

# Breaking a spell of silence

## The Tasmanian evaluation of the 2006 Pride & Prejudice program

An evaluation of the Pride & Prejudice program,<sup>1</sup> which ran in three Tasmanian schools in 2006, suggests that students who completed the program had more positive attitudes towards gay men and lesbians. This finding parallels an earlier evaluation of the same anti-homophobia program undertaken in Victoria.

The evaluation leads to a discussion about the deeper and often hidden purposes of schooling, and about the discursive formations of heteronormativity, which provide a heterosexist basis for 'curriculum'. Issues related to school systems becoming more democratic and tolerant are also identified.

by  
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**M**any students, teachers, principals and school administrators are aware of the need to address issues of homophobia and associated bullying within and beyond their classrooms. The Pride & Prejudice program (Witthaus 2006) was designed to support teachers to address these issues. It was developed by Deakin University and the City of Greater Geelong, and funded through VicHealth's Rural Sexual Diversity Grant Scheme.

An evaluation of the program in Victoria (Higgins, King & Witthaus 2001) indicated that homophobic attitudes of students lessened after they undertook the program. The Tasmanian Pride & Prejudice program used the same instruments to gather data and a similar methodology to those developed for the Victorian trial.

The Pride & Prejudice program explores the notions of sexual diversity and homophobia with students in a secondary school context. The program attempts to explore and challenge rather than change student attitudes and beliefs. It involves the provision of accurate information and the opportunity for all viewpoints to be aired safely in a classroom setting.

In 2006, two government high schools and a Catholic independent school in Tasmania implemented the Pride & Prejudice program. The program was offered to Year 8 and 9 students and ran from August to early September. The program was funded by the Tasmanian Community Fund.

Pride & Prejudice is not a sex education or sexual health program. The context of delivery of this education package, which focuses entirely on exploring social differences, discrimination, gender issues and how these relate to gay and lesbian people, differs from that of previous sexual diversity and homophobia actions/programs. The program provides opportunities for dialogue with gay men and lesbians, and aims to foster a safe, supportive and nurturing environment where students can explore issues of sexual diversity and homophobia with their peers.

As Higgins, King & Witthaus (2001, p.239) report, "traditionally Australian school-based initiatives on sexuality and homophobia have tended to be focused on either anti-violence or disease prevention and have not always been delivered by an openly gay and/or lesbian facilitator ... Although the impact of a same-sex-attracted facilitator in these programs has not been evaluated, the impact of an openly gay instructor on the experience of first-year psychology students in the US was positive".

The Pride & Prejudice program is made up of six 45–55 minute whole-class sessions, which may be tailored to the needs of a particular school and/or class. The program is interactive and challenging, providing students with an avenue to discuss sensitive issues and topics. The package includes a video, an outline of each session with the aims, the key skills required to undertake the session, and optional homework.

Working It Out Inc.<sup>2</sup> was the agency responsible for supporting Tasmanian teachers to undertake the Pride & Prejudice program in each school in partnership with a trained presenter.

## Processes of evaluation

The Tasmanian Department of Education commissioned the University of Tasmania (Faculty of Education) to undertake a formal evaluation of the effects of the Pride & Prejudice program on students' attitudes towards gay men and lesbians.

Three key questions were developed beneath this aim:

- How, if at all, did taking part in the program change the way students see themselves, gays

and lesbians, and others who might be different from them?

- How might the program be improved? and
- How did students find taking part in the program?

The collected data also allowed some tentative responses to be made to the following questions:

- Is homophobia linked to other prejudices, such as racism?
- How might self-esteem be related to homophobia?
- How might social conformity be linked to homophobia? and
- Are sex roles related to homophobia?

## The cohort of students

Sixty-one students participated in the Pride & Prejudice program across the three schools. They were aged between 13 and 16, with 41 students aged 14 to 15. Evaluation of the program in Tasmania was built upon an analysis of a subset of 43 students who attended at least four of the sessions and who completed both the pre- and post-program Homosexuality Attitudes Scale (HAS modified). Seven of these students were male and 36 female. Fifteen students, or 24.6% of students who began the Pride & Prejudice program, did not complete it.

The Catholic independent school only offered female students participation in the 2006 Pride & Prejudice program because classes in health and sexuality at the school are offered to same sex cohorts. The school administration believed that this gender separation allowed for more open discussion in the classes and supported the girls in particular to participate. The school planned to offer male students participation in the Pride & Prejudice program in 2007. As in the Victorian trial, the Tasmanian trial involved assessment of students' attitudes to gay men and lesbians and their social connectedness, self-esteem, attitudes to race, and beliefs about gender roles before and after their participation in the program.

The following scales/surveys, based on those used in the Victorian trial, were used in the Tasmanian trial:

- Modern Racism Scale (modified)
- Social Interaction Questionnaire

Male students' attitudes to gay men were significantly less homophobic after the program, but male students' attitudes to lesbian women were unchanged.

- Homosexuality Attitudes Scale (HAS modified)
- Australian Sex Role Questionnaire
- Marlowe-Crowne Social Disability Scale, and the
- Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale.

Modifications were made to some of the items to suit the Australian context. Students also completed two questionnaires about the content and teaching of the program. The data were collected one week before the Pride & Prejudice program started and again after the program had finished. The instruments were completed anonymously and identified with a student self-generated code that enabled matching of pre- and post-test sets of responses while ensuring student confidentiality.

## Statistical analysis

### Coding and analysis of data

Data for all surveys were recorded in an MS-ACCESS database. The surveys were then reverse or forward coded in MS-EXCEL to generate homophobia scales such that a higher score indicated a more homophobic attitude. For example, on the HAS (modified), the item "The growing number of male homosexuals indicates a decline in Australian morals" was reverse coded to generate a higher value for a more homophobic response. Half (9) of the items included for analysis addressed attitudes to gay men, and other half addressed attitudes to lesbian women.

The data from the other scales and surveys used in the evaluation were treated similarly.<sup>3</sup> Individual students' responses to all items within a scale/survey were then added to generate an individual student's global score. Paired t-tests allowed comparison of student pre- and post-test responses. A one-tailed test was used to test, against the null hypothesis, the alternative hypothesis "That the Pride & Prejudice program led to a reduction in homophobia among students".

### Findings of the Tasmanian 2006 evaluation

As the analysis and findings were based on data from 43 students, universal claims have not been made in relation to the findings. However, the

results assume an extra trustworthiness as they parallel those of the earlier Victorian trial.

Both the Tasmanian and Victorian evaluations found that "attitudes held toward gay men and lesbians were significantly more positive after the program" (Higgins, King & Witthaus 2001, p.238). And both evaluations concluded that, "school-based programs delivered in classes in which students are given the opportunity to explore their attitudes toward lesbian and gay men may be a useful part of a strategy to reduce homophobia" (Higgins, King & Witthaus 2001, p.238).

Overall, the individuals' scores on the pre- and post-test HAS (modified) revealed that the student group was not strongly homophobic, nor were they less sympathetic to gay men and lesbians than the students in the Victorian study.

### Attitudes towards gay men and lesbians

After comparing HAS (modified) global pre- and post-test scores, it can be claimed that, overall, students involved in the Pride & Prejudice program positively changed their attitudes towards gay men and lesbians.

There was more positive change in attitude towards gay men than towards lesbians, however, the change in attitude towards gay men may have been stronger than the change related to lesbian women because the attitude of the cohort (in general) was initially less sympathetic towards gay men. On completion of the program, students' attitudes to both gay men and lesbian women were very similar.

Male students' attitudes to gay men were significantly less homophobic after the program, but male students' attitudes to lesbian women were unchanged. Female students' attitudes to *both* gay men and lesbian women were significantly less homophobic after the program.

All schools involved in the program reported a decrease in homophobia, but the decrease was only significant, in a statistical sense, at the Catholic school. The all-female group at this school may have been more receptive or sympathetic to the program.

Individual scores on the pre- and post-program HAS (modified) revealed that some students had a negative change in attitude. The criterion for a significantly negative change in attitude was an increase in the mean score of

0.222. This is equivalent to a student recording a more negative response on two, or more items, on the post-program HAS (modified). Of the 43 students, four (9.3%) had more negative attitudes to *both* gay men and lesbian women after the program, two (4.6%) had an increased negative attitude to gay men only, and a further three (7%) had an increased negative change in attitude to lesbian women.

It is not clear what factors may have influenced this finding. The cohort of students is small, some students may have responded negatively to the post-survey for reasons unrelated to the Pride & Prejudice program, or students may have been more candid at the completion of the program.

### Student evaluation of the Pride & Prejudice program

All the students (45) who completed the course evaluation survey are included in the analysis. Most students (91%) evaluated the course positively. Only one student (2.2% of the cohort) evaluated the course negatively. Students found the program enjoyable (96%), and thought that the content was interesting (96%). The presenters of the program were assessed favourably, with most of the student group (89%) agreeing, or strongly agreeing, that the presenters “did a good job”. Students found the program helpful (89%), and almost all (87%) would recommend Pride & Prejudice to other students.

### Self-esteem, racism & homophobia

The Tasmanian trial found no correlation between self-esteem and homophobia.

The trial found a weak positive correlation between homophobia and racism using the post-HAS scale data. One might speculate on the link between racism and the post- but *not* the pre-HAS scale.

### Sex roles, social interaction and homophobia

There was not a strong correlation between the 43 students’ scores on the social desirability scale and their student pre-program HAS (modified) scores. There are no statistically significant links between any item within the sex-role scale or the Children’s Social Interaction scale and whether or not students completed the program.

### Students who did not complete the program

Data from one of the 15 students who did not complete the program was excluded from statistical analysis because he or she did not provide any useable information. Of the remainder, eight were male. There were no statistically significant differences between the pre-program HAS (modified) scores of students who did or did not complete the program. Overall, analysis of the HAS (modified) scores of students who did not complete the program suggests that they were not homophobic.

An evaluation using a two-tailed t-test revealed the following intriguing, but not statistically significant, information:

1. The global pre-HAS (modified) scores provided some evidence that the students who withdrew were more homophobic than the students who went on to complete the program.
2. There was strong evidence that the male students who withdrew were less homophobic towards gay men than the male students who went on to complete the course. This evidence was almost statistically significant.

It is important to question why a disproportionate number of boys did not complete the program. It might be assumed that some boys left the program because it was too challenging of their attitudes. The data analysis suggests that this was not so; the boys who left the program were (in general) less homophobic initially than their peers who stayed in the program. Comments from the program facilitators suggest that some of the males who left the program did so because they were gay, and perhaps felt no need to be involved. This assertion cannot be tested through the data collected for this trial.

### Summary of findings

- 1) The Pride & Prejudice program positively affected students’ attitudes towards gay men and lesbians.
- 2) In general, students’ attitudes towards gay men improved more than their attitudes towards lesbians.
- 3) Twenty-five per cent of students who registered to begin the Pride & Prejudice program did not complete it.

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- 4) Some students' attitudes towards gay men and lesbians did not change.
- 5) A small number of students held more negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians after engagement with the program.
- 6) The students involved in the program assessed both the program and the teaching of it as being of a high level.
- 7) Self-esteem was not correlated with homophobia.
- 8) Racism was not correlated with homophobia.

## Discussion

### Cultural complexities

Much research in this field suggests that one of the most significant sites of homophobia is the school (Pinar 2003; Sumara & Davis 1999; van der Ven 1996). Gay and lesbian youth rarely hear or see positive depictions of their sexuality in school or within the curriculum, nor positive role models at school. Research into the New South Wales Personal Development, Health and Physical Education syllabus shows how the dominant view of society is promoted in the syllabus (Beckett 1997) – heterosexuality is normalised, and gay and lesbian sexualities are omitted or regulated and expressed in ways that perpetuate notions of weirdness and abnormality. Homophobia presented in this way condones students' homophobic behaviour.

Gay and lesbian students are often derided in the vernacular of their peers. Thonemann's (1998) Australian research found that homophobic language is mainstream and ubiquitous. This finding resonates with experiences of gay and lesbian youth in studies from throughout the Western world. Thonemann found, particularly among boys in Years 7 to 10, that homophobic terms were used in a negative way, whether as a joke or an insult. For example, the students reported that "most often 'you're gay' means 'you're stupid'". However, they did not think it appropriate to use homophobic language around people who were gay or lesbian, which Thonemann interpreted as a positive finding because it shows that students are aware of the possible effects of their language. Alex, one of the group of young people delivering the Pride &

Prejudice program in Tasmania is quoted in *The Mercury* newspaper (Grube 2006, p.13) as saying, "I was very lucky because I had positive experiences for most of my high school years, but negative language associated with being gay is still commonplace in schools. Even when your friends refer to you as their *gay friend* they are discriminating by labelling you".

Hegemonic explanations for gender differences have been accepted as natural for so long that any efforts to explain gender differences in other ways meet with resistance, often powerful, from within school communities. Sumara & Davis (1999), when discussing a queer curriculum theory, inquire into the ways that heteronormativity might be interrupted and argue that studies of sexuality must become intertwined with all questions of curricular relations. In particular, they argue that curriculum has an obligation to interrupt heteronormative thinking – not only to promote social justice, but also to broaden possibilities for perceiving, interpreting and representing experience. As Britzman & Gilbert (2004, p.84) state, usually "discussions of gayness are placed under the sensitive sign of 'controversial topics' and are therefore cordoned off from ordinary classroom experience". This label of "controversial" refers to the conflation of power and sexuality, which Butler (1993; 1990) names the "heterosexual matrix".

The teaching and evaluation of the Pride & Prejudice program were undertaken within this cultural complexity. Although there is a largely untested assumption that anti-homophobia programs taught on a whole-class basis may lessen discrimination (and bullying) in schools (van de Ven 1996), the power of such programs to challenge the hidden assumptions of the school curriculum might be questioned. This is not an argument against the use of programs like Pride & Prejudice in schools, rather it is an argument for the development and implementation of a range of other supportive anti-homophobic strategies in schools, particularly related to the curriculum.

### Problematic (problematizing) ethics

Orr (2002, p.478) notes that the deeper purposes of schooling and of the "hidden curriculum" of traditional schooling are to prepare students

for dominant or subordinate positions in their existing societies. This social positioning, she suggests, privileges certain forms of knowledge over others, and affirms the dreams, desires and values of select groups of students over other groups, often discriminatorily, on the basis of race, class, gender and sexuality.

Complex ethical issues are foregrounded when challenging the taken-for-granted, the seen-as-“natural” relations between sex, gender and sexuality. Beckett (2004) suggests that it is the hidden, the silences, that make addressing exclusion and discrimination (particularly homophobia) so hard to locate and redress. Boundaries between the hidden and overt, the silent and the voiced in relation to gender and sexualities are at once all pervasive and invisible.

Mindfulness is required when researching in the areas of sexuality and education. Thonemann (1998) notes that the Sydney University Ethics Committee had initial reservations about her intention to interview focus groups of students because the committee feared that these students could be targeted for homophobic abuse after the interview.

### **Necessary but not sufficient to break a spell of silence**

Daniel Witthaus (2006), designer of the Pride & Prejudice package, noted the difficulties involved in developing a comprehensive whole-school approach to homophobia. He suggests that schools often interpret “whole school approach” as a policy framework that does not address the requirement of teachers for immediate strategies they can use, nor does it develop an inclusive school environment where same-sex-attracted young people feel safe and supported” (Witthaus 2006). It would seem that both a strong policy framework and clear and practical strategies are required at the school level to address homophobia. In particular, other strategies might be required for the small group of Tasmanian students for whom the Pride & Prejudice program either had no effect, or confirmed or worsened their negative perceptions of gay men and lesbians.

It seems possible that in Tasmania at least, the Pride & Prejudice program might form a stepping stone from which further comprehen-

sive school-based (and perhaps systems-based) anti-homophobia strategies and approaches might evolve; the Pride & Prejudice program is necessary – but not sufficient – to address deeper issues of heteronormativity and homophobia in schools.

Some issues that arose during the evaluation of the program related to the fact that it was offered (and evaluated) as a separate “program” or “package”. The strength of such a “packaged” approach is that a coherent approach is fostered, and appropriate people are trained and available to deliver it. The weaknesses include that fact that the program and “homosexuality” may become special, separate and more highly politicised within the school context.

Pinar (2003, p.272) argues that we must “continue to break the silence on homosexuality and release that latent energy. First, it needs to be broken in elementary and secondary school curricula. The omnipresence of homosexuality culturally and historically needs to be taught in the humanities, arts and social studies across the curriculum whenever possible. As queer theorists of education have insisted, knowledge is, however, not enough. Simply informing homophobic heterosexist students hardly guarantees ‘tolerance’ for ‘diversity’. Knowledge guarantees nothing except the end of ignorance. But that **is** something.”

### **Issues for Tasmanian school systems**

Thoughtful planning is required to support further implementation of the Pride & Prejudice program in Tasmanian schools. Only a few schools in the state have taken up the program so far, perhaps because of a lack of resources and a lack of access to appropriate programs and professionals. However, there may also be reluctance on behalf of schools to openly discuss homosexuality. The topic appears to be controversial and cordoned off from ordinary classroom experience (Britzman & Gilbert 2004, p.84).

The controversial nature of the program might also account for the high number of girls involved in the trial. The school which involved only female students may have done so as a way of trialling the program before they offered it to a (perhaps more challenging) cohort of male students. Girls might be understood to

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be more sympathetic to the topic than boys. Unfortunately there were no data collected in this trial to either support or dismiss this possibility. This all suggests that further implementation of the program would have to proceed carefully, perhaps from bases in the schools which have undertaken the program successfully.

In addition, the Pride & Prejudice program requires specialised training, requires time within the school timetable to teach, and has costs associated with employing specialised trainers/facilitators. Negotiating a "train the trainer" implementation process, based within those schools that have successfully implemented the program, may be one way forward.

The implementation of the program also has implications for undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programs, and for the forms of professional learning that should be on offer to practicing teachers. Ware (2002) suggests that reform in this area begins with a "suspicion of the self" and a willingness to risk the personal. It would take a talented and sensitive team to offer professional learning to teachers that allows and supports this risk-taking, but does not further provoke prejudices and stereotyping of gay men and lesbians.

This evaluation has uncovered some management issues associated with delivering a "standardised" program (like Pride & Prejudice) across schools that are essentially autonomous. Further, some Tasmanian schools serve relatively conservative communities that might resist the teaching of programs like Pride & Prejudice, yet these may be the very sites in which such a program should be offered! This suggests that the Pride & Prejudice program should be developed within a framework of critical factors for success identified for all programs addressing sexuality and gender (Dyson et al. 2003).

### The curriculum as politics

What roles (if any) should schools play in challenging or transforming their local communities? Perhaps paralleling the conservative and progressive (liberal) political and social divides and schisms within our contemporary Tasmanian communities, approval for the

evaluation of the Pride & Prejudice program required negotiation over several meetings of the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee. How should schools situate themselves within this political diversity? Addressing homophobia and associated bullying requires school communities to address the political and social justice facets of their functions within democracies like Australia.

Wood & Bartkowski (2004), researchers in the American context, state that, "opposition to gay rights is most pronounced among political conservatives, fundamentalist Protestants, persons with little or no favourable contact with gays, individuals who embrace negative stereotypes about gays, and persons with ... etiological beliefs about homosexuality". In the Australian context, such conservatism may also be pronounced among fundamentalist Catholics and Muslims. Lakoff (2002; 2004), Linneman (2004) and Wood & Bartkowski (2004) suggest that contemporary conservatives see certain kinds of difference/diversity, particularly in relation to sexualities, as a threat to themselves and their communities and come to understand that the primary purpose of schooling is to maintain hegemonic power relations. In Lakoff's (2002, pp.65-70) terms, they work with a "strict father" morality. Liberals (in the American sense) work with a "nurturant parent morality" (Lakoff 2002, pp.108-13). Contemporary educational progressives (liberals) may, through their moral framework, come to see schools and schooling as processes for liberation and change. Pinar (2003), for example, argues that the school curriculum is one site in which to unfold the omnipresence of homosexuality culturally and historically. Foregrounding our embeddedness within the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990; 1993), let alone challenging this situation, is bound to provoke skirmishes that are both divisive and personal (Beckett 2004).

McWilliam (1995) suggests that there is a "spell of silence" around sexuality in general in the classroom, not just around gay and lesbian sexualities. The cultural positioning of teachers as un-bodied (asexual) beings in the classroom (McWilliam 1995) means the issues related to ethics and the evaluation of the Pride & Prejudice program are complex, but even more complex if a teacher involved in the school,

and with the Pride & Prejudice program, is also “out” and proud.

### Further research questions

This evaluation found that, when assessed one week after the delivery of the program, Year 8 and 9 students’ attitudes toward homosexuality were significantly more positive than those they held prior to undertaking the program. Is this positive change in attitude maintained after a longer period of time, for example after six or 12 months?

What of the subset of students for whom the Pride & Prejudice program had either a minimal effect or deepened negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians? What forms of teaching and/or intervention might be supportive in this situation, if any? Or is this finding largely due to measurement error?

This evaluation placed an emphasis on students’ individual attitudes as a prime cause (and site for remediation) for homophobia. The evaluation does not address embedded and systemic homophobia. How might we research the “discursive formations” of a school – its cultural/social shape – that which determines what can be thought and what can be said about gender and sexuality?

There are important research questions to be posed about the power of the group over the individual to stand in resistance to discrimination and bullying.

Finally, there are questions about the gender mix of the cohort of students involved in this evaluation. The majority of students in the evaluation were female. How might this have affected the findings?

For theorists like Grosz (2005), Grosz & Probyn (1995) and Butler (1993; 1990), homophobia plays a large role in sustaining patriarchal patterns of power through the social construction of masculinity and femininity as opposites. “A heterosexual construction of masculinity and femininity as opposites creates within society a bind where masculine as strong and feminine as weak cause the cultural derision of femininity. Girls and gay boys are feminine and therefore weak. Insults like calling a boy a girl are culturally sanctioned in the dominant culture because of the relative privilege of masculinity” (Thonemann 1998). Should

programs like Pride & Prejudice be structured differently for different groups of students?

Beckett (2004) draws on her personal (and separate) experiences of “leaving heterosexuality” and of “being disabled” to find common ground for action between these two experiences by interrogating the experience of being sexual. She argues that heterosexuality functions as a social matrix, with exclusionary practices that operate in similar ways towards those who are homosexual and those who are “disabled”. Mechanisms may be different, but the experience of exclusion is similar, and is based on similar practices.

### Recommendation

The 2006 Tasmanian evaluation recommended the Pride & Prejudice program to schools and learning services as an effective program for countering homophobia and as a starting point for the development of further, comprehensive anti-homophobia programs in schools.

### Endnotes

- 1 Information about the Pride & Prejudice program can be found at: <<http://www.prideandprejudice.com.au/>> (viewed 29 January 2007).
- 2 Information about Working It Out Inc. can be accessed from: <<http://www.workingitout.org.au/>> (viewed 29 January 2007).
- 3 Details about the data can be obtained from the author.

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## EXTRA

### 'Homophobic bullying and schools – Responding to the challenge'

by I. Warwick, R. Goodrich, P. Aggleton & E. Chase, *Youth & Policy*, n.91, 2006, pp.59-73.

In 2004, the UK Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the University of London's Thomas Coram Research Unit to review the extent and impact of homophobic bullying in schools and to identify ways to control it. Data were gathered from British, Australian and American studies and publications relating to homophobia in schools and from semi-structured interviews with 28 'key informants' with relevant expertise. A thematic analysis of the data revealed that 30–50% of gay, lesbian and bisexual young people experience 'homophobic harassment

in an educational setting'. Such bullying often went unreported and potentially had serious long-term emotional, physical and educational effects on students. Homophobic bullying was experienced by both same-sex attracted students and those whom their peers perceived 'not to act in ways they should for their gender'. While direct, whole-school action is needed to address heteronormative school cultures that potentially legitimatise homophobia, homophobic bullying can also be addressed through existing anti-bullying programs and programs designed to make schools a 'safe and positive learning environment for young people'. Source: 'Abstracts', *Youth Studies Australia*, v.25, n.3, pp.60.