

Introduction

EVERY DAY AROUND AUSTRALIA

A young gay man of fifteen has rocks and rotten fruit thrown at him almost every day before, after and during school. The teachers think he should tone down his flamboyant behaviour and stay away from 'those boys'. Should he leave the school?

A young woman of sixteen questioning her sexual identity is 'outed' to her parents by her teachers after she befriends a known lesbian at her school. She is forced to leave home after refusing to 'play it straight' for her parents. Did her teachers have a responsibility to protect 'their girls'?

After weeks of uninterrupted homophobic harassment, a heterosexual student 'snaps' and strikes one of several younger students who had teased him for being too effeminate. The school had not acted upon several reports of the homophobic harassment, yet punishes the student for his physical outburst. Should the focus be the heterosexual student?

A group of teachers await a presentation on their Professional Development Day about gay and lesbian issues. It's 9.00 a.m., they don't want to be there and they haven't had their first coffee. They do everything to let the speaker know it. Is this a waste of time?

A male teacher notices a young man being bullied regularly because other students think he is gay. When he observes overt physical bullying he interrupts; however, he does not address its homophobic nature. He is worried about what the students, other teachers and parents might think if he does. Is it possible to support him in challenging the students' homophobia?

A school principal announces at a staff meeting that she disagrees with a recent change in education department policy that mandates schools to challenge homophobia:

'Let me make it clear that there are two things we do NOT talk about in MY school: suicide and homosexuality!' What are the chances of change in this school?

These and similar scenarios play themselves out every day in schools throughout Australia. Many non-heterosexual teachers' jobs are threatened if they take action and too often straight teachers think they cannot do anything because they themselves are 'not gay'. **Beyond "That's so gay!"** will look at what is happening in schools, what is and is not taking place to respond to such scenarios, and how small actions from educators will immediately make a significant difference in the lives of young people.

EVERYDAY ANSWERS

In *Pride & Prejudice: An educational package to challenge homophobia in secondary schools* I offered Australian teachers a step-by-step guide to safely negotiate the subject in everyday classrooms. Almost a decade later, I have recreated my workshops here, to provide strategies that will make many teachers' lives easier and, dare I say, professionally more interesting too.

Beyond "That's so gay!" charts an unlikely and unparalleled journey that will appeal to educators who:

- Have observed homophobia in their school, yet feel it's one for the 'too-hard basket'
- Are sick of hearing the phrase 'that's so gay' and not knowing whether, or how, to respond
- Know they have gay and lesbian students at their school but are not sure how best to support them
- Believe that only gay and lesbian teachers can challenge homophobia
- Are concerned about how parents and the broader school community will respond when sexual diversity is discussed in classrooms.

Beyond "That's so gay!" offers a comprehensive, effective and often fun guide to changing schoolyards and classrooms. Here you'll find recipes for electrifying staffrooms, exciting classrooms and liberating educators. Rather than feeling overwhelmed and unable to respond to the rampant educational reality of homophobia, you will benefit from learning:

CHAPTER TWO

Are you ready for this?

Assessing school community readiness.

*'I am so sorry Daniel. Are we the worst school you have been to?
Is there any hope for us...?'*

Female teacher, 2003

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE TEACHERS

Without consciously setting out to observe the differences between schools, over time I discovered a not-so-surprising truth. Some schools were 'more ready' for change than others. Over a number of years I became curious as to why some schools were 'more ready', others less so.

My belief grew that the readiness of any school community to significantly challenge and eradicate homophobia would be determined by its staff. In a heavy support role is the school administration. To reiterate a point made throughout this book: if most of the teachers want it, it will happen. My focus in terms of change in any school is always on the masses, and I'm not talking about the students. While students are the main rationale for any action, teachers are my target audience for change. Diverting too much of our energy and attention away from teachers can impede rapid gains in school movement. We have the tools and the know-how to engage students in fun, challenging and effective ways. We just need to give educators the opportunity to use them.

It is less fanciful than you might think to concentrate so heavily on teachers rather than focusing on educational authorities, the political climate, and parent and community concern. If an all-boys Catholic school could undertake a challenging homophobia pilot while concurrently a conservative religious leader condemned homosexuality from the pulpit, then conservative educational authorities are not the barriers we once thought they were. In 1999 a forthright school leadership team, a progressively committed group of teachers and a class of everyday young men proved this to be the case.

One day it dawned on me in an unlikely situation that a rudimentary model for working more effectively with teachers was available. In my work with Kids Helpline's Peer Skills Program where I trained teachers and health professionals, we would make a great deal of effort to travel and work in regional and rural communities. I was doubly lucky in 2004 to be travelling to Maitland, South Australia, and to be accompanying the then State Manager for Kids Helpline/Peer Skills, the earnest, highly skilled and inventive Kerry Jarvis. Driving from Adelaide I began describing my work in schools. Kerry casually referred to a model she had used in her own work with child protection workers, which sparked my interest. Immediately I recognised its focus on moving resistance in individuals. Could this help me put some structure to the hunches I had in my work with teachers? Kerry agreed to send me a copy of the 'Discount Model'.

THE DISCOUNT MODEL – A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The Discount Model's five stages are: *Significance, Existence, Solvability, Self and Action*. The Discount Model comes from the Protective Behaviours Program, an American program developed by Peg Flandreau West in the 1980s. It is not a framework for evaluating shopping bargains. The word 'discount' is used to highlight how, as individuals, institutions and the broader community, we can 'mark down the value' of a socially contentious and sensitive issue like child abuse, domestic violence or, in my example, homophobia.

Exercise: If I gave you 90 minutes with 100 teachers, what would you want to cover? Write down 10 points without reading ahead...

What were your points?

Based on my experience I will explain how I personally use 90 minutes. Before I do, here are some goals that have been useful:

1. To have the presentation introduced by an authority in the school.
2. To change the state of participants using a pattern interrupt (Chapter 3).
3. To share an optimal amount of research, policy and legislation (Chapter 4).
4. To model behaviour that is expected of teachers, i.e. homophobia interrupted respectfully (there is not one rule for students and one for the teachers) (Chapter 15).
5. To allow a minimum of three opportunities for teachers to talk to one another
 - > once about their experiences
 - > once about their practice
 - > once about the information they have heard.
6. To give three examples of effective practical strategies
 - > one example of how to interrupt student homophobia (Chapter 15)
 - > one activity that students could experience in a classroom (and what students do and say in response) (Chapter 9)
 - > one discussion of what teachers believe would work with their students.
7. To share no less than three, no more than five useful, relevant resources (see Resources Section).
8. To share examples of schools where things have worked (Chapters 7–13).
9. To ensure that language is plain and accessible.
10. To smile at least five times. Bonus: if teachers smile at least five times.

If you can achieve these things within 90 minutes, you have set the best foundation for creating a vastly different educational experience for gay and lesbian young people. While you cannot change an entire school in one sitting, you can dramatically alter the atmosphere, perspective and motivation level of a staffroom.

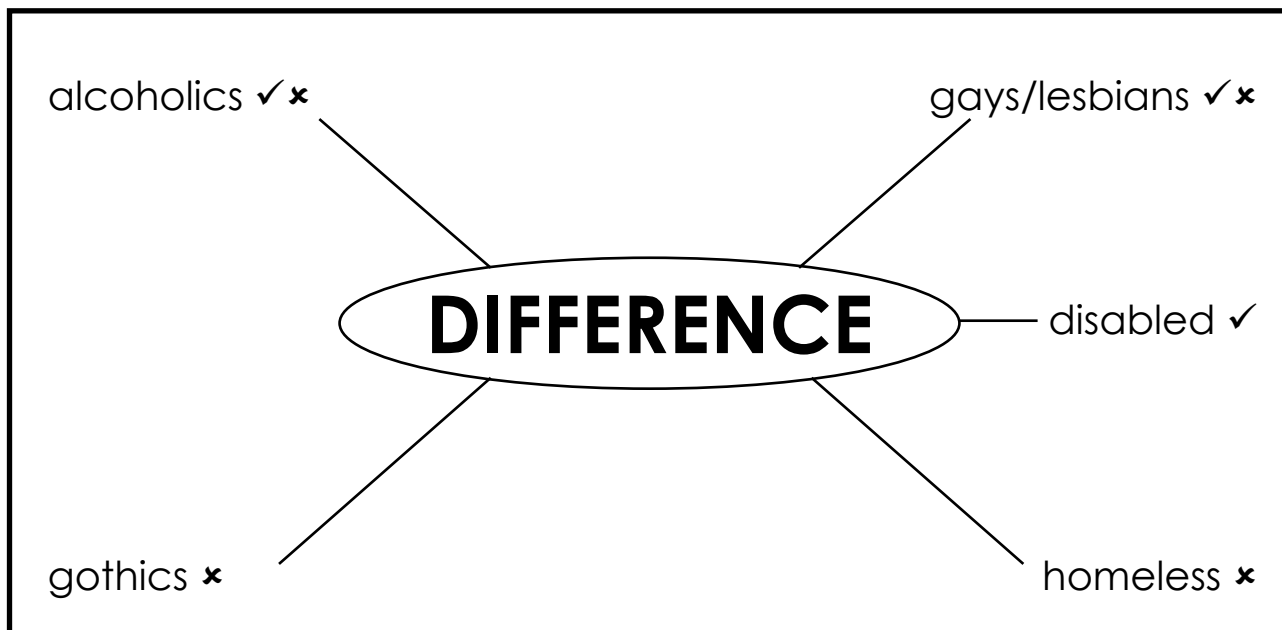
A sample running sheet might look like:

- Affirming Diversity questionnaire (15 minutes, to be discussed)
- Introduction and research summary (15 minutes)
add teacher discussion (5 minutes)
- Outline successful school responses (10 minutes)
add one student activity (15 minutes)
- How to challenge and interrupt student homophobia (15 minutes)
add teacher discussion (5 minutes)
- Share resources and final questions (10 minutes)

It is true that not all presenters are created equal. While not everyone is an exceptional presenter, many are capable of delivering an exceptional presentation that addresses the cognitive, emotional and practical needs of the teachers. With planning, preparation and the right tools, you can too.

Ninety minutes with a staffroom of teachers might sound to some like a token, trivial and insignificant amount of time. In the eyes of most at the school it quite possibly is. Too often this time is all that is offered. Complaining or refusing is unlikely to change the situation. Hence I recommend that you surprise them and exceed their wildest expectations.

Let me show you how I do it...



Such questioning prompted a lively discussion as the students offered invariably stereotypical descriptions of each group under scrutiny. I kept asking these simple questions, writing the responses, accurate or not. This included observations that might be considered politically incorrect. Where something was offensive it was sufficient to ask if other people might word it differently. This was an opportunity for the class to sometimes laugh and gradually relax.

For each group I would challenge one or two observations made by the students. I would do so by asking whether other people in the room agreed and sometimes I would challenge the assumptions behind their descriptions. I was careful to prod on politically correct and incorrect material.

For example, a young man said that disabled people were acceptable because they 'could not help it'. Previously students had condemned drunk drivers for their risk to families on the roads. I asked whether a disabled person would be acceptable if they had become a quadriplegic in a car accident that they had caused while drunk and that killed a family of four. The young man's view changed.

My strategy was quite clearly to create an environment where young people felt as comfortable as possible to share what they thought. I wanted to send a message that I would always question and gently challenge things that they contributed, as well as have them compare and contrast their views with those around them. If I set this environment up early, I hoped that when we discussed sexual diversity and homophobia later that students would be more likely to contribute and be comfortable when challenged.

Once conversation began to 'dry up' for a selected group I would then ask another question: *If we were to take a survey of students at this school at lunchtime, would this group be considered as acceptable in society? Hands up. Now those for unacceptable?*

Groups were rated on their acceptability with a tick, cross or both. A tick was assigned to each 'acceptable' social group, whereas a cross was assigned to those deemed 'unacceptable'. The decision for this was made by class consensus or an outright 'majority rules' system (i.e. a rough estimate of the number of raised hands).

Herein lies the most interesting point of the lesson. Almost every social group provoked discussion and debate about whether a tick or cross could be assigned, with almost all being given both a tick and a cross. The theme running through the activity was that a person's character cannot be classified based on only one characteristic.

This fence sitting changed, however, with the discussion of 'gays and lesbians'. The class was adamant that an overwhelmingly accepting tick be given to lesbians, while allocating a disapproving cross to gays. Both decisions were made with much giggling and nudging of each other. This was a distinction that the young men wanted made. Two dissident students spoke to the hypocrisy of this; however, consensus ruled. The

If I needed a sign before the class as to how it might unfold, it came unexpectedly. One young man trotted excitedly past and said, 'Did you bring any gay people with ya?'

I smiled. *Kind of... We are watching the video interviews, remember?* I then asked for everyone to be seated quickly.

THE VIDEO

The class settled quite quickly and a game of hangman began. The answer: 'REALITY'. I posed a question: Why would I use this word? Tim, who had stayed behind in the previous class, offered that the class would get to see and hear real gays and lesbians, rather than assuming certain things about them.

Joan placed the video in the video recorder:

So why a series of video interviews? Apart from myself, I wanted to bring examples of real gay and lesbian people into the classroom. I had reasoned that if it was difficult getting myself into one school, then it was going to be even more challenging getting a panel of gay and lesbian speakers into a school. Video interviews of openly gay and lesbian people seemed the next best thing. I wanted to give it a shot.

Prior to this session, I had rented a video camera, with considerable drama given that such devices were not as commonplace as they are today. I had asked a number of gays and lesbians to answer the students' questions on camera. While many gay and lesbian people had initially volunteered to participate, it was surprising and frustrating how people suddenly backed out or got busy on the shoot day. In saying this I also understood the realities of how much people invest in the coming out process. Add to this the doubt when faced with a camera, an unknown audience and trusting me – and willing participants evaporated.

My only regret is that I was unable to schedule a suitable time to film any lesbians. I was fortunate enough to find two lesbians who agreed to participate only if they could contribute written responses. Not surprisingly, my reading their answers out had only a limited impact.

However, I was successful in securing the trust, time and emotional energy of four gay men on video. Ryan, James, Glenn and David answered the following questions, as described in the previous chapter:

- Do you enjoy being gay or lesbian?
- Are your friends (if you have any) gay, lesbian or straight?
- Were you straight in high school?
- How did you find out you were gay or lesbian?
- Have you ever been harassed for being gay or lesbian?
- Was being gay or lesbian a choice?
- Have you ever been with a person of the opposite sex?
- Are gays and lesbians paedophiles?
- Do you know people who have died of AIDS?
- What's your favourite colour?

Now it was finally time to show the video. Joan pressed 'PLAY'. I held my breath.

All eyes were riveted to the screen. The video consisted of four separate segments, each of an openly gay male answering the ten questions posed to them.