

Why homophobia needs to be named in bullying policy

Lynne Hillier & Anne Mitchell

Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society

Homophobic abuse is different from other types of bullying and the differences mean that the impacts are likely to be greater and interventions more difficult to put in place. There are four main reasons which support the argument that homophobic abuse needs to be specifically named and challenged.

1. *There has been broad historical, institutional backing for homophobic beliefs* through the church, psychiatry, psychology and the law. Though the law, psychiatry and psychology have officially changed their discourse, leaving homosexuality free of the taint of criminal activity (Freeman, 2004) and mental illness (APA, 1973), homophobia remains enshrined in the beliefs of many Christian churches. For example, despite the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia explicitly approving clergy in same sex relationships in 2003 and in 2006 confirming this decision despite repeated opposition within their ranks, gay men and lesbians in 2006 are refused communion in the Catholic church and ordination in the Anglican church. Despite institutional changes, the discourses that position same sex attracted people variously as evil, immoral, sick, and abnormal remain pervasive in the community and the schoolyard and serve to justify homophobic abuse as reasonable (Hillier & Harrison, 2004).
2. *It is harder to challenge homophobic abuse* than other bullying, such as that based on race or gender. Young people often report the double standards in regard to teachers ignoring homophobia while punishing racist and sexist behaviour in the classroom. Teachers, as members of the community, often share the pervasive beliefs about same sex attraction and may feel personally uncomfortable in challenging homophobic bullying. Teachers who do challenge such abuse also risk being stigmatised if they are not backed by educational policies and school support. They may feel that they will be accused of “encouraging” homosexuality if they oppose homophobia. Teachers have reported at time being uncertain “where they stand legally” if they are seen to “champion” homosexuals by standing up for them.
3. *It is more difficult for young people to access help.* Getting help from parents is likely to result in disclosure and so rather than risk parental rejection many same sex attracted young people remain alone with the problem at least for a time (Hillier, 2002). This is also the case with disclosure to other adults and peers. Because homophobic discourse is pervasive in the community, as soon as young people recognise their sexual difference and this most often

occurs prior to, or at, puberty, there is also the realisation and fear of the stigma that accompanies it.

4. *The alienation from homophobic bullying is likely to be more absolute.* It is enacted systematically against a person on the basis of suspected membership of a group, however, unlike members of other minority groups who often share their minority status with their families and are therefore supported by them, parents of same sex attracted young people are in most cases heterosexual and expect their children to be heterosexual as well.

Naming homophobic bullying, giving teachers and others permission and direction in dealing with it is the first step in dealing with the problem.