



Editor's mailbox

Dear Editor

Over time many words change their meaning; some acquire cult status for a season. In the 1950s young people decided that 'cool' was an expression of approval and respect rather than being a description of temperature. In the 60s 'heavy' was more an exclamation of gravitas and kudos than a statement about mass or weight. In the 70s praiseworthy stuff was 'ace' or 'brill'. In the 80s children got excited about all things 'keen', 'minted' and 'mega' ... and many adults were surprised to learnt that 'wicked' and 'bad' both meant 'good'! In the 90s anything excellent was invariably 'fly', 'dope', 'sweet', 'sick' or 'pukka' (derived from the Hindi 'pakka', meaning 'thorough' or 'substantial'; popular during World War I; resurrected by Jamie Oliver). And, in the first decade of the 21st century joyful outbursts are likely to include 'random', 'legend' and 'cool'.

In the 2000s, teachers began to discover that if something is 'gay' it is shoddy, rubbish or unwanted, eg 'This homework is gay' or 'Alan has a gay pencil case'. But when does use of the word 'gay' constitute a homophobic taunt, and when is it harmless playground banter?

The sad truth is that whilst teachers come down on racist or sexist abuse like a ton of bricks, they all too often turn a deaf ear to 'fairy', 'faggot', 'poofter', 'queer', 'lezzo', 'dyke' and 'gay'.

Surely, as Christian teachers, we should want to tackle homophobic bullying in the same way we deal with any other form of bullying or offensive behaviour. After all, every school – primary and secondary; including those with a distinctive religious character – has a legal obligation to ensure that every student has the right to learn safely. Zero tolerance of the word 'gay' as an insult or put down is a step in the right direction.

A male teenager in my form group told me one day: 'I am a Christian. I go to church every Sunday and the school Christian Union every Tuesday lunchtime. I don't believe in sex before marriage. I don't fight and I try not to steal or swear or put

Subject: The learning environment
ACT Now issue: Summer 2009
 Item responded to: Visual Valet

Dear Editor

I'd like to say how much I appreciated Harold Klassen's article about the need to underpin all we do in the classroom with humility, love and a thankful spirit. And, if we want our students to prosper we need to fill the learning environment with prayer, Christian values, love, patience and creativity.

Sandra Small

anyone down. I love music and drama and poetry. And, just because of who I am, I'm being bullied every single day.' He broke down and wept for five minutes before he could continue his story. 'The other kids hate me. They call me "gay" and "batty boy" all the time. They say my shoes are gay, my hair is gay, they even say my pet rabbit is gay! They steal my books and hide my bag. They push me in the corridor and slap me and spit at me when I get changed for PE. When I walk home after school I've been threatened with knives and broken bottles. One time three other boys dragged me along the ground by my hair. I'm not gay – I'm just a boy who doesn't have a girlfriend – but I don't want to dignify their bullying with an answer. I don't know what to do.'

It was only after hearing this that the penny dropped – homophobic bullying is something that can be experienced by anyone, regardless of their sexuality. Furthermore, precisely because this torrent of abuse is couched in homophobic terms it can – strange as it sounds – be socially acceptable!

Hurting someone because they are male or female is socially unacceptable. Beating someone up and making their life a misery because they are Black or Irish, or Jewish or Christian, or obese or have a physical disability is also taboo. But, in the eyes of all-too-many teenagers, picking on someone because they are labelled 'lesbian' or 'gay' by their peers is okay.

According to a 1999 survey of American teenagers openly lesbian, gay and bisexual youngsters are nearly three times as likely as their peers to have been involved in at least one physical fight at school, three times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school, and nearly four times as likely to skip school because they feel unsafe.

Girls and boys are harassed in different ways. Gay students receive more physical threats than their straight peers. Lesbian students are more likely to

Subject: The end of an era
ACT Now issue: Summer 2009
 Item responded to: How education used to be

Dear Editor

I greatly appreciated 'How education used to be' by Frederick Crabbitt-Thunderston-Armstrong in the Summer 2009 edition of *ACT Now*. Thank you – this article helped me to come to terms with the sad fact that 'Headteacher's log' ended suddenly and unexpectedly in the same issue.

Vicky Falmer

be sexually harassed by male students and be threatened with sexual violence.

With many experiencing such abuses on a daily basis, it's not surprising that lesbian, gay and bisexual teens are more likely than their heterosexual peers to use alcohol or other drugs, engage in risky sexual behaviours, or run away from home. They are two to three times more likely than straight youths to attempt suicide.

Teachers and other adults (including pastors, school governors and parents) need to ensure that students are safe in school and able to enjoy their right to an education. Supportive teachers who are willing to take action make a huge difference. And it all starts by making it clear that:

- verbal abuse, including misuse of the word 'gay', is contrary to school policy and is every bit as unwelcome as physical abuse
- everyone is of intrinsic value to God exactly as they are and, as such, are worthy of dignity and respect from staff, students and the wider community.

It doesn't take much for young people to feel supported: a few words of acknowledgement; a gesture; the tone of a teacher's voice.

We worship a God of love. We serve the Prince of Peace. And, as Christian educators, we ought to realise that the failure to address anti-gay harassment and violence affects the education of all students, not only those who are harassed, by sending youth the message that it is permissible to hate.

Brian Anderton

Dear Editor

I am writing in response to Duncan Ferguson's email and Andrew Kleissner's letter (Summer 2009 *ACT Now*) on the topic of ACT's 'Statement of Faith'.

I am an evangelical Christ-worshipping Spirit-filled Bible-believing Christian; I am comfortable saying the Lord's Prayer; and I fully and unapologetically subscribe to the Apostles' Creed. As such I feel at home in ACT and confident enough in my faith to engage in respectful dialogue with people who may hold a very different viewpoint, be it religious, theological, philosophical, political or pedagogical.

So, when friends, family members, colleagues and fellow *ACT Now* readers have something different to say I am eager to hear it, willing to reflect on it and able, if necessary, to re-evaluate my own position.

I am a 'young earth creationist' ... but I am interested to learn what Christian evolutionists think. I believe that intimate same sex relationships are not part of God's plan for human society ... but I make every effort at school to give gay and lesbian colleagues, parents and students the exact same level of respect I give to straight people. I am an omnivore and I love eating meat ... but I admire others who care enough for animal welfare or the environment to adopt a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle.

So, in conclusion, I would encourage *ACT Now* to continue accepting contributions that are well-written, thoughtful and thought-provoking. Similarly, I would urge fellow *ACT Now* readers to prayerfully engage with items that might be 'hard' on both brain and soul. After all isn't this precisely the kind of engagement we say we want from our students?

Jenny Jenkins

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