

## **Teacher positioning around 'homosexuality' in schools**

(CUR98105)

Paper presented as part of the symposium, 'Interrogating Sexualities: Addressing Curricula, Pedagogies and Subjectivities in Schools', at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference in Adelaide on December 2, 1998.

"I could have been in strife and I guess I wasn't prepared to...to take that risk." (Sarah\*)

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This paper is a 'work in progress' which will contribute toward my PhD

(which I am in the process of converting to).

The PhD is provisionally entitled:

" 'Homosexuality' within the school environment: Teachers' perspectives".

\* Sarah is a primary school teacher (Catholic school) who was interviewed for my Master of Education (research) degree, which is 'in progress'. I have applied to convert from the degree of Master of Education to Doctor of Philosophy commencing in the 1999 academic year.

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## Research background

### Focus of the research

This paper is based on a Master in Education research thesis (in progress)<sup>1</sup> entitled, 'Homosexuality' within the school environment: Teachers' perspectives. The research for this paper was conducted during 1998.

This research aims to explore the attitudes, knowledge, perceptions and experiences of primary and secondary teachers in relation to what they feel constrain or enable them to talk about 'homosexuality' or 'gays' or 'lesbians' within their classrooms.

### Teacher background

- \* Most of the participants are female. Male participants who are prepared to discuss homosexuality were more difficult to find.
- \* All of the participants have friends or relatives who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. This was not however a pre-requisite to being involved in the research study. All of the participants involved had an awareness of the harassment that these friends and relatives had faced at school and in the general community.
- \* All of the participants interviewed were born in Australia, though a number of them have parents who were born overseas.

### Teaching area and experience

- \* Most of the teachers were working in a variety of Melbourne Catholic schools that varied not only in terms of their size but also in their demographics. One subject taught in a region outside of Melbourne while a couple of participants were from interstate (A.C.T. & Q.L.D.).
- \* The teachers involved are quite experienced having worked in a number of schools. The most experienced had recently retired after 30+ years in teaching, while a number of others had worked over twenty years. The least experienced teacher had worked eight years in one school only.

### Selection of participants

- \* The participants were recruited through the snowball method.
- \* Participants were required to be able to speak in depth about homosexuality as it related to their classroom practice. They also needed to be able to reflect on their own feelings in relation to the topic.
- \* Participants needed to have experiences that related to the topic area.
- \* Many of the participants were known to me prior to the research.
- \* I was not interested in interviewing teachers that were opposed to or negative to homosexuality for I did not want to engage in the arguments against homosexuality.

### Method of research

- \* The method of research involved face to face, semi-structured interviews of 60-90 minutes duration. Participants were provided with a list of questions and identified specific areas that they were or were not willing to discuss. Interviews therefore varied based on the experience and knowledge of the teacher involved.
- \* Participants were asked to respond to additional questions (arising from the transcripts of the original interview) in written form.
- \* Participants from interstate provided written responses to the list of questions that I sent them but were not interviewed.

## Further information

I do not claim that the findings from this research can be generalised across to the whole teaching community. I seek instead to raise and engage with discourses that some teachers are speaking in relation to 'homosexuality'.

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If my application to convert to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is successful then my research will be broadened. The focus is to remain on teachers but from other vantage points such as parents and educational consultants who work in the areas of gender and sexuality. Also a number of teachers who are working pro-actively for gay and lesbian students will become the focus of case studies.

## The backdrop - the context

Primary and secondary teachers are situated within a heteronormative<sup>2</sup> school framework. This positioning and reinforcing of heterosexuality as the "unquestioned norm" occurs through it being "...systematically built into and spoken by everyday routines and structures of school life" (Redman, 1994: 139, 148, see also Friend, 1993). This is evident in a number of aspects of school life from curriculum (such as sex education programs) and reading materials, to the physical signs such as engagement rings and photos of opposite sex partners, to the conversational discourse about opposite sex partners and husbands and wives, to school functions (such as debutante balls), to the talk and presence of opposite sex relationships between students, as well as aspects such as the dress and appearance of people in the school (Epstein and Johnson, 1998, Mac An Ghail, 1994). In contrast there is an overwhelming silencing and regulation of discussion or presence of homosexuality, not just among students but also among teachers (Epstein and Johnson, 1998, Rogers, 1994, Redman, 1994, Mac An Ghail, 1994). In considering teacher discourse relating to homosexuality it is therefore necessary to consider the context and the power structures that teachers are not only part of but contribute to (Nickson, 1996, McLean, 1996, Mac An Ghail, 1994, Redman, 1994).

In this paper I will be concentrating on teachers working in Catholic schools in Victoria. At times however I will draw on the experiences of teachers working in the state system for comparison. Firstly however I wish to consider the broader contexts outside the school and Catholic Education system

Research focusing on various educational initiatives, programs or educational concerns such as boys and educational achievement (Martino, 1997, Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, Ryan 1997), sex based harassment (Kenway et al, 1998, Blackmore et al, 1996) and gender equity (Gender Equity Taskforce, 1997, Martino, 1997, Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1997, McLean, 1995, Boulden, 1997, Collins et al, 1996) have shown that if these issues are to be addressed then the homophobia and heterosexism that exists in schools needs to be addressed. Gays and lesbians have been shown to be high risk groups in suicide (Gibson 1989, Tremblay with Ramsay, 1997, Victorian Suicide Prevention Taskforce, 1997) and homelessness (Irwin et al, 1995) while increasing amounts of research point to youth perpetrating violence and harassment, as well as social exclusion towards to those known or thought to be gay and lesbian both within schools and outside (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, Martino, 1997, Hinson, 1996, Griffin, 1995, Mac An Ghail 1994, Epstein 1994). The design of educational programs focusing on violence, gender and sex based harassment is slowly beginning to reflect this mounting evidence (Kenway et al, 1998, Boulden, 1996, NSW Department of School Education, 1991). Issues relating to or involving gay and lesbian youth are increasingly being integrated into these published educational programs. This illustrates

how tackling homophobia or heterosexism in schools need not occur in isolation or as stand alone programs. This is very necessary given the time constraints on schools and the ever increasing amount of pressures to take on extra programs.

Within public discourse the damaging silence surrounding homosexuality is being challenged; there is an increasing amount of public discourse relating to gays and lesbians and their lack of rights within laws relating to child custody and same-sex relationships (wills and superannuation, for example). Within religious institutions such as the Uniting and Catholic Church the lack of acceptance of gays and lesbians and their relationships is increasingly being challenged. The debates have attracted considerable media attention and public interest. Recently the launch of a national Australian survey of 750 same sex attracted youth 3(14-21 years) garnered a fair share of media attention in Melbourne highlighting the high proportion of same-sex attracted youth who experienced verbal and physical abuse, most of which occurred at school.

The schools of teachers involved in this research however seem largely to be distant to and disconnected from this growing amount of public discourse and research relating to homosexuality and gay and lesbian youth. They remain closed, not allowing this discourse or research to seep into their environs and influence their practice and policy. Working in this environment teachers are kept contained and removed from this information. The message is loud and clear that they must not engage with, or utilise such discourse or research in the school environment. Ignorance, prejudice, and uninformed attitudes can therefore prevail. And even though research continues to mount showing the predominance of homophobia and heterosexism in schools and the harm that that this does to known and perceived gay and lesbian students schools continue to "protect" themselves from this information.

#### The political level

For teachers working within the Catholic system there are clear messages about the Church's stance in relation to homosexuality. At the political level religious institutions in Victoria lobbied to achieve exemptions from anti-discrimination law as applied to 'lawful sexual activity'. (Morgan, 1996) Exemptions apply if:

...employment involves the care, instruction and supervision of children and if the employer genuinely believes the discrimination is necessary to protect the children and if the employer has a rational basis for that belief.

[it] is necessary to comply with the discriminator's genuine beliefs or principles. (Morgan, 1996: 121)

Non heterosexual teachers therefore have a lack of protection if the school or Church authorities take action against them for anything that they may say or do in relation to homosexuality.

A high profile case in point is the Catholic Education Office in Sydney which refused employment to Jacqui Griffin<sup>4</sup> in 1993, claiming during a hearing in 1997 that:

Ms Griffin's prominent public stance on the question of homosexual rights and behaviour is contrary to the teachings and values of the Catholic Church. Catholic parents would be outraged and offended by the prospect of the CEO (Catholic Education Office) permitting a high profile lesbian activist who engages in what the Catholic Church teaches to be immoral, homosexual activity to stand in loco parentis to their children. (Pollard, R., Sydney Star Observer, No. 385, August 18, 1997, p.1)<sup>5</sup>

Such a case like this certainly sends a very powerful message to teachers, that there is no place for talk about homosexuality in schools. Terms such as 'values' and 'teachings' are usefully deployed in such statements and whilst they are undefined there is no doubt that they stand in opposition to homosexual 'rights' and 'behaviour'.

This statement also signals that the opposition to people like Jacqui Griffin is extremely broad, the Church institution itself and parents. There is no thought or consideration of the possibility of a range of views that individuals within these groups would have, rather each is positioned as uniform in their opposition. It therefore alerts teachers to the range of opposition they could face should they be seen to be outside of Catholic 'values'. Teachers are also warned that their lives could be scrutinised in the public arena. The message is clear, how would you like to be in Jacqui Griffin's shoes.

It is little wonder that statements such as these by Church authorities seed fear in teachers minds. The Church has to do very little policing of its employees since teachers self regulate their behaviour and language in order to avoid what they presume will be censure or dismissal. And in contrast to the growing internal conflicts the Catholic Church is able to appear a cohesive unit<sup>6</sup> with consistency in rules, approaches and opinions.

In Victoria the public media stance that Archbishop Pell has taken in relation to homosexuality, such as opposing openly homosexual people receiving communion<sup>7</sup> contributes to a climate in which teachers are aware that there will be little or no support for teachers who are supportive of homosexuality. It also sends a message that there is a officially sanctioned, clear and non-negotiable stance with respect to homosexuality. This is a very effective regulating mechanism.

Marty shows how the public discourse of leaders like Archbishop Pell can be taken on board by teachers, filling them with enough fear that they self-regulate around homosexuality.

The attitude of the Church to this issue in a Catholic School, you would be out the door pretty fast I reckon if you were too supportive, especially with Pell's recent actions. (Pell refused communion to openly homosexual people)

The non-negotiable stance that Marty refers to can have a powerful effect on teachers in spelling out the options for those who are outspoken. These teachers quickly learn that the message is to quieten down, and not make a public scene about what you're doing or at the other extreme 'if you don't like it, get out'. Marty, is one of these outspoken people. She is a former Catholic primary school and English as a Second Language teacher, who is actively involved in the Church. In considering her future career options within a Church lead by Archbishop Pell she considered the best one to be retirement since she, "...wasn't interested in being part of regime...[whose] authority figures and leadership fails to reflect my views of Christian justice..."

The retirement of people like Marty, or the resignations of those who choose to no longer work in Catholic Schools quietly points to the effectiveness of the policing and regulating mechanisms within Catholic Schools and also to the influence of Church leaders. They ensure that public flouting of its 'values' and 'teaching' is minimised, and over a period of time the Catholic system can slowly be rid of the outspoken teachers who can create discord in their public image. They also (necessarily) make it difficult for teachers trying to work out a way of opening up the area of homosexuality in that they must avoid gaining too much of the spotlight in case they're detected and called to account. To the outside world therefore images of harmony and consistent approaches to homosexuality can be promoted.

Given this limited, negative and threatening framework it is not surprising that most teachers positioned themselves as employees within a system who had to tow the employer line.

...it's more in the context of Catholic education, Catholic beliefs and teachings, I think. And the idea is that if those children come to a Catholic school then you give the Catholic ... view. (Maria)

Maria is a primary Catholic School teacher who has been teaching for over 15 years. She has worked at a number of schools, across all grades and in a number of positions of responsibility. Maria does have views and values<sup>8</sup> that run contrary to Church teaching yet within this situation she clearly separates her own views and values from the ones that she feels she must provide through being part of the Catholic education system. The line of reasoning that she deploys here is quite similar to that used by the Catholic Education Office to refuse employment to Jacqui Griffin in Sydney insofar as there is seen to be a single Catholic view on homosexuality.

Mills (1996: 319) claims the "orderly...effective and efficient running of a school rests upon the acquiescence of those lower in the hierarchy to the power of those higher up the educational ladder." (See also Ginsberg et al, 1995) This acquiescence among teachers is evidenced by the maintenance of silence or particular discourses about homosexuality by teachers for as long as they are part of the Catholic education system. And with contrary opinions, knowledge and discourses relating to homosexuality largely being silenced within their school environments the dominant discourse of negativity towards homosexuality prevails.

#### The Church doctrine level

At the Church doctrine level there are various documents relating to homosexuality. A few documents present what can seem as positive statements such as:

They (homosexual people) must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994, Item no. 2358)

Statements such as this could be seen to support teachers who oppose homophobia or heterosexism in the classroom yet the statement needs to be contextualised by the fact that located within this document quite close to this sentence are also numerous negative statements. Negative statements, opposition to anti-discrimination legislation and labelling homosexuality in numerous negative terms tend to be far more common than positive statements<sup>9</sup> in Church doctrine. So dominant are the negative lines that even when general statements are made most teachers presume that there is a line being drawn against homosexuality.

As Catholic teachers we are constantly reminded (by Parish Priest) that we need to live our lives in the Catholic ethos. (Lynne)

For teachers like Lynne and Maria to go outside what is portrayed as the 'Church' line is to put oneself at odds with the organisation. In Lynne's situation the parish priest speaks about a 'Catholic ethos' as though there is a clearly marked position with no room to move. There are no contrary or varying lines on what this ethos is, the boundaries are firmly set. The one dominant discourse is all that there is.

## The School policy level

School documents or statements such as Pastoral Care, Mission or Vision statements are used as powerful promotional tools by schools. They send a clear message about what the school supposedly values and stands for. And yet even though these documents often contain generic, open statements that could be used to justify inclusive approaches for gay and lesbian students, many teachers in the Catholic system were still more focused elsewhere on Church teaching and discourse that was negative towards homosexuality. These took precedence over the generic, open statements. There was recognition among a number of teachers of the contradiction between Pastoral Care statements and what happened in relation to homosexuality yet such thinking was insignificant in comparison to their thinking about negative, anti-homosexual Church doctrine which provided the basis for fears about what they did in the classroom.

## The local level

At a local level there may be a whole range of signals for teachers that it is not safe to discuss homosexuality.

## Other staff

Maria not having raised homosexuality as an issue with others on staff decides to try and open up the area. With an article relating to Catholic schools and homosexuality she chooses a staff member who she thinks will be interested in discussing the area.

I think I was a bit naive, on staff, there are teachers who don't understand homosexuality and still see it like teenagers, 'they're poofers'...because I was talking to my co-worker about the article you (Greg) had written<sup>10</sup> and he just couldn't handle,... and most (teachers) couldn't handle homosexuality. He just said, 'oh I can't, they just turn me right off,' and I know another male there's the same...

Even though she is aware of constraints relating to talking about homosexuality within their work environment, the homophobia she encounters with this staff member jars her profoundly.

I was shocked, ...I expected him to be ... .. I s'pose understand about it, be a bit more ... understanding, well understand... well not have that reaction. I didn't expect him to have that kind of reaction.... (Maria)

This is a critical moment for Maria unsettling her to such an extent that when later asked about raising homosexuality as a topic within the context of sex education in a staff meeting she says:

Maria Oh I wouldn't (laughs) basically I wouldn't be comfortable

Greg What would be the thing that would be

Maria Ah probably all these people would have such a backward... .. view. And I'd probably call it not an informed view, something that there's no understanding behind.

This initial negative experience so colours Maria's view of her work environment that the door is shut to any further discussions about homosexuality with staff. She is therefore not aware of the array of other possible opinions on staff unless they raise the issue with her.

What is paramount in Maria's mind is the uneasy situation she was placed in and a desire to avoid this in the future.

Parents.

Uninformed or anti-homosexual views expressed by her own Italian relatives and family friends also exert a powerful influence over how Maria sees the mainly Italian parents in her school. This may be all that Maria has to go on since the avenues for discussions about homosexuality with parents may be limited. Also her negative experience with another staff member may dissuade her from investigating further.

...knowing from my Italian background how they would be, the Europeans... see males are more affectionate in Europe... but you know people forget here, it's different here ... I think it's more the understanding that they haven't read about it (homosexuality), they haven't thought about it, they haven't experienced it within

their social context.

...see I don't think the parents would have much understanding of a homosexual or a lesbian. They would have no idea from their experiences. And that's not their fault, that's where they've come from...

...I think parents too would have a problem with it all because they haven't had much contact and they don't understand about it all.

If the Italian parents in Maria's school were given the chance to offer their opinion there would no doubt be a range of opinions on talking about homosexuality in schools yet their voices are kept out of the school environment so that the stereotyped, homogenous line of presumed 'anti-gay', ignorant parents holds sway. This also means that the variety of other factors that impact on peoples' attitudes besides their ethnicity, such as their life experiences, gender, their sexuality, education, class, religion etc (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1996, Walkerdine, 1990) are not considered. Without Maria engaging with parents on the issue of homosexuality these fears about negative parental reaction can remain untested.

Fear, confusion and uncertainty

Given that the school system is largely oppositional or silent about homosexuality, many teachers expressed fear of engaging in any discussion relating to homosexuality. There is clearly an unwritten code that if teachers take up issues relating to homosexuality in a positive manner then they will be on their own. There is no evidence that the Catholic Church is open to discussing or re-examining its position. There are often no policies that back them through the specific naming of homosexuality, no anti-discrimination protection, and often no support staff. Clearly there is potential for risk not only to their job, but also to their name. So, a climate exists in which the mere mentioning of the terms 'homosexual', 'gay' or 'lesbian' is seen to be risky (see Nickson, 1996).

Sarah has been teaching for over twenty years in Catholic primary schools. She has taught right across all grades and has taken on a number of positions of responsibility and leadership including Acting Principal. She has also worked in special education where she became more aware of sexuality and sexual identity through a psycho-therapist that she worked with. Sarah identifies as heterosexual. In 1997 as a grade six teacher she taught Aaron who was constantly bullied by other boys of his age because he was perceived to be 'gay' since he wasn't interested in sport, was more interested in sitting and chatting with the girls and his mannerisms and walk were deemed to be effeminate.11

In the following quote Sarah is asked about the possibility of specifically naming the specific terms of abuse (eg. faggot) in a discussion with Aaron. Her thoughts reveal a myriad of fears.

I don't know I didn't ever feel that it was appropriate to talk about it with him. You know sexuality is a pretty unsafe area to talk about with kids at primary or secondary level. I think you can end up in trouble if he then re-related it to another adult who mistook p'haps what I was talking about to him. I could have been in strife and I guess I wasn't prepared to take the risk and I'm not sure how much about sexuality he really understood anyway or about himself.

The comments Sarah makes need to be contextualised through considering the Church policing and regulating of teachers in relation to talk about homosexuality. Sarah speaks of a lack of safety, of being in 'strife', of the 'risk' to her and the 'trouble' she could be in. This shows that she has taken on board as real the fears to her livelihood through discussing homosexuality, and consequently she regulates and polices herself.

Sarah is also in a work environment where she received little support from her colleagues in her year level who claimed that Aaron "...asked for a lot of this stuff that he got..." since they believed his actions were 'funny' and 'strange'. By 'funny', and 'strange' they meant his effeminate gestures, his flicking of his scarf, the overuse of his arms when playing sport and the squeals he often made. Hinson (1996: 251) in research focusing on heterosexual violence in schools, speaks of a 'blaming the victim' approach. To not fit within the 'appropriate' roles for your gender is grounds for policing, regulation and violence by others (Martino, 1997, Renew, 1996, Friend, 1993). This as in Sarah's situation can be sanctioned by teachers. Hinson (1996: 251) claims that some teachers and principals feel that:

...violence against gay males in particular is an 'understandable consequence of their not doing masculinity properly.

Hinson (1996: 250) identifies 'blame attribution' as one "...cultural and institutional practice which encourage[s] harassment, discourage[s] reporting, and discourage[s] the implementation of broader harassment policies" (see also Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998:225-251). There is clearly a need for a re-consideration of how bullying is thought of and approached within Sarah's school. Rather than purely focusing on the students involved there also needs to be a focus on the structures and practices within schools with contribute to, and "sanction" heterosexual violence (Hinson, 1996:247, Friend, 1993).

With many constraining contextual factors impacting on her Sarah reveals a great deal of uncertainty in her answer. She fails to find any way through to supportive territory in which she can speak openly, and in so doing explore her fears and discuss strategies with others. Within the school context she is unable to develop greater clarity in how she speaks about the issue, nor is able to improve her knowledge, find resources and make links with supportive agencies. Outside of the school environment there is the possibility of this yet the array of negativity and constraints around her lead her to remain within the parameters set by Church leaders and school structures.

When Sarah tries to open up Aaron's situation to colleagues they effectively close the door on her, showing that they don't consider it important and in effect questioning why she is taking it seriously. With these negative responses from colleagues she didn't speak about it with anyone. The ultimate consequence of this is that Sarah spent a year contemplating whether or not to tell Aaron's parents the specifics of what was actually occurring. In the end she decided not to. She also never spoke about the specifics of the situation with Aaron.

Even after a year she still has no more clarity about what she should have done. Fear, uncertainty and negativity essentially immobilise her within this area.

Sarah does seek to do something practical for Aaron. She sees that the only way through is for her to teach him some skills to combat the bullying he is facing. She acknowledges he feels embarrassed about being taught these skills.

He was still embarrassed and his body language gave the message that even though what he was saying was strong, the rest of his behaviour didn't follow that through.

Though the situations are set up to assist Aaron there are numerous grounds for potential embarrassment. No matter how sensitively the issue is handled in this situation the students would be aware who the skills sessions are for. They along with Aaron learn that boys like him must change their behaviour in terms of how they appear, walk and talk in order to combat abuse from bullies. In effect Aaron (and the rest of the class) is being told that this is 'the way it is' in the school environment. The focus is on him having to adapt to a homophobic environment and whilst the other students are sent messages about the need to accept difference, the lack of speaking to specifics means that the homophobia and heterosexism that is entrenched in the school system, structures and practices remain unchallenged. And unlike Aaron the bullies don't have to undergo any training program to explore their own prejudicial attitudes (see Hinson, 1996, Renew, 1996, Friend, 1993).

#### Pro-active teachers

Despite an environment where discrimination against those known or presumed to be homosexual is not recognised in policy or practice some teachers in Catholic schools do find means of opening up the topic in their classrooms. They situate themselves within a 'social justice' approach whereby they maintain a stance of opposition to any form of discrimination including homophobia and heterosexism. Knowing that this may not provide them with enough job protection they also seek to work out other strategies.

Louise is a secondary teacher in a Catholic school. She is an ex-religious who has and continues to hold positions of responsibility relating to religion in the school. She also works in a voluntary capacity in an AIDS hospice. In these few aspects of her life are embedded a number of aspects of protection for her teaching position. As an ex-religious with a significant influence on religion in the school she is able to rely on a thorough knowledge of theology relating to homosexuality, whilst she is also very well versed in the Church's stance on homosexuality. Whilst she recognises that school Pastoral Care policies and other documents on inclusive curriculum are silent on homosexuality she seeks to use the general, all embracing statements that can be found in these documents which she can also combine with her theological knowledge in support of gay and lesbian students

Another thing that affords Louise some protection is the fact that she works in an AIDS hospice. Such volunteer work is given the mantle of acceptability and respectability by the Church since it has established its own AIDS hospices. Through her volunteer work Louise could be expected to speak about her work and was often allowed and encouraged to do this. If it were known that she were lesbian however she feels the situation would be far different, for that could mean (to others) she was just pushing her bandwagon. (See Epstein and Johnson, 1998) It is indicative of the fine line that she walks that she remains fearful of becoming known as a lesbian (see Clarke, 1997, Flood, 1997, Renew, 1996, Khayatt, 1994).

Well I'm a bit of a chicken I'm still very afraid that I will be outed by my gung-ho attitude so I explain myself away by my work at AIDS accommodation.

It (the work at the AIDS accommodation) gives me an expertise I can talk about without giving myself or others away.

...I just pray I don't get the question. (Are you a lesbian?)

After one session with a group of students where she spoke about homosexuality, and also about going to a gay café with a friend, a colleague said to her, "...that was great you didn't tell them whether you were or weren't..." The implication being that she could speak this discourse, open up this area and be congratulated for it as long as she didn't reveal her sexuality. The other implication is that the session wouldn't have validity if conducted by a known lesbian.

I've been involved with HIV/AIDS ministry ....that's given me a foot in the door as a respectable you know thing ... So in a sense I have a respectability and because...so many HIV positive people are gay. It gives me an expertise I can talk about without giving myself or other people away

That colleagues and students and others know I work in HIV/AIDS field makes it logical that I know people who are gay, and that - through that - I know about gay cafes and the like. I have a fear that without that connection, my knowledge and interest about gay and lesbian issues would point the finger and lead people to put two and two together.

Louise also seeks to follow-up opportunities that arise with other staff members, such as staff members who show themselves to be open to discussing homosexuality with their classes.

So I think by doing things like joining her (a teacher who uses films with gay characters with her class) table at lunch and following up the conversation and including other people, you soon get to know who's gay friendly and who's not.

As seen in this situation Louise uses incidents that are happening around her as a way of raising the issue, rather than being positioned as always going on about gays and lesbians herself. In these moments she is able to position herself as merely responding to what has happened around her. It is an effective strategy that allows some protection of herself whilst still allowing the issues to enter the conversations of staff. She is also able to find out who is 'on side' thereby enabling her to build a base of allies.

There are a number of other factors that enable Louise to create some space to discuss homosexuality in a Catholic secondary school. She is often engaged in discourse about homosexuality outside the school environment with a variety of people, so she learns means of speaking about the area. She has access to, and has taken on board discourse which challenges the heterosexual dominance of schools. She knows others who are supportive of gay and lesbian students, so she is able to not only learn strategy from them but to also seek advice from them. Louise is also able to ground what she does and says through continuing research and reading in the area. What is central to Louise's approach however is that working to create a class environment that recognises and affirms gay and lesbian students is crucial to who she is as a person. It is a passion for her and it is what motivates her in her work. She sees that she must take a stand in whatever ways she can.

I think I realised I had a voice and the kids (gay and lesbian kids) couldn't have a voice and therefore I felt a certain responsibility to do what I could...

I think the thing that REALLY impacted on me was the boy's death last year when he committed suicide. I thought I don't care what it takes I don't want another kid in a school that I teach at to suicide.

This drive that Louise shows, is also evident in another teacher who is working pro-actively for gay and lesbian students in a secondary state school.

...its (discrimination against homosexuals) just always made me angry, personally. I mean I've got a lot of gay and lesbian friends and have had since I was very young so I've always felt offended on their behalf and I think the same as I hate racism, it just seems to diminish people. I guess it's my social barrow to push. (Jane)

Jane is a teacher librarian in a state secondary school. It is important to acknowledge that this is a quite different situation in terms the absence of Church doctrine and biblical theology that is utilised as a mechanism to engender fear among teachers in Catholic Schools. There is still however the possibility of danger in taking the stances that she does.

Jane used to work as a classroom teacher in secondary schools. She identifies as heterosexual. She describes herself as a feminist and also as a hippy. Like Louise she is passionate in her determination to challenge homophobia and heterosexism and also to make her library and lesson content inclusive of gays and lesbians. This is a vital distinction between those who were pro-active in regards to gays and lesbians in schools and those who were fearful on a number of fronts of taking such a stance. Those who are pro-active have taken on board the issues as part of who they are as people. Through their knowledge of research in the area they have recognised that the issues affect more than just gay and lesbian students. They are also cued into the signs of homophobia and heterosexism in the school environment, and are also open to the possibility that there may be gay and lesbian students in the school and that they must do something.

Jane like Louise uses the positions she holds in the school as a means of protecting herself. As the Equal Opportunity officer in the school she makes it clear to her classes that she will challenge any forms of discrimination.

We've never been challenged yet on anything. We haven't had any parents screaming yet. If we do though we've got the policy written down to say well we are trying to cater for all groups within the school and they'd have to really have something good to say why you wouldn't cater for gay and lesbian kids.

If people in the community do 'kick up' then the school has an educative role. We need to explain that info will not change kids' sexual orientation or encourage homosexuality.

The lack of Church doctrine and Church 'values' and 'teaching' within a state school are perhaps significant influences on Jane's thinking. Not only does she see that she has scope with the parents but she also considers the possibility that they may need to be educated about homosexuality so she can continue her work. Such thinking could certainly not be promoted by the Catholic Church.

For Jane there is a sense that there are spaces<sup>12</sup> to operate within, indeed in many ways she sets out to create these spaces which enable her to work towards an environment that was inclusive of gay and lesbian students. Jane speaks of an anti-discrimination display and unit she is preparing at her school.

I'm starting off on racism, I'm going to have a multi-cultural display...and I'm going to move through to sexism and I'm just gonna throw homophobia in and I know there'll be a few problems but I think it's gotta be done

Critical to this display and unit actually occurring and succeeding is that Jane has worked through the problems that may arise in doing this unit. If challenged she can point to the range of discrimination areas that she is looking at and highlight that homophobia is just one aspect. She has set herself within a supportive framework in taking on diverse forms of discrimination which can be backed by the broad inclusive statements found in school policies (such as Equal Opportunity). She has also set about finding allies in the school to support such a unit. Central to all of this is Jane's determination for this unit to occur and so she plans her strategy well before the unit is to take place.

#### The need for alternative discourses

Without latest research and information about homosexuality reaching teachers in schools then the silencing around homosexuality and inaction for lesbian and gay students can prevail. Also the fear of danger for anyone who dares to do anything pro-active survives, is reinforced daily and not questioned. Some teachers remain within these constraining parameters since this is all that is around them, as Epstein (1993: 19) says:

People are active agents in the making of their own meanings and identities, but, in doing so, they can only use the discourses and material conditions available to them.

Teachers also need to know about how to resist and subvert the dominant heteronormative structures in order to support gay and lesbian students, especially if there is a lack of support from school employers.

The overwhelming lack of discourse<sup>13</sup> about homosexuality in the school environment of teachers interviewed in this research means that it cannot establish a base from which understandings can be developed and prejudices or ignorance challenged.

"Non-recognition or mis-recognition makes it hard to develop or elaborate a recognizable identity, to put into circulation an acceptable story about yourself." (Epstein and Johnson, 1998: 19)

Homosexuality in these schools is not allowed to establish an 'acceptable story' about itself, and its 'recognizable identity' remains negative, based on stereotypes and ignorance.

The silencing of homosexuality also means that the teachers do not have opportunities to talk about their ideas in order to shape, refine and develop them. Without these opportunities being provided teachers may not have a means (in school at least) to work out safe methods of opening up the area of homosexuality. (Nickson, 1996) It can therefore be far safer to keep away from the subject area or to say as little as possible.

Silencing of talk about homosexuality is therefore a critical means of ensuring that the 'compulsory heterosexual' status quo remains.

Leaving the children alone to their own devices means that they will reproduce those positions in discourses with which they are familiar, and are thus not open to scrutiny and transformation. Neither the children nor the teacher can change without the production of different discourses in which to read their actions, and to produce different actions and different subjectivities. (Walkerdine, 1990:9)

In the absence of alternative discourses staff may not be aware of the range of sexualities among students and teachers. They may work on the assumption that everyone is heterosexual. This means that some students' realities are not recognised or spoken of. Also teachers may make offensive or insensitive comments, relating to sexuality, not considering that these may be impacting on students in their classes.

I heard one of the tradees (trade teachers) make a remark...that they wished that this particular boy would stop PONCING around pretending that he was 'gay' and it HADN'T even CROSSED this guys mind that he WAS gay. It's just not on the agenda for those sort of people. They just don't understand the damage that a comment like that can do. (Jane)

## Conclusion

It is difficult to concisely summarise the issues of this paper. Fear, confusion and uncertainty are only part of the battle that teachers face to recognise and affirm their gay and lesbian students. And yet despite this change is occurring. Some teachers are making a difference as they search for, and find ways to open up their classrooms for gay and lesbian students. In order for this to occur on a broader scale however systemic changes are needed. With many teachers perceiving the situation to be fixed, and risky to their job security then they clearly need to be given a mandate to take action from their Church leaders and employers.

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## NOTES

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Greg Curran is a former primary school teacher of 10 years experience who has worked in a variety of multi-cultural schools (Catholic and State) both in Melbourne and in London. During the last three years he worked as an English as a Second Language teacher and co-ordinator within both the primary and adult sectors. He has also trained and worked as a volunteer facilitator for the Victorian AIDS Council.

He is currently a full-time Master in Education student researching 'Homosexuality' within the school environment: Teachers' perspectives.' His other interests are designing inclusive curriculum and developing strategies that enable gay and lesbian students to be recognised and catered for in school environments. He has had articles published and has spoken at conferences about these areas. Greg also works part-time as a training and maintenance officer for the Victorian AIDS Council.

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1 Please note that I have applied to convert from the degree of Master of Education (research thesis) to Doctor of Philosophy commencing in the 1999 academic year. 2 For a discussion of 'heteronormativity' see, Warner, M. (1993), *Fear Of A Queer Planet: Queer Politics And Social Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p. xxi - xxv. 3 Hillier, L., Dempsey, D, Harrison, L, Beale, L., Matthews, L. & Rosenthal, D., (1998), *Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Well-being of Same-Sex Attracted Young People*, National Centre in HIV Social Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne. 4 For further information about the case and Jacqui Griffin see, Pallotta-Chiarolli, M. (1998), 'When Religious Liberty Is Religious Bigotry', in *Campaign*, 264, March 1998, p.28-30. 5 For further coverage of the case see, Walden, M. (1998) 'School principles' in *The Australian*, June 27, 1998. 6 For further information about how these types of processes can operate in an Australian state high school see Mills, M. (1996), 'Homophobia kills': a disruptive moment in the educational politics of legitimation', in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol, 17, No. 3, p. 315-326. 7 Media release - Statement by the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Dr George Pell, addressing the issue of homosexuals who request Holy Communion, 31 May, 1998. 8 For further discussion about teacher 'values' see, Whatley, M.H., (1992), 'Whose Sexuality Is It Anyway?', in Sears, J.T. (ed), *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, Teachers College Press, New York, p. 78-84. See also, Harrison, L, Hillier, L. & Walsh, J. (1996), 'Teaching For A Positive Sexuality: Sounds Good, But What About Fear, Embarrassment, Risk And The 'Forbidden' Discourse of Desire', in Laskey, L. & Beavis, C. (eds.), *Schooling and*

Sexualities: Teaching for a Positive Sexuality, Deakin Centre for Education and Change - Faculty of Education, Deakin University, Geelong, p.69-82. 9 For a further exploration of Catholic Church doctrine and homosexuality see Curran, G., Crowhurst, M. & Halliday, L. (1998) 'Being lesbian and gay in a Catholic School' in Campaign, (264), March 1998, pp. 31-32. [Reprinted in Independent Education Unions, Independent Education as 'Sensitively accepting the objectively disordered', Vol.28, No. 1, 1998, pp. 31-33.] 10 Curran, G., Crowhurst, M. & Halliday, L. (1998) 'Being lesbian and gay in a Catholic School' in Campaign, (264), March 1998, pp. 31-32. [Reprinted in Independent Education Unions, Independent Education as 'Sensitively accepting the objectively disordered', Vol.28, No. 1, 1998, pp. 31-33.] 11 For an overview of research relating to the bullying and vilification of male students though or known to be gay see Gilbert, R. & Gilbert, P. (1998), Masculinity goes to School, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards, p. 159-166. 12 A number of teachers in this research speak of feeling that they have very little room in which to move in relation to discussing homosexuality in class. The term 'space' therefore refers to teachers seeking to make room in their everyday teaching to incorporate an approach that is inclusive of gays and lesbians. Creating space can mean seizing everyday opportunities that arise in the class as well as identifying integration possibilities. It can also be planning for a specific focus that is supported by policy and other staff. 13 For further discussion about issues related to 'naming' (in relation to sexual harassment) see Wood, J.T. (1994), 'Saying It Makes It So: The Discursive Construction of Sexual Harassment', in Bingham, S.G. (ed), Conceptualizing Sexual Harassment as Discursive Practice, Praeger Press, Westport, p. 17-30. See also Fine, M., (1992), 'Silencing and Nurturing Voice in an Improbable Context: Urban Adolescents in Public School', in Fine, M. (ed), Disruptive Voices: The Possibilities of Feminist Research, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, p. 115-138. "I could have been in strife and I guess I wasn't prepared to take that risk." (Sarah) Teacher positioning around 'homosexuality' in schools (c) Greg Curran 1998 ('Work in progress') 13