

Rainbow Network
c/o Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria
Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health &
Society
Latrobe University
First Floor, 215 Franklin St,
Melbourne City 3000.

Monday, 14 January 2008

Rainbow Network submission to the Equal Opportunity Review.

In response to the Discussion Paper distributed in November 2007 I have prepared the following brief paper on behalf of Rainbow Network.

For further questions or clarification please contact me on (03) 9285 5203 or by email on f.martin@latrobe.edu.au. As I am only available on Thursday each week, for urgent enquires please contact me on 0411 593 607 at any other time.

Yours sincerely,

Felicity Marlowe
Rainbow Network Project Coordinator

Introduction

Rainbow Network is the Victorian Statewide Network for workers who facilitate groups, coordinate projects or work with same sex attracted, bisexual, queer and transgender young people in the community or school-based settings.

Rainbow Network provides a unique opportunity for workers who work in this new and emerging area to:

- exchange ideas, information and resources
- discuss issues that may emerge when working with young people, their families, schools and community agencies
- hear from guest speakers about the latest research, government initiatives or community information
- advocate for same sex attracted, bisexual, queer and transgender young people and
- develop partnerships between agencies and schools aimed at empowering young people to participate in decision making and community development opportunities
- Plan and develop activities for same sex attracted, bisexual, queer and transgender young people to meet each other and participate in discussions

The Project Coordinator position was created in 2005 after the Network had been informally organised and ran by volunteers since 1998.

Response to key questions – note not all have been answered.

1. *Does the law need to be changed to improve the equality of opportunity and the elimination of discrimination in Victoria?*

And

2. *What are the social and economic costs and benefits involved in reforming the EOA to eliminate discrimination to the greatest possible extent?*
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One of the key areas of interest to many Rainbow Network members, and the same sex attracted, queer and transgender young people they work with, is the experience of young people within the Victorian Education System, both at the primary and secondary level.

The “Writing Themselves in Again – 6 years on” report (2005) collated survey responses from 1749 same sex attracted young people across Australia, with approximately 25% from Victoria. The report summarised that:

*“Many of these young people (38%) had experienced unfair treatment on the basis of their sexuality despite the fact that such treatment is illegal throughout Australia. Work and school were common sites of this discrimination. In addition, 44% reported verbal abuse and 16% reported physical assault because of their sexuality, figures that are largely unchanged from 1998. Verbal abuse extended beyond name-calling and insults to include threats and rumour mongering. Physical abuse ranged from having clothes and possessions damaged to rape and hospitalisation for injuries. **The most common site for this abuse, as in 1998, was school and this remains the most dangerous place for these young people to be with 74% of all the abuse happening there.**”¹*

Anecdotal evidence collected by Rainbow Network members suggests a number of reasons why same sex attracted or transgender young people may leave school: fear of being “outed”, being outed, suffering bullying and harassment with little or no intervention by school administration, being ostracized by peers as well as associated factors such as homelessness, drug or alcohol abuse or self harm. It should be noted that some young people who are perceived to be same sex attracted, because of how they look, talk or act for example, may also become victims of bullying and harassment.

The law does need to be changed to ensure a greater emphasis on addressing systemic discrimination in the education system against same sex attracted and transgender young people. The social and economic benefits or higher rates of retention in the education system amongst young people would benefit both the individuals impacted and society more generally.

There are a number of Victorian metropolitan schools such as Eltham High School and Princess Hill Secondary College which have gained reputations as schools which will accommodate young people who leave another school due to issues or circumstances related to their actual or perceived sexuality or gender identity. The Student Welfare Coordinators at each school would be excellent resources for further investigation on why their school environments manage to foster welcoming and inclusive school communities.

¹ Hillier et al (2005) Writing themselves in Again – 6 Years On. ARCSHS Latrobe University. Page x

4. *What role should the Commission have in preventing discrimination, including additional powers or functions (if any)?*

Extending the scope of the Commission to be able to provide more in-school training to school staff about the EOA as well as offering professional development similar to the "Safety in Our Schools" sessions previously coordinated by Peter Gourley within the VEOHRC would be a great start to ensuring consistency with schools when addressing systemic discrimination.

The Commission could consider further research into the experiences of same sex attracted and transgender young people in Victorian schools. Such evidence would be very useful in convincing schools that they do need to address issues of homophobia and gender stereotyping within their school community, regardless of whether or not they *know* if there are same sex attracted or transgender youth people enrolled at the school. The scope of such research could include children of rainbow families or LGBTI staff members.

Systemic discrimination

Systemic discrimination is evident with the Victorian Education system with most schools lacking either inclusive or thorough anti-bullying or anti-harassment policies, or safe school policies or diversity policies, which encompass key characteristics included in the EOA. In addition the Victorian Essential Learning Standards has limited provision for classroom teachers to include discussions on homophobia or transgender issues if the individual teacher chooses to but there is a definite lack of consistent information or educational material available for use in the curriculum areas of history, legal studies, health or SOSE, for example.

While some individual teachers in some schools are participating in free or in-house training provided by Rainbow Network, individual Network members, Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria or the VEOHRC, there is a general lack of relevant or consistent information being provided to young people about sexual health or wellbeing. The following excerpt from the Writing Themselves in Again Report highlights this lack:

*"There is, however, strong evidence that schools are beginning to provide relevant sex education information for same sex attracted young people with the 14-17 year old group being significantly more likely to learn about homophobia and discrimination, gay and lesbian relationships and safe sex than the 18-21 year old group. Though this was still the minority of schools, there is an indication of change towards inclusive sex education. Overall 80% of respondents found sex education at school to be useless or fairly useless and only 20% found it at all useful."*²

The irrelevance of key health education subjects to same sex attracted students as well as the non-inclusion of information on gay or lesbian legal rights, rainbow families, significant historic events that include gay or lesbian issues or people, transgender people throughout history, for example, are all examples of both direct and indirect discrimination faced by same sex attracted and transgender young people, as well as young people with gay, lesbian or transgender parents or family members.

² *ibid.* Page xi.

Other key areas for consideration:

- Increased and improved education within schools is required to ensure young people are not only aware of what the Equal Opportunity Act is but how and when they can make a complaint.
- Need for a child/youth advocate program with the VEOHRC to support children and young people wishing to make complaints.
- Investigate why complaints about education are not recorded as one of the Top 10 issues when anecdotally Rainbow Network members, and many school staff members would rate education as a key area where discrimination is apparent.

Reports and websites of interest

Rainbow Network would like to refer the Equal Opportunity Review to the following reports and websites:

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay/publications.html>

Website of the Same Sex Attracted Young People's project – part of the Australian research centre into Sex, Health & Society. Reports of interest where school experience is mentioned include " *Writing Themselves In Again: 2nd national report on the health and wellbeing of same sex attracted young people - 2005* "

www.rainbownetwork.net.au

Website for Rainbow Network – contacts list of projects, project workers and social/support group from around Victoria, information about the Network, updates on research and resources, upcoming Professional Development including a session in February 2008 on schools and education.

Department of Education – Contact Steven O'Connor, Senior Project Officer, Sexuality Education Policy and Project Development, regarding the evaluations from the Sense & Sexuality Conference, July 2006.

Email: o'connor.steven.p@edumail.vic.gov.au

Not So Straight Report

A national study examining how Catholic schools can best respond to the needs of same sex attracted students. By Father Peter Norden (2007)

Order through Jesuit Social Services on (03) 9427 7388 or email: jss@jesuit.org.au

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.