

**Anti-homophobia education in teacher education:
Perspectives from teacher educators
in NSW, Australia**

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Introduction

This paper reports on preliminary findings from research that examines anti-homophobia education in teacher education courses across New South Wales, Australia. In this research, anti-homophobia education is seen as pedagogical approaches that endeavour to address the inequities imposed by homophobia and heterosexism and which explore the discrimination towards non-heterosexual relationships. It also attempts to develop an awareness and understandings of the positive experiences and concerns of sexual identities that transcend heterosexuality. In this study, the focus of anti-homophobia education was related specifically to lesbian and gay identities.

This conference paper relays several key findings from the study. These include:

- Why and to what extent do teacher educators consider the incorporation of anti-homophobia perspectives as important to teacher education, if they do at all;
- The various discourses in which issues pertaining to anti-homophobia education are positioned, including the changing discursive locations that frame the incorporation of anti-homophobia education across the early childhood, primary and secondary sectors;
- The influence of broader socio-cultural discourses on teacher educators' perceptions of the relevance and importance of anti-homophobia education to teacher training.

This conference paper extends upon two earlier discussion papers that have previously been published by the authors (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001, 2002), which explore their personal and professional experiences of teaching social justice issues, particularly anti-homophobia education to pre-service teachers.

To provide a brief background to this discussion, there are several key issues that reinforce the need to address anti-homophobia education in teacher training across the three sectors of teacher education. Despite the apparent acceptance and visibility of non-heterosexual identities in the media, as demonstrated by shows such as ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’, and one of Australia’s most popular reality shows in the nation’s history of television – ‘The Block’ – homophobia is still a major social justice issue in Australian schools and indeed in schools across many western, industrialised nations. Although sexual orientation was included into the NSW Anti- Discrimination Act of 1977 more than two decades ago, homophobic violence, vilification and marginalization still pervades classrooms, playgrounds and unfortunately, even staffrooms (Ferfolja, 1998, 2003; Robinson, 1996; Collins, 1997; Robinson, Irwin & Ferfolja, 2002). In 1997, a well-publicized case of homophobic violence against an Australian high school student resulted in the successful litigation against the NSW Department of School Education for failing to enact their ‘duty of care’ (Angelo, 1997).

Typically, anti-homophobia education is perceived as relevant only to older children – usually those in junior high school; however, much research has indicated that even very young children are aware of the power relations in operation and their access to power depending on the discursive location in which one is positioned by self and others. In relation to sexuality, Chasnoff and Cohen (1997) have clearly demonstrated that children even in the early childhood years of schooling can have negative understandings about gays and lesbians; some apply these labels in a pejorative manner as a powerful means to marginalise, harass and ostracise others (see also Collins, 1997).

In Australia, the high levels of suicide and suicide ideation, isolation, depression and mental health concerns, academic disengagement, school drop-out which impacts on career opportunities and aspirations amongst young gays and lesbians has been well documented (Barbeler, 1992; Hillier & Walsh, 1999; Kendall & Walker, 1998; Mills, 1999) and reinforces the need to actively engage teachers and teacher trainees in anti-homophobia education. In addition, staff perceived or known to be lesbian or gay, often experience overt and covert anti-lesbian/gay discrimination from students and colleagues,

resulting in high levels of anxiety, stress, depression, leaving teaching, work dissatisfaction, inability to connect with students and colleagues, as well as having implications for promotion and career advancement (Ferfolja, 1998, 2003). There is still a fear on the part of many lesbian and gay teachers, that they will be discredited or become “open slather” to harassment if their sexuality becomes known by the school and its community (Clarke, 1996; Ferfolja, 1998, 2003; Khayatt, 1992; Kissen 1996; Olson, 1987).

Schooling cultures also marginalise and reinforce the silences and stigma about lesbian and gay identities. Not only do many gay and lesbian individuals hear pejorative language, such as “poof”, “dyke” and “that’s so gay” bandied around on a daily basis, often unchecked by teachers, but gay and lesbian identities are largely omitted from school curricula or from any positive representation at all. They and the issues pertaining to them are invisible or not seen; this means that in many schools, because such issues are not seen to be relevant or even in some instances problematic, (such as gendered harassment that reinforces homophobic cultures), they are not addressed (Ferfolja, 1998) reinforcing the silences and marginalisation around their identities.

These are just some of the reasons why teachers have a professional, moral and legal obligation to intervene in discrimination based on sexual orientation and to encourage critical understandings of sexual ‘difference’ throughout all stages of education; they have a duty of care to the safety and well-being of all students. They are also required to work within the NSW Anti-Discrimination legislation. There are thus, clear implications for pre-service teacher education and the need to address anti-homophobia education in all levels of teacher training.

Perceptions about discriminatory issues vary widely and are not necessarily considered of equal importance; in fact, how discriminations are considered varies across social, historical, political and cultural landscapes. Currently, due to global events, ethnicity and racism have come to the fore as major social justice issues. Other factors also impact on which social justice issues are considered “worthy” to be explored and may include

individuals' personal perceptions in terms of relevance or need, their understandings and exposure to equity issues, their values, their personal comfort levels with dealing with 'difficult knowledge' (Britzman, 1998), and the discourses in which they situate self and others. This notion of how subjects shift was highlighted in research conducted with early childhood educators (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000), which found that some educators who espoused strong social justice philosophies about particular social justice issues, expressed opposite and sometimes quite negative attitudes in relation to issues of sexual orientation. This highlights the teachers' subjectivities as contradictory, shifting, unstable, and contextually located (Weedon, 1987). Individuals, including teachers are exposed to the prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance that abound in society and may equally be positioned in homophobic discourses that may impact on their pedagogical practices and by extension, schooling cultures.

There has been some limited research conducted in tertiary education that addresses gay and lesbian identities and/or homophobia (e.g., McQuarrie, 1998; Herek, 1993; Hopwood & Connors, 2002; Myers & Kardia, 1997), but little has been conducted either nationally or internationally on anti-homophobia education in pre-service teacher training (some exceptions being Eyre, 1993; Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004 in press; Hatton, 1995; Goldstein, 1997; Goldstein, Robinson & Ferfolja, 2004 in press; Mathison, 1998; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001, 2002; Sears, 1992). This current research aims to address that gap and thus, this paper focuses on some of the broader experiences and understandings of academics involved in teacher education in universities across the state of NSW. This work examines the exclusion and/or inclusion of anti-homophobia education in teacher training, across the various age levels of schooling and particularly focuses on the emerging discourses in which teacher educators position anti-homophobia education in teacher training. Of particular relevance to this conference's theme is the perceived dilemmas and risks of doing anti-homophobia education; these have been borne out on multiple levels throughout this research and some of these will be discussed in the time remaining.

Methodology and participant background

The research utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods in an effort to provide a picture of anti-homophobia education in NSW teacher training programs across the three sectors of school education. Areas explored included: if and where anti-homophobia education was located in teaching units; the rationale for its inclusion/exclusion and if included, the content addressed and the theoretical and pedagogical approaches applied; pre-service teachers' responses to addressing such issues; perceptions of relevance for future teachers, and an overview of the teacher educator's experiences.

One hundred surveys were disseminated to academics involved in teacher education across six of the seven NSW universities that provide teacher training. (The seventh university did not respond). These educators were most likely to potentially include anti-homophobia perspectives in their subjects.

Approximately 40% of the questionnaires were completed and returned; 60% of respondents were female, 35% were male and 5% did not identify their sex. 22% self-identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. About half came from rural institutions and most had no formal education in lesbian and gay equity issues. It needs to be forefronted that most of the participants incorporated social justice perspectives, not necessarily anti-homophobia into their teaching framework; however, for obvious reasons, one is unable to ascertain the awareness or perceived relevance of, or interest in these issues by the 60% of the targeted individuals who chose not to participate. Such silences can also be telling; however, it is beyond the scope of this conference paper to surmise further on this issue. However, as Foucault (1978, p. 28) states, silences are "element[s] that function alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies."

The questionnaire findings were further explored through analysis of fifteen individual interviews which extended on the issues arising in the questionnaires. The data were thematically coded and analysed to identify the various discourses (in the Foucauldian

sense) operating amongst the participants in relation to anti-homophobia education in teacher training.

Preliminary Findings

The following are some of the preliminary findings from the research to date:

- Generally the teacher educators who responded to this research espoused the importance of anti-homophobia education to pre-service teacher training.
- The perceived degree of importance decreased across the secondary through to early childhood and also was not considered of such immediate relevance as other issues of social justice, reflecting earlier research conducted by the authors (see Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001, 2002). Despite this, about 25% of the participants indicated that they considered that all social justice issues were equally important to pre-service teacher education regardless of whether it was early childhood, primary or secondary.
- Over a fifth of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they did not address lesbian and gay equity issues or anti-homophobia in their subjects despite the seeming ‘suitability’ to the areas in which they taught.
- Integration into other issues such as gender seemed to be a dominant way of ‘doing’ anti-homophobia education; despite the fact that to some extent this marginalized the issue because it was not necessarily given a specific focus like other areas such as racism, bilingualism, gender or Aboriginal Studies, which were typically allotted a specific space.

Why is anti-homophobia important to teacher education? - The emerging reasons

- A major discourse to emerge in relation to why participants thought that anti-homophobia education was an important area to address with pre-service teachers

was the recognition that schools are homophobic and heterosexist institutions that reinforce dominant constructions of gender and sexuality.

- There was recognition by some teacher educators of the connection between violence, harassment and isolation and the prevailing link between gay and lesbian youth suicide and suicide ideation. This link has been well reported in the Australian literature (Barbeler, 1992; Kendall & Walker, 1998).
- Homophobia was considered by some participants as endemic to some rural regions, but not all considered this true. In different socio-historical spaces, certain knowledges, such as those associated with lesbian and gay identities may be more strongly resisted; although, this is not to say that all rural communities are homophobic. However, one must be mindful of the fact that young gay/lesbian individuals have less power in the adult/child binary, less opportunity to activate their “sexual capital” (Britzman 1997, p. 187), and difficulties may be compounded in rural spaces that have fewer services, especially in terms of LGBTQ support services.
- It was acknowledged that some teachers in schools are complicit in the perpetuation of heteronormative discourses.
- Anti-homophobia education was positioned in the discourse of teachers providing positive and socially aware role models for students; this discourse has its roots in the historical construction of teachers, who are meant to reflect and uphold the morality of social citizenry (Walters & Hayes, 1998), are considered *in loco parentis* (Dressler, 1978; Khayatt, 1990), and who are constructed as the moulders of young minds. Interestingly, role modeling and its political impact remain open to debate (Khayatt, 1997).
- Akin to the notion of role modeling, was a position that placed the importance of anti-homophobia issues as essential in undertaking one’s duty of care.

Discourses of non-responsibility: The role of the teacher

- In contrast to the teacher as role model, some teacher educators questioned the role of the modern teacher in regards to dealing with anti-homophobia and felt that it was more the responsibility of the parents/peers/community.
- A few respondents felt that assuming some responsibility for a socially just society is deemed as an additional burden to the teacher's role; this contradicts the role model discourse and resists the dominant pedagogical rhetoric that teachers should endeavour to cater to the needs of each and every student.

Discourses of Childhood and Adolescence

- Teacher educators strongly supported the need to address anti-homophobia education with secondary pre-service teachers, who would be dealing with adolescents. The decrease in perceived relevance of these issues in primary and early childhood reflects hegemonic discourses of childhood and their intersection with discourses of sexuality. These reflect industrialised, western constructions of childhood and need to be deconstructed

The Discourse of Liberal Tolerance and Anti-bias

- Although there was a strong theoretical presence of feminist poststructuralism amongst some research participants, the majority were located within the humanist discourse of liberal tolerance in terms of their theoretical and pedagogical approaches towards dealing with diversity and difference. Consequently, 'humanness' becomes the point of similarity that tends to eclipse understandings of difference and power relations and underlies notions of acceptance and tolerance.

- The Anti-bias (Derman-Sparkes, 1987) curriculum in early childhood was seen by some participants to an extent, to counteract the prevailing discourse of childhood although it is underpinned by notions of liberal tolerance. Unfortunately, it is often interpreted so as to incorporate a ‘touristic’ approach to cultural diversity, where ethnicity and multiculturalism are primarily focused on and often framed within the genre of a tourist brochure; a series of facts around eating, housing, clothing and geography.
- Some participants involved in teaching in early childhood pre-service teacher education considered anti-homophobia education as critical to ensure the disruption of heterosexism and homophobia that begins in the early years. Additionally, there was relevance seen in its link to diverse families and relationships.
- The importance of increased visibility and social change
- Another perspective that was commonly espoused in relation to the importance of anti-homophobia education stemmed from an awareness of family diversity and the increased visibility of lesbian and gay identities in the lives of children.

Conclusion

This paper highlights some of the initial findings of this research examining anti-homophobia education in NSW teacher training. It demonstrates that anti-homophobia education involves a variety of risks and dilemmas –for teachers in schools, for school education and curriculum, for pre-service teachers and although not alluded to in this conference paper, but what is arising from the research, is also the personal and professional risk for several pre-service teacher educators in some contexts. However, what must remain the focus of these perceived difficulties and discomforts are the risks and dilemmas faced by lesbian and gay students and teachers every day in many of Australia’s schools. These risks and dilemmas often go ignored, are marginalized, silenced and invisible. It is up to pre-service teacher educators to help facilitate future

teachers in their development of greater understandings of diverse sexualities across early childhood, primary and secondary teacher education. As Kobayashi and Ray (2000) point out:

Institutions that set public policy and provide public services, including ... education, represent a network that also functions ideologically to determine what kinds of risk are more or less acceptable and what levels of risk will be publicly tolerated. (p. 2)

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