



Note from the editor

To whom it may concern,

this is to confirm that *Writing from Below* has ceased operating and no longer has a web presence. The below article was peer reviewed and published on our website but is no longer available online. If you wish to confirm any details regarding this article, please contact me (Quinn Eades) in my capacity as former Managing Editor of *Writing from Below* at quinn.eades@unimelb.edu.au.

Sincerely,

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Title: Queer Youth Articulating Wellbeing Through Reading and Writing Groups

Abstract: In media, policy and research in Australia, queer youth have often been positioned as victims. This subject position has emerged in response to their very real disproportionate vulnerability, but tends to limit how these subjects are represented, by themselves and others. While alternative frameworks for understanding queer youth subjectivity, such as 'queer thriving', move beyond the victim, these can create new exclusions around what counts as an authentic, successful, or liveable queer life.

This article explores the context for my mixed-methods research with queer youth who participated in a reading and writing group. Using ethnography, semi-structured interviews and an action research approach, I investigate whether such groups offer practical possibilities for queer youth to make sense of and articulate their lives. Written while the field work is still underway, this article begins to reflect on how queer youth, through reading and writing together, might imagine, embody, and make visible under-explored modes of living 'well'.

Article:

It is near impossible to think about queer (anyone who identifies as other than heterosexual and/or cisgender) or questioning youth wellbeing in Australia without thinking about the public discourse around the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) program. This program was a set of resources that aimed to assist teachers and students in managing gender and sexuality-related bullying. What had the potential to be an uncontroversial anti-bullying program from the SSCA sparked an intense national conversation about youth, gender, and sexuality, reflecting a cultural tendency wherein “children are the *tabulae rasae*, onto whom are projected the anxieties and insecurities of the body politic” (Aggleton et al. 2018, 2). This public debate activated discourses around childhood innocence, protection, danger and shame. Inherent in this discourse is a mode of protectionism that sees children in a paradoxical space – both entirely free of sexuality, a stage of ‘innocence’ where they are not yet sexual, and a space of heightened potential for corruption and damage. Fears of children being ‘made’ trans, for example, or of radical queer agendas infiltrating schools and teachers teaching children to engage in ‘dangerous’ sexual behaviour circulated through social media groups and in mainstream media.

The impacts of Australia’s moral panic about Safe Schools have been analysed eruditely by scholars such as Robinson and Davies (2018), Rasmussen and Leahy (2018), and Rawlings and Loveday (2021). This moral panic raised a concomitant level of concern among activists, health professionals and policy makers who were looking to intervene to assist queer young people. Ironically, both sides of this public debate demonstrated a tendency to locate the subjectivity of queer youth as that of the victim. On the one hand, queer youth were said to be at risk of being corrupted by radical queer teachers and activists. On the other hand, they

were to be protected from conservative media personalities and organisations that were agitating to remove anti-bullying material from schools. In both scenarios, queer youth were rendered passive receivers of either homophobic attack or of queer radicalisation. Though of course well-intentioned, and despite the necessity of implementing strategies to reduce gender and sexuality related bullying, the strident defence of queer youth during the Safe Schools debate reinforced the idea that central to the definition of queer young people is their need to be defended. It is in this context I ask: If queer youth are interpolated as victims, both through defending them against homophobia and through their presentation as corrupted innocents, what subject positions remain available to them?

It's important to point out that the subject position of the victim is not a new phenomenon for queer youth in Australia and was being critically examined before the Safe Schools debate reached fever pitch. Daniel Marshall, for example, has been critical of the tendency within public health and education discourses to limit queer youth to a subjectivity defined by victimhood, which he argues has been born out of a focus on bullying. He explains that within a "deficit way of seeing queer young people, the complexity of the young person's gender and sexuality is reduced to being little more than the "cause" or trigger of a bullying incident. In short, the kid's perceived queerness becomes synonymous with trouble" (2008, 97-8). Marshall argues that "the circulation of a hegemonic discourse of safety" (2008, 96) limits the extent to which queer youth can be appreciated in their complexity and reinforces a heteronormative way of thinking. Thus, to work against the cultural impulses that reinforce heteronormativity, we have to look beyond a deficit framework of queer youth.

Thriving?

With a similar intention to Daniel Marshall, Education scholar Adam Greteman (2018) is interested in how researchers can move beyond discourses of safety – that is, deficit models of queer youth – and “to think about and through what happens alongside and after surviving” (2018, 5). In this pursuit, Greteman suggests adopting the goal of ‘queer thriving’. In order to ‘thrive’, Greteman suggests queer youth should have “access to living full lives within and by creating queer cultures that resist dominant cultures and ideas”, which will assist queer youth to “grow and develop well or vigorously” (Greteman 2016, 309). While the concept of queer thriving is an alluring one, it carries with it another set of so far unanswered questions and complications. The first of which is defining ‘growing well or vigorously’ in the first place. Further, living a ‘full’ or ‘happy’ life are particularly nebulous and sometimes problematic terms that have attracted significant critical attention from scholars such as Lauren Berlant (2011) and Sara Ahmed (2010), to name a couple.

Affirmation

Similar questions are raised when one reads the fourth iteration of the Writing Themselves In Report (released in 2021), which is Australia’s biggest survey into the health and wellbeing of gender and sexually diverse young people. The report ends with recommendations that place a strong focus on affirmation. In total, the word ‘affirm’ is used 200 times in this 186-page document, sometimes in the context of gender-affirming medical care for gender diverse youth, but mostly in the context of one’s identity (whatever it is) simply being ‘affirmed’ as a way of achieving wellbeing. While the word ‘affirm’ is used to such an extent that its meaning starts to become somewhat slippery, we can assume that by

'affirm' the report means having your identity affirmed as both real, rather than a phase or misunderstanding, and as positive, rather than negative.

However, scholars have challenged an uncritical approach to the goal of affirmation and its impact. In theorising the concept of sexual citizenship, Peter Aggleton et al (2018) note that if young people fail to assimilate into the norms of their social world, they "remain liminal citizens, only able to participate to the extent deemed convenient by others" (Aggleton et al. 2018, 2). Thus, their affirmation is dependent on their intelligibility and their ability to align with the public's discourses for their sexual subjectivity. The requirements that emerge from the process of attaining sexual citizenship play out in often troublesome ways for queer youth. Rob Cover (2012) argues that the demands of intelligibility and coherence for both heterosexual and non-heterosexual identities can "enact an over-regulation or regimentation" (2012, 79) of the self. Cover's argument, which comes from an examination of queer youth suicide, is that "identity disarray through the question 'what after all am I, sexually, if I do not fit hetero, homo, or bi?' can in extreme cases produce unliveability, whereby destabilisation of coherent selfhood leads to a detachment from living, because there is no clear self to perform such attachment to life" (2021, 86). Rather than critique the individuals unable to perform a coherent sexual identity, Cover focuses on the rigidity and potential unworkability of sexual identities as they are presently constituted in dominant discourses. Thus, the model of 'affirming' one's identity in order to achieve wellbeing may only be useful to a certain extent. For researchers like myself who are invested in the ways that queer youth navigate wellbeing and identity, there can be a somewhat vexing bind between promoting an affirmed but stable and coherent identity, or one that is dynamic and contingent. Further, one must address whether or not to do research into how queer

youth might 'thrive', considering the risk of erasing the diversity of ways that queer youth are sustained in everyday life. A thread that runs through each of these considerations is an attention to how well/unwell binaries are constructed, shaped often by medical or neoliberal logics. In response to this context, my work is asking the question: What modes or definitions of wellbeing might be made visible through a reading and writing group that escape the dominant trajectories of living a successful queer life?

The reading and writing group

As a way of entering into these questions, I facilitated 10 reading and writing group sessions with queer young people aged 16-24. These sessions were held fortnightly on Zoom. In each session we spent about 45 minutes discussing two short texts that the members had read in advance, usually one fiction and one non-fiction. These texts spread across a variety of genres and were chosen in a week-to-week way by me, taking into account participants' expressed preferences and sensitivities. I then provided two writing prompts and we spent about 20 minutes writing. At the end of that, we shared our writing with each other and gave each other feedback.

Group members attended from 6 different states across Australia, were split quite evenly between rural and metro areas, and were fairly evenly spread across the age range. A higher-than-expected number of participants also identified as having a disability or being neurodiverse. These participants had particularly rich anecdotes about the ways that 'wellbeing' as a concept had structured their lives. There was also a broad range of genders and sexualities represented. The group included some cultural and racial diversity, but most participants identified as white Australians.

At this stage of the research, some preliminary themes have emerged that cast an interesting light on how queer youth navigate wellbeing discourses:

- *Work*

The program for the New Futures Deakin Symposium, at which this work was originally presented, reads: “Amongst the persistence of crisis we can fashion hope for the future”. This feels like a very normal thing to see written about queer youth, who are often encouraged to endure what is perceived as a difficult adolescence until they can create a better life as adults. This phrase, then, prompts other key questions driving my research: Amid persistent crises, how do we ‘make do’ in the present? How do we navigate the well/unwell tangle of everyday life?

Participants reflect on what ‘works’ for them. Phrases like ‘making it work’, ‘this works’, ‘making do’, and ‘working it out’ are frequently used to describe participants’ everyday lives. The evocation of labour here might be troubling, like when we ‘invest’ in friendships as if they are financial transactions. But maybe work can be broader than just the types of labour that young people engage in to earn a living. Work in this context can evoke a broader range of affects and experiences: effort, political struggle, refinement, craft.

Thus, woven into participants’ re-articulations of wellbeing is the act of ‘figuring it out’. They are engaged, through writing, through reading, and through life, in sense-making. Here, making sense is a type of ongoing work. Managing the relation between identity and wellbeing is a type of creative labour.

- *Time*

Participants regularly challenged time-bound metrics of success, such as moving to a capital city by a certain age, buying a house at a certain age, and having your identity ‘figured out’ by a certain time. Queer critique has a history of attending to heteronormative temporalities and their effects on queer communities (Halberstam 2005), and yet many measurements of success for queer youth are still oriented around linear timelines – particularly when ‘it gets better’ narratives are mobilised. This did not neatly fit with how participants understood and experienced the connection between time and wellbeing. Instead, participants used time as a *tool* for managing their identity and conditions of living the best they could. In pieces of writing, the future tense was employed to create a source of hope. Writing in the past tense helped participants to reframe their histories in more empowering ways. And time could be slowed down, to the minutia of the everyday, in order to pay attention to the often-unnoticed elements of ‘making it work’ as a queer young person.

- *Everyday tenderness*

A lot of the writing produced by the group focused on everyday moments of connection. With a strong focus on the domestic and on the natural world, writers described feelings of affection, attachment, and peace through otherwise mundane activities like walking along a river, watching stars, making lunch, or vacuuming the house. While this research was conducted in 2021 in Australia and was thus influenced by lockdowns and other pandemic measures, participants did not frame the significance of the ‘everyday’ as something new or temporary, suggesting this significance began before and would continue outside of

pandemic restrictions. During one of our sessions, Tayla¹ (24, queer woman) shared a piece of poetry that helps to flesh out the possibilities of everyday tenderness in her framing of wellbeing:

I want to stay at my old house

Where I cut Ami's hair

Where I used to have to five point turn to get out of the driveway and I'd park so close to the hedge and laugh so hard at Jesse having to step out of the car and into it

Let me wander up Centre Road and wish there were more options

Get greasy battered goods from the tuck shop under Caulfield Station

The HSP place that played bangers and knew my name

I want to park a kilometer away from Sandringham Station because the Frankston line is down and they have restricted parking and then I'm annoyed about it and feeling rushed but actually the walk is quite lovely.

Here, wellbeing is oriented around everyday life as opposed to more common measurements assessed via a linear progression through milestones.

Conclusion

By paying attention to queer youth reading and writing practices, we can see that wellbeing doesn't have to be a glorified, singular moment where we are recognised and given our rights as an intelligible sexual subject. In fact, queer youth wellbeing can be quite ordinary,

¹ Publication of this research replaces participant names with pseudonyms in accordance with the conditions agreed upon by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.

gradual, and mundane, and at the same time intensely rich. If we are able to make more visible the diversity of feelings, desires, and experiences of queer youth, then we may be able to unsettle the rigidity of a victim subjectivity and move toward a more complex framework for wellbeing – one that takes into account the ambivalence of everyday life and the creative ways that queer youth ‘make it work’.

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