

Counsellor Support For Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth in Schools

Annemarie Wille +

The reality in our schools is that a significant minority of our students do, or will, identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Still more students care for, or are cared for by, lesbian and gay people. All our students will function in a society where they interact with people of all sexual orientations as friends, colleagues and family members.

*This article examines the role of the school and the school counsellor in recognising and addressing the needs of a small, but highly vulnerable, number of our students.**

The School Environment

An effective school environment supports the learning and development of essential skills by all its students. To ensure that learning opportunities are not restricted the New Zealand Curriculum Framework states that schools must recognise, respect and respond to the educational needs, experiences, interests and values of all students: both female and male students; students of all ethnic groups; students with different abilities and disabilities; and students of different social and religious backgrounds (p7).

Rarely do our schools acknowledge that they have gay, lesbian and bisexual students and other students who have gay and lesbian, and (often less visibly) bisexual, family and friends. Yet here is a small but significantly vulnerable group in our school system. There is both empirical and anecdotal evidence to show that les/bi/gay students have experienced their school environment as a negative and unsafe place, adversely affecting their ability to learn and delaying their development towards a healthy, integrated personal identity (Treadway & Yoakham, 1992).

Two major factors maintain this negative

environment in our schools: the absence of support and the prevalence of homophobic attitudes within the school.

The absence of support for anything other than a heterosexual identity marginalises the gay, lesbian or bisexual student. It reinforces a sense of isolation which is false - there are other gay, lesbian and bisexual people within the school, both staff and pupils - and it creates a vacuum in which the homophobic attitudes of a few are exaggerated.

In the wider society we have seen increased understanding of sexuality and how fundamentally sexual identity is related to other aspects of our lives. There is increased tolerance in society and abhorrence that people should experience discrimination based on their sexual identity or sexual experience. Yet in our schools les/bi/gay students remain invisible and unaffirmed. Whilst some people have argued that schools simply reflect society's predominant discomfort with or antagonism towards same-sex relationships, schools in fact now fail to reflect significant shifts in social attitudes which are embodied in the 1993 Human Rights legislation.

Our schools are not a positive learning environment for les/bi/gay students who report that school reinforced fear, shame and alienation and delayed their development towards an integrated personal identity. The following quotes came from adult gay, lesbian and bisexual people in the course of producing the teachers' resource 'Affirming Diversity: An Educational Resource on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Orientations':

"The realisation of my sexual orientation didn't hit me properly until intermediate school. Of all the experiences which have sculpted me, I always remember the last three years of school in the Waikato. It was the loneliest, most hurtful time in my life. I thought everyone was out to get me - the feeling of rejection was acute.

"I really hated my third and fourth years

+ Sexuality educator, Family Planning Association and has a private practice in Auckland.

I really hated them, through those two years I was constantly branded by classmates for being a fag or a homo, so I kept on denying it, of course, and really fooling myself that I wasn't. I was constantly picked on because of it and I was really the low of the low because they thought I was gay.

"If I'd had someone, anyone telling me that lesbians were OK at that time in my life it would've changed my life, things would have been really different for me. I would not have gone through so much self-doubt and beating myself up about being different.

"When I first thought I was gay, I had a feeling of overwhelming fear, dread and guilt which lasted two or three years. I had never once heard so much as one positive word about being gay all my childhood and teenage years and expected a lonely, ostracised, sad and possibly bitter life.

"The strange thing is that when I left school last year I kept running into others from my school in gay clubs or groups. If only we had known at school we could have had someone to talk to and wouldn't have felt so hassled.

The Role of the School Counsellor.

American research into the attitudes of school guidance counsellors toward homosexuality indicates counsellors feel unprepared, poorly resourced and concerned about their ability to respond appropriately and effectively to gay and lesbian students (Thompson & Fishburn 1977; Rudolph, 1988). Furthermore counsellors believe that schools do not do enough to help gay and lesbian students adjust to their school environment. (Price & Telljohann, 1991).

Discussion with New Zealand counsellors confirms that many feel inadequate about dealing with gay, lesbian and bisexual issues and many counsellors acknowledge that they experience feelings of ambivalence in working with gay, lesbian and bisexual students. Yet youth who sexual identity issues have been clearly identified as a high risk group.

At the very time that adolescents face huge pressure from their peer group and families to

conform, gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents are identifying, usually secretly, as different. These young people are vulnerable to alcohol and substance abuse (Fified, 1984; Ziebold & Mongeon, 1982) and have a higher adolescent suicide rate (Ramafedi, Farrow & Deisher, 1991). School performance may be affected and some leave the school system prematurely.

However, Savin-Williams (1990) has found that once 'out of the closet', the self-esteem of gay and lesbian people is as high, and on some measurements higher, than their heterosexual peers. Most often, however, the 'coming out process' comes late in the school years or post-school years.

Society has been slow to provide les/bi/gay youth with the care, information and access to support from their peers which they need. All the usual places where young people should expect to get support - their families, friends, church leaders, health and educational professionals - either overlook or reject young les/bi/gays. These students are unlikely to talk to anybody, even family and close friends, and this places the school guidance counsellor in a frontline position for preventing and responding to crisis situations which may face these youth.

Les/bi/gay students do not readily self-refer and self-identify as such to their school counsellor (Coleman & Ramafedi, 1989). This is due to mistrust, uncertainty and fear and is compounded by self-doubt and internalization of society's negative construction of homosexuality.

I went to an all boys school...it was a real tough school, a real tough school...there wasn't room for gay people there, I was quite aware of my sexuality but kept it totally hidden and went to great lengths to hide it. I really wanted to speak to someone and I rang (gay) switchboard, but lost my nerve and didn't say anything. I wanted to speak to the school counsellor about it...I just didn't trust him. I really didn't think he would be supportive, I though he would be supportive of most things but not that.

It is critical that counsellors can signal to the students that they will not judge them and that they do represent a safe confidante. Ways of

doing this include the use of posters outside the counselling room, the use of inclusive language, and including sexual orientation issues when describing counsellor services. When counsellors do signal this they commonly receive an immediate increase in young gay, lesbian or bisexual clientele or of clients raising issues related to sexual orientation (Rudolph, 1989).

Many counsellors I have been in contact with through my workshops on sexual orientation do express a desire for being better prepared and resourced to work with these clients.

Without exposure to issues of heterosexism in counsellor training the onus is on counsellors to keep themselves informed and aware of issues affecting their availability to, and performance with gay, lesbian and bisexual clients. So where do counsellors go to get their information and to explore the issues? The most common sources for counsellors appear to be personal contacts, the media and workshop/conference material (Price & Telljohann, 1991). Of these, only the workshop situation provides reliable opportunities for counsellors to explore attitudes and to broaden their knowledge of sexual orientation issues.

Typically, counsellors request information and opportunities to explore sexual orientation issues such as: 'innate' homosexuality and/or degree of 'choice' over sexual feelings; the development of adolescent sexuality and issues of 'experimentation'; 'crushes' versus reliable indicators of homosexuality and bisexuality; and the effects of sexual abuse on sexual identity formation. To work effectively with sexual orientation and identity issues counsellors need opportunities to explore the complexities of the issues.

In New Zealand almost all school counsellor training is provided by the universities. Coverage of issues of sexual orientation has been very uneven, very limited, and often the topic is not a compulsory part of the course. Progress has been made in that some university trainers invite appropriately skilled gay, lesbian and bisexual people (and this may include some of their own trainees) to facilitate counsellors in exploring their own attitudes and ways in which they can affirm and empower clients across all sexual

orientations.

Counsellors who feel comfortable in their own sexuality and in their attitudes toward homosexuality and bisexuality, and who are non-judgemental and well-informed about sexual orientation are more likely to give clear signals to les/bi/gay students that they are a source of support for them (Rudolph, 1989). Such school counsellors can also initiate change and monitor the school is a place of inclusion and acceptance.

** Although not dealt with here, students with trans-gender issues form an even smaller, but significantly high-risk school population.*

References.

- Coleman, E & Ramafedi, G. (1989). Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Adolescents: A critical challenge to counsellors. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, Sept/Oct, Vol. 68.
- Fified, L. (1984). On my way to nowhere: isolated, alienated and drunk. In Boston Lesbian Psychology Collective (ed) *Lesbian Psychologies*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Hunter, J. & Schaefer, R. (1987). Stresses on Lesbian and Gay Adolescents in Schools, *Social Work In Education*, Vol. 9, No 3.
- New Zealand Family Planning Assoc. (1993). *Affirming Diversity: An Educational Resource on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Orientations*, NZFPA.
- Price, J.H. & Telljohann, S.K. (1991). School counsellors' perceptions of adolescent homosexuals. *Journal of School Health*, 61 (10), 433-438.
- Ramafedi, G., Farrow, J. & Deisher, R. (1991). Risk Factors for Attempted Suicide in Gay and Bisexual Youth, *Pediatrics*, Vol. 87, No 6.
- Rudolph, J. (1988). Counsellors' Attitudes Towards Homosexuality: A Selective Review of the Literature. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, Vol. 67, Nov.
- Rudolph, J. (1989). Effects of a Workshop on Mental Health Practitioners' Attitudes Toward Homosexuality and Counselling Effectiveness. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, Vol.68, Sept/Oct.
- Savin-Williams, R.C. (1990). *Gay and Lesbian Youth: Expressions of Identity*. New York: Hemisphere Publishing Co.
- Thompson, G.H. & Fishburn, W.R. (1977). Attitudes Toward Homosexuality among Graduate Counselling Students. *Counsellor Education and Supervision*, Dec.
- Treadway, L. & Yoakham, J. (1992). Creating a Safer School Environment for Lesbian and Gay Students. *Journal of School Health*, Vol. 62, No 7.
- Ziebold, T. O. & Mongeon, J.E. (1982). *Alcoholism and Homosexuality*. New York, Haworth Press.