

## Disrupting Heteronormativity: A High School Student Queer–Straight Alliance as a Site of Peer Learning

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## Who Counts as Sexual Citizens in Schools?

- *The trouble is that, there is this thing which has been going around for a long time, which is called being normal. And that's the problem. ... people trying to be normal ... being cool, or fitting in... I think ... the definition of normal should just be changed to just being unoriginal and having no individual ideas!* (James, Emo, New Zealand European, 14yrs, Interview One, 14 March 2007)
- "... citizenship is a status whose definitions are always in process. It is continually being produced out of a political, rhetorical and economic struggle over who will count as "the people" and how social membership will be measured and valued" (Berlant, 1997, pg 20)

- 'Working' Sexual Citizenship within schools is a complex and paradoxical progress- strongly shaped by the social and cultural norms of students, teachers, school structures within a late liberal settler society.
- What's possible can't be considered outside dominant forms of discipline in liberalism- multiple discourses and practices which invoke the autonomous and self-determining 'enterprise subject' and sit uncomfortable with notions of kinship and obligation (Povinelli, 2002, 2006)

## 'Diversity Groups' As Sites of Learning within and Outside New Zealand Secondary Schools (Quinlivan, Goulter & Caldwell, 2010)

- 2007-> present- Four school based diversity groups (based on gay straight alliance model); two community based diversity groups
- Kereru High School: Ethnographic case study undertaken with diverse diversity group YES! In a co-educational decile seven racially diverse school in an outer suburb of an NZ metropolitan centre in 2007.
- Three Data Sets: f to f baseline, midterm and follow-up semi- structured individual and group interviews with 11 Yr 10-13 queer and straight/ ethnically diverse and ability/ diverse students (F= 8, M= 3), counsellors (F= 1, M= 2), school principal (M=1), Dean (M=1), teacher (M=1); participant observations; researcher fieldnotes

## YES!- a safe space in a predominantly heteronormative school culture- AND...

Carmen...I decided to join this group because as a person who has been, um, mocked or bullied since I've began at Kereru for things like me coming out as bi-sexual, or my acne, all that sort of stuff, and, um, and I found it really hard to cope with it, and I thought that by joining this group I can show people that there are people you can come to to, um, sort of resolve this, and also to try and combat being mocked about diversity (Carmen, Followup interview November 2007)

AND: Diverse sexualities are seen as a personal deficit that need counselling- and normative sexualities/ genders are legitimated

Linda: I told [my friends] I was going to be doing YES!, and stuff, and they're like "Oh, that's really cool, blah blah blah", and then it's like, when it comes to, like, [reading] material and stuff, they're like, "Nah, I don't wanna be associated with that", because if someone finds it, they're gonna think, well she's gay. (Linda First Interview March 2007)

## YES!- challenges heteronormative attitudes within the school - AND...

Lisa: Yeah, it has. Um, I know my mates are sick of me saying "don't use 'gay' as a derogatory word, it is a derogatory word", but it definitely has built awareness, I totally agree, because, you know, we haven't done a lot yet, but you can already see a lot of people change, and it challenges people to change what they think, and change the way that they associate words and different things, if nothing else. (Lisa, Carmen, Pei, Kerry, final interview, November 2007)

- AND: Diverse sexualities are framed as a problem you can get help for- normative sexualities/ genders are legitimated

Juliet...in front of the principals assemblies, [YES!] did three different kind of role plays that were ...very out there... Robbie coming up to a friend and saying "I need to talk to somebody, because I think I'm gay!", and the friends saying "you need to talk to someone from PSS!", and ... Robbie is still getting "Oh, are you gay?". So he's gotta have high enough self-esteem and self-confidence in himself that he goes "Well no, I'm actually not, but, but you know, if you wanna talk to somebody" (Interview with Juliet, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2007)

### Along with a range of other Student Support initiatives 'YES! is legitimated and operates with counsellor support - AND...

... actions of Yes! are carefully contained so that they don't threaten the heterosexual reputation of the school

Juliet: I think that [with] sex and sexuality, you are coming into collision with some of these strongly held views of parents about 'poofers', and, you know, disgustingness ... you still do have that perception. ...we've got quite a conservative element in the public forum, there's very differing sort of intakes from very wealthy kids... to, ... middle income, ... to very poor ... impoverished families. ... it's recognising those kind of different values, so again it's working cleverly, and, so that building of tolerance, that building of acceptance ... (Interview with Juliet, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2007)

- AND... because diverse sexualities are 'addressed' within in the counselling arena heteronormativity is largely framed as a personal problem which doesn't threaten the dominant discourse of academic achievement and is therefore largely ignored in the classroom

One of my teachers the other day, he goes "I know this project is so gay, but you have to do it anyway, no matter how gay it is", and I was like, you're a teacher, you're not supposed to say that! ...That was like the first time, I was so surprised. 'Cause I didn't think they were allowed to say it, to be honest. 'Cause it's almost like saying "oh you're a bitch", if you know what I mean." (Linda, First Interview March 2007)

### YES! Students represent a range of diverse sexualities, genders, ethnicities, abilities and want to challenge normative understandings of difference more broadly

- The potential to move beyond ghetto group of (white) queers and intersectionalities of difference have the potential can be attended to and explored

Linda: it helps get us more noticed [having] people with different ethnicities involved, it's not just gay, white people. But then the people of different ethnicities will realise that the gay, white people are not as bad as they might have thought before, so it's like sort of putting them in the same room, rather than having a secret, well not a secret, but like a little place for those people only. You know? (Linda, Robbie, Hemi, final interview November 2007)

#### AND...

Robbie: as far as I'm concerned it's not really that bad. But, I mean, for a gay person, mocking them real publicly'd be really personal and really hurtful. But, for me, they mock me about being gay, and I don't care, because I'm not, and I know I'm not... I just laugh, and say "no, I'm not". Or, if I don't like them, then I say "yeah, sure, I am"... Play with their minds... Freak them out, and start coming on to them. Get them really scared." (Interview with Robbie, 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2007)

- AND... Issues of hetero and gender normativity can get marginalised

Lisa: I think it's gonna grow. I mean, at the moment, you know, the one thing that we've made a difference about is not using 'gay' as a derogatory word, it's the one thing that we've managed to do this entire year. But it has to grow somewhere.

Pei: That's not what it's all about.... (it's) the whole diversity thing, not just gay sort of thing.

Lisa: Diversity is sexuality, diversity is more, diversity is religion, which is why I joined ... and it's just about making sure everybody knows that they're fine the way they are. And the more people that we can get on the band wagon would be great. You know, that army of millions...

Pei: Good, because PSS can kinda concentrate on the sexuality aspect...

Lisa: It has to, too, if we can deal with everything else. (Lisa, Carmen, Pei, Kerry, final interview, November 2007)

### YES! Builds students' confidence and leadership

Juliet: [our AP] talked about Mary having got up in assembly and spoken, and yet when she's gone to do the YES! presentation she was absolutely freaked and couldn't do it, she got stage fright, and she did the last one, but it's like, "it's ok, it's not that difficult", but that, but it's also that working in synergy with people and talking and having your own ideas, not just your own ideas carried forward, but your own thinking taken to places that you wouldn't have got to by yourself (Juliet, John, final interview, November 2007)

#### AND...

Ella: Well, um, I've been mocked sometimes, because of my colour, and I know how it, you know, feels weird, and confusion, and I came to this school, and (the school counsellor) helped me a lot with my problems, and my family, and everything, and I just thought, you know, it's kind of, it would be nice to give that back to someone else who has a problem. So, ... I don't know why, but I just like helping them, you know, just trying to find a better solution to work it out, and do it with all my friends, and they kind of get annoyed with it, 'cause I'm like the counsellor, or the parents, or something, so, I just love the whole thing about, yeah. (Ella, Follow up interview 29<sup>th</sup> November 2007)

- Helper Femininities- "Little Miss helper"/Agentic because you are doing good and seen to be 'good' and caring (even though you are deviant?)

### What citizenships are really valued in schools?

- Hemi: Like, the school's achievement for every student is to pass their grades, but they're only focused on what their achievements are for coming to school... Robbie: You come to school, and you learn this, you need to do your test, you need to pass, and then you can go away. It's not like you need to come here and learn how to live life, and communicate with others, and get friends. (Linda, Robbie, Hemi final interview, November 2007)

### The double-bind of challenging heteronormativity in schools

- Schools are normalising institutions
- You can run but you cant hide- the inescapability of circulating 'at risk' sexuality discourses in schooling contexts
- the role that both 'at risk' and queer discourses play in simultaneously enabling and limiting possibilities for engaging with gender and sexual diversities
- the politics of liberal recognition for queer kids and their allies in schools- tolerance and acceptance are ok but you can't be seen to problematise heteronormativity too much (whose problem is this? Its Queer kids with the deficit ...)

- Quinlivan, K. (2013). Disrupting Heteronormativity: A High School Student Queer–Straight Alliance as a Site of Peer Learning. In N. Higgins and C. Freeman (Ed.), *Childhoods in New Zealand*: in press. Dunedin: Otago University Press.

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