

Victoria Rawlings – ‘Why LGBTQI School Students Need Your Help’

Moderator: Welcome to the podcast series of *Raising the Bar Sydney*. Raising the Bar in 2016 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into 20 bars across Sydney; all on one night. In this podcast, you will hear Victoria Rawlings talk, *Why LGBTQI Students Need Your Help*. Enjoy the talk.

Victoria Rawlings: Thank you. I hope you can all hear me. I was just saying I feel like Britney Spears with this mic on and hopefully I’m going to bust out some moves like that later. Thank you very much for being here. It’s really great to be part of this event and it’s really great to have so many friends and family here and colleagues and people that I don’t know, and some great students as well. Thank you so much for making the effort to be here.

Before I start my talk tonight, I do want to say that ... give a trigger warning that I will be talking explicitly about self-harm and suicide at some points in this talk. If that bothers you, please feel free to leave the room or just do whatever you need to do in that way. A lot of you in this room know that I’m pretty nervous about the talk tonight. I have been making it pretty clear that I’m pretty nervous and I’m going to be very relieved when it’s over.

One of the reasons that I’m nervous about this talk is because although I do a whole heap of public speaking and I do a whole heap of teaching and writing in public forums, is that talking about gender and sexuality and education is still a really vulnerable thing to do. There’s a lot of negative discourses that are around these issues that push back on you no matter which forum you’re in, and so kind of coming up into this space and having these discussions can be a little bit dangerous and sometimes a little bit vulnerable.

Just yesterday, I saw a Facebook post which was about this talk and on it, someone had written, started off a whole comment stream as Facebook does about how this talk was irrelevant because we shouldn’t be talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex students as being particular victims of bullying or violence, and in fact, we should be talking about bullying and violence generally as important for all students.

This is kind of like a problematic discourse and we’ll go into why that is later but all in all, these little moments can make you feel really vulnerable, and they represent moments that tell us that might call into question your identity or your right to just be you. Equally, I’ve heard that LGBTQ bullying is just a minority issue that’s not appropriate for educational bodies or schools to address because it affects such a small amount of people.

Of course, I’ve heard discussions about the gay and lesbian agenda which I’m not really sure what it is. I think that what it is is, us making everyone worship rainbow flags in some sort of cabal or something like that. I don’t know but these and other really hurtful discourses can fly up and that is what makes talking about these things sometimes difficult. The problem with all of these negative discourses is that we, as researchers, still have to make a case for our research and for our teaching. A lot of the time, this takes the form of us beginning with some really sad statistics about LGBTQ youth.

I could list a whole range of studies that tell us that LGBTQ youth are more likely to self-harm, they're more likely to attempt or complete suicide. They're more likely to have poorer academic outcomes in schools; they're more likely to be subject to abuse and violence.

They're more likely to have eating disorders; they are more likely to have problematic use of drugs and alcohol. All of these statistics probably make me sound really fatigued and I am fatigued because every time that we do a research paper, every time that we do a grant proposal or every time that we begin a talk, we kind of have to run through these. It's starting to feel a little bit like climate change, that scientists always have to say over and over again, "Climate change is real and human-induced climate change is real." Most people agree on this. The problem is that there's still a few people who push back against this and make it a problematic discourse for everyone.

I want to talk to you a little bit, to start off with, about my work last year and the year before which was at Lancaster University in the UK. My work there basically was to work on a national study about LGBT youth, self-harm and suicide and the reason that that study's different for me is that instead of just reading papers, I was actually talking with real, young people. You know, when I listed off all of those studies just before about all of those negative health outcomes, it's really different when you're actually talking to someone and we kind of gloss over these words like self-harm. I want to just return to that just for one second so that we know where we're coming from, we know what kind of things we're talking about.

I talked to a young person who was so distressed that they took a knife to their skin. I talked to a young person who was so distressed that they hit their head against a brick wall so many times that it bled and then they fell unconscious. I talked to young people who got themselves so inebriated with drugs and alcohol that they put themselves in dangerous situations, and that they were likely to be sexually assaulted in those situations. I talked to young people who were so hurt and hating themselves that they would walk along high ledges, that if they had fallen off, they would have died. These are the many different faces of self-harm and they make us realise that these young people are really hurting and really distressed, and that these problems are not simple. They're not flippant and that these young people are full of hurt and sadness and self-hatred. A lot of the time, these young people said that they did these things because they didn't deserve any better.

So let's talk about how they got to this point. A lot of the research around this area talks about the impact of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia on this young people. Indeed, 70% of the people who are in this study that I did, of which there were about 800 participants, had experienced homophobia, biphobia or transphobia and it was really distressing to them. In fact, it was so distressing that if you had experienced homophobia, biphobia or transphobia, you're one and a half times more likely to attempt suicide that if you had not.

I want to read to you a quote from one of our participants who's called Brianna. She experienced serious verbal and physical violence when she was at school that was homophobic. School was so difficult for her that in the end, she ended up attempting suicide.

She said that, "I remember just sitting there wanting more than anything to just die, to end it all. I was so, so sick of them hurting me. I didn't want to feel like this anymore and as I was, as I was constantly feeling like this the majority of the time, I remember thinking that the only way to make it all stop was to die." These words are incredibly powerful and they are pretty distressing as well.

They show us that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are really distressing for the individuals that are impacted by them. It also tells us about the difference between self-harm and suicide. Young people who are self-harming basically, most of the time, were doing it to cope with really difficult feelings and emotions. The difference with suicide was that they were no longer trying to cope. They had given up. They felt hopeless about their future and they wanted to end their lives.

So this shows us that the experience of homophobia or biphobia or transphobia or any kind of attacks related to your gender or sexuality are really important for us to think about. You might be thinking there was 30% in this study that didn't experience those things. Why would they be experiencing these really intense feelings of distress if it wasn't for those things? Importantly, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia is not always the major reason for distress. Distress can be really multifaceted but a lot of the time, it comes down to the norms and expectations that we have about gender and sexuality. Our findings show that one of the most powerful factors that related to self-harm or suicide in this population was them living up to expectations. These could be expectations of themselves, it could be expectations from their family, from their society or from their friends.

They felt, a lot of the time, that because they weren't straight or because they weren't cisgender, that they had failed and they felt ashamed of those things. I want to read for you another quote from Matthew, and he actually had a really supportive friendship group and family around him. They were so supportive that they led him to attend an LGBT youth group. When I met him there, he was super confident and happy and all of these kind of things. He mentioned that he was still self-harming and that he had been suicidal. He said to me that when he was talking about his realisation of his sexual and gender diversity, he said that it's distressing when it first starts happening because obviously, you want to deny it. Because no matter how much everyone says it's okay, part of you is always going to think that it's a minority and therefore, it's not as normal and all of this negative stuff could happen to me.

So here we've got Matthew thinking that he's not normal and we've got him thinking that although he's got friends and family that support him, he's actually not ever going to fit in and that all of this negative stuff could happen to him. It's not necessarily about experiencing abuse or violence but experiencing a society that is not accepting him for who he is.

I also spoke to a young man who was 24 called Faruk, a young Muslim man and he said to me, "When I was at school, I had difficulty accepting my sexuality. I was seen as different. I felt very lonely, isolated and I would lock myself inside the room, go home and start self-harming when I was young, because I used to feel like what I'm ... what I am and what I'm doing in life is wrong." All of these feelings I have are putting guilt and pressure on top of me."

“Because of my community and all my friends at the time, they were mainly Asians as well and they thought that choosing to be gay is completely wrong.” These two accounts show us that when young people feel that they are wrong or that they are failures, they become ashamed and they begin to question who they are in society, but this isn’t really surprising when we start to think about all of the symbols and signals that we get about gender and sexuality in our society.

In fact, this is where I’m going to deviate from the topic of this talk a little bit. This talk is actually called *Why LGBTQI School Students Need Your Help. Raising the Bar Sydney* helpfully chose that title for me but I think they thought it sounded really marketable. I’m just going to say that it’s really hard to get a 30 to 40 minute talk into a catchy title so they did a really good job with that, but I’m just going to go off-piste here and say we’re not going to run with that right now because we’re going to be talking about other students as well.

It’s not just about LGBTI students because all of us experience gender and sexual norms. To do this, I’m going to talk a little about my PhD research and just as a heads-up, this is coming out as a book in the next month or the month after and I expect every single person in this room to buy a copy, unemployed academic here. When I first started my PhD, I really wanted to look at homophobia in schools and how it impacted LGBT youth.

As I did some more reading and some more research, I found out that gender and sexual bullying actually impacts everyone. Regardless of your gender and sexuality, 80% of people will experience gender or sexual violence in their schooling regardless of their gender and sexuality. In fact, the average school student will hear four to five gender or sexuality-based insults per day at school. School is the most common place to hear these kind of things. They are critical sites for us to do research into this area. Gender and sexuality policing, which is what I’m going to be talking about a little ... for the next little while, is basically any kind of comment or action that communicates a particular norm or expectation around gender or sexuality. We hear these words so often that we often don’t know that they’re happening.

For example, a word like slut gets thrown around a lot, particularly in youth cultures. When we hear that word, it conveys to us that women have a particular standard that they need to have a particular kind of sexuality. They can’t sleep around too much basically. Not so long ago, I was driving in the car and a friend said, “Check out that girl. Her outfit is super slutty,” and I was like, “Whoa! Okay. That’s the wrong person to say that comment to.”

Basically, it shows us that the girl is not wearing the intended ... our society’s norms intended types of clothing. She’s not wearing enough maybe or what she’s wearing, she’s wearing it the wrong way. These kind of expectations are constantly shifting but they generally relate to an idealised form of femininity or masculinity. The thing about these things is that they impact on us all. We hear about them through a range of mediums, for example, through literature, through marketing, through popular culture and they also really importantly come through in our interactions. The important thing to realise about schools is that they actually teach us far more than what is in the syllabus or in the curriculum. We have things called the hidden curriculum or the overt curriculum. In hidden curriculum, we can learn about, for example, how we should get on with other people, how we should

sit, when we should stand up, how to fit in with the crowd or how to stand out. When we learn each of these lessons, often, they're embedded within understandings of gender and sexuality. In fact, research that was before my PhD said that inclusion into social context demanded that you be a certain kind of boy or girl and if you don't ascribe to those expectations, you'll probably not going to be included into school groups. We often hear this kind of phrase, fitting in so John is not fitting in with his group.

Maybe John, perhaps, is not playing the right kind of game with the boys. He is more interested in traditionally feminine activities and he's more friends with the girls, and he's not fitting in. These ideas of fitting in can often have gender descriptions. Again, you can read more about this in my book, and well, we can't always say exactly what particular identities are going to fit in or not. They often revolve around a heterosexual or cisgender ideal.

The problem although with this is that when we say John is not fitting in, we're actually situating the problem with John himself. We're not actually situating it with the system that's operating here, so gender and sexuality often operate in a really binary way. You're either gay or you're straight, you're a male or you're a female.

A lot people don't fit into those categories and so we really need to trouble these systems that are operating in that way and say, "Well, perhaps John is not fitting in because the system that we are using to, to classify his behaviours isn't flexible enough to show that what he's doing is fine." In my research, some of the teachers talked about the students who didn't fit in their schools and they said, "In our town, they're not jocks, they're not into footy, they're not in the main group. They're not skanks, they don't smoke. You know, they're the quitter kid or the easy victim or the one that doesn't have any friends or even a kid with a disability. They stand out in some way and there's something that makes them a target." I want to just focus on that moment, they stand out in some way. Research shows us that kids that stand out are usually those who are unpopular, marginalised and excluded.

Inclusion and belonging for many young people therefore becomes a journey of understanding and ascribing to fit in particular boundaries and these can be different in every school context. They might be different in a single sex school versus a co-ed school, they might be different in an urban school to a rural school, they might be different in a private school or to a public school but gender and sexuality are two key systems that young people draw upon to fit in. From a very early age, we're told the ways that girls and boys should walk and sit and talk. We're told the ways that they should ... what activities they should be doing and which toys they should be playing with, and these are continually communicated through adolescent settings as well in more detailed ways.

Sometimes these expectations of what it is to fit in are difficult to define and especially when it comes to gender and sexuality. What it's often easier to see is transgressions. So we notice when someone goes past those boundaries. We don't often notice when they're within them. I want to tell you a little bit about an event that happened during my PhD research, which was amazing actually. I showed up on my first day of data collection to a school and I went into the library. They showed me into a little room just off the library and a group of girls came in, and I was chatting to them about the school and their life and gender and sexuality and all these great things.

I asked them then, "Could you tell me a bit about an event, maybe something that happened in your school where gender and sexuality has ever been used to hurt someone or any moment of violence in that way?" "All right, yeah. We can tell you this thing happened yesterday." I was like, "Sweet." "This thing happened yesterday. It was called Kick a Slut in the Head Day," and I was like, "Okay, all right. You tell me what happened with that." They said, "Yeah. This girl made a Facebook group and all the people in the school signed up, and the event was called Kick a Slut in the Head Day and that was yesterday and everyone came to school and some of the boys in Year 10, they went around kicking girls in the head at lunchtime and recess. I got kicked in the head." "Yeah, so did I." "Me too," three girls in my group of six had been kicked in the head at lunchtime but they told me that it was just a joke. "It's okay. We just laughed it off. Uh, it was all a bit of a joke." They then told me though that there was one girl in the school who had a name for herself as being a slut. After school, she went to the bus stop and was waiting for her bus to head home, and a group of boys approached her. They kicked her in the head; they kicked her in the head hard, so hard that she fell down to the ground. Then when she was on the ground, they continued kicking her in the head and in the back. This moment like this story, still I find unbelievably upsetting but it just shows us so much about how gender and sexuality operate in these schools beyond LGBT youth for everyone.

It shows us that girls in this school had very clear and direct messages about the type of girl that they had to be. It showed us that there's violent consequences for those who don't conform to those messages. The other thing that happened with this was that straight afterwards when the girls were telling me this story, they were talking about this attack on this final girl at the bus stop. They said to me, "Yeah, but, you know, that's just what boys do. Boys are just like that."

We're also seeing these messages that boys are naturally violent, so it's not just about what girls are like. It can be about what boys are like too and it can really emphasise these boundaries and these inclusions of behaviours that are really, really problematic in schooling context. Some of the problems that are within that story go much further than the scope of this talk, talking about joking, talking about bullying in schools. All of these terms are really problematic and again, you can read about them extensively in my book.

I do want to talk about how these are really problematic incidents and how often in schools, teachers have very little resources to deal with them. There's very little teacher training around gender and sexuality, there's no clear policy around moments of bullying that are related to gender and sexuality in schools. Some schools are exempt from the anti-discrimination framework because of their religious status. A lot of the time when we think about definitions of bullying, they often don't apply to what is... well, they're not perceived to apply to moments of bullying about gender and sexuality. One great thing that's been happening for the last six or seven years is the Safe Schools Coalition. The Safe Schools Coalition basically was set up in 2010. It was in Victoria and it developed from there to become a national movement. About 550 schools signed up nationwide. The purpose of Safe Schools was to talk to teachers and provide them with professional development training about gender and sexuality in their schools. This was a really great thing because it allowed teachers to get training, access to training, it allowed them to do an audit of their schools because sometimes the students might have been having a terrible time but the teachers didn't really know about it.

By doing an audit of the schools, they would find out and they would be able to adjust. Also, it allowed schools to begin to assess themselves for where the students are safe at school. I mean schools are really important. Everyone has to go there and the thing is that they're not safe for everyone. Again, 80% of LGBTQ students have experienced homophobia, biphobia or transphobia at school. These are a huge amount of the school proportion.

Equally, research tells us that when schools are open, accepting and celebrating celebratory spaces, all students thrive. It's not only about a particular minority of students. Unfortunately, in March of this year, the Liberal national government proposed a review of the program and although this review found basically that there was very little wrong with the program and that the vast majority of it was age-appropriate, federal funding for this program has now stopped and it's likely to cease in New South Wales in the early stages of next year.

The other thing that we can talk about in terms of curricular approach to this problem is the Crossroads program which is a Year 11 and 12 syllabus initiative which is basically 25 hours that you do in Year 11 and 12 and they talked about gender and sexuality with those students. This has also been under attack and in the last few months, has been called in for a review. The reason it was called in for a review, and I've got to read this because I've got to always remember what the quote is, is that it was 'radical and that it taught that gender was a social construct that is neither fixed nor binary, and that sexuality is dynamic and constantly changing'.

Unfortunately, this is like a well-established truth, so that's weird that they have taken that out because of those reasons. We can see from both of these initiatives that there's a really big, conservative push at the moment in terms of curriculum and approaches to gender and sexuality in schools when actually, the research tells us that instead of being conservative, we need to be far more progressive. Students in schools are actually really cluey about gender and sexuality, and with the rise of this thing called the Internet; they're able to access information and are generally leaving schools behind in terms of their knowledge. I was told to give a good talk. You have to give a conclusion that is really positive and proactive and makes people feel really good about themselves. This talk has been on the down so sorry about that. I'm going to try and make you feel really good about yourselves now.

The first point I want to make in conclusion is that some people might say that gender and sexuality is not appropriate for the school curriculum at all, and that it should be taught about by families in homes and all these kind of things. The problem is that there's a huge amount of teaching in schools about gender and sexuality already. It's just that it's only about one type of gender and sexuality. We have a huge amount of literature, English history, all of these kind of things, it all has messages about gender and sexuality. They're just not diverse messages about gender and sexuality. Schools need to adapt to recognise that and to bring in new resources that confront those kind of norms. The second thing is that a lot of my advice generally comes from the education faculty because that's where I'm teaching.

I know there's a few teachers and aspiring teachers in the room. One study found that if teachers confronted homophobia and gender-based violence as much as they confronted school uniform issues, there was a marked change in behaviours in the schools, something really as simple as that showing an institutional backing and showing a shifting of a gaze to become more proactive about these moments no matter how serious or not serious they might seem to be.

My advice to the public, it's really important to engage in discussions online about the Safe Schools movement, the Crossroads curriculum and anything that supports diverse understandings of sexuality and gender in schools. These are really critical and they really allow us to show that we are advocating for change even if we're not from the LGBT community.

It's also really crucial that we don't get sucked into the argument that these issues are just for sexually and gender diverse students. Straight and cisgender students continue to have their options for self expression, relationships and behaviours narrowed by these systems. I want to tell you just really briefly about a couple of incidences from my research. One girl came in, she had got a new haircut, she was feeling great and a guy in her science class said, "You've got a lesbian haircut." Okay, a moment like that. One guy was a prefect at his school and he was trying to raise money for charity. It was a dress-up day and he dressed up like a fairy and he was terrified the entire day that he was going to get beaten up as he faced homophobic slurs. Should we really have to be having these moments in our schools? We really need to rethink what schools are. Should they be safe spaces? Should they be inclusive spaces? Should they have curricular moments that represent everyone?

I would hope so in an ideal world, and we have to make sure that we don't forget about trans students who are often excluded not only from the curriculum, but from classrooms, from change rooms and from bathrooms, some of our most vulnerable students who are continually facing the backlash from the community. Much of this falls onto schooling institutions themselves and they need to shift their gaze to allow it to recognise moments of aggression and policing that are motivated by sexuality and gender.

Equally, we need to reject discourses that suggest the kind of moral panic that children can't handle this or that they're too young to understand gender or sexuality. We have a lot of work to do but from the beginning, it all starts with rejecting ignorance. There was a great researcher called Yoda and he said, "Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate and hate to suffering." We need to acknowledge that many people who are acting against the teacher of gender and sexuality in schools are simply afraid of these concepts and have never encountered them before. I think we can all do a little bit better by engaging in calm, non-judgmental conversations with these people, having patience and trying not to get so nervous. Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you for listening to the podcast series of *Raising the Bar Sydney*. If you want to hear more Raising the Bar talks, head to raisingthebarsydney.com.au.

End of Recording.