

**“Can I Use The Word GAY in my Essay or Will I Get Into Trouble?”:
Challenging Homophobia in Single-Sex Boys’ Schools.**

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli

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Introduction

The principal beckoned me to his office, and he and Peter [the deputy principal] sat silently, waiting for me to speak. They understood and would explain to the School Board if necessary. Peter called the staff together and told them the truth firmly and compassionately. I stood near the back wall where I could see everyone. Afterwards I was hugged and comforted, but I couldn't help wishing the hugs and comfort could've been for Jon when he needed them. Kevin sent a letter for the staff, and thanked them for the support and friendship shown to Jon. 'He wanted to be closer to many of you but unfortunately a gay way of life is not often accepted within a school and he feared discrimination. I ask you to remember him for who he was.' (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1991:187).

That was easy. Jon had been an inspiring teacher and a good friend to the boys in our Catholic single-sex boys' school. He had also been a good friend and educator to many of the staff. I was one of them. So when he died of AIDS early in 1989, his friendship was missed terribly but his passion for educating continued at St. Paul's, and continues still in many schools throughout Australia, in ways that he had wanted but could never do himself: about homophobia, homosexuality and HIV/AIDS.

So after such an emotionally binding time for the staff, I wasn't prepared for one of the first reactions a year later to my Catholic Education Office funded project on gender and equity in relation to masculinity. A simple poster started it: the silhouettes of two men facing each other, their arms around each other's shoulders. The accompanying text spoke of how strange it was that two men touching each other was considered unusual when thousands of media images of men violently injuring each other was considered normal. I put it up in the staff-room as it indicated one of the issues I would be addressing: the acceptance of violence and conflict as part of the construction of 'normal' masculinity. I returned to school the next day to find an anonymous white paper pinned to the poster declaring: "You are promoting homosexuality in the school". This was followed by two consecutive days of anonymous papers taped to the wall near my desk with outdated Catholic Church dogma on homosexuality.

Somehow, I muddled through my mixed emotions of grief, sadness, frustration, anger, disbelief. The Project went on to be very successful and gained national recognition (THE GEN, 1994). Staff divisions and discussions ran hot for about a month; a significant friendship was lost; a few staff members decided they could not support this Project, including a main participant who carefully chose which issues were "safe" to examine, or became intimidated into not supporting; others maintained and indeed developed their support; the administration subtly soothed the antagonism without removing support for the Project. Every now and again, as the Project developed over the next two years, homophobia reared its ugly head but its success waned as more and more students and more and more parents began to openly support and encourage the work. Particularly after my book about Jon was published late in 1991, and the few homophobes on staff predicted scandal for the school which did not eventuate, despite mainstream media coverage, the school went on to trial some very significant strategies. I was invited into other Catholic schools by teachers and principals and as Gender and Equity Officer for the Catholic Education Office, responsible for developing a Gender and Equity Policy for South Australian, homophobia became part of my daily work.

Hence, for very personal reasons, anti-homophobia work was very important to me. In addressing homophobia in the classroom and in staff in-services, I was talking about the lives of people I loved and with whom I shared a great proportion of my personal life outside the school, and about whom I

also could say very little inside the school in order to avoid personal and professional repercussions for them. It was also important for my sense of self as an effective teacher and role model to students: my responsibility for the individual development and care of each of my students. I saw it as obvious and necessary to take on homophobia, confirmed by my meetings with ex-students such as one who said to me:

Your English lessons were so important to me. It was the first time I ever heard an adult say something good about how I was secretly feeling. But I couldn't tell you then. I was too shy and I thought the other guys might find out. But I kept on reading and learning and now everything's alright..

There were also students who needed to confide in someone, such as the following girl, one of the few who undertook their senior year at our school for various reasons(see Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1990).

I like girls and I like boys. I think it would be great being bisexual but it's how everyone else will feel that worries me. I'm not going to say anything while I'm still at school here. I'm already a minority. I'm one of eight girls in a school of seven hundred boys, and I'm Asian. I think I'll leave my coming out till I get out.

This chapter will examine strategies for challenging homophobia in boys' schools, based on my experiences and the experiences of teachers and students who have discussed with me and written to me over the last few years.

Connecting Marginalities

Schools need to recognize that equal opportunities is about everybody and present the concept that oppression and power cannot be sectioned off into separate categories or issues. The danger of such sectioning is that some issues, particularly lesbian and gay issues, will be perceived as dangerous and controversial, while others will be seen as less important

(Sanders and Burke, 1994:71)

In a previous article on challenging homophobia in the English classroom, I discussed a very disturbing trend that had become entrenched in some schools, preventing work on homophobia(Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994d, 1994e). I called this 'hierarchical dualism' in that a new definition and categorisation of good and bad had been established in relation to dealing with social justice and prejudices in our schools. While school policies and practices were advocating and implementing strategies targeting disability, race, ethnicity, class and gender, homophobia was consciously ignored or silenced, or unconsciously was not even considered. The binary looked something like this:

Safe-to-Challenge Prejudices: minimal personal, social and professional risk;

Unsafe-to-Challenge Prejudices: considerable to high risk of personal, social and professional ostracism and marginalisation

Appropriate-to-Challenge Prejudices: major public institutions including educational and religious institutions have finally arrived at a point of understanding and support in challenging these

of prejudices;

Inappropriate-to-Challenge Prejudices: major institutions have not yet understood or supported the challenge to this prejudice and may still be justifying its maintenance.

What appears to be needed and what seems to work best in relation to anti-homophobia strategies is where connections are made between marginalities. In other words, homophobia is not seen to be outside of or different to the challenging of any prejudice and social injustice that undermines human dignity and respect for others. Thus, incorporating homophobia alongside and equally with issues such as racism and sexism appears to be the most effective strategy. Tacked-on lessons or statements once the "main" prejudices have been dealt with are marginalising and demeaning the significance of homophobia. Isolated extended sessions on homophobia without any framework outlining its incorporation into the overall concern with social injustice, social and personal development, historical and cultural learning, pastoral care programming, still leaves teachers open to attack. Thus, anti-homophobia work as an afterthought or in isolation both incur more negative reactions and/or

less positive responses than anti-homophobia work incorporated into mainstream curricula, school policies, and school culture (Harris, 1990; Patrick and Saanders, 1994).

Here are some examples from my own students and from letters received from students in schools throughout Australia who have read my book **Someone You Know**. They highlight their being guided toward considering the basic interconnectedness between prejudices in terms of human oppression, suffering, and modes of resistance. Students were often encouraged or able to connect their own positions of marginality to homophobia.

I can now relate the prejudice that Anne Frank was subjected to for being Jewish, the prejudice Steve Biko felt from the white South Africans in **Cry Freedom**, to how Jon felt about his disease and his sexuality. He, like Anne Frank and Steve Biko, was faced with society's negative views about differences.

I am now more aware of what is happening around me. I don't regard homosexuality as a disease anymore or a disorder. I just see it as a characteristic of a person, like black skin or being Vietnamese.

Coming out is not only relevant for gays and lesbians. It's about all of us saying who we are. Coming out about many things like sexual abuse, rape, etc. I grew up with a secret but I'm slowly coming out of the shadows.

I didn't think much about gay people before, I didn't want to think about AIDS before, but this book made me want to think more and talk to my friends about them. It even made me think that I don't have to have a marriage like everybody else's if it doesn't suit me. I was always worried about what feminists were like too. I think I'm one and that's why some of the guys don't want to know me.

Very much about AIDS-phobia and homophobia, **Someone You Know** also addresses issues of gender and ethnicity, and situates all marginalities within the wider thematic frameworks of subcultural identification and marginal personal identity, ignorance and discrimination, love and friendship, death and dying, parents and children, teachers and students, religious dogma and spiritual growth. Students are encouraged to consider the injustices of homophobia and AIDS-phobia as seriously and sympathetically as they are encouraged to consider racism and sexism. We can encourage students to empathise with the fears and questions inherent in coming out as gay or lesbian by asking them to reflect on their own experiences of challenging and resisting social, familial, institutional rules and regulations of what one is meant to be, think, feel and behave. Boys resisting limiting gender stereotypes, students of non-English-speaking and Aboriginal backgrounds can discuss their own forms of marginality and connect with gay marginality.

I'm prejudiced against because I'm a teenager. Old folks and shopkeepers hate us because they think we're all out to rob or bash them. I always feel like I'm suspected wherever I go.

Yes, I am Italian and proud of it but it doesn't mean I have to act the way everyone expects Italians to act.

Some of the questions that have been used in English studies and Social studies in relation to **Someone You Know** and which connect marginalities and human feelings include:

What are the ethnic, gender, gay and AIDS stereotypes the book challenges? What are the common attitudes these stereotypes are based on?

Are there differences between homosexual and heterosexual love and relationships? What are the common anxieties, joys, fears and expectations?

What sorts of parent-child relationships are presented in the book? Is your situation reflected in the book? How?

How did you feel about Jon's death? Has someone you loved died? How did you feel? Do you think there is something particularly significant about AIDS-related illnesses and death?

Do you have prejudices against some people in our society? Why or why not? What do you think will shift those prejudices?

The Whole School Approach

The task is surely to develop a perspective which reflects upon all the work

we do, so that countering and diffusing heterosexism and homophobia, become as with racism and sexism, a principle and an objective upon which all our practice should be rooted. Clearly, this does not mean it has to be mentioned constantly. But once it forms part of the philosophy underpinning our pedagogy, it will inform what we teach, why we are teaching it and the methods used in that teaching(Harris, 1990:39).

Research shows that schools which adopt an incorporative framework or inclusive approach to issues of homosexuality are far more successful than isolated teachers working without structural, administrative and peer support(Patrick and Sanders, 1994). Nevertheless, research also indicates that this whole school approach is rarely arrived at without the determined, persistent and at times, painful efforts and experiences of those isolated teachers who gradually find themselves acting like pebbles thrown into a pond- the ripples spread out further and further(Redman, 1994).

In this section , I would like to discuss useful strategies, provide practical examples and relate experiences that gradually begin to construct a whole school approach to anti-homophobic principles. A final point I wish to make before dealing with specificities is that teachers are human beings and no matter how passionate they are about an issue, the practicalities of surviving comfortably in a job, such as not finding themselves suddenly faced with overhauling a whole curriculum and throwing out half a resource centre of texts for their sexist and homophobic content while out foraging for new and expensive materials, need to be considered. Hence, the first strategy in whatever is begun in dealing with homophobia is to consider the usefulness of existing school structures, resources and curriculum. In other words, how will homophobia be included and incorporated into existing policies, practices and perceptions?

(I) Policy: I have not heard of any school which has a specific anti-homophobia policy. What is proving useful and effective is to incorporate homophobia into existing social justice policies, behavioural management policies, curriculum development policies, harassment policies, yard behaviour policies, language use policies, pastoral care policies, mission statements, the set of rules and regulations often listed at the front of school diaries, often placed on a classroom wall, often discussed and agreed upon with students as part of the classroom behaviour guidelines.

I remember beginning my classes each year with “this will be a non-racist, non-sexist, non-homophobic classroom”. It was always the last one that got the looks of puzzlement and a confident it-may-be-the-first-day-of-the-year-but-I’m-letting-you-know-I’m the -one that-will either-help-break-or make- your class hand would shoot up and ask “what’s homo, homo, whatever you said?” A few brave laughs, and then the opportunity to give him his first positive reinforcement for being so honest and asking a question that I’m sure many students would like answered....etc, etc... thereby assuring that he was now on side and introducing my first short lesson on homophobia in relation to definitions, language use and behavioural expectations. I found that in the first year or two students would initially test this part of the classroom contract more than the other two. But once it became obvious I was serious and ready to follow up misdemeanours alongside the other social injustices, and when the same faces would pop up in my classes year after year, it became less necessary to give out definitions and there were less occasions to have it tested.

Here is an example of an existing statement with modifications in brackets. It is the existing Gender and Equity Policy for South Australian Catholic Schools (South Australian Commission for Catholic Schools, 1993). It is being modified and applied to schools throughout the state and interstate. It would be easy to extend the Policy to cover anti-homophobia and anti-racism and thus make it a social justice policy:

In the light of the Gospel values (love, justice and reconciliation), the responsibilities of Catholic education in relation to gender[inequality, racism and homophobia] are:

- * To raise critical awareness in student, staff and parent communities by reflection on gender stereotyped, racist and homophobic values and attitudes.
- *To demonstrate the equality, dignity and full humanity of each person.
- * To empower students in Catholic schools to lead responsible and productive lives, and to make informed decisions and choices about lifestyle within a Christian framework.
- *To promote each person’s gifts and talents, foster self-esteem and self-acceptance, so that students develop responsibility for self, others and the environment.

*To acknowledge the entitlement of each person to respect, to economic security, and to participation in decisions which affect their personal, interpersonal and working lives.

*To encourage the organisation of appropriate programs for the pastoral care of students [in relation to gender, race and sexuality].

*To raise awareness in Catholic schools' wider communities of the need for gender inclusive[, anti-racist and anti-homophobic] education in schools and society.

(1993:4).

Of course, as with any policy, the implementation and school community introduction to the policy would have to be carefully handled.

Another form of policy could do away with the specifics of race, gender, sexuality and speak in open terms of justice, equity, individual respect with an introduction that clearly explains the specific issues addressed by the policy. An example of this would be an harassment policy that deals with all forms of harassment, intimidation and bullying: sexual, homophobic, racial, and others, clearly outlined and defined at the beginning of the document.

Having policies which are intended to cover homophobia and are seen to do so means that administrative support is available for teachers and students. To the credit of the school administration at the time of the publication of **Someone You Know**, the school policies must have been ready and waiting! I found out months later that a handful of parents had contacted the administration and were calmly and clearly dealt with "in the light of the Catholic ethos of the school". I had not even been asked to make an appearance in the principal's office! It had been "an administrative matter" that did not require my needing to justify or explain anything. One persistent parent was invited to contact the Catholic Education Office or Church Office if further clarification was required. I did later learn of how a couple of letters were received and responded to calmly and clearly. Thus, a whole school approach and ideally a whole system approach diffuses potential conflicts and downplays the supposedly "controversial and scandalous nature" of an issue.

(ii) **Practice:** Issues of homophobia should be incorporated, where relevant and practical, across the school curriculum in terms of content, resources, methodology. English, Social Studies, Australian Studies and History Studies are four areas where much work can be done. I will present some of my own work and the work of colleagues at St. Paul's and teachers in other schools. What will become apparent is not only the need for specific anti-homophobic material but how material that does not even address homosexuality can be very useful, particularly if it deals with some form of social injustice, or if it negates or ignores homophobia or homosexual persons.

English is the subject pre-eminently concerned with what it means to be a human being in relationship with other individuals, growing within a culture. By language we create the world that we need to know about, we come to know ourselves and others, we discover how to learn and how to make choices or judgments, and at the heart of these processes is responding to literature(Protherough, Atkinson, Fawcett(1989) quoted in Harris, 1990: 27).

Most of my anti-homophobic work with boys was done in the English classroom. For the purposes of this article I am not able to elaborate but it has been documented in earlier publications(Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994d, 1994e). I will briefly outline the issues that need considering and texts and resources I found useful. These issues are relevant across the curricula.

Three processes of textual selection need to be considered: the choice of text, the choice of writer, and choice of student response. Does the text invite the reader to be critical of characters, language and plots that represent and normalise homophobic practices? Does the text invite the reader to empathise and connect with characters and situations of experiencing, as victims and resisters, homophobic discrimination? What is known of the writer and his/her lived experience of homophobia within a particular historical, socio-cultural landscape? It has become standard practice to discuss the significance of a writer's gender, race, ethnicity, geographical and historical location and yet a writer's sexuality is often silenced or seen as of no textual relevance. How can students be invited to respond/participate in ways that will enable them to journey into their own emotional, psychological and social landscape? How can students respond/participate in ways that provide a comfortable context within which they can undertake self-exploration without necessitating self-disclosure? Written responses seem to provide the widest range of possibilities as writing is predominantly a personal task where

knowledge of the written material can be restricted to dialogue between teacher and student, thus making it easier “to neutralize the potency of peer pressure” that can become problematic in oral work(Harris, 1990:51). However, with time and increasing comfort where discussions of homophobia are seen as normal and occurring alongside other discussions, structured and distancing oral activities such as role plays and media analyses can also be useful. For example, when students were asked to write scripts and perform them in groups and the topic was harassment, it was obvious that I would want different groups to examine various forms of harassment so one group of students would readily agree to deal with homophobic harassment. Part of the challenge I gave all groups was to deal with their topics devoid of stereotyping. Early drafts of plays were monitored for such “harassing stereotypes”. This activity had been preceded by an analysis of where we obtain information about particular social groups and the need to critique stereotypes such as in the media.

Using texts, whether written, visual or aural, also provide for opportunities for students who may not have personal knowledge or experience of people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual to gain understanding and connect. Harris also points out another benefit of raising issues of homosexuality through the novel as being “intimate thoughts and emotions of a lesbian or gay person can be presented and discussed without a real person risking the possibility of any kind of negative responses”(1990:50). I would add that this textual work proved to be a necessary stage before inviting a homosexual person to the school to run a workshop with students. By the time students were meeting Kerry, many of the potential barriers to sincere participation had been dissipated over a couple of years of regular and relevant input by teachers such as myself.

In the references accompanying this chapter, I list several texts that will guide teachers and parents in locating appropriate anti-homophobic works(e.g.Clyde and Lobban, 1992; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994c). I will briefly mention those materials that I found useful.

Obviously, my own book **Someone You Know**(1991) proved successful because it was located within the school, I was the available writer and one of the protagonists. Alongside **Someone You Know** I would use excerpts from **To Sir With Love** by E.R. Braithwaite(1992), an autobiographical narrative made into a successful film of a black teacher in a London school in the Sixties’ who challenges his students’ many prejudices borne out of ignorance. Australian films such as **The Sum Of Us** and **Muriel’s Wedding** would also be useful in connecting both feelings of marginality and feelings of similarity to the characters. What is required, in terms of literature and film, are a diversity of representations of homosexuality so although both **Philadelphia** and **The Sum Of Us** have been critiqued, particularly by gay audiences, for mainstream student audiences who lack any anti-homophobic representations in their psyches with which they can empathise and connect, these films are very powerful. For example, the often-critiqued representation of the ‘ideal family’ in **Philadelphia** is useful. Why shouldn’t gay men come from totally accepting and loving families? Why does there have to be conflict and homophobia? Isn’t one of our goals to assist students to be able to visualise and consider the possibility of a world where homophobia is not considered ‘normal’ in families? Indeed, my own book presents Kevin, Jon’s partner, from a strong Irish-Catholic family that is extremely similar to the family in **Philadelphia**. It is also interesting to situate the film historically and guide students to think about socio-cultural shifts in what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable and how these shifts occur. AIDS and homosexuality are marginalised in the Eighties whereas earlier decades would not have seen an Afro-American and a woman as lawyers in the film. Indeed, presenting the film of **To Kill A Mockingbird** alongside **Philadelphia**, would highlight this point.

I found **To Kill A Mockingbird**, a text about racism in Alabama in the mid-twentieth century, to be a very useful text in discussing homophobia because of its representations of childhood, prejudice and persecution, alienation and social hypocrisy. It is a perfect example of how texts do not need to directly address homophobia. It can be read, recreated, experienced and responded to in the exploration of racism, sexism and homophobia. There are two elements that encourage this line of interpretation. First, the author Harper Lee is a lesbian writer and indeed Scout Finch is an autobiographical description of herself as a child(Grant, 1992). Second, the character of Boo Radley and the children’s game of making him “come out” are open to interpretations and imaginative recreations that can raise the issues of homosexuality as much as the issues of intellectual disability(Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994d., 1994e). When I introduced and discussed these two issues with students, they were able to make connections and indeed enjoyed the text and film far more. It certainly led to interesting debates about whether Boo Radley could have been a boy growing up gay.

They were able to connect between the marginality and oppression as historically constructed in the southern United States of the thirties with their own contemporary world. A creative re-writing exercise in terms of how would a writer like Harper Lee construct the story of Boo Radley as a homosexual youth if she were writing today, and would HIV/AIDS occupy a significant space, proved successful. Here are some examples of student responses from a few Year Ten English classes:

Most of the time, prejudices and stereotyping is out of fear although most people are afraid to admit it. Why were the children afraid of Boo Radley? Because of what they'd heard which must have been very exaggerated over time and because they might not have used the word gay or homosexual, the children never know what it was about Boo that people were afraid of.

I think Boo Radley could've been gay and even after his father stopped hiding him, he probably wanted to keep hiding himself. I think many gay people hide their feelings from the public and their friends. Most gay people feel left out of the community, not being allowed to participate, and yet wanting to. ...Maybe Boo wanted to be friends with the children because he thought the children wouldn't know what being gay was so they couldn't stereotype him. And he only came out at night so he wouldn't have to face people.

People have prejudices because of the limited or bad experiences they have. Whatever Boo did when he was young, he's been stuck with that stereotype all his life and they won't let him outgrow it. They may have only ever met one gay person...and they judge everyone.

If Boo went to the boys' home, his ignorant father thought he'd meet more guys and become more gay. So he isolates him also because he's ashamed of his son.

I think Atticus knows about Boo but he doesn't explain it to the children. He just says 'there were other ways of making people into ghosts.' I guess you didn't talk about those things then. My Mum's explained to me about my Uncle and he and I are good friends.

If Boo was gay, I don't think the Maycomb society would have known. That's why his father keeps him away from society. He doesn't want them finding out. But maybe he isn't gay. Maybe he's mentally retarded. But then for some people that would've been the same thing.

Even students who defined themselves as homophobic were encouraged to consider their positions:

I think I will somehow get rid of my prejudice against homosexuals by trying to see what it would be like to be one and have the world against you. Like Atticus said, we have to get into their shoes to find out how life is really treating them.

If I were to get to know someone with AIDS or who is gay, I think I would be able to change my prejudice. Like Scout and Jem finally meeting Boo and seeing he's alright after all.

As one male student euphemistically wrote to me in relation to **Someone You Know**:

The initial reading of the book proved very enjoyable, as there was no mention of homosexuality or AIDS. It was not until the third chapter that I realised Jon was gay. Personally this posed a problem. I regret to say I have always had an 'immense dislike' toward homosexuals. Yet, after a little self-deliberation, I decided to continue, although determined not to enjoy it. To my surprise, I was glad I persevered.

And another gruff adolescent male voice went for the blunt approach on my answering machine late one night:

I'm ringin' cos I just finished yer book about AIDS and poofers- uh, gay men- and and it's made me do a lotta thinkin' and I feel like a fuckin' shit for having bashed one. It sure won't happen again. Yeah, well, thanks.

On reflection, I remember how I told very few teacher-colleagues what I was doing with **To Kill A Mockingbird**. I had just mentioned it to one colleague who happened to mention it to one of the resident homophobes on staff who immediately retorted I was 'destroying a classic text'.

Two books specifically about growing up and the experiences of adolescent masculinity in relation to sexuality are **Reflections of a Rock Lobster** by Aaron Fricke(1981), an autobiographical account of growing up gay, experiencing prejudice at school and in the wider community, and how he successfully

challenges and resists it. Adolescence, family relationships, and gender constructions of masculinity are connecting themes as they are in the second book **Peter** by Kate Walker(1991). The ambiguity of the ending, for Peter decides to let life take its course and whether he will be gay or not is not as frightening as he had at first thought, is excellent for many student re-writings and debates.

Another text I found very useful and successful was **Two Weeks With The Queen** by Morris Gleitzman(1989). The teaching of this text with a class of 'low-achiever' Year Ten boys proved how we may think the incorporation of homophobia and AIDS issues into the curriculum are more difficult than is often the reality. First, it is a short and easy novel to read and therefore accessible to students who would not see themselves as readers. Second, because few students of those read outside the classroom, I found myself reading out loud to them every day. They enjoyed this as we could stop along the way and chat and analyse. It also meant that by the time we got to the "gay word" and Ted and Griff's relationship, the students had few preconceived ideas and had got to know and like the characters. Thus, examining any shifts in attitude toward characters was easy and productive. Again, students were asked to consider homophobia and AIDS-phobia as part of the text, alongside other issues such as childhood, death and dying, loss and grief, family. The honesty with which the students discussed forms of harassment, parents with terminal diseases and gay members of family and friendship networks encouraged peer affirmation and the nurturing of a safe space in the classroom. Also, the fact that many of them could succeed in understanding and writing and speaking about the novel was important. I remember the day one of the students suddenly shouted out,

You know what? Prejudice is like how we're supposed to be the thicko class but we're really good at all sorts of things. But some teachers and other kids don't want to know. So it's like if you're gay, they treat you like you're thick or subhuman or something".

Crescendos of applause, including my own, followed this one.

I also used Adrian Mitchell's poem "Back in the Playground Blues" and if I was teaching this now, I would use the techno, hip-hop song "Language of Violence" about gay bashings by schoolboys on the CD "Hypocrisy is the Greatest Luxury" by The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy.

Again, I said very little with some members of staff. I wanted to avoid conflict in order to get on with what I was doing and work only with people who wanted to work with me.

More materials are being developed for English classes which incorporate or include issues of homophobia in to their broader canvases. For example, **Gendered Fictions** by Wayne Martino(1995) incorporates homophobia in his analyses and classroom reading practices. Anthologies and collections are also including gay and lesbian issues such as my story "Roses" in a multicultural anthology recommended for secondary schools. It is about a frustrating day in the life of a lesbian of Italian background as she goes about her daily routines at work and visiting her mother although the reader does not know about her sexuality until the last line of the story(Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994b). Another multicultural women's writing collection used at senior secondary school level also includes my article on lesbians of Italian background(Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1992). Gender inclusivity in relation to anti-homophobia is to be aimed at as it is in other areas of schooling. Thus, the experiences of lesbians and bisexual women need to be presented and analysed. A recent novel that I would be incorporating into my classrooms now is **Me Mum's A Queer** by Catherine Johns(1994). Written for an adolescent readership, it is the story of a sixteen year-old girl who decides it's time to tell her friends in her Adelaide co-ed high school about her mum being a lesbian. The consequences are both funny and sad as her friends come to realise that most parents and most families are "queer" in one way or another. The links between racism, sexism and homophobia are clearly drawn through the characters from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. The text has a few flaws in its one-sided view of sexism in ethnic families and bisexuality as a "cop-out", providing material for interesting class debate. In relation to HIV-positive lesbians, excerpts from the autobiographical **A Shallow Pool of Time** by Fran Peavey(1990) were very effective.

Gaining access to anti-homophobic texts is becoming easier. Feminist bookshops and gay bookshops (such as Murphy Sisters and Imprints in Adelaide, Hares and Hyenas in Melbourne, and the Feminist Bookshop and the Darlinghurst Bookshop in Sydney) as well as specialist libraries such as the Darling House Community Library (part of the AIDS Council) and the Women's Studies Resource Centre in Adelaide are great sources for teachers and senior students. **XY:MEN, SEX, POLITICS** is a very useful journal of articles, poetry, stories that are anti-homophobic as well as anti-racist and pro-feminist. Kits such as **Block Out: Fighting Homophobia**(Mahamati and Miller, 1994) are available. GALTAS(Gay and Lesbian Teachers and Students Association) based in Sydney can provide much

material and advice as well as speakers and workshop facilitators. Membership is open to all sexualities.

The above are also useful in providing resources for other studies. Texts on Australian gay, lesbian and bisexual history provide important factual data that previous history books tend to silence (Aldrich and Wotherspoon, 1992; Hodge, 1993; French, 1993; Aldrich, 1994). In relation to international history, there are history texts which uncover details omitted in mainstream (read: homophobic) history texts. For example, when studying the Nazi concentration camps of World War Two I would guide students to recognizing the omissions of gay and lesbian persecution in their texts and the augmentation by material from other texts. A recently published poignant short story on the experiences of a gay Jewish man losing his lover in a concentration camp would be an ideal narrative to accompany factual studies (Sharp, 1994). Likewise, studies of ancient societies such as ancient Rome and Greece, as well as pre-Western or pre-colonial societies such as the Native Americans, Australian Aboriginals and Hindu cultures provide diverse knowledge of other socio-cultural constructions of sexualities and concepts of "normal" and "abnormal".

Sometimes all that is required is a mention of some fact or detail to broaden students' minds to possibilities and realities that have been denied or silenced. In Economics, what else do we know about Maynard Keynes, the brilliant economic theorist? What do we know about other productive members of our society in the past and in the present: artists, writers, scientists, sporting heroes? Providing a homosexual or bisexual identity to persons not only diffuses the feeling of non-existence of non-heterosexual persons but allows for role-modelling, and a breaking of stereotypes of who would be a gay person (Rench, 1990).

Finally, when groundwork has been covered, inviting gay, lesbian, bisexual visitors to the school is useful or taking students to visit the Gay Counselling Service or other Community Organizations. One of the most successful events at our school in terms of anti-homophobia was inviting a lesbian in her early twenties to conduct workshops and chat to senior students. Out of twenty students who attended her session, only two had negative comments to make when asked to anonymously tell us how they had found the session. Most commented on how they had found it easy to talk to her about parents, jobs, study, being in love, fashions, gender roles, and her being a lesbian and what she often had to put up with. The two negative assessors both said they had not liked the way "she was so open and proud to be a lesbian". After the session, news travelled through the school fairly fast but we had obviously done enough work for we did not hear one negative comment from students. However, some staff were rather stressed at possible ramifications with parents. This did not eventuate. A few staff had found it highly inappropriate and unfortunately, we were asked not to undertake it again. But we had proven a point: how accepting students could be, how useful the exercise had been. In fact, Kerry had been so successful that future classes wanted to meet her and we clearly explained to students that the school had some homophobic members in the staff and so the concern with what homophobia does in terms of silencing, denial, discrimination was a useful discussion exercise in itself. Indeed, one student came to one of my seminars at the University of South Australia where I was lecturing in order to listen to Kerry present her workshop, with full parental approval. Again, I was placed in a position where I chose not to tell many staff members about this. My responsibility as an educator to my students outweighed my need to be "uncloseted" with my peers who may have hindered further work.

(iii) **Perception:** Shifting staff and student perceptions in relation to homosexuality means the "hidden curriculum" and the "school culture" must be addressed. Posters and displays in relation to equal opportunities and social justice can include anti-homophobia alongside anti-racism and anti-sexism. Public events like assemblies and publicity pieces such as newsletters are effective shifters of cultural mores and expectations via the use of language and content. Patrick and Sanders (1994) report on one school in London in which assemblies have "marked International Women's Day, Martin Luther King Jr's birthday, World AIDS Day, May Day, Nelson Mandela's release from prison and Lesbian and Gay Pride Week" (119).

Shifting the school culture in relation to the constructions of masculinity will automatically have repercussions and openings for work on anti-homophobia. Thus, broadening the extra-curricular activities to encourage student participation in areas other than football and soccer allowed for students to join the drama club, art club, writers' club. This would lead to some homophobic put-downs which gave us the opportunity to address them. For example, the first boys to join the drama club and put on a school performance were subjected to early homophobic intimidations on buses and

in the yard. With constant encouragement, and with the boys own anti-homophobic stances, and with the school publicly giving space to these boys alongside the football team and soccer team at assemblies and in the newsletters, the intimidation diminished. Instead, after the success of the first school production, students were queuing to join in. We knew we had gotten somewhere when we staged "A Midsummer Night's Dream" with our boys sewing and wearing fairy costumes and all sorts of cross-dressing and hardly a homophobic ripple was heard by any of us! We had done some groundwork, of course, in the study of all-male acting troupes in Shakespeare's time and the use of make-up by men at various points in history and in various cultures, again encouraging students to consider social attitudes as indicative of a particular society, place and time.

Teachers themselves are very influential in shifting perceptions. In his study of school counsellors and prospective teachers, Sears found that many often expressed the feeling that they should be "more proactive and supportive as professionals" but due to their own countervailing "high levels of personal prejudice, ignorance, and fear, the realities of their professional intervention and support were negligible" (1992:29). Experiences at my school and in discussions with teachers from other schools show that the teacher can act as facilitator fostering educational debate and as a provider of a context in which students can express individual and collective values and questions. Articulating one's own experiences and concerns with students were more effective than teachers who offered no opinions or information. Thus, I can remember how effective was a boys' school principal who invited me to speak to his Year Twelve Religious Education class and began by discussing how he had grown up thinking of homosexuality as taboo, had later had only had access to the vicious stereotypes, and so was still wanting to "understand and accept" and he would be sitting in the class alongside the students needing to learn. This presentation of his own positions cleared the air for some honest questions, debate and effective learning. At St. Paul's College, a few colleagues would talk to the boys about how they had been extremely homophobic at school and how it took years of adulthood and mixing with gay people before their prejudices were shifted. This honesty meant that students could see that they were not being targeted as "bad" for being homophobic, which could have resulted in rebellion against our teaching, and ignorant about homosexual issues.

Nevertheless, there is a fine line between teachers being honest about their own journeys around issues of sexuality, and making discriminatory or careless statements that adversely limit the space of students to participate and contribute to anti-homophobic learning and attitudinal shifts. Rogers (1994) cites a lesbian called Sue who remembers the following incident in a Religious Education class:

...someone asked if love between people of the same sex was wrong. The teacher answered that he did not want to condemn anyone but on the other hand 'a plug and a plug and a socket and a socket'. It was never mentioned again.

Rogers explains how detrimental this "brief, dismissive answer" was:

First, his failure to deal with the question of love illustrates the common-sense equation of lesbian and gay relationships with sex. Second, by using the plug/socket metaphor, he discounts any form of sex apart from heterosexual intercourse...an opportunity for a serious and useful discussion about relationships was lost there (1994:39).

Another participant remembers the only reference to homosexuality by a teacher in the context of a science lesson on reproduction:

...'there is a theory that homosexuality', and I perked up and listened, 'has something to do with the imbalance of hormones'. Then she moved on and I thought, 'Wow! I've been mentioned.' (40).

Do we allow homophobic comments from students? One of Rogers' participants remembers:

I cannot believe that none of the teachers heard the name-calling I was subjected to or the gossip about me, yet they did nothing to my knowledge and certainly offered no support (1994:42).

Do we make homophobic "jokes"? I often had students telling me how they "camped it up" for one male teacher just to hear him make homophobic comments about them and then get other students to laugh at him and call him a "poofster-basher". They liked the way he "made a fool of himself", pretending to be "so macho and a real man". Although I could not condone their behaviour, it frustrated me that this teacher could not see how his homophobia was creating havoc in his classroom with boys who were very aware of his prejudice. I later found out that one of the boys had indeed been gay and his friends had supported him by proving how silly homophobia was. His "camping it up" in class had also made him feel strong and able to resist homophobia. Ex-students who identified as

gay told me how they appreciated the teachers who did intervene. One ex-student related to me the situation where one teacher of non-English speaking background would “have fits” if any racist comments were made in class but was the first to make homophobic comments and enjoy homophobic jokes at the expense of boys “who couldn’t play football and soccer the way he wanted”.

How do we respond when our own sexuality is challenged or queried? Although it is still difficult for gay and lesbian teachers to be open at school, judging from the impact Jon’s posthumous ‘coming out’ had on my students who had been taught by him or who had older brothers who had been taught by him, I believe this form of role-modelling is very powerful and I hope more and more teachers will be able to “come out” in their schools. This may seem contradictory but I would encourage heterosexual teachers not to be so defensive about their own sexuality. Phrases like “I’m not gay myself, of course, ...” “I can’t imagine myself as gay...” “Thank God I’m not talking about myself here...” still imply a sense of marginality and fear of being implicated as gay. Heterosexual teachers have a significant role to play in downplaying their heterosexuality or not using it as a defense against homophobic intimidation. Living with ambiguity can be a very good learning experience for students. As Sanders and Burke write,

Whilst I have the option to state my heterosexuality, ...the most useful strategy is to respond to pupils’ questions by asking ‘What difference does it make?’ ...We find that this can engage pupils in thoughtful and provocative discussion. If heterosexual teachers simply confirm their sexuality, it can immediately close down discussion(1994:74).

Every now and again a student would state or intimate that I was a lesbian. I would neither deny or affirm. Instead, I’d make comments such as “And if I am, what does that mean to you?”, “Thank you, I think being seen as a lesbian is quite a compliment for lesbians have so much to teach straight women”, “I think you don’t have stereotypical views about lesbians! That’s great! Some guys would look at my long hair, my make up and clothes and never think I could be a lesbian!” I remember a senior student rushing up to me one lunchtime: “I’m going to punch that idiot’s face in! He just called you a dyke!” “What do you mean by acting so violent? Don’t put on that macho aggression, please, it doesn’t become you.” “But, but I want to do it for you, for your reputation! You’re not a dyke”. “But what’s wrong with being a dyke? I’m not offended. Let him think that. Now if he says it in a homophobic way in the classroom, I’ll deal with it. But I bet he won’t because he knows I don’t care. But I do care at the way you think you can solve problems by punching people in the face! If you need to protect my honour, go back and tell him that you don’t think being called gay or a lesbian is anything dishonourable to me” and I walked away.

As I hope the above has shown a whole school approach can be very powerful. From what we encourage in our teacher-directed classrooms to what we will tolerate in the yard to how we will respond to language, gestures, harassment, shifting boys’ school culture can be done.

Meeting Resistance

As I have shown throughout the above, there will be resistance from staff, students and parents, often framed in the accusations of “promoting homosexuality” and being “anti-heterosexual”. My experience and the experience of several teachers who have trialled this work is that most resistance seems to come from other staff members or from parents. I will present some useful strategies in dealing with resistance.

Personally, I faced little resistance. Speaking with parents, colleagues, ex-students who have now become close friends and students, they have provided me with several reasons which account for this. I had been at the school for a long time and gained credibility as a teacher and administrator with parents, staff and students. From the outset, in the early eighties, I had discussed homophobia so while the resistance was greater in my earlier years, I had gained experience through trial and error in dealing with it. I had written a book and thus made a very public stand about my beliefs and experiences, many of which involved another loved teacher in their school, and I had openly talked to students about my grief at losing one of my best friends. They respected this. Finally, many students saw me as rather radical anyway. I was a feminist, encouraged the boys to express their feelings and be open in my classes, dealt with any intimidation and harassment, often sided with them against school rules that I considered sexist or irrelevant, refused to toe particular Church lines without allowing for discussion and analysis, and encouraging the spiritual and social development of students rather than being a stickler for their attendance at masses or number of times they had been to

reconciliation. I also saw many of the boys or their older siblings outside of school as part of the Italian community or at nightclubs, movies, etc. I enjoyed similar music, genuinely took an interest in their haircuts, clothes, after shaves as well as their intellectual and other talents. I had a sense of humour and could turn a potentially nasty situation into something funny and yet revealing of their behaviour. Students often said I was strict, expected a lot from them, but cared about them as individuals. They said I wasn't against them. I was with them and for them as a teacher and a friend, especially in the senior years. I refused to use put-downs as a disciplinary technique. I could be trusted with confidential information about their personal lives or about their experiences with other teachers although they also knew I would not tolerate their rudeness to another teacher or student. They saw me as independent and determined, and doing my own thing even in relation to some school rules.

Over the years, it seems to me that teachers who have the most success in dealing with issues such as sexism and homophobia tend to be a little on the margins in the school, have developed strong relationships with students through their genuine concern and liking for them, and are not willing to resort to violence and verbal abuse as a way of "controlling" the students. They also present themselves not only as teachers but also as persons with a life outside the school, and strong values in relation to people and social justice. They are very open with students in relation to feelings and sensitivity as well as being firm in expectations and consequences for misbehaviour.

Resistance from parents and staff is greatly decreased and prevented if the emphasis in the work teachers do is on the broader themes such as social justice, marginality, prejudice and discrimination, and lesson plans and materials exemplify this integration through a variety of resources, methodologies and contents. Homophobia is then seen to be part of a greater picture that the school undertakes as part of its responsibility in the intellectual, personal and social development of students. This is where the incorporation of homophobia into school policies can play a crucial role

Resistance from students is greatly decreased if they do not feel as if they are being coerced to adopt a particular stance. Nor are they being harangued as naughty homophobes. Their homophobia is understood in the light of the types of messages they are getting from their so-called adult role models. Hence, a teacher is there to assist them in analysing where these ideas come from and are there other possibilities and realities that they are not being told about. After all, as independent beings, how can they make valid choices without being informed? Likewise, students are encouraged to clarify the difference between voicing a personal opinion or preference, and voicing a prejudice and oppressing others. Students must feel free to voice a personal opinion and be guided in examining where that opinion comes from and on what it is based, rather than being forced into silence so that significant issues never get aired, or be incited into further homophobic resistance as a way of rebelling against the teacher. I often used the following section from **Two Weeks With the Queen**: "He[Colin] knew that men sometimes fell in love with each other and that it was called being gay. The idea had never worried him that much, though he didn't think he ever would himself"(Gleitzman, 1989: 103). This quotation provides examples of language use and attitude construction in verbalising one's own position in terms of gay sexuality. Colin acknowledges the reality of gay relationships without adopting a condemnatory or persecutory stance toward others while simultaneously acknowledging that it is not a personal need, desire or inclination. Students must feel free to voice a personal opinion in a way that it does not become destructive and persecutory.

I also found that student resistances were increasingly met and responded to by other students. The following examples illustrate the power of anti-homophobic strategies within the classroom. As the environment is made a safe space to discuss issues and affirm alternative ways of knowing and being, students began to intervene into each other's homophobia and "come out", permanently situating themselves in an anti-homophobic position.

Student 1: But if a boy is brought up with two lesbians as parents, how's he going to develop into a real boy? You need a man around.

Student 2 (popular champion school soccer player) My mother raised me all by herself because my Dad left her when I was a baby. And I'm the school's best soccer player and I grew up with mostly women and that's why I reckon I'm also a nicer guy.

Student 1: I don't mind gays and lesbians but I don't think they should be parents. Their kids grow up weird.

Student 2: (a popular boy highly respected amongst peers) My auntie's a lesbian and she's raised my three cousins and some of yous hang out with them. Are

they weird?

Often, there was laughter and applause from others and the resident homophobes would sheepishly reconsider as their peers opened the closets in their own lives. And I would just sit on the desk and not even feel it was worth adding anything. The students were guiding each other.

Student resistance cannot be used to justify not incorporating anti-homophobia work into school curricula. Indeed, as Sanders and Burke(1994) state:

it seems the strongest reason in the world for starting such work. Would it be acceptable to say, "I'm not going to study oppression and racism in my school because the kids are too racist?"(1994:72).

Indeed, the shifts in attitudes toward race, gender and disability have only come about because resistance was met with persistence.

"Bridging the Chasm": Homophobia and Church Teachings.

Yes, there is a chasm although how wide varies from state to state in Australia, from school to school, from parish to parish. Ultimately, the chasm will not be crossed until we make the efforts to build that bridge. Sometimes, our efforts will collapse due to storms and other "environmental upheavals", sometimes our efforts will collapse because our own foundations were not laid carefully enough, and one day the bridge will become redundant as the chasm will heal. We may not be alive to see this. But neither was the ex-communicated radical Mary MacKillop alive to see herself beatified! Neither have many people who have worked for shifts in Church thinking when those shifts finally reaped the ultimate rewards.

In my work with many teachers and administrators of Catholic schools, I find many who wish to bridge this chasm but fear it will be themselves who fall into the depths below. Personally, I do not think this chasm is as wide as we tend to believe it is, or perhaps are cowered into inaction by believing it is by some homophobic Church leaders. Points of connection can be found from which to begin and develop anti-homophobic initiatives. The Catholic Church makes a distinction between a person's sexual orientation and the sexual activities they choose because of that orientation. As the Vatican stated in 1986:

It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech and action. It reveals a kind of disregard for others which endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law(Shinnick, 1991:5).

This is clearly an anti-homophobic statement that is useful in dealing with parental, staff and student resistance. There are others like it that I found useful :

The Vatican affirms ' every person has a fundamental identity: the creature of God, and by grace, his(sic) child and heir to eternal life'(Shinnick, 1991:5).

'the fundamental liberty which characterises the human person and gives him his (sic) dignity be recognised as belonging to the homosexual person as well'(Shinnick, 1991: 5).

Those people we have struggled to understand or whom we have rejected out of hand are none the less part of our Church. Our judgment of them has often forced them to abandon the Church...[such as]gay men and women, bisexual people and their spouses...Our response to such people has in the past been minimal at best.

('HIV/AIDS and Your Parish Community', 1992).

Compared with some of the things commonly done by human beings to one another in our modern world...sexual activity between homosexuals will scarcely seem of such grievousness...If it is condemned in the Bible, furthermore, so are a range of sexual and other practices, such as intercourse outside marriage and divorce, whose frequency and social acceptability are now often unquestioned.

(Norman, 1986)

Whatever a person's views on the sexual activities of a homosexual person, there is no justification for discrimination, persecution and verbal, emotional, psychological and physical violence. Indeed, our

Catholic schools are actually not carrying out their Vatican mission statements if they do not address homophobia. We may take issue with some of the other specificities in relation to homosexuality as presented by the Church recently but in order to begin to bridge the chasm, we need to focus on the points of connection and utilise what is there that serves a positive purpose.

I was and am often asked how I can reconcile Catholicism with my attitudes toward homosexuality. I believe it is easier and simpler than we think or have been led to think:

My God says we should love one another, not judge, or condemn. Who am I to deny someone else's opportunity for love? I think we label gay men and lesbians through fear and ignorance (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1991:9).

I do not overlook the fact that I am labeled as a 'wife and mother, socially appropriate and safe qualities', and this certainly makes it easier for me to "challenge the system" (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994a). But unless some of us do, the system will not change. I have seen strong positive responses to my work within Catholic schools and communities to doubt the effectiveness of diving in like a pebble, often anxious and anticipating the drowning, only to surface finding the ripples are spreading far and wide as people are being called to action in various forms and often to publicly voice their positions such as at one event with over five hundred Catholic participants and a well-respected eighty year-old nun stood up and announced:

After all my years in this patriarchal system, I have learned an important thing. That to be Catholic is not necessarily to be right." (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994f).

And at two other events, a nun, a priest and a Catholic school teacher stood up and publicly announced their homosexuality. The responses to these "coming outs" were applause and encouragement.

When the reality is that gay-bashers are coming from private boys' schools, when the reality is that boys in Catholic schools are being harassed for being or supposedly being gay, when the reality is that there are HIV-positive students and teachers in Catholic schools, and HIV-positive and/or young adults who left Catholic schools with low self-esteem and minimal sexuality and HIV/AIDS education, Catholic schools need to question where the Catholic ethos has disappeared to (Keenan, 1993).

"Lightening the Too-Hard Basket"

As with previous issues of racism and sexism, homophobia will see a gradual and persistent and growing number of teachers, educational institutions and policy-makers join in acknowledging that unless we resist and intervene, the denial of basic human rights to people who are not heterosexual will continue to be constructed as the norm well into the next generations (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994d; 1994e; 1994f). The too-hard basket is gradually lightened until eventually the too-hard basket will belong to those who are still resisting these issues. We must work so that it becomes hard to resist or avoid undertaking work on homophobia just as it has become very difficult to avoid one's pedagogic responsibilities in relation to other social issues.

As I hope this chapter has shown, undertaking this work met with its dilemmas but the rewards in the shifting perceptions of students, staff and parents far outweighed these. Sometimes I believe that we allow fear to prevent us from undertaking work that in reality would not be as difficult as it seems. Ultimately, the issue rests on our self-perception as educators, as responsible for paving the way with young adults for a better world.

To continue to ignore the relevance and importance of homosexuality in both the overt and cover school curriculum is to continue to allow lesbian, gay and bisexual students to suffer from silence, isolation, and verbal, emotional, psychological and physical violence to one's personal identity formation. It is to stand back and allow the lived realities of a marginalised group in our society to be excluded, distorted and trivialised, even while as educators we engage in the discourses of anti-discrimination, equal opportunity, pedagogic responsibility" (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1994e:125)

The more of us who take up this basket, the lighter it will get.

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