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**Title**

Out of the silence: Bridging the queer divide in Australian secondary English classrooms

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**Abstract**

This paper will present the findings of a research investigation into the use of Young Adult fiction in the English classroom to challenge homophobia and heterosexism.

The presumption of heterosexuality is very much encoded into the fabric of western society and is reinforced and validated in schools. Young people, struggling with their own sexual identity, face many obstacles in self-efficacy, especially if they believe that they may not be heterosexual. Homophobia remains as the last 'acceptable' prejudice of the twenty-first century. Laws still exist that discriminate against same-sex attracted people. Indeed, many people fail to recognise that there are any queer youth at all.

Imaginative literature opens up a world of possibilities for young adults. For same-sex attracted youth it can provide the opportunity to see authentic representations of aspects of their own lived experiences.

There is much misinformation about same-sex attraction and there are too few safe places for young people to look for answers to their questions about sexuality whether heterosexual, bisexual, transgender or homosexual.

The extent to which imaginative literature can have an impact on negative attitudes to same-sex attraction may perhaps be minimal. However, books can stimulate discussion where otherwise there may be silence; make the invisible, visible; offer hope and reinforce dreams. It can give a voice to those who may not be able to speak out loud.

**Keywords**

Young adult fiction, homophobia, heterosexism, imaginative literature, discrimination.

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## **Out of the silence: Bridging the queer divide in Australian secondary English classrooms**

### **Introduction**

Despite an increased societal acceptance of homosexuality over the past decade, a resounding silence frequently surrounds issues relating to same-sex attraction (SSA) in schools, perpetuating a hidden curriculum of heterosexuality, validating heteronormativity and reinforcing homophobia (Walton, 2005; Town, 2002; Misson, 1996). Indeed, on those occasions when this topic has been addressed at all in the classroom, some curriculum treatments of homosexuality may have in fact reinforced the marginalisation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (GLBTQ) identifying young people (Ellis & High, 2003 p214).

This presentation is a product of the research conducted for my PhD at the University of Sydney, which investigated young adult (YA) imaginative literature with themes of male same-sex attraction and same-sex attracted characters. The thesis proposed how imaginative literature could be used in the English classroom, as a component of a whole-school approach to combating homophobia and heterosexism, and therefore assist to promote inclusion of sexual diversity in schools. This would promote environments where queer students could feel safe and be able to be nurtured as effective learners. It is an attempt to bridge a cavernous divide that has existed for far too long.

Briefly, to contextualise the research I conducted, a sample of 39 YA novels, containing same-sex attracted male characters and/or themes of male same-sex attraction were critically examined; each being placed within its socio-historical context. The time-period covered began with the publication of John Donovan's landmark novel, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip* published in the United States in 1969 and concluded with two publications in 2007, one from the United States and one from Australia. Comparisons were made between texts published internationally and those published in Australia. Conclusions were then made about how these texts could be incorporated into the English classroom, in an effort to combat heterosexism and homophobia.

In his seminal text *Gaily Transfigured: Gay self-representation in American Literature*, David Bergman, argues that gay men have a different history and a distinct literary representation compared to lesbians (1991 p12). Employing Bergman's premise, my research focused on the literary representation and portrayal of same-sex attracted male characters in YA imaginative literature. The exclusion of lesbian and transgender characters and themes was not intended to diminish or minimise their worth or experience in any way, but rather reflected limitations of time and scope imposed by the nature of the research.

This presentation aims to provide some background to some of the issues relevant to SSAY in schools in Australia today, to inspire the creation of an inclusive learning environment for SSA students and to identify some of the texts that may be appropriate – or not – for students, regardless of their sexuality, which may in some small way combat heterosexism and homophobia and promote positive sexualities.

### **Is there indeed a divide to bridge?**

Homophobia and heterosexism remain the last bastions of socially acceptable discrimination. The silencing and exclusion of issues related to SSAY remains a significant issue in education in Australia today. Homophobic abuse and derogatory epithets are common in schools and largely go unchallenged by teachers. Despite government legislation and education department directives, many schools still foster an atmosphere that is hostile to SSAY; which ignores their needs; and fails to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment. While language is promoted that is inclusive of multicultural backgrounds, different religious faiths and dis/ability; epithets such as 'fag,' 'poof' and 'gay' pass without comment. There are still schools that fail to acknowledge that SSA students even exist. Some schools still ban same-sex partners from social events such as schools formals. Discrimination of SSAY, whether explicit or implicit, permeates most aspects of school life.

Statistics from a range of sources indicate the high levels of intolerance to homosexuality throughout society. Violence is something that many gay youth have had to learn to live with. A survey of 929 gay and lesbian people, titled *Enough is Enough*, conducted by the Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (VGLRL) in 2000, found that 26% of those surveyed, reported experiencing discrimination or abuse because of their homosexuality during their education. Harassment by teachers or other students was the most commonly cited type of incident. Incidents of school based harassment ranged from non-directive homophobic comments aired in the course of classroom activities to serious verbal or physical assaults sustained over a number of years. In some instances, participants reported that the abuse occurred with the full knowledge, and even the involvement of teachers. The invisibility of GLBTQ issues in the education curricula of schools was often raised in the quantitative data as a cause for concern. In addition to specific incidents of discrimination or abuse, 50% reported problems associated with the invisibility of their sexuality (VGLRL: 2000: 50).

*Writing Themselves In Again: 6 years on: the 2<sup>nd</sup> national report on the sexuality, health & well-being of same sex attracted young people in Australia* (2005) compiled by Lynne Hillier, Alina

Turner and Anne Mitchell from LaTrobe University in Victoria, is a follow-up to a similar study completed in 1998. A total of 1749 young people aged between 14 and 21, from all states and territories throughout Australia, including urban and rural locations, successfully completed the survey. One of the most concerning findings of the study was the impact of homophobic abuse on those young people who reported that they had thought about committing suicide or harming themselves in other ways, such as 'cutting'. Previous research tells us that SSAY are more likely to commit or attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers and that this is more likely to happen before they tell anyone about their sexuality (Nicholas & Howard, 2001; Remafedi, 1994). Additionally, Hillier et al's research demonstrates that suicide and self-harm occur more commonly in those SSAY who are experiencing abuse (2004 p46).

Unfortunately, many people fail to recognise that there are indeed any queer youth at all. The problems of homophobia and heterosexism, the related violence and the implications associated with it, is therefore not identified or challenged. As a result there is little support for young people, in school or in the wider community. Gerald Unks argues:

... they are children in a minority that society has chosen to regard as solely adult ... The most apparent parts of gay and lesbian culture – particularly bars and social clubs – are highly adult centered, and there are legal, social, financial, and political barriers that prevent any legitimate adolescent participation in them (1995 p4)

While progress is being made, further change is needed. Youths struggling with their homosexual identity, still face disturbingly high levels of depression, alienation, substance abuse and suicide (Baker, 2002; Lipkin, 1997; Moore & Rosenthal, 1993; Harris, 1990; Savin-Williams, 1990). Many of these youths do not receive any affirming or positive reinforcement about their homosexuality from their family, friends or schools. Homosexuality does not need to be glamorised to counteract homophobia and stigmatisation. Through honest information they will learn that there is more to be celebrated than to be feared (Lipkin, 1997). The use of imaginative literature with GLBTQ content in the English classroom can facilitate discussion about sexuality. These discussions can break the silence that so frequently surrounds issues of sexuality in schools, and challenge existing beliefs, stereotypes and misconceptions about homosexuality.

### **The situation in schools**

Adolescent sexuality, especially adolescent homosexuality, is often considered a difficult subject to discuss (Parsons, 1998). Unfortunately, the resulting silence perpetuates homophobia, fuelling hatred, fear and violence against homosexuals (Boulden, 1998). Too frequently, adolescents cannot access accurate information about same-sex attraction or find positive role models. Portrayals of gay men in the media and popular culture are often stereotyped or conservative and do not adequately present the diversity of the lived

experiences of gay men. Despite the increased visibility of homosexuality in western societies, same-sex attraction is often viewed as being exceptional, exotic or just different.

Schools provide the perfect arena for the topics related to SSA to be addressed in a positive and open forum, where young people can discuss concerns, relevant issues and pose questions, and preconceived opinions can be challenged. Van De Ven (1996) examined the effectiveness of 'short courses' in combating homophobia and heterosexism in schools. He argues that to effectively implement an 'inclusive' environment in schools, a multi-faceted approach is required. This would include comprehensive training for teachers to raise empathy and understanding of GLBTQ issues, an increased awareness of educational personnel about homosexuality, the use of anti-homophobia kits, unambiguous anti-discrimination policies and the cross curricula 'inclusion' of GLBTQ issues in lesson content, to provide a whole school approach to combat homophobia and heterosexism.

There is still reluctance on the part of teachers to include GLBTQ issues in their classroom curriculum, and there is a common belief that including GLBTQ content in class will draw unnecessary and often unwanted attention to GLBTQ students. Those teachers that identify as same-sex attracted are often, quite understandably, reluctant to expose themselves to potential homophobic abuse from students, and heterosexual teachers are usually unwilling to be perceived to be homosexual. For many teachers, whether heterosexual or homosexual, simply introducing issues related to same-sex attraction can be career suicide, especially where there is a religious agenda in the school. Until legislation is in place regarding same-sex attraction, that protects all staff and students in all schools, this situation will continue.

The current absence from the curriculum of any valid information about same-sex attraction in most schools fails all students and staff. Heterosexual students are given no reason to challenge preconceived ideas about homosexuality and generally, therefore, have no reason not to hate them; homosexual students are not given any reason not to hate themselves. Teachers, in this instance have failed their students markedly. Gerald Unks contends:

Within the typical secondary school curriculum, homosexuals do not exist. They are "nonpersons" in the finest Stalinist sense. They have fought no battles, held no offices, explored nowhere, written no literature, built nothing, invented nothing, and solved no equations. Ironically, they were neither Greeks nor Romans, and they did not write poetry, compose music, paint, or sculpt. The lesson to the heterosexual student is abundantly clear: homosexuals do nothing of consequence. To the homosexual student, the message has even greater power: no

one who has ever felt as you do has done anything worth mentioning (1995 p5).

Frequently, while teachers and schools as a community acknowledge the special needs of GLBTQ youth, they are not prepared to openly adopt policies to actively discourage homophobia and heterosexism. They are willing to give resources to support these students, but for religious and cultural reasons, will not seek to openly challenge the status quo and therefore support homosexuality. Homosexuality is once again silenced and forced to remain in the private sphere. Mayo argues that this is a case of “‘love the sinner, hate the sin,’ a position that does little to convince people that they are respected” (2002 p86).

Controversy is usually not far away from GLBTQ YA issues. In his study *Bullying and Homophobia in Canadian Schools*, Gerald Walton (2005:94) suggests that the mere discussion of GLBTQ issues in schools or the inclusion of homophobia in anti-bullying programs causes unease in many school communities. Walton argues that addressing GLBTQ issues in schools creates battles of power and ideology. General strategies to reduce and prevent violence and bullying in schools are welcomed by most school communities. Media representations of school violence certainly encourage support for these initiatives, often intimating that not enough is being done by schools and teachers to protect students. Paradoxically, the media similarly promotes fear about discussions of sexual diversity, the link between homophobia and school violence often being lost.

### **The problem with subject English**

Sexuality is a poignant topic for young people and warrants attention and space for dialogue in the classroom. Sexuality education is needed in all areas of the curriculum where “educative discussion might occur” (Brunner, 1992 p239), especially the English curriculum (Brunner, 1992; Harris, 1990). Misson (1995) suggests that approaching the topic of homosexuality in the English classroom, however, is not without its problems, especially for male students.

English is seen as a feminised subject ... there is a belief that the subject is trying to rob boys of their (heterosexual) masculinity, and so any attempt to develop sensitivity towards homosexuality will be undermined by suspicion of the motives, and by deep-seated resistance based on the rejection of English-induced sensitivity as unmasculine (Misson, 1995 p125).

The English teacher faces an entrenched barrier of resistance from many students when trying to introduce texts with gay characters or homosexual themes into the classroom. Determination and perseverance are required to challenge the homophobic and heterosexist attitudes that

have dominated western society for so long and that are embedded in the culture of schools. Misson encourages teachers to persist:

However, things can be done, because things have to be done. Indeed ... the very problems at times suggest solutions ... Classroom work ... may seem of miniscule value, compared with the huge weight of heterosexism and homophobia in the community, but everything that we can do, no matter how limited counts. The gains are small but incremental. Gains made in the classroom are part of larger gains in society through work being done, usually by other people, in different arenas at different levels. Nothing is achieved only in the classroom, it's true, but few social changes are achieved, at least effectively, without work in the classroom supporting it (Misson, 1995 pp125 – 128).

Simon Harris is optimistic about the value of teaching against heterosexism and homophobia in the English classroom:

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 practices should be rooted. Clearly this will not mean that 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 (1990 p39).

One way that teachers of English can contribute to ensuring that the voices of gay students are heard in the classroom, is through the incorporation of texts that include GLBTQ characters and themes in lessons and units of work and to promote open and honest discussion about sexuality and ways of being. The characters in GLBTQ YA novels provide potential role models for students and open 'other' possible worlds, which may not have been previously considered or even thought possible. While it could be argued that the use of texts with SSA characters and themes can only make a small impact on the entrenched homophobia and heterosexism that exists in schools (and the wider community), it is a starting point. If teachers across the curriculum use similar strategies in their classrooms, the impact may be greater. What is important is that GLBTQ youth are given a voice, are able to read or see representations of their own lived experiences, and that homophobia and heterosexism are challenged, no matter how limited that combat may be perceived to be.

## **What can we do?**

A growing body of literature exists which argues the importance of government and school policies to combat homophobia and heterosexism in schools, to ensure that they are safe and positive environments for GLBTQ youth (MacGillivray, 2004; Kissen, 2002; Sears, 2002; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001; Hickson, 1995; Harbeck, 1992). Anti-Discrimination laws vary throughout Australia as this is legislated on a state by state (or Territory) basis. Each Australian state and territory has also been responsible for legislating its' own educational policies and developing its' own curriculum and syllabus documents, discussions of a national curriculum aside.

### **Language:**

Fletcher and Russell, in their study of the incorporation of sexual orientation into a family studies course at the tertiary level, suggest that students need to be provided with a basic vocabulary to discuss the life experiences of same-sex attracted individuals (2001). The provision of an appropriate vocabulary enables students with a language through which they can phrase questions and comments; therefore increasing the clarity of any class discussions.

Secondary students are familiar with many of the derogatory epithets associated with same-sex attraction, but are often ignorant of the appropriate language to use. Students need to be made aware of the distinctions between the use of words which the dominant culture regard as pejorative, but which have been re-appropriated by GLBTQ people; this includes words such as 'queer' and 'gay', which can still be interpreted as insults (Fletcher & Russell, 2001).

Young people need to be provided with tools to challenge homophobic language; such as cultural awareness about same-sex attraction and appropriate language to use in reference to same-sex attraction. Epithets such as 'fag', when directed at students are very loaded terms. Pascoe argues that these epithets "may or may not have explicit sexual meanings", but they always have gendered meanings (2007). She suggests that the boys she interviewed for her study on masculinity and sexuality at high school knew that they weren't supposed to call same-sex attracted boys fags "because that was mean". She continues to suggest that this "has been the limited success of the mainstream gay rights movement" (2007 p82). She intimates that some of the boys she interviewed for her research had interpreted the messages that they had received through the media to be that gay men can be masculine if they want to. Pascoe argues that:

Instead of challenging gender inequality, this particular discourse of gay rights has reinscribed it. Thus we need to begin to think how gay men may be in the unique position to challenge gendered as well as sexual norms (2007 pp82-83).

Through the use of appropriate language, students can begin the journey to understanding alternate ways to be male, without necessarily conforming to traditional prescriptions of masculinity. The English classroom is the ideal arena to introduce this language. Pallotta-Chiarolli argues that while schools can be institutions of intense homophobia and heterosexism, they can also be a catalyst for “anti-discriminatory responses to marginalisation” (1999 p183). Framing the language for any discourse about sexuality and reinforcing equity and affirming positive diversity, is similar to what is done to combat racism. Inappropriate comments directed at race, religion, ethnicity or social class are regarded as socially unacceptable; comments about sexuality should be viewed in the same manner (Daniel, 2007; Fletcher & Russell, 2001).

The language of social relationships is highly gendered and reflects the heterosexist nature of society, excluding same-sex attracted individuals. Terms such as *boyfriend*, *girlfriend*, *mother and father*, *husband and wife*, carry certain assumptions and reinforce heteronormativity. The language of the classroom should always be inclusive. Non-gender-specific terms that more than adequately replace these other ‘loaded’ terms include significant other, spouse, partner and parent.

## **Popular Culture**

A seminal coming-out film *Beautiful Thing* (1996), produced in Britain, magnificently tells the story of two male teenagers, Jamie and Ste, who live in a London housing estate. They fall in love and in a very moving and often funny sequence of events come-out to *everybody!* Originally written and performed as a play, this film is one of the first positive cinematic representations of young same-sex attracted love and provides a turning point for later representations of SSAY.

The opening decade of the twenty-first century has seen the proliferation of same-sex attraction being portrayed in film, on television and represented in magazines. Films such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Capote* (2005) were mainstream Hollywood productions, including same-sex attracted characters that were received to critical acclaim. The release in 2006 of *Another Gay Movie*, was a giant leap forward in the recognition of teenage same-sex attraction. The movie is a spoof of the traditional teenage-sex-romp movies that became so popular in the

1980s and 1990s such as *Porky's* and *American Pie*. In the film, four queer, high school graduates make a pact to lose their anal virginity by the end of the summer. Through a series of sexual misadventures experienced by the characters, the movie parodies everything from other movies to gay culture.

A growing genre of made-for-television animation, with queer content has also emerged in the twenty-first century, in the tradition of *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. *Queer Duck* and *Rick and Steve* present same-sex attracted characters that challenge stereotypes of homosexuals and add a refreshing sense of humour to GLBTQ issues. *Queer Duck*, follows the life and experiences of a gay anthropomorphic duck; Queer Duck, his boyfriend Openly-Gator and their friends, Bi-Polar Bear and Oscar Wilde-cat. It began in 2002 as a series of 20, three minute episodes and was developed into a film, *Queer Duck – The Movie* in 2006. *Rick and Steve: The Happiest Gay Couple in All the World*, is a stop motion animated sitcom from Canada. It covers a variety of themes relevant to queer couples in contemporary society. It was first aired on America's *Logo* channel in 2007 and currently screens on cable television in Australia. Given the commercial success of animated sitcoms, such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, it is not surprising that GLBTQ content is now being included in similar animations. This also serves to introduce queer issues to a new audience in a different medium, an audience that may not necessarily be reading literary fiction.

## **YA Literature**

Young adult publishing underwent enormous growth in the 1990s and this has continued into the twenty-first century. The number of novels with gay male characters and themes relating to male homosexuality has mirrored this growth. The titles that have emerged in this new century include many innovative techniques, themes, narrative strategies and have begun to pose plots that are much more positive, becoming, in many ways a more integrated part of the wider body of YA literature.

Increasingly, novels published since the beginning of the twentieth century, have departed from the 'problem novel' model made popular in the 1970s. Characterisation, complex structures and ambiguity are common features of the novels published in this period. This is in many ways an acknowledgment of the increasing sophistication of adolescent readers.

An increase in the number of texts that employ non-traditional narrative techniques has also emerged, developing the strategy of earlier writers such as Aidan Chambers (1982) *Dance On My Grave*. Chambers use of narrative, news articles, and other techniques, has pioneered this strategy. In his *The Reading Environment* (1991) Aidan Chambers discusses the importance of the narrative structure in imaginative literature:

... as much as anything I enjoy the drama of narrative – the characters talking in voices of their own, the narrator telling what is happening, the pace and colour of the text ... and I take particular pleasure in the formal techniques of narrative, to the extent that I'm often more interested in how a story is told than I am in its content (Chambers, 1991 p88).

Two recent examples of GLBTQ imaginative literature with innovative narrative techniques come from Australia; Doug MacLeod's (2003) *Tumble Turn* and Alasdair Duncan's (2003) *Sushi Central*. *Tumble Turn* (MacLeod, 2003) takes the form of a series of email letters, combined with first person narrative, to tell the story of Dominic Dear and his coming of age journey. *Sushi Central* (Duncan, 2003), employs a series of narrative techniques including (but not limited to) narrative, songs, snippets of conversations, reflections and film to convey the disturbing and decidedly dark story of Calvin.

A constant theme of YA fiction, that began with the earliest publications of YA novels with gay male characters and themes and which continues into the twenty-first century is that of the anguish and indecision of coming to terms with one's sexuality and coming out. This perhaps reflects how little has changed for many young people, where heterosexism and homophobia are still part of daily life, in school, at home, from the images presented by the media and in overall societal attitudes. Homophobic violence is also a theme that persists in YA fiction.

There have been, however, some promising developments in YA imaginative literature with GLBTQ content. Each year of the twenty-first century has seen the publication of an average of 10 to 12 young adult novels with GLBTQ content published in English in the United States, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. This is a remarkable development given that there were only approximately 140 novels of this genre published in the entire twentieth century. The content of these novels is also beginning to depart from previous publications. There are now an increasing number of happy endings in imaginative literature with GLBTQ content published for a YA audience. Brent Hartinger's (2003) *Geography Club* ends with the previously closeted characters publicly attending a Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance meeting at the school. David Levithan's (2003) *Boy Meets Boy* is set in a gaytopia, where sexuality is not an issue, providing one of the first feel good novels for young GLBTQ people.

Alex Sanchez, the writer of a series of YA novels with GLBTQ content, has done much to fill the cavernous gaps that have hitherto existed in the genre. Although encyclopaedic in proportion at times, Sanchez explores a vast array of GLBTQ issues in his novels, ranging from stereotyping to homophobia and AIDS. However, his novels include sympathetic characters, realistic plots and creative structures. Sanchez's novels include *Rainbow Boys* (2001), *Rainbow High* (2003), *Rainbow Road* (2007), *So Hard to Say* (2006), *Getting It* (2007) and *The God Box* (2007).

Sexual identity and the occasional sexually ambiguous character have become themes that occur in a few of the titles published in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Aidan Chambers (2002) *Postcards From No Man's Land*, follows the protagonist, Jacob, who travels to The Netherlands, where he is to represent his family at a ceremony to honour British soldiers (including his late grandfather), who died in a Dutch village during World War II. Jacob's ideas about love are expanded and challenged by his visit to Amsterdam. He meets and is attracted to, an androgynous boy named Ton, who also happens to be the occasional lover of Jacob's Dutch cousin Daan (who is also in a relationship with a girl named Simone). Daan tells a shocked Jacob:

There are no rules about love ... Who you love. How many you can love ... All the stuff about gender. Male, female, queer, bi, feminist, new man, whatever – it's meaningless. We're beyond that now (Chambers, 2002 pp277-288).

By the end of the novel, Jacob has become interested in a Dutch girl named Hillie, although, there remains a suggestion that he is still attracted to Ton. This novel remains one of the most sophisticated and complex treatments of human sexuality, incorporating one of the most highly developed literary depictions of sexuality in a YA novel.

Sexual and gender ambiguity are also the subject of other YA literature in the early twenty-first century, including Glen Huser's (2003) *Stiches*, which presents the gender-bending story of Travis, who loves sewing. In Julie Anne Peter's (2004) *Luna*, one of the first transgender characters in YA fiction is presented. The new century then can be seen as a time of innovation and development for YA fiction with the promise that more exciting and original publications are to follow.

The innovations and increased quantity and quality of the YA literature with GLBTQ content being published in the early twenty-first century reflects the shifts in societal attitudes to same-sex attraction that are occurring throughout the western world. There is now greater visibility of GLBTQ people in the media and public life; there have been fundamental legislative changes both in Australia and internationally; queer people are becoming increasingly visible and conscious of their rights and there are a wider range of organisations providing accurate information about same-sex attraction, homophobia and discrimination. However, with increased visibility there has also been an increase in reported discrimination and violence against GLBTQ people (Hillier, Turner & Mitchell, 2005).

The increased quality, quantity and range of YA novels with GLBTQ content can also be seen as reflecting the changing direction of the calls for true equality and legislated human rights for GLBTQ people throughout the world. Tahmindjis argues that tolerance of sexuality, and in particular of queer sexualities, has largely been ignored in human rights. *The Universal*

*Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), which was a revolutionary document for its time, represents the social, political and legal values of the late 1940s, and not surprisingly does not protect the rights of people on the basis of their sexuality. However, the beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed calls to adapt this Declaration. Throughout the western world, countries which once had laws that punished homosexuality, have now legalised gay 'marriage' or instituted same-sex partnership registers. A plethora of laws have been changed to prevent discrimination on the grounds of sexual preference. While there is a long way to go to prevent discrimination, the climate of change for GLBTQ people is promising. It is within this climate that YA novels with GLBTQ content have become increasingly positive and encouraging.

## **Not Without Controversy**

Controversy is usually not far away from GLBTQ YA issues. In his study *Bullying and Homophobia in Canadian Schools*, Gerald Walton (2005) suggests that the mere discussion of GLBTQ issues in schools or the inclusion of homophobia in anti-bullying programs causes unease in many school communities. Walton argues that addressing GLBTQ issues in schools creates battles of power and ideology. General strategies to reduce and prevent violence and bullying in schools are welcomed by most school communities. Media representations of school violence certainly encourage support for these initiatives, often intimating that not enough is being done by schools and teachers to protect students. Paradoxically, the media similarly promotes fear about discussions of sexual diversity, the link between homophobia and school violence often being lost.

*The Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005, contained an article with the headline 'School Sex Furore', the lead paragraph read: "Students as young as 14 have been asked at school to place themselves in an imaginary world dominated by homosexuals and lesbians". It continued to explain how "The controversial lesson has been branded as "brainwashing and social engineering" by education experts" (McDougall, *The Daily Telegraph*, 06/06/2005). This article sensationalises a classroom lesson that asks heterosexual students to empathise with what GLBTQ students experience every day of their lives. In an interesting twist to the article, the NSW Minister for Education, Carmel Tebbutt, hastily added that the lessons would be banned immediately. The homophobia and heterosexism evident in the article illustrates to some extent the extent of the problem in Australia. This, however, is only one example of the suppression of material with GLBTQ content.

The President of the Secondary Principals Council, Chris Bonner, sent a letter to the Minister, which said in part:

I shall certainly not be encouraging principals to ban use of such teaching strategies in their schools. Instead the task of principals is

now to convince their teachers not to walk away from using teaching and learning materials which challenge students to understand the world of others and in the process reduce discrimination, bullying and homophobia (cited on NSW Teachers Federation website written by Frank Barnes)

In America, Author Nancy Garden described how her novel *Annie on My Mind* (1982), which has an adolescent lesbian protagonist, was burned on the steps of the Kansas City School District offices, 11 years after it was published. It was “doused with gasoline, dropped into a metal bucket, and set on fire. Subsequently, officials in several school districts removed copies of *Annie* from their libraries, where it had been for many years”. She adds that “recently in Barron, Wisconsin, something similar happened. The school superintendent and school board there between them removed four gay YA books from the high school library” (Garden, 2000). In response to her outrage at these events Nancy Garden wrote another YA novel (1999) *The Year They Burned The Books*, which focuses on the controversy that erupts over a new health education curriculum supported by a small town high school newspaper. The controversy arises because the curriculum includes material about condoms, AIDS and homosexuality. The novel also examines the increased homophobia as the controversy escalates.

Homophobia and violence are legitimised and supported through cultural constructs such as male privilege, religious fundamentalism, and nationalism. The media, in the form of newspapers, film, television and the internet reinforce intimidation, aggression, overt masculinity, vengeance and conformity. Similar to racism and sexism, homophobia is supported (not necessarily explicitly) by the larger social realms of politics, public policy, legal structures, and institutional processes (Walton, 2005). The resistance to the inclusion of GLBTQ issues in schools and the banning of books with GLBTQ content are manifestations of this preservation of heterosexual and masculine privilege. As teachers, we must challenge an unequal and discriminatory status quo - to bridge the queer divide.

## **Conclusions**

Can we bridge the divide that all too frequently marginalises and stigmatises GLBTQ youth? I suggest that the answer is a resounding yes. Let us build bridges in our classrooms, whether they are primary, secondary or tertiary. Let teachers lead by example – challenge homophobic epithets, provide appropriate language, incorporate queer inclusive material into the classroom, discuss sexuality, challenge the status quo, use Queer Theory as an alternative reading to Shakespeare, Stoppard or dare I suggest it - Jane Austen. Question heteronormativity, rally against discrimination and most certainly do not tolerate harassment or derogatory epithets. Build bridges that will challenge the final bastion of legitimate discrimination; build bridges that affirm identities and that will potentially save lives.

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