

A critical examination of quality research use for LGBTIQ+ equity in Australian schools: PhD proposal

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Introduction

Despite recent progress towards social equity for LGBTIQ+ Australians, schools still remain spaces where hegemonic discourses simultaneously position heterosexuality as the norm, while ‘othering’ LGBTIQ+ people and their identities (Cutler, 2021; Gray et al., 2016). In these environments, many LGBTIQ+ students face discrimination and homophobia which can negatively impact their wellbeing and academic performance (Ullman, 2021). Yet, addressing these issues is challenging and involves navigating teachers’ varied emotional experiences (Cutler et al., in press) within complex policy contexts (Jones et al., 2014) and networks of power relations.

In recent times, the Australian education system has turned to research-informed initiatives to address issues of LGBTIQ+ inequity. Most notably, the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) was developed to foster “safe school communit[ies] through a whole-school and evidence-based approach” (McCormack, 2016, p. 8). Yet, the program was the topic of heated public and political controversy and was consequently dissolved in late 2017. State-specific adaptations of the SSCA still exist and “draw on current national and international research [to] provide best practice examples” of progress towards LGBTIQ+ equity in schools (Victorian Department of Education, n.d., p. 8). Although these initiatives are informed by research, there is little examination of how research is used in practice to address issues of inequity for LGBTIQ+ students.

This thesis will address this gap by critically examining how the ‘quality use of research’ can help to address issues of LGBTIQ+ inequity in the Australian school system. To justify the merit of this focus, this proposal provides a rationale for: i) the emphasis on quality research use in schools; ii) the proposed methodology; and iii) the positioning of Foucault’s ideas as a theoretical framework.

Focusing on ‘quality research use’

The current education policy context calls for the mobilisation of research-informed practices in Australian classrooms to foster a rigorous “research-rich and self-improving education system” (White et al., 2021, p. 338). On one hand, this is welcomed by many educators, policy-makers and researchers (Rickinson et al., 2021). However, there is also debate about the role that research evidence *can* and *should* play in practice (e.g., Biesta, 2010) as well as *what*

research evidence is considered to be appropriate (e.g., Cowen, 2019). While these debates are important, I, alongside others, argue that they are limited because they focus on the quality and value of *research* rather than the quality and value of *its use* (Rickinson et al., 2021).

In this thesis, exploring the quality use of research for LGBTIQ+ equity in schools will focus not only on *what* research is used, but *how* it is used, and *where* it is used to understand how it impacts LGBTIQ+ students and teachers. Such a focus highlights the need to examine how research is used in both policy and practice, as well as the interplay between these two contexts (Rickinson et al., 2017). Indeed, previous studies have pointed to the importance of research—particularly research highlighting the risks for LGBTIQ+ students—in initiating LGBTIQ-inclusive education policies (e.g., Jones & Hillier, 2012). However, there is a lack of understanding of how this research is used in practice. This is a gap worth addressing as international research suggests that “most research and advocacy efforts persist in upholding protectionist frameworks ... that are inadequate for addressing [issues of] power” and LGBTIQ+ inequity in practice (Roberts & Marx, 2018, p. 282).

The proposed methodology

To address this gap, this thesis will operate within the critical paradigm and use qualitative data collection methods to answer the overarching research question:

- 1) How can the quality use of research contribute to addressing LGBTIQ+ inequity in schools?

With two sub-questions guiding the specific research activities:

- a) How is research currently used in policy and practice in service of social equity for LGBTIQ+ students?
- b) What are educators’ perspectives about the use of research for LGBTIQ+ equity?

First, a critical policy analysis will be conducted on Australian anti-homophobia, anti-bullying and anti-discrimination educational policies to interrogate how the positioning of research within these policies supports or hinders social justice efforts in schools. This will build on previous critical policy analyses in Australia (e.g., Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2018) by focusing specifically on how research is entwined in the exercise of politics, policy and power. It will follow Horsford et al.’s (2018) core steps of *defining the problem* and analysing the aims of these policies, before analysing how research is used in the *policy process* and *policy implementation* through the creation of a policy narrative (see, Rickinson et al., 2017).

Second, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a purposeful sample of educators who have experience in working to address issues of LGBTIQ+ inequity in

Australian schools (e.g., LGBTIQ+ educators or wellbeing coordinators). The interviews will focus on their experiences of fostering equitable school environments, how their work is informed (or challenged) by research, as well as how they would like to see research used to support LGBTIQ+ equity within current discourses of evidence-based practice. Although these discourses are abstract concepts, they can be represented by “the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Thus, excerpts from educational policy and LGBTIQ+ research will be used to guide and prompt further discussion in the interviews. The interviews will then be analysed using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to explore how research, power, and the discourse of evidence-based practice influence educators’ approaches to LGBTIQ+ equity. This will provide insight into how research and policy may have the “material effect of fostering inequity” in Australian schools (O’Malley & Long, 2017, p. 78).

A critical theoretical perspective

Recognising that power is implicated in issues of LGBTIQ+ inequity and research use, this thesis will find its theoretical footing in Foucault’s (1972, 1978) argument that the concepts of knowledge, power and sexuality are inextricably linked. For instance, Foucault’s ideas highlight how the construction of knowledge through research has “acted as a form of power that defined, ordered, categorised, constituted and differentially valued individuals” (Pringle, 2014, p. 399). However, this thesis will apply Foucauldian thinking to examine how power is exercised through the use of this research in policy, and as a result, understand ‘what happens’ in relation to issues of LGBTIQ+ inequity in practice (Foucault, 1983). To paraphrase Foucault (1984), this positioning does not aim to argue how the use of research ‘is bad’, but rather to consider how its use may be ‘dangerous’. In doing so, it will be possible to understand how research can be used better in service of LGBTIQ+ equity in schools.

Applying Foucault’s iconoclastic ideas to this thesis will also make a timely theoretical contribution to the broader field of scholarship on the use of research evidence. In the American context, researchers are applying critical social theories, such as Critical Race Theory to understand how “research is inextricably implicated” in the reproduction of racial (in)equality (Doucet, 2019, p. 2). In contrast, while critical theories underpin much of the research conducted with LGBTIQ+ people, critical ideas are rarely applied to investigations of how this research is used, especially in schools. Thus, applying Foucault’s ideas in this thesis will provide a unique opportunity to understand how the use of research acts as a form of power that may (re)produce LGBTIQ+ inequity in Australian schools, and thus, give insight into how it might be used “with more equitable goals in mind” (Doucet, 2019, p. 10).

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