

**“In or ‘Out?’”:  
An Examination of the Effects of School Climate  
on Same-Sex Attracted Students in Australia**

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**ABSTRACT**

Research has shown that the school-based experiences of same-sex attracted (SSA) young people are frequently less than ideal, often fraught with verbal and physical harassment and social isolation from peers. School-based victimisation of SSA students has been correlated with their negative mental health outcomes, drug and alcohol use, decreased academic outcomes and lowered tertiary aspirations. These outcomes raise issues related to duty of care for educators, including the general responsibility of schools to create safe, equitable learning environments for all of their students.

In order to better meet the needs of SSA students in Australia’s secondary schools, this nationwide study examined the current school climate toward same-sex attraction as described by SSA young people aged 14-19 through their reported experiences and perceptions of environmental stresses and supports, using Margaret Spencer’s PVEST model as the theoretical framework. A web-based survey instrument, advertised through both mainstream and lesbian/gay/bisexual-orientated youth sources, was used to sample Australian SSA students ( $N = 282$ ). The relationships between SSA students’ perceptions of their school climate (including the treatment of SSA students and topics), their sense of connection to their school community, and their reported academic self-concept and motivation toward learning were investigated using bivariate and multivariate techniques, including structural equation modelling. In-depth interview sessions were conducted with six SSA young people in order to further examine these findings.

Results indicated that SSA students’ perceptions of their school climate were directly related to their sense of safety within the school environment, their social connection to their peers and teachers, and their feelings of connectedness to the school environment in general. SSA students’ connection to their teachers and their school environment had the strongest total impact on their academic self-concept and motivation to learn. Of key import was the clear indirect impact of SSA students’ perceptions of their school climate on both of these important academic outcomes, through their connection to both their school community and general school environment. These findings allow for the generation of informed recommendations for school policy and practice with the academic outcomes of Australia’s SSA students in mind.



The University of Sydney  
Faculty of Education and Social Work  
*Division of Graduate Studies*

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### **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

This is to certify that:

- I. This thesis comprises only my original work towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
- II. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
- III. The thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree.
- IV. No part of this work has been used for the award of another degree.
- V. This thesis meets the *University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.*

Signature(s): .....

Name(s):.....Jacqueline Anastasia Mikulsky.....

Date: .....

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## GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

€	Absolute Value
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AGFI	Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index
AIC	Akaike Information Criterion
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AMOS	Analysis of Moment Structures (computer program)
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
ARHS	Affective Reactions to Homosexuality Scale
ASDQ II	Academic Self-Description Questionnaire II
ATH	Attitudes Towards Homosexuality Scale
BHS	Beck Hopelessness Scale
$\beta$	Beta; regression weight
BSI	Brief Symptom Inventory
Co-ed	Co-educational (i.e. schools which enrol both girls and boys)
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
$\chi^2$	Computed value of a chi-square test
CGI	Computer Generated Instruction
$\alpha$	Cronbach's index of internal consistency
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
$\Delta$	Delta; increment of change
DEET	Department of Education, Employment and Training, Victoria
<i>df</i>	Degrees of Freedom
EDA	Exploratory Data Analysis
<i>F</i>	Fisher's <i>F</i> ratio (ANOVA)
GFI	Goodness of Fit Index
GLSEN	Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educational Network
GPA	Grade Point Average
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HTML	Hyper Text Mark-up Language
ICE	Identity-Focussed Cultural Ecological Perspective
IFI	Incremental Fit Index
IHP	Index of Homophobia Scale
IP	Internet Protocol
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic
l/g/b	lesbian/gay/bisexual
l/g/b/q	lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer
l/g/b/t	lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender
MAX	Maximum
ML	Maximum Likelihood
<i>M</i>	Mean
MIN	Minimum

MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
MATHS	Modified Attitudes Towards Homosexuality Scale
MAACL	Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist
MANOVA	Multiple Analysis of Variance
MI	Multiple Imputation
<i>N</i>	Number (Final Sample)
<i>n</i>	Number (Partial Sample)
N/A	Not Applicable
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
<i>p</i> ( <i>p</i> -value)	Probability; measure of statistical significance
<i>p.</i> (pp.)	Page number(s)
<i>r</i>	Pearson product-moment correlation
PVEST	Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory
PRELIS	Preparation for LISREL (computer program)
PCA	Principal Component Analysis
Q	Question
QLD	Queensland
QUAL	Qualitative
QUAN	Quantitative
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error Approximation
SA	South Australia
$\rho$	Spearman rank correlation coefficient (rho)
<i>SD</i>	Standard Deviation
<i>SE</i>	Standard Error
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SPS	Suicide Probability Scale
SQ	Suicide Questionnaire
SRMR	Standardised Root Square Mean Residual
SSA	Same-Sex Attracted
<i>t</i>	Computed value of <i>t</i> test
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TAS	Tasmania
TLI	Tucker Lewis Index
TSC-40	Trama Symptom Checklist-40
URL	Universal Resource Locator
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia

## PREFACE

When you're safe, if you're comfortable, and you know that you can be who you are – when you're in that state of mind, you're much more likely to be able to do your work without stressing because you haven't got those things on your mind to put negative thoughts and everything into your head.

'Jacob,' Gay Student, Aged 15

In the autumn of 1997, my final year as an English Education major at university, I began my student teaching placement at a co-educational New York City public middle school on the lower east side of Manhattan. I taught English, literature and grammar, to two classes of Year 7 students, aged mainly 12 and 13 years old. There were many “characters” amongst those 60 students, but one of the most intriguing personalities was “Jarell,” a 13-year old boy who rose a full head higher than many of his classmates and had the brawny build of a high school student.

Despite his physical size, Jarell was consistently marginalised by the other students, mostly boys, in both subtle and obvious ways. He was excluded from the boys' cliques and, instead, socialised with his female classmates during both in-class group work as well as in the lunchroom and on the playground during recess. Despite my efforts to curtail this behaviour, students would often roll their eyes or make comments to their neighbours under their breath when Jarell stood to present his written work to the class. Jarell was often subjected to mockery – of his voice and intonation, of his manner of standing, walking; it was as if the students had studied Jarell and decided that he did not “fit.” It didn't help matters when, three months into the school year, Jarell decided to start going by the nickname “Bubbles,” a blithe choice for a young man living in the housing projects of the lower east side.

I was fairly certain that Jarell was gay. I do not know this because he disclosed his sexuality to me or to any other staff members or students; as far as I am aware, Jarell kept his sexuality private and perhaps would not have had the words to vocalise it himself.

Nevertheless, Jarell's sexuality, or potential sexuality, was obvious to me. Other students appeared to think Jarell was gay too, and while homophobic comments were admonished by myself and my supervising teacher whenever they were actually heard in the classroom, some of Jarell's classmates would privately speculate to me about his sexual orientation and it was not uncommon to hear groups of students calling him homophobic names behind his back during recess duty or at the end of the day.

The following year, I began my first full-time teaching position at the same school, again teaching English to several classes of Year 6 and Year 7 students. One of my new Year 7 students was a girl named "Maureen," a quiet girl who rarely volunteered in class and was very reluctant to share her work with the group. In contrast to Jarell's animated personality and strong friendship with a small group of his female classmates, Maureen was more introspective and preferred spending lunchtime in the classroom with me – working on the computer, completing assignments – than in the crowded lunchroom or out on the yard at recess and, from what I could ascertain, did not have even one close friend at the school. Rather than being actively picked on like Jarell, most of the time Maureen was simply left alone by the majority of the students who thought she was weird and was "probably a dyke," because of her baggy, longer clothing, lack of make-up or intricate plaits, unlike those of many of her female classmates, and her general lack of interest in acting "girly."

While I was relatively sure of Jarell's sexuality, I was much less definite about Maureen's, although I had my suspicions. What I did know for certain was that should Maureen or Jarell care to seek out information about same-sex attraction or find support for confusing or anxious feelings about their sexuality, they would need to go elsewhere, as our school did not offer such materials or support. Even when I was asked to teach a short course on sex-education to our students (as was every teacher at the school, regardless of training), homo- and/or bisexuality were not incorporated into the program and, instead the focus was on safe, heterosexual sexual practices and heterosexual attractions during puberty. The environment was virtually silent on issues surrounding same-sex attraction. As a certified secondary school teacher, my university training

never once touched on issues of sexual diversity in the classroom and any work I did towards addressing homophobia in the classroom came from sheer intuition and personal commitment.

As an educator who believes strongly in issues of equity and safety within the classroom, my teaching experience raised a number of questions in regard to the school experience of young people with same-sex attractions. I was curious about whether or not other secondary schools acknowledged the potential existence of same-sex attracted (SSA) young people, how other schools in other countries were addressing same-sex attraction within the curriculum, what systems other teachers had in place for combating homophobia, and whether or not they were mindfully taking steps to establish an environment where SSA students felt confident and safe in their sexuality. Although I had never thought it appropriate to ask Jarell or Maureen, I was eager to understand how SSA students in other schools perceived their school's "climate" with regards to same-sex attraction, in terms of both personal bullying and isolation stemming from others' negative attitudes toward their sexuality, as well as active support of same-sex attraction from both teachers and classmates. How widespread was homophobic harassment at school in the present social climate and how common were positive school experiences related to same-sex attraction? Further, I was curious about what differences in perceptions of school climate might exist for SSA young men and young women and for SSA students attending different types of secondary schools (private vs. public; single-sex vs. co-educational).

While understanding differences in perceptions of school environment was a start, it seemed only a small portion of the picture. I had seen Jarell and Maureen's experiences of isolation and bullying impact their overall enthusiasm for schoolwork and social connection to their peer group, and became interested in exactly how SSA students' experiences of overt and covert homophobia within the school environment impacted their student experience. I wanted to know if what I had witnessed was an isolated experience and to gain a better understanding of both if and how SSA students' friendships, general sense of school connection and motivation, and relationships with

teachers were potentially impacted by their school's climate with regards to same-sex attraction. In addition, a major question which had been raised by my teaching experience was whether or not SSA students' general self-esteem and academic self-concept were affected by these same school climate issues.

Of all the potential effects of school climate toward same-sex attraction for SSA students, this last one carried particular potency for me. Students' academic self-concept, or their feelings about themselves as students (investigated in lieu of actual marks which are typically tricky to access and problematic to compare for students attending different schools), appeared to be one of the best measures of whether or not students are receiving an equitable school experience. While my teaching experience had shown me a great deal about how students' attitudes toward school and feelings about their self-worth as students could be impacted by social factors, I was curious to see exactly what aspects of the school experience had the strongest relationship to SSA students' academic self-concept. Accordingly, I became extremely interested in how SSA students' academic self-concept could be safeguarded and enhanced by practical actions taken by staff members within the school environment.

A move from NYC to Australia extended my interest in this topic, as I was curious as to how same-sex attraction was handled by secondary schools within this new cultural context. Further, as the relationship between school climate and other school-related outcomes had not been explored in great detail, I saw a need to investigate these issues on a national level, surveying a large sample of SSA young people from each state and major territory in Australia. In order to better understand larger trends which may have been apparent and account for some of the limitations of survey data, interviews with some of the young people seemed an appropriate method to further explore school climate while simultaneously lending the results a more personal feel.

Reflecting on my own teaching experiences and students, I approached this research study with the following three research questions and key objective:

*Question #1: What are the major variations in how Australian same-sex attracted (SSA) youth perceive their secondary school's environment with respect to treatment of same-sex attraction and same-sex attracted persons?*

*Question #2: How do variations in how SSA students perceive their school environment relate to their perceptions of their personal academic success (i.e., academic self-concept), practical school-related outcomes and their sense of belonging within the school community?*

*Question #3: What school climate characteristics and psychological school-related outcomes have the greatest impact, both directly and indirectly, on SSA students' academic self-concept?*

*Research Objective: Determine practical steps that can be taken by Australian secondary schools to promote positive academic self-concept for their population of SSA students.*

## **Organisation of the Thesis**

To answer these research questions and meet the objective of the project, the thesis presentation is structured as follows:

Chapter One outlines a systematic review of the literature surrounding same-sex attraction and schools. The review begins with an investigation of attitudes of school staff members and secondary school students with regards to same-sex attraction and continues with the reported school experiences of SSA students, first in the United States and the United Kingdom, and narrowing to experiences of Australian, SSA students, as the focus of this enquiry. Correlates of personal victimisation for SSA young people are explored, with a primary focus on the impact of victimisation on school-centred outcomes.

In Chapter Two, socio-historical precursors to the modern-day experiences of SSA young people are investigated, highlighting the social implications of marginalisation for SSA youth. This discussion provides the backdrop for the presentation of the theoretical model under investigation, which focuses on the interaction of risk factors, environmental

context, coping mechanisms, and emergent identity formation towards eventual life stage outcomes for individuals, while using a phenomenological approach. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the research questions under investigation and the project objective.

Chapter Three presents an overview of the data collection for the project - a mixed-method design using an online survey instrument and in-depth interview sessions - and analysis. Further, the operationalisation of the concepts included within the theoretical model is discussed through the presentation within the survey instrument and the methods for survey administration are outlined. Finally, key sample demographic information is provided for the final survey cohort of SSA young people ( $N = 282$ ).

Chapter Four charts the necessary steps in data preparation prior to analysis including case deletion and index construction for the latent variables included in the study. Chapter Five continues with results of the subsequent analysis including descriptive statistics, comparisons of means and correlation analysis, with multivariate analysis in the form of the integration of findings from the six in-depth interview sessions. In Chapter Six, more complex multivariate analysis is conducted through the construction and testing of the theoretical model as a structural equation model (SEM). A number of model iterations are presented and a comprehensive analysis of model fit is presented in line with the study's mixed-method design.

These results are synthesised and discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven, in their relationship to other research findings and through the lens of their contributions to theory. Based on analysis, emerging answers for each of the research questions are provided and limitations of the study are addressed, including suggestions for future research in the area. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the research objective in light of the current study.