The Impact of School Climate on Same-Sex Attracted and Gender Nonconforming Youth

Dr. Jacqueline Ullman
School of Education,
University of Western Sydney
j.ullman@uws.edu.au

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Defining “School Climate”:
Here, school climate is framed specifically with regards to same-sex attraction and boundaries of the gender “spectrum”

- Curriculum
- Attitudes
- Policy/Rules
- Perceived “ethos”
Defining “Gender-Climate”:

“Sum total of school ethos around gender expression, including: the official (e.g. organisationally enforced) and unofficial (e.g. socially enforced) rules regarding students’:

• physical appearance, contingent on their assumed biological sex;
• the hidden curriculum of ‘gendered’ areas of study (e.g. certain classes being perceived and subtly presented as more appropriate for one sex of students rather than the other); and
• both the academic and social rewards and punishments linked to students’ gender expression.”

(Ullman, 2014, pg. 431)
Background (a “refresher”):

- Gender vs. Sex
- Biological Determinism
- Social Constructivism
- Social Learning Theory
Gender Performativity

• Individuals are **actively involved** in constructing gendered identities, albeit unconsciously;
• Construction of gender identity is dynamic, constant and interdependent – a **performance** dependent on repeated iteration and subject to normative expectations (Butler, 1990)
• Even though each of us actively construct our own gender identity, our **options are limited** by the available discourses of gender that circulate via cultural institutions
Links between gender “norms” and sexuality:

• Gender norms are linked to expectations about how women and men, boys and girls, will behave differently from each other.

• Those who do not conform may face violence and discrimination.

• Part of being what is seen to be a ‘proper man’ or ‘proper woman’ is to stick to the stereotypes (no gender ambiguity or transgendered appearance) and express desires for or have relations only with people of the ‘opposite’ sex.
Setting the Scene:
Heterosexuality as Cultural/Social “Capital”

- Sexuality as a locus of social control  (Foucault, 1978)
- Heterosexuality as part of the “hidden curriculum” (Plummer, 1989)
- Heterosexuality as part of students’ unspoken identity within the secondary school setting
- Heterosexuality as cultural and social capital - an “asset” to students in their social interactions
Heteronormativity:

- Way in which gender and sexuality are separated into hierarchically-organised categories;
- A cultural presupposition that heterosexuality is appropriate standard for sexual identity/practice and that alternative sexualities are deviant, abnormal, or wrong
- Functions by organising categories of identity into hierarchical binaries:
  - MAN opposite and superior to WOMAN
  - HETEROSEXUALITY “” HOMOSEXUALITY
How do SSA/GQ students perceive school-based discussions of same-sex attraction and gender nonconformity?

• When it’s discussed...
  ➢ Non-heterosexual sexuality presented in a reduced form (male homosexuality only)
  ➢ Teachers exhibit prejudice toward same-sex attraction which would not be tolerated in the instance of a racial or gender issue

• More often it’s non-existent...
  ➢ Less than 50% of SSA high school students could find LGBTQ resources or references in libraries
  ➢ Less than 15% of SSA high school students reported exposure to LGBTQ curriculum references in classes

*(Ellis & High, 2004)*

*(Kosciw et al., 2010)*
Secondary teachers & discussions about same-sex attraction:

• In national survey of sex-ed teachers, 15% did not include sexual orientation or same-sex attraction.
  ➢ Teachers reported:
    o being concerned about community values (e.g. parents complaining/getting in “trouble”);
    o not having appropriate teaching materials,
    o not having appropriate training (both pre-service and in-service).

• Teachers fear being labeled pro-homosexual, risking negative repercussions from others. (Holmes, 2001)

• LGBTQ issues positioned as too controversial for schooling communities (e.g. “Controversial Schools Policy”) – content subject to surveillance.
What marginalisation of SSA and GQ students looks like:

• Starts subtly with...
  ➢ Monolithic depictions of family structure and romantic relationships
  ➢ Strict gender roles
  ➢ Absence of LGBTQ role models, topics, and general visibility

• Sows the seeds for overt victimisation (verbal/physical/cyber harassment and bullying)
Impact of a Hostile School Climate

- Feeling unsafe at school
- Difficulty concentrating at school
- Lower school achievement
- Truancy
- Lowered educational aspirations
- Mental health/emotional wellbeing issues

Source: Writing Themselves In (1, 2, & 3); GLSEN National School Climate Surveys; Russell, Seif & Truong (2001); Murdock & Bolch (2005); Bontempo & D’Augelli (2002)
Key Research Goals

Explore perceptions and impact of school climate (including ‘gender-climate’):

1. How does school climate impact SSA students’ sense of belonging and school community membership?

2. How does school climate and sense of belonging impact SSA students’ academic self-concept?
Participants (LGBTQ):

2004/2005:
- N = 282 (56% female, 2.4% questioning their gender)
- Aged 14-19
- Australian current/former secondary students
- 62% government school; 29% religious school

2013:
- N = 704 (57% female, 7.5% transgender or gender nonconforming)
- Aged 14-18
- All current secondary students
- 62% government school; 30% religious school
Sex-Based Differences:

- Male students significantly more likely to witness instances of verbal homophobia and a lack of positive teacher intervention \( (t_{260} = -3.92, p < 0.01) \)
- Female students at single-sex schools reported lowest levels of verbal victimization and significantly less likely than male students at single-sex school to witness victimization \( (t_{74} = 2.23, p < 0.05) \)
School Climate and School Belonging:

Students’ reported verbal and physical homophobia measures were strongly, negatively associated with their:
1. sense of connection to teachers
2. connection to the school environment
3. connection to peers and
4. sense of safety while at school.

Students’ reports of 1) how their teachers spoke about SSA persons/topics and the 2) frequency teachers & peers were positive about SSA persons/topics were strongly, positively associated with their:
1. sense of connection to teachers
2. connection to the school environment
3. connection to peers and
4. sense of safety while at school.
School Belonging & Academic Outcomes:

Students’ “belonging” measures (teachers, peers, school in general, safety) were strongly, positively associated with their reported:

1. learning motivation
2. academic self-concept.
2005/2013 Comparisons: Language

**Frequency (%) of Homophobic Language at School**
(negative terms to describe lesbians, gay or bisexual people)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2013</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or Twice</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or Twice per Week</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Several Times per Week</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost Every Day</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>58.3</td>
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</table>

**Frequency of Teacher Intervention**
(Homophobic Language)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2013</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the Time</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of the Time</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardly Ever</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>20</td>
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</table>
Frequency (%) of Transphobic Language ("What *are* you [boy/girl]?"; "He/She", "It")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>7.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Once or Twice</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or Twice per Week</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several Times per Week</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost Every Day</td>
<td>8.4</td>
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2005/2013 Comparisons: Physical

Frequency (%) of Physical Bullying Related to Sexuality/Gender Expression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or Twice</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or Twice per Week</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several Times per Week</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost Every Day</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Frequency of Teacher Intervention (Physical Bullying)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2013</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Most of the Time</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of the Time</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardly Ever</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hey Western Sydney Teens!

We want to hear from you!

Are you 16-19 years old?
Are you same-sex attracted or playful with your gender?

Does your school have a group of "girly girls" and wannabe "tough guys"?

Would most guys at your school rather be called just about anything else than called a "GIRL" in public?

Six western Sydney teens (aged 16-19)
- 3 SSA girls/2 SSA boys/1 transgendered f2m

- Religious/Public schools represented
- Asked about gender norms, stereotypes, policing, boundaries of acceptable/non-acceptable behaviours and appearances

Some emergent themes...

• Homophobic abuse as solidifying us/them dynamic & protecting heterosexual identity
  
  *If I said, “Oh, can I use this chair?” he’d be like, “Pfft! Piss off, faggot!” ... I think it makes them feel big and reinforces their own masculinity*

• Teachers as reinforcing preferred (traditional) gendered behaviours
  
  *Teachers were asking people, ...“Are they together?” or, “Are there lesbians in your year?”*

• Students taking responsibility for personal protection/education of others (in lieu of teachers)
  
  *When they [the bullies] did get punished for it, it still went on. You have to take matters into your own hands, kind of thing, but when you’re an insecure sixteen year-old, you’re not thinking about that. You’re thinking, “I’m scared and I’m running home.”*
You can definitely tell that there’s air of “Let’s not talk about that. Let’s get back on track and talk about normal things.” They isolate it and make it something that we don’t touch on (Jessie, 16)

There was actually only one lesbian couple that was rumoured to be a couple. It was all hidden. They were actually pretty much hunted down by teachers and the teachers were asking people, “Is it true that blah blah [name] and blah blah [name] — are together as a couple?” (Sara, 17)

Every time I was on the bus I used to freak out because they used to scream things at me and I didn’t know if it was going to get violent or not and none of my friends would do anything about it. I went to the extent of walking kilometres just to avoid that bus and ducking and weaving throughout the streets and running just to get away from these bullies. Just to get home. (Markus, 18)
In their words: the qualitative dimension

Whole-School Silences = LGBTQ issues as taboo:

• Teachers’ ignoring of homophobic or transphobic comments/slang and not addressing intent or implications

• Not addressed in sexuality ed. (or anywhere else)

• Interventions (for homophobic behaviour) as discrete, private conversations
In their words: the qualitative dimension

Impact of Whole-School Silences:

• Decreased sense of school belonging
• Sense of futility about their own social experiences
• Follow-on impact on their academic experiences
In their words: the qualitative dimension

Why did you “wag”/“skip” school?

Most of the time I would skip school because I was very afraid of going to school. I knew that the teachers weren't really on my side and that they wouldn't defend me, and I didn't feel as though I could talk to any staff member about what was going on. Amanda, 18

At times I was quite scared to go to school because of all the bullying at school. I knew that there was nothing I could do because the teachers saw it going on and they did absolutely nothing about it… I lost interest in my schoolwork because of it. Jonathan, 18
In their words: the qualitative dimension

What was your favourite subject and why?

It [the class] gave me the opportunity to write about issues that affected me (i.e. being a gay kid in a rural, religious high school). It gave me a voice, and the teacher was always supportive of what I had to say. *Kylie, 19*

In Years 11 and 12 the only people who did chemistry/physics/biology were the smart ones who actually wanted to do it, and all the dumb f**ks who couldn’t spell their own name didn’t do it. These were the people who gave me a hard time, that’s why it was my favourite subject…People tend to enjoy things more when they are comfortable than when they suffer anxiety attacks because they are worried that the stupid Neanderthal at the back of the class was going to throw a Bunsen burner at you!!! *Daniel, 18*
It got to the point where I didn’t really want to go to school anymore...because the constant looks or the people coming up to me...Every time you walk past – just comments...You’ve got to take all that extra stress and do well at school. When it’s constantly at you 24/7, it’s a bit hard to concentrate.  

Samantha, 18

They’ve always been bumping me around when I go into class or something...I usually get anti-gay things...and so, there was a time when I didn’t go to school. I’d skip maybe four times in a fortnight...Just the stress and everything got too much for me at the time...I didn’t really feel that I could do my schoolwork, couldn’t catch up, couldn’t do anything. I thought I was dumb and everything in classes. Like “Essay” in English – which I wasn’t’! I was one of the best! Jacob, 15
The “take-home” message:

- Positivity toward LGBTQ Issues
- Safety and School Community Connection
- SSA Young People as Confident, Connected Learners
NSW Policies Re: Sexuality: What’s the official “line?”

• Specifically advocates being inclusive of same-sex attracted persons and working to minimise homophobia
• Advises consulting with the community and incorporating community values
• “Controversial Issues in Schools” policy (2007)
  - Encourages open communication with parents – policy allows parents option to withdrawal
“In primary schools, there are opportunities when teaching sexuality, to be inclusive of same-sex attracted people and issues by:

• identifying any homophobic language in the classroom and explaining to students that these terms are demeaning and offensive to others as well as breach anti-discrimination laws.

• normalising the terms gay, lesbian and same-sex attracted to avoid students using other terms which are demeaning or discriminatory.

• acknowledging the presence of same-sex couples and families by generating inclusive examples when discussing family life.

• providing a wide range of positive images and examples of same-sex couples in lessons focusing on caring and loving relationships to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

• using inclusive language when discussing social and emotional changes during adolescence to acknowledge that some students may be attracted to the same sex (e.g. using the term ‘partners’ instead of boyfriend and girlfriend or husband and wife).”
From the ‘Sexual Health’ Materials:


• “Respond to discrimination and harassment based on sexual diversity as effectively as you would acts of racism or sexism.
• Ensure that students have access to accurate and developmentally appropriate books and other resources on sexuality and gender diversity issues.
• Check existing resources for validity and bias; for example, gay, lesbian or bisexual people may be either invisible or depicted as unhealthy or deviant.
• Within the classroom in teaching and learning activities:
  – de-gender language
  – use a range of scenarios not just heterosexual characters
  – avoid using stereotypical scenarios/roles
  – do not tolerate discriminatory language
  – develop a suitable vocabulary to express sexual feelings
  – challenge stereotypical attitudes and assumptions.”
• Cross-curricular priorities include (social) sustainability: working for socially-just world/sustainable social futures. [Link](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities/Sustainability)

• General capabilities include:
  – Personal and social capability
  – Ethical capability

• Health & Physical Education (foundations to year 10) specifically includes: [Link](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/healthandphysicaleducation/Curriculum/F-10)

**Same-sex attracted and gender-diverse students**

As with other areas of student diversity, it is crucial to acknowledge and affirm diversity in relation to sexuality and gender in Health and Physical Education. Inclusive Health and Physical Education programs which affirm sexuality and gender diversity acknowledge the impact of diversity on students’ social worlds, acknowledge and respond to the needs of all students, and provide more meaningful and relevant learning opportunities for all students.

The Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education (F–10) is designed to allow schools flexibility to meet the learning needs of all young people, particularly in the health focus area of relationships and sexuality. All school communities have a responsibility when implementing the Health and Physical Education curriculum to ensure that teaching is inclusive and relevant to the lived experiences of all students. This is particularly important when teaching about reproduction and sexual health, to ensure that the needs of all students are met, including students who may be same-sex attracted, gender diverse or intersex.
Teaching Links:

• “Teaching Sexual Health” Website
  – Sections on sexual diversity, gender diversity, cultural inclusivity and Indigenous cultural groups
Quality Teaching/Values Ed.

Quality Teaching Framework is concerned with “significance” of content:

- Incorporating cultural knowledge
- Being inclusive
- Connecting knowledge to real-life contexts/problems

Values Education is concerned with “social outcomes” such as:

- Social cohesion
- Compassion
- Rejection of violence, harassment & discrimination
From NSW Teachers Federation:

• Gender, Sexuality and Identity Kit (2011)
  - Hard copy sent to NSW schools
  - Contains:
    - Gender, Sexuality and Identity Policy
    - List of GLBTI Library Resources for Classroom Use (books/DVDs, sorted by age)
  - GLBTI Special Interest Group: glbti@nswtf.org.au
Whole School Resources

- Site full of free resources from:
  - Lesson plan ideas
  - Social and emotional learning resources

http://safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au/resources/
Whole School Resources:

- Sexual Diversity Checklist (developed by La Trobe University):
Media (Teaching) Resources:

“It’s Elementary” & “It’s STILL Elementary” documentaries:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMG06eT1k0o&feature=related

Video project to prevent suicide and self-harm for SSA students:
http://www.igba.org.au/

“U R Not Alone” Video project – Survival stories from Australian teens
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlzmnv16a9c&feature=player_embedded#!
Additional Resources:

- Outsmarting Homophobia:

- Skool’s Out:

- Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria:

- Twenty10 – ‘Out West’ Group:
  http://www.facebook.com/outwestsydney
Additional Resources:

• “Your Sex Health”
  http://www.yoursexhealth.org/flash/index.html

• “LikeItIs.org.au: Sex Like it Is!”
  http://www.likeitis.org.au/sexuality

• “This is Oz”
What (a few) Others are Up To:

New York City: “Respect for All” Initiative
http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2587.html?state=research&type=research

Ireland: “Exploring Masculinities” Program

Syracuse City (New York State): “Reduction of Stigma in Schools” Program
http://soe.syr.edu/academic/cultural_foundations_of_education/projects_institutes.aspx#RSIS