

# Curriculum, schooling, research, young people and sexualities in Australia<sup>i</sup>



*lisa is currently working in research areas that investigate embodied subjectivities of young people in various contexts. In particular the middle years and boarding spaces (snow, skate and surf) are the focus of her projects, spaces where issues related to*

*learning, sex, gender, sexualities, social spaces and being are of interest.*

Over the last three decades there has been considerable discussion regarding curriculum policy, practice, and research pertaining to young people, sex and sexuality in Australia. This paper is to introduce some background information as to developments from these discussions and actions, firstly with regards to policy and practice in schools and then with regards to research into young people and sexualities.

There is currently a mandate in Australian schools to provide a safe environment for students and to build sex education into the curriculum. Ways in which curriculum policy and practice have responded to these mandates have been the subject of considerable and on-going discussion in the research literature (Connell, 1994). Public debate about the nature and place of sex and sexuality education in the

Australian curriculum has generally been framed by a binary opposition between so-called conservative and progressive discourses—on the one hand religious and moral concern over the inclusion of sex education in the school curriculum, and on the other a concern to emancipate the sexual self and enable sexual diversity (McLeod, 1999). However, a national educational response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s served to not only raise questions about new ways in which sex, sexualities, and homosexualities could be represented in the curriculum, but also served to further justify the place of sexuality education in the curriculum. This, coupled with greater recognition of homophobic bullying in schools and, paradoxically, greater public legitimacy attached to homosexualities, has meant that, at least on paper, 'sexual orientation' is mentioned in many state syllabi, and anti-violence/anti-discrimination (if not explicitly anti-homophobia) policies and practices have been invoked in Australian schools.

National curriculum statements targeting Grades 1–10, developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, typically located topics pertaining to sex and sexuality in the subject areas of health, physical education and social science. These statements act as guidelines for the development of specific state-based syllabi in the government and non-government school sectors. Included in the documents were strands associated with human development, sex, sexual health, safety and human relations. These curriculum statements and syllabi extended previous curricula founded on biologism and developmental psychology in which the focus had been on reproductive sex, anatomy, heterosexual relationships and age-stage theories of sexual development.

Learning outcomes stated typically assume that students will identify factors that shape understandings of sex, sexuality and gender. In theory, this opens a space for critical discussion in relation to, for example, the social construction of sex, sexuality, and gender, and how particular constructions are legitimated.

There has also been a range of other formal and informal curriculum interventions by educational authorities, youth advocacy groups, health workers, researchers and so on that exists both inside and outside the mandates of specific health and physical education syllabi. These interventions have included various pedagogies and support materials designed to provide information for SSAY people, extend knowledge about a range of sexualities, and address homophobia. These also include whole-school approaches to the development of safe environments, anti-bullying programs, integration of sexualities into various curriculum areas and so on. Whole-school approaches, for example, attend to the gendered and sexualised reasons for harassment and do not pathologise the victims' sexualities (Beckett, 1998; Martino & Berrill, 2003). Activities that enable students to critically examine their assumptions about masculinity, femininity and sexualities in the whole-school approach include, for example, undertaking a 'gender audit' in which students are anonymously able to document their gender experiences at school. There has been a range of analyses on the ways in which homosexualities have been represented in the curriculum. These vary from a consideration of students' responses to programs, to critical analyses of how knowledge about sexualities should be represented in curriculum and pedagogy, to the preparation of teachers. Some of these responses include:

- **Program evaluations:** There is little by way of large-scale or longitudinal evaluations of particular interventions. Further, there is little evidence to support significant large-scale changes to the practice of sexuality education that might go beyond discussions of future adult (typically heterosexual) sex, its biological and procreative functions and associated risks. Nevertheless, evaluative data pertaining to interventions that specifically concern anti-homophobia interventions or activities that require analysis of assumptions about gender and sexualities report some success in at least raising awareness (Harrison, Hillier & Walsh, 1996; Martino & Berrill, 2003). Not surprisingly cautions have been noted with respect to

the potential for creating more opportunities for hostility or for 'we're all the same' forms of tolerance (Harrison et al., 1996).

- **Conceptions and views of young people:** Young people are often missing from the negotiation and construction of the sex and sexuality education curriculum. Curricula and pedagogies serve to censor and sanitise much education concerned with sex and sexuality. The real experiences and thoughts of young people in relation to, for example, masturbation, same-sex partnerships, desire, love, pleasure, 'pashing', intimacy, sexual harassment, sexism, and bodily exposure in change rooms remain largely ignored (Davies, 1999).
- **Representations of homosexualities:** Whether the sexualities curriculum and pedagogy take account of diverse homosexualities is debatable. Harrison (2000) argues that the dominant representation of homosexuality in schools is male homosexuality (1996). Rasmussen (2001) notes that bisexual, transgender and intersex people are typically ignored in the pedagogical literature and argues that some school programs serve to pathologise LGBTI students and reproduce homo-hetero binaries. She calls for greater attention to queer theory in conceptualising a pedagogy of sexualities.
- **Teacher preparation:** Research documents ways in which teachers and pre-service teachers may feel unwilling, unable or under-prepared to engage with syllabi that are explicitly focused on diverse beliefs and values pertaining to sex, sexuality and gender (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). Lesbian or gay pre-service teachers may fear being 'outed', while heterosexuals supportive of different sexualities risk conflict through peer reluctance to discuss ideas.

While these practices and policies work within the field of schooling there is a parallel, and sometimes overlapping field of research relating to young people and sexualities although unfortunately many issues, including school access and the sensitivity of topics, often preclude researchers from doing their research in schools. Nevertheless there is a large literature base to be drawn from (see Sears, 2005) although here we consider Australian literature focused on the experiences of same-sex attracted young (SSAY) people

and their schooling; on heteronormative and homophobic cultures and values found in schools; and curriculum and pedagogy focused on young people and (homo)sexuality. There is a small yet growing body of educational research concerned with young people's sexual identities in the context of schooling in Australia. Moreover, much of the recent research in this field challenges stereotypical and deficit conceptions of (homo)sexuality and young people and charts the implications this has for curriculum and pedagogy. This entry focuses on research taking place in Australia; however, there are strong international connections with research conducted elsewhere, particularly from the United Kingdom and North America.

There is a growing body of research evidence documenting sexual diversity among young people in Australia. Of a national survey of 3,500 senior students, 8–9% reported feelings that were not 'exclusively heterosexual' (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997). Further, a large-scale national study by Hillier, Dempsey, Harrison, Beale, Matthews and Rosenthal (1998) of 750 same-sex attracted young people documents considerable diversity in terms of attractions, behaviours and identities. The study also documents how this sexual diversity intersects gender, geographic locations, family and school experience.

Accompanying these broad studies of young people's sexualities has been research specifically focused on schooling and its relationship to the formation and expression of sexual and gendered subjectivities and identities. Sexual diversity notwithstanding, this research documents both a pervasive heteronormative and homophobic culture in Australian schools (Hillier et al., 1998). Much of the recent research has drawn on the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasised femininity' to explain ways in which particular gender and sex-based forms of power and privilege are manifest in Australian school cultures. Hegemonic masculinity, which in Australia is unambiguously heterosexual, is defined in opposition to femininity, represented by women and those men who do not conform to the heterosexual norm. Mills (2001) suggests the signifiers of hegemonic masculinity in schools in Australia are sporting prowess, the gendered nature of work in many schools (for teachers and students), and power over women and other men. Emphasised femininity on the other hand is underpinned by discourses of compliance, care and empathy.

There is currently considerable research interest in the field

of masculinity, boys and schooling in Australia. In part, the research specifically focused on the intersection between masculinity, sexuality and schooling in this entry has its antecedents in a strong line of Australian feminist theorising broadly concerned with gender and education. As well it reflects a more recent intersection of lesbian/gay/queer theory and feminist theory and its application to schooling.

Considerable interview and survey data conducted with young people documents ways in which homophobic and heteronormative attitudes are expressed in the context of school. Through a series of interviews with young men in one middle-class Catholic high school in Australia, Martino (1999) notes how they conceive of a hierarchy of masculinities – 'cool boys', 'party animals', 'squids' and 'poofers'. 'Cool boys' and 'party animals', played out particularly through sport and drinking alcohol, represented the dominant form of masculinity in this school. Those boys seen to be not conforming to this masculine norm were labelled 'poofers' or gays. The gay slur directed at young men not conforming to models of hegemonic masculinity, direct insults and hatred directed towards gay people, and the association of particular subjects/activities such as English, Art or Dance with 'gayness' have been noted by other Australian researchers who have interviewed young men in schools (eg. Gard, 2001; Mills, 2001).

Through an evaluation of a sexuality education program in the state of Victoria, Harrison et al. (1996) note a difference in the way in which the young men and young women in the study expressed their views about homosexuality. Males tended to express homophobic views in more aggressive and overt ways than females. Further, in some focus group discussions some of the young women challenged homophobic assumptions. The study also noted that many of the participants in the study had little knowledge of homosexual, especially lesbian, sexual practice, and that the representations of homosexuality in schools were typically about male homosexuality.

Many researchers have documented the actions drawn on by young men in particular to create and maintain heterosexual boundaries (Gard, 2001; Martino, 1999). Mills (2001), for instance, demonstrates ways in which current patterns of violence and bullying seen in schools are gendered and sexualised and represents ways in which certain young men can assert their heterosexual dominance. Mills suggests that this manifests itself in both homophobic and anti-lesbian

harassment. Mills is also careful to delineate differences between homophobia and anti-lesbianism.

Ways in which school cultures can sanction homophobic and heteronormative practices have been identified in the research (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Mills, 2001). These may be in the form of teachers doing little to support SSAY people or failing to stop homophobic bullying. Butler (1995) notes that there is little by way of pastoral care in the curriculum more generally that might recognise, if not value, homosexualities. Mission (1995) further argues that SSAY people are discriminated for two contradictory reasons: if homosexuality is invisible it doesn't have to be dealt with, and if it is visible it can be rejected.

There is a small amount of research discussing ways in which SSAY people have negotiated school cultures underpinned by heteronormative values. Respondents in Hillier et al.'s (1998) research indicated that information about heterosexual sex and heterosexual safe sex was easily accessed, schools being one key point of access. Only 15% of respondents indicated that they accessed information about gay and lesbian relationships from school. Further, there was little information about gay and lesbian safe sex to be accessed at school.

Hillier et al. (1998) also report that schools, in particular, were sites in which SSAY respondents experienced homophobic abuse from peers and teachers. For example, 46% of participants reported some verbal abuse and 13% reported physical abuse related to their sexuality. Of these reports of abuse, 70% took place in schools. This abuse at school was more prevalent among the young male respondents than among the young female respondents. Twenty-eight percent of respondents also reported some form of discrimination while at school, such as not being able to take a partner to the school dance or not being allowed in the change rooms. Hillier et al. note the effect of such cultures meant that some respondents chose to keep their sexual identity invisible and/or reported loneliness, depression and alienation. Some recent research has sought to document links between sexuality and suicidal behaviour (Dyson et al., 2003). This research reports that SSAY students are unlikely to disclose matters pertaining to their sexuality to teachers or other workers in their school.

Numerous reports document ways in which sexuality intersects with other identity markers in the context of school.

In light of the findings reported by Hillier in the previous paragraph, Dempsey, Hillier and Harrison (2001) comment on ways in which dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity impact on the understandings and practices of SSAY. For SSAY males there was a clearer construction of sexuality in terms of a hetero-homo binary, and the 'battleground' of the school environment is crucial to this. For SSAY females the social scripts linking femininity to homosexuality are less clear and this is posited as one reason why females in the study did not report abuse to the degree experienced by males. However, as the authors note, this lack of social script has its own problems in relation to a lack of clarity and visibility for forms of lesbian identity.

Research conducted by Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) provides examples of ways in which the sexuality of young gay men intersects with other identity markers such as ethnicity, gender and social class. By documenting how these intersections played out in the research participants' schooling, the studies are indicative of multiple, fluid and complex ways in which sexual subjectivities are understood and expressed.

Hillier et al. (1998) also highlighted that young people in rural areas had more difficulty accessing information about gay and lesbian safe sex than young people in metropolitan areas. Butler (1995) further notes that the lack of information in schools can be particularly silencing of lesbians and bi-sexuals. It is important to note that while the research mentions gays and lesbians, bi-sexual, transgendered and intersexed young people are often invisible.

There are clearly many issues for students, teachers, policy writers, researchers, school managers and bureaucrats around sexualities and schooling. However, this does not mean we can simply avoid discussing or acting upon such issues as silence is also a powerful choice that sends particular messages to our young people. In these conservative times we must remember that such issues are alive and well and deserve attention through continuing and open debate and based on sound research rather than popular and media-promulgated myths or taken-for-granted assumptions around young people and around sexualities. Education is about learning new ways of knowing our world, living in our world, and creating a liveable society for all, not the reproduction of fear about certain subjects or the dissemination of misinformation that leads to uninformed decision-making. It is with this in mind that our hope is for a

more informed population of young people and adults around topics related to sex, gender and sexualities and that these knowledges are firmly placed within education and research. It remains to be seen whether such knowledges are for schooling to have a role in practising or not.

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