



# OCCASIONAL PAPER 1

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WRITING THEMSELVES IN 3**  
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**James A Athanasou**  
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James Athanasou

968 Anzac Parade, MAROUBRA NSW 2035 Australia

E: [athanasou@gmail.com](mailto:athanasou@gmail.com)

<https://sites.google.com/site/jamesathanasou/Home>

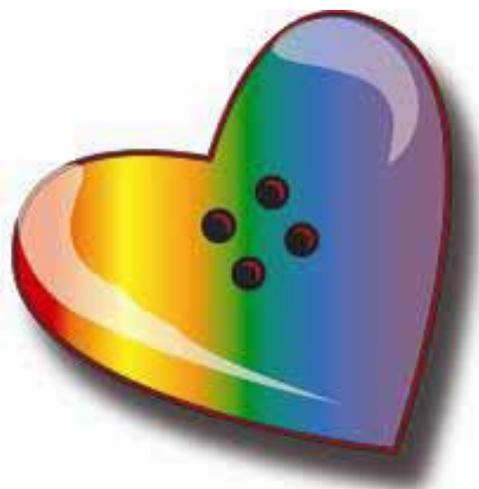
**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to critique the Writing Themselves In 3 study. Nine concerns are raised about the methodology and eight comments are made about limitations in the educational and social interpretation of the findings.

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## **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *WRITING THEMSELVES IN 3 (WTI3)*. THE THIRD NATIONAL STUDY ON THE SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF SAME SEX ATTRACTED AND GENDER QUESTIONING YOUNG PEOPLE.**



### **BACKGROUND**

The *Writing Themselves In 3* study explored the sexual feelings, the sexual identity, the sexual behaviours, treatment from others and health aspects of 3134 same sex attracted and gender questioning young people.

This is the third in a series of reports that have major policy and program implications especially for sexuality education. It is stated that

The research has been widely accepted. It has been used Australia-wide to inform government policy, and is evident in a number of government documents relating to social policy, school safety and curriculum development (Hillier et al., 2010, p. 1 – all page references are to the report).

The methodology of *Writing Themselves In 3* becomes important when the report indicated, “We have the numbers in this study to provide strong statistical evidence and we have young people’s stories which provide vivid explanations for any findings that emerge” (p. 3).

This paper provides a critique of the *Writing Themselves In 3*. The findings have been accepted without restriction in some quarters such as the Human Rights Commission.<sup>1</sup> The New South Wales Department of Education described it as “a report card for governments, communities,

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, Face the facts: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex People. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/face-facts-lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-and-intersex-people#fn10> Retrieved March 2016.

families and in particular, schools”.<sup>2</sup> It has become an integral component of same-sex policies, especially in education and is referred to in *All of Us*, the health and physical education resource for understanding gender diversity, sexual diversity and intersex topics for Years 7 and 8 (Bush, Radcliffe, Ward, Scott and Parsons, undated).

The first aspect of this critique is to consider how the findings were obtained. Nine concerns are raised about the methodology and eight comments are made about limitations in the educational and social interpretation of the findings. The following section provides the reader with a brief summary of some key findings of *Writing Themselves In 3*.

### GENERAL FINDINGS OF WRITING THEMSELVES IN 3

As in previous studies from the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society it was reported that “young people suffer high levels of verbal and physical homophobic abuse in the community and particularly at school” (p. ix). This comprised verbal abuse and physical abuse. Schools were considered to be the main context for abuse.

The report makes a link “between homophobic abuse and feeling unsafe, excessive drug use, self harm and suicide attempts” (p. x). Physical abuse was linked to worse mental health. There appeared to be a spectrum from no abuse to verbal abuse to physical abuse. Drug use was higher than young people in general.

The impact of homophobia was lessened by supportive environments. The role of sexuality education and school experience were also explored. Some 90% received sexuality education (p. xi) but this was not considered useful in 85% of cases.

The authors suggest that a comprehensive sexuality education will increase the acceptance of same-sex attracted students. It will reduce homophobia with its verbal and physical abuse and the harmful side-effects of bullying, such as suicide.

The following section lists aspects of the methodology that are of concern or it cites excerpts from the *Writing Themselves In 3* report before providing a comment.

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<sup>2</sup> NSW Department of Education and Communities, Teaching sexual health. [http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/sexual\\_health/research/writing.htm](http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/sexual_health/research/writing.htm) Retrieved March 2016.

## A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE METHODOLOGY

### 1. This study was conducted using an online questionnaire

Comment – There are advantages of online surveys for select populations, such as gay, lesbian and transgender (Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005) but there is also mixed support for the accuracy of web-based surveys (Duda & Nobile, 2010).

There are potentially lower response rates for web-based (approximately 11% lower) than paper-based surveys (Fan & Zan, 2010; Nulty, 2008).

### 2. The target group for the survey were same sex attracted persons aged 14-21 years

Comment – For a valid sample, every member of the same-sex attracted population must have a known chance of participating.

Without a sample frame, the presence or absence of non-response bias cannot be determined. People who do respond are more likely to be interested in the topic.

### 3. *Writing Themselves In 3* is based on a sample of convenience. Subjects were recruited to the study through various means (business cards, print media, social networking, radio) (p. 7). The Internet was the main source for recruiting participants (75%) (p. 12)

Comment – It is not possible to obtain a valid sample through respondent self-selection.

Without a valid sample, all data are questionable.

The people who did not respond have the potential to be different from those who did respond.

### 4. The average age of participants was 17 years and the sample comprised 57% females, 41% males and 3% gender questioning (all percentages rounded). Around one-fifth were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background (pp. 13-15)

Comment – the sample was not representative. This limits any generalisations that can be made.

(a) For instance the proportion of persons from a cultural and linguistic diverse background is likely to be under-represented based on the official statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009) and in particular that “25% of all youth aged 12-24 in Australia are from a CALD background” (Hugo, McDougall, Tan, & Feist, 2014, p. 11).

(b) The difference in the proportion of males and females in *Writing Themselves In 3* is markedly different from that in the general population aged 14-21.

14-21 years	Males	Females
Proportion in the general population (approx.)	51%	49%
Proportion in WT13	57%	41%

Source: 2011 Census of Population and Housing

(c) Compared to other regions, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory were over-represented in the survey

### 5.The educational background of the sample was also described: 41% attended school, 40% were at a university or TAFE (p. 15)

Comment – It has mixed accounts from students at university or TAFE with comments from current school students.

These are vastly different cohorts with different perspectives.

### 6.The report interprets ratings across a 12-year period as identical in meaning

Comment – In 1998, 2004 and 2010 the respondents were asked “How do you feel about being attracted to the same sex”. There were three options “good”, “okay” or “bad”.

At the outset, these descriptive terms are highly subjective. There is no behavioural anchor for the meaning of “good”, “okay” or “bad”.

Even if they are considered accurate, the interpretation of the results does not allow for the fact that feelings of same-sex attraction may have changed in meaning from 1998 to 2010. For example, what is “okay” in 2010 might have been “good” in 1998.

All one can say is that feelings about being attracted to the same sex, is that the probability of feeling good vis a vis the probability of feeling bad has changed.<sup>3</sup>

### 7.There are gaps in reporting

Comment – On page 77 a link is made between school support and self-harm, such as suicide. In the text, the reader is referred to a previous chart

<sup>3</sup> The ratings on any scale are a function of the characteristics of a group and the probability of endorsing the various categories (i.e., the difficulty of making a particular rating). It is possible to extract these components using a Rasch measurement methodology.

in *Writing Themselves In 3* (possibly Figure 14) that has been re-drawn in this paper in order to emphasise a key aspect (see Figure 1).

Firstly, the chart assumes that abuse occurs on a dimension from zero to some very high level. It uses a line graph whereas it should be really using a bar chart. Of itself, this is not critical but it masks the fact that these are categories. Note that suicide attempts occurred even in the absence of abuse.

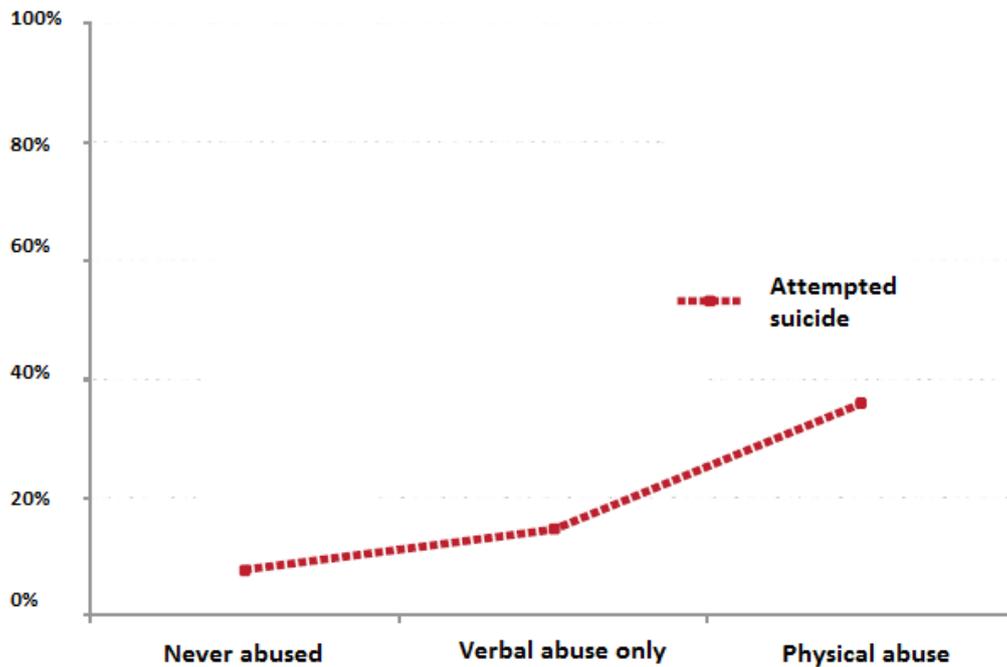


Figure 1. Suicide attempts and categories of abuse (Source: *Writing Themselves In 3*).

Secondly, the explanation on page 77 is only partial. A part of the data has not been reported.

It is important for its educational implications because it is stated that “for those who had suffered homophobic abuse school policies had little or no connection to self harm and suicide” (p.77)

SUICIDE ATTEMPTED			
	Never abused	Verbal abuse	Physical abuse
School with policies	7%	<b>Not stated</b>	
School without policies	15%		

**8.Young people’s stories provide vivid explanations for any findings that emerge (p. 3)**

Comment – the accounts from participants are moving but they do not meet the criteria for an explanation in social science.

They provide examples of individual situations. They were specially selected.

These individual cases are not sufficient for explanation of group behaviours.

**9.Lack of reliability and validity of the responses**

Comment - There is no indication in *Writing Themselves In 3* that the results are reliable or valid. The accuracy of the answers has not been verified.

Secondly, the test-retest reliability of the responses was not checked. Accordingly there is no guarantee that respondents have answered accurately or would give the same answer if asked again.

**EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

**1.The 2010 data reveal that young people felt more positive about their sexual feelings... these trends reflect the more positive visibility of same sex attraction in Australian culture (p. 18)**

Comment – this is a cross sectional comparison of different cohorts across time. A longitudinal study is really required to monitor change.

It is not possible in the context of this study to attribute changes to “the more positive visibility of same sex attraction”; alternative explanations are conceivable.

It may simply be that society is becoming *inter alia* indifferent, more individualistic as well as more tolerant. These influences are vastly different from the single cause of “more positive visibility”.

**2.Education and exposure to new positive discourses are important for young people and their communities (p. 19)**

Comment – this statement appears following two extracts from respondents. There is inadequate empirical support for this inference.

**3 ...more than half of these young people will know they are same sex attracted at primary school (p. 20)**

Comment – This statement is controversial.

There is no indication that any perceptions of same-sex attraction are variable.

By around age 3 children identify gender in themselves and this is well before schooling commences (Kalbfleisch & Cody, 1995).

#### **4. There were strong links between homophobic abuse and feeling unsafe, excessive drug use, self harm and suicide attempts**

Comment – suicide is a complex phenomenon. It is an area of research that is fraught with difficulties.

While homophobia may be a catalyst it is clearly not the only factor. Suicide attempts (See Figure 1 above) occurred even in the absence of abuse. The claim that homophobia and suicide are inextricably related is far too simplistic.

Suicide in developed nations has risen independently of same-sex attraction and homophobia.

For a start it is both age and gender related. Among young males aged 15-19 the rate is around 9 suicides per 100,000 and 3 per 100,000 for women aged 15-19.

Contrary to the perceptions of many laypersons, it is not youth that suicide at the highest rate but men aged 40-44 years with some 26 deaths per 100,000 and also men aged 85 years and over (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). It is drawing a long bow to attribute suicide to a single cause.

Instead Eckersley and Dear (2002) have related male youth suicide rates to factors such as health, optimism and individualism. They portrayed suicide as “the tip of an iceberg of suffering” and sheeted home the blame to developed nations that did not promote social identity and attachment. They singled out naive expectations about personal liberty and independence. There is not a single mention or reference to homosexuality, same-sex attraction or homophobia in their analysis.

#### **5.A significant number of SSAGQ young people find the sexuality education at their school not at all useful (p. 108)**

Comment – There are concerns that the same-sex attracted population in the study is not a suitable basis from which to make inferences to the general school population.

For a start 72% in *Writing Themselves In 3* reported that they had sex in the past two years (p. 33).

This compares with 34% of all students from the *National survey of Australian secondary students and sexual health 2013* who had experienced sexual intercourse (Mitchell, Patrick, Heywood, Blackman, & Pitts, 2014).

### 6. Verbal and physical abuse

*Writing Themselves In 3* documents the level of verbal and physical abuse experienced by same-sex attracted people.

An explanation for 34% reporting no abuse is not explored sufficiently.

By any standard this is a substantial proportion. It may be that differences within the same sex attracted cohort are quite large.

It is of concern when the Human Rights Commission and the publication *All of Us* indicated that 80% of students experienced abuse at school.



of students experienced  
abuse at school.<sup>5</sup>

Source: *All of us*

The correct statement is that 34% of students did not experience abuse. Of those who did experience abuse (based on interpolating from Figure 11 on page 45 in *Writing Themselves In 3*) only around 0.36 of the instances of all abuse (i.e., school, street, home, social occasion, sport, other and work) were at school.

This is not surprising given the time young people spent in school. It is also reasonably consistent with the reported levels of bullying in general in schools.

### 7. Homophobic abuse and levels of drug use

A statement is made that that drug use was significantly related to abuse (p. 55).

This statement is not particularly helpful when it is considered that those who never experienced abuse have a similar pattern of drug abuse (see Figure 2) as those suffering verbal or physical abuse.

Another explanatory mechanism is required.

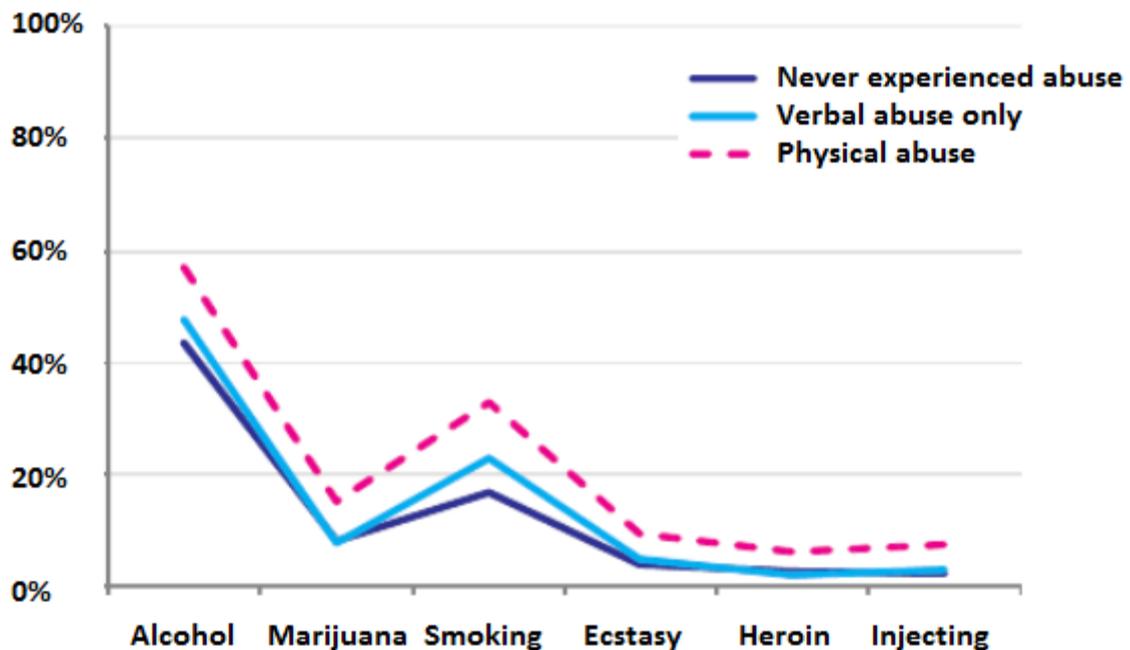


Figure 2. Abuse and drug use (Source: *Writing Themselves In 3*)

### 8. Schools as a source of harassment

Comment - As expected school is the major site of bullying but It is also appropriate to say that abuse in the street, abuse in the home, at social occasions and sport when combined outweigh that of school. Moreover there is no indication of the extent to which these contexts are correlated.

It is not clear why abuse at school has increased from 69% in 1998 to 80% in 2010. This is completely at odds with the claim about “the more positive visibility of same sex attraction in Australian culture” that was cited on page 18 of *Writing Themselves In 3*. This would require some drastic assumptions about the school environment *vis a vis* the remainder of Australian society from 1998 to 2010. It is also at odds with the finding that “support from almost everyone was higher in 2010 than in previous studies” (p. 67). These incongruities raise additional suspicions about the quality of the responses.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The bullying behaviours outlined in *Writing Themselves in 3* are studied in isolation from other features of bullying in school. This gives a distorted emphasis for social policy initiatives.

This report really required a control group of students to study similar phenomena and in order to provide a meaningful comparison.

Bullying is a common feature of school environments. For instance as far back as 1999, Forero, McLellan, Rissel and Bauman documented bullying behaviour among 3918 primary school students (government and non-government) in New South Wales. They reported that 23.7% bullied others, 12.7% were bullied and 21.5% were both bullies and bullied others.

The 2009 *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study* (Cross et al., 2009) reported:

Being bullied every few weeks or more often (considered to be frequent) overtly and/or covertly during the last term at school is a fairly common experience, affecting approximately one in four Year 4 to Year 9 Australian students (27%). Frequent school bullying was highest among Year 5 (32%) and Year 8 (29%) students. (p.xxi)

Bullying is a complex phenomenon that is age-related (lower in the highest grades) and centres on factors such as school bonding (Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003).

There is also a sense in which same sex attracted and gender questioning youth are portrayed solely as victims and not as perpetrators. This aspect is not explored.

Moreover, it is not clear whether there are also other pre-existing personality features or adjustment problems of same sex attracted and gender questioning youth that distort the results.

Overall, there are justifiable concerns that the same-sex attracted population in the study was not a suitable basis from which to make inferences to the entire general school population. This paper outlined 17 different aspects by which *Writing Themselves In 3* has major methodological and conceptual weaknesses.

On the basis of the information available to me it appears that there are major shortcomings in the sampling let alone the design of the study that limit the potential value of the findings. Nine technical limitations were documented. In addition there are major concerns about the theoretical or conceptual basis for the findings as well as potential inadequacies in the interpretation of results.

In summary this report paints quite a one-sided and incomplete picture. It is not asserted that there is no bullying or that abuse does not occur at school. There is never justification for any abuse or bullying. Tolerance is a *sine qua non* of a civil society.

At the very least, what I am saying is that this is a study of self-reports from a sample of convenience that is not representative. The findings may not be accurate. There is no control group(s) built into the study. It disenfranchises the majority of school students who experience other forms of bullying and abuse. It is not viewed as an adequate basis for national programs and policies related to sexuality education in schools. It omits as much as it includes. Finally, one is reminded of the criticism by the famous statistician John W Tukey of the Kinsey data on sexual behaviour (Leonhardt, 2000): "A random selection of three people would have been better than a group of 300 chosen by Mr. Kinsey".

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#### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

None declared.

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## OCCASIONAL PAPERS

1. *A Critical Analysis of Writing Themselves In* 3. March 2016

<http://www.lulu.com/shop/james-athanasou/writing-themselves-in/ebook/product-22704186.html>

2. *A Critical Comment on the 5th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health*. March 2016

3. *The Practices and Behaviour of Men who have Sex with Men: A Summary of "Sexual Health and Behaviour of Men in New South Wales 2013-2014"*. April 2016