

# LGBTIQ+ Representations and Social Justice Principles within English Teacher Education

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**Abstract:** Teacher education programs play a significant role in shaping pre-service English teachers' pedagogy. The incorporation of texts with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning (LGBTIQ+) perspectives in the curriculum is one mechanism for promoting inclusion as well as a means to address and combat homophobia and heteronormativity. Situated at an Australian university, this case study examined the beliefs and practices of pre-service teachers and teacher educators related to the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ issues and texts in secondary English classrooms. Drawing on sociocultural theories, the findings from this study indicated that pre-service teachers generally held positive attitudes towards the incorporation of LGBTIQ+ texts and representations. Notably, preparation to teach through a social justice lens developed pre-service teachers' understanding of the significance of including a diverse range of lived experiences in classrooms. However, the lack of specific inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives in teacher education meant that pre-service teachers often struggled to incorporate related texts in their university assessments and professional experience placements, and they were concerned about their ability to do so in the future.

*Literacy is one way to combat homophobia,  
but it's also a tool for fighting all sorts of oppression.*  
(Blackburn, 2012, p. 17).

## Introduction

The texts chosen for study within schools privilege certain groups, experiences, and belief systems (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). For some young people, the English curriculum does not support the inclusion, let alone the celebration, of their lives and identities. In particular, students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, or other identities (LGBTIQ+) may feel that their lived experiences are entirely invisible within the curriculum. However, 'the classroom space holds contemporaneous plurality and teachers have great agentic possibility to rupture dangerous dichotomies and myths about gender and sexuality while educating' (Miller, 2015, p. 39). Consequently, teachers' inclusion of texts containing LGBTIQ+ perspectives within the secondary English classroom is one way through which homophobic and heteronormative practices can be challenged (Blackburn & Smith, 2010).

Drawing on sociocultural theories, this case study focused on pre-service English teachers' beliefs and practices related to the incorporation of LGBTIQ+ texts and representations in the secondary curriculum. The inclusion of these texts is informed by social justice principles as it allows for the recognition of a group that has often been marginalised in school institutions while also providing resources to support their wellbeing (Bell, 2016). If our aim is to promote social justice within schools, we need to begin by considering how

teacher education programs give pre-service teachers the theories, tools, and texts that they need as they step into classrooms. As an English teacher educator and undergraduate Honours student, we believe that social justice principles value equality, justice, and respect. In this study, we examined our own university context and asked the following questions: What are English pre-service teachers' attitudes towards teaching texts that reflect LGBTIQ+ perspectives? What training is provided to pre-service teachers in order to prepare them to embrace LGBTIQ+ inclusive pedagogy?

### Theoretical framework and literature review

Sociocultural theories emphasise that the interpretation and significance of literature is socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). Importantly, they recognise the way that particular perspectives and lived experiences are included, or excluded, from classrooms, and this influences the meaning and the value attached to them (Gee, 1991). A sociocultural approach emphasises the ways in which 'culturally and historically situated meanings are constructed, reconstructed, and transformed through social mediation' (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006, p. 208). Therefore, the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ texts in English classrooms has the potential to incorporate diverse LGBTIQ+ experiences, and it offers students the opportunity to gain insight into how texts shape meaning making about gender and sexuality. Sociocultural views of literacy highlight the role of texts in developing students' understanding of LGBTIQ+ experiences (McInerney & McInerney, 2010), as well as how texts, including novels, plays, poems, and films, can promote social justice, reflect diverse genders and sexualities, and combat homophobia and heteronormativity.

A growing body of scholarship has examined teachers' approaches to the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives within the secondary curriculum, both in Australia and around the world (e.g., Blackburn, 2012; Blackburn & Schey, 2017; Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Curwood, Schliesman, & Horning, 2009; Ferfolja, 2007; Jones & Hillier, 2012; Miller, 2015;). Notably, prior research suggests that the training provided to pre-service English teachers significantly informs their beliefs and practices related to incorporating LGBTIQ+ representations in the classroom (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2010). English teacher training involves both broad education about the roles, responsibilities, and identities of teachers as well as a specific focus on English methodology, including programming, planning, and

assessing student learning. To situate our study, we begin by reviewing the literature relating to LGBTIQ+ discourses in schools and social justice principles in teacher education programs, and then we situate both within Australian educational contexts and policies.

### LGBTIQ+ youth in schools

Australian LGBTIQ+ youth experience social isolation and marginalisation in secondary schools, which is perpetuated by their classmates and teachers (Robinson, Bansel, Denson, Ovenden, & Davies, 2014; Ullman, 2015). In many schools, there is a prevalence of anti-bullying and anti-homophobic messages within the curriculum; however, these discourses often serve to reinforce heteronormativity in schools (MacIntosh, 2007). If we consider discourse as 'a form of social interaction and power' (Pope, 2012, p. 226), we can understand it as socially constructed, politically related, and historically embedded. Therefore, discourses within schools affect students' experiences and their understandings of texts and contexts. Liasidou (2008) considers the ways that discourses of inclusion are constructed in the curriculum and the effect this has on concepts of difference and the promotion of inclusion. She suggests that identification of the 'other' through school policies reinforces difference and exclusion. As a result, critical discourse is needed to allow for meaningful inclusion of LGBTIQ+ texts.

The ways in which diverse genders and sexualities are represented in, or absent from, the English curriculum shapes whether teachers and students are able to engage in thoughtful, respectful, and inclusive discourse. Quinlivan and Town (2010) investigate the influence that reading practices have on binary constructions of gender and sexuality in schools. They suggest that the 'silence around same-sex expressions of sexuality ... reinforces the normality of heterosexuality while inferring that there was something wrong and abnormal about experiencing same-sex desires' (p. 515). Blackburn (2012) and Blackburn, Clark and Martino (2016) show how this can be addressed in the classroom, while Curwood et al. (2009) consider ways of working towards the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ texts. Such studies highlight LGBTIQ+ inclusive teaching experiences that promote non-discriminatory environments and pedagogies, and emphasise the importance of teacher education in preparing teachers to achieve these objectives. Similarly, Miller (2015) identifies the potential for positive curriculum inclusion of LGBTIQ+

perspectives as a means of promoting acceptance and reducing homophobia and heteronormativity. In order for teachers to incorporate LGBTIQ+ discourses in schools, their teacher education programs must equip them with the knowledge of theory, pedagogy, and policy.

### Teacher education and social justice

The *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* provides teachers with requirements that need to be achieved in order to teach effectively and to meet the needs of their students. For pre-service teachers to meet the graduate requirements and to later become proficient, they need to 'establish and implement inclusive and positive interactions to engage and support all students in classroom activities' (Australian Institute For Teaching and School Leadership, 2011, p. 14). Unless pre-service teachers and in-service teachers are prepared to incorporate inclusive discourses within classrooms, including the integration of LGBTIQ+ perspectives, this cannot be achieved. For teacher education, this means that the training and mentoring needs to support the development of inclusive practices and social justice principles (Miller, 2006; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2010).

Teaching for social justice is not neutral, and teacher education should position pre-service teachers as activists, as agents for social change, and as LGBTIQ+ allies. Burns and Miller (2017) argue that social justice teaching involves a research base that 'provides a robust, adaptive, and evolving conception based on continuous critical reflection on the nature of social justice and the use of knowledge gained from that reflection to design and attain educational goals for the public good' (p. 5). Pre-service English teachers need ongoing support and mentoring as they reflect on their beliefs and identities, enact social justice principles, and consider how they can support LGBTIQ+ students through their pedagogical choices. Because research indicates that inclusive discourses and practices have the ability to break down environments of homophobia, harassment, and heteronormativity within schools (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Ferfolja, 2007; Miller, 2015), English teacher education needs to effectively prepare students for the challenges they will face in diverse school contexts.

### Australian policies and positions

Within the *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English*, there is a direct acknowledgement that texts should be 'of personal, cultural, social, and aesthetic

value' (National Curriculum Board, 2009, p. 8). *The Quality Teaching Framework* (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003) identifies 'significance' as a key aspect of encouraging student learning. Therefore, both of these documents effectively embrace the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ individuals and voices. Broadening the range of represented experiences, identities, and stories is beneficial to all students as it promotes awareness and acceptance of sexuality and gender diversity. The inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives in schools is still perceived by some to be controversial; however, the *Controversial Issues in Schools Policy* (New South Wales Department of Education, 2018) validates the choice of material that is 'sensitive to students' needs and relevant to the curriculum'. The inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives in the state's schools is appropriate to this policy and is further supported by the *Values in NSW Public Schools Policy*, which recommends teaching materials that reflect values that form 'the basis of law, customs, and care for others in our society' (New South Wales Department of Education, 2016).

In New South Wales, there are policies and curriculum materials that support the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ texts in English classrooms. While independent schools are exempt, government schools operate under the *NSW Anti-Discrimination Act (1977)*, which states that discrimination is not allowed on the basis of race, sex, marital status, disability, sexuality, age, transgender status, or carer's responsibility. The *Australian Education Union Policy on Gender Education (2008)* supports the *NSW Anti-Discrimination Act (1977)*. *The Safe Schools Coalition* (Foundation for Young Australians, 2015) also provides schools with assistance and resources to promote a safe environment for LGBTIQ+ identifying school community members. In addition, the *NSW Teachers Federation (2014)* explicitly supports LGBTIQ+ inclusive practices, providing materials primarily concerned with combating homophobia and harassment.

Despite the prevalence of materials supporting LGBTIQ+ inclusion, there is a notable lack of texts and specific outcomes that include LGBTIQ+ perspectives within the *NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum: English K-10* (NSW Education Standards Authority [NESA], 2012), *English Stage 6 Prescriptions* (NESA, 2018a) and the *Stage 6 Syllabus English* (NESA, 2018b). Although students in Stage 6 English are meant to read 'texts with a wide range of cultural, social, and gender perspectives' (NESA, 2018a, p. 5), the prescribed texts

notably lack representations of diverse genders and sexualities. As Mills (1999) found, some parents, teachers, and school leaders are resistant to increasing the incorporation of LGBTIQ+ perspectives. This results in tacit, and at times explicit, censorship of texts and the perspectives included in English classrooms (Noll, 1994). While there is a broad sense that inclusive educational practices are required in Australian classrooms, the absence of specific attention to representations of diverse genders and sexualities is problematic. Therefore, it is not only teachers' personal views that impact the censorship of certain perspectives, but also the wider contexts they are working in, which are shaped by the curriculum, parents, community members, and administrators.

### Methodology

Qualitative research methods emphasise 'inductive, interpretive methods applied to the everyday world which is seen as subjective and socially created' (Hatch, 2002, p. 6). In this study, qualitative methodology supported the investigation of a particular social and cultural context as well as the values and ideas present within it (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006). Notably, this research built on previous studies that employed qualitative methods to gain insight into experiences and perspectives related to LGBTIQ+ inclusion and teacher education (e.g., Blackburn, 2012; Elia & Elianson, 2010; Quinlivan & Town, 2010; Szalacha, 2003).

In order to gain insight into pre-service teachers' attitudes, case study methodology allowed for 'an empirical inquiry that investigate[d] a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context [we]re not clearly evident' (Yin, 2003, p. 13). A case study methodology (Stake, 2005) allowed us to explore pre-service teachers' attitudes regarding the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives within the secondary English curriculum.

### Research context and participants

This study is situated at a major Australian university with an education program that emphasises social justice. As a teacher and a learner within this context, we sought to interrogate our own university to understand how the presence (or absence) of social justice teaching shaped pre-service teachers' understandings of LGBTIQ+ inclusive policy and pedagogy. Our study involved two participant groups: teacher educators and

pre-service secondary English teachers. The pre-service teachers were chosen using purposive sampling techniques (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), and they had completed at least one professional experience placement.

### Data collection

Data was collected from three main sources: pre-service teacher surveys, semi-structured interviews with pre-service teachers and teacher educators, and artefacts such as unit outlines and curriculum policies. Pre-service English teachers completed an online survey involving Likert scale questions (de Vaus, 1995) and open-ended response questions. Surveys were distributed to 150 pre-service English teachers, and 25 were completed. The surveys asked pre-service teachers to share their beliefs related to including LGBTIQ+ perspectives, their experiences doing so in their teacher education program and professional experience placement, and whether they felt prepared to enact social justice principles and facilitate inclusive discourses within the English curriculum.

From the survey respondents, eight were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected because they indicated previous experience teaching LGBTIQ+ texts, and they expressed representative views concerning the inclusion or exclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives. Interview questions were constructed to gain further insight into the reasoning behind pre-service teachers' attitudes to the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives, as well as their concerns and their sense of preparedness to teach these perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three university teacher educators who teach within mandatory units required of all students as well as specific units within the English education program. Interviews focused on the support and training provided to pre-service teachers in order to prepare them to teach LGBTIQ+ perspectives within classrooms. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

Unit outlines were used to triangulate university teacher educators' accounts of training provided to develop LGBTIQ+ inclusive practices. As products of the teacher education program, 'they reflect the interests and perspectives of their authors' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 231). Data sources were chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of pre-service teachers' beliefs and attitudes as well as teacher educators' perspectives and practices.



### Data analysis

Thematic analysis identified the key themes and ideas present within the surveys, interviews, and unit outlines (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive coding was applied to all data sources, with the focus on interpreting and pinpointing the main attitudes identified in the participants' responses (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Multiple sources of data were necessary as they allowed key themes to be identified across the different data sources and for these to be triangulated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A second cycle of coding, using axial coding, was conducted in order to highlight overlapping codes and clarify existing codes. The original descriptive codes became more refined, and this process also allowed the main categories to be identified according to the way they related and responded to the research questions (Saldaña, 2013). For example, categories that emerged from the interviews with pre-service teachers included their rationale for inclusion or exclusion, their concerns about specific texts, and their sense of preparedness. Identification of such categories focused the research and led to the identification of key findings which responded to the research questions (Boeije, 2010).

### Findings and discussion

The study identified a strong desire within the majority of the pre-service teachers to incorporate LGBTIQ+ perspectives in their classrooms. At the same time, the findings highlighted pre-service teachers' sense of feeling unprepared by their teacher training to effectively include LGBTIQ+ texts and perspectives. Teacher educators placed a significant focus on the promotion of safe environments and socially just practices in teacher training. As a result of this, pre-service teachers were broadly prepared to support social justice principles; however, LGBTIQ+ perspectives were often not explicitly included within this social justice framework.

### The inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives

The majority of pre-service English teachers were supportive of the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives in their classrooms. In the surveys and interviews, they acknowledged that this inclusion could promote tolerance and reduce homophobia and heteronormativity in schools. However, even pre-service teachers who held positive attitudes towards the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives acknowledged that they had multiple reservations. These included their sense of

preparedness to teach these perspectives and the potential for repercussions due to negative responses from parents, school leaders, and community members.

Surveys showed that pre-service teachers had a strong knowledge of the perspectives that are mandated by the *Stage 6 English Syllabus* and the *NSW K–10 Syllabus*. From the respondents, 64% acknowledged that gender was included in the *Stage 6 Syllabus*; however, only 25% identified LGBTIQ+ perspectives as an aspect that could be included as part of this according to the curriculum. The low rate at which LGBTIQ+ perspectives were identified as a possible area of study within the curriculum identifies a gap in pre-service teachers' awareness of the potential to include these perspectives. Despite this lack of recognition, 91% of surveyed students indicated that they believed that there was a place for LGBTIQ+ texts within English classrooms. This suggests that pre-service teachers hold positive attitudes towards teaching and including LGBTIQ+ texts, but are unsure how this can occur.

Pre-service teachers highlighted four main reasons why they would incorporate LGBTIQ+ perspectives, including an effort to increase inclusion, reduce bullying, promote safe environments in schools, and adhere to the social justice tenants of education. The justifications that pre-service teachers provided for their desire to teach LGBTIQ+ perspectives aligned with the social justice values that have been central to their teacher training. One pre-service teacher explained, 'Yes, I think it is really important to look at as many perspectives as possible. You can't ignore one side of things and only teach one perspective'. Another participant acknowledged, 'I think more needs to be done in this area', and suggested, 'That will be when we get out there to try and make schools more inclusive for all students regardless of their sexuality'. The views expressed here show an awareness of the increasing acceptance of LGBTIQ+ identities and perspectives, and they highlight the need for schools to be actively involved in promoting tolerance and inclusion through the incorporation of diverse voices in classrooms (North, 2010).

Some pre-service English teachers expressed significant concerns about the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives and shared an unwillingness to incorporate them in classrooms. Notably, this stemmed from their personal beliefs about sexuality and gender diversity and from their concerns about the impact that LGBTIQ+ texts may have on their relationships with colleagues and parents. For instance, one pre-service teacher explained that teaching LGBTIQ+ perspectives

may encourage 'gay students to come out in an unsafe environment, which could be an issue with parents'. Moreover, he believed that it 'could be an ethical issue because if a student comes out to you and it's because you are teaching a particular text, you very much could get reprimanded'. Embedded within this justification is the problematic idea that LGBTIQ+ perspectives, and potentially, LGBTIQ+ identifying individuals, are unwelcome within the school environment.

While these attitudes were in the minority, it is important to acknowledge that they are present, even within a university faculty that values social justice. Moreover, these attitudes will influence the texts and perspectives included in classrooms. We suggest that the lack of emphasis on the significance of including LGBTIQ+ perspectives in teacher training may be a contributing factor to these views. The silence around the need to incorporate these perspectives in teacher training reinforces and justifies attitudes that position these perspectives as unwelcome in classrooms (McInerney & McInerney, 2010). Despite their commitment to social justice, pre-service teachers may then tacitly support heteronormativity and fail to confront homophobia (Miller & Gilligan, 2014)

### Key aims of teacher training

Teacher educators repeatedly identified that one of their central goals was to develop pre-service teachers' understanding of social justice. Sara (all names are pseudonyms), an English teacher educator, suggested that her goal was 'to explore that concept of empathy ... to expand their horizons, their perspectives, and their sense of understanding of the other'. She explained that she sought to develop pre-service teachers' understanding and empathy, which she believed should translate to actively combating discrimination. This ideology drove the need to develop pre-service teachers' critical pedagogy and reflective practice in order to support inclusivity (Ferfolja, 2010). Elisabeth, who oversaw all secondary education courses at the university, expanded on this: 'I work in a faculty that has a vision and a mission that is very concerned with specific ideas about education ... We teach through a particular lens which is anti-neo-liberal and pro-social justice'. This statement reflected a common goal across the education faculty to promote social justice practices.

Elisabeth drew on Paulo Freire's work and emphasised the importance of both reading the word and reading the world: 'My perspectives on teaching texts in English has always been about understanding the

world and the development of a critical consciousness through the critical reading of texts'. This focus on developing social justice practices and critical pedagogy through pre-service teacher training was designed to encourage implementation of these practices in future classrooms for the inclusion of all students (MacIntosh, 2007).

The approach taken to teacher education, and specifically English teacher training, can be seen to support these key ideologies. When Theresa, another English teacher educator, was asked about the preparation provided in order to develop abilities to teach multiple perspectives in teacher training, she said, 'I would consider that to be one of the most significant dimensions of the pedagogy that I recruit when I am teaching English ... within the spectrum of diversity and social justice'. She continued: 'I think that is a critical dimension of teacher training'. Interviews highlighted the primary concerns of these teacher educators and showed that their emphasis on social justice and critical pedagogy informed their approaches to teacher training.

### Preparing pre-service teachers to teach diverse perspectives

Within the social justice-driven aims of the teacher education program, there was an emphasis on the development of inclusive learning environments. It is through this lens that preparation was provided to support pre-service teachers' abilities to teach LGBTIQ+ perspectives. The approach taken during pre-service secondary teacher education was not generally focused on providing explicit instruction regarding aspects of identity such as race, class, gender, or sexuality. Instead, training was concerned with building skills that could be applied across a variety of lived experiences and perspectives. However, curriculum mandates and accreditation requirements demanded that teacher educators must ensure that considerations of Asian and Indigenous perspectives were present in unit outlines and assessment tasks across programs. These perspectives were reinforced through their position as explicit cross-curriculum priorities in the state and national curriculum, and they are required components within Australian teacher education programs.

LGBTIQ+ perspectives are not explicit requirements of the state or national curriculum, and despite the faculty's focus on social justice, LGBTIQ+ issues were not specifically emphasised within the teacher education program. There is only one lecture within

the mandatory units for all pre-service teachers that directly focuses on the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives, which is given by the second author and highlights issues of curriculum integration, text selection, and censorship. Although pre-service English teachers can elect to include an LGBTIQ+ focus within their self-selected activities and assessments, the reality is that engagement with LGBTIQ+ perspectives is not required nor is it explicitly emphasised across their course. Due to this, exploration of these perspectives within teacher training are directed by pre-service teachers' own interests; those that have not been exposed to ideas, or that may not be confident discussing LGBTIQ+ perspectives, are not effectively supported in developing the necessary content knowledge and pedagogy (Miller, 2006; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2010).

Teacher educators believed that pre-service teachers recognised the importance and significance of teaching LGBTIQ+ perspectives; however, there was also an awareness of factors that caused hesitancy to do so. As Elisabeth noted, 'I think probably they feel quite confident teaching the text but they don't feel confident either having conversations with faculty, or administration, or parents about the text'. This assumption that the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ perspectives will be seen as controversial or even undesirable reinforces the prevalence of heteronormativity within schools (Blackburn, 2012). It aligns with the idea that all students, families, and staff members identify as cisgendered and heterosexual, and due to this, LGBTIQ+ perspectives may be unwelcome within schools (Mills, 1999). Ultimately, pre-service teacher preparation to teach LGBTIQ+ perspectives was seen to arise from the overarching focus on social justice and reflective practice. However, findings from this study suggest that it is not sufficient.

### Conclusion and implications

This study offers new insights into pre-service teachers' desires and concerns related to including LGBTIQ+ perspectives in Australian English classrooms. By building on previous understandings of the mechanisms that support inclusive practices and the incorporation of LGBTIQ+ perspectives, this study demonstrates the need to explicitly address LGBTIQ+ issues within English teacher education. We argue that unless English teacher education programs include a specific focus on LGBTIQ+ perspectives, pre-service teachers themselves cannot know how to talk about – let alone how to teach about – diverse genders and sexualities.

It is the responsibility of teacher educators to give them the words, the tools, and the strategies. Moreover, a social justice foundation is essential because, 'to be successful, pre-service teachers must be prepared for the diversity of students they will encounter and be comfortable modelling and encouraging fairness, equity, and respect in their classrooms' (Alsop & Miller, p. 195, 2014). While this foundation resulted in pre-service teachers having a strong sense of the importance of social justice, the lack of a specific focus on LGBTIQ+ perspectives meant that social justice values were not always translated into practice. As one pre-service teacher shared, 'With the more aware society that we have today, I think we need to teach those perspectives. Our classrooms should reflect the attitudes and issues that are present in greater society'.

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