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**"... and people said: Why should this stand out and be important?"**

**DISCOURSES OF DIFFERENCE:**

**A Study of How Secondary School Teachers  
and Administrators position sexual diversity  
in the context of school**

**A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Education Administration at  
Massey University, Palmerston North.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This is a study of how New Zealand secondary school teachers and administrators (defined as senior managers and school trustees) position people and issues of sexual diversity in their schools. New Zealand and overseas studies have reported that gay, lesbian and bisexual young people and teachers experience damaging effects of heteronormative discursive practices that prevail in schools. While there are some successful overseas models for intervening in schools to make the environment safer for lesbian, gay and bisexual students and teachers, such as the Massachusetts Safe Schools Project (1993), no studies have investigated how New Zealand teachers and administrators think and feel about sexual diversities. Such information is important if change strategies in New Zealand schools are to be successful.

This study uses a feminist poststructural framework to explore this issue through identifying and analysing the discourses that are constraining and / or enabling teachers and administrators to address the discriminatory practices in their schools that affect lesbian, gay and bisexual students and teachers. A survey questionnaire, with some closed but mostly open questions was used in ten secondary schools of differing types in mainly urban settings. Among the more open questions, participants were also asked to respond to a set of 'Scenarios' as a means of gathering data for a discourse analysis.

The research identified that while liberal humanist discourses of individual rights were defining and limiting possibilities for professional interventions, 'othering' and minoritising discourses of homo/sexuality as essential difference were also leaving the privileged status of heterosexuality as unproblematised. A majority of the respondents perceived that gay, lesbian and bisexual students, but not teachers are adversely affected by heteronormative practices in their schools, and a majority believed their schools were not doing enough to address this issue. Increased visibility of sexual diversity in the curriculum was the most cited suggestion for action in their schools. Recommendations are made to capitalise on these findings and understandings so that sensible steps can be taken to intervene in the professional practices in schools to make school a safe and rewarding experience for all students.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Tables	xii
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Background to the Research and the Researcher</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What the Literature was Saying</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Outlining the Thesis</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Feminist Perspectives</b>	<b>11</b>
Liberal feminism	15
Radical / cultural feminism	16
Socialist feminism	18
Hegemonic masculinity	19
<b>Feminist Poststructuralism</b>	<b>21</b>
Social construction of identity	22
<i>Problems with social constructionist politics of difference</i>	23
Beyond social constructionism	24
<i>Deconstructing the unitary subject</i>	24
<i>Subjectivity as discursive effect</i>	25
Discourse, subjectivity and power	29
Power, schools and the state	32
<b>Summary</b>	<b>35</b>

<b>CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>The Approach to the Literature Review</b>	<b>38</b>
Discourses of essential identities	39
<i>Alienation</i>	39
<i>Oppressed minorities</i>	39
Liberal humanist discourses	40
<i>Equal rights</i>	40
<i>Toleration of difference</i>	40
<b>School Experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students</b>	<b>40</b>
Discourses of essential identities	40
<i>Alienation</i>	40
<i>Oppressed minorities</i>	44
<b>School Experiences of Lesbian and Gay Educators</b>	<b>46</b>
Discourses of essential identities	46
<i>Alienated teachers – identities in the closet</i>	46
<i>Positioning gay and lesbian teachers as an oppressed minority</i>	49
<b>Liberal Interventions – an Emphasis on Equal Rights</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Attitudes to Homo / sexuality in Education Institutions – Psychological Discourses</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: THE OFFICIAL LITERATURE</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Government Legislation</b>	<b>59</b>
The Human Rights Act (1993)	59
<b>Education Regulations</b>	<b>59</b>
The national curriculum framework	60
The National Administration Guidelines	61
The health syllabus in the New Zealand curriculum	62

<b>Classroom Resources</b>	67
<b>Conclusions</b>	71
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: THE METHODOLOGY</b>	72
<b>Introduction</b>	72
<b>The Research Questions</b>	73
<b>Method</b>	73
Survey as methodology	74
Justifications for the methodology	77
<b>Evolution of the Survey Instrument: Shifting Theoretical Perspectives</b>	79
Issues in the original design	82
<i>Attitude research</i>	82
<i>The focussing question</i>	83
<i>Access and acceptability of the research</i>	85
Pilot testing – the trial school	85
The final instrument: some innovations to fit queer into straight	86
<b>The Sample</b>	89
Some technical and theoretical considerations	90
Selecting the school sample	91
Rate of response in the sample	94
<b>Administration of the Instrument</b>	96
Fronting up and speaking the unspeakable	97
Initial contacts with schools	97
<b>Ethical Considerations</b>	100
Informed consent	100
Minimising of harm	101
Truthfulness	101
<b>Methods of Analysis</b>	102
Statistical analysis	102
Discourse analysis	102
<b>Conclusion and Evaluation</b>	104

<b>CHAPTER SIX: WHO RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY?</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Demographic characteristics</b>	<b>107</b>
School type	107
Position of responsibility	108
Curriculum / responsibility areas	109
Length of service	110
Age groups	111
Sex	112
Ethnicity	112
Current relationships	113
Sexual orientation	113
<b>Summary</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: WHO HAS A PROBLEM?</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>Q1. Tacit Acceptance of Heterosexuality as ‘Normal’</b>	
- Harm for Students	115
<b>Q2. Active Discrimination – Against Students</b>	118
<b>Q3. Tacit Acceptance of Heterosexuality as ‘Normal’</b>	
- Harm for Staff	121
<b>Q4. Active Discrimination – Against Staff?</b>	124
<b>Summary</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: ARE SCHOOLS DEALING WITH HETEROSEXIST DISCRIMINATION?</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Q1. Measures to Address the Needs of Students and Staff?</b>	127
<b>Q2. How Adequately is the School Addressing Needs?</b>	129
<b>Q3. Training and Staff Development?</b>	130
<b>Q4. Knowledge About Legislation or Policies</b>	131
<b>Summary</b>	<b>132</b>

<b>CHAPTER NINE: DISCOURSES AT WORK</b>	133
<b>Scenario 1 – Quantitative Analysis</b>	134
<b>Scenario 1 – Discourse Analysis</b>	135
School discipline	136
Individual / equal rights	138
<b>Scenario 2 – Quantitative Analysis</b>	142
<b>Scenario 2 – Discourse Analysis</b>	144
Individual rights	144
<i>Heroic individualism</i>	145
Authorised (versus subjugated) knowledges	146
<b>Scenario 3 – Quantitative Analysis</b>	147
<b>Scenario 3 – Discourse Analysis</b>	148
Heteronormative phatic communion	149
Heroic individualism	151
Il/legitimate sexualities	151
<b>Scenario 4 – Quantitative Analysis</b>	152
<b>Scenario 4 – Discourse Analysis</b>	153
Equal / civil rights	
Competing discourses of professional practice	154
<b>Scenario 5 – Quantitative Analysis</b>	156
<b>Scenario 5 – Discourse Analysis</b>	157
Alienated identities	157
Il/legitimate school knowledge	159
<b>Summary</b>	161
<b>CHAPTER TEN: CONSTRAINTS, POSSIBILITIES</b>	163
<b>Q. 1: School Barriers to Addressing Heterosexist Bias</b>	163
Community factors	166
Staff factors	166
Not school role	167
Resource constraints	168
School culture and leadership	168
Student factors	169

<b>Q. 2: Desirable and Possible Courses of Action School Could Take</b>	169
Curriculum support	172
Not school role	172
Go gently / just EEO	173
Staff action / education	173
Policy development	174
Support bisexual, lesbian and gay students and staff	174
Educate the community	174
Re-educate the unions	174
<b>Q.3: Personal Barriers to Addressing Heterosexist Bias</b>	175
Personal constraints	176
Lack of support from others	177
Against my beliefs	178
No constraints	179
Not my role	179
<b>Q.4: Desirable and Possible Courses of Action Individuals Could Take</b>	179
Curriculum change	182
Working directly with students	182
Offer leadership	182
Educate myself	183
Just EEO / apply fairness	183
Oppose action	183
<b>Summary of Responses to Research Question – Perceived Constraints and Possibilities for Taking Anti-discriminatory Action</b>	184
<b>CHAPTER ELEVEN: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS</b>	185
<b>1. Perceptions of Discrimination</b>	
<b>The Students</b>	185
Minoritising discourses	186
What is 'normal'?	188
Subjugated knowledge	189
Homophobic harassment	191
<b>The Staff</b>	193

## 2. What are Schools Doing?

Dealing with harassment	197
Staff development	198
Curriculum	199

## 3. Perceived Constraints and Possibilities for Action

<b>Constraints on Schools</b>	200
Schools in the education market place	200
Staff attitudes	202
Resources	202
<b>Possibilities for School Action</b>	203
Curriculum support	203
Teacher development	205
Policies	207
Support groups	207
No action – gently does it	208
<b>Constraints on Individuals</b>	209
Personal constraints	209
Lack of support from others	209
Against my beliefs	211
<b>Possibilities for Individual Action</b>	211
Curriculum intervention	212
Working with students / offering leadership	212
Oppose action	213

## 4. Discursive practices that position sexualities

Equal rights	214
Professionalism – competing discourses	217
Homophobic harassment as a matter of ‘discipline’	218
The inclusive curriculum	219
<b>Summary of Findings</b>	220

## CHAPTER TWELVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

<b>Limitations of the Study</b>	224
<b>Conclusions</b>	228
<b>Recommendations</b>	230
Recommendations for Schools	230
Recommendations for teacher education	232
Recommendations for further research	232
<b>REFERENCES</b>	235
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
<b>Appendix 1. The Original Research Design</b>	246
The original research questions – designed to replicate Sears' research	246
The first draft of the survey instrument	247
<b>Appendix 2. Sampling Plan</b>	251
<b>Appendix 3. Introduction to survey in school staff rooms</b>	252
<b>Appendix 4. Sample Letters to Principals of Participating Schools</b>	
A. Letter to trial school	253
B. Letter of introduction (preceded by phone call)	254
C. Letter of thanks	255
<b>Appendix 5. Some Reactions to and Reflections on the Survey Instrument</b>	256

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## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
6.1: Source of respondents according to school type	108
6.2: Status Position in the School	109
6.3: Curriculum or responsibility areas	109
6.4: Distribution of subject areas in Renwick Study (1993)	110
6.4: Years of service	111
6.5: Ages of respondents	111
6.6: Sex of respondents	112
6.7: Ethnicity of respondents	112
6.8: Sexual orientation	113
7.1: Are students harmed/ disadvantaged by heterosexuality being seen as 'normal'?	116
7.2: Is there active discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual students?	119
7.3: Are any staff are disadvantaged or harmed by a tacit acceptance of heterosexuality as normal?	121
7.4: Belief there is active discrimination against gay, lesbian or bisexual staff	124
7.5: Summary of responses	125
8.1: Teachers' beliefs that specific measures are in place	128
8.2: Teachers opinions about how adequately needs are met	129
8.3 – Teachers' participation in training or staff development	130
8.4: Knowledge of legislative or policy requirements to address issues for gay,lesbian and bisexual students in schools.	132
10.1: School constraints to addressing heterosexist bias – first mentioned responses	164
10.2: School constraints to addressing heterosexist bias - second mentioned responses	165
10.3: School constraints to addressing heterosexist bias – third mentioned responses	165
10.4: Possible school action –first mentioned responses	170
10.5: Possible school action -second mentioned responses	171
10.6: Possible school action – third mentioned responses	171
10.7: Personal constraints to addressing heterosexist bias – first mentions	176
10.8: Personal constraints to addressing heterosexist bias – second mentions	176
10.9: Possible personal action – first mentioned responses	180

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<b>10.10: Possible personal action – second mentioned responses</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>10.11: Possible personal action –third mentioned responses</b>	<b>181</b>