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Opinion: Why the Safe Schools program was doomed to fail

By: Dalal Oubani in Industry+Reform, Opinion, Top Stories January 11, 2018 0

While parents, educators and policy makers fought over the politics and practices of the Safe Schools program, few assessed whether the program was educationally sound for the NSW Education system – that is, suitable for use in educational settings that strive to meet the needs of a democratic, secular and pluralistic society.

The controversy surrounding the Safe Schools program centred around whether it was acceptable to introduce complex concepts on sexuality to children as early as stage 2, and how the program itself was accused of indoctrinating students with non-evidence based theories on gender fluidity and sexual orientation. These concerns were even highlighted by educators who supported the LGBT community, yet felt that the program created inequality and unfair advantages where discipline was concerned, as even simple 'hands off' school policies were difficult to implement.

Adequately addressing the needs of any student from a minority background – whether their difference be race, religious or sexual orientation, is a challenge that is best addressed in educational programs that do not specifically focus on one group and neglect others. Selectively choosing one group of students to focus on in any antibullying program is systematically unfair to other students who are also bullied in schools for other reasons. For example, Muslim students in Australia do not just suffer from endless bullying and taunts in the playground, but fare worse in the Australian workforce compared to members of the LGBT community, despite their higher level of education compared to the average Australian.

Selecting one group to be the centre of an anti-bullying program further entrenches the disadvantage suffered by other marginalised groups in society, as it fails to also acknowledge their lived human experiences. Suicide is only one consequence of bullying. Marginalisation and increased risks of radicalism, drug use and violence are other consequences that we need to consider when formulating and implementing anti-bullying programs in our schools.

Another example of a marginalised and often overlooked minority in the education system is students with autism. A recent Senate inquiry into the treatment of children with disability in the education system found that despite 90 per cent of children with a disability attending mainstream schools, only one-third complete year 12 as they experience constant discrimination, there is limited or no funding for support and resources, staff are inadequately trained, and a systemic culture of low expectations, exclusion and bullying exists. Such groups must be considered in any anti-bullying program that aims to be truly effective and relevant.

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After all, for any anti-bullying program to be inclusive and have merit, it must at least acknowledge the various minority groups that also suffer from disadvantage in our education system and society.

Another reason Safe Schools was doomed to fail is that it was based on the premise that to empower one group in society, another must be disempowered. The treatment of homosexuality as a questionable norm is problematic, as it is the centre of most cultural and religious identities. Undermining the lived identity of the majority is not just a politically poor move, but an educationally unsound one as well. For example, Oubani and Oubani (2014) argued that the best way to tackle Islamophobia and the marginalisation of Muslim students in Australian schools is to incorporate their lived experiences into the Australian Curriculum, similarly to how other marginalised groups, like Chinese, European and Jewish Australians have been included in the past. Imagine the response if the authors had proposed including extreme religious ideologies or interpretations of religion within the Australian Curriculum and discredited Christianity as the main religion in Australia! Yet this is the approach that was taken by the Safe Schools program, which used constructs of sexual identity that required disparaging the heterosexual majority in the school system.

It is not impossible to formulate educational programs that meet the needs of *all* Australians, nor does it mean that we need to engage in cultural or political wars to achieve equality. This is only possible if our main goal in educational curriculums focuses on humanising others and not promoting political hegemony. For an educational program or policy to be sound, it must navigate the sensitivities of diverse Australians – whether they have right or left-wing orientations – and meet their needs. *All* student lives matter. It is time to call out the injustices students face in the Australian education system without turning their education into a proxy war for ideologies. After all, inclusion should never be at the expense of exclusion.

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