

## Questionnaire & focus group for students

Aquinas College, a catholic secondary school in the eastern metropolitan region, developed their own process to assess the needs and experiences of students in the school in terms of same sex attractedness.

Finding out what students felt about the issue of homophobia and bullying and the school's response to this, as well as how well same sex attracted young people were supported in the school, seemed to be an important first step in developing a plan of action.

The process involved both past and present students to ensure a full spectrum response.

### **The questionnaire**

*Previous students* were the first group to be approached and their input was invited through participation in a focus group or completion of a questionnaire. As these students no longer attended the school, *no parental permission was required* for them to be involved in completing the questionnaire or attending the focus group. The questionnaire, consisting of 4 sections – homophobia, support, general and ideas for action – and 17 questions, evolved out of discussions among staff at the school, with input from Shelley Walker (Gay and Lesbian Youth Project Worker) and Lynne Hillier (Australian Research Center in Sex, Health and Society). The school Principal reviewed all drafts before the final format was achieved.

### **How to select students**

The committee sent the questionnaire and the invitation to a random selection of students from the cohorts between 1998 and 2003. Every fourth name on the student lists for those 6 years was selected. Several staff with substantial knowledge of the senior cohorts over this period of time suggested the inclusion of a small number of students. The staff members believed these students would be both interested in the issue and able to make a valuable contribution to the discussion. A letter containing an invitation to the focus group was attached to the questionnaire and dispatched to 308 students in early May 2004. Reply envelopes were included in each letter to maximise ease of reply.

Twenty-seven former students completed and returned questionnaires.

### **What happened at the focus group?**

The focus group was held at the school with 12 past pupils (6 males and 6 females representing the cohorts of 1998, 2002 and 2003) attending. The evening began with refreshments at 7.00 and moved into formal discussion at 7.30. The discussion was audiotaped with the permission of all participants with an understanding that no individuals would be named or comments attributed to any particular individual. The questionnaire was distributed to all participants and they were encouraged to make notes as the discussion occurred. The focus group was facilitated by the school counsellor and followed the general format of the questionnaire in terms of topics. Before discussion began, the Gay and Lesbian Youth Project Worker presented some

of the research about same sex attracted young people and their experiences at school. The counsellor then explained what the school was doing in terms of dealing with the issue of homophobia, including the membership of a committee working on the issue and a brief outline of professional development offered to staff around this issue since the Gay and Lesbian Youth Project began. The group discussion then followed and concluded at approximately 10.30pm. The discussion was transcribed and a report written which was distributed to all school staff. Focus group participants and questionnaire respondents were asked to indicate their interest in receiving a brief written report about the project at the end of 2004, which was sent to all those who requested feedback.

### **Why is finding out what students think and experience important?**

Responses to the questionnaire and from the focus group provided invaluable information to the school in terms of what students had experienced, but more importantly what they thought could be done to address the issues. An action plan is being developed based on responses from students.

### **Present students**

The school is in the process of organising for SRC groups from senior levels to complete the questionnaire followed by focus groups with each of these groups.

## Sample Focus Group Questionnaire

(Insert School name) is currently working towards addressing safety in our school for all students, but particularly same sex attracted students. Research has established that around 10% of students are same sex attracted.

Thank you for taking the time to respond to this questionnaire. Your input is greatly appreciated and will make a valuable contribution to the College's ongoing work in this area. This questionnaire is anonymous, unless you would like a brief report about the project and the outcomes. If so, please write your name and address in the space at the end of the questionnaire and a report will be sent to you.

### 1. HOMOPHOBIA

Homophobia is a fear of homosexuality. Like other forms of discrimination and prejudice (such as sexism and racism), homophobia can be expressed overtly through physical and verbal violence or covertly through jokes targeting a group or social exclusion. Name calling, such as using the term "gay", can also be directed to any individual and constitutes homophobic bullying when the express purpose is to put down another person, in this case using sexuality to denigrate the other person.

#### 1.1 Were you aware of any homophobic bullying occurring at (school name) during your time at the school?

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely              Never

---

---

---

#### 1.2 If so, describe what happened.

---

---

---

#### 1.3 Did the school take any action to counter this homophobia?

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely              Never

---

---

---

#### 1.4 Were you told that homophobic bullying was wrong?

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely              Never

---

---

---

**1.5 Were you told that discrimination on the basis of sexuality was wrong?**

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely              Never

---

---

---

**1.6 Can you tell us more about what you were told about discrimination on the basis of sexuality?**

---

---

---

**1.7 Were you aware of any policies or codes of conduct at the school that specifically talked about homophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexuality being unacceptable?**

Yes                      No

---

---

---

**2. SUPPORT**

**2.1 During your time at (school name), do you think same sex attracted students felt safe?**

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely              Never

---

---

---

**2.2 Can you describe what the daily experiences of same sex attracted students at (school name) would have been like when you attended the school?**

---

---

---

**2.3 When you were at (school name) were there teachers or staff whom students with concerns about sexuality could have gone to for support?**

Lots              Some                      A Few                      None

---

---

---

**2.4 If so, what roles did these staff members have at the school?**

---

---

---

**2.5 Would students with concerns about their sexuality have felt confident that what was discussed with a particular staff member would have remained confidential?**

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

---

---

**3. GENERAL**

**3.1 When you were at (school name) were you aware during your learning experiences of how issues concerning same sex attracted people were treated by staff and fellow students, particularly during classes that focused on health and sexuality?**

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

---

---

---

**3.2 Can you recall strategies that were used during your time at the school that sought to promote understanding and sensitivity when dealing with same sex attracted young people and if so, what some of those strategies were?**

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

---

---

---

**3.3 Can you recall if same sex attraction was discussed in any classes during your time at (school name) and if so, what the nature of those discussions was.**

Always      Often                      Sometimes              Rarely                      Never

---

---

---

**3.4 Did you have personal awareness of or friendship with any 'out' student/s or parent/s during your time at the school?**

Yes

No

---

---

---

**IDEAS FOR ACTION**

We are committed to improving (school name) in terms of ensuring it is free of homophobia and bullying, so that all students, including same sex attracted students, feel safe and supported. If you have any ideas about what might have made the school environment at (school name) safer and more supportive for all students when you were there, please comment in the space below.

If you would like to receive a brief report about this project, please write your name and address below.

---

---

**Thank you once again for completing this questionnaire.**

## Sample letter & invitation for students

Dear (student name)

As you would be aware there is concern that bullying and victimisation in schools continue to be significant, if not major issues. As a Catholic school, (school name) is always striving to identify and implement ways in which we, as a community, can address these concerns. As part of an ongoing commitment to promoting safety for all students, we are currently working towards addressing safety in the school for young people who may see themselves as same sex attracted.

So far work undertaken has focused on providing professional development to staff about the issue. At this stage a committee of staff is seeking student input from both current and former students and your name has been randomly selected from the cohorts of 1998 to 2003. If you are still in contact with any of your year level, please feel free to pass this invitation on to them, if you think they may be interested.

We wish to invite you to join a focus group discussion at (school name) to be held on (date, time and venue). The event will take the form of some sharing of hospitality before moving into a focus group mode. The purpose of this discussion is for committee members to gain an understanding of how issues related to homophobia and safety for same sex attracted young people were addressed by the school staff and policies during your time at (school name). Your contribution on this issue will also help inform the direction the school may take in terms of implementation of strategies and policy formation.

If you wish to share your ideas on this issue but are unable to attend on (date), we have attached a brief questionnaire that you may wish to complete and return in the enclosed prepaid envelope. Any input you would like to share on this issue would be highly valued and would contribute to work of the school on these issues.

If you are able to attend the discussion you can reply to this invitation by ringing (contact person), completing the attached RSVP and returning it in the enclosed envelope or by e-mail to (contact person). We look forward to your reply by (date). The committee and school look forward to hearing from you and believe that whatever way you participate will be of great assistance to the wider school community.

Yours sincerely

Principal and Committee Member

## Sample follow-up letter & invitation for students

Dear

We recently contacted you regarding a 3-year project in which (school name) is currently involved. The project is addressing safety in schools for all young people with a particular focus on young people who may see themselves as same sex attracted.

As mentioned in our previous letter, your name was randomly selected from the cohorts of 1998 to 2003 and you are invited to attend a discussion at (school name) to be held on (date, time and venue). The evening will begin with some sharing of hospitality before the discussion begins. A small number of the committee members will be present during the evening to facilitate discussion. The purpose of the evening is for committee members to gain an understanding of how issues related to homophobia and safety for same sex attracted young people were addressed by the school staff and policies during your time at (school name). Your contribution on this issue will also help inform the direction the school may take in terms of implementation of strategies and policy formation. We randomly selected names across the 6-year period in an effort to ensure that a wide range of opinions on this issue would be represented in the discussion.

If you are still uncertain whether to attend, could we encourage you to seriously consider our invitation? Your contribution on this issue would be most valuable and would certainly help inform the direction the school may take in terms of implementation of strategies and policy formation. If you are unable to attend the discussion on (date), we would greatly appreciate your feedback on the questionnaire, which was posted with the previous letter. Any input you would like to share on this issue would be highly valued and would contribute to the project's work.

If you are able to attend the discussion you can reply to this invitation by ringing (contact person), completing the attached RSVP and returning it to (contact person) by e-mail to (email address). We look forward to your reply by (date). If you have any questions about any aspect of the project or would like further information about the evening, please do not hesitate to contact (name) on the above number.

Many thanks for your consideration of our invitation.

Yours sincerely

Principal and Committee Member

✂-----

I will be attending the focus group discussion at (school name) on (date).

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact \_\_\_\_\_ Number: \_\_\_\_\_