

Beyond ‘safety’: Teachers and school staff approaches to LGBTI-inclusion in Tasmanian schools

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Abstract

Australian and international research consistently indicates that inclusive school cultures improve the educational outcomes and health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) students. Little is known, however, about how Tasmanian school staff are supporting LGBTI students or the needs of teachers and school staff in creating and sustaining inclusive school environments. To address this knowledge gap, this paper reports on findings from a qualitative inquiry conducted with teachers and school staff. Drawing on Szalacha’s (2004) three paradigms of LGBTI-inclusive education practices, this study found that teachers and school staff employ Safety and Equity approaches in an education system where there is little time or resources given to knowing and understanding relevant policy focused on supporting LGBTI students. We argue that school staff’s perception of school and departmental policy influences how they understand what is expected and what is possible in supporting LGBTI students. Findings from this study point to the need for inclusive education policies that inform and support teachers and foster potential for more critical approaches to equity and diversity.

Keywords: gender, inclusivity, LGBTI, sexuality, policy.

Introduction

Australian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) young people report high levels of bullying, harassment, and discrimination at school, resulting in negative educational and health outcomes (see, e.g., Hillier et al. 2010; Robinson et al. 2014). A growing body of interdisciplinary research identifies significant need for LGBTI-inclusive teaching practices and schooling environments (Jones and Hillier 2013; Kosciw et al. 2013; Robinson and Ferfolja 2002; Shannon 2016). Pullen Sansfaçon et al. (2015) suggest that one barrier to LGBTI-inclusion relates to school

staff members' understandings of gender, and whether discussions of sexuality and gender diversity are silenced or are positively included within school policies and practices. Other studies similarly show that a lack of knowledge in this area amongst staff makes school experiences difficult for both LGBTI students and their parents (Riggs and Bartholomaeus 2015). While there is now ample evidence of LGBTI students' negative educational experiences and a growing body of literature examining teachers' approaches to inclusive practice, the majority of this research is conducted in urban areas of the Global North. Comparatively little is known about Australian teachers and school staff understandings of LGBTI-inclusivity or their lived experiences of supporting LGBTI and gender-questioning students.

A significant body of LGBTI education research focuses on student experiences, with several studies highlighting the important role that educators can play in facilitating supportive school cultures (Luecke 2011; Slesaransky-Poe et al. 2013). Ferfolja and Robinson (2004, 10) argue that “teachers have a professional, moral and legal obligation to intervene in discrimination based on sexual orientation and to promote critical understandings of difference throughout all stages of education.” Research shows, however, that despite best of intentions and positive attitudes towards supporting LGBTI students, teachers rarely intervene in homophobic behaviours and maintain heteronormativity in teaching (Dragowski et al. 2016).

There is limited research evidence about how LGBTI inclusive practice occurs in classroom settings. According to Sadowski (2016, 21), inclusive curriculum continues to lag behind other measures, such as anti-bullying, gender and sexuality alliance groups, policy, and other reforms. Inclusive curriculum encourages educators to think about LGBTI identities in ways that do not position students as vulnerable or “at risk” (Talbut, 2004). Jones (2013) and Allen (2015) explore the positioning of LGBTI identities in ways that challenge framings of vulnerability, which have been prevalent over the last three decades (see Harwood and Rasmussen, 2004). This raises questions as to how teachers are incorporating diversity and LGBTI-inclusivity into their everyday teaching practice in the classroom. In the US, fewer than one in five students report any representation of LGBTI people or issues in any of their classes (Sadowski 2016, 22). Often, despite willingness to support anti-discrimination legislation and implement LGBTI-inclusive policies, many schools still position

gender and sexuality issues as “forbidden” in classroom settings, with schools actively prohibiting displays of gay-related materials or talks (Sadowski 2016, 22). Clearer and more supportive policies can help teachers to create school cultures that are affirming for all LGBTI students.

To address the knowledge gaps identified above, in this article we examine teachers’ and school staff approaches to LGBTI-inclusive practice in government secondary schools in Tasmania, Australia. This paper makes a contribution to the field by advancing understandings of how teachers and school staff enact LGBTI inclusive practice in different school contexts. Further, this study highlights the role of state- and school-level policy contexts in contouring the possibilities of LGBTI-inclusive practice. In the first section, we contextualise LGBTI-inclusive education practice in Australia, describing past and current policies that impact on LGBTI-inclusive education in Tasmania. Next, we outline the research methodology, describing our use of qualitative methods and Szalacha’s (2004) inclusive practice paradigm as a theoretical framework. The third section forms the analysis, where we interpret the different ways Tasmanian educators approach LGBTI-inclusive practice. Finally, we explore the factors that influence and enable educators efforts to support LGBTI students and discuss implications for future research and practice.

Safe Schools: LGBTI-inclusive Education in Australia

The topic of LGBTI-inclusive school environments has been a point of contestation in Australia over recent years. An example of this surrounds the Safe Schools Coalition (SSC), Australia’s first national, government-funded anti-bullying program aimed at reducing homophobia and transphobia in schools (for an overview, see Shannon and Smith 2017). The SSC brought together government and non-government organisations to develop professional learning for teachers and school staff about inclusive school practices and to support schools in gender identifying affirmation processes for transgender and gender diverse students (Foundation for Young Australians, 2018). The SSC and the support services it offered mirrored those of other LGBTI-focussed education networks and support services, such as the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network in the United States and New Zealand’s Post-Primary Teaching Association’s Rainbow Teachers Taskforce.

In 2015, the SSC released a range of optional teaching resources for schools covering diverse genders and sexualities, anti-bullying strategies, inclusive school cultures, and advice for supporting LGBTI peers. These materials generated controversy among conservatives who claimed the resources aimed to indoctrinate children with a “leftist agenda” and promoted “a radical view of gender and sexuality” ([Donnelly 2016](#)). The program’s appropriateness was questioned, leading to a Government inquiry (see, e.g., [Louden 2016](#)). While the inquiry found materials aligned to the National Curriculum, since the inquiry, the SSC has been defunded in most states, including Tasmania ([Wisby 2017](#)).

Despite growing awareness of LGBTI-inclusive education policy and teaching practices in Australia, to our knowledge no studies have investigated how Tasmanian school staff are supporting LGBTI students in schools or what teachers’ needs are in creating and sustaining inclusive school environments. Tasmania was the final Australian state to decriminalise homosexuality in 1997 and prior to this, was known for having Australia’s harshest penalties for cross-dressing and consensual sex acts between adult men (see Baird 2006). Subsequently, in the broader Australian cultural imaginary, Tasmania has long been positioned as an “unsafe” place to be LGBTI, especially for young people (see Croome 2013). However, over the last two decades, Tasmania has led the way in Australian gay law reform, becoming the first state to officially recognise same-sex relationships and overseas marriages, to legalise same-sex parent adoption, and to introduce marriage equality legislation to parliament. The 2012-2014 Relationships and Sexuality Education in Tasmanian Government Schools Strategy arguably demonstrates progressive approaches to LGBTI-inclusive education, yet conservatives continue to critique the inclusion of sexuality and gender issues in Tasmania ([Prismall 2012](#)). A state-specific Gender, Sexuality and Intersex Status Support and Education Service (herein named GSIS organisation), funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, works closely with the Department of Education to realise the aims of the strategy. Given this education policy context, we were interested to explore how Tasmanian teachers and school staff understand LGBTI-inclusive practice and what they practically do to support LGBTI students.

Method

This article draws on data from an interpretive qualitative study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007) investigating teacher and school staff understandings of LGBTI-inclusive education practices in Tasmania, Australia from 2017-2018. The study received ethical approval from the researching institution (H0016908) and the Department of Education (2017-44). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling methods (Sekaran 2003) assisted by a local GSIS organisation. The organisation provided researchers with a list of schools that had in some way accessed their services (e.g. resource requests, referrals, professional development) and from these schools, participants were recruited.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews using an interview guide based on the following research questions: 1) How are teachers supporting LGBTI students in Tasmanian schools? 2) What are the needs of teachers in creating and sustaining inclusive school environments? These questions were developed in response to gaps identified in existing literature around teachers' understandings and approaches to LGBTI-inclusive practice in Australia (see Robinson and Ferfolja 2002; Shannon 2016). During interviews, participants were invited to share their experiences supporting LGBTI students, their understandings of school and department policy, and their professional development needs. Staff shared their broad understandings of LGBTI-inclusion and some experiences working directly to support LGBTI-students. However, we acknowledge that not all LGBTI students are 'out' at school nor do staff necessarily need to identify them when prioritising inclusive practice. Therefore we do not claim this data to be representative of the entire LGBTI student populations at the schools included in the study. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with consent. Data have been de-identified and pseudonyms are used.

Sixteen staff members from six Tasmanian Government high schools participated in the study. Participants were class teachers ($n=7$), social workers and school psychologists ($n=5$), school nurses ($n=3$), and school leadership ($n=1$) who had been working at their current schools for an average of 4.7 years. When asked how they describe their own gender, the majority of participants self-identified as women ($n=12$). Participants were between the approximate ages of 25-60. Two participants

identified themselves as members of the LGBTI community. While demographic data was not collected, at interview all participants identified as white, middle-class Australians.

Data were analysed thematically using QSR NVivo. Computer assisted data analysis software allows for efficient storing and sorting of large amounts of qualitative data, especially when working collaboratively. NVivo was chosen for this project because its functions facilitate a systematic yet flexible approach to inductive thematic analysis (Hutchinson et al., 2010). Data were analysed thematically by Authors 1 and 2, first by inductive coding, surface reading transcripts, taking note of any striking words or phrases arising from the data using NVivo's annotate function. Once common themes were identified, thematic nodes were created in NVivo and relevant data was coded to those nodes. To ensure the validity of this thematic analysis and inter-coder reliability of the coding system, Authors 2, 3, and 4 conducted additional analyses and provided critical feedback on the initial interpretation of the data. During this phase of analysis, we coded participants' discussions of LGBTI-inclusive practice into two inductive themes: "Safety" and "Equal Treatment." When exploring ways to interpret this data, Szalacha's (2004) inclusive practice framework was identified as a potentially useful way to analyse our data because of the similarities between our inductive codes and Szalacha's (2004) discussion of "safety" and "equity" approaches to inclusion. With this framework in mind, Authors 1, 2, and 3, revisited the initial analysis and identified new ways to re-structure the nodes and build meaning from the findings.

Theoretical Framework

We draw on Szalacha's (2004) paradigmatic representation of inclusive practice to reveal the texture of teachers' experiences in supporting LGBTI students. Szalacha's (2004) framing recognises the multiple expressions of inclusive practice; including practices to promote safety, to promote equity, and practices intended to challenge heteronormative schooling environments (termed "critical theory"). Szalacha (2004, 69) suggests that "safety" approaches tend to position LGBTI students as victims or problematic students who need special accommodation. Safety approaches are seldom whole-of-school initiatives and tend to focus on individual cases of homophobic

bullying in a reactionary manner. In contrast to these reactive approaches, Szalacha (2004, 69) describes “equity” approaches to LGBTI-inclusion as broader initiatives that aim to treat all members of a school community with respect. Rather than focusing merely on anti-bullying efforts, LGBTI-inclusion efforts working in an equity paradigm aim to foster whole-school environments where LGBTI or questioning students are meaningfully included and acknowledged (Szalacha 2004). Szalacha (2004) recognises that equity approaches require teachers and school staff to undertake the challenging, politicised task of advocating for social change.

Szalacha’s third paradigm of LGBTI-inclusive education practice refers to approaches that draw on critical perspectives to problematise heteronormativity in education. “Critical” perspectives aim to interrogate representations of all sexualities and genders in education, particularly through the “queering” of curriculum (Szalacha 2004, p. 69), or, the process of integrating non-normative, deconstructionist understandings of sexuality into dominant education frameworks (Luhmann 2012, 120). Here, like Jones (2013) and Allen (2015), Szalacha critiques approaches that position LGBTI students as vulnerable and at risk. While Szalacha (2004) identifies these three dominant paradigms in inclusive education practice, we recognise that these are not exhaustive of all potential approaches, nor does each paradigm exist in isolation from the others. In line with Linville (2011) and others who have deployed Szalacha’s framework in their analyses (e.g. Burford et al. 2017; Payne and Smith 2011) we use the safety-equity-critical model as a starting point to consider the many different ways teachers and school staff might approach LGBTI-inclusion. In the following section, we discuss the findings related to teachers’ and school staff practice within each of these paradigms, before exploring the factors that influenced and enabled their efforts to support LGBTI students.

Findings

Participants discussed both individual and whole-school approaches to LGBTI-inclusive education, including promoting safety and inclusion through anti-bullying initiatives, using inclusive language, having strong school leadership, and including LGBTI experiences in physical spaces and school curriculum. School staff outlined the need for clearer department- and school-level policies around LGBTI-inclusion

and additional professional development resources and training to support LGBTI-inclusive practices. Using Szalacha's (2004) paradigms of LGBTI-inclusive education as a framework, we have identified inclusive practices among participants that reflect the following approaches: Safety, Equity, and Critical Perspectives. We also acknowledge that some participants described experiences demonstrating a combination of these approaches, highlighting the necessity of multi-layered approaches to inclusive education practice.

Safety

Ensuring safety for students is a legal and ethical requirement in the provision of quality education (see Barrett 2010). Safety for LGBTI students has been widely discussed and broadly interpreted in both queer studies and education scholarship (Jones et al. 2016; McCormack 2012; Monk 2011; Sadowski 2016; Shannon 2016). As we shall discuss in this section, discourses focusing purely on safety for LGBTI youth often rely on deficit models that uncritically accept their assumed vulnerability, neglecting to recognise strength and resilience (McCormack 2012; Quinlivan 2002; Talburt 2004; Monk 2011). While a comprehensive analysis of queer young people's understandings and lived experiences of safety is beyond the scope of this paper, staff understandings largely aligned with these deficit models of safety and risk for LGBTI youth. Szalacha (2004) similarly recognises that practices of safety are the most common approach employed in schools to support LGBTI students. Participants' understandings of what constituted safety for LGBTI students reflected Szalacha's (2004) ideas of the physical and emotional safety paradigm:

...[Ensuring] opportunities are actually safe, because the additional safety load I guess, and the cognitive load of trying to manage a lack of safety, or even a perceived lack of safety, it doesn't have to be at a significant risk of happening, but the cognitive load of a lack of safety or a feeling of unsafeness... (Denise, teacher)

...to have a place where young people feel safe and welcome and that they have a sense that this is - they have some vested interest than just being in that space and participating in it and feel comfortable enough to take a risk - take

on something that might have them out of their comfort zone (Matt, Counsellor)

feeling like they have somewhere that they're safe, that they can be themselves, that they can learn. So, that psychological safety comes into that whole word of being able to be inclusive (Carolyn, Assistant Principal)

Participant accounts reveal the importance of LGBTI students feeling safe at school, and accordingly, the need for schools to create and maintain an environment that is experienced as safe by the students. These participants all emphasise that feelings of un/safety impact LGBTI students' abilities to participate fully in education. For example, Denise refers to unsafety as placing a distracting "cognitive load" on students, while Carolyn stresses that students need to feel that they can "be themselves" in order to learn. While we do not have corresponding data from LGBTI young people on this topic, these participants' observations reflect the embodied, lived experiences of unsafety, trauma, and risk and the impact these can have on overall wellbeing at school (see McCormack 2012)

In contrast, some participants defined safety more literally, referring to the importance of having a school police officer and security guards at their schools. For example, both Gary (teacher) and Jodi (social worker) emphasised that their large inner-city school required this additional support to ensure all students' physical safety, both from fellow students and members of the public. However, given the tumultuous history that exists between police and LGBTI people, especially in Tasmania (see Croome 2013), it may be that LGBTI students feel unsafe with the presence of police on school grounds (Dwyer, Ball, Bond, Lee and Crofts 2017). Here, Gary and Jodi, employ notions of what it means to be safe from their own perspectives, which may not reflect the same feelings experienced by LGBTI students. These approaches demonstrate safety as a heteronormative administrative perspective that does not necessarily take into account Tasmanian LGBTI people's historic and lived experiences of living illegally (see Warner 1999).

Participants highlighted language as an important way in which safety for LGBTI students could be supported in schools. Where there were incidents of inappropriate

language, punitive measures of policing and disciplinary actions were taken. Literature suggests that punitive approaches to combating inappropriate language are largely ineffective at challenging the ideals and assumptions on which the inappropriate language is based (such as homophobic ideals) (Ferfolja 2007). Denise highlights an example where antagonistic language, that she described as a “homophobic slur”, was a catalyst for an incident resulting in violent behaviour in a classroom:

There was a point in one year where there was a fair bit of that sexuality related verbal bullying that I think the antagonist saw as just like normal communication... And we had a couple of kids come very close to blows, because another kid in the room at the time, as well as the bullying kid, he responded very badly and got quite aggressive in policing that ‘that’s not okay to say’ boundary. And so a lot of what happened there was around “I’m supporting you in this ‘that’s not okay to say’ stuff, but I’m also going to remove you for violent behaviour” (Denise, Teacher)

In the account above, Denise's response was to increase policing of language in the classroom as a means of controlling and addressing the perceived problem of the inappropriate language. Within the Szalacha's (2003) “safety” paradigm, inclusive practice occurs when LGBTI students who experience some kind of discriminatory behaviour then seek to induce a response from school staff that aims to improve the immediate conditions for that student. In a similar study, Ferfolja (2007, 147) found that homophobic prejudice, often in the form of silence, omission and assumption, occurred in schools and that more awareness and proactive responses by schools are needed. While reactive responses to homophobic remarks are necessary and in many cases take into account the context and needs of the individual, they do not address issues of what it means to be included in a community or how LGBTI students become valued and equal members of community, such as the school community. Further to this, safety approaches foreground reactionary responses to incidents and tend not to address the underlying problems which include homophobic and transphobic attitudes.

As we have discussed in this section, working from within a paradigm of safety tends to induce responses that address symptoms and behaviours rather than the underlying problems that cause incidents and cultures of unsafety to occur. Yet, there remains tensions in how schools are proactively able to support LGBTI students when they are continually faced with incidents that call for reactive, safety-based responses. This demonstrates the need for a combination of approaches to inclusive practices, focusing on both safety and equity models of inclusion in teaching practice, curriculum, and school policy (see Sadowski, 2016). In the next section, we explore how some of the participants were able to do this working from within a paradigm of “equity.”

Equity

Szalacha (2004) observes that another common approach to LGBTI-inclusion in education practice focuses on “equity.” According to Szalacha (2004, 69) equity paradigms demonstrate approaches to building school cultures that treat diverse students equally and with respect. When asked what inclusivity means to them, our participants’ definitions broadly aligned with Szalacha’s (2004) framing of equity, for example:

I think it’s about treating everyone equally, that no matter what cultural background they have, or socio-economic background or anything at all, that everyone is included within the community and treated equally. (Xavier, teacher)

Inclusivity would mean that a school is open for everyone, regardless of physical ability, mental ability, sexuality, gender, religion, race, whatever. (Helen, school nurse)

Participants tended to consider equity as synonymous with equality. As Xavier and Helen’s comments exemplify, the participants spoke of the importance of treating all students “equally” regardless of their sexuality, gender, race or other identifying characteristics. Participants’ conceptions of equality appeared to align with Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh’s (2006, 7) “respect and recognition” dimension of

equality which emphasises the “equal public status” of all people as “universal citizens.” Understandings and expressions of inclusivity among school staff often focused on “treating everyone the same” and “normalising” difference:

I don't see it [LGBTI inclusion] as something different to including all the kids in the class. Don't exclude anybody, for whatever reason. I just don't see it as something different. I just see it as a normal – they're all just kids in my class. (Joan, teacher)

The word inclusive means to me, pretty much anything or anybody who is sitting in a classroom, anything as in if a dog wants to sit there and learn and they can, then they should be able to. For me it is about making sure a space is available for everyone really in the classroom. (Karla, teacher)

In the accounts above, when participants emphasised providing equal opportunities for students, their initial understandings focused on cultural diversity and disability access in education (see also Ferfolja and Robinson 2004). This reflects trends in education literature and policy, which have examined making education accessible to these marginalised groups (Robinson and Ferfolja 2001). With the exception of Helen, few participants explicitly incorporate sexuality and gender diversity into their understandings of inclusivity and inclusive education practice.

Although these approaches are well intentioned in their efforts to prioritise “equal treatment”, they neglect to acknowledge the differences between equality and equity. Espinoza (2007, 345), outlines that “equity is associated with fairness or justice in the provision of education or other benefits and it takes individual circumstances into consideration, while ‘equality’ usually connotes sameness in treatment by asserting the fundamental or natural equality of all persons.” In the quotes above, participants appeal to this “fundamental or natural equality of all persons” by emphasising how they treat everyone the same (“I just don't see it as something different”). However, participants' focus on being “equally” inclusive of “anything or anybody” arguably risks obscuring the specific diverse identities of marginalised groups (Ahmed 2012, 67). For instance, Joan's framing of LGBTI students as “just kids in my class” normalises difference while not explicitly recognising LGBTI identities and the lived

implications these can have for students. This is potentially problematic in the context of ongoing homophobia in schools (see Robinson et al. 2014), as positioning LGBTI students as “just kids in my class” may risk erasing the specific challenges they face. While these approaches reflect an “equity” approach in terms of their focus on equal, respectful treatment, such understandings of inclusion fail to foster school environments where LGBTI or questioning students are meaningfully included and explicitly acknowledged (Szalacha 2004, 69).

A key factor in staff capacity to contribute to LGBTI-inclusive school cultures is support from school leadership. Staff described principals and other leaders as key drivers for diversity and inclusion efforts, without which such efforts would fail. When explicit school policies are absent or unclear, teachers and school staff value leaders who set the tone for inclusive school cultures.

The leadership here are really good. In my experience they're natural leaders and so it's not just a whole lot of reaction and respond, it's really an effort to make a culture for staff and students I think that's inclusive, it's healthy. (Matt, counsellor)

It comes back from the principal. The principal's very inclusive and wants everyone involved, and doesn't segregate any student, whether it be from that LGBTI community, or from a disability community. So I think [the inclusive school culture] stems from, yeah, [leaders] stemming it down to the bottom, and then transpiring it to the kids. (Rosalie, school nurse)

School staff recognised the importance of “top-down” approaches to building inclusive school cultures. In both cases, personal actions and attributes of school leaders were seen to filter through school cultures, for example, Rosalie's principal “wants everyone included,” which led to the school forming an LGBTI student group, hosting a “diversity day,” and increasing professional development around diversity issues for staff.

One participant was a member of a school leadership team and saw her role as

integral to building an equitable, inclusive school culture:

Oh, if we don't lead it, it won't happen. You have to walk to the talk, you have to believe and demonstrate that kind of inclusivity, yourself. We need to be trained, the leaders have to be trained, not so it's top down, because I actually don't think that works, but if we're not really well informed, you know, you can't lead. You can't lead something if you're not really well informed.

(Carolyn, assistant principal)

Like other participants, Carolyn identified school leaders as the agenda-setters for mainstreaming inclusive practices. However, although she saw the need to set an example for the school community, Carolyn did not believe inclusivity has to be implemented from the "top down." This was similarly reflected through several participant accounts where LGBTI-inclusion was driven by student demand or by specially trained support staff. However, in all cases support from school leadership was essential for LGBTI-inclusion initiatives to permeate school culture. Therefore, awareness-training and resources are essential for school leaders to prioritise LGBTI-inclusive policy and practices.

While many of the educators' approaches to LGBTI-inclusion could be described using Szalacha's (2004) equity paradigm, participants' accounts demonstrate that additional resources and clearer education policies are needed to further their efforts. More explicit school and department level policy on LGBTI-inclusion (e.g. codes of conduct, diversity and inclusion statements, gender affirmation procedures) sends a clear message to staff about school culture and empowers them to actively support LGBTI students. In the following section we will examine instances where school staff engaged with critical perspectives in their approaches to LGBTI-inclusion.

Critical Perspectives

Szalacha (2004) indicates the "critical theory" paradigm involves educators examining policies and curricula that normalise heterosexuality. Taking a critical approach to education and school policy is crucial for advancing inclusion because it encourages revising often-unquestioned frameworks for pedagogy and teaching

practice (Ferfolja, 2007; Sadowski, 2016; Spade 2015). In contrast to the safety and equity paradigms, we observed fewer examples of critical perspectives in practice among Tasmanian teachers and school staff. Robinson and Ferfolja (2002) and Shelton and Barnes (2016) demonstrate how educators can be resistant to critical perspectives on diversity and inclusion. However, as we will outline in this section, we identified positive scope for growth in this space.

There were limited examples of how participants challenged heteronormativity through curriculum in the critical way that Szalacha (2004) suggests. Donna was one exception, sharing her use of a text (V for Vendetta) that she taught regularly in her English classes to support students to trouble gender identities. Maths and science teacher Gary said he sometimes envied humanities teachers commenting “Sociology, social psychology, philosophy, all of those subjects lend themselves to discussing this, and lots more issues, obviously.” These accounts suggest the need for professional development resources assisting specialist teachers with practical techniques and strategies for integrating gender and sexuality into curriculum. Providing such opportunities for teachers has the potential to begin necessary conversations about inclusive practices that foster a more critical understanding among educators.

Although critical approaches to inclusive practice emphasise an interrogation of heteronormative education and school policies, few participants were aware of specific department and/or school policies that tangibly promote LGBTI-inclusive school cultures:

Yeah, I’m not sure whether there are any specific policies about inclusiveness, actually, I guess I could find out. The education department does have its inclusive policies... (Gary, teacher)

I don’t know what the exact wording or anything is, but there has always been an inclusive practice expected, that you wouldn’t treat students any differently, regardless of gender or whatever. I haven’t seen anything written about it, I think it’s just understood. (Xavier, teacher)

These participants demonstrate a general awareness that inclusivity is “expected” by their schools and the Department of Education, however it was unclear how this translated to practical supports for LGBTI students. Participant accounts above reveal that the existence of department-level inclusion policy does not necessarily result in inclusive teaching practices and school cultures, particularly if staff are unclear about how to implement the policies.

In line with the literature, participants recognised that “whole-school” approaches are vital for fostering inclusive learning environments for LGBTI students and identified school policies as an important factor. In sharing his understandings of inclusivity, Gary outlined the importance of policy in building inclusive school cultures:

I guess, to me, it would mean that all students feel welcome and safe, respected, and able to express themselves openly if they want to. Then, on the other side, that the school has explicit policies in place to encourage students to participate and feel that way, that the school actively – you know, makes it obvious that’s it’s a place that everybody should be able to feel safe and respected and celebrated. (Gary, Teacher)

Gary’s understanding echoes the other participants’ framings of inclusivity discussed in the previous section, but emphasised the importance of “explicit policies” encouraging inclusion and celebrating diversity. Previous research demonstrates that staff working in schools with clear anti-harassment policies specific to LGBTI students are more aware of gender and sexuality issues and are more likely to support LGBTI students (Taylor et al. 2016). However, as Ahmed (2012, 53) argues, institutional language around diversity and inclusion is often vague and “invokes difference but does not necessarily evoke commitment to action or redistributive justice.” For Gary, meaningful, whole-school approaches to LGBTI-inclusivity require clear school policy frameworks to support the inclusive practices that may be already in place. Denise similarly felt that while the “motherhood statements are there” in inclusive policy, there remains a void in support for implementation, which leaves teachers and staff under-resourced and unsure how to practically support LGBTI students.

As in previous research (see e.g., Dragowski et al. 2016; Robinson and Ferfolja 2001, 2002), given the often “controversial” nature of gender and sexuality issues in school contexts, unclear department and school policies around LGBTI inclusion discouraged teachers and school staff from supporting students or innovating in this space.

I’m a health expert, I’m not an education expert. The department policies and protocols and things... it’s all very well for me to say, “Yeah, let’s run a gay day” or whatever they want to do; let’s do that, but I need to know what the policy is around saying something like that, or doing that. (Helen, school nurse)

I know that a lot of schools are doing work with that pretty much exact scenario [gender affirmation for trans students] at the moment; some are making changes, and stuff like that. But it’s hard when you don’t know exactly what the support would be like from higher above. (Amy, school nurse)

Although most staff knew their schools were generally inclusive of diversity, these participants indicated that clearer policy and a stronger stance from school and department leadership would enable them to support LGBTI students more effectively. Without being given access to policies surrounding support for LGBTI students (or time to understand those policies), the school staff operated within an implicit consensus discourse designed to contain disruption within the school. Without knowing what support they have from a school policy perspective they appeared to be restraining their activities to their designated role and not extending into advocacy or critical approaches. In this context, as school nurses, Amy and Helen highlighted the importance of professional development and policy awareness for school support staff, who are often critical in both supporting LGBTI students and educating teaching staff.

Discussion

This study revealed a range of approaches to supporting LGBTI students implemented by Tasmanian teachers and school staff that were more and less focused on the provision of safety. Reactionary practices of responding to “problems” as they emerged in the area of gender and sexuality diversity were notably at the forefront of practice, rather than specifically planned curriculum opportunities. Overall, teachers and school staff employ a combination of “Safety” and “Equity” approaches in an education system where little explicit policy was available at either school or department level for staff to draw on in efforts to realise LGBTI-inclusive practices in any other way. While we found little evidence of “critical” approaches to LGBTI inclusive practice, participants requested more support in policy and guidance on practical implementation of critical approaches to inclusive practice in their classrooms and schools. However, we acknowledge that the mere existence of LGBTI-inclusive policy would not necessarily determine how all school staff can think and act, given the common lack of awareness of policy in general.

Overall, we found that school staff are constrained in their ability to support LGBTI students by the context in which they work. All school staff noted the importance of having explicit inclusive practices for LGBTI students in schools which align with broader policy mandates including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008) and the profession-specific code of ethics that participants are bound by, including the [Teachers Code of Ethics](#) (Tasmanian Teachers’ Registration Board nd), the [Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia](#) (International Council of Nurses 2012); and [The Australian Psychological Society Code of Ethics](#) (Australian Psychological Society 2007). However, we found that the policy context, as perceived by participants, did influence how they came to think about what was *expected* and what was *possible* in supporting LGBTI students and informed the overarching approach taken to employing inclusive practice.

Tasmania’s Anti-Discrimination Act includes strong protections for people with diverse genders and sexualities ([Gaze and Smith 2016](#), 137) and [departmental guidelines do exist for Supporting Sexual and Gender Diversity in Schools and Colleges](#) (Department of Education 2012). With broader policy frameworks in the state, it would seem reasonable to assume LGBTI inclusive practice frameworks in

schools were well orchestrated. Yet, many participants did not know about this policy framework and the (un)knowing of policies influenced how participants felt supported and justified in implementing LGBTI inclusive practices in the school. For those participants that were aware of what policy existed to support LGBTI inclusive practices, the understanding of what these policies enabled them to do on the ground was found to vary. For example, staff shared their experiences of having to “hit the ground running” in their roles without being adequately informed of, or being given the time to engage in, school policies. These findings speak to the lack of time that teachers and school staff have to become familiar with the policy that enables LGBTI inclusive practices and also the need for additional professional development in areas of policy discernment and onground LGBTI-inclusive practice strategies.

Participants suggested that they did not feel well supported by education policy which acted to (de)legitimate their practices of support. Publicly supporting LGBTI students (for example through holding a ‘gay day’ as Helen suggested) disrupts the “heteronormative projects” of education (Szalacha, 2004) and may be perceived in some schools as a challenge to the hegemonic interests protected by the institutional structure. Some staff noted the importance of the GISS organisation’s endorsement by the Department of Education and the legitimacy conveyed through it being government-funded and having the status of the government’s chosen support service. Yet, regardless of the broader policy available, other participants suggested that it was not until school-based policies or mandates had been prescribed that they were able to engage in more explicit (and critical) forms of LGBTI-inclusive practices (e.g. rainbow days, diversity groups). Participants’ experiences suggest that the greatest tension, but also the greatest potential, exists in the disconnect between departmental policy and school-based initiatives.

Taken together, the accounts from school staff in participating schools suggest that there is a discourse of deficit surrounding LGBTI students. This is not a criticism directed at the staff involved in supporting LGBTI students, who undertake challenging and necessary additional work to support students in a system that often fails to adequately support them. Instead, our critique is of the cultural hegemony maintained through the education policy and schooling contexts in which school staff operate. Throughout this article we have outlined how Tasmanian policy and

schooling contexts remain largely geared towards the safety paradigm, constraining staff ability to engage with the equity or critical approaches needed for building more sustainable, inclusive school cultures. The focus on safety discourses may stem from Tasmania's historically conservative policy environment and the legacy of criminalisation, shaping perceptions of Tasmanian LGBTI youth as "at risk," with little critical analysis of what this means. Like van Leent and Ryan (2015, 711), we argue that teachers may be less able to make well-informed pedagogical decisions promoting inclusivity without comprehensive policy, professional learning, and curriculum support. The existence of such policy is especially important in the Tasmanian context, given the historical injustices done to the LGBTI community and in light of the continuing discrimination against LGBTI students since the SSC controversy. Despite the gains made in Tasmania in terms of progressive LGBTI-policy, anti-discrimination law reform, and marriage equality, LGBTI students' safety and wellbeing at school face erosion if clear policies and practices are not established and safeguarded.

This research makes a timely and unique contribution to inclusive education scholarship and practice by demonstrating how certain education policies engender educators' understandings and approaches to LGBTI-inclusive practice. Using Szalacha's (2004) three paradigms of LGBTI-inclusive education, we have shown how predominant approaches to inclusion stem from reactionary, safety paradigms, which fail to address the structural inequities LGBTI students face and subsequently neglect whole-school approaches necessary for creating inclusive school cultures. These findings extend current Australian scholarship in this area and importantly indicate the need for additional policy and professional development to support more critical understandings of LGBTI-inclusion in Australia. Building from the limitations of the present study, additional qualitative and quantitative research is required to understand staff capability in a range of contexts, such as primary schools, private, religious and alternative schools, and schools in rural and remote areas. In addition, more critical discourse analysis of policies around equity and diversity in education is needed to foster new approaches to LGBTI-inclusion.

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