Introduction

Greater recognition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity led the United Nations to take a direct stand against school-based homophobic bullying. The UN Secretary-General called the prevalence of this specific type of bullying a public health crisis. UNESCO has released several documents guiding education sectors globally to explicitly address discrimination and bullying driven by the type of legal actions and public protests now emerging across several Australian states.

Literature Review – Schools and GLBTIQ Students

Human rights statements and laws have recently been introduced that protect against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity which many Australian education stakeholders may not be aware of, or reflecting in policy and practice. However, media controversies surrounding school-based discrimination will not have escaped notice, particularly around same-sex couples at school formal and teen suicides stemming from homophobic bullying. Around 2% of people are born intersex and there is an increasing number of youth who question their gender identity. Further, 10% of secondary students identify as gay or lesbian, and bisexuality may count for over one-third of adolescents’ sexual experiences. Research reveals that as Australian GLBTIQ students increasingly ‘come out’ they are actually experiencing more abuse at school than in previous years: 61% reported verbal homophobic abuse, 18% reported physical homophobic abuse and 65% reported other forms. Overall, 80% experienced the abuse at school (up from 69% a decade ago). Other problems included a lack of relevant sexuality education, and deficiencies in social and structural supports.

WA Education Review – Gaps and Opportunities

A comparative review of WA education for GLBTIQ students reveals an urgent situation for the state. While a strong majority of WA GLBTIQ students reported receiving a school-based sexuality education, these provisions mainly overlooked GLBTIQ issues. Only 12% were taught that homophobia is wrong, the lowest result across all states. Other problems included a lack of relevant sexuality education, and deficiencies in social and structural supports.

Recommendations – Policy and Practice Strategies

The report concludes with a series of recommendations arising out of recent research, consultations with the WA EOC Working Group and Steering Committee and UNESCO, and key informants from the Victorian and NSW contexts. These recommendations are directed to government, education authorities and schools. Important features include the need for policy-based leadership, clear guidelines and training and specific structural provisions. Many different education stakeholders are seen as having a role in preventing discrimination and bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.