



Queering interventions: Improving pre-service teachers' knowledge and awareness of LGBTQI+ inclusive practice

Bri McKenzie^{*}, Julian Chen, Kimberley Andreassen, Cindy Smith

Curtin University, Bentley, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQIA+ is an acronym that stands for 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual and other diverse sexualities and genders'. In Australia, LGBTQIA+ people still experience extensive discrimination within the education system, a recent report highlighting that most Australian LGBT students felt unsafe in secondary school. LGBTQIA+ youth in Australia have significantly higher rates of anxiety, mental health conditions and suicide attempts when compared to the general population. At the same time, pre-service teacher training in Australia is not consistent in providing information and support to prospective educators in LGBTQIA+ inclusive practice and curricula development. This paper explores the initial results of a multi-phase, ongoing project designed to assist pre-service teachers in developing their awareness and understanding of LGBTQIA+ inclusive practice. Utilizing Participatory Action Research (PAR), co-creation and the Design Justice Principles (DJP), the research group sought stakeholder feedback from both pre-service teachers, LGBTQIA+ identified educators and LGBTQIA+ allies to design and deliver LGBTQIA+ inclusive training and resources. Data was collected from pre-service teacher's survey responses to a professional learning workshop on LGBTQIA+ inclusive practice, revealing high value in understanding inclusive language and discussions of gender diversity and desire for earlier inclusion of these topics in teaching degrees. This was followed by a co-creation phase, resulting in the development of a queering curriculum resource site, followed by a focus group with lived experience stakeholders. This latter phase of the project drew upon insider perspectives to help refine the co-designed resources to make them more intersectional, inclusive, and relevant. The resulting analysis highlights the link between our research and the DJP, while emphasizing the importance of 'listening to the voices from within' by establishing meaningful, ongoing stakeholder engagement in the development and delivery of inclusive education resources and materials.

Societal impacts details

Social Impact

While Australian educational policies and laws focus on equitable education of all children regardless of socioeconomic (SES), ethnic/cultural background, disability, or gender identity status, LGBTQIA+ [1] people still report experiencing extensive discrimination. In a recent report over 60% of Australian LGBT students felt unsafe or uncomfortable in secondary school [2]. While research has examined queer pedagogy and LGBTQIA+ student experience in the context of Australian schooling [3], specific LGBTQIA+ inclusive interventions in Australian teacher education have been less explored. Initial teacher education (ITE) programs can adopt approaches that ensure teachers in

training are equipped with skills to support young people in schools. In keeping with the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically *Goal 4: Quality Education*, *Goal 5: Gender Equality* and *Goal 10: Reduced Inequality* [4], queering teacher education for pre-service teachers helps develop teacher knowledge about queer lived experience and enhances teacher empathy for LGBTQIA+ students according to international research [5]. Building empathy and inclusion in teacher education also enables our future teachers to better integrate LGBTQIA+ content into curricula [6].

A national study in 2021 explored the schooling experiences, academic outcomes, and well-being of queer students in public and private Australian high schools [7]. It highlights the pressing need for LGBTQIA+ inclusive pedagogical approaches to ensure LGBTQIA+ students feel safe and perform optimally at school. Similar themes were

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bri.mckenzie@curtin.edu.au (B. McKenzie).

noted by Ullman in 2015, putting forward similar recommendations including prioritizing acceptance, affirmation of sexuality and gender diversity.

Available Australian resources supporting teachers with LGBTQIA+ inclusive practice often emphasize sexual education, which can silo and stigmatize LGBTQIA+ content. This lack of diverse LGBTQIA+ inclusive Australian curriculum resources is contributing to the challenges faced by teachers. To address this problem, our research team at Curtin University in Western Australia developed a multi-phase project designed to support pre-and in-service teachers to make their practice more LGBTQIA+ inclusive.

Methodology

Our approach was informed by the principles of stakeholder co-creation following PAR, a process “that embraces the concerns experienced by a group, community, or organization” [8]. PAR requires the sustained involvement of the research participants, empowering them to be agents to help transform their unique set of circumstances [9,10]. In our case, stakeholder engagement and feedback are pivotal when the research seeks to support marginalized groups who may traditionally experience social injustice, hostility, and discrimination [11].

Phase one of the project was initiated by the introduction of a workshop for fourth-year pre-service teachers preparing to complete their final practicum in fulfillment of their Bachelor of Education degree. The content included information on basic LGBTQIA+ inclusive practices in the classroom such as correct pronoun use, non-gendered language and supportive allyship. Interactive activities were also included, such as a ‘Privilege for Sale’ activity. The aims for the session were to help pre-service teachers a) understand basic LGBTQIA+ inclusion practices, b) recognize straight and cisgender privilege in education contexts, and c) consider opportunities for LGBTQIA+ inclusive curricula. To implement PAR, we developed an online survey, consisting of both open-ended and closed-ended items to collect student responses, gauging their perceptions of the usefulness of the activities and information provided in the workshop.

Student participants were informed about the purpose of the study before the workshop started and were aware that their participation was fully voluntary; no coercion or penalty would apply should they choose to withdraw at any point. After receiving their informed consent, the lead researcher of the project conducted the 90-minute workshop, followed by participants completing the survey. Open-ended item responses were analysed thematically and closed-ended, statistically, to improve the workshop whilst informing the subsequent phases on the project.

Recognizing the paucity of LGBTQIA+ resources for pre- and in-service teachers, we undertook a co-creation process in phase two with queer-identified pre-service teachers, designing a queering curriculum resource website as part of a “students as partners” initiative. Aligned with the ethos of PAR, co-creation is the process of knowledge creation through collaboration with stakeholders external to academic research contexts [12]. Our three student collaborators were recruited through purposeful sampling; one of the researchers lectured the unit in which two of the students were enrolled and another researcher was the mentor of the third student. Over the course of four face-to-face meetings, we co-developed the concept and content for an LGBTQIA+ inclusive practice website, *Queer Tiers*, using mind-mapping and brainstorming. A visual representation of this work can be seen here: <https://bit.ly/49SMY9v>.

In the final stage, we sought feedback on the website content, resources, and accessibility from stakeholders using a focus group approach. Stakeholders were recruited through the researchers’ professional networks and included LGBTQIA+ -identified in-service teachers, LGBTQIA+ advocates, a parent of a LGBTQIA+ child and LGBTQIA+ - identified trainers and IT specialists. Considering the importance of intersectionality [14], we sought insider perspectives that

were unique, with varied intersecting identities to give differing perspectives, particularly in relation to oppression and discrimination, thereby ensuring that the co-designed resources were inclusive and relevant to stakeholder needs. A two-hour focus group was conducted, audio recorded and transcribed via Otter. A thematic analysis of the resulting data was then conducted. Through this data gathering and analysis, we saw the value of the DJP [13] (see Fig. 1), providing an inclusive framework for enacting change by empowering marginalized stakeholders, having their voices heard in a safe, collaborative, and respectful environment, limiting oppression and discrimination. Hence, we adopted the DJP to guide our data coding and thematic categorization.

Implications

At the initial phase, pre-service teachers’ survey responses showed that prior to the workshop, many participants had limited confidence integrating LGBTQIA+ content into curriculum materials. However, workshop content designed to improve inclusive language skills and practical skills in queering curriculum was well received. For example, participants reported that they ‘now feel equipped with better things to say and more information’, appreciating content around ‘how to easily add inclusive language and strategies into the classroom’. For some participants, ‘seeing the statistics on how many students feel unsupported or isolated’ emphasized the importance of inclusive curricula.

Our preliminary results reveal that most participants found our workshop improved their knowledge of LGBTQIA+ inclusive teaching, expressing the urgent need to receive this training earlier in their teaching degree. Other findings also highlighted that pre-service teachers need more support in navigating ‘practical ways to include LGBTQIA+ [materials] into the classroom’ and information on how to deal with ‘push-back from parents who may strongly disagree with including LGBTQIA+ content in education’. Further support to communicate with colleagues and ‘people who have oppositional views’ were also desired.

Although data indicated strong support from participants for the inclusive language teachings within the workshop, the gender and sexual diversity-based learnings received lower support. It is hypothesized that participants either desired stronger details and examples of gender and sexual diversity in the workshop or felt that the topics of gender and sexual diversity were more relevant for their future classroom teaching. These conclusions were mirrored in correlations (see Table 1), where the variables in ‘presentation assisted to develop and deliver inclusive curricula’ and ‘gender/sexual diversity content usefulness’ were found to be strongly positively correlated ($r(23) = .68, p < .01$). This may also indicate that those who felt the presentation assisted them more, also believed that the gender and sexual diversity content was more useful.

Recent discussion around LGBTQIA+ inclusive language, allyship and pronouns, has increased in media and advertising [15]. Yet, based on the above results, pre-service teachers require deeper exploration of the issues beyond basic materials. Qualitative responses to the survey reinforced this proposition. Respondents wanted ‘more strategies and situations, with ways to deal with them’, and ways to embed ‘queer icons’ into lesson plans and assessments. For the research team, the question remained, how could appropriate information about gender and sexuality diversity be better shared with both in-service and pre-service teachers to support their professional learning?

The team undertook a stakeholder-informed co-design process in phase two, partnering with queer-identified pre-service teachers in the development of the *Queer Tiers* website. The title of the site is a play on words, with the tear in the logo expressing the pain and discrimination experienced by queer young people across Australia. Whilst still in its development stage, *Queer Tiers* aims to promote curriculum queering approaches by sharing co-created curriculum materials and case studies, encouraging allyship and building skills of pre- and in-service teachers. Each case study highlights the work and first-hand experiences of our queer pre-service teacher co-creators, including strategies for supporting

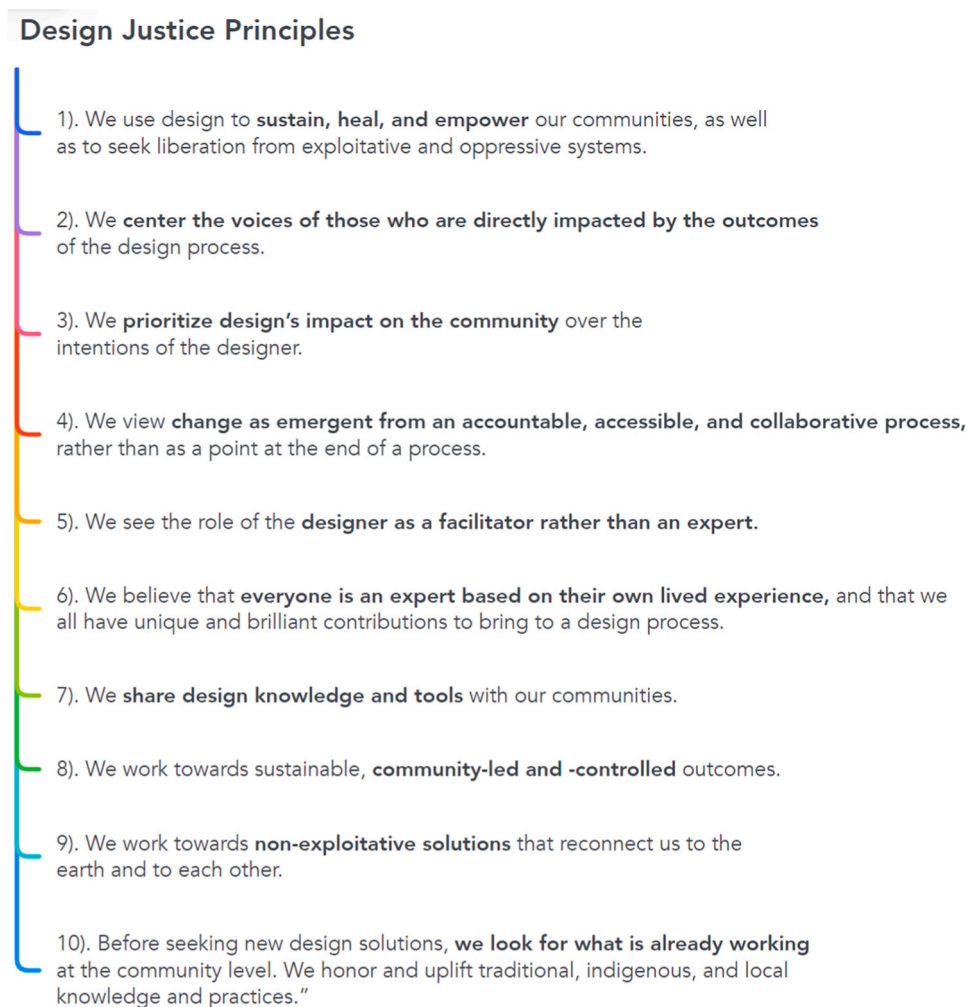


Fig. 1. DJP adapted from Design Justice Network [13].

Table 1
Correlation (r) between Qualitative Variables for Queering Curriculum Workshop.

	Confidence Prior to Workshop	Presentation Assisted to Develop and Deliver Inclusive Curricula?	Inclusive Language Content Usefulness	Gender/Sexual Diversity Content Usefulness
Presentation Assisted?	0.41*			
Inclusive Language Content Usefulness	0.24	0.67**		
Gender/Sexual Diversity Content Usefulness	0.21	0.68**	0.43*	
Presentation added to Inclusive Learning and Knowledge	0.07	0.48*	0.57**	0.67**

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01

queer youth facing bullying and working with external resistance to LGBTQIA+ inclusive pedagogies.

Results gathered from the stakeholder focus group in the third phase

highlighted their self-described ‘intersectionality’, including through ‘family’, ‘gender and sexuality’, ‘location’, and ‘employment’, as well as participant’s ‘race’ and LGBTQIA+ ‘ally’ status. Viewing the emerging themes of our consultation process through the DJP (see Fig. 1) revealed several useful considerations, illustrated by stakeholder views shared in the focus group.

First, proactive, rather than passive approaches to inclusion were vital, including inclusive language to empower community, ensuring ‘active anti-discrimination’ and ways of ‘teaching allyship’. One participant noted that ‘allyship as well as non-discrimination in children is really important’. This included the research process where open communication with stakeholders allowed for insider perspectives to be provided to ensure definitions within the website were able to be ‘...technically correct’ (DJP 1, 5).

The merit of intersectional voices was confirmed at several points, with researchers and participants feeling comfortable sharing their backgrounds, be that a ‘conservative upbringing’, or ‘LGBTQIA+ lived experience’. This enabled collaborative and constructive feedback during the focus group that contained a variety of authentic perspectives, highlighting the value of impact over intentions with a recognition that positive intentions can be misconstrued. Nevertheless, ‘it’s better to try and make a mistake than not try at all’ (DJP 2, 3, 6).

The participants supported community-led outcomes, which were more likely to identify the accessibility gaps within real-life scenarios, thus bringing ‘accountability and balance’ into the parent, administration, and student cohort to be able to get ‘as many people engaged as possible’ (DJP 4, 7, 8). Both participants and researchers noted that

'needs and solutions' should be developed collaboratively between educators and the wider community. Additionally, participants agreed that existing 'simple solutions', including queer educator role models, allowed all students to feel free to be uniquely themselves. As well as these findings, our analysis of the data identified design challenges not considered by the research team. Hierarchies within schools themselves need to be considered when developing inclusive teaching materials and as such, websites like ours need to have sections specifically aimed at principals or heads of department. Our stakeholders also recommended providing more opportunities for self-reflection within the website contents so that teachers with different strengths, LGBTQIA+ awareness levels and different areas of expertise could navigate to materials that best suited them (DJP 9, 10).

This stakeholder co-design approach highlighted how LGBTQIA+ inclusivity work is not a linear process and will look different for each teacher and school. The insider perspectives on the website, emphasize the importance of 'listening to the voices from within' by establishing meaningful, ongoing stakeholder engagement in the development and delivery of inclusive education resources and materials.

Impact overview statement

The impact of this research project is significant in the Australian context, and broadly in other global institutions where initial teacher education (ITE) programs do not consistently include content on LGBTQIA+ inclusive practices and curricula. Research into what pre-service teachers need from their training to support them to engage in more inclusive and gender equitable education is essential if we are to address the ongoing exclusion of LGBTQIA+ students and curricula in Australian schools and beyond. The research project reported in this article has been further developed through the roll out of a scoping survey to in-service teachers in Western Australia. The broadening of the participant pool and the resulting data collection and analysis (which began in August 2023) will enable the research team, in collaboration with industry stakeholders, to develop relevant resources and training to sit alongside the existing website materials. Our research over the coming years, and collaboration with industry and lived-experience stakeholders, will result in the development of best-practice training, resources and materials for pre- and in-service teachers which can be adopted by Australian state governments and higher education providers as part of their policy agenda.

Ethics statements

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HRE2021-0661). All participants in this research provided informed consent before participation in both the survey and focus group.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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- [1] We use 'LGBTQIA+', 'LGBT', 'Queer', and 'LGBTQI+' interchangeably in this article as different contexts will require different terminology. For example, research we refer to sometimes does not include the A or I in findings. Hence, we need to present the original wording in the literature without misrepresentation.
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