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Discrimination and Heterosexism in Schools: The  
School Experience of Same Sex Attracted Youth  
(SSAY)

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# Discrimination and Heterosexism in Schools: The School Experience of Same Sex Attracted Youth (SSAY)

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*Abstract: Beginning with a discussion of current legislation in Australia around inclusion, this paper highlights recent research into the school experience of Same Sex Attracted Youth (SSAY), including the issues faced by students, the negative outcomes of such experiences, the critical role that administrators school staff (particularly school counsellors) can play determining school culture. Factors that may influence a more supportive and inclusive school culture are discussed.*

Keywords: Inclusion, Discrimination, Social Justice, Homophobia

## Introduction

**T**HE NOTIONS OF Inclusion and Diversity have been on the Australian educational agenda in one form or another through the legislation of various Commonwealth acts, including the Racial Discrimination Act (1975), Sex Discrimination Act (1984), Disability Discrimination Act (1992), Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act (1986) and the Disability Standards in Education Act (2005). The translation of these acts into inclusive policies and practices within educational settings challenges schools to transform the rhetoric of the law into authentic and tangible applications.

Within the State of Queensland, these acts resonate within the publication of the Inclusive Education Statement (Department of Education and the Arts, Qld, Australia, 2005). Whilst this statement is not legislated policy it is an attempt to clarify 'the nature of inclusive education and its role in achieving the objectives that underpin public education in Queensland' (p1). The statement outlines that school communities are diverse and offer rich opportunities for students to learn to respect and value difference. It articulates a range of factors that contribute to educational disadvantage including 'poverty, gender, disability, cultural and linguistic diversity and sexuality' (p1).

While schools throughout Queensland (and indeed Australia), have developed many inclusive practices addressing the educational outcomes and social well-being of a wide variety of students, current research would indicate that the school experiences of many same-sex attracted youth (SSAY) is anything but

inclusive (Mikulsky, 2006) or reflects an appreciation of diversity. This paper is an attempt to highlight some of the recent worldwide research into the school experience of SSAY, including the issues faced by students, the negative outcomes of such experiences, the critical role that school staff can play, and finally the identification of factors that may influence a more inclusive school culture. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'same sex attracted youth' may include students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex or questioning.

## Homophobia and Heterosexism in Schools

Schools are often intensely heterosexist institutions (Buston & Hart, 2001). Heterosexism may be defined as the 'belief and practice that heterosexuality is the only natural form of sexuality' (Cooper, 1994, as cited in Buston & Hart, 2001, p95) and is often perpetuated through the school's provision of the 'hidden curriculum', 'or the social norms that school-aged students learn without them being part of the formal curriculum' (Plummer, 1989, cited in Mikulsky, 2005). This notion is also referred to as compulsory heterosexuality, which, it is argued, schools institutionalise and naturalise through inherent school structures (Martino, as cited in Beckett, 1998).

Heterosexism is also perpetuated through implicit or explicit homophobia, which is defined as 'negative and/or fearful attitudes about homosexuals or homosexuality' (Sprecher & McKinney, 1993, as cited in Buston & Hart, 2001), and refers to discrimination at an institutional and societal level. Research indic-



ates that homophobia is learned in the primary school playground and is endemic to both primary and secondary settings (Plummer, 1999 as cited in Family Planning Victoria, SSAFE Booklet 1)

Homophobic practices within schools are well documented in the literature. An Australian study on SSAY conducted by Hillier et al (1998, as cited in Family Planning Victoria, SSAFE Booklet 1, n.d.) found that forty six percent of SSAY students had been verbally abused including threats of violence and thirteen percent had been physically assaulted. Sixty nine percent of respondents stated that this abuse occurred at school with three percent being attributed to teachers. Fourteen percent said that they felt unsafe at school.

Within the UK, studies by Rivers (1996) and Mason and Palmer (1996) indicate that twenty four percent of students surveyed had been subject to homophobic physical bullying including 'having clothes set alight; having chemicals thrown on them in science classes; being burned with cigarettes while being held down; being dragged across the school playing field by the hair; and being raped by teachers or pupils' (as cited in Warwick, Aggleton & Douglas, 2001). Thurlow, (2001) states that various UK studies have reported verbal abuse as the most common abusive homophobic practice and that irrespective of whether or not the name-calling is intentionally directed at gay, lesbian or bisexual pupils, this form of bullying 'pollutes the social-psychological environment in which young bisexual, gay and lesbian people must live' (Thurlow, 2001, p 26).

Other overt forms of victimisation towards SSAY in schools include property damage and social isolation within the school setting, with an underlying theme of a lack of adult school staff intervention (Mikulsky, 2005).

US studies report that SSAY have been further abused at school in the form of ridicule, physical violence, being spat upon, and having objects thrown at them (Tharinger & Wells, 2000). In a study conducted in the state of Massachusetts, SSAY 'reported higher frequencies of having been threatened with a weapon at school, fighting, and injuries from fighting that required medical attention; they were also more likely to report weapon and gun carrying' (Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001, p.113). D'Augelli, Pilkington and Hershberger (2002) reported that eleven percent of high school youths interviewed had been physically assaulted.

### Effects of Homophobia

The effects of such explicit and implicit homophobic practices within schools are also well documented in the literature. The research consistently positions SSAY as 'at-risk', identifying a significant number

of detrimental outcomes for this population of students. Perhaps the most concerning effect of such bullying is the large amount of evidence that links the difficulties experienced by SSAY with an increase in suicidal behaviour. It is of major concern that not only are schools failing to fulfil their role in preventing suicide of SSAY but that they may also be contributing to the suicide risk for this group of marginalised, isolated and vulnerable students (Family Planning Victoria, SSAFE Booklet 1, n.d.).

Harassment of SSAY has also been correlated through various research reports with substance abuse and harmful mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety and a heightened sense of fear and social isolation (Mikulsky, 2005). Thurlow (2001) indicates that homophobic bullying results in inescapable stigmatising effects and may result in profound social and psychological alienation including feelings of self-contempt leading to further loss of self esteem and increased risk of suicide and self-harm. This phenomenon has been labelled 'internalised homophobia' (Kruks, 1991, as cited in Buston & Hart, 2001). Other research from North America and the UK not only reinforce these outcomes but also highlight other negative effects such as ostracism, hostility, school-phobia, emotional problems, self-injurious behaviours, running away, homelessness, increased sexual risk taking behaviours and traumatic stress reactions (Henning-Stout, James & Macintosh, 2000; Buston & Hart, 2001; D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002).

Mikulsky (2006) argues that students who are victimised in these ways whilst at school would 'undoubtedly experience a different academic identity and overall connection to the school environment than their peers' (p2). This therefore begs the question of the effects of homophobic bullying on academic outcomes for SSAY. The literature is surprisingly limited in this area with apparently few studies of this nature conducted in Australia (Mikulsky, 2005a). Mikulsky, (2006) has since however, conducted an investigation of the relationship between school climate and academic outcomes for SSAY in Australia finding that 'in many instances students drew a connection between their perceptions of a negative school climate and their truancy behaviour and subject preference' (p.14). These findings indicate that in some instances, school outcomes for SSAY will be a direct result of their school experience of victimisation. Studies from the US support this finding by reporting a positive correlation between victimisation of SSAY with increased truancy, early school leaving, a decreased sense of belonging and decreased academic performance and educational aspirations (Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001).

Lasser and Tharinger (2003) utilise the term 'visibility management' to describe the complexities of school life for SSAY. They argue that these students must not only manage their academic goals but must also manage hidden identity status, elaborate efforts to pretend to be something other than what he or she is and the realisation that someone is not what they have seemed to be. Coupled with an awakening and a self-acceptance of their own sexual identity these young people manage a complex and stressful interaction of identities as they navigate their way through what may be an unaccepting and negative environment. This notion is reinforced by Galliher, Rostosky and Hughes (2004) who suggest that school belonging is a crucial factor to the psychosocial adjustment of SSAY.

### Factors Contributing to Homophobic Practices in Schools

Clearly the plight of SSAY in schools is one of social ostracism and exclusion, the very antithesis of the intent of publications such as Queensland's Inclusive Education Statement highlighted earlier. As Unks (1995, p3, as cited in Thurlow, 2001) states, 'picking on persons because of their ethnicity, class, religion, gender or race is essentially taboo behaviour, but adults and children alike are given licence to torment and harm people because of their sexuality'. The literature underscores a number of key factors that contribute to a negative school environment, resulting in the alarming outcomes that have been identified above.

The combination of societal norms and palpable staff attitudes and values surrounding homosexuality are a contributing factor to the overall tenor of the school environment, and hence, a determinant of students' attitudes towards homosexuality (Mikulsky, 2005). The reported frequency with which school staff fail to respond to (or indeed, perpetrate) violence and harassment directed at SSAY contributes to making schools unsafe places for these students (Tharinger & Wells, 2000).

Other factors contributing to the educational experiences of SSAY include the degree to which homosexuality is incorporated in the curriculum, although as Connell (2000) states, 'Homosexual experience is generally blanked out from the official school curriculum' (p156). Lasser and Tharinger (2003) also identify factors such as the opportunity for SSAY to meet and share experiences and the level of support offered to sexual minority students by their heterosexual peers.

In considering these factors it becomes increasingly evident what directions may be taken to ensure that inclusion is not just a catch cry to which lip

service is paid but an authentic expression of a true celebration of diversity.

### The Role of the School Community

Hillier, Dempsey, Harrison, Beale, Matthews & Rosenthal (1998) in their National report on the Sexuality, Health and Well being of Same-Sex Attracted Young people mention the importance of a "whole school approach" to the issues raised in their research. This school approach they see as encompassing policy and curriculum issues.

Administrators, school counsellors and other key staff members may play a vital role in supporting SSAY within the school environment. The literature highlights that a 'school culture must be created wherein homophobia is not tolerated, and heterosexism is recognised as such and the power it has over individual's thoughts and actions is brought to light' (Mikulsky, 2005, p2). Addressing homophobia is not simply a matter of providing the telephone number of a helpline or telling adolescents to stop 'teasing gay kids', but is a whole school issue that affects all of those linked to the school community (Warwick, Aggleton & Douglas, 2001).

Tsutsumi (n.d.) highlights a number of ways in which the school community can create a safer and more inclusive school culture, drawing upon literature by Black and Underwood (1998); Ferren (1997); Imich, Bayley and Farley (2001); Lipkin (1999); Monahan (1997); and Omizo, Omizo and Okamoto (1998). The information outlines how schools can firstly become more informed about homophobia and heterosexism, how safe and inclusive classrooms and schools can be created and specific suggestions for counsellors working with SSAY.

Maria Palotta-Chiarolli, an Australian teacher, author and leading proponent of social justice issues in schools offers a comprehensive synopsis of the issues around shifting school culture in relation to homophobia (as cited in Browne & Fletcher, 1995). She suggests that homophobia must be incorporated into existing policies, practices and perceptions and that antihomophobic principles must inform what is taught, why it is taught and the methods used when teaching. Acknowledging that addressing sexuality issues raises a wide range of value-laden responses from the school community, Palotta-Chiarolli states 'a whole-school approach and ideally a whole system approach diffuses potential conflicts and downplays the supposedly controversial or scandalous nature of an issue' (as cited in Browne and Fletcher, 1995, p70).

An example of such a value-laden response was recently seen in a secondary school on the outskirts of Brisbane, Queensland, after a student refused to complete an assessment piece requiring her to com-

pose a written response from the perspective of a heterosexual person living in a homosexual colony. This dilemma ended up on the front page of a statewide newspaper, quoting the Federal Minister for Education, Ms Julie Bishop as saying, 'Parents need to know the content of school curriculum so they can be confident their children are receiving a high quality education that is also consistent with their values' (The Sunday Mail, 2006).

School administrators can function as change agents in the school ecology, through the development and implementation of policy that protect SSAY. Further actions that the administrators may pursue include curriculum development that is inclusive of gay and lesbian issues (Tharinger & Wells, 2000) and through ensuring that school libraries incorporate books and materials that accommodate homosexual issues.

Finally Hillier, Dempsey, Harrison, Beale, Matthews & Rosenthal (1998) advocated that young people who are maltreated within the schools system be provided with the same supportive legal framework in schools that they are entitled to in the community.

Literature supports the notion that the school counsellor has the opportunity to play a pivotal role in the support and well being of SSAY within the school environment. Lasser and Tharinger (1997, as cited in Savage, Prout & Chard, 2004) suggest that the school counsellor may not only contribute to the mental health of SSAY but can also 'impact the overall school climate by promoting issues of social justice for all students' (p201). Tharinger and Wells (2000) argue that for many SSAY, 'neither their homes nor their schools are places in which they can feel safe and valued for who they are' (p.10). They cite this as reason enough for school counsellors to be available means of support who have educated themselves about the special needs of sexual minority youth. It is imperative, however, that SSAY are assured of the unbiased support and confidentiality of any disclosures to school counsellors as Hillier et al (1998) noted that these school personnel often 'had the reputation of not keeping a confidence' (as cited in Family Planning Victoria, SSAFE Booklet 1, n.d).

Henning-Stout et al (2000) outline three roles the school counsellor may take on as they support SSAY within the school setting. These include establishing school-based support groups for gay and lesbian students and their allies, the provision of formalised education programs, direct research into the nature, incidence and prevention of school based harassment and consistent intervention and interruption of incidents of harassment. They argue that an 'active response to harassment in conjunction with advocacy for programs to address these issues are vital for positive change to occur' (p.188).

Wells and Tsutsumi (n.d.) provide school counsellors with a comprehensive guide to creating safe, caring and inclusive schools for SSAY. This publication includes information about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues and the potential health and safety concerns, violence and victimisation risks commonly experienced by SSAY within the school setting. It also outlines practical counselling techniques, including information about confidentiality, consent and responses to avoid. Of particular importance is its emphasis on the counsellor's need for self-reflection and examination of personal beliefs and values and how these may influence the counselling relationship.

### Whole School Programs and Strategies

Strategies and examples for facilitating a whole school approach addressing homophobia abound in the literature with notable publications such as 'Everyone is special! – A handbook for teachers on sexuality education', edited by Lori Beckett, 1998. Examples of whole school initiatives from the US include Project 10, a dropout prevention program for sexual minority youth, Sexual Harassment Policy Implementation developed by Framingham (Massachusetts) Middle School and the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington project (Henning-Stout, James & Macintosh, 2000).

The 'Out with Homophobia' workshop, developed by Family Planning Queensland, is a direct attempt to inform and train school staff in meeting the challenge of addressing homophobic bullying and harassment issues in their school environments. It consists of a workshop designed to explore educational, motivational and organisational strategies for developing a schoolwide response to challenging the discrimination of a person because of their sexual orientation (Murray, 2001).

The Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) is another whole of school resource designed primarily to facilitate inclusive practices for students with disabilities but can be extended to embrace all members of the school community including SSAY.

Whilst many whole school approaches expose the hidden curriculum inherent in school culture, it is also necessary to pay attention to the formal curriculum. This may be done through the delivery of specific non-heterosexist sex education, not only for SSAY but also for all young people (Buston & Hart, 2001). Mikulsky (2005) argues that sexual minority topics, issues and historical or prominent figures must be discussed in the classroom as well as the historical discrimination of same sex attracted persons. Palotta-Chiarolli (as cited in Browne & Fletcher, 1995) suggests that curriculum development and resource selection must occur that enable stu-

dents to be critical of homophobic representations and to empathise with the experience of homophobic discrimination.

Thr journey towards a truly inclusive educational setting for sexual minority youth is clearly fraught with challenges and obstacles to overcome. Position statements around inclusion such as exists in Queensland are certainly a step in the right direction and provide a systemic framework for policy development within schools. The issues faced by SSAY within the schooling system have potentially devastating consequences for students, impacted by the silence that surrounds sexuality, a dominant heterosex-

ist approach to curriculum and school structures and the confusion experienced by individuals as their emerging sexual identity takes shape.

School staffs are in a position to promote a positive school climate for all students and to facilitate a school wide response to addressing homophobic practices. Through the inclusion of sexual minority awareness in policy development, explicit attention to homophobia within subject content delivery, a school community can begin to embrace a population of students who have largely been forgotten in the rhetoric of the inclusion agenda.

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