

"Good Morning, I'm a Heterosexual": A case in the closet in rural Australia

Belinda Downey Charles Sturt University

Abstract

This paper uses interview data from a case study about a teacher in rural Australia to examine and think critically about issues related to sexuality and their connections to schooling in rural and regional settings. Using the construct of the "closet" as a starting point,

Teaching from the closet

How many times has a teacher walked into a classroom and said to you "Good Morning my name is . . . and I'm a Heterosexual"? Never? It seems an absurd thing to say, doesn't it? So why is it that in today's society we expect gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender teachers to come in and declare their sexuality? Does it make their teaching any better or worse? Is it any of our concern what sexuality a specific teacher has, and what motivates this craving we have to know? Why do we have a dire urge to categorise people into specific groups, and what difference would it really make if we did know? And how might these issues be exacerbated in small rural and regional communities?

This paper examines the case of Anthony, a gay teacher in his first year out of university. Anthony was part of a larger study (Downey, 2002) that interrogated the construction and perpetuation of "the closet" for gay educators. In this project I examined the negative images of closeted gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender [GLBT] teachers discussed in the research literature by exploring four participants' perceptions of these views. The basic intention of this research was to discover the reasons behind why Australian gay educators choose to remain "closeted" or not in the workplace. I also intended to discover if the existing research was portraying a broadly conceived impression of how these closeted educators feel about their choice to remain "in" or "out" of the closet and the concurrent lifestyle that it entails.

Due to the limited research and information available about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender [GLBT] educators, especially those living in Australia, combined with the fact that a lot of existing research about GLBT educators presents them as having negative views about their lives, I felt that this project would help to provide a broader view of the concealment of sexual identities. Current research identifies GLBT educators as often living in fear and in danger of being "found out" in their workplace, by their co-workers, students and the parents. They are also seen to be stressed, isolated, and anxious. Further, the existing research base contains very few studies that deal with Australia or Australian educators. This topic caught my interest because of the paucity of research available about this subject. I felt the research available was presenting a narrow view of "closeted" GLBT educators and that the findings in the US, where most of this research has been carried out, may be different to those found in the Australian context. I wanted to discover if the negative views about GLBT educators' lives, their stress and isolation, and their fear of being "found out" are consistent with the findings in the available research.

As you read through the case that follows you will realise what a complex and problematic paradox the closet is. One is never totally "in" the closet and one is never totally "out" of the closet - there always seems to be a shifting equilibrium. Even those people who feel themselves to be completely "out" of the closet are never completely "out" because with each new person comes the choice of revealing their sexuality or not. One sometimes chooses not to come "out" because of the environment or context you are in. Others say they're "out" yet never actually state it - they just assume people know. Still others may think they're "in" the closet yet everyone around them thinks they're gay, so are they really in the closet? This paper deals with this paradox and attempts to unravel it, even if just a little. The closet is anything but a coherent construct.

In this paper I will describe Anthony's case, paying particular attention to how issues surrounding the "closet" manifest themselves in relation to rural schooling. I look at Anthony's perceptions of what it means to be a rural teacher and his assumptions about what rural communities are like to problematise and complexify the dialogue about sexualities and schooling. I conclude the paper by critically examining why a better understanding of these issues matters to all of us involved in schooling.

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What about Australia?

Although there are more articles about GLBT teachers in lesbian and gay publications and some education and law journals and today's popular press, there is, compared to other areas, little formal research available. Because fewer studies or articles are Australian, with almost no work taking place specifically in rural and regional contexts, this motivated me to want to contribute to this research literature. Some notable Australian exceptions to this lack of research include Beckett & Denborough (1995), Carrigan (1978), Ferfolja (1998), Fitzclarence, Warren & Laskey (1996), Mills (1999) and Philips (1994).

The lack of research literature does not mean that Australia is untouched by these issues, however, as Ferfolja (1998) illustrates in her study of the homophobic harassment of lesbian teachers in Australia. She states that "despite the apparent support and tolerance for homosexuality in Australia, demonstrated through public messages of encouragement from politicians, financial sponsorship from major companies for the staging of gay and lesbian events, the glossy promotion of lesbian chic and heterosexual attendance at lesbian and gay events, homosexuals still frequently experience harassment and vilification" (p.402). Further, she found that the homophobic attacks on staff members caused them to be vulnerable and were exacerbated by the fact that they never knew where the next attack was going to come from or the form it would take. This interfered with their work, their professional growth - it affected their confidence and the control they had over the classroom as well as the student/teacher relationship. Many felt if they were "outed" they would experience management problems and diminished respect. The attitude displayed by the schools in this study was one of a lack of support and empathy for lesbians and other GBT educators and this reinforced the notion of the stereotyped attitudes and behaviours contributing to the construction of gendered bias.

Beckett and Denborough (1995) suggest in their research that including gay and lesbian content in the curriculum may provide strategies for teachers and researchers to counter homophobia. They also contend that schools and teachers have a moral and legal obligation to ensure freedom from such discrimination and vilification as homophobia. Beckett and Denborough consider why sexuality is generally discussed in ways without pleasure, fear and intimacy, and how discussing sex or sexuality often becomes an experience that is embarrassing or ignored by students. The denial of students' sexual experiences is apparent in Australia with policies such as the prohibition of condom vending machines in high schools which is extremely important, for example, to rural students who can't gain access to condoms, whilst maintaining their anonymity any other way.

Along these same lines Mills (1999) discusses the failure of western education systems to treat homophobia, anti-lesbianism and heterosexism as social justice issues. In schools, teachers have to deal with the connotations of homosexuality with paedophilia; and students are bombarded with images and comments that portray gay people as abnormal or perverted. Mills feels that schools are also worried about their image and reputation. Schools need students and confronting homophobia in schools is not seen as a very good marketing strategy. To some extent schools see these things as poor marketing strategies because they presume parents won't want to send their children to a school supportive of gay and lesbian students and teachers.

However, Mills (1999) and other researchers have agreed that violence in schools is an issue that does need urgent consideration. Some popular responses to the causes of violence in schools are poor discipline and the disappearance of behaviour modification. Very rarely are issues of gender or homophobia considered to be contributing factors to violence or are considered in the attempt to understand school violence. Fitzclarence, Warren & Laskey (1996) touch on the issue of homophobia in Australian schools and how homophobia is intrinsically linked to the wider culture. Schools are meant to be safe havens for children, but in a lot of instances they are not. In Australian schools, the perpetrators of violence are mainly male. Some researchers assert this factor is due to the construction of masculinity in teenage male culture and their need to affirm and assert it. The need for assertion is believed to be because some gender stereotypes are still strong in society, and are still being taught. Many young males are still being taught to deal with situations using violence and this is brought into schools. Different lifestyles and different types of relationships have emerged, causing male dominance in sexual relations to be threatened with the many new opportunities and challenges that have appeared. Schools are often the first direct point of contact with alternative forms of relationships, which is why it is important to model genuine forms of the ideal of democratic equality. Violence in schools is slowly increasing, as is resistance on the part of schools to confront this issue.

Carrigan (1978) felt that the source of the problems that GLBT's face lies with a society which is anti-sex, which insists on enforcing artificial distinctions between men and women, and which is extremely intolerant of

relationships that are not heterosexual. More recently another Australian researcher, Philips (1994) strongly supports the need that teachers expressed to have the institutions they work for support them, and for the institutions to have the willingness to challenge homophobic comments in accordance with the current policies on sexism and racism. In addition, each school should have policies for anti-homophobia and the clause that currently exempts religious and private schools from the anti-discrimination legislation should be removed.

Laws and Policies addressing GLBT Educators

When considering the fears of GLBT educators and the strategies they sometimes use to conceal their identities, do we query the laws and legislation that address and protect these educators? Lipkin (1999) and Kissen (1996), both researchers from the USA, agree that even the legislation intended to protect GLBT people from discrimination gets challenged. Lipkin addresses how politicians insist that GLBT's have the same rights as heterosexuals, yet there is no federal civil rights law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in the USA. Even if the courts protect teachers' jobs, can they be relied upon to provide security and comfort? There are different considerations that may prevent GLBT educators from coming out and there is no evidence to suggest that even with guaranteed civil or employment rights that they would come out, but without them it certainly communicates to students and the rest of the education community that there is substantial shame and no safety in being a sexual minority.

Similarly Kissen (1996) noted that in the past decade, promoters of citizen initiatives in the USA have mounted anti-gay campaigns in dozens of states. "Referendum questions have even reached ballot in a few states in the USA, but what voting "yes" on these questions generally means is voting to deny the rights of gay people to be protected from discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodation, and credit. Proponents draw their backing from conservative political organisations and right-wing fundamentalists groups, that base their arguments on the religious condemnation of homosexuality as sinful, and on the claim that there is a "gay agenda," concocted by homosexuals and their supporters, to take over the country" (1996, p. 110).

Australian laws provide somewhat more hope than those in the USA, but they too have a long way to go. In 1994, the Australian government added the homosexual vilification law to the existing anti-discrimination law, which means GLBTs who are publicly vilified have a legal right to redress. GLBT discrimination is also reflected in Australian law through the inferior legal status of GLBT relationships in comparison to heterosexual relationships (Lesbian and Gay Legal Rights Service in Ferfolja, 1998).

Edwards (1996) looked at Australian laws in relation to education and she found that the discrimination against GLBT people in the paid workforce in NSW is widespread, and that this discrimination was most apparent in teaching. In her study Edwards considered why few GLBT people invoked the anti-discrimination legislation even though discrimination against this minority group was quite high. She states "The motivation of the school authority to set such standards is suggested by the findings of the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board that gay and lesbian teachers are mostly tolerated as long as their existence is not brought to public attention" (p.42). Sexual harassment is part of the Sex Anti-Discrimination legislation and it includes any remark with sexual connotations, or that is of a sexual nature. It is also unlawful under NSW legislation to incite hatred, contempt or severe ridicule, in public, of a person because they are GLBT.

Strategies that are employed to address discrimination in NSW Schools include: the NSW Anti-discrimination Act (1977) which makes it unlawful to discriminate, harass or vilify anyone due to their race, sex (including sexual harassment), marital status, disability (including HIV/AIDS), homosexuality or age. There is also separate Commonwealth legislation in areas of racial, sex and disability discrimination, which also makes it unlawful for adult students (16 and over) to harass a member of staff or another student (Gardner, 1996).

Philps (1994) writes that discrimination is still rampant in Australian society against gay and lesbian teachers and although the USA has been moving towards creating a gay-friendly education, in reference to Australia he notes that in 1994 The NSW Education Department was the only Australian Authority to institute any kind of violence prevention program, and even then many schools had not begun to respond. The irony of the Anti-Discrimination Act in Australia is that it allows private and religious schools to discriminate against someone if their sexual preference is considered not to affirm the teachings of the church.

What is "the Closet"?

Glimpsing into the lives of "closeted" GLBT educators and understanding their fear, as well as questioning the legislation and laws that are supposed to protect them, is part of this important project. But what exactly does it mean to be "closeted"? From the research reviewed thus far it appears that the motivator for remaining "closeted" is fear, and it appears that for many GLBT educators "the closet" represents a perceived security net. When these educators are "within it" they feel safe- safe in their jobs, their status and themselves- even though in themselves they know this safety net is false and may have huge flaws pieced into it.

I mentioned earlier the idea or strategy of "passing as straight." Dankmeijer's (1993) and Griffin's (1992) research showed that their participants used strategies and styles to "fit in" at their workplaces. These participants altered certain things about themselves to be seen as less homosexual and more heterosexual. The "closet" is misrepresented in literature when it is shown as a tool of GLBT's to protect themselves. The "closet" is in actuality a patriarchal construction designed to maintain itself. Homosexuality cannot be eliminated but the "closet" is what can be used to contain it. The primary purpose of the "closet" is to marginalise and hide from view the "different" so as not to disturb the "normal" (Archer, 2001).

Coming out of the Closet

So if we're not in the closet we're out, aren't we? Are you ever really out? What does it mean to be out and how is it done? Many researchers have considered this issue. Kissen (1996) states that "Coming out as a lesbian or gay man is a rite of passage, a moment of truth, and a step toward integration" (p. 153). She discusses how naming oneself as GLBT is only the beginning. It is followed by a continuing series of disclosures to family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. Coming out does not end after a gay person has shared his or her gay identity with others; it continues with every new colleague or friend, neighbourhood or environment.

Spraggs (1994) writes that although it is a difficult concept for heterosexuals to imagine, as they have never had to consider it, "coming out" or identifying oneself as gay or lesbian is an odd experience. It is about announcing to the world words that are widely pronounced with embarrassment and distaste. It is an experience of terror and exhilaration all at once. It is a moment of vulnerability, as well as assertion and freedom. Spraggs discusses how identifying oneself as GLBT is basically "making a statement about one's personal sexual behaviour; coming out is felt as a form of indecent exposure, intruding that contaminating secret, sex, into the public view, in a context in which the familiar, sterilizing conventions of monogamous heterosexuality are flagrantly neglected" (p. 179).

In her chapter Spraggs (1998) also discusses how coming out isn't a 'once for all time' act. Many GLBT's move in and out of the closet during the day depending on where they are and who they're with. Experiences such as love, parenthood and relationships are so intertwined with sexual identity as to make it almost impossible for some GLBT's to talk about in any situation where their identity remains obscure. To consider these issues she looks at the teachers' unions in the USA and whether they will supply GLBT educators with sound legal advice, good advocacy, and unstinting support for those caught in the increasing complaints and disciplinary procedures.

Adams and Emery's (1994) understanding is that "coming out can take just a moment, but being out - in a way that empowers lesbian and gay students and asserts to straight ones everyday actuality of lesbian existence - requires revisiting that revelation" (p. 33). Adams and Emery question why it is that GLBT's feel that they have to suppress something so central to their identity as sexuality, something that constructs their social relationships, because it causes them to teach out of a context of anxiety. This question stems from the assumption that sexuality is private and would never be relevant to a classroom discussion, which of course is far from reality. In their chapter they provide some strategies for and anecdotes about coming out. They state that "nine out of ten lesbian teachers agree: coming out in the classroom feels good" (p. 31). For decades people have been pushing society's nervousness about conflict that is experienced, and many disenfranchised groups have taken on the government and the community for civil and human rights why should GLBT educators be any different.

Likewise Bliss and Harris (1998) state that "there are three groups of gay men and lesbians who are particularly affected by homophobia in the schools: students, teachers, and parents" (p. 13). They discuss the benefits of coming out, such as feeling better about ones identity and having an influence on others. Discrimination is different for GLBT educators and parents in different situations. Parents might feel that coming out will lead to

the loss of child custody or even visitation rights. Some parents fear the ostracising of their children from others if they come out. Children who have GLBT parents might be the targets of prejudice and peer acceptance could be a problem. Many parents don't wish to inform schools of their sexual orientation because of potential legal ramifications or changes in attitude towards them and their children.

Although there is a growing body of research about GLBT educators, there is not much research that deals with the sometimes invisible, but highly emotional response that some people feel towards these educators (Harbeck, 1992, p. 121). In Harbeck's (1992) research she investigated the history of GLBT educators in the USA. In the 1940's homosexuality was considered innately evil, a mental disorder and a criminal activity, but today there has been remarkable advances made by GLBT educators. In the 1970's the effects of the "sexual revolution" and the emphasis on personal freedom, privacy and minority rights combined with GLBT rights movements altered the character of educators and case law. There has also been a significant shift in public and administrative attitudes towards GLBT educators, school boards are more willing to respect a teacher's sexual orientation and GLBT minority job applicants have a broader range of legal protection.

Dankmeijer (1993) talks about politically incorrect identities within schools. He discusses GLBT teachers' identities and how they portray these identities using different strategies or styles. No matter what strategy the teacher ultimately chooses there can be conflict of interest, which can lead to juggling their interests in the schools and in classrooms. For example in schools, lesbian teachers tended to blend into a group with other female educators, because many perceived discrimination against lesbians simply as discrimination against females. In this research it became evident that coming-out and openness did not mean the same for everyone. For some openness meant not concealing and for others openness was too not relevant because it only encouraged labelling. Some felt that coming-out was not a strategy of openness for them; it was just a matter of accepting themselves as who they are (Dankmeijer, 1993).

Pollak (1994) felt that growing up as GLBT in society is "either agony or a big surprise, because we are denied role models in the schools" (p. 131). This sits beside the number of GLBT adolescents who attempt and commit suicide at a much higher rate than straight adolescents do. Pollak believes that it was perhaps because none of them knew a GLBT educator, so there was no safety net. Pollak also felt that a role model who is "closeted" cannot be as much of a role model as they could have been had they been out. She felt that a student coming out to an already out professor is an occasion to celebrate, because the student realises that the educator is neither surprised nor upset. Pollak felt that all students need GLBT role models, and not only the GLBT students but also the heterosexual students as well to end homophobia.

Because of how our society is structured, heterosexuality is taken for granted. Gay people must constantly come out if they are to be seen as who they are and not mistaken as straight. Some people feel that these disclosures are just a way for GLBT people to "flaunt" their sexuality to heterosexuals. However, Kissen (1996) rebuts this notion with an interesting question, "If homosexuality were the norm, what straight person would not want to be sure everyone knew that he or she was heterosexual?" (p. 153).

But the action of "coming out" isn't the only contested ground. Mission's (1999) notes that even in discourse the tolerance and respect of GLBTs is fraught as there are ignorance and silences demanded by these discourses, which are so powerful and are constructively/destructively at work. People are "allowed" to be homosexual as long as they don't burden heterosexuals with any knowledge of that existence, which amounts to a "non-discriminatory" discourse rampant with heterosexism. It is not that GLBTs ought to be silenced, this line of thinking goes, it is just that any reminder of their existence must be avoided.

As is demonstrated throughout this literature review, a majority of current research identifies GLBT educators as often living in a state of silence and fear. They are scared that their co-workers, students and parents will "find them out." They are perceived to be stressed, isolated, and anxious. This literature review also reveals that existing research dealing with Australia and Australian educators is limited. The literature that has been presented illustrates issues of homophobia, curricular issues and policy issues that research has yet to take into consideration. There are references to the closet and to the paradox of what "being out" really means. Further research is necessary in these area to uncover more than just the frame of this very large "closet." The following case study will hopefully be a start at shedding light upon these grey corners and giving us more of a sense of the range of issues that affect GLBT educators, even in rural and regional settings.

The case of Anthony

Anthony is a 24-year-old, first year out teacher working temporarily in a rural school in NSW, and he is gay. Anthony expressed his interest in this study after reading about it in a local education newsletter. It's a topic he felt people usually weren't interested in, because they often swept topics such as this under the mat. He felt that this study helped him clarify his own thoughts on certain issues and he felt positive in the respect that it was a topic that was now being looked at and that people are out there who will support GLBTs and their efforts in the field of education.

To a certain extent Anthony has remained closeted at school, and he has chosen to say "Good Morning" like the majority of other teachers say it. When asked why, he says, "because although society has moved forward, they are still very conservative in regards to their views on gays and lesbians. Therefore, an educator is constantly in the spotlight and having his/her sexuality out there could end up causing a lot of problems." He also reasons that he is closeted so "that I'm given an opportunity to carry out my work like any of my other colleagues. You don't need to wear a neon sign, you don't go in with your pink clothes and talk with your lisp and all that stereotypical crap, you can be a normal person because you are a normal person." Kissen (1996) has found that due to how our society is structured heterosexuality is taken for granted and gay people must constantly come out if they are to be seen as who they are. Some people feel that these disclosures are just a way for GLBT people to 'flaunt' their sexuality to heterosexuals. However, Kissen (1996) rebuts this notion with a challenging question, "If homosexuality were the norm, what straight person would not want to be sure everyone knew that he or she was heterosexual?" (p. 153).

Further, Skelton (1998) discusses how the general perception and stereotypical view of a gay man is of an effeminate man, and Anthony certainly seems to bear this out in his own talk about the subject. We must problematise discourses that invoke notions of "the normal," asking where this image comes from and what it is being used to explain [and to mask]. In Anthony's case, he is deploying "normal" to describe himself, distancing himself from stereotypical images of effeminate gay men. This serves to emphasise the ways that he is like everyone else [i.e. all of the other teachers] and quite different and separate from the [albeit stereotypical images of] gays. What kind of work does Anthony have to do to bifurcate his life in such defensive manner? What toll is it taking on him, and on his teaching?

Ferfolja (1998) investigates the homophobic harassment aimed at lesbian teachers in Australia. She states that "despite the apparent support and tolerance for homosexuality in Australia, demonstrated through public messages of encouragement from politicians, financial sponsorship from major companies for the staging of gay and lesbian events, such as Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, the glossy promotion of lesbian chic and heterosexual attendance at lesbian and gay events, homosexuals still frequently experience harassment and vilification" (p.402). Anthony seems convinced that he, too, would face such harassment if he were out. Being out would get in the way of his work.

Is it our right to know?

Anthony feels "it really is no one else's business but mine. This is my place of work and as I see it, I'm there to educate the students and my sexuality really plays no part on my ability to carry out that duty." Here he invokes the discourses that his sexuality doesn't matter to his job. But how could it NOT matter? How could something that helps define him not be an important part of his identity? Anthony doesn't consider that if he is stressed about his sexuality, if he is fearful about disclosure, is he is anxious about what the small community will think if they find out that this most likely would affect his abilities to carry out his duties as a teacher. Instead, he seems to partition sexuality off as something he is/does in his private life and therefore makes it none of anyone else's business. But again, to what end? What assumptions underlie Anthony's views about the small community he is teaching in and their [potential] reactions to finding out that he is gay? And to what extent do Anthony's own views about and stance on the subject of his sexuality perpetuate his feelings about the community he is working in?

Edwards (1996) looked at Australian Laws in relation to education and she found that the discrimination against GLBT people in the paid workforce in NSW is widespread, and that this discrimination was most apparent in teaching. In her study she considered why few GLBT people invoked the anti-discrimination legislation even though discrimination against this minority was quite high. She states "The motivation of the school authority to set such standards is suggested by the findings of the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board that gay and lesbian teachers are mostly tolerated as long as their existence is not brought to public attention" (p.42).

Sexual harassment is part of the Sex Anti-Discrimination legislation and it includes any remark with sexual connotations, or that is of a sexual nature. It is also unlawful under NSW legislation to incite hatred, contempt or severe ridicule in public, of a person because they are GLBT. Despite these regulations discrimination does still occur, which leaves little wonder that teachers like Anthony remain closeted.

You're gay you must be a paedophile!

Anthony is adamant that "There is still this notion that a gay person is a paedophile when they're with children." He links this public misconception with his belief that homosexuality is genetically determined. After all, if they had a choice why would people set themselves up for discrimination and insinuations? Why would someone choose to be the target of discrimination if they weren't born that way? These feelings are understandable to an extent. Kissen (1996), for instance, notes that "The fears of lesbian and gay teachers may seem extreme, even paranoid, but despite the proliferation of gay/straight alliances and diversity days, despite the very real legal and contractual gains of the last ten years, gay teachers are still harassed, humiliated, and fired because they are lesbian or gay" (p. 84). And Anthony realises this. That is why there is safety in believing that you are born "this way" and why it is so threatening to think that this could be a result of one's own choice. Even these discourses oversimplify these issues by appealing to a dichotomy where [homo]sexuality is determined either by nature or nurture. Such reliance on a stark binary forecloses the possibilities available when sexuality is thought of in more complex ways.

Lipkin (1999), like Kissen and Griffin, discusses how gay and lesbian educators feel their school relationships would be harmed if their sexuality became known, because they feel they would forfeit the esteem of peers and their effectiveness in the classroom. Griffin and Juul (in Lipkin, 1999) noted that the stress produced from remaining "closeted" could lead to drug abuse, depression, detachment and dysfunctional behaviour. Although this is a problem for some, this was not [yet] a course of action for Anthony. But that is not to deny the stresses associated with his work that Anthony speaks about

The question of whether or not to come out is very complex and troublesome. Many educators have been hurt or fired, but then others have found it to be a personal and a community triumph. Anthony is a beginning teacher so he is nervous about how people in his workplace might react to his sexuality - and rightly so according to one poll from the USA. In this poll only 44% of people felt comfortable about their children being taught by openly gay educators (Rockport Comfort Barometer, 1997). Lipkin feels this is in part provoked by the fear society has of molestation and the influence they (GLBT educators) could have on children.

Closeted behaviour and its negative effects

In the interview Anthony said, "In [a] school setting to a degree [closeted behaviour will have negative effects], in a home setting, definitely! Because if you're all closeted at home or in your real life setting then you're not going to live your life, like be true to yourself, your living a life of lies, where as at school I think to protect yourself to protect a lot of situations, it's not a bad thing to remain closeted to a degree- once again if you're starting to act to a point where you're not being yourself, [like pretending to be a heterosexual] then that's crap you can get around that by just not saying anything." Notice how Anthony describes his bifurcated life by appealing to two separate spheres - the school life and the home life. Although he can articulate the perils of being closeted in one's home life, he fails to use this same reasoning for one's school life. Quite to the contrary, he delineates a list of reasons why staying closeted is the right thing to do in one's school life. He acknowledges that not acting like yourself, even at school, is "crap" but his proposed solution is one of silence rather than disclosure.

In addition, Anthony feels the negative consequences of coming out in a school situation are that he "would have the parents and not everyone is going to do that some people will just take you for who you are but we still live in a very stereotyped world and some parents are going to say I'm not having my child being taught by a gay person, crap, crap, crap." Griffin's (1992) work looks at the tension between the fear of public accusation and the need for self-integrity and integration- something Anthony is clearly struggling with. Some participants in her research state how "the conflict between concealing and revealing their lesbian or gay identity was as much a part of every school day as were lesson plans and faculty meetings" (p. 173). Griffin discusses how educators have a constant sense of division with the wish to integrate their gay or lesbian identity with their professional identity and how most educators chose to remain "closeted" rather than risk being exposed to prejudice, discrimination or accusations of child molestation and recruitment of children to the "GLBT lifestyle." Anthony has this same conflict; he is scared of the prejudice that may be directed towards him. So

instead of putting himself at risk he would rather not say anything at all. Anthony sees that there is less chance of experiencing prejudice if people don't know the truth, even if that means hiding parts of your identity.

Too cool to be gay?

Anthony feels in the long-term he is protecting himself from discrimination by remaining closeted. When children get curious and start asking questions, Anthony tells them it is inappropriate or avoids the question. Anthony said the children that "sussed" him out would say, "we've had gay teachers before and then others would say no you're too cool to be gay." Anthony believes, "It's your personal life and I think you need to cross it over. At the same time I don't go around making a habit of avoiding the whole gay issue. Like when I get the kids to do plays and improvised roles we had a situation where we had a guy and a girl and they were husband and wife or two guys or two girls, the kids in today's world especially, a lot of them are growing up anyway without the hang ups." So one "safe" way to touch on issues of sexuality is through the curriculum. Beckett and Denborough (1995) suggest that by including gay and lesbian content in the curriculum, it may provide strategies for teachers and researchers to counter homophobia. They also write that schools and teachers have a moral and legal obligation to ensure freedom from such discrimination and vilification as homophobia.

Anthony is attempting in his own way to promise freedom from homophobia to the students he teaches. He is attempting to discuss difficult topics with honesty to the children and confront these issues. "I'm a big believer on gender issues and I believe you can't teach one set thing - you need to cover all bases. I know what it was like to be in primary school and be told you had to grow up, have children and get married and you knew you were gay - you felt abnormal. It confuses you as a little kid because you don't know that you're gay then you've just got these feelings and I think it confuses you cause you're like is what they're saying right because you come from a Catholic background and the church is like you must not be gay, gay is evil and you'll go to hell! And you're like oohh shit I'm in trouble." Here Anthony discusses issues of sexuality and their relevance to the primary school classroom with great insight and sensitivity. Drawing on his own feelings of invisibility as a primary school student, he imagines a different classroom reality for his own students. Perhaps focussing on his students and his duty of care to them, rather than on his own identity, Anthony is able to act upon and deal with these issues.

We can cure them?

In Western Australia in November, 2001 there was a rally going on against a law being passed to ensure that the rights of gay and lesbian people are equal to the rights of heterosexuals. If in our country today we can still discriminate against GLBT people, doesn't it stand to reason that schools may do so too? During this rally a notable public figure was quoted as saying, "we love homosexual people and we can help cure them." If sexuality is a disease then we are all infected because all people possess sexualities. But this notion of homosexuality being a disease is not a new one. Until the 1970's literature about homosexuality and education were framed in two ways - by complete absence or by defining the behaviour and the topic as deviant. Literature at that time considered homosexuality a disease that would be spread to the students. Willard Waller was one such scholar that advocated this viewpoint. As indicated earlier his work has influenced directions for studies even though it was published over 60 years ago, and his research would be considered both ethically and methodologically unacceptable today (Tierney and Dilley, 1998).

Is this way of thinking found worldwide? Is it to do with geography? Would it make a difference if Anthony taught in a major metropolitan city as opposed to a rural setting? Anthony felt it probably would. "You've got to have some life. I'd go to Sydney and go to a gay bar if I was working here (a rural community); if I was down there (metropolitan area) the kids are probably used to gays down there anyway, it wouldn't matter although I don't go [to gay pubs] that much anyway. I don't think there is a need to be gay and be different cause you're not different to anyone else so why can't you blend in." What makes Anthony believe children or parents in metropolitan areas are any less homophobic than children or parents in rural areas? Is it that children in rural communities are surrounded by fewer GLBT people or fewer GLBT people who are out? Anthony is clearly drawing on socially prevalent deficit discourses that see rural and regional communities as closed minded. But where do these taken for granted truisms get validated? Part of the answer must lie in the notion that rural and regional areas are less "cultured" and are more "traditional" in their beliefs. What fails to get acknowledged when these beliefs are not challenged are the benefits to living and working in a small community- one where you are not anonymous, one where people get to know you and care about you. Although we might understand the ease with which Anthony can take up these simplistic discourses, we also must ask about the ways that we interrupt such easily uttered stereotype-ridden discourses.

Thomas (2000) discusses how homophobia has certain levels in our consciousness. On one level homophobia is a fear of GLBT men and women while on another level it is the "straight" person's fear of being abjectly identified as GLBT. The latter fear is a stronger component of homophobia than for racism or sexism as a sexist male or white racist are less likely to be identified as a woman or non-white than a "straight" person being identified as "queer." This fear is due to the fact that heterosexuality cannot be proven because many people have lived "straight" lives, married, had children and then they come out as GLBT. Heterosexuals, especially homophobic heterosexuals constantly set about trying to prove themselves, assert themselves, and insist on themselves.

Schools are often the first direct point of contact with alternative [to the heterosexual norm] forms of relationships. Pondering this Anthony said, "for the staff it's different to the kids, although still most of the staff are homophobic. There are so many old farts out there in the teaching profession. Staff are worse than the kids, I think kids are more accepting of it. Their parents are what you have to worry about in that regard. The staff definitely because you've got so many old views there, like the young teachers they don't give a shit, the ones that aren't over thirty have got their set views." This sits next to his earlier comments about his impressions of the tolerance [or lack thereof] in rural communities in an interesting way. Perhaps, in fact, it is fellow staff members who he perceives to have more problems with issues of non-normative sexualities than the students or their families.

Anthony's "girlfriend"?

Anthony is in a relationship at the moment and he lives with his boyfriend. In conversations at school Anthony simply refers to his boyfriend as a friend called Eric. In certain situations he calls him his partner but Anthony says, "we're living in a world where people aren't stupid it would be your girlfriend if it's your partner so people start to say hmmm." In the staffroom when everyone is discussing their weekend Anthony feels that he can't say that he is doing things with his partner so he would say he was going to Sydney on the weekend if asked "who with?" he would say a friend. Everyone else in the staffroom however discusses freely what he or she did on the weekend with their partner and their kids whereas Anthony would rather sit in silence than "put his foot in it."

Woods (1992) brings to our attention the fear of coming out due to job loss and how many GLBT educators use opposite sex pronouns and take opposite sex dates to functions. Anthony does this in order to hide his sexuality- when referring to his partner he sometimes uses she instead of he. Perhaps those educators that are GLBT and are most vulnerable are those who teach subjects that are not considered to be consistent with traditional gender roles, such as a male librarian or early childhood teacher or a female woodwork or metal work teacher. This is consistent with what Griffin (1992) describes in her research. She found that numerous gay and lesbian educators feel that they must be constantly wary about protecting their identity and how the energy required for this takes a tremendous toll on them psychologically. Their fear affects relationships with colleagues, students, and parents creating a sense of isolation for the teachers. She also discusses how they feel frustrated by their inability to change the negative image of GLBT educators and the self-betrayal they feel for the sake of their safety.

Implications - Thinking beyond this case

After reading this case, think about the comments Anthony has made and the generalisations he has used, and try to relate this to your own experiences. Anthony has turned against who he is by trying to defend and protect a public image of himself. Anthony, a gay male himself, has bought into the stereotype that a gay male wears "pink clothes and talks with a lisp." Anthony disguises his defence mechanisms in a generalised stereotypical jokes, as with the reference to "old farts" that are closed-minded, the fantasy of not bringing your sexuality into the classroom, the myth that urban areas are less homophobic than rural areas. These generalisations may be true of some situations, but is every rural town filled with red necked hillbillies? Is every teacher over the age of thirty narrow-minded? Of course not. These generalisations are typical of the unhelpful stereotypes that dominate public discourses and get in the way of teachers doing their jobs.

Due to his perception of how society is structured, Anthony sees his only hope of protecting himself against homophobia is to blame the stereotypical generalisations of society. How can we as educators help to bring about a change in these generalisations? What can we do to stop society's perception that if you live in a community smaller than 10,000 people or even 30,000 people you're 'backward' or 'unsophisticated' or

'traditional'? Anthony feels it is our profession that forces GLBT educators to remain closeted and that in any other profession there wouldn't be a "glitch." He feels it is the child protection act that creates the biggest pressure for a gay educator because it is always on your back. The first thing people think of when they think child protection is abuse. An assumption and a stereotype that often comes with the knowledge that someone is gay is that they are a paedophile. Pessimistically, Anthony feels the only reason GLBTs are in the education force is because it's illegal for the Department of Education and Training in New South Wales to discriminate.

I feel that an analysis of Anthony's case adds to the existing literature by documenting the nuanced ways of understanding that an educator is neither entirely "in" or "out" of the closet. I think this study has shown the wide reach that homophobia can have and how we can help to try to end this form of discrimination in our schools and communities. The existing literature discusses fear and how GLBT educators are anxious in relation to being closeted. I think this project has shown where the fear is coming from so that we are able to understand more about it. But I also feel that this case has shown how not to let fear and self-doubt drag you under. As was detailed previously, even though Anthony had fears he didn't actually live in fear.

With more research in the vein of this project the grey areas in the field will be brightened and there will be less ignorance in the world. This, in turn, gives more hope to the educators and the children of the future. I think this project suggests many more avenues that could be explored and researched that due to time and energy constraints I was unable to follow up. This project was only able to give the view of gay male educators but there are many more LBT educators, particularly in rural and regional areas, which I was unable to tap into. These educators could help to find out more research within this topic and give the wider populace more knowledge and understanding.

Future research projects could be based on the themes that underpinned the case study presented here. If the education profession does attempt to force GLBT educators into the closet, what are the mechanisms by which it accomplishes this? How do children respond to being taught by openly LGBT educators? How do parents in rural and regional schools feel about their children being taught by GLBT teachers? How do rural and regional communities react? What are the positive effects of coming out? Research questions could also be pulled from the case studies themselves. In what ways are teenage sub-cultures saturated with homophobia? How is this homophobia generated and perpetuated? What are schools doing to introduce GLBT issues into the curriculum? How effective are these curricular interventions?

Hopefully this study will foster deeper thought on issues such as these. Perhaps this study could be useful for [straight] educators to help them to better understand their sexual minority colleagues, the sexual minority students they are teaching and the sexual minority parents of some of their students. It could also be useful for teacher education students to think about these issues while at university and when they go onto practicum. When they are in the teaching workforce they might think about these issues in relation to their programming. It is also useful for GLBT parents and parents of GLBT children to perhaps help them to better understand each other.

I aimed in this project to interrogate the negative images that abound in the research literature of closeted gay teachers. This study gives an individual a voice to express what he felt was important in his life as gay educator in a rural setting and to share his experiences and knowledge with others. In doing so this work paints the lives of Anthony as not clearly "in" or "out" of the closet. He is always in the process of becoming, and from this I think we can take valuable lessons about identity and its relationship to schooling. My hope is to reach the broader educational community with this work so that Anthony's experiences may help to change existing views. If this study makes even one person sit back and think, then it was entirely worth it.

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