

‘It was as useful as chocolate kettle’:

sex education in the lives of same sex attracted young people in Australia

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Abstract

Sex education is a contested site in the school curriculum as communities grapple with who should teach young people about sex and how it should be taught. In this paper we ask whether same sex attracted young people are being exposed to appropriate and relevant sex education at school and if they are not, whether it is necessary that sex education be inclusive of sexual difference. In the second Australian survey of 1749 14–21 year old same sex attracted youth, we ask young people about sex education classes at school, how useful they were for them, their sources of information regarding gay and lesbian relationships and safe sex, sexual behaviours and incidence of sexually transmissible infections and pregnancy. We find from the data that most of these young people found sex education to be useless because it was not inclusive. In comparison with normative studies, these young people were on average, sexually active earlier, had higher rates of diagnosed sexually transmissible infections and at least as high incidence of pregnancy. We conclude from the data that there is a need for sex education in schools to be inclusive of the sexuality of all students, not just those who are attracted to the opposite sex.

(205 wds)

Key words

sex education; sexually transmissible infections; same sex attraction; adolescence; sexual health

Introduction

Schools are ideally placed to provide comprehensive and inclusive sex education to all young people because their core business is education, and also because all young people attend school for some part of their lives. However, sex education has always been a contested site in the school curriculum, perhaps because highly emotive notions of morality are entangled in the subject matter and as a society we remain fearful of the sexuality of adolescents. Vigorous debate about the role of the family in sex education, the provision of ‘too much’ or the ‘wrong kind’ of information and the destruction of innocence have remained powerful and current throughout the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st. This legacy has ensured that the legitimate territory of sex education remains unstable and open to colonisation by those on either side of the debate.

In spite of this somewhat fraught history, young people in Australia currently nominate school programs as their most useful source of sexual health information (Smith et al., 2003) and regard it as a source to be highly trusted (Rosenthal & Smith, 1995). Considerable international effort over the last few decades has gone into evaluating sex education and with frequently inconclusive results. However, it has been demonstrated that, despite all fears to the contrary, sex education does not lead to earlier or increased sexual activity (Baldo et al., 1993; Franklin et al., 1997), has been shown to potentially delay initiation of sex (Baldo et al., 1993; Kirby, 2001) and to decrease the number of sexual partners a young person may have (Kim, et al., 1997; Jemmot & Jemmot, 2000). Sex education has also been seen to increase both the intention to use condoms, and their actual use (Kim, et al., 1997; Franklin, et al., 1997; Kirby 2001). None of these findings have put to rest the paternalistic belief that young people, once apprised of sexual possibilities, will instantly and hedonistically indulge in them without discretion. This fear has persisted and remained robust through all these debates.

It is therefore not surprising that any demand for sex education, which is inclusive of sexual diversity, is seen as a new threat around which the forces of conservatism and traditional

Christian morality must rally. In the United States the politicisation of the imperative to teach 'abstinence only' programs has been seen increasingly since 1998 with nearly one billion dollars of government funding attached to compliance since that time (SEICUS, 2006). Such programs, seeing the goal as the preparation of every adolescent to form half of a heterosexual married couple, confirm the ongoing exclusion of any who do not fit this paradigm. In the United Kingdom the emotive debates accompanying the 2003 repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act which prohibited the 'promoting' of homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship' indicated a similar polarisation and potential for 'moral panic' in that country (Moran 2001).

The trajectory of inclusive sex education has been more positive in Australia where a proactive response to the HIV pandemic led to a refocus on, and a prioritising of, sex education for young people in schools. The federal government's pre-emptive response to the threat posed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in 1988 was based on the frightening lack of success repressive measures were having in the USA, and took on the challenge to work in partnership with the gay community, providing 'arm's length' funding for explicit and culturally acceptable sexual health promotion campaigns for gay men. The infrastructure set up to carry out these initiatives also had the capacity to engage with the schools sector and support HIV/AIDS prevention education there. In the third National AIDS strategy in Australia (Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, 1996), young people were nominated as an 'at risk' group and school the obvious venue for providing them with education that would help protect them.

As a result, the Federal and some state governments commissioned the development of new frameworks and materials for sex education (ANCAHRD, 2001; STD/HIV Education Project (2003) with an imperative to provide young people with the information and motivation they need to conduct their sexual lives safely. Anxiety about HIV smoothed the pathway for these developments, cutting across many of the earlier debates. It is now generally accepted in

Australia, that schools have a responsibility to young people to provide them with information about safe sex and relationships so that they can protect themselves from infectious diseases and pregnancy. However, sex education is not mandated in any state or territory of Australia and its provision is 'ad hoc' and somewhat discretionary in its nature. Individual schools make decisions within broad curriculum frameworks about what will specifically be taught and, at this level, debate continues about what will be acceptable to parents. These decisions generally favour the teaching of reproductive sex and safe sex based on penis-vagina sex. Where relationships are included in a social context, they are generally confined to heterosexual relationships. This means that the 7-11% (Hillier et al., 1996; Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997; Smith et al., 2003) of young people who are same sex attracted remain at risk of missing out on relevant sex education.

In the first study of its kind in Australia, *Writing Themselves In* (Hillier et al., 1998), a national report on the sexuality health and well-being of 750 same sex attracted young people, reported that barely one in 10 of these young people were getting the information they needed about safe sex and relationships from school or family (Hillier et al., 1999), the two sources that young people access and trust for information of this kind. The information provided by the family and the school was confined to heterosexual safe sex and relationships, leaving young people who had same sex encounters with little information about protecting themselves from sexually transmissible infections (STIs). Same sex attracted young people heard nothing about how to protect themselves within same sex encounters and experienced such invisibility in the classroom that they 'tuned out' on safe sex information generally leaving them also ill-equipped if they had sex with members of the opposite sex. It is possible that this may be a contributing factor in explaining why, in the previous year, research with 3500 senior student around Australia revealed that same sex attracted young people were many times more likely to have been diagnosed with an STI than their opposite sex attracted peers (25% of young men and 12% of young women). A lack of relevant safe sex information

was regarded as one of the reasons for the high incidence of STIs in this group at the time (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997) and the question warrants further research.

Since the 1998 study, the introduction in 2001 of the new and inclusive national framework and teaching materials in the *Talking Sexual Health* package (ANCAHRD, 2001) has been implemented with accompanying teacher training, and there have also been specific curriculum initiatives in many states, for example, the *Catching On* curriculum in Victoria (STD/HIV Education Project, 2003). At the same time, a plethora of community development projects around Australia, (many of which have included social support groups for same sex attracted young people) have meant that work to address homophobia and discrimination has been implemented in many school communities, including an emphasis on an inclusive curriculum. This work has not gone on without challenge and the inclusion of these issues in school programs is still unusual and highly contested. The lack of policy and systemic leadership on these issues from educational authorities has left those many individual teachers willing to take on this work, feeling under-confident and uncertain. Six years after the first report, *Writing Themselves In* (Hillier et al., 1998), we were interested in whether same sex attracted young people were receiving adequate sex education and how useful they felt sex education had been for them.

The aims of this paper are: to report on young people's first realisations of sexual difference and their sexual behaviours; to document rates of pregnancy and STIs in this group; to document the extent to which same sex attracted young people in 2004 reported receiving information about gay and lesbian relationships and safe sex from a number of sources including family, school, friends, media, and gay community in comparison with a 1998 study; to report on young people's perception of the usefulness of sex education and to make recommendations about sex education from here.

Design and Methodology

The methodology from the 1998 national survey was repeated. A reference group was formed to advise the researchers throughout the project including feedback on the survey, design and layout of advertising and other print material, budget expenditure, recruitment strategies and dissemination of results. Ethics approval was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee.

A self-complete survey, based on the 1998 survey (with some changes) was made available at the beginning of 2004 on the internet and in printed form. The survey was piloted with young people and youth workers in urban and rural areas. Items with ambiguities and were altered accordingly and some language changed to make it more youth friendly. The project was advertised nationally in magazines, on the internet and through youth networks. Young Australians aged between 14 and 21 years, who were sexually attracted to people of their own sex, were invited to participate. The survey included demographics and items on homophobic abuse, sexual identity, attraction and behaviour, drug use, self-harm and feelings of safety in a number of venues. Of particular interest for this paper was a Sex Education Information section where young people could report their sources of information regarding relationships and safe sex and their opinions on whether sex education in school had been useful to them. These items were a repeat of those used in the 1998 study. There were also items on first realisations of sexual difference, sexual behaviours, experiences of pregnancy and STIs.

Young people were invited to complete the survey anonymously online via the www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay/ website or fill out a coupon in a magazine with their name and address and apply for a copy. They could also leave their contact details on a toll free answering service for the survey to be sent to them. The content for the web-based version was the same as the hard copy version, with the format modified in order for participants to

simply scroll down and submit at the end. To ensure anonymity was maintained, the mail-back process was configured to conceal participants' email addresses.

Using the term 'same sex attracted'

As with our previous research (Hillier et al., 1996; Hillier et al., 1998) and the five yearly national school studies in Australia (Lindsay et al., 1997; Smith et al., 2003), we adopted the descriptive term 'same sex attracted' for a number of reasons. First, young people tend to experience sexual attractions long before they assign themselves with a sexual identity and so by using sexual attraction as our criterion we were maximising our potential research population. Second, unlike the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian', 'same sex attracted' is less threatening for organisations and young people. We were, for example, given permission to distribute a rural survey through education department schools using a question about attraction where we may not have been able to use the terms gay or lesbian (Hillier et al., 1996). Third, by using the term 'same sex attracted' we are not foreclosing on young people's sexual futures by using a firm identity. Young people who are same sex attracted today may or may not become the gay or lesbian adults of the future.

Data analysis

Surveys were received via email and in hard copy and then transposed into quantitative (SPSS v12) and qualitative (Excel) computer programs. Excel was used because each set of qualitative data focussed on one issue and needed organising and matching with the appropriate quantitative responses. Other specific qualitative programs were less able to achieve this aim. Qualitative data were cleaned, names and other identifying features removed and pseudonyms created. Two researchers worked together establishing codes within each subset of data and then checking the validity of the other's coding. Inter-rater reliability stood at 95%. Descriptive and comparative statistical analyses were undertaken with the quantitative data. A sub-sample of 15-18 year old students was extracted from the data set and used to compare with findings of the 2003 high school survey (Smith et al., 2003). Related

qualitative and quantitative data were grouped to give depth to the quantitative associations (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994; Dzurec & Abraham, 1993). For example the quantitative data from the item *Did you receive any sex education at school?* was coupled with qualitative data from the item *How useful was it for you?*

Results and discussion

Profile of the young people

It is impossible to calculate a response rate for this survey. We used a scattergun advertising approach in an attempt to reach as many young people as possible and, because no one was directly approached to be involved in the research, we have no idea how many same sex attracted young people were exposed to the advertising.

We received 1749 valid surveys, over double the number in the 1998 study. Criteria for inclusion were that young people were same-sex attracted, 14 – 21 years of age and Australian residents. One hundred and thirty questionnaires were excluded because they were incomplete, vexacious or replicated.

Young people were on average, 18 years old with young women being 6 months younger. The gender balance was skewed towards young men, who made up 63% (n=1106) of the group. More of the young men (70%, n=769) than the young women (45%, n=291) found out about the survey via the web and more young women through magazines (18%, n=115 young women and 3%, n=33 young men). There were nine transgender young people (7 m-f and 2 f-m) in the sample.

Eighty-eight percent (n=1539) were born in Australia and (2%, n=35), New Zealand. Of the 10% (n=175) born elsewhere, the majority were born in the Americas (3%, n=51), North-West Europe (3%, n=51) and South-East Asia (2%, n=35). In all, 43 countries were represented, 36 of which we classified as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD),

mainly on the basis of language difference of the birth country of the young person or either of his or her parents. On this basis 22% (n=385) of the young people were classified as having a CALD background. As well, 2% (n=35) were of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI) background, the same percentage for the 1998 survey and a little under the population census figure of 2.9% (Census of Population and Housing: Australia's Youth. (2001). Australian Bureau of Statistics).

From postcode information, we ascertained that 80% (n=1327) of young people came from major Australian cities, 15% (n=256) from inner regional Australia, 4% (n=68) from outer regional Australia and less than 1% from remote Australia (n=13). This distribution is similar to that of the general population in Australia.

Thirty-seven percent (n=654) of young people attended school and 34% (n=670) were at University or TAFE. Other than school and university young people worked full time (12%, n=213) and part time (29%, n=270) although many of these (23%, n=404 of the full sample) studied as well. Four percent (n=70) of young people were unemployed.

Finally, in response to the question: *Which of these statements best describes your sexual feelings at the moment?* young people could choose one of four options: *I am attracted only to people of my own sex; I am attracted to people of both sexes; I am attracted only to people of the opposite sex; I am not sure whom I am attracted.* Sixty six percent of the sample was attracted exclusively to the same sex (78% young men, 45% young women), 29% were attracted to both sexes (19% young men, 46% young women) and 5% were unsure (3% young men, 6% young women). Gender differences were significant ($X^2 = 193.41, p = .000$).

First realisation about sexual difference

There remains in debates about sex education, a strong concern that information given to young people will act as an inducement to sexual experimentation. For this reason, although it

is not the main focus of this paper, young people's age at first realisation of sexual difference is important here. As part of a request for stories we asked young people to tell us when they first knew about their sexual difference and in what context this occurred. Twenty-seven percent of young people (n=476) included this information in their stories and of these 11% (n=51), roughly equal numbers of young men and young women, said they 'always knew'. A further 15% (n=70) knew before they were 11 years of age and a further 36% (n=174) before they were 14. All of the young people in the sample knew by the time they were 19 years. In Victoria, one Australian state, recent revisions to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards have included, for the first time, information about same sex attraction and homophobia in the recommended curriculum at years nine and 10 when young people are 15 and 16 (VCAA, 2005). We do not want to minimise the importance of this new step, but it is clearly too late for around 80% of young people who recognise their sexual difference before age 12 and experience invisibility and isolation by this age. Moreover as we will see in the next section, many of these young people are also sexually active by this time.

Sexual Behaviour

Unlike the 1998 survey, and in line with the 2003 national high school study (Smith et al., 2003), we asked young people questions about the age at which they were first involved in specific sexual practices including deep kissing, genital fondling, oral and penetrative sex. Ninety percent (n=1568) of young people had experienced deep kissing, 88% (n=1542) had touched a partner's genitals, 88% (n=1545) had had their genitals touched, 80% (n=1398) had given oral sex, 79% (n=1387) had received oral sex, and 69% (n=1211) had experienced penetrative sex.

Two large national studies of high school students in Australia, one in 1997 (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal) and the other in 2003 (Smith et al., 2003) found that same sex attracted young people were sexually active earlier than heterosexual young people. When we compare the 15–18 year old school-attending sub-sample in this study we find that 63% of this group had

experienced penetrative sex compared with less than half of the equivalent national high school sample. Simon's description of his sexual pathway is one of many experienced by the young men.

I first knew I 'liked boys' when I was in year 4 [9 years], first touched a boy's penis at age 11, first blew, and got a blow in year 8 [13 year], first had anal sex at 17 (Simon 19 years).

There are arguably many reasons for the earlier sexual activity of this group, however, one that makes most sense relates to young people's reactions to the dissonance they experience when they realise that their feelings are regarded negatively by their family and their community. As demonstrated earlier, first realisations of difference often come early to this group and when young people realise there is a taboo on their feelings, it is likely that they will feel impelled to either, 'test out' their attractions with people of their own gender to settle it once and for all, or try to prove to themselves that they are heterosexual by having sex with the opposite sex. The added motivation to 'settle the matter' by experiencing sex could easily explain the earlier sexual experiences of these young people.

Sexuality is often described as having three main components: sexual attraction, sexual identity and sexual behaviour (Laumann, et al., 1994). Because the literature with this group indicates that attraction and identity are not good predictors of sexual behaviour, especially for young women (Diamond, 2000; Dempsey et al., 2001; Hillier 2001), we asked about sexual behaviour, that is, the gender of young people's sexual partners over the previous two years. This is especially important because sexual behaviour is obviously a better predictor of sexual risk than attraction or identity. In line with previous research, young men were more likely to be having sex with partners of the gender they were attracted to than the young women. Of the young men, 61% (n=661) had had sex with males only, 16% (n=174) had had sex with both sexes, 3% with females only (n=28) and 21% (n=229) had not had sex. Of the young women, 30% (n=188) had had sex with females only, 30% (n=188) had had sex with

both sexes, 12% (n=77) with males only and 28% (n=175) had not had sex. Though not the focus of this paper, for many of these young women, there was a lack of congruence between the three aspects of their sexuality. The reasons for this have been canvassed in other publications (Dempsey et al., 2001; Hillier, 2001; Hillier, 2006) and have important ramifications for those who work with these young women. Disclosure of a lesbian identity to teachers and health professionals should not mean that a young woman can be assumed to have sex only with women, nor does it give specific direction to the kind of health information she needs. For the young men, of whom two thirds were sexually active with men, information about safe sex practices is particularly vital to their sexual health.

Pregnancy

Given these findings about the extent and nature of the sexual activity experienced by these young people it is important to explore some of the consequences before going to look at the provision of sex education. Of those young women who had engaged in penetrative sex with males, 11% (n=46) reported having been pregnant, with one third of these being attracted exclusively to their own sex and 26% (n=12) identifying as gay or lesbian.

In order to compare pregnancy rates with the national high school study (Smith et al., 2003) we separated out the 15–18 year old female students in the study. Eight percent of the Year 10 and 12 young women in the national high school study reported having had sex that resulted in pregnancy, while 10% of the 15-18 year old young women in this study had been pregnant. Given the focus on the prevention of teen pregnancy in most sex education programs, this information may well be of vital importance. We know that same sex attracted young women are sexually active earlier than their heterosexual peers and the sexual behaviour often involves penis vagina sex. This finding should not be unexpected and adds both to the special issues facing these young women, and the rationale for educating them.

Sexually transmissible infections (STIs)

We added a new question in the 2004 survey asking young people if they had ever been diagnosed with a sexually transmissible infection (STI). Of the 1710 young people who answered this item, 14% (n = 230) reported in the affirmative and a range of infections noted. In terms of gender, young men (17%, n=161) were more likely to have been diagnosed with an STI than young women (12%, n=69).

Ten percent of the sexually active 15-18 year old sub-sample in this study had been diagnosed with an STI. This rate of diagnosis is five times (10% vs. 2%). that of young people in the national high school study (Smith et al., 2003). Additional research should investigate whether this increased incidence of STIs stems partly from a lack of access to relevant safe sex information from trusted sources. Such sources are available to provide safe sex information to most young people about heterosexual sex.

Sources of information about relationships

In 1998 we found that fewer than 10% of young people had accessed information about gay relationships and lesbian relationships from school and the family, whereas information about heterosexual relationships was much more readily available from these traditionally trusted sources (Hillier et al., 1999). In 2005 there was some improvement in regard to the school and the family as providers of information about gay or lesbian relationships (see Table I below), with one in five young people now receiving this information from school in comparison with one in 10 in 1998.

Place Table 1 here

A further age analysis of the data, comparing the experiences of the 14-17 and 18-21 age groups showed sex education at school to be more inclusive over the last four years. The 14-17 year old sub-sample was significantly more likely to have learned about gay and lesbian relationships at school than the older 18-21 year old group (26% GR vs 14%GR, $X^2 = 38.45$,

$p = .000$) and (27%LR vs 14%LR, $X^2 = 55.921$, $p = .000$). It may be that one in four school-attending same sex attracted young people is now receiving inclusive relationships education at school.

Despite improvements, this figure is still low and young people found other avenues, in particular, the internet, to be an important source of information about gay and lesbian relationships. Many young people wrote about turning to the internet for information when they realized they were same sex attracted. Garrett was typical of this:

I first realised feelings for other guys when i was about 13 years old. I explored internet sites and went searching for information on gays. I began chatting on internet sites around that time. No one knew i was gay. (Garrett 20 years)

As well, gay media, same sex attracted friends and gay community were gay-connected sources of information that young people used that tended to 'even-up' the heterosexual bias of information in traditional sources though general media was also an important traditional information source for over half of the young people in the study.

Sources of information about safe sex

A similar trend was found in data on information sources about safe sex (see Table II below). Most young people learned about heterosexual safe sex at school whereas few learned about gay or lesbian safe sex at school. Many young people learned about heterosexual safe sex from the family but few families provided information about gay or lesbian safe sex. As with sources about relationships, the major source of information about safe sex was the internet, a safe sex information source that heterosexual young people tend not to trust (Smith et al., 2003). Gay connected sources such as same sex attracted friends, gay community and gay media were also well used. As with school and family, general media provided little information about gay or lesbian safe sex.

Place Table 2 here

Once again, an age analysis showed that the 14-17 year olds were significantly more likely to have learned about gay safe sex (33% vs 22%, $X^2 = 21.008$, $p = .000$) and lesbian safe sex (29% vs 15%. $X^2 = 25.329$, $p = .000$) at school than the 18-21 year old group, indicating a trend towards inclusiveness of sexual difference in safe sex education in Australia over the last five years.

These data are encouraging, but still present a problem for educators in Australia today, especially if we accept that all young people have the right to receive appropriate sex education at school. Same sex attracted youth are on average sexually active earlier than their heterosexual peers and many of these young people are at a higher risk for STIs and yet not enough schools, the traditional providers of sex education, are providing them with the safe sex and relationship education that heterosexual students are receiving. In an effort to triangulate the data, we asked a further question about the usefulness of the sex education to them that these young people received.

Usefulness of sex education at school

Ninety-three percent (n=1591) of young people reported that they had been taught sex education at school. In response to the item: *How useful was it?* 85% (n=1449) gave an explanation to their answers. These were coded into four categories – not at all useful, partly useful, moderately useful and very useful. Forty percent of young people (n=579) felt sex education was not useful at all, 40% (n=576) felt it was hardly useful because it had no same sex content, 10% (n=143) said it was moderately useful and 10% (n=145) found it very useful.

Josh and Sam who identified as gay, were two of the 40% who found the classes to be of no use at all:

Not at all. It only covers heterosexual sex, it really doesn't cover anyone outside the heterosexual, gender binary type system Perhaps they need to make note that there are others like us out there (and in school) (Josh 20 years)

Not useful at all...in fact it was as useful as a chocolate kettle (Sam, 18 years)

For those young people who had opposite sex partners, sex education was to some degree useful. Kelley who was bisexual and Lee found they was only partly catered for:

It was mostly hetero-related and of course that's always useful, you're not as scared when you go to have sex with a guy because you've been told how it all works. But at high school they don't exactly tell you how same-sex relations work, they would maybe think they were encouraging you and no one wants that. They talked a little bit about homophobia etc. but the concept of "bisexuality" is ignored, sometimes there is less of an understanding or tolerance of that than rather than homosexuality itself. (Kelley 18 years)

In terms of information about heterosexual safe sex - invaluable. In terms of homosexual safe sex - ohmygod, you mean there are people who aren't straight? In other words; no information whatsoever. (Lee 21 years)

Robin, who was part of the 10% who found sex education fairly useful, could supplement what he learned with information from elsewhere

Fairly useful... I felt the need to look up where I was unsure or wanted to know more about. (Robin 20 years)

Finally, about ten percent of young people found their sex education classes to be quite satisfactory because classes were inclusive of sexual difference and their own experiences were included.

Sure, [sex education] it was useful because we were taught that it's ok, and that it's being accepted (Rodney 16 years)

One could argue that same sex attracted young people should be able to transfer the information they need from classes on safe heterosexual sex to their own practice but the data belie this. Because the information was seen as not relevant to their lives, many young people simply lost interest, or in the words of one young woman – ‘*not overly - it was all aimed at straight students so i just tuned out*’.(Lily, 18 years). We can deduce from comments like this that information that is couched in heterosexuality is irrelevant to some non-heterosexual young people despite the fact that they may have sex with opposite sex partners. Assuming that all young people are heterosexual, immediately brackets the information as not personally relevant for many same sex attracted young people regardless of their sexual practices.

In summary, though the percentages were very small, there is reason to believe that Australian schools are moving towards sex education that is inclusive of sexual difference, however, the shift is so recent that few of the 18-21 year olds were able to take advantage of it.

Conclusion

These findings reflect the beginnings of change and we celebrate that, however, we are a long way from all young people being provided with the information at school that they need to have safe sexual relationships. Change is in progress but only within individual schools and without strong support or leadership from departments of education there is no guarantee that

the momentum will be maintained. Provision of this information is not only important for same sex attracted young people, it is also vital for all young people as its inclusion in the school curriculum gives it a legitimacy which can help to reduce discriminatory attitudes. School safety and the involvement of caring adults rank highly as protective factors for same sex attracted high school students (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006). The very high incidence of homophobic abuse that is currently occurring in Australian secondary schools (Hillier et al., 2005) indicates that these factors are not universally present and discriminatory attitudes need to be addressed. The sexual health classroom provides a unique opportunity to begin educating for change and inclusion.

The data in this study revealed a number of findings on the sexual health of same sex attracted young people in Australia. These young people were sexually active at an earlier age than their heterosexual peers, many of them, especially the young women, with partners of the opposite sex. They were on average five times more likely to report having been diagnosed with an STI and the young women, many of them exclusively same sex attracted, were at least as likely as their heterosexual peers to have sexual intercourse that resulted in a pregnancy. The higher rates of STIs may be because their sexual partners are in a higher risk group for STIs or because SSA young people have more and/or earlier sex. Regardless of the answer, we know that accurate knowledge about STIs and pregnancy are a necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) part of the safe sex equation. Knowledge alone may not change young people's sexual practices but without the knowledge, safe, protected sex is unlikely to occur.

The findings outlined in this article underline the importance of finding ways of delivering sexual health information to this group in a way that is meaningful and relevant. Given the history of contestation of school sex education, this is not likely to be readily resolved. Many school communities are still struggling against opposition to the inclusion of sex positive health information for heterosexual students, and are less likely to be able to accommodate the needs of same sex attracted students or willing to take on advocacy for the issue.

Nevertheless schools remain the best and most universally available source of appropriate information for same sex attracted young people. Access to sexual health information is a human rights issue for all young people and particularly for those whose interests are marginalised or made invisible.

Strong leadership which legitimises and expects positive change in this area must be shown by both health and education authorities in each state if the change is to be systemic and sustainable. Readily available classroom resources and training to support their use must be available to teachers throughout Australia. Care to ensure that sexual health programs are not heterosexist or discriminatory, either in their content or mode of delivery, is vital if such programs are to meet the needs of all students. Teachers must feel confident to engage in a continual checking of language, content, and the assumptions underlying both to ensure a genuine responsiveness and inclusiveness. Access to information about sexual health and safety cannot continue to be made available only to some students when it is clear that those who most need it are also the most likely to have their needs overlooked.

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Table 1 Sources of information about heterosexual (HR), gay (GR) and lesbian (LR) relationships.

	HR n(%) n=1492	GR n(%) n=1539	LR n(%) n=1279
Family	1029 (69)	277(18)	203 (16)
School	1280 (86)	296 (19)	250 (19)
Het peers	1207 (81)	403 (26)	325 (25)
Media	1183 (79)	735 (48)	589 (46)
SSA peers	620 (42)	1047(68)	783 (61)
Gay media	436 (29)	927 (60)	734 (57)
Gay comm'y	323 (22)	760 (49)	591 (46)
Internet	986 (66)	1129 (73)	772 (60)

Table 2 Sources of information about heterosexual safe sex (HSS), gay safe sex (GSS) and lesbian safe sex (LSS)

	HSS n(%) n=1519	GSS n(%) n=1447	LSS n(%) n=954
Family	932 (61)	301(21)	99 (10)
School	1412 (93)	386 (27)	204 (21)
Het peers	1024 (67)	262 (18)	112 (12)
Media	1181 (78)	429 (30)	207 (22)
SSA peers	462(30)	777 (54)	437 (46)
Gay media	368 (24)	898 (62)	473 (50)
Gay comm'y	307 (20)	808(56)	503 (53)
Internet	948 (62)	995(69)	510 (54)