Writing themselves in 3

Writing Themselves in 3 is the follow up report to similar studies conducted in 1998 and 2004.

In 2010 a new term, ‘gender questioning’ (GQ) was introduced into the report to describe young people who do not identify themselves as being male or female, rather they identify as transgender, gender queer or other. This report, as the others before it, acts as a report card for governments, communities, families and in particular, schools. We learn who chooses to include or neglect, who chooses to abuse or support and what this means for the mental health and wellbeing of these young people.

In 2010, a total of 3134 same sex attracted and gender questioning (SSAGQ) young people participated in Writing Themselves In 3 (WTi3), almost double the number in 2004 and more than four times that of 1998. The participants, who were aged between 14 and 21 years, came from all states and territories of Australia, from remote (2%), rural (18%) and urban (67%) areas and from a range of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. There were more young women (57%) than young men (41%) and a smaller group (3%) who were gender questioning (GQ).

The world in which today’s same sex attracted and gender questioning (SSAGQ) young Australians are living is in many ways different from the one in which the survey was first conducted in 1998. Differences include how young people communicate through new media technologies, changing attitudes to homosexuality and changes in the law to protect same sex relationships.

Sexual attraction and identity

In 2010, the complex interaction of sexual attraction, identity and behaviour was even more evident than in previous studies. Most young men who completed the survey were exclusively same sex attracted but half of the young women were attracted to both sexes and less than one third exclusively to the same sex.

More than a third of these young people realised their sexual difference before puberty and there were few gender differences in age of first realisation.
More young people felt positive about their same sex attraction than in 2004. As in 2004, young people who felt bad about their sexuality used homophobic beliefs to describe their reasons whereas those who felt good used resistant, affirming explanations. Of those who participated in the survey, most young men identified as gay/homosexual. Young women were more likely to identify as bisexual and young women chose a greater range of identity terms to describe their sexuality.

**Sexual behaviour**
As in 2004, the evidence from this survey indicates that SSAGQ young people are less likely to use a condom, twice as likely to become pregnant and more likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection (STI) compared to their heterosexual peers. These young people were sexually active earlier than their heterosexual peers.

However, 28% of participants had never had sex, more than the 23% in 2004. Young women were more likely to have had sex than the young men and young men were more likely to have had exclusive same sex sexual encounters (56%) than young women (28%).

One fifth of the young women, despite their same sex attractions, continued to have sex exclusively with the opposite sex. These young people were more likely to be sexually active at an earlier age than other young people raising the importance of teaching inclusive and relevant sex education and the need for inclusive sexual health service provision.

A comparison of the 15-18 year olds with the SSASH survey (Smith et al., 2009) showed that SSAGQ young people were more likely to have experienced all types of sexual activity. In terms of specific sexual practices, 88% of young people had experienced deep kissing, 84% had touched partner’s genitals, 84% had had their genitals touched, 74% had given oral sex, 74% had received oral sex and 68% had experienced penetrative sex.

**Homophobia and discrimination**
We learned from the previous two national reports that SSAGQ young people suffer high levels of verbal and physical homophobic abuse in the community and particularly at school. In 2010, 61% of young people reported verbal abuse because of homophobia, 18% physical abuse and 26% ‘other’ forms of homophobia. Young men and GQ young people reported more abuse than young women. The most common place of abuse remained school with 80% of those who were abused naming school.
This continues the trend of increased levels of reported homophobic violence in schools (69% in 1998; 74% in 2004) and may, in part, be the result of more SSAGQ young people being out and visible.

**Multiple layers of identity**

Through their stories, many young people expressed concern about living in rural and remote towns due to the isolation, discrimination and lack of appropriate services and support. The rates of self harm for urban young people were far lower than those in rural and remote areas. Young people living in rural and remote areas were less likely to feel safe at school, at social occasions and on the internet than their urban peers. Many young people aspired to leave their rural and regional homes to become the person they wanted to be in an urban environment.

In this survey 3% of young people described their gender identity as other than male or female. These young people had quite complex understandings of their attractions, sophisticated ideas on sexuality and different views on what various identities mean. Generally this group was more likely to have always known their sexual identity and, while they were more likely to have disclosed their difference to others, they were less likely to be supported.

Gender Questioning (GQ) young people were also at greater risk of homelessness, physical abuse, self harm and suicide. They were more likely to have moved schools or dropped out of school as a result of homophobia and to have had problems at school such as difficulty concentrating, reduced academic performance and hiding at recess and lunchtime. Many of these young people aspired to make a difference in the world despite the extra difficulties they face, and feel pride in their diversity. This group was twice as likely to get involved in activism in response to the discrimination they face.

**Alcohol and drug use**

There were strong links between homophobic abuse and feeling unsafe, excessive drug use, self harm and suicide attempts. Young people who had been physically abused had worse mental health indicators than those who reported verbal abuse or no abuse. Drug use, which we surmise from their stories is often about self medication, was higher in these young people than young people in general and young women were more likely to use drugs than young men. For more than half of the participants, homophobic abuse impacted negatively on aspects of their schooling, however, for 42%, homophobia had no impact at all.

**Disclosure and support**

In 2010, 97.5% of young people had disclosed their same sex attractions to at least one person, a continuing trend to openness from 1998 (82%)
and 2004 (95%). This was largely successful with support from family, friends, internet and professionals being higher than in previous studies. In general, young men were more likely to disclose, and more likely to be supported compared to young women, particularly by parents.

As in previous reports, friends, more than anyone, were the first confidantes for SSAGQ young people. Friends and peers on the internet were also an important avenue of disclosure and for many young people the only avenue for at least a time. While young people with a religious background were almost as likely to be out to parents compared to the rest, they were less likely to be supported. Young people from CALD backgrounds were less likely to tell their parents and, if they did, less likely to get family support.

Sources of information
The internet was readily available to the young people in this study with 97% having access at home. Young people used the internet to seek opportunities not available offline, that is, to connect with others in a similar situation and to learn about being same sex attracted. Those who reported using the internet to explore sexual identity were more likely to be male and attracted exclusively to the same sex.

Belonging to an internet site was generally a positive experience for these young people with 75% of them feeling accepted there for who they were and feeling pride in their sexuality. Activism was also an important part of internet use with around a third feeling it was a place where they could work for change around homophobia. Facebook was overwhelmingly the most popular site used by participants.

Support as a buffer against negative health outcomes of homophobia
Rejection following disclosure was associated with higher rates of self harm and suicide attempts in these young people. Support of family, friends and, to a lesser extent, professionals was shown to lessen the destructive impacts of homophobia.

A significant contribution to the mental health of SSAGQ young people was made by schools which had policies against homophobic abuse, with students at these schools being generally less likely to self harm. More significant was the finding that young people who reported their school as having a supportive environment, were less likely to harm themselves or attempt suicide demonstrating the importance of putting policy into practice.

The support of a family member was linked to lower rates of self harm and lower rates of suicide attempts, regardless of what level of abuse young people experienced.
Sexuality education and school experiences
For SSAGQ young people, school is important in whether they can explore their identity safely and experience social inclusion. While a quarter of young people attended a school where they knew there was policy-based protection from homophobia and discrimination, almost a half of participants attended a school with no social or structural support features for sexual diversity. One in five attended a school that they felt was, in the main, supportive or very supportive of their sexuality. As many as 37% of young people described their school as homophobic or very homophobic overall.

Sexuality Education was not provided at all to 10% of participants, and when it was, only 15% found it useful. It was clear that quite conservative messages emphasising heterosexual sex and danger are the norm in most Australian schools with a far smaller number providing messages inclusive of SSAGQ youth. This meant that the internet, generally less trusted by young people, was the most important source of information.

Young people were asked what they wanted from their school and the strongest theme (appearing in 40% of responses) was that they wanted the Sexuality Education delivered by their school to be changed so that it was more inclusive of same sex attraction and gender diversity.

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A summary report of the of the key findings of the 2010 survey can be accessed through the Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria website http://www.glhv.org.au.