# CORE EDUCATION
## Tātai Aho Rau

# Creating safe spaces: Triggering the shift for sexuality and gender inclusive classrooms

**Dr Vince Ham eFellowship – Final Report**
**May 2018**

**Author**

**Jerome Cargill**
Dr Vince Ham eFellow 2017

## Contents

## Introduction

In 2017 I had the privilege of being the recipient of the Dr Vince Ham eFellowship awarded through CORE Education. This gave me the opportunity to undertake a research project that contributed to my journey[1] of helping to make Aotearoa's schools safe for all gender and sexuality minorities.

I set out to work with a small group of teachers to develop their inclusive practice to make diverse students feel welcome, included, and accepted at school. I was interested in delving into the teachers' historical understanding of sexuality and gender and support the development of that understanding. This inquiry was to help appreciate **what makes a difference for supporting teachers' understanding in this area and what helps encourage practice that promotes empathy and acceptance for gender and sexuality minorities.**

I hoped that understanding the teachers' journeys, both past and present, would help to develop gender and sexuality inclusive practice in others.

The key questions that guided the work with the teachers were:
- How do sexuality and gender minority students know they are safe in your classroom?
- How does your practice support the disruption?

## Background to the project

The guiding inclusive principle of the NZ Curriculum is "...that students' identities...are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.9). However, young people of gender and sexuality minorities (which includes identities such as, but certainly not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, takatapui, pansexual) are overrepresented in negative well-being statistics in New Zealand. This data suggests that the inclusive principle of our curriculum is not being upheld.

The University of Auckland Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences has conducted three major surveys in 2001, 2007 and 2012, often referred to as the Youth2000 surveys. The data shows us that sexuality minority students are three times more likely to be bullied weekly than their heterosexual peers; both-sex attracted students are four times more likely to experience significant depressive symptoms; and transgender students are five times more likely to attempt suicide than their non-transgender or cisgender peers (Clark et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2014).

Earlier this year PISA released their third volume on student wellbeing from data that was collected in 2015. The report showed that 15 year old New Zealanders have the second highest rate of bullying out of the 51 countries involved in the study (OECD, 2017). Considered alongside the Youth2000 data we know that this bullying rate disproportionately impacts on sexuality and gender minority students in New Zealand.

This is only a snapshot of the statistics that tell us we are not doing right by our sexuality and gender minority youth. What is most concerning is that there is virtually no change in the data since 2001; in fact, in many cases, things have become worse.

## Methodology

I began by approaching the research as a self-study. Inclusive practice has no destination: we can always grow. I shifted when I began canvassing the project, as I wanted to create a bigger impact. This meant working with other teachers to develop their inclusive practice.

Four teachers opted into this study from my school. We met fortnightly, sharing lunch together. In these meetings I inquired into their current understanding of gender and sexuality and their historical understanding, focusing on the shifts that they had made and what had caused them. These meetings also

---

[1] My journey was outlined in a blogpost I wrote in 2016 after appearing on a Seven Sharp story on Seven Sharp
<https://cargillsclassroom.wordpress.com/2016/04/14/seven-sharp-mr-cargill-the-teacher-who-is-gay/>

contained several provocations, such as articles, readings and an introduction to Universal Design for Learning[2]. The offer of classroom observations was made, but only one of these occurred.

To support this data from the teachers, I planned focus group sessions with students from their classes. I wanted to facilitate conversations with the students to find out what shifts they had noticed, what was important to them, and if their views reinforced or contradicted the perspectives of the teachers. Unfortunately, no students consented to being part of these focus groups. These opportunities were sold to the students by the teachers in the study and were to be held at lunchtimes. I wonder if there would have been participants if I was able to sell the study to the students myself, or if it was class time they were giving up.

At the end of each session, the teachers' thoughts were captured on an A4 piece of paper in text or drawings. Some of those images and words they created and wrote are used in this project summary.

## Findings

Two significant themes emerged from the data collected over these eight sessions, reinforced by numerous casual conversations. The first outcome was unsurprising, reinforced by prior work in this area. The second was surprising and challenged my thinking in this area.

### Visibility

Predictably, visibility was a theme that we might understand as an umbrella that sits above all the data from this research. It is challenging to engage in deliberate targeted action for a group that is invisible to the teacher. Visibility is key to action.

All four teachers shared stories of their increasing understanding of gender and sexuality diversity. For one the most notable shift was during their training at teachers' college. They recalled being specifically struck by the suggestion a lecturer made that not everyone in their health classes might be heterosexual. For them, visibility of gender and sexuality diversity in previous work and their own education was virtually zero. Others recalled the PPTA presentation 'Safer Schools for All' delivered at the school in early 2016. It contained statistics and insights that helped the teachers really understand sexuality and gender diversity. They recalled

this as a massive challenge to their assumptions and a call to action that resulted in a shift in practice, such as not dividing the class up by gender.

One teacher came to understand how some comments they were making in class were gendered: stereotypes or gender bias were part of their everyday language. From this project, they became so much more self-aware and self-checking. They have begun to use the opportunities where they have said the wrong thing to discuss the issue with students. This was an important realisation. All of us can be certain that at one point or another, we are bound to say the wrong thing - whether it be a gendered comment or using the wrong pronoun. It is vital that these moments are checked and unpacked with those



*Figure 1: Teacher data*

who witness the moment so that everyone can learn from mistakes.

---

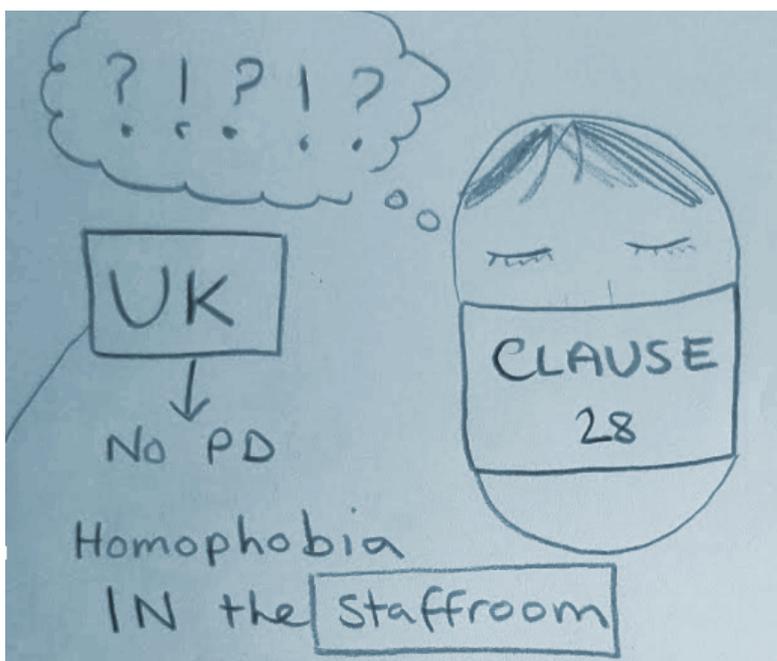[2] See the 'Universal Design for Learning Inclusive Education Guide' for more information.

Another teacher participant who began teaching in the United Kingdom was hugely impacted by Clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 there. This prescribes that teachers shall not *"promote the teaching ...of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship."* This was repealed in 2003, but the sheer existence still causes ripples through the profession as the legislation encouraged teachers to self-censor. The teacher's drawing on the right represents the power of this legislation in the way that it has literally silenced their voice and created uncertainty in their thinking.

In one session we looked specifically at cultural understandings of gender and sexuality. This introduced terms such as takatāpui[3] to the group. While they had heard of fa'afafine, they were new to viewing homophobia, transphobia and biphobia as concepts raised by colonisation. Elizabeth Kerekere has undertaken significant work as part of her recent PhD research that shares evidence that pre-colonial Māori were sexually experimental people who openly accepted gender and sexual fluidity (Harris, 2017). This offered a new lens to the teachers; giving them the chance to reflect on their Pākehā perspective and their bias. It was a challenge to their naturalised and European way of thinking around gender and sexuality.

Another theme that emerged was visibility being misleading; visibility justifying inclusion only to the point of what is apparent to the teacher. The group explored Universal Design for Learning to challenge this notion. Inclusive environments are inclusive because the teacher is making them so. The principle of predictable variability means we don't always have to understand the difference to include it. Universal Design for Learning was found to be a helpful tool to challenge and develop practice. However, I would suggest that the cumulative couple of hours we spent on the framework is only enough to scratch the surface of its potential to impact upon a shift in pedagogy.

Visibility is also taking action. Our school took part in Day of Silence[4] for the third time this year. The day draws attention to the silencing effects of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia by participants taking a vow of silence. All teachers involved in the study acknowledged it by wearing a sticker, but on reflection, not one of the group discussed the purpose of the day with any of their classes. When we unpacked the potential impact of this decision - how our diverse students might feel, how the issues of the day might have been understood by the students not participating - they all said they would facilitate a discussion as soon as possible.



Figure 2: Awareness to Action Scale,( Du Waele, 2015)

If we borrow the awareness to action scale from the business world, we can see a model for steps to turn visibility (awareness) to action (Du Waele, 2015). I suggest the journey from awareness to action can be understood as a continuum that relates to the teacher's experiences in triggering the shift for sexuality and gender inclusive classrooms. In the Day of Silence example, teachers demonstrate awareness and appreciation, but have become stuck around the point of advocacy, preventing meaningful action from taking place.

### Fear

The biggest shifts for my thinking as I began to understand more about what holds teachers back from making change, was understanding the barriers that prevent us from making it all the way to taking meaningful action. One of the barriers that the teachers identified was fear.

They spoke of being fearful of getting it wrong, of creating conditions where students couldn't participate. They spoke of fear of using the wrong language: of not being able to use the terminology that would make all students feel included. Fear of doing things that are insensitive and their hyper-awareness of the damaging impact that they might have.

Fear is one of the barriers to action on the aforementioned continuum. It holds us back from taking risks

---

[3] To learn more about takatāpui, the Mental Health Foundation's publication of '[Takatāpui: Part of the Whānau](#)' is an excellent source.
[4] [Day of Silence](#) is run by [InsideOUT](#) in New Zealand and takes place annually.

because of the fear of it being wrong.

The concept of diversity inertia[5] might help us to understand this. The diagram illustrates our pedagogy and our inclusive practice in between the pressure to be more inclusive and the pressure to be comfortable. Pressure from one direction comes from well-being initiatives or professional development opportunities, the statistics shared earlier that tell us that more needs to be done, and student voice that demands change for inclusion. The pressure in the opposite direction comes from internal pressure that naturally wants to maintain the status quo, the drive to stay in your comfort zone and competing priorities.



Figure 3: Diversity Inertia Diagram (Cargill J., 2017)

Our conversations affirmed the Diversity Inertia model. These teachers are all creating sufficiently inclusive environments to feel comfortable in their practice, but when digging into their pedagogy, some of them acknowledge the fear that sits underneath decisions they are making in the classroom. When this fear arises, they are making the choice to not engage. Thus, a diversity inertia occurs.

### Diversity Inertia

In order to create a shift, we can draw inspiration from Newton's First Law: an object at rest stays at rest unless acted upon by an unbalanced force. What is required to shift teachers to more gender and sexuality inclusive practice is greater pressure for change. To avoid diversity inertia, we need to make the compelling reasons to change more visible.

There's a real need here to make gender and sexuality more part of the conversation around inclusive education. Professional learning is an important step: when you know better, you do better. However, personal responsibility and conquering individual inertia is only one issue. One teacher reflected: "I feel comfortable moving myself out of my inertia, but I don't know how to handle it when it comes to the school not doing something." All teachers could identify issues with uniforms, bathroom and changing room arrangements, and some of their colleagues who are more conservative in their views.

I hypothesise that diversity inertia extends beyond individual practice to schools in a wider sense. The next step in this research will be testing if schools are fearful or stuck in a paralysis of change around inclusion for sexuality and gender minorities. The principle of catering for most and ignoring some is at play here. When most people are included, it may seem to be enough. Action around being more inclusive might seem too hard, too unfamiliar, or too expensive. I would propose that if diversity inertia exists on a personal level then it also exists on an institutional level, fear of progress because what is already in place is already working for most.

One of the teachers drew the image below at the end of the session, acknowledging a floodgate of change is on its way. We must move past this systematic inertia that stalls the well-being of our sexuality and gender minority students. We must be enabled to disrupt the status quo in order to open these floodgates.

---

[5] I began playing around with the idea of inclusion inertia, but settled on diversity inertia after coming across this blogpost <https://diversipro.wordpress.com/2014/02/10/diversity-fatigue/>, from which I adapted some ideas including the image of Diversity Inertia.
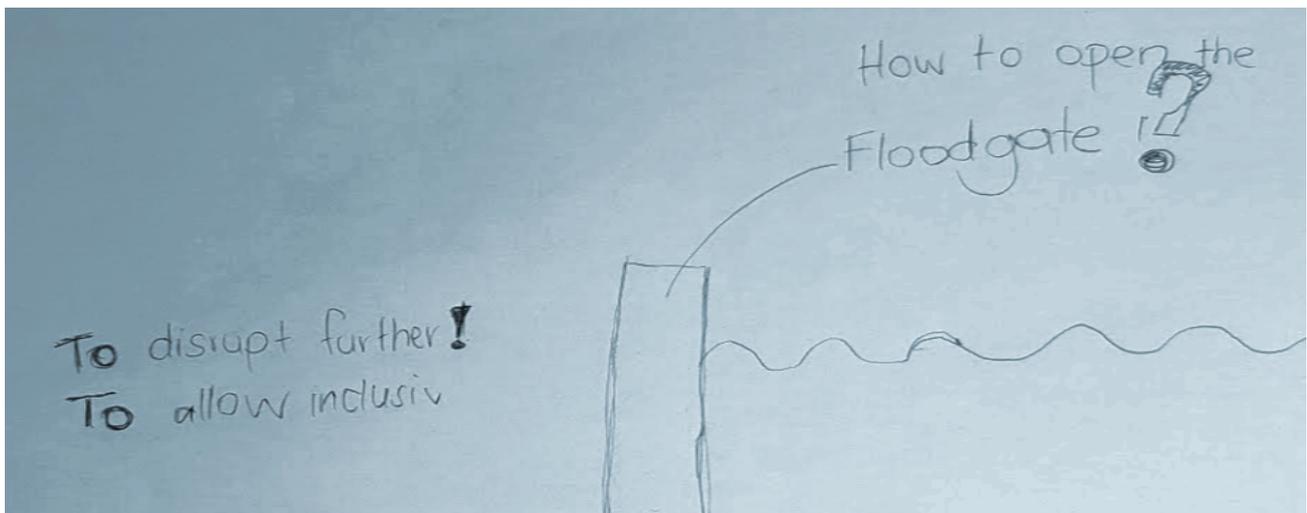
*Figure 4: Teacher data*

## Where to from here?

This project is just a drop in the water of change and there are a range of next steps. Considered here are four next steps based on reflection from the project.

Firstly, in September 2017, the Ministry of Education published the long overdue 'Supporting LGBTIQA+ Students' Inclusive Education guide.[6] The guide supports teachers to understand sex, gender, sexuality, to create school-wide inclusive systems and processes, to address environmental, physical and social needs, and to develop inclusive classrooms and curriculums. It offers teachers and schools the 'how to address these issues' raised by this project. It's important this guide is used by schools across Aotearoa whether it be school-wide reform or individuals that are making small steps. Anyone can be a leader of inclusive practice.

Secondly, an ethical requirement of the project was that the teachers I worked with were self-selected. I'd like to consider how to undertake research with the teachers who would be the last to put their hand up to be involved in this research. How might we trigger shifts and make accountable the most hesitant staff? I'd like to understand more about their inertia - are the reasons the same? What makes a difference to them?

Thirdly, I used a range of research to inform my work, including the Youth2000 surveys. The findings of this research have informed our communities and helped our understanding of youth and well-being in many more areas than just sexuality and gender. The 2012 Youth2000 data provided a first in the world insight on the experiences of transgender teenagers. Pending funding, the University of Auckland Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences hope to run the survey again in 2018. The hole in this research is that there is a causal gap between sexuality and gender diverse students and achievement. It isn't much of a leap to suggest that five times the risk of attempting suicide is likely to impact negatively on your achievement at school, but this is an area of research that needs to be explored. If research was to link sexuality and gender minority youth and poor achievement, we would likely see a reform to address this disparity. Could sexuality and gender minority students be considered priority learners?[7]

Finally, Ann Milne's inspirational keynote at uLearn17 included a compelling use of critical pedagogy.[8] This is a concept that could have been used as a framework to structure this active research project. Critical pedagogy offers a lens to challenge structures and norms that fail to allow individuals to self-determine or express their individuality. The emphasis on critiquing assumptions and bias lends itself very well to an evaluation of inclusive practice. I suggest the next steps for this area need a critical pedagogy framework.

---

[6] Found here <http://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/lgbtiqa/>

[7] I'd like to briefly acknowledge that while this suggestion could create positive outcomes, to take this step would be significantly problematic. The pressure of such a measure to label learners is in contradiction to the principles of creating an inclusive environment. Any reform would require care and considerable consultation with the LGBTIQA+ community.

[8] Keynote can be viewed here: <http://www.edtalks.org/#/video/cultural-identity-and-community-in-whitestream-schools> Critical pedagogy is unpacked really effectively in Karen Spencer's blog here: https://karenmelhuishspencer.com/2017/10/13/critical-pedagogy-how-to-respond-to-future-focused-discourse/

## Final Word

> *When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female or speak with a different accent or dialect than their's, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard. (*Rich, 1994)

Every student needs to have the opportunity to learn and succeed in Aotearoa's education system, and for that every student needs to see themselves as part of the system. "*Heteronormativity [and cisnormativity] ...narrows the options of all children and young people (and adults) in terms of how they can safely and supportively explore and express their gender and sexual identities and desires*" (Robinson, 2015, p.7). Including sexuality and gender diversity in our inclusive pedagogical approaches is about creating the space for all students to express themselves and grow their empathy, understanding and acceptance.

## Acknowledgements

---

[9] John now works at University of Auckland. One of his significant recent contributions was producing and directing the Inside Out video resources.

# References

Clark, T. C., Fleming, T., Bullen, P., Denny, S., Crengle, S., Dyson, B., Fortune, S., Lucassen, M., Peiris-John, R., Robinson, E., Rossen, F., Sheridan, J., Teevale, T., Utter, J. (2013). Youth'12 Overview: The health and wellbeing of New Zealand secondary school students in 2012. Auckland, New Zealand: The University of Auckland.

Clark, T. et al. (2014) The Health and Well-Being of Transgender High School Students: Results From the New Zealand Adolescent Health Survey. Journal of Adolescent Health 55, 93-99.

Du Waele, B. (2015, June 2). The Digital Customer Journey. Retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/netlash/the-digital-customer-journey-48888889/102-awareness_appreciation_action_advocacy_mapped>

Harris, S. (2017, October 3). Elizabeth Kerekere speaks on Maori LGBTQ term Takatāpui. New Zealand Herald. Retrieved from <http://www.nzherald.co.nz>

Kerekere, E. (2015). Takatāpui: Part of the Whānau. Auckland: Tīwhanawhana Trust and Mental Health Foundation.

Ministry of Education. (2007). The New Zealand Curriculum. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.

OECD. (2017). PISA 2015 Results (volume III): Students' Well-Being. Paris, France: PSA, Publishing.

Rich, A. (1994) Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Robinson, K. H. (2015) Forward. In A. C. Gunn, & L. A. Smith (Eds.), Sexual Cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand Education(pp.7-8). Dunedin: Otago University Press.