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"That's so gay." When it comes to derisory statements, this one, in particular, circulates in schoolyards, workplaces and online environments without any hesitation. While for many this is not meant as an intentional verbal assault upon a person's sexuality, it's still clear that the word "gay" has now become synonymous in our vernacular with stupidity, annoyance and even anger.

Is it surprising then that so many sexuality and gender-diverse people face excessively high rates of anxiety and depression when they are linguistically marked out as "deficient" within so many social settings?

An extensive study prepared by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society in La Trobe University in 2007, "Writing Themselves In Again", noted that 44 per cent of same-sex attracted young people endured verbal abuse. Significantly, 74 per cent of this harassment or vilification was experienced at school.

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Victoria is leading the way in tackling the significant risks of harassment and vilification suffered by same-sex attracted young people in schools: establishing an Australian first "gay/straight alliance" called a "Safe Schools Coalition". Such an initiative is aimed at promoting sexual diversity in schools by improving training for teachers on homophobic bullying, providing a space for sharing resources, and building peer networks that are supportive of all students, regardless of their sexual orientation.

The Australian Christian Lobby has echoed some concerns that such schemes facilitate "normalising homosexuality as a lifestyle". Using the rhetoric of normalcy is particularly troubling, as it immediately marks out "homosexuality" as something other-than normal or acceptable. How can the solution be to negate the existence of diverse sexualities or gender identities if we wish to build a more inclusive educational environment?

Continuing to define "homosexuality" or "transgender" as a confused or problematic "lifestyle choice" promotes social stigma that being different is unnatural or a mental pathology. We need to challenge this kind of rhetoric if we want to ease the psychological burden of "coming out" and reduce the risks of bullying and shaming directed to people on the basis of who they are attracted to or how they express themselves.

Visibility, not evasion, is critical to addressing the personal struggles of same-sex attracted or gender diverse young people. We can no longer turn a blind eye to a child who is humiliated in a classroom for being a "fag" or pretend we are deaf to the taunts directed at a child in the playground who chooses not to perform their "appropriate" gender role.

The Safe Schools Coalition program provides a forum to neutralise prejudices directed towards different sexualities or gender identities and

promote a welcoming space for "coming out". This will potentially reduce the risks of vilification and violence encountered in schools.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) young people continue to face numerous challenges in coming to terms with who they are. This youth demographic (15-24) are estimated to be four times more likely to attempt suicide and self-harm when compared to their heterosexual peers.

The consequences of failing to tackle the corrosive effects of homophobia can be devastating. We only need to look at the recent spate of suicides by young people in the US to lament the disastrous effects of ongoing sexuality-based bullying in schools. What adds to the tragic nature of these events is that all these children lacked networks of peer support and adequate pastoral care. Programs directed at encouraging sexual or gender diversity are not simply "politically correct" additions to curriculums, they have the potential to be lifesaving.

So where to from here? In seeking to end homophobic victimisation in schools, all Australian governments must commit to tangible legislative change and policy initiatives to improve the wellbeing of sexual and gender minority young people. Introducing federal anti-discrimination legislation to address vilification and discrimination is essential. Funding a peak body similar to organisations dedicated to the protection of other minority groups (race, sex, age and disability), will help ensure the concerns of sexual and gender minorities are adequately met.

We can no longer tolerate a society that continues to shame and coerce people into hiding who they are. Homophobia is a pervasive social problem. While legislative and policy changes are important, we also have to shift the fears and prejudices that govern our perceptions and feelings about "difference".

Ignorance can only be overcome with greater cultural sensitivity and understanding. Peer education programs are a crucial step in this process and can help build an inclusive educational environment for all children.

By committing to initiatives such as the Safe Schools Coalition, we can hope to end the abuse and depression that continues to cut short the lives of so many sexual and gender minority young people.

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