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Whatever happened to Duty of Care? Same-sex Attracted Young People’s Stories of Schooling and Violence

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Abstract

This article describes a research project about the health and well-being of same-sex attracted young people (SSAY) in Australia. The project was 'a first', in that it was a national study that accessed a range of young people, from those who had never disclosed their sexual feelings to anyone, to those who were connected to the gay and lesbian community and who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. The article focuses on a subset of data about young peoples' experiences of abuse and discrimination at school and the different ways that their schools responded to homophobia in the student culture. Seven hundred and forty nine same-sex attracted young people aged 14-21 years completed a survey which included items about sex information sources, support, abuse, discrimination, personal feelings of safety and sexual and drug using behaviours. Two hundred young people also sent in stories about their lives. About half of the participants reported being verbally and/or physically abused because of their sexuality and most of this abuse took place at school. Few young people were able to access information about gay and lesbian relationships and safe sex at school and many had deficits in their knowledge about safe sexual practices. Participants described a range of school reactions to homophobia in the student culture and these are examined in the light of the Health Promoting Schools strategy that has become popular in schools over the last ten years.
Homophobia, that is, fear of sexual difference in schools affects the health and well-being of the entire student population, but there are many reasons why Australian sexual health educators and researchers might raise extra concerns about its effects on young people who are attracted to their own sex. Homophobia is played out in schools in many different ways. The first is a documented silence regarding gay and lesbian sexuality in sex education and sexual health services which may mean that young people are denied the lesbian or gay specific information necessary to the practice of safe sex. As well as living with invisibility in the formal aspects of their school curriculum, many same-sex attracted youth (SSAY) live out their school lives in a culture that fosters fear and hatred of their sexual difference and of behaviours that are gender a-typical.

Previously, research documenting the impact of homophobia has mainly taken the form of retrospective studies with gay and lesbian adults, small studies with young people who are connected to the gay community and studies that are restricted to young gay men. Regardless of the limitations of, and differences between these research projects, they all document how homophobic abuse has negative effects on the emotional and psychological health of gay and lesbian students. Furthermore, there is growing evidence overseas and in Australia of a relationship between same-sex attraction, a homophobic environment, depression and youth suicide.

Until now, there has been no research about the large proportion of SSAY who are not connected to a gay community and who have spoken to no one or very few people about their feelings. This includes young people who are still exploring their identity and who are still mulling over their feelings and silently weighing up the consequences of adopting a lesbian, gay or bisexual label. The paucity of large-scale research with this group is in part a reflection of the difficulties involved in accessing a stigmatised group whose members rely on anonymity to keep them safe. It may also reflect the resistance of
researchers and funding bodies to tackling a topic that may result in a community backlash.

Such resistance to fostering the health and well-being of a sizeable group within the school community runs counter to the aims of the Health Promoting School. The concept of the Health Promoting School (HPS) is one that has become popular in Australian schools (and indeed worldwide) in the last decade in part because it embraces a community desire to think of schools as safe places that promote all students’ health and well-being. In theory, this model provides a framework for supporting SSAY. Within this framework homophobia should not exist because the whole community has the collective responsibility of promoting the health of all students, regardless of their sexuality. In practice, the HPS concept has been criticised for focusing on the medical model of the body and disease prevention while neglecting the socio-cultural domain and the damage that can be caused to students who suffer in hostile school environments.

However, there is some evidence of change in school and community thinking about a 'duty of care' to SSAY given the more recent and local emphasis on the responsibility of school authorities to provide a safe and supportive environment for all students. Following the release of the Victorian Government’s Suicide Prevention Task Force Report \(^8\) (July 1997), $12.08m in recurrent funds was allocated to both the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services to enhance service provision and welfare support to schools and their communities. Primary prevention and early intervention are two of the foci of a proposed new welfare structure in Victorian schools. Suggested strategies include the provision of supportive school environments and curriculum and/or educational programs that focus on promoting resilience with the acknowledgment that ‘student welfare is the responsibility of all staff’. \(^9\) Within this approach several protective factors have been identified that are said to enhance resilience, one being the promotion of ‘...a sense of belonging at school or a similar institution’. \(^10\) One of the particular strategies for enhancing student resilience suggested
by the Department of Education which is pertinent to the issues discussed in this article, is the development of:

...policies and strategies concerning overcoming violence, victimization and harassment, racism and homophobia to increase a sense of belonging and security for students.  

The recognition that homophobic violence is taking place in schools is a crucial first step in addressing the forms of discrimination experienced by SSAY both at school and in the wider community context.

Following on from the above, this article aims to document the experiences of abuse and discrimination of a large national sample of same-sex attracted Australian youth, including their access to information about sexuality and safe sex. These data will provide educators and policy makers with a firm basis on which to develop programs and policies of relevance to SSAY. The article also aims to examine the ways that schools deal with the bullying, the abuse and the generalised homophobia where it exists. In particular, we were keen to find examples of positive ways that schools were addressing homophobia and taking their duty of care to SSAY in the student population seriously. We use a combination of quantitative data, open-ended responses and autobiographical stories to present a rich picture of the everyday school lives of Australian SSAY.

Procedure
We were well aware of the ethical and logistical challenges of this research. Due to potential abuse, the target population had a large investment in remaining invisible and in order to ensure their safety it was important that participation in the research did not compromise the anonymity of the young people involved. The final design of the study achieved this end while allowing a range of young people to participate in the research. The study was advertised widely in national magazines, street press and via the radio.
Participants could access the questionnaire through the mail by leaving their contact
details over the phone or by mailing in a coupon. Alternatively, young people could fill
out the questionnaire on a web site and send it to us by email. Contact details were
destroyed once the questionnaires were posted out.

Data were collected using a short questionnaire that asked about experiences of
discrimination and abuse, quality of life, access to information about safe sex and
relationships, sexual behaviours, drug use, support and safety issues. It also included
many open-ended items and a request at the end for autobiographical stories.

Profile of the Participants
Valid questionnaires were received from 749 (369 males, 379 females) Australian SSAY
aged 14-21 years. Two hundred participants also wrote stories about their lives. Their
average age was 18 years with the young women on average six months younger than the
young men. Almost three quarters (73%) of the group were students attending school,
university or TAFE and 65% lived at home with their families. The States and Territories
were proportionally represented as were metropolitan (78%) and rural (22%)
municipalities. Eighty-seven percent of the participants were born in Australia and two
percent were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Half of the participants
accessed the survey through the Internet and half through the post. One in five of these
young people had never spoken to anyone about their sexuality.

Results and Discussion
The quantitative data were entered into SPSS Mac [version 4], and descriptive and
comparative analyses carried out. The open-ended items were transcribed, coded and
entered into SPSS. Stories (including the accompanying open-ended text) were read
separately as case studies and then across stories for emerging common themes. The
stories were coded and entered into Ethnograph [version 4], a computer software package
for managing qualitative data. We have focused on a subset of the data for this paper that
focuses on the experiences of SSAY in schools. In particular, we describe young people's experiences of abuse, discrimination and access to information sources about sexuality. As well, we include information about the ways school authorities address homophobic abuse in their schools. Other elements of the data, for example, drug use are referred to only where they have relevance to the main focus of the paper.

**Verbal and Physical Abuse**

One section of the questionnaire asked specifically about verbal and physical abuse as a result of sexual orientation. Young people's responses to these questions added significantly to our picture of the environments in which SSAY live. Almost half of the total sample, (more of these were boys), reported being verbally abused (46%: 52% young men, 39% young women, $\chi^2 = 13.0, p < .0003$). Their descriptions of what was said ranged from single word remarks and insults to threats of violence. The most common form of verbal abuse (65%) consisted of name calling, for example, ‘poofter’, ‘dyke’ and ‘faggot’. These remarks were more likely to be directed at boys, however, girls were also targeted in this way. Two word insults (31%) were also a common form of verbal abuse, and ‘lezgo trash’, ‘queer bitch’ and ‘cock sucker’ were typical examples. Threats of violence (7%) were the most severe forms of verbal abuse described by the participants, and these had been directed at a smaller but sizeable number of the group. The effects that these often very public jibes had on the young people were numerous and multi-faceted, but the most immediate impact was humiliation, shame and alienation. For example, Tim described constant threats and harassment from other students at school that culminated in what can only be described as a devastating event:

The ultimate humiliation was in my final year of school when a few guys decided to declare my sexuality to the world by spray painting the local shopping centre with my supposed sexual habits and the fact that I am gay...it has taken me two years since school finished to begin rebuilding my life again (Tim, 20yrs).
Thirteen per cent of the young people in the study reported being physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation. When asked for further information young people described a range of violent attacks from single incidents, for example, 'Got my arm broken', to systematic abuse, such as, 'I had rocks thrown at me every day on my way home from school, and on one occasion, I had my head split open by one, and was then hit and kicked.'

In order to build a better picture of the context of the verbal abuse and physical assaults that these young people were subjected to we asked two further questions. The first concerned the place at which the abuse occurred and the second, the person who was responsible. On average, each young person who had suffered abuse described two separate locations at which the abuse occurred (603 reports, 327 respondents).

Over two-thirds of the young people who reported abuse (69%) experienced this at school. Rowan (20 years) recalled being: ‘Punched discretely while the teacher wasn’t looking, black eyes, broken bones in fingers when a desk lid was slammed on my hand’. Abuse also occurred on the streets (47%) at social (34%) and sporting events (9%) and in a smaller number of cases, at work, church and on public transport (total of 11%). In regard to perpetrators, 59% of the young people who had been verbally or physically abused named other students. Strangers (44%), family members (10%) and friends (10%) were also named. Very often there was no redress for the students who were assaulted. One boy described being bashed up at a party by his friend’s father and then being made by his own father to apologise. Another told of an assault in the classroom that was observed, but ignored by the teacher.

There was a strong indication in the young people’s stories that verbal and physical abuse had far reaching effects on many other aspects of their lives, and very often left them feeling alienated, depressed and alone. Further analysis of the data revealed a significant
relationship between abuse and drug use with young people who had been abused (verbal and/or physical) being more likely to have used heroin ($t[726] = 2.68, p < .007$), party drugs ($t[730] = 3.58, p = .000$) and to have injected drugs ($X^2 = 12.3, p < .001$). As well, having been verbally and/or physically assaulted left young people feeling less safe and secure in their general living environments ($t [640] = 6.97, p = .000$).

**The Well-being of Those who were not Abused**

What of those young people whom had not suffered abuse? A small number indicated that they had disclosed their sexuality without negative results and examples of their stories are presented later in this article. The remaining group, many of whom had managed thus far to pass as heterosexual, suffered from inner anxieties and fears. Many worried about what might happen to them if someone found out. They watched what was happening to others and were afraid. Kate, who was 15 years old expressed this fear:

> I am most afraid about what will happen at school. I know that I will get verbally harassed a hell of a lot but I'm hoping physical abuse won’t happen (Kate, 15 yrs).

Others described having to relegate their sexuality to a secret inner life. Daman wrote of the discomfort of being on guard at all times, censoring his every word and action so that he would pass as a consistent, coherent heterosexual person.

> I don't feel lust to declare that I'm gay, but I want to be able to talk to EVERYONE without censoring myself, without thinking ooh, I can't say this to them (Daman, 19 yrs).

Jack and Sarah felt the burden of not being able to relate honestly to those around them and the damage caused by not being true to themselves:
I'm still in high school and completely in the closet. I think I'm one of the best actors in our school! Still, the lie gets burdensome. I'd like to be able to relate to someone my REAL feelings (Jack, 18 yrs).

I end up living a lie, this is what gets me down. I join in on my peers drooling over guys when inside I’m screaming (Sarah, 16 yrs).

Not relating honestly had negative effects on many young people. Peter, among others, wrote about the shame and the guilt that he felt:

The worst thing about it all is the guilt. Not the guilt at being gay, but the guilt at lying to your family and friends. THAT is the where the shame comes from for me. Most of the time it is unbearable. I sneak and hide and lie (Peter, 20 yrs).

Another consequence of hiding for these young people was the deep feeling of isolation and alienation that came about because no one really knew them. This was particularly acute in rural areas where young people had much more to lose from disclosure. In urban areas where there is a choice of schools, a young person who is having problems at one school could in theory move to another without disrupting home and family. For young people in rural areas where changing schools means changing towns, this is far more difficult to manage. Tim wrote of trying to hold it all together until depression and a suicide attempt resulted in him leaving school and his family home to stay in a refuge in another town. Sally was another rural student who was acutely aware of the dangers of exposure and the costs of hiding:

As high school went on I became more and more depressed. I hated lunch times when my friends would all talk about their latest boyfriends or some older guy they had a crush on. I really couldn’t care but I would join in and
pick some moderately dateable guy to pretend to fancy. In a small school like mine was (only about 300 people) the last thing you want is to be singled out as different (Sally, 19 yrs).

Unfortunately for SSAY, disclosing to someone was also likely to lead to negative results. Betrayal by the confidante, as Lyle discovered, is always a risk of disclosure:

When it got too hard to sustain the illusion of heterosexuality, when I got tired of not being me, I came out to my friends. The last four months have been hell. I came out to two of my friends, they told all of my other friends but refused to have anything to do with me. I didn't find out for a month that they'd told my other friends about my sexuality (Lyle, 19 yrs).

We learned from the stories told by the young people in our research, that hiding one's sexuality, like disclosure, has damaging consequences and these tend to manifest in a negative self image, lowered self esteem and depression.

**Schools Dealing with Sexual Diversity and Homophobia**

*Adequacy of Information Sources*

As well as having a mandate to provide a safe learning environment for their students, school authorities in Australia also have the responsibility for providing sex education. Research on young people's perception of information sources has consistently shown that they trust some information sources more than others. A study by Rosenthal et al found that school and to a lesser extent family are generally regarded as authoritative sources whereas young people feel that the information they get from the media and their friends cannot be relied upon.

In line with the aims of the study young people were asked to indicate whether they had received information about heterosexual, lesbian and gay relationships and safe sex from
four different sources: the family, school, media and friends. The results have been graphically represented in figures 1 and 2 below.

**INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Figure 1 shows that information about heterosexual relationships was widely available to young people from all four sources, however, the picture was very different when it came to information about gay and lesbian relationships. Less than one in five received information from family and school and approximately half of the students gained information from friends and the media.

**INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE**

Where safe sex was concerned, the same lack of credible information sources was apparent. For the young people in this study this was a case of double jeopardy; the information sources available to them were limited and those that were available were of dubious worth. The silence and invisibility left Wendy uninformed and isolated:

> There was nothing visible at school or in my community to help. No pamphlets at school, no posters, no safe homosexual sex lessons. I felt alone (Wendy, 17 yrs).

In order to ascertain more about the nature of the information deficit facing the group, we included an item in the questionnaire that invited young people to share three of their queries about sexuality. Each participant wrote an average of two questions. Over half of the questions asked concerned practical issues about safe sex. For example:

> Is cling wrap safe to use as a safe sex tool?
> Will swallowing semen affect my stomach?
How do you protect against hepatitis during non-penetrative sex?
Exactly how safe is oral sex without a condom?
Besides HIV what are the health dangers of anal sex?
Is performing anal sex on a guy as high risk as taking it?

These very basic and specific questions are an indication that the information deficit experienced by SSAY is likely to constitute a real barrier to their ability to maintain their sexual health. Though we were unable to provide the answers to these questions personally to the participants, we have endeavoured to feed information back through various avenues, including the web site.

**Discrimination**

Another item on the questionnaire asked the participants whether they had suffered discrimination because of their sexuality. Twenty-eight per cent said 'yes', 39% said 'no', and 33% said 'no because no one knows'. There were no gender differences in the number of reported incidents. In response to a request for more details, the young people described three different types of discrimination. The first consisted of generalised heterosexist practices, such as, young people not having the same rights in regard to their same sex partners, for example, not being able to take them to the school dance. Far more personally devastating was the second group of discriminatory practices that took the form of individually tailored rules (particularly in the school arena) which singled out young people for attention. Jason, for example, wrote: ‘I am not allowed in the boys’ changing rooms’ and Penny recounted being told by a teacher when she was twelve years old, that she was not to have any physical contact with any of the other girls. Penny wrote that this affected her self esteem and that the whole episode had been handled very badly. The hidden, though not very subtle messages behind individually targeted rulings that are designed to prevent SSAY from touching anyone are that these students are a danger to the rest of the student population. It has been argued elsewhere, and it seems to be the
case here, that anxiety around sexual contamination underpin many homophobic acts, particularly in the school environment.  

The final group of discriminatory practices described less often by the young people in the study had the most severe outcomes. In these cases a young person was directly or indirectly excluded from school, sacked by a boss or thrown out of home by parents because of the disclosure or discovery of their homosexuality.

_Schools Engaging with Homophobia: Four Examples_

It was often very easy (in hindsight) when reading young people’s stories to pinpoint the stages at which the intervention of school authorities or other adult figures could have interrupted the downward spiral that many young people were caught in. Chrissie's story below describes a physical assault and her attempts to redress the problem and educate her school community:

My school was closed in 1995 when I was 15. The following year I enrolled in my nearest high school and the students were extremely homophobic. Talk of homosexuality was avoided in all classes. One day as I was walking home some younger students started shouting "gay slut" at me. They then began to hurl rocks at me. I made an appointment with the counsellor to file a report. After finally making a report I was asked to identify the offenders in a line up (!!??). I then spent hour on the phone verifying my story to seven staff members. They did not believe me and put me on the phone to talk to my home group teacher as they didn't think I would lie to her. The offenders were internally suspended for forty-five minutes. I was told that it was 'all they could do' so I suggested that I arrange a homophobia seminar. They refused my offer but could somehow mitigate the three Christian seminars that were conducted that year saying that "the Christians sing, dance and entertain". Being a musician myself, I approached a group of gay, lesbian and bisexual
musos who agreed to do a show. My proposal was once again refused by the school. I signed out that day and never went back. I blame my incompletion of school on the staff and on the government who closed my high school (Chrissie, 17 yrs).

There are at least two stages in Chrissie’s story at which her teachers failed in their duty of care. The first was when they refused to believe her, and the second when they individualised the assault on her as her problem. Chrissie took up the challenge however, and suggested a number of appropriate educational strategies to address the homophobia at her school. Unfortunately, all of her suggestions were rejected and she lost heart and dropped out of school. Her school failed her and in so doing lost a valuable opportunity to educate its students and staff about homophobic bullying.

There were also examples, recounted by the young people in the study, of schools dealing well with sexual difference and the homophobia of other students. At the most basic level, it became apparent that the support of one caring adult, not necessarily a parent, could make the difference between emotional health and despair in a young person’s life. Elly, who attended a school in a rural area had the support of one lesbian teacher at her school:

The most supportive person that I have talked to is a teacher at school who is a lesbian. She was really great. I went to her before my student welfare officer because the welfare lady is my best friend's mum. It was rather complex but I managed. I haven’t really “come out”. I don’t think where I live is the best place to do such a thing but I’m hoping to move to Melbourne next year to go to uni so things will hopefully improve (Elly, 17 yrs).

We have written elsewhere about the difficulties for teachers of making a stance against homophobic abuse because they can be labelled and excluded in the same way that some
students are 14. One of the participants wrote of an 'obviously' gay teacher who was treated so badly by students and staff alike that he stayed at the school for only six months. This was demoralising for the other SSAY who looked on and were afraid.

Preferable to the support of one isolated teacher was the more public and collective anti-homophobic stance demonstrated by Simon's teachers, including the Principal, when they dealt with a violent incident between groups of students. By naming the violence as homophobic the Principal and the teachers made an authoritative statement about the violence and abuse being unacceptable. Simon felt secure because he had the protection and support of his teachers and he stayed on at school. In the excerpt below, he described what happened:

We yelled and punched a bit, then a teacher came up and we had to see the head teacher of our year, not all 20 of them though, about 5 and all 3 of us. The head teacher was okay, she told them stuff about homophobia and in not so many words, told me something about violence. They got in more trouble though. She was pretty good. So here it was easy to finally find myself and "Come Out" I had no problems and all my friends were extremely supportive, as were the teachers who worked it out for them! (Simon, 17 yrs).

Even more important in dealing with Simon’s situation was the way the head teacher took on the abuse as a problem of homophobia in the student culture rather than individualising his sexuality as the problem.

Finally we come to the best example we were able to find of a school culture which embraced sexual difference. Andrew believed he was fortunate when he moved to a school which openly embraced its students' sexual diversity. Andrew was treated the same way as heterosexual students at the school, and suffered the frustrations of normal misunderstandings about relationships:
I was at an all boys private school which was horribly homophobic until year 11 but moved to a mixed school to do year 11 and 12. There, I was in a very caring and open minded environment, with a lot of other people in my situation both boys and girls (approx. 10% of students were not "Straight"). So here it was easy to finally find myself and "come out". I had no problems and all my friends were extremely supportive, as were the teachers who worked it out for themselves. The only problem that I really encountered here was that as my best friend is openly gay, people thought that we were a couple, including my mother; which irritated me a bit because if I had a fight with him in class some teachers thought that we were having relationship problems (Andrew, 18 yrs).

Andrew's knowledge of other students' sexuality suggests that his school provided a positive and supportive environment for 'coming out'. There is no mention in his story of abuse or exclusion, rather he describes a school culture in which young people's sexual diversity is respected as a normal part of their identity.

**Conclusion**

These data give a very clear picture of a pervasive homophobia in the culture of many Australian schools which was manifested in both the formal and informal aspects of school life. In the formal classroom curriculum, an assumption that students were heterosexual meant that safe sex and sexuality issues were dealt with only in the context of heterosexuality. In most cases, there was a silence around sexual difference and the research participants were left without the vital information they needed to maintain their sexual health. We also learned of overt homophobic abuse in the informal curriculum that was perpetrated in the playground and on the way to and from school. Often the abuse began because a young man’s interests and behaviours were gender atypical. Those who played music or liked reading, for example, were singled out as targets of abuse. In light
of this, it is likely that the problem of homophobic bullying also extends to heterosexual young people (particularly young men) who do not perform their masculinity in narrowly prescribed ways. Homophobia affects more of the student population than those who are same-sex attracted.

Participants’ reports of their school experiences indicate that approaches to sexuality in Australian schools occur on a continuum. At one end, sexual difference is treated as a pathology and the problem of the individual deviant student. When this approach is taken there is a silence in the curriculum about gay and lesbian sexuality. Young people find there is no redress for homophobic abuse, rather the perpetrators will be seen to be under threat and merely protecting themselves from sexual danger. Most of the young people in this research endured school cultures in which these beliefs were pervasive.

Alternatively, discrimination and abuse are seen as a symptom of homophobia and a problem that lies in the school culture, rather than in a student's non-heterosexual orientation. It is clear from the stories in which this approach was taken, that some schools do provide safe environments for sexual minority youth by challenging violent and abusive behaviours and the beliefs that underpin them. The task for schools is to embrace best practice models and ensure that policy development around sexuality and human rights is translated into practice in the classroom and the school yard.

As mentioned previously, one framework that is already in place in a growing number of Australian schools is the internationally recognised concept of the Health Promoting School. This framework has its origins in the World Health Organisation’s Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion\textsuperscript{,15} which emphasised building health public policy; creating supportive environments; strengthening community action; developing personal skills, and reorienting health services.
There is little evidence however after ten years of implementation that the HPS framework is being used to its full potential in promoting student health. Colquhoun among others has argued that the initiative is in danger of losing its initial promise to deliver emancipatory health education. An example in the context of this article, could be the interrogation of inequalities around gender and sexuality. Behind Colquhoun’s comments is an implicit understanding that there is a relationship between culture and health that should not be neglected in the notion of the HPS. Health campaigns which focus on the body, for example, ‘sun smart’ and ‘healthy food’ are important in maintaining the health of young people’s bodies, but sexual health extends far beyond the body into social, cultural and psychological realms. Promoting the health of sexual minorities is especially challenging because it pushes at the doors of religious and other institutional prejudice by highlighting the importance of equal opportunity and the human rights of this group. The promotion of the health of sexual minorities necessarily involves a re-evaluation of the power structures that produce the silences, the neglect and the abuse that these young people endure in their lives.

In theory, the concept of the HPS recognises that a broad range of interconnected factors affect our health and that health promotion is not just the work of the formal curriculum. Schools working within this framework are obligated to ensure that all students not only have equal access to educational outcomes but also to physical and emotional well-being. With an increasing emphasis on primary prevention of mental health problems and the role of schools in this process the structures and support for change are in place. This of course is no guarantee that same-sex attracted young people will not fall through the cracks but it does create the conditions of possibility for change and an opportunity to test the integrity of the HPS initiative. The challenge for school authorities within this framework is to extend their thinking beyond sunsmart campaigns and the provision of healthy food in school canteens to the broader health concerns of sexual minority students.
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**Figure 1.** Sources of information about relationships
Figure 2 Sources of information about safe sex

- Heterosexual
- Gay
- Lesbian

Percentage of sample

n ~ 732
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Deborah Dempsey is a researcher and PhD student at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. Her research interests include: the relationship of sexuality to identity formation among young people and adult women; gender relations between gay and lesbian adults; gay parenting and qualitative research methodologies.

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