

# "I can't wait to leave school"



Photo by Rob Chiarolli

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# ...ol so I can get educated”



The title of this article are the words of a bisexual 17-year old girl, Marita, from my research with bisexual young people in Australian and US schools [24; see also 20; 25]. She was voicing her frustration at the absence of education and affirmation in her Australian school in relation to bisexuality, even though the school endorsed anti-homophobic policies and practices. This frustration and marginalisation was expressed by many young people in my research who felt that bisexuality fell into the gap between the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality that informs anti-homophobic policies, programs, and practices in schools such as in health education,

sexuality education, and student welfare programs. These absences and erasures leave bisexual girls feeling silenced and invisibilised.

This article is excerpted from the larger research study conducted between 2000 to 2007, including some quotes from some of the bisexual girls and young women in that research. The qualitative research involved semi-structured interviews and email correspondence with 94 bisexual young people, polyamorous families, mixed-orientation families, teachers and health workers in the US and Australia. The study also involved ethnographic research with US and

Australian social and support groups, and email listserv discussions, both methods leading to an indeterminate number of participants, given the nature of Internet list memberships and shifting social/support group participation [see Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010 for a more detailed discussion of research methods]. For the purposes of the research, the term bisexual was used to define young people who are sexually attracted to both males and females, and/or identify as bisexual, and/or are sexually engaging with both males and females and identify themselves with broader and more inclusive terms such as ‘sexually fluid’ and ‘sexually flexible’.

## An overview of the available research

The importance of undertaking research in order to inform health and education policy has always been a given, and yet this connection has largely remained ignored in relation to Australian bisexual young people [22]. Indeed, the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) points to the “pervasive tendency” in research literature “to exclude bisexual people or to obscure them by collapsing bisexual samples into gay, lesbian or same-sex attracted categories” [6: 7]. The urgency for bisexual-specific research became evident when Jorm et al. (2002) publicised their alarming findings into Australian bisexual youth health having worse mental health than their homosexual or heterosexual counterparts. The higher rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns were accredited to more adverse life events and less positive support from family and friends.

*I became quite depressed, quite anxious about my sexuality... I was crying continuously, I couldn't sleep. This went on for about two weeks. I had to go and stay with my dad because I wasn't eating, I wasn't showering, yeah ... I couldn't look after myself, I couldn't function... and I thought it was the end of the world.*

(Michelle, 20, recalling her feelings at 14)

Given the dearth of Australian data, I will briefly present some findings from US and UK research which are pertinent to bisexual young women in Australia. For example, Galupo et al (2004) found that bisexual women participants were much more likely than lesbians to feel as though their sexual identity was invalidated within friendships with heterosexual women, being either ignored or not taken seriously. Given that friendships and peer group relations are of high significance to most adolescent girls, to what extent are these findings reflected in Australian bisexual young women's friendships at school today?

*I didn't feel connected to that sort of culture of girls sitting around and talking about boys and [I was] thinking that was really stupid.*

(Jess, 19)

Balsam and Mohr (2007) found bisexual young people experience higher levels of identity confusion and lower levels of both self-disclosure and community connection in comparison to their gay and lesbian peers, which may increase isolation, affect self-esteem, and promote risky behaviours such as alcohol abuse. Research with same-sex-attracted Australian youth in relation to gay/lesbian youth social and support groups found that they were more likely to be exclusively attracted to the same sex and to identify as gay or lesbian [13]. To what extent do Australian bisexual young women feel coerced to mismatch their attractions to a lesbian identity in order to gain

acceptance and support from this group membership? Is “the invisibility and isolation they experience in broader society mirrored in these youth groups” [32: 131]?

In regard to risk-taking behaviours, Drabble and Trocki (2005) found that bisexual women were more likely to drink heavily, use drugs and smoke as compared to both heterosexual women and lesbians [see also 21]. Koh and Ross found that bisexual women “reported a greater frequency of having had an eating disorder” than heterosexual women or lesbians [16: 40]. All the above-cited researchers believed there is “some evidence” that these behaviours were linked to coping with the stress of marginalisation in relation to both heterosexual and lesbian communities. In relation to substance abuse, there were several instances in our Australian research where drug and alcohol use was seen as a way of coping with discrimination and marginalisation [24; 20; 25]. Indeed, further research is required into how and why disclosure and closetedness affect the mental, sexual and emotional health of Australian young bisexual women. Likewise, given the high rates of eating disorders among adolescent girls, are there links to feeling marginalised as bisexual, and if so, how prevalent is this linkage?

The available international research into bisexual students in schools points to greater learning difficulties among bisexual young people. These poorer learning outcomes are of course, linked to the feelings of emotional and mental disconnection and anxiety at school [28]. Research conducted by Robin et al. (2002) illustrates how bisexual students are more likely to report suicide attempts, drug use, unhealthy weight control practices, and being harassed and injured by others at school. Udry and Chantala found a stronger link between bisexual females' substance use and “delinquent behaviour” in schools as compared to heterosexual and homosexual cohorts [33: 91]. Indeed, bisexual adolescent females emerged as the highest risk group, as their delinquent/rebellious behaviours were accompanied by extreme emotional distress. They also had higher rates of suicidal feelings, depression, and victimisation, including being attacked or being in a physical fight. In my research, Linda, 17, had come out at school and then found she had to leave school early after harassment and bullying led to suicide attempts:

*I got thrown down stairs, punched and threatened with rape by boys for coming out as bi. They said raping me would take away the lesbian parts. I'd tried several times to complain to the principal. I reported what these guys were doing, but all he said all the time was that since I'd done this foolish thing and come out, he could guarantee no protection; I'd brought it on myself. So when these losers saw my complaining wasn't getting me anywhere and they weren't getting in trouble, they got worse and worse.*



Varying degrees of sexual coercion, harassment and assault of bisexual girls by boys at school has been reported in research as well. For example, Saewyc et al. (1999) found that bisexual teenage girls were twice as likely to report unwanted pregnancies.

Overall, in the research that does exist, bisexuality in girls is largely subjected to one or more of four types of problematic representations in health and education research, and in the wider populist culture:

### 1. Underrepresentation

A particular method of underrepresentation is what can be called “exclusion by inclusion” [20; 25]. This is evident in the way educational and health organisations focusing on same-sex attraction gain funding for projects that appear to be inclusive of bisexual young women by including bisexuality as a category in their project outlines and submissions, but they do not follow through with bisexual-specific recommendations, outcomes, and services for youth [34].

### 2. Misrepresentation

This occurs via media and popular culture stereotypical constructions, societal presumptions, and prejudices and they have a strong impact on the self-perception of bisexual girls. For example, “Female bisexuals are often tossed into the script as erotic grist for the heterosexual male target audience” [Bryant in Alexander, 2007: 117]. Bisexual girls grow up seeing very few bisexual women in the media and those they do see often encompass negative bisexual stereotypes such as criminals, murderers, evil vampires, and sexual predators out to entrap “anything that moves” [35].

Most bisexual girls are stereotyped as transient bisexuals, “trendy bisexuals” [5], or what Marita in my research calls the “drunk-on-a-date bisexual”, experimenting or “phasing” with sex with other girls, usually for the “normal” titillation of their heterosexual boyfriends, before returning to or restoring one’s true “normal” (sober?) heterosexuality [see 11]. This kind



of heteropatriarchal framing of same-sex attractions and delineation of how these attractions can be deployed contribute to the “erasure of bisexuality as an authentic sexual identity” and create “uneasiness” for those women identifying as such [30: 57]. This major misrepresentation of bisexuality in young women as meaning “hot bi-babe girl-on-girl action” as a staple of “straight male porn” and straight male entitlement impacted upon many young women in my research:

*Guys sometimes want to know which I like better, men or women, and when I answer both equally, the first thing they say is “then let’s hook up the threesome”, and I say, “Ok, let’s find a guy we both like,” and that gets them every time. The thing is, they don’t bother to ask if I’m even into threesomes and what kind, it’s just like my bisexuality’s there at their command, like, for them to control.*

(Katrina, 18)

Fahs (2009) refers to “public performative bisexuality” expected from young women who internalise heteropatriarchal cultural scripts regarding women’s sexualities. It needs to be stated that this is not to deny or repress bisexual young women’s erotic pleasures should they enjoy or desire “performing bisexuality” for male partners. What is of concern is the high level of coercion, scripting and staging by men that women experience in “male-dominated, male-controlled, male-observed” same-sex eroticism constructed as men’s entertainment [11: 446].

In my workshops with adolescent girls in schools, I am often told about girls “dirty dancing”, “pushing at parties” or “having threesomes” to “turn on” boys or at their boyfriends’ requests. While I emphasise to these young women that girls should be able to be sexual with other girls as they desire, I question the gendered power dynamics at play there, and the role of boys as puppeteers in these situations. And when I ask girls what would happen if they should ask their boyfriends to “make out” with another guy the girls think is “hot”, the usual responses are: “No way, you just don’t ask that”, or “No way, he’d dump me ‘cause he’d think I was a freak”, or “No way, he wouldn’t do that for me”. As Fahs writes, “For women, the rules are clear: either choose a man for a sexual partner, or choose a woman with a man’s approval” (11: 447).

Misrepresentations and assumptions are also apparent in research. For example, the emphasis in some research becomes explaining or rationalising bisexuality in young women as being predominantly due to the desire for same-sex sexual contact occurring within a coercive heterosexual framework. I agree it is important to acknowledge how some of the heterosexual experiences “were coercive and non-consensual” rather than chosen or desired by same-sex attracted young women [7: 25]. Nevertheless, researchers need to ensure that these discourses of what I call “pre-lesbian bisexuality” are not constructed as depicting the universal story for all bisexual young women and do not prevent the research and questioning needed with young women whose lives are not represented within such discursive frameworks of coerced heterosexual activity.

### 3. Outdated Representation

This situation has arisen due to the lack of current research that engages with shifting discursive and societal constructs of bisexuality among adolescents and young people. Entrup and Firestein refer to the “TNG: The Next Generation,” whose sexuality is “characterised by fluidity, ambisexuality, a reluctance to label their sexuality, and an interest in the sacred” [10: 89]. 17-year old Andrea, in my research, referred to fixed and essentialist labels of sexual orientation as “leftovers from the seventies and eighties sexual cultures, real retro”. Other terms that are increasingly being used by or applied to young people are “heteroflexible”, “not quite straight”, and “mostly straight”, particularly in relation to young women [31].

Young people’s polyamorous and multi-sexual relationship negotiations and partnering preferences also lack sufficient current scholarship [18; 24].

### 4. Homogenised Representation

This is apparent where the diversity within youth groups, youth subcultures, and categories such as sexual categories is not acknowledged or explored, or it is deliberately homogenised. Very rarely do we read of class, ethnicity, geographical location, gendered expectations, disability, culturally diverse expressions and classifications of bisexuality, and other factors that impact upon a bisexual young woman’s decisions, negotiations, and experiences [14; 8; 26; 34].

*I had my left leg amputated when I was ten years old, so I guess that disability, if that’s what you like to call it, has probably impacted a lot on my personality, my view of myself, my place in the world, and I think it’s also had an impact on my sexuality. I had a lot of self-esteem issues . . . in terms of being bi and trying to figure all that out and at the same time, trying to feel okay about my body... I had my first same-sex sexual experience with one of my partners who was also bisexual and just feeling completely inadequate in front of her and being completely terrified about taking the leg off because no one ever tells you. There’s a real problem with a lack of information with young people with disabilities about sexuality so you feel like you’re not normal, and therefore you can’t have normal sex. . . . and just trying to figure out how I’m supposed to have sex as an amputee.*

(Jess, 19)

Geographical isolation and living in a rural environment may also have an exacerbating effect on the lack of social support for an Australian bisexual girl. Michelle, 20, had grown up in a rural community feeling quite isolated:

*“I think it’s more difficult to get access to even social groups and support groups. ...I never had access to any of that... it was just nothing”.*

## Australian bisexual girls and young women speak out about school

Many bisexual young women in my research could not recall any education around bisexuality in their schools (see also 19). As Bonnie, 19, said, “I just



don't have any memories of it". Josie, 22, recalls the silence about bisexuality at her school being interpreted and internalised as her own abnormality and confusion. Thus, while socially she passed as straight in response to a school setting that provided no discursive framework, definition, or validation of bisexuality, internally she was searching for external definition and affirmation of the 'realness' of her bisexuality:

*It's just so missing. It's just like it's not a concept that people consider and that's probably why I suppressed it a lot because it's like, well, my god, I don't know who I am, how can I explain it and they don't understand... You've [schools] got to respond to what the [bisexual] kids are feeling and they're feeling confused and abnormal and concerned and so it's just addressing that need that people have for validation.*

In schools where bisexuality was named or made unofficial appearances without educational legitimation, it was usually in some derogatory or negative way among students, or even from teachers:

*My only memory of any teacher explicitly mentioning anything to do with bisexuality was an English teacher, who would mutter "ac/dc" whenever he talked about Shakespeare... He would also look directly at my friend, who was gay. Pretty illogical, huh?... When I was in first year at uni it suddenly occurred to me that "bisexual" simply meant attracted to both genders. Before then I had associated the term only with ridiculous jokes, in which it sounded exotic, like laughing about "bisexual midgets from obscure African countries" and so forth. It just wasn't on the map at any time before this epiphany.*

(Sibyll, 19)

Even schools that claimed to be 'out' about the need for non-heterosexual inclusion and education were still closeting bisexuality or expecting bi-specific education to pass as gay and lesbian education. Josie's experiences reflected this concern with "exclusion by inclusion" [25]. She spoke about how gay and lesbian youth workers who worked and liaised with her school in anti-homophobic education were bi-phobic in silencing her reality: "I used to think, well, hang on, you guys face oppression and marginalisation on a daily basis because of your sexuality. Shouldn't you be a bit more open to the fact that we have eyes on us all? Why do you treat us badly?"

Those young women who did seek support and resources from school counsellors were mainly dissatisfied with the response, as Bonnie relates below. Thankfully, being bisexual was a positive experience for her when she began to self-identify as bisexual, and gained support from family and friends. Thus the counsellor's responses were not as influential, but it is concerning that students with less peer group and family support may have been more reliant on this counsellor's responses for a sense of self:

*I was seeing a school counsellor because I was really stressed... and I ended up talking about the fact that I had a crush on a girl and I said to her, "Are there any support groups or anything that I can go to, anyone I can talk to about this stuff?" And all she said to me was,*

*"Just wait until you're at uni. It will be fine then. You'll meet lots of queer people there." And to this day, I'm just shocked by that because it was so irresponsible... I mean, maybe she didn't have any resources on it, which was also awful... I remember thinking to myself when I was talking to her, "Oh, I've got a crush on a girl. That means I like girls and guys. That means I'm bi. Wow, that's really awesome." ...I remember just running around the schoolyard, just like I couldn't tell anyone and I was so excited... I think later on that year I told most of my close friends about it [and family]. And they were great, too.*

Many bisexual young women such as Bonnie, above, did come out at school, constructing their own identities despite external hierarchical dualisms, negations, and invalidations. Andrea came out in a school that was proud of its reputation for having clear anti-homophobic student welfare policies and health education resources. Even in that environment, she found that her refusal to label her sexuality or co-operate with school procedures regarding same-sex-attracted students made her feel alien.

*It's like they can only do all this good stuff for you if you fit into the boxes. ... Like they act as if they can't help you unless they have a label for you, a name tag for your sexuality. Like instead of, "Hi, I'm Andrea", your name tag has to read, "Hi, I'm gay" or "Hi, I'm lesbian", so they can go to their sex kits and pull out the words, the program, and all that school stuff that are for people like you... I did crack it one day when the counsellor kept pushing me to say what I was, and I went, "Look, if I have to wear a sticky label, I'm a UFO, an unidentified fucking object". I got detention for that and all these warnings about being promiscuous, STDs, the lot. They kinda went into a panic... The thing is, I wasn't even having full-on sex with anyone, but I was feeling shitty about their boxy ways, and I let them have it with the UFO thing. I was quite proud of my creative imagery. You'd think my English teacher would be pleased, but he said I was disrespectful. That's what he called it. Well, how about respecting me in letting me tell you what my sexuality is or isn't?*

Many young women called for role models in schools or bisexual visibility in the school curricula when discussing historical or contemporary individuals [see also 19]. This is seen as reflecting increasing positive representations in adolescent popular culture, such as Missy Higgins, a young Australian singer-songwriter who in 2007 talked about her sexuality to the Australian media, describing how sexuality is "fluid" and how she was "definitely" comfortable with being identified as a "not-so-straight" girl (in Kroenert, 2007). The significance of making such media examples and cultural texts available for discussion in schools is evident in Josie's words below:

*I'm very aware of the need for role models, for kids to know that they're not alone. ...When you don't see anyone, you think, fuck, it's true, if no one else is, it must be abnormal and I've got to work out whether I'm A or B... Just having lessons about it and holding just constructive discussions... using people, celebrities to make a difference.*



Bonnie also calls for greater visibility of bisexuality in school texts and materials:

*You'll be reading books and studying texts that are about straight kids having crushes on other straight kids and maybe they could include it [bisexuality in books] more in the material... They definitely could be just putting materials around the school.*

There have been few books written for adolescents and young adults that include positive representations of bisexuality and bisexual characters [4]. Pink is a recent Australian novel about adolescent Ava who is on a quest to find out whether she is gay or straight by moving in and out of various youth and school subcultures, including various performances of femininity, only to find that sometimes sexuality cannot be known or chosen from an either/or selection [36]. My own novel for young adults, *Love You Two*, is an attempt to address this absence with its multicultural, multi-sexual, and multi-partnered characters, based on people in my research over fifteen years, who disrupt, subvert, and agentically construct their own sexual identities and families according to their own needs [23].

### "I guess the message is it's okay"

As Andrea explains below, bisexuality "messes up" the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality that frames and informs most anti-homophobic policies, programs, and practices in schools. In doing so, many young women are left feeling like "X-files" at school—alien, isolated, and disconnected—thereby potentially leading to risk-taking and self-harming behaviours:

*We're not straight A files or gay B files. It's like we mess up their tidy sex files. But that means they make you feel like you're messed up yourself, as if there's no way their filing system is what's really fucked.*

In conclusion, Josie's words below exemplify the level of self-affirmation and self-validation that all bisexual young women should be empowered to achieve. This appears to occur without hesitation when bisexual young women, and their adult carers and mentors such as teachers and school counsellors, construct "communities of commitment" [2] wherein bisexuality is perceived as being part of the bigger picture of learning, school community and culture, safe and consensual interpersonal connection, and love:

*When I was with my girlfriend, I didn't deconstruct it. When I was with my guy, I didn't deconstruct it. I fell in love, and when you fall in love, you fall in love. I guess the message is it's okay, that's it.*

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