

Case studies to think and talk about

The following case studies are based on real events in New Zealand secondary schools. They can be used as a way for teachers to think through how well prepared their school is to deal with issues for LGBTI students.

Case Study One

Simon is in Year 12. He's a quiet boy, a good student who is always near the top of his classes and well-liked by his teachers and classmates. He lives with his mother and stepfather. Recently he has been scruffy, withdrawn and tired and his work has not been up to standard. He's not the bright-eyed youngster he was.

This morning the DP brought him back from the local shops. When asked why he was truant, he was sullen at first, then he started crying and the story came out.

A bunch of macho boys and a few tough girls have been following him at school and in the street, taunting him, calling out 'homo' and 'gay'. He can't get away from them and he has been assaulted twice. Most of his friends have left him to it, because they're scared they might be branded too.

The thing is that he isn't sure about his sexuality. He might be gay, but he just doesn't know. He told his mother what was happening, and that he might be gay. She told her husband, who said he wasn't having any poofs living in his house and he'd better not see Simon again. Simon's mother won't stand up to her husband.

So Simon has been sleeping at his friend Martin's place or sneaking home after the lights go out and slipping out again before anyone's up. He hangs around the mall till it closes and comes to school as early as he can. It's the safest place, but it's also the most dangerous.

How can the school and individual teachers help Simon, so he can continue his education?

Case Study Two

Jenny is a high school teacher, and Moana is a Year 10 student in her class. Recently, Moana saw Jenny and her partner holding hands while walking along a beach and concluded (correctly) that Jenny was lesbian. Moana approached Jenny, assuming she would be supportive, and told her she thought she was lesbian herself. Jenny was supportive and made some suggestions to assist her.

However Moana has become very demanding on Jenny, and refuses to be referred to the Guidance Counsellor for more expert help. She keeps staying behind after class and trying to talk to Jenny, who has become worried about her position. Jenny has approached the Deputy Principal for advice. She was sympathetic but did nothing. Jenny later approached the Principal, who also left Jenny to deal with it herself.

One evening when Jenny is out, Moana arrives at her home, very distressed, and Jenny's partner invites her in and gives her a cup of coffee. When Jenny arrives home she is furious and sends Moana home.

Next day, another student in the same class says to Jenny in front of the class that she has received a phone call from Moana alleging that she was afraid to come to school because Jenny has made a pass at her. The students begin to giggle; Jenny has difficulty restoring order. Two days later, the BOT receives a letter from Moana's parents alleging that Jenny is guilty of inappropriate behaviour.

How can the school and individual teachers support both the teacher and student in this case?

Case Study Three

Michael is in his last year at secondary school. He is quiet and well behaved, doing everything that is expected of him and not drawing attention to himself. His immediate friends know that he is gay, but he has not yet come out to his family. In Year 13 his life is being made miserable by a group of Year 10 students who have decided, on the basis of his appearance, that he is gay. They shoulder him in corridors, shove him on stairwells, and whisper offensive comments as they pass him. Michael is reluctant to go into changing rooms or toilets at school for fear of meeting this group.

One day, three of the harassers corner him in the corridor as he is leaving the Science lab and push him into a corner. Two of them pin him against the wall while the third jams a banana down his trouser front. Michael has had enough. He loses his temper, jerks his right arm free, and punches one of the boys in the face. Taken by surprise, the other harasser lets him go. Michael kicks out and hits a second boy in the groin. The screams of the two injured boys are heard by the Science teacher, who comes into the corridor and stops the fight. All four boys are taken to the Principal's office.

As the older student, Michael is suspended pending a BOT meeting with his parents. When his parents arrive to collect him, Michael is forced to tell them the whole story.

What could the school and individual teachers have done to prevent this incident from occurring, and how can Michael be supported now?

Case Study Four

Susan has always been popular with her peers; she is articulate and friendly, and has a wonderful sense of humour. Lately, however, she has begun to annoy some students by her constant attention to one or two close female friends. She can often be seen holding hands or cuddling in public, and some people find this threatening and/or embarrassing. Susan laughs it off, asserting that it is normal behaviour for girls to hug each other and walk around hand in hand or with arms around each other's shoulders; their sexual orientation is immaterial. She says that people are uncomfortable because she is lesbian; if she were heterosexual nobody would take any notice.

Should Susan be expected to change her behaviour? How can the school and individual teachers manage this situation?

Case Study Five

Rangi joined the Science department in his school two and a half years ago. It was his first teaching position, and he worked hard. Now into his third year as a teacher, he is regarded by most of his colleagues as a competent and dedicated professional. His youth and energy are seen as an asset in departmental meetings, where new ideas are most welcome.

Karen, one of his colleagues, is very concerned about a situation that has developed. She has noticed that another colleague, Ryan, takes every opportunity to tell inappropriate jokes in Rangi's hearing and to make comments about 'faggots' and 'poofters'. On Athletics Day three weeks ago, Ryan and Rangi were assigned to the same area of the field. Ryan refused to talk to Rangi, and at lunchtime he complained to the sports co-ordinator about being asked to work with a 'fairy'. He was moved to another position and Karen took his place with Rangi. She was disturbed that the incident had occurred, but Rangi did not discuss it with her although she noticed that he was quite upset.

Last week, Ryan complained to Karen about Rangi's 'slack attitude and general incompetence'. Karen defended Rangi, asserting that she had always found him to be an efficient teacher. Ryan scoffed and told her she did not know the whole story. He assured her that other staff members agreed with him.

After some thought, Karen went to the Principal. She was aware that Rangi had not made a complaint himself, but she was angry on his behalf and wanted the harassment dealt with.

Has Karen chosen the best course of action? Can you suggest any other way(s) she or other teachers could support Rangi?

Case Study Seven

There is a male student in your school whose mother is well-known in the community as an 'out' lesbian. The boy himself is not that comfortable about his mother's sexual orientation, and this discomfort is being exploited by other students at his boys' school. He is being bullied physically and psychologically.

How would your school deal with this situation? Consider the boy himself, his relationship with his mother, and the bullying students.

Case Study Eight

A Year 9 student who previously attended a co-ed area school has been enrolled at a single-sex girls' school. This student has identified as male from an early age, but has a body which is physically female. With the onset of puberty, the student has become increasingly miserable and now finds such things as using the female toilets and changing rooms intolerable. The student begins to act out, assaulting fellow students and ultimately a teacher in the hope of being indefinitely suspended and then being able to stay at home and study through the Correspondence School. The mother wants the child to settle down and accept a female identity in the new girls' school.

How would your school deal with this situation?