

# Talking Straight

## Finding new ways to challenge homophobia in Australian schools.

Report by – Jen Sainsbury – 2009 Churchill Fellow

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA



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## **Introduction**

The seeds of my Churchill Fellowship were sown during my time working as a teacher in a high school in Melbourne's outer South Eastern suburbs. I was overwhelmed by the insidious levels of homophobia amongst the students. More disheartening was the uncertainty and inaction of many teaching staff and the school administration. There was a culture of denial and avoidance in the school that was incredibly difficult to break through. Watching a number of young people at the school struggling to hide their sexual orientation, and seeing the battle for acceptance that they faced in their daily lives challenged my professional practice. I tried to make a difference in my own classroom, by implementing some simple strategies to deal with homophobia and discussing sexual diversity in positive and normative ways. The response from young people, regardless of sexual orientation, was inspiring. Many young people had never had a teacher willing to discuss sexuality and sexual orientation openly before, let alone the power and implications of homophobia and bias. This was a deeply empowering professional experience and encouraged me to further investigate the resources and strategies available to support teachers in this work. What I found was a complex landscape, with a piecemeal and fragmented approach to challenging homophobia in schools and supporting sexually diverse young people in the education sector, despite the strong evidence base compelling us to do so.

In trying to better my own professional practice I have realised that there is real scope for improvement in many classrooms and schools across the country. I have met many educators who want to do more, and do better, but require support to create change. By investigating and drawing from international best practice I hope to augment, strengthen and support the work of the many dedicated and passionate professionals who are working to create positive change for young people in Australian schools.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Johanna Wyn, Anne Mitchell and Sue Hackney for sharing their experience and wisdom. Their encouragement and support has been invaluable. The support of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, their staff and volunteers, has enabled some of the most significant professional experiences of my career. I would also like to thank the Foundation for Young Australians, especially Adam Smith, Barbara Lemon and Lucas Walsh.

# Executive Summary

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## Project Description

This Churchill Fellowship is focused on investigating strategies to improve the health, wellbeing and educational success of same sex attracted young Australians. By researching methods to build the capacity of the education sector to challenge homophobia and heterosexism, my project is focused on creating safe, inclusive educational environments for young people.

## Highlights

One of the greatest benefits of my Churchill Fellowship was seeing a wide range of responses to the impact that homophobia and heterosexism are having in the lives of young people. Whilst there are strong commonalities in the issues across Australia, the United Kingdom, Holland and the USA, the responses in each of these countries differ significantly. Investigating these different responses to and translating my learning to the Australian context has been a thought provoking and compelling experience, especially seeing the work being done by independent, mainstream and multifaceted organisations that are advocating for change in the education sector. Stonewall (London, UK) and GLSEN (New York, USA) are powerful examples of this. I also enjoyed learning from the strategic planning, commitment to advocacy and political advocacy of organisations such as Gay Straight Alliance Network (San Francisco, USA) and School's Out (London, UK).

## Findings and Recommendations

Comparable countries are dealing with homophobia in schools much more effectively than we are. While we have good work happening across disparate sectors, we need to anchor these initiatives and focus this work with strong campaigns in the education sector. Working with the education sector, the health sector, as well as human rights and equal opportunity initiatives and the justice system is imperative. We need to generate multiple leverage points for positive social change in this area. The development of a Safe Schools Coalition is an appropriate and effective implementation of this approach. It will allow a range of organizations and interest groups to work towards a clear and irrefutable goal – a young person's right to a safe and inclusive education. This will include inviting young people to actively shape school culture, strategies and policies around sexual diversity and challenging homophobia.

## Dissemination and Implementation

There are a range of strategies that I will use to disseminate my findings. These include, but are not limited to, submitting an extract of this report to a range of Australian and international education journals presenting at the 2010 "Health in Difference" Conference to be hosted by the National LGBT Health Alliance. The opportunity to present my Churchill Report and experiences to a wide range of health professionals and educators interested in these issues will be invaluable in generating pathways for collaboration. I will implement some of my recommendations through my work at The Foundation for Young Australians, including initiating a safe schools coalition and working with youth led LGBT support groups to develop youth advocacy training and programs. Securing funding for these initiatives is vital, as is maintaining international relationships.

## Program of Study

My travels included meetings in 3 countries, attending 3 conferences and working with a diverse range of organisations and individuals. I would like to thank the following for their time, assistance and passion.

Date	Institution/Organisation	Place	Contact Person
6/10/09	School's OUT	London, UK	Sue Saunders
7/10/09	EACH	Bristol, UK	Jonathan Charlesworth
10/10/09	National Union of Teachers	London, UK	Various
12/10/09	Stonewall	London, UK	Chris Gibbons
13/10/09	No Outsiders	London, UK	Mark Jennett
15/10/09	Oldham NUT	Manchester, UK	Jeff Evans
21/10/09	GALE	Amsterdam, Netherlands	Peter Dankmeijer
22/10/09	Schorer	Amsterdam, Netherlands	Paul Van Beek
3/11/09	Hetrick Martin Institute	New York, NY USA	Thomas Krever
4/11/09	Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network	New York, NY USA	Matthew Yandoli/Joe Koswic
5/11/09	NY Queer	New York, NY USA	Rosie Brown
17/11/09	Project 10 East	Boston, MA, USA	Ed Byrne
17/11/09	Boston PFLAG	Boston, MA, USA	Pam Garromone
18/11/09	Brown University	Providence, RI, USA	Kelly Garrett
18/11/09	Youth Pride RI	Providence, RI, USA	James Robinson
18/11/09	Harvard Graduate School of Education	Boston, MA, USA	Arthur Lipkin
19/11/09	University of Houston, Clear Lake	Houston, TX, USA	Michele Kahn
22/11/09	National Community Education Association	Phoenix, AZ, USA	Various
24/11/09	Citizen Schools	Santa Fe, NM, USA	Sue Goodwin
31/11/09	GSA Network	San Francisco, CA, USA	Danielle Askini

## **The Australian Context – Experiences of Young People in our schools.**

The basic tenet of the Australian education system is that all young people have the right to be educated in an environment in which they feel safe and valued. Research shows that the reality is quite different. School is an unsupportive and unsafe place for many young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), or who are either perceived to be LGBT or challenge heterosexist norms (Alexander 2003; Hillier et. al, 2005; Ollis et. al, 2001). Schools are the site of a significant amount of homophobia against young people and are ideally placed to challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity. Schools make a significant contribution to the development of values and attitudes in young people. The power of inclusive and responsive education programs to shift attitudes towards community-wide acceptance and celebration of sexual diversity is immense.

Before we progress further, a word on language. In this paper I use the acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) to try and encompass the diversity of those who do not identify with the traditional idea of heterosexuality and normative gender roles. I recognise that that transphobia and discrimination are not the same as homophobia and homophobic bullying, but for the purposes of this paper I use the term homophobia as a catchall to cover discrimination based on sexuality as well as gender identity and expression. Currently in Australia, LGBT youth are the only youth population that has been studied for the effects of homophobia, but victims of homophobic bullying transcend sexuality and gender lines. While not all victims of homophobia are LGBT and not all LGBT young people are subjected to homophobic bullying, the impact of heterosexism and generalised homophobia on 'normal and healthy identity formation [for LGBT youth] is profound' (Rofes 1989, p.149).

There is little doubt that bullying, victimisation and social isolation have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of young people. Homophobic bullying is one of the most pervasive and unchallenged forms of bullying in Australian schools and can have a serious and long term effect, not only on young people's educational experiences and outcomes, but on long term health and wellbeing (Hillier et al 2005, Milkusky 2006). LGBT young people engage in more behaviour that is risky to their health, and experience more dramatic health deficits than their heterosexual peers. This includes higher rates of drug use, higher rates of STIs, homelessness, depression and suicide. It is important to understand that being same sex attracted does not increase a young person's risk of 'suicide or risk taking behaviour, it is the broader social context, and the factors associated... rejection, victimisation and isolation that do' (Seal, 2003, p.4).

School is the most dangerous place in Australia for LGBT youth, with 74% of homophobic abuse occurring there (Hillier et. al 2005). The prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism in schools reinforces the rigid boundaries around gender and sexuality, limiting the ways in which they are represented and experienced. The threat of violence for gender and sexual orientation non-conformity in schools 'is pervasive, although often implicit' (Walton 2005, p.91). This has significant implications not just for those who identify as LGBT, but for the way all individuals construct, live and express their sexual identities. As well as experiencing higher levels of negative health outcomes, LGBT youth are more likely to disengage from education than their heterosexual peers. LGBT youth have significantly higher rates of truancy, and are three times more likely to leave school before completion than their heterosexual peers (Milkusky 2006, p.26).

In a longitudinal study completed in the USA, LGBT students reported more 'school troubles' than their heterosexual peers, including difficulty completing homework, paying attention, getting along with peers and teachers, and a lower sense of academic self concept (Russell et al 2001).

### **What can be done to generate positive social change?**

There is a clear understanding of strategies and approaches that would make a significant difference to the experience of LGBT youth in the education sector (Seal 2003, Ollis & Mitchell 1999, Jenet 2004, Hillier et. al. 2005) but a concerning lack of initiative implementation. There is real consistency between the research findings of the UK, USA and Australia about the experiences of LGBT youth in schools. Unfortunately Australia is further behind in implementing programs to support LGBT youth and challenge homophobia than many other Western countries (Milkusky 2006).

Currently in Australia, momentum for change is building. The shifts in socio-political attitudes are subtle, yet the impact of homophobia on the health and wellbeing of LGBT people in our community is becoming more widely understood. Progress made in legal parity for same sex couples, access to assisted fertility programs and relationship recognition continuing to appear on political activism agendas. There is a convergence of policy initiatives at both federal and state level that may provide leverage points for new initiatives and programs to support young people in the education sector. The rise of the Respectful Relationships agenda in the political landscape, and its focus on primary health prevention work with young people, generates some interesting questions for challenging homophobia and supporting sexual diversity in schools. Now is an excellent time to progress real solutions for this issue.

## **International Context**

### **United Kingdom**

#### Context

The United Kingdom is an interesting point of comparison for Australia. Impacts of homophobia on the health and wellbeing of LGBT youth are entering mainstream education debate and UK policy. The UK has a very different political and legislative climate, including progressive laws regarding gay rights and relationship recognition rights for same sex couples. Building on the Gender Recognition Act of 2004, the Civil Partnership Act was created in 2005 to provide a 'parallel legal structure to marriage, giving same sex couples all the rights and responsibilities of marriage, including the eligibility to apply to adopt children' (Anderson 2006). In 2007 it became illegal to discriminate based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This political climate, combined with a strong focus in equality and diversity, a long history of social activism and political lobbying, and the coherence provided by a national education authority have contributed to the development of clear and explicit policies addressing homophobia and heterosexism in schools (Evans 2008, Charlesworth 2006).

The UK has the dominant framework of 'preventing and responding to homophobic bullying' firmly set within the parameters of the education sector. Although there are still high numbers of young people reporting incidents of homophobic abuse whilst at school in the UK, there is a clear mandate of responsibility in the education sector to deal with homophobia. Legally, it cannot be left unaddressed. The effectiveness of the interdependent relationship between legislation and practice is clearly demonstrated in the UK - legislative change and policy development has raised public awareness of the issue, and in turn, legislative change has been influenced, developed and driven by activism and innovative practice. There are other key drivers for change in schools, including the increased visibility of same sex headed families as a result of relationship recognition legislation. Unions and teacher groups have played a significant leadership role in the UK, by portraying positive messages and empowering members to be open, proactive and accountable. The Unions also advocate for the importance of creating safe and inclusive work environments for teachers. This is a welcome and important aspect of this work that is often overlooked when discussing change in the education sector.

Another effective strategy in the UK is the cross sectoral collaboration. For example, the criminal justice sector has made significant progress in the way that it recognises, documents and deals with hate crimes. The impact of hate crime on wider society is clearly articulated and widely understood and has impacted policy, practice and programs challenging homophobia in schools. In the UK there is a growing understanding that schools have an immutable moral obligation, not only to protect the victims of homophobia, but to help the perpetrators of homophobic bullying (Charlesworth 2007). There is a recognition that tackling the core problem of homophobia is 'in essence the same as other forms of prejudice... students need to know that what they consider to be normal and right are socially constructed categories and therefore unstable, unfixed and mutable' (Khan 2007, p. 116). Lund (2007) recognises that existing methods for challenging heterosexism and homophobia are too simplistic, and that there is a need to move beyond simply protecting the "victim".

The UK frames homophobic bullying as a human rights infringement. Their focus is on equality, preventing hate crime, human rights and school safety compared with our enduring connection between homophobia awareness campaigns and health. Although there is a growing link between human rights and homophobia in Australia, a significant proportion of Australian funding and initiatives to challenge homophobia and support LGBT young people come from blood borne virus or suicide prevention funding. This limits the effectiveness and sustainability of many initiatives and sends a strong and disturbing message about the reasons that young people are being supported.

### Surveys and Targeted Research

Targeted research about the prevalence and impact of homophobia in UK schools with clear, immutable conclusions have been an effective mechanism for stimulating change. Several organisations have conducted research into the experiences of both young people and teachers and are using this research as a powerful advocacy tool. One notable example is Stonewall, a London-based LGBT rights organisation, who produced The School Report – The experiences of young gay people in Britain's Schools (2007) and The Teachers' Report – Teachers' perspective on homophobic bullying in Britain's primary and secondary schools (2009). Stonewall and their partners have used these survey results as the cornerstone for their Education for All campaign, raising public awareness, developing strategic responses and undertaking advocacy and lobbying work. These surveys provide a compelling argument to improve policies and practice in schools. The Teachers' Report demonstrates that nine in ten secondary school teachers and

more than two in five primary school teachers have witnessed children being subjected to homophobic bullying in their schools. It is important to note that it's not only LGBT young people who are affected. Teachers 'reveal that boys who are academic, girls who play sports, young people with gay parents, friends or family members, and young people merely perceived to be gay are all victims of homophobic bullying' (Guasp 2009, p.iv). The teacher-focused research also highlights some key barriers and fears, including, a lack of training and support for teachers, and an absence of anti-bullying policies that specifically address homophobia. This information is enabling supporting organisations, such as education authorities and teacher unions to be more strategic and responsive.

The British National Union of Teachers (NUT) has been conducting a series of localised research projects. The *Prevalence of Homophobia* studies are being conducted at a regional level and are providing an important perspective on teachers' experiences. The Oldham chapter of the NUT has been a pioneer in conducting the *Prevalence of Homophobia* research. Almost 90% of teachers who responded indicated that they had overheard or observed homophobic abuse in their school on a weekly basis. Over 77% of teachers who responded to the survey stated that they believe homophobia is a serious issue demanding attention and 75% would welcome whole school training to better address homophobia in their school (Oldham NUT, 2009). These numbers are incredibly high and strengthen the work examining the experiences of young people in schools. With both young people and teachers calling for better resources and more support to challenge homophobia, the localised approach of the NUT research is proving to be a powerful point of engagement, helping schools and teachers understand the breadth and depth of the problem in their region and school.

This multifaceted approach to conducting targeted research into the education sector stands in contrast to current practice in Australia, where insufficient funding, support and engagement by mainstream organisations, education departments and government undermines the efficacy of many research projects. OUTthere, the Rural Victorian Youth Council for Sexual Diversity is currently conducting research into the experiences of young people and workers in rural secondary schools. Despite the best intentions of the young people involved, the project is not gaining much traction due to a lack of organisational capacity and mainstream support.

### Early Intervention

The United Kingdom has a strong focus on providing concrete strategies for teachers and schools to make changes, moving past uncertainty and guilt to create positive practical change. Their approach is comprehensive and includes targeted resources for teachers and school staff, as well as materials for parents, health workers and other allies. Training and support for school and education authorities is offered by a range of organisations (including School's Out and Stonewall) and is an integral part of engaging with teachers and school staff. There is a clear focus in this work in being an ally to teachers and schools, helping them work through the issues in a context specific to their community. Stonewall cleverly and clearly articulate their policy of unconditional positive regard and the importance of celebrating progress in their programs. Stonewall recognise that there can be an embarrassment about failure to act sooner, or the inadequacy of approach from many of the schools and organisations they work with and that a 'bespoke' approach is the most effective way to empower organisations to create change.

An interesting example of good practice is the Education Champions Program. This program is an important part of the 'Education for All' campaign, and takes a different approach to anything we have seen in Australia. The Education Champions Program provides bespoke support to local authorities in tackling homophobia and homophobic bullying in their schools. The membership based nature of the program is helping to shift the 'traditional' power imbalance in this work, where schools are often seen to 'indulge' external service providers by allowing them to come into the school. Through the Education Champions initiative, Stonewall deliver a valuable and sought after service that local authorities pay for and actively participate in. Program facilitators work with the authority to audit the current local authority's policies, procedures and practice; prioritise areas of action and improvement: and bringing local authorities together to share best practice, network and affirm the work they are doing. Youth Volunteers are often engaged as part of the Education Champions Program. This may involve acting as consultants to the local authorities, or co-facilitating the training sessions. The program is focused on empowering local authorities to build their knowledge and capacity, make decisions and improve their practice. With the local authorities being responsible for school governance, this is proving a powerful mechanism for change. Although the structural framework of the Education Champions initiative is not directly transferable to Australia there is a significant amount we can learn from this approach.

There is a growing focus on work in primary schools in the UK. Programs such as No Outsiders are generating practice that is focused on diversity and acceptance and targeted specifically at younger children. This practice is supported by research highlighting the growing prevalence of homophobia in primary schools. According to the *Teachers' Report* only a quarter of primary school teachers have addressed issues relating to sexual orientation in their classrooms and two thirds did so because the children brought it up. Nine in ten primary school teachers think lesbian and gay issues should be addressed in schools or in specific lessons and 87% of primary school teachers believe that school staff have a duty to prevent and respond to homophobic bullying (Guasp, 2009).

This research and practice is helping to counter the blocking argument that challenging homophobia is about sex and sexuality, and to focus on the complexities of gender roles and power dynamics. There is a growing understanding of the prevalence and power of heteronormativity in the school environment and an awareness that homophobia is not only directed at LGBT people. There is a growing compulsion for schools and educators to draw down into the importance of gender diversity and encouraging young people to 'be' who they are without the powerful and limiting stereotypes that are enforced by heteronormativity.

I was struck by the focus on equality and diversity in the UK. Although the progressive legislative context has a huge impact on the success of UK programs, there are some significant learning opportunities for Australian policy makers and practitioners in the approach and work of our UK counterparts.

## Netherlands

### Context

The Netherlands has long been renowned for its social liberalism. With a population of 16.5 million (roughly comparable to Australia) there is a strong commitment from government to support the health and wellbeing of the LGBT community. Although there is still some social conservatism regarding homosexuality and anxiety about addressing sexual diversity in the education sector, there is a significant amount that Australia can learn from the Dutch approach. Whilst in the Netherlands, I worked primarily with two organisations, Empowerment Lifestyle Services, who do a significant amount of work in the education sector; and Schorer, whose work is primarily focused in LGBT health and wellbeing.

### Action Research

Dutch organisations have undertaken a comprehensive range of action research projects. These have shown that despite the availability of resources to help teachers to deal with LGBT issues in schools, resources alone are not an effective strategy. There is a documented need for much more than resource packs to deal with a complex problem.

There is a multifaceted approach to much of the work that is occurring in the Netherlands. There is a strong focus on directly supporting schools. Research has shown that it is imperative schools have the freedom and support to tailor programs to meet their specific needs and cultural sensitivities. This 'capacity building' of individual schools involves developing the skills, resources and understanding with the school necessary to change social behaviour and power dynamics. One of the predictors for school safety in the Netherlands is having a robust, sensitive counselling service available for LGBT students to access if they choose. Echoing the shifting focus in the UK there is also a strong emphasis on having counselling available for students who are the perpetrators of homophobia.

There is a strong focus on creating 'gay friendly' schools, and the Netherlands is focusing on the development of a concrete set of objectives for student engagement. There is an acknowledgement of the importance of having positive objectives for challenging homophobia, for example, 'in a gay friendly school, gay and straight students would be able to work together on school projects'. This approach could be effectively applied to the Australian context. There is still a strong focus on proving that homophobia is a problem in Australian schools, and this can result in a tendency to default to 'negative' or preventative measurement tools, rather than clearly articulating what positive progress may look like.

### School Consultancy

Empowerment Lifestyle Services runs a School Consultancy program that has a clear focus on social safety and citizenship for young people in the school environment. Their work is nuanced and well documented, with the primary aim of mobilising schools to develop a holistic approach to 'dealing with and preventing a negative environment around sexual diversity'. This approach uses Kotter's organisational change model (see appendix one) as an overarching framework and is focused on building internal commitment to change. Empowerment's School Consultancy tailors the approach to meet the different needs of schools. This involves working collaboratively with the school and other external agencies to develop specific strategies, action plans and resources to promote safety and inclusivity in the schools. They emphasise engaging with teaching staff as well as school leadership to set

concrete actions to generate change. They also integrate interventions with existing initiatives and areas of focus, allowing the work to fit into the regular routines of the school, increasing the impact upon school culture. Instigating change at a lower intensity over a longer timeframe ensures longevity and effectiveness. The education authorities responsible for the City of Amsterdam recognise the importance of this approach and acknowledge that meaningful, long term change requires time.

### Teacher Engagement and Support

Another strategy being used effectively by Empowerment Lifestyle Services is tapping into the core reasons why people become teachers. Engaging a teacher's personal passion, empathy and belief in young people can be a powerful leverage point to progress passed blocks like a school's 'limited' sense of purpose and primary focus on academic learning. International research shows that engaging an individual's sense of purpose and providing strategies and support for them to tackle social justice issues, can stimulate organisational change.

COC Netherlands have conducted a range of action research projects to determine the best approach to developing safer schools. Their work has found that teacher safety and belonging is a strong determinant of a healthy school. This is reflected in the report *Healthy Teacher, Healthy School* which emphatically recommends that school management, teacher unions and education authorities focus on creating safe, supportive and welcoming environments for LGBT teachers (COC Netherlands 2003). These findings are supported by US research that demonstrates that teachers being out, visible and supported in schools is the number one predictor of school safety for LGBT youth (Russell et. al. 2009). This raises some pertinent questions for Australian practice where there is very little focus on support mechanisms for LGBT teachers.

### Community Partnerships

Empowerment Lifestyle Services also have a deliberate strategy of working with organisations that influence schools, including municipalities, local education authorities and the education ministry. The importance of strong links between innovative practice and existing policies and frameworks, such as bullying and diversity policies, is acknowledged and focused on by service providers from the inception of their work.

Empowerment and Schorer have developed a range of innovative and engaging resources aimed at diverse target groups, for example Empowerment Lifestyle Services' highly successful empathy building program for marginalised young men or their popular and effective resource kits for apprehensive school managers (a very powerful target group).

I found my time in the Netherlands inspiring and stimulating. I would encourage those seeking to generate change to refer to the resources that Empowerment Lifestyle Services have published in English (frustratingly, most of the resources are untranslated). I have found them to be very informative, useful and relevant to Australia. The Netherlands' complex, considered and multifaceted approach with support from education authorities and government is an example of what we can aspire to and work towards in Australia.

## USA

### Context

I was drawn towards the work being done to challenge homophobia in the USA for several reasons. There is a strong focus on youth activism in the USA that underpins much of the work being done to challenge homophobia in schools. There is a significant history and culture of philanthropic funding and corporate support, that enables a range of innovative practices to be tried and implemented, and has resulted in the establishment of several not for profit organisations advocating for and working towards generating safer and more inclusive schools. The state based structure of the US education system, the diverse sociocultural spectrum of the USA, and the impact of politicised religious conservatism are all significant elements that add to the rich and complex work being conducted in the USA, and make it significant to Australia.

I spent just over 4 weeks in the USA working and meeting with a wide range of organisations and individuals in 7 states. The political, legislative and social context regarding LGBT issues differs markedly between states and there were significant benefits in seeing a cross-section of these. All my meetings, research and work experiences contributed to my understanding of work occurring in the USA, but there were several key learning experiences.

GLSEN (the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network) is a national not for profit organisation with a high profile, both in the USA and internationally. GLSEN works with a range of constituencies including educators, policy makers, community leaders and students 'on the urgent need to address anti-LGBT behaviour and bias in schools' (GLSEN 2009). They engage in research, policy development, advocacy, resource development and support for young people, schools, educators and parents. The organisation's offices are based in New York and Washington and there are also over 30 GLSEN chapters around the country. These chapters are largely staffed by volunteers and vary in their size, capacity and focus. I was drawn to GLSEN by their multifaceted, organised and dynamic approach, their blend of national and local work and their ability to generate and maintain partnerships with a range of corporate and philanthropic organisations. I met staff from their education, communications, community initiatives and corporate sponsorship teams, offering insight into the range of their work. From their offices located deep in Manhattan's financial district I got a sense of what is possible in this field.

A source of rich learning in the USA was working with Project 10 East (P10E) in Boston, Massachusetts. Although they are a relatively small organisation, P10E have a strong background in Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) activism and currently work to support LGBT youth, their peers, educators and the school community to create and sustain safe schools. Project 10 East has a flexible and progressive approach to its work with schools. This includes some capacity as a 'first responder' for schools in crisis, or newly 'out' students who are experiencing problems. P10E are clear that schools are an ideal intervention point, but are determined that flexibility and responsiveness are key when developing interventions. Massachusetts is considered one of the most liberal legislative states in the USA when it comes to LGBT rights. There was a strong sense of community amongst activists and educators in Boston and my time there was remarkable.

Another key organisation in the USA is the Gay Straight Alliance Network (GSAN) based in San Francisco, California. Although my visit to GSAN was brief, the strategic direction of the organisation is impressive. A core commitment to youth activism and empowerment underpins their work. As well as using the GSA model to support youth activists fighting homophobia in schools, GSAN also plays a crucial role in the California Safe Schools Coalition. This body conducts a range of research projects and is a powerful advocacy platform.

### Safe Schools

A 'safe schools' approach underpins much of the successful work occurring in the USA. There are a range of organisations working with this approach, as well as a number of state based and national coalitions focused on eliminating homophobic bullying in schools. This focus on school safety engages with the wider community and 'disarms' some of the resistance to dealing with LGBT issues in schools.

An example of legislative change being driven by the safe schools movement is the introduction of the Safe Schools Improvement Act to Congress. This has been driven by the National Safe Schools Partnership (NSSP), in collaboration with GLSEN and a number of bipartisan political sponsors. NSSP is an informal coalition of leading national education, health, civil rights, law enforcement, youth development and other organisations committed to creating safe American schools. The bill focuses on using funding from the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act to ensure that schools and districts have comprehensive and effective anti-bullying and harassment policies. There is a strong focus on effective prevention strategies and professional development for school personnel. The Act also articulates the imperative to gather and report data regarding incidents of bullying and harassment in order to inform and track effective federal, state, and local policies that address these issues.

Homophobia doesn't exist in isolation and is commonly wrapped up with other forms of bullying, stigma and isolation for young people. There is a strong focus in both the UK and the USA on comprehensive anti-bullying policies that specifically enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as protected characteristics. American research shows that LGBT students from schools with a generic policy experience similar harassment levels as students from schools with no policies at all. Students from schools with a comprehensive policy that specifically names sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression report a less hostile and more supportive school climate. In the UK, Stonewall reports that only 25% of schools explicitly state that homophobic bullying is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. In these schools, LGBT youth are 60% less likely to be bullied (Hunt & Jensen, 2005). The safe schools approach is an important mechanism for generating change, but the ultimate goal is an environment where sexual diversity is accepted and celebrated, not merely tolerated. Clearly, this must be adapted to Australian schools.

A safe schools alliance is a coordination tool that is clearly applicable to the Australian context. In June 2008, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development released the first policy specifically addressing sexual diversity in Victorian Schools entitled Supporting Sexual Diversity in Schools. To be effective Supporting Sexual Diversity in Schools will require a significant investment of time and resources from schools, community organisations and educational authorities and involve Health, Education, Youth Work, the Juvenile Justice System, Human Rights advocates and their relevant peak bodies, government departments and interest groups. This kind of national coordination could be achieved through a safe schools alliance, which focuses on providing support

mechanisms for challenging homophobia in schools, generates constructive professional dialogue around these issues, and engages community partners from a wide range of sectors. A Safe Schools approach would enable targeted work in challenging other forms of entrenched prejudice based stigma, such as racism, that impact on the health and wellbeing of young people. This approach would link with existing initiatives to strengthen and augment their practice, whilst maintaining a clear focus on School Safety. The coalition would have the capacity to provide tailored support and a wide range of resources to schools, education authorities, and other youth focused organisations.

### Youth Activism

Another dominant framework for engaging with this issue in the US is youth participation, activism and advocacy. Australia has no such framework although the idea (if not the US model) is easily transferable and vital to our success in addressing this issue. The strong culture in the USA of student clubs and associations set within the co-curricular structures of schools creates a culture of youth participation around a broad range of issues and causes. This allows Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) (often initiated by students) to grow and flourish across the country, including in some of the more socially conservative areas.

GSAs are supported by both local and national organisations, enabling a dynamic blend between localised experience and the critical mass of nationwide advocacy. GSA model is problematic when translated to the Australian context. This may be due to some inherent cultural differences with the USA, or it could be attributed to the 'readiness' and capacity of the education sector to enable and support this work. We can readily pick apart the model, though and adapt characteristics like the 'ally' component. Although some youth support groups in Australia welcome young people who do not identify as LGBT, we could do more to empower young people who are passionate about social justice and the acceptance and celebration of diversity. The GSA Network have a strong focus on supporting young people to create change in their schools, but also have mechanisms to support young people to generate systemic change. GSAN's youth led policy advocacy efforts have created significant legislative and practical changes in California.

While some Australian programs are already successfully working with ideas of youth activism and leadership, there is a clear need to strengthen and expand upon these programs. Twenty10's Q&A program is focused on building the skills and capacities of emerging young leaders within the GLBT and queer communities over an eight month period. It is a structured program involving community engagement, experiential learning personal reflection, mentoring and project work. The project has been run successfully in New South Wales, and has been funded by the Department of Health in Victoria where it is being delivered in partnership with Family Planning Victoria.

Another example of youth led change in Australia is OUTthere, the Rural Victorian Youth Council for Sexual Diversity, who work to raise awareness, advocate and provide information and resources to communities, youth services, schools and government departments about issues facing Same Sex Attracted youth in rural Victoria. These projects work predominantly with 18-28 year olds and there is great opportunity to do more work specifically focused with secondary schools students. These are both good examples of effective youth activism and leadership projects, but it is essential that we increase the opportunities, frameworks and mechanisms for youth participation and advocacy in Australia, but we need to develop culturally and contextually appropriate model.

One relatively easy springboard for more sustained youth advocacy could be to adapt the USA model of annual events and actions days. These play a significant role in the USA and whilst some action days (such as the Day of Silence and Ally Week) are LGBT specific, some initiatives (including No Name Calling Week) are set within the mainstream education context. GLSEN have been a driving force behind several of these initiatives and recognise them as important catalysts for generating support, raising awareness, and contributing to practical change within schools. The youth led nature of these campaigns and action days are crucial to their success and they often lay the foundation for broader change within schools. Australia could connect more broadly with international action days as well as developing a campaign specifically for the local 'market'. This could be a focus for increasing the level of youth advocacy and activism in Australia. There are numerous benefits of youth activism, involvement and advocacy, including the development of social consciousness, and civic participation in young people that goes on past their school years. The benefits of this engagement and empowerment, especially in a demographic group that is often seen as disengaged and hard to reach, are significant.

### Countering social conservatism

There can be no doubt that there are some conservative groups within the USA who are very vocal, influential and hostile towards LGBT people and communities. This generates significant challenges for organisations like GLSEN, who are working for holistic change in the mainstream education sector. Although we do not have the same level of organised and politicised religious conservatism in Australia, there were some valuable and transferable lessons for dealing with social conservatism and resistance. One strategy that GLSEN uses effectively is aligning their work with broader social change agendas. GLSEN's work for the last few years has been focused on school safety as it has been a prominent issue in the broader education community, and provided a natural and important point of leverage. Although GLSEN have a clear focus on combating anti LGBT bias, this is often wrapped up in a broader anti-bullying approach. From a communications perspective they have a strong focus on organisational message discipline and deliberately avoid talking about sex and sexuality, as this helps nullify some of the emotive opposition and backlash to their work.

In the USA there is strong recognition of the importance of youth led campaigns in countering social conservatism. It is much harder to deny the importance of challenging homophobia in schools when it is young people who are advocating for and driving change. There are significant opportunities to increase structural support for youth advocacy in Australia and generate a significant cultural shift.

### Partnerships

There is a strong culture of partnerships in the work being done to create safe and inclusive learning environments in the USA. GLSEN successfully build and maintain positive and supportive relationships with a range of reputed, mainstream education and health organisations, to maximise the effectiveness, credibility and profile of their work. Partnerships have many benefits including generating legitimacy, access to constituents, collaborative learning, and expertise in tailoring resource development to meet the needs of target groups. It also enables the wider dissemination of issues. For example, GLSEN's partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) produced *The Principal's Perspective: School Safety, Bullying and Harassment* which investigates the experiences of principals and outlines areas for improvement. GLSEN continue to work with the NASSP to

develop resources and targeted strategies to improve the support mechanisms for principals and their staff to challenge homophobia and create safe and inclusive learning environments.

Corporate support of organisations challenging homophobia enables innovative practice in both the UK and USA. IBM have been key sponsors in leading research projects, such as Stonewall's *The School Report – The experiences of young gay people in Britain's Schools* and GLSEN's *2007 National School Climate Survey*. By lending their mainstream profile and support to initiatives such as these IBM provides much more than funding. The reports have been integral in both countries, and have contributed to the culture of corporate support. There are clear benefits for IBM, who have been named 2010 Employer of the Year in Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index, highlighting their commitment to diversity and support for LGBT staff. This is only one example, but highlights the benefits of developing sophisticated, mutually beneficial relationships with corporate organisations.

This partnership model underpins the work of many other organisations, including the Hetrick Martin Institute, the GSA Network and the Californian Safe Schools Coalition. There is a much higher level of philanthropic investment in the USA than in any other country that I visited and it impacts significantly on the work. The state based nature of the US education system and long held social conservatism of the federal government has resulted in the mantle of social change being taken up by not for profit organisations. The leadership shown by these organisations has been one of the key catalysts for change. Robust partnerships have encouraged and enabled the wider community to become involved in working for change, whilst increasing and sustaining the capacity of not for profit organisations.

This 'capacity through partnerships' approach is largely missing in Australia. There is reluctance by many philanthropic organisations to support projects involving LGBT issues, there is an absence of strong partnerships with corporate organisations and a lack of leadership from government. There is a real danger of stagnation in Australia as a result of sporadic or inadequate funding and lack of support for organisations and initiatives that have the capacity to drive and shape social change. The current climate of scarce, short term, piecemeal funding at best allows initiatives to survive, but makes innovation, creativity and long term endeavour incredibly difficult. We need to find new methods for increasing the level of funding available to challenge homophobia and support LGBT young people in our schools and our community.

### Targeted Research

A number of organisations in the USA are using targeted research to great effect. GLSEN have been a leader in this field, with the breadth and depth of their research respected both in the USA and internationally. GLSEN have conducted a range of research projects that investigate the experiences of LGBT young people in USA schools. The momentum for this work has built over time and allowed GLSEN to develop further research into a range of important issues, including the experiences of transgender youth, LGBT youth of colour and the way that LGBT parents are involved in (and often ignored by) the education system. This research is invaluable in dispelling myths, raising awareness and increasing commitment to create change in schools. Whilst GLSEN's research has a predominantly national focus, the research department also provides research-related technical assistance and tools designed to be used by educators and students in their own communities.

The GSA Network and the California Safe Schools Coalition have produced a series of academically rigorous targeted research briefs that explore and discuss topics such as the correlation between school safety and academic achievement, school safety for students with LGBT parents and the economic cost of homophobic bullying. These have become powerful advocacy tools as they mount a persuasive argument for significant change in school climates, especially the estimate that homophobic bullying costs California school districts at least \$39.9 million each year in absenteeism-associated costs (Russell et al 2009). There is a significant opportunity for Australia to learn from and emulate international best practice in developing a factual springboard for change in the school sector through research.

There is a real opportunity for Australia to draw on the success of the *Writing Themselves In* research series conducted by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society. This national research investigates the sexuality, health and wellbeing of same sex attracted young people in Australia. This innovative research series has been the cornerstone of understanding the experiences of young people exploring sexual and gender diversity. The third edition of this report is due out in late 2010 and will provide a significant opportunity to continue the debate into improving the lives of LGBT young people in Australia.

#### Resources for Educators

In the USA there is a culture of providing online resources for a range of purposes, including teacher training and professional development. Research categorically shows that improved safety and educational outcomes for students are linked to the presence of supportive educators who can intervene appropriately and effectively to address bullying. Advocacy and support organisations are receiving a clear message that despite current efforts, educators often feel isolated and need more support. GLSEN currently provide online resources, limited teacher training, newsletters, a social networking site, and with a constrained capacity to answer questions and provide support. There is a real challenge in providing support across the vast geographical distance of the USA and as a result, there is strong emphasis on delegating the responsibility for training through to local chapters.

Local and community structures are utilised to great effect in the US. Whether creating state based GSA Networks, working collaboratively with local health services and parent groups, or establishing ongoing teacher training projects with local education authorities, the means are many and varied. As in the UK and the Netherlands, there is recognition that providing resources alone is not enough, there must be a holistic approach involving a range of community groups, school leadership and education authorities.

An essential element of supporting teachers is the integration of sexuality, sexual and gender diversity and challenging homophobia into pre-service teacher training. Pre-service teachers need to be exposed to discussions about heteronormativity in schools and develop strategies to challenge and interrupt homophobia. In each of the countries I visited this was acknowledged as a clear area for improvement. My time with Dr. Michele Kahn at the University of Houston gave me an insight into the complexities and importance of this work. I observed Dr. Kahn working with a group of students undertaking a Masters in Library Science, many of whom will go into positions as teacher-librarians in elementary schools. For many of these students, it was the first time they had explored the concepts of sexual and gender diversity, and considered the importance of representing diversity in their professional practice. The discussions that this group had around these issues are a clear reminder that schools are key sites for

the reproduction of heteronormative social constructs and we need to ensure that beginning teachers are prepared, supported and empowered to challenge these.

### Social Marketing

Social marketing is another strategy that has been used to great effect in both the USA and the UK. Campaigns and activism specifically aimed at challenging homophobia in schools and reducing its impact on young people have helped raise the profile of the issue in wider society and engage a broad range of organisations and individuals. Lobbying groups have also used a strategy of getting high profile people to support their work and become spokespeople for their campaigns. These strategies are under utilised in Australia, and could be used to much greater effect, especially in the specific area of education reform.

The 'Think B4 You Speak' campaign developed by GLSEN is an example of an effective and successful mainstream social marketing campaign (See Appendix 2). It was carefully and deliberately targeted at the 'moveable middle' of young people. The work was done in close partnership with the Ad Council and media readiness was carefully investigated. The campaign aims to reduce homophobic slang among young people, and educate parents and teachers on how to create a safe environment for LGBT youth. It is being used in conjunction with GLSEN's 2007 *School Climate Survey* to raise awareness of the issue and continue to place it on the political agenda.

As part of their Education for All Campaign in the UK, Stonewall has had significant success with its 'Some people are gay. Get over it!' social marketing strategy. The boldly coloured promotional materials (See Appendix 3) were developed in collaboration with 150 secondary school pupils and teachers, and were launched in November 2007. Stonewall distributed posters, stickers and postcards to all 5,000 secondary schools across England. The campaign was so successful that it was expanded to include roadside billboards, and significant exposure on public transport. The campaign was met with some controversy but has unarguably raised public awareness of the issue of homophobic bullying in schools, and built the profile and efficacy of the Education for All campaign.

There are some good examples of social marketing in Australia around broad human rights issues, such as the 'Faces For Freedom' campaign run by the Freedom Centre and the 'This is Oz' campaign run by ACON. There is great scope in Australia to develop a multiplatform social marketing campaign specifically targeted at homophobia in the education system and youth culture more broadly following the lead of successful international campaigns.

My time in the USA was one of the most significant experiences of my professional career. The commitment, creativity and passion of those working to challenge homophobia and support diversity was inspiring. Many of their initiatives and practices including, but not limited to, a safe schools approach, corporate partnerships and creative, broad reaching social marketing campaigns, can be adapted to Australia.

## CONCLUSIONS

There are four main points of connection between international best practice and the challenges that we are facing in Australia:

1. **School programs are effective in challenging homophobia.** Internationally, effective campaigns to challenge homophobia work across several sectors but are anchored by and focussed on work in schools. Here in Australia we lack a clear and direct focus on the education sector. There is a disproportionate reliance on the health sector and local government to support and fund initiatives to improve the health and wellbeing of LGBT young people. Until we can tighten focus around the education sector - working with both teachers and young people - we cannot generate meaningful change.
2. **Secure and ongoing funding is essential** to sustainability, longitudinal impact and to enable innovation. LGBT support suffers from a chronic lack of funding in Australia. There is reluctance by many funding bodies to support something seen as controversial, and a lack of leadership and responsibility being taken by government departments to provide resources and funding.
3. **Leadership from 'mainstream' not-for-profit organisations is essential.** Currently homophobia in Australian schools is conceptualised as a minority issue that only effects LGBT youth, we need to acknowledge that it impacts upon us all. There is a significant role for non-government organisations that deal with education, health and welfare to follow the example of Australian organisations like the Inspire Foundation and lobby for more comprehensive programs.
4. **Effective social change requires active youth participation** in decision making. We need to develop and strengthen mechanisms for youth leadership, advocacy, and lobbying. While there are some excellent Australian initiatives, they currently exist in isolation. We need to find new ways to support, augment and expand these initiatives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Undertake targeted research.** National surveys modelled on international practice will fill in the gaps of the Australian context and help us better understand both the real cost of homophobia on the educational engagement and success of young people. Surveying teachers and school staff will also help to identify the barriers to changing practice regarding homophobia and supporting sexual diversity in schools.
- **Develop funded teacher training and school consultancy programs** that build the capacity of schools to create safe and inclusive learning environments. Initiatives such as *Safety in our Schools (2001)*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Celebrating Diversity in Schools* would be the springboard for an expanded, funded and more comprehensive approach to working with schools.
- **Working with existing youth-led initiatives** to strengthen and expand their work, whilst developing new strategies to support youth activism and youth-led social change. Working with established youth initiatives such as OUTthere Rural Youth Council and Twenty10's Q&A program to build their capacity and expand projects to a national level is an important beginning point. Establishing new programs and initiatives that engage with secondary school students is essential.
- **Establish and contribute to annual events** focused on the issue of challenging homophobia and supporting sexual diversity in schools. International initiatives such as the International Day Against Homophobia or the Day of Silence promote the issue widely and can easily be adopted. Providing support to professionals, such as running an annual conference for educators would also be effective.
- **Increase support for LGBT teachers.** Working with teacher unions, education departments, and workplace relations organisations to improve this area of practice is important not only for the health and wellbeing of teachers, but for the flow-on benefits of increasing school safety and issue awareness.
- **Increase corporate involvement and partnerships.** Other countries show how effective mutually beneficial partnerships between corporate and not for profit organisations working to support sexual diversity and challenge homophobia can be. This model can easily be adopted in Australia and is fundamental for creating effective change.
- **Explore establishing a Safe School Alliance.** Establishing a collective voice and a clear platform for lobbying on this issue and implementing these recommendations will increase their effectiveness.

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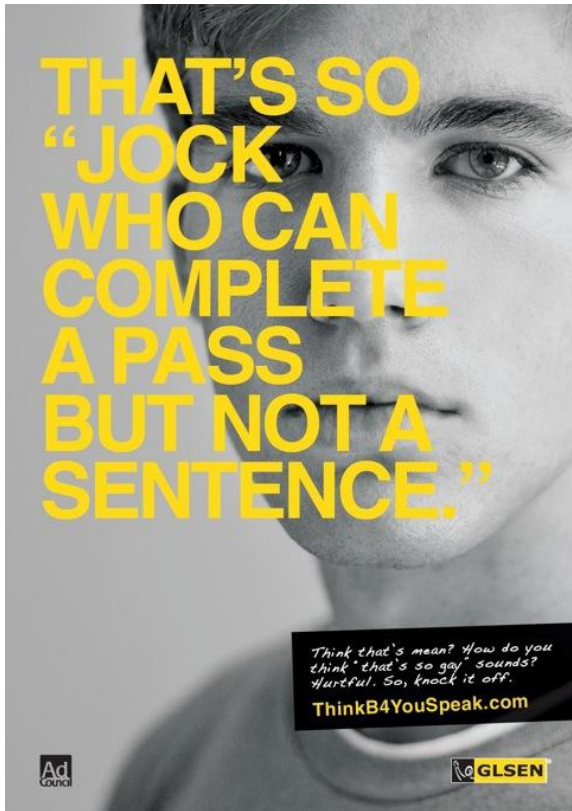
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## Appendix One - Kotter's Model of Organisational Change



Appendix Two – Stonewall Social Marketing Campaign





**THAT'S SO  
"JOCK  
WHO CAN  
COMPLETE  
A PASS  
BUT NOT A  
SENTENCE."**

*Think that's mean? How do you think "that's so gay" sounds? Hurtful. So, knock it off.*  
**ThinkB4YouSpeak.com**

**Ad Council** **GLSEN** **Ad Council** **GLSEN**

**gay** (gā) 1. there once was a time when all “gay” meant was “happy.” then it meant “homosexual.” now, people are saying “that’s so gay” to mean dumb and stupid. which is pretty insulting to gay people (and we don’t mean the “happy” people). 2. so please, knock it off. 3. go to [ThinkB4YouSpeak.com](http://ThinkB4YouSpeak.com)