

Interview with Roz Bellamy

I'm interested in Roz Bellamy's work and views on the 'need for support groups for LGBTI students. Even in the most diverse schools, where LGBTI students feel completely supported, these students may have different needs. Students need a safe place to ask questions, share experiences, swap resources and bring up issues that are affecting them at school or in their home lives'. Since it's been a long time since I was a young adult, I collaborated with Ell Lamb-Rundle to interview Roz.

In Australia, not so long ago, gays and lesbians were considered aberrant, notwithstanding some of our greatest names in literature, arts, politics, business and humanities were homosexual. Transgender people were seen as primarily entertainment. Bashing of people who were not heterosexual was common, as was blackmail. Sexuality was seen as a 'lifestyle choice' for all but heterosexual men and women. Bullying was rife for those seen as 'different'. Young adult literature hadn't been invented yet.

A few years' later, Australians became more aware and more accepting of diversity. Even so, *Peter* a novel about a 'gay boy' was banned from school reading lists and libraries.

Fast forward to 2016, where diversity of sexuality and gender is not only accepted but embraced by far greater numbers of people, though some of past generations are catching up even now.

I asked Roz what she thought about the changes she has seen and experienced. My questions are shown in italics.

I have seen great progress since I finished Year 12 in 2001. I am constantly astounded by how engaged, empowered and passionate young people are today. I wish that some of the older generations were more progressive and open to change, and less jaded.

I found the [interview] questions very interesting. I have answered as a teacher and writer who cares strongly about these issues. However, I haven't really answered personally about the way these issues affected me. I know that if my school had talked openly about sexuality and gender, and provided support to LGBTI (and questioning) students, my late teens would have been far less stressful. Instead, it took me until late in my 20s to properly work through internalised homophobia and a lot of shame. I really want things to be different for young people today.

Should schools provide education on not only physical but gender/sexuality/mental health?

Yes, sex education should include a lot more than information on consent and reproduction. Unfortunately, it is an area that makes many teachers, schools and parents uncomfortable, and many have different perspectives on what should be taught. It is a very fraught and complex area. In my opinion, a lot of sex education is heteronormative and based around sex between a cisgender man and woman. It doesn't go into the complexities of non-heterosexual sexuality or the nuances of gender identity. Consent is often taught in a very simplistic way. There is no simple solution to this. I know some sex educators who teach externally as consultants and are brought into schools to provide education. They are experts in this area

and are able to explore important issues that many teachers find embarrassing or inappropriate, but are often most important for students to learn. I have also come across very interesting academic research into providing sex education in religious schools (despite opposition), as well as very positive work being done within the Health and Physical Education teaching areas.

Should schools run support groups for LGBTI+ kids?

I think there is definitely still a need for support groups for LGBTI students. Even in the most diverse schools, where LGBTI students feel completely supported, these students may have different needs. Students need a safe place to ask questions, share experiences, swap resources and bring up issues that are affecting them at school or in their home lives. Of course, it could be argued that all students deserve this level of welfare and support, but LGBTI students have common experiences of being overlooked, rejected or systemically marginalised, and having a support group is likely to empower them. Even if they don't need support themselves, working together may provide ideas that lead to change for others.

How can we make relevant books and literature available? Who are the gate-keepers? Eg: publishers, HSC reading list committee, teachers, education department officers, education ministers, other bureaucrats. Religious bodies, the general public, conservatives.

Change in this area often involves change at the policy level, both national and state curriculum as well as school policies. If a school makes it a priority to reflect the students' lives and contexts, then it should follow that they need to provide relevant books and literature in school libraries and on school text lists. However, this is often not the case. Some schools or teachers may believe there no LGBTI students in their environment, and therefore neglect to refer to gender and sexual diversity explicitly in the classroom, while others may believe that the 'lifestyle' is wrong and refuse to acknowledge it in anyway. Unfortunately, this can make it very difficult for teachers or family members who want these issues raised in the classroom and want books about LGBTI people to be readily available.

What can we do to argue for literature that represents the full spectrum of human beings?

Offer grants, mentoring and support to writers who are marginalised and may not have the same privileges to write and promote their work. Organisations have been created to promote women writers (Stella, WILAA and VIDA). It would be great to see similar organisations actively promoting LGBTI writers. Lambda Literary Foundation in the US is doing this for American LGBTI writers by providing fellowships, retreats, awards, resources and promoting works. Unfortunately, there is no organisation like Lambda in Australia. LGBTI writers who wish to take advantage of Lambda have to compete for limited grants to fly overseas to attend these workshops. Closer to home, Midsumma Festival in Melbourne, Feast in Adelaide and Mardi Gras in Sydney offer some support and opportunities for queer writing, but many only take place annually. Several gay bookshops provide a range of resources and events, but we need organisations specifically created to promote LGBTI writers and literature. Of course, I think this is also needed for other people commonly left out of the mainstream, including Indigenous writers, writers of colour, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, and those living with disabilities. The work that you do, Sharon, to promote diversity in the literary world is so inspiring.

How do we encourage those who fear LGBTI?

A lot of prejudice and fear comes from ignorance. Some people may change their opinions if they realise that family members or friends are LGBTI, and may overlook their religion's teachings or what they have learned from society. However, a more important aspect is explicit teaching on respect and diversity. By teaching young people to respect others for who they are, and modelling respect, acceptance and empathy, they will learn by example. Often, this sort of teaching will directly contradict the attitudes students encounter outside of school. Unfortunately, some people (especially from older generations and conservative backgrounds or religions) won't change, no matter how much you might try to educate them or open their minds.

Which is more effective? Writing letters to the above gate-keepers? Social media petitions and campaigns? Grass-roots education?

I have written countless letters to the gate-keepers in the past but it seems to have little effect. Social media campaigns seem to be effective, especially when a post or meme goes viral and embarrasses a politician. Grass-roots organisations, protests (especially those that have a very comprehensive online presence), education and the sharing of personal stories all seem to be effective. By the latter, I mean articles or personal essays about prejudice and injustice that are read and shared. In terms of education, another important factor is having very engaging and interactive civics and citizenship classes that encourage students to participate and get involved in issues they feel strongly about. This in turn can promote democracy, as students realise that they can have a say and get involved politically.

How are you personally bringing awareness through your own writing, communications, media and social media?

I can't stop writing about sexuality and gender. My wife is writing a PhD about gender in early childhood, which has made me realise how early our society teaches children messages about what is 'normal' and 'abnormal'. No wonder in our teen years and adult life it can be so hard to work out our identities! In my own work, which is mainly personal essays as well as a memoir I am currently writing, I try to raise questions and promote change through sharing my own experience. I am quite willing to be open about my own life, even though it can make me feel quite vulnerable, as people seem to respond to personal stories and find them compelling. I happen to really enjoy writing nonfiction. If this leads to change on social issues, it's a bonus!

You researched this topic for your final Masters research project. You didn't look into gender specifically, but at how sex education curriculum compares with what young people are finding online about gender, sex and sexuality.

This was a minor research project rather than a thesis. I worked with a partner looking into the differences between what students find online (especially through social media) about sexuality compared with what they are taught at school. We looked at policy and curriculum in detail, as well as current research and statistics about internet use. It became clear how necessary it is for schools to help students navigate the online world, especially considering issues of consent, domestic violence, pornography and pleasure. Students are accessing this

information alone or with their peers, and without guidance or a safe place to talk about these issues, they can pick up quite damaging messages about their bodies and sexual experiences. However, school-based sex education shouldn't presume to have all the answers, and should ensure that students have agency and feel empowered to make their own decisions.

I spoke with a nurse at a Melbourne private school who does some amazing work with students and makes it a safe place to come out as gender or sexually diverse. It is an area I am very passionate about.

Ell Lamb-Rundle & Sharon Rundle © 2016



Ell Lamb-Rundle is a HSC student from the Central Coast who says: 'Outside of studies, I spend my time making music, art, and writing. I'm currently working towards taking animation courses in game design.'