

Considering uses and abuses of Safe Schools - Australian, The/Weekend Australian/Australian Magazine, The (Australia) - December 9, 2017 - page 26

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Moral Panic 101: Equality, Acceptance and the Safe Schools Scandal By Benjamin Law Quarterly Essay 67 Black Inc, 115pp, \$22.99

You are only as happy as your most unhappy child. In a world beset by fear, this is a maxim that resonates. Not just as parents but as caring adults, we want our children — all children — to be safe. And in a world where dangers abound, we can find ourselves paralysed by the thought that something bad will happen to them.

In Moral Panic 101: Equality, Acceptance and the Safe Schools Scandal, Benjamin Law considers this fear for our children and our search for their safety in his detailed exploration of the now contentious Safe Schools program.

Living in a society of quick information and wisdom in 140 (or 280) characters, it is soul food to sit down to Law's thoughtful, clear and carefully researched essay, in which he looks behind the media frenzy to examine the genesis and principles of the Safe Schools program and tries to understand the moral panic that ensued.

The Safe Schools program was developed as a resource to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer students and to address the high rates of abuse, suicide and self-harm among these students. Never intended as a compulsory program in schools, it was simply a resource available to interested schools to address the particular needs of their students. It wasn't so much a tailored anti-bullying program: the idea behind Safe Schools was to promote safe, supportive and inclusive schools.

This, according to one of the founders of the program, Roz Ward, was because "the most effective way to reduce bullying around gender and sexuality is to have more positive and inclusive schools". Crusoe College principal Brad Madden explained the program this way:

It was never about making big changes to the curriculum or big changes to anyone's identity. It was just another way we could support all the students we have here at the school.

Within months of its launch, however, the Safe Schools program had become the subject of enormous controversy. For some, the electronic resource All of Us, which was included in the program, was to blame for this.

All of Us includes a compilation of video case studies of thoughtful and articulate young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer. It also includes lesson plans for

teachers, one of which challenges the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation. The All of Us resource led to a push back by parents who objected to their children being taught about sexual orientation and transgender issues.

It also led to an expose of Ward, who was said to have described the Safe Schools program as part of a “broader Marxist strategy”. Widespread media attention and online comments ensued.

Not long afterwards, 13-year-old schoolboy Tyrone Unsworth killed himself. According to his mother, her son had been “bullied to death for being gay”.

Tyrone’s death is at the heart of Law’s essay. For Law, it is the quest to save other kids like Tyrone and his fear for the safety of LGBTIQ young people in general that underpin his view that the Safe Schools program is a resource to be supported and extended.

Significantly, however, Law does not ignore the concerns of those who do not share his opinions, most particularly parents with conservative views — who see themselves losing more and more control of their children, and who fear their kids will be indoctrinated with values they oppose, values that could lead to a shift in their children’s concept of sexuality and the notion of gender. To his credit, Law is not beyond showing some sympathy for this view:

Many Australians yearn for the past. This is understandable. The present can be complicated and the future sounds frightening. We romanticise a time when things were simpler, when boundaries were clearly defined, when boys were boys and girls were girls.

But the gentle comparison to race relations that follows — and which precedes an examination of the spate of murders of gay men between the 1970s and 90s — hits hard:

However, as the British writer Zadie Smith recently asked in The New York Review of Books — as a black woman — “What would I have been and what would I have done — or more to the point, what would have been done to me — in 1360, in 1760, in 1860, in 1960?”

Fear is a ferocious motivator and the success of Law’s essay lies in his ability to distil the fear that surrounds the Safe Schools debate: that our children are being lost to us, either through suicide and self-harm or through the world’s changing moral face. For the proponents of the Safe Schools program, it represents a chance to protect our children, for its detractors it magnifies the growing alienation between parents and children. Law’s skill is in his careful consideration of both views, and in a world of increasing division, this is not to be underestimated. **Suzanne Leal’s** latest novel is *The Teacher’s Secret*.