)-coding or diagnosis of female to female transmission of the HIV/AIDS virus (Albury, 1993; Axell, 1994; Hanna, 1995; Lawless, Kippax & Crawford, 1996; Short & Gale, 1995), in conjunction with myths which exist in minority communities, for example, lesbians cannot or do not catch or pass on sexually transmitted diseases when they only sleep with women (Gale & Short, 1995; Lampton, 1995), heightens the importance of accessible and correct safe sex information for all.

## What Can We Do?

Firstly, place posters in strategic positions around the school. These posters can cover a wide content area from advertising lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender youth oriented social or support groups in the area to books with lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender content. Posters can be integrated into already existing displays and noticeboards around the school or they can be placed in your office or classroom space to alert students that you are open and knowledgeable about issues pertaining to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning students.

While this is can be a small step it can make a significant difference to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, staff, and parents within the school environment as it helps to legitimatise their existence, experience and issues. It sends a message that homophobia will not be tolerated in this school and helps to create a 'safe' environment to talk about, explore and acknowledge same sex attracted feelings.

Secondly, organise training or talk sessions where school staff and parents have the opportunity to educate themselves about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. These sessions should be run by an experienced person (this can be someone on staff or from the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender communities or an educator from Family Planning) who can provide information whilst also breaking down myths and stereotypes which exist in our society. Realistically sessions may need to occur over a significant period of time and address issues pertinent to the particular clientele of the school, for example, the school may have a particular religious basis or be in an area where the community has strong religious ties, or a large number of specific cultural groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Asian or Arabic communities.

Alternately organise a Gay/Straight alliance (a US concept) which meets regularly to educate, address issues within the school community, and social support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students, staff and parents and friendly heterosexual peers.

Thirdly, information about the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people can be integrated into the everyday curriculum in all teaching areas. For example, English (Sappho, Virginia Woolf, Armistead Maupin, Jeanette

Winterson, Radcliffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, Hans Christian Anderson, William Shakespeare, Lord Byron, Oscar Wilde, Allan Ginsberg, Walt Whitman, Patrick White, Vita Sackville-West), History (Joan of Arc, Socrates, Edward II, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Plato, Quentin Crisp, Justice Michael Kirby), Art (Robert Mapplethorpe, Michelangelo), Mathematics (Alan Turing), Science (Leonardo da Vinci), Drama (Francesca Gregorini, Portia De Rossi, James Dean, Sandra Bernhard, Pedro Almodovar, Noel Coward), Music (Tchaikovsky, kd lang, Melissa Etheridge, Elton John, Peter Allen, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Gus Van Sant), Health and Physical Education (Ian Roberts, Rudolf Nureyev, Martina Navratilova) are just a few of the areas people with a lesbian, gay, homosexual or transgender identity have made and continue to make significant contributions.

However, it is important to avoid tokenism in the form of a one off information session, class or poster display. It is also important not to fall into the trap of using possibly the only openly identified lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender staff member, student or parent as an isolated point of contact. It is a huge responsibility to place on one person, rather it should be a responsibility shared by all members of the school community. And what happens when that one person burns out or moves on to other employment or education opportunities?

And lastly, but certainly not the end of complete list of suggestions, would be to integrate safe sex information into existing sex education programs within the school. This information should include information about same sex attraction, condoms, dental dams, sexually transmitted disease (STDs) prevention, healthy relationships, and the effects of drugs and alcohol to name a few key focus areas. However, information on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues should not focus solely on gay men and the HIV/AIDS virus as this tends to portray homosexuality as a male disease which leads to illness and an early death. Despite being incorrect and offensive towards the lesbian gay, bisexual and transgender communities, statistics are now showing that heterosexual women are in the highest category of new cases of HIV/AIDS.

The creation of safe schooling environments for students, staff and parents requires a joint effort by everyone in the school regardless of their sexual orientation. The early termination or failure to complete their education by even one student, and the isolation and exclusion of even one parent or teacher from the school community because of their sexual orientation is one too many. Given estimates that

approximately 10% of the population has a non-heterosexual orientation can you and your school afford to actively fail to cater for 10% of your school community without severe long term consequences? As a society we no longer tolerate sexism, ageism, ablism, or racism so why tolerate homophobia? Be proactive, educate yourself and others and make a difference in your school community today!\

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