

Telling kids homophobia is wrong won't stop bullying in schools

16 September 2014, by Mary Lou Rasmussen, Fida Sanjakdar, Kathleen Quinlivan And Louisa Allen



Teaching kids that homophobia is wrong won't necessarily stop sexuality or gender bullying. Flickr/Kurt Lowenstein Education, CC BY-SA

There is no doubt that homophobic bullying is a problem in Australian schools. The latest [Writing Themselves in](#) report published by Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria reports 80% of young gay, lesbian or questioning teens experience gender and sexuality-based bullying in the form of physical and verbal assault while at school.

So how should schools respond to incidents of teasing and bullying related to [gender](#) and sexual identity? In an article [Challenging homophobic bullying in schools](#), Daniel Monk draws attention away from therapeutic or disciplinary responses to bullying, arguing we should understand [homophobic bullying](#) as part of a broader politics related to childhood and [sexuality](#).

He challenges the idea that an educative response to such bullying is to try and stamp it out by educating young people about why it is wrong. While this approach acknowledges the harms caused by violence, it also silences other experiences of [homophobia](#).

We gave students the scenario below of a young boy with feminine qualities being bullied, and asked what they thought he should do. Students we spoke to were in years 9 and 10 and attended public schools in Australia and New Zealand. The following is a response from a female student at a Melbourne outer suburbs high school:

A new boy has started in your class at school and he has been teased by other students because they think he is a sissy-boy, his name is Joshua but he prefers to be called Jo. He mainly hangs out with a few girls and he likes to wear make-up to school. His parents don't care what he wears or how he looks as long as he is happy. For as long as his family can remember he has enjoyed dressing up, wearing jewellery and putting on shows for his family.

Q: What advice would you give Jo about being teased?

Bisar: *If he doesn't care what people think, just don't think about them. If he wants to be like that, he can be like that, but if he actually gets offended at what people say, he should actually take it into consideration and try fixing it. So, he'll either ignore it, or he's got to fix it.*

Q: You think it's worth fixing it if he wants to?

Bisar: *Yeah, if he wants to, he can fix it. If he wants to actually get a girlfriend and be like a man, he's got to fix it. But if he likes the way he is, who cares?*

One reading of this exchange is that Bisar has the wrong answer - there is a suggestion here that Jo is broken because he is transsexual and needs fixing. One could respond by educating Bisar that this is the wrong way to think about gender and bullying.

But in responding to bullying related to gender and sexuality we want to suggest the need for a response that doesn't fix Jo, or Bisar, but rather

thinks more about about the politics of what it means for schools and students to respond well to bullying. We want to resist the impulse to immediately correct Bisar's thinking about Jo - because such a response individualises the problem as Bisar's transphobia or homophobia and fails to recognise how homophobia is shaped by cultural and religious difference.

Schools need to be having conversations that recognise that students don't all think about gender and sexuality in the same way.

Stating that we need to do something about gender, sexuality and bullying therefore involves first grasping how students think about gender and sexuality. Where did Bisar get the idea that Jo needs fixing? And where did she get the idea that Jo might not need fixing, that he might like the way he is - and that it is okay?

Misconceptions about sexuality, gender and bullying

Common misconceptions exist about sexuality, gender and bullying, and how schools should cope with these issues. Some of these include:

- That we can agree on what homophobia and transphobia are - and that this is stable over time
- That there is a "right way" to respond to homophobia and transphobia
- That teachers and students should all challenge homophobia and transphobia
- That people who are homophobic and transphobic will benefit from anti-bullying education that illustrates why such beliefs are wrong

If an aim of anti-bullying education is to create spaces in which young people who are lesbian, [gay](#), bisexual or trans identified may be safer, can we assume that saying homophobia and transphobia are wrong will have this desired effect?

This strategy attempts to shift responsibility away from individual students and onto schools and teachers, and to use sexuality education to explore historical, cultural and religious roots of

homophobia and transphobia.

Classrooms should be a place for conversations about sexuality, homophobia and transphobia that recognise [students'](#) diverse backgrounds.

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