A Study on Gender-based Bullying in Australian High Schools -Take LGBTIQ Student Support Policy as an Example

Yitong Shen*

Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia

*Corresponding author: yitong@student.unimelb.edu.au

Abstract:

This thesis provides an in-depth investigation of gender-based bullying in Australian high schools through a critical policy analysis of a relevant sexuality education policy text – LGBTIQ Student Support. The thesis summarises the general phenomenon of gender-based bullying among teenagers and points out the existence of the disconnection between policy and practice – including the unclear definitions in academic materials and policy texts regarding "bullying", as well as the tendency of individuals to be "silenced" within the high school environment. The thesis subsequently provides an in-depth analysis of the selected policy text, exploring the underlying political discourses as well as the sexual political preferences within the policy. Further, the thesis evaluates the current state of the policy and its practice, revealing its issues and limitations, meanwhile providing certain possible suggestions for further development regarding gender-based bullying. The continuous focus on the issue of gender-based bullying among teenagers is significant, with further support from academic research, actual practices and politics should be provided – to address the disconnection status between policy texts and practices, and to achieve the objective of "improved solutions". At the same time, the perspective of teenagers is significant and needs to be incorporated into future research and practices to enhance the responsiveness of the result.

Keywords: Teenagers, Sexuality Education, Education Policy, Critical Policy Analysis, Gender-based Bullying

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of gender-based bullying in schools has been of great concern on the part of educational researchers. Scholars have concluded it as "a recurrent and significant issue" [1]. According to the statement of scholars, bullying in schools against sexual and gender minority teenagers is a pervasive issue of social violence [2]. Despite the fact that attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities in Australia have gradually changed to be positive and supportive over the years, prejudices against them remain present and persistent objectively [2, 3]. It can be argued that educational activities directed towards sexuality-based education continue to be emphasised, as well as sustained research and discussion are essential. Teenagers from sexual and/or gender minorities are more at risk of circumstances such as identity-based social violence, stigmatisation, marginalisation, and so on [2]. These factors are inextricably associated with the academic performance, state of health and long-term well-being of individual teenagers, therefore an "appropriate" framework for sexuality education and bullying prevention is

highly recommended.

The current educational frameworks and approaches in Australia demonstrate significant attention to teenagers' sexuality and gender-related education, which is reflected in evolving policies such as Victoria's LGBTIQ Student Support, and educational frameworks for promoting "inclusive schools" [4]. However, when it comes to practice, existing sexuality education curricula are inclined to focus on a "plumbing and prevention" approach, that is, an educational methodology that focuses on resolving ostensible issues as well as the prevention of certain negative behaviours [5, 6]. At the same time, scholars have indicated that the design of sexuality education in Australia continues to emphasise "respectful relationships" on the basis of the transmission of knowledge on biological sciences and general health aspects [5, 7]. These frameworks and approaches disregard the concerns and demands of teenagers, at the same time restricting sexuality education within an adulthood-centred authority framework [5]. The pedagogical knowledge explored by teenagers is controlled and regulated by adults, with the sexual behaviours and identity constructions of teenagers being dominated

by adults in this context. That is to say, the attitudes of adults in the school environment – regarding gender, sex and sexuality – tend to be dominant, meanwhile strongly associated with the development and construction of teenagers' sexuality attitudes, individual identity, and gender-based ideology. To the extent that adults on campus demonstrate negative (e.g., exclusionary, or silent) attitudes toward gender-based and/or sexual minorities, a subsequent change in teen attitudes is predicted.

The LGBTIQ Student Support policy is one of the representative Australian sexuality education approaches, aims to support LGBTIQ students through school-based education, to address the problematic status of gender discrimination, as well as to support students in developing and constructing individual identities. It is liberalised and individualised, granting schools and individuals the power to practice according to the circumstances. Meanwhile, it is supported by the education and public health sectors within various territories across Australia [7]. That is to say, LGBTIQ Student Support is one of the critical education policies being implemented today, due to its enriched involvement of knowledge regarding LGBTIQ – the non-binary categorisation of knowledge. However, the issue of "inconsistency" between the policy text and practice exists [7]. It is attributable to the vagueness of the policy text with a lack of clearer definitions and descriptions of the curriculum and practice, which aggravates the incoherence between the actual practice and the policy [7]. Furthermore, the gender norms and cultural expectations demonstrated by the policy are continued to feature heteronormative ideology, which is contradictory to its objectives - a further causative factor for the inconsistent practice [8].

Given the existential discrepancies between current policy on sexuality education as well as its practice, it is necessary to investigate the reasons for such discrepancies. The author will unfold from a poststructuralist perspective to explore the gender-based power distribution and underlying gender-based issues and conflicts implicit in policy and power discourses, taking an existing policy text in Victoria, Australia as an example – LGBTIQ Student Support policy. Through the progress of analysing the discourses and discursive logic, the underlying gender-based political and social perspectives will be discussed. Meanwhile, the author aims to discuss the potential strategies to cope with issues regarding gender inequality, discrimination, and individual identity constructions.

2. Causes of Inconsistent Implementation

2.1 Lack of Direct Definition

Within the context of bullying in schools, the concept of school violence inevitably arises. However, the terminology of "violence" is controversial, which leads to variations in the perceptions and responses to "violence" and "bullying" among all individuals in the school environment. Based on a poststructuralist research perspective, the meaning attributed to the phenomenon of violence and the associated responses are correlated with the individual's construction of the incident/phenomenon, in other words, with the individual's observation, interpretation, and subsequent meaning-making processes [1]. The traditional paradigm of violence based on essentialism considers "repetition" as a critical feature of bullying, which occurs only when an individual is subjected to repeated negative behaviours by individuals/mass groups [9, 10]. In relation to the post-structuralist research perspective, such a paradigm is undoubtedly biased. As concluded by scholars, it lacks an evidentiary foundation, neglects the complex cultural components of societal composition, and at the same time oversimplifies the nature of power [1, 9, 10]. In other words, it is essential to integrate the perspective of teenagers into the study of bullying and violence-related topics, for the purpose of exploring broader and in-depth status of power distribution and power disparity, as well as identifying disposable incidents and contextual differences, for the aim of achieving a deeper comprehension of gender-based bullying in schools [1]. The terminology grounded in "violence" favours a binary perspective to simplify, diminish and neutralise violence in intersectional contexts, which increases the limitations of the research [9, 11]. Consequently, this thesis will draw on Rawlings' terminological conceptualisation, from the perspective of bullying rather than violence to demonstrate the "dynamic", "unpredictable" and "interpretable" nature hidden in the complex structure of these phenomena [1]. Furthermore, this thesis regards the school as the representation of a power system, based on Rawlings's summarisation that the educative context of schooling incorporates a set of complicated and dynamic power relations [1]. Where bullying is an instrument for the power group to perpetuate the privileged status quo, power relations in educational contexts engage in a continuous and dynamic positioning towards individuals/groups based on differences in intersectionality [1,12]. On the basis of this, attitudes towards bullies serve as one of the instruments to achieve positioning [1]. Through the investigation of bullying and responsive attitudes, it is possible to explore the more implicit discourses of gender preferences and power emerging from the school and society.

School bullying against teenagers of the non-binary gender remains unpromising, despite the fact that an increasing number of schools are incorporating content related to inclusivity, as well as LGBTIQ+ relevant content. For

LGBTIQ+ individuals, schools are places of bullying practices, with gender-based bullying and harassment being an integral part of their school experience [13, 14]. Research findings in recent years additionally confirm that non-binary students are more exposed to the effects of bullying, including marginalisation and violent behaviours, as well as other negative educational and welfare issues in comparison to heterosexual students of the same age [2]. At the same time, victims of identity-based bullying are more vulnerable to experiencing negative health, psychological and social consequences [2]. Thus, from the perspective of non-binary students, school becomes an unsafe place whereas disengagement from school becomes a self-protective "safe behaviour" [2]. It can be argued that a significant disconnection exists between the theoretical framework of inclusion programmes and its actual practice. The causes of the disconnection are multidimensional, including lack of training for teachers, unclear political discourses, and so on. Such factors have resulted in the silence of teachers, which researchers referred to as "silent spectators", and which has been interpreted by non-binary students as a simultaneous acceptance of bullying and bias [2, 15, 16].

2.2 Unclear Definitional Theoretical Frameworks of Violence

In general, recent studies categorise the paradigms of violence into two, the psychological definition-based paradigm advocated by Olweus, and the post-structuralist-based violence paradigm [1, 9]. As summarised by scholars, Olweus's paradigm centres the causation of violence on the individual attributes of the violator and the victim], i.e. the violator commits violent behaviour for specific reasons against a victim with corresponding attributes [1]. Contemporary Australian policy and practice is dominated by the Olweus paradigm], which inclines to attribute and pathologise bullying to individuals [1, 9]. The focus of challenging and critiquing is directed to the individual teenager, whilst ignoring the problematic aspects of the school structure as well the other complex socio-cultural factors [9]. From Olweus's theoretical perspective, gender-based violence is often ignored, escaping from interventions that scholars refer to as "traditional violence" [1]. In other words, Olweus' paradigm of violence is incapable of supporting the examination of gender- and identity-based violence required in education nowadays. As it disregards the multiple unfolding manifestations of violence (e.g., bystander violence) and the complicated interactions of characters.

The post-structuralist-based paradigm challenges the fundamentalism and individualism promoted by the previous paradigm, which questions the established truths and knowledge of the existing world, considering knowledge as a social artefact produced by individuals as they engage in discourse and interactions with themselves, the society they live in, as well as other factors [9, 17]. Meaning is contextualised and related to individual interpretations, therefore the process of meaning production and its variation in diverse forms of discourse can be inspected. While relating to the topic of gender and identity, identity ceases to be inherent, while discourse constructively shapes the representation of gender [1,17]. That is to say, the process for an individual to construct identity is interactive, at the same time being fluid. The process of regulating gender boundaries can be considered as the surveillance and maintenance of power [18]. In situations where an individual's behaviour contradicts the "accepted" meaning, by not regulating the behaviour, the individual is risking being in the realm of "non-conformity". Individuals can be punished for their "non-conformity" in order to achieve the goal of maintaining power and privilege [18].

3. Political Discourses Analysis on an Existed Policy Text – LGBTIQ Student Support Policy

3.1 Introduction

With regard to the issue of gender-based bullying in the high school environment, supportive policies are proposed and executed in practice. The following texts initiate a discourse analysis of policy with the example of LGBTIQ Student Support in Victoria, Australia, to explore the concealed distribution of power and gendered political preferences in high schools [4]. This thesis considers policy as an instrument of power, with the policy text as a part of the policy configuration that consciously or unconsciously impacts individuals. Interpreting the implicit "incidents" and " the logic of problematisation" in policy texts enables the exploration of underlying gender-based ideologies [19]. Meanwhile, the construction and maintenance of power relations and hierarchical systems in campus environments can be interpreted. In the context of Rawlings' summary, the schools validate and establishes a heterarchical social order with a normative and conventional discourses based on the privileged and unprivileged (i.e. marginalised) identities. An in-depth interpretation of school policies can provide a lens for exploring the political dispositions and power perspectives involved, as well as contributing to the discussion of the presentation and dispositions of gender ideologies and identity politics [1]. This thesis applies the "What's the Problem Represented to be" (WPR) approach, in order to develop a critical policy analysis on the selected policy texts, with a critical research perspective of "problem-led" [20]. In other

words: what is the issue addressed by the policy? How is it problematised? As well as the ideological and political perspectives it conveys to individuals in the environment. LGBTIQ Student Support policy intends to provide appropriate interventions and supports for LGBTIQ students (including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Gender Diverse, Intersex, Queer and Questioning students) in school environment [4]. The policy identifies the issues of gendered discrimination and bullying, and categorises LGBTIQ students as a marginalised group, with proposals to improve the 'inclusivity' of the school environment. Ostensibly, it attempts to address the issue of gender in terms of equality and empowerment, to provide additional support to marginalised groups to achieve the objective of resolving the issues and changing the status of inequality. Therefore, schools are places of problem-solving, in order to modify gender-based violence, continuous, supportive and significant interventions and orientations are required - granting partial authority and responsibility to the schools. However, it is essential to mention an underlying navigation of school culture and gendered political preferences within the policy discourse, which is premised on patriarchal and heteronormative paradigms.

3.2 The Recurrent Process of Categorisation and Simplification on Gender

The concept of "inclusiveness" is repeatedly mentioned as one of the emphases of the policy text. It demonstrates a tendency to "unify" various groups in the same environment, that is, the inclusion of students in the LGBTIQ minority in the text, to integrate them into the school environment and the social environment, in order to promote gender equality and to interfere with gender-based bullying. A series of implicit logical relations are involved: the goal of equality can be achieved, and the benefits of equality enjoyed only if unification is achieved. In other words, the inclusive approach normalises the LGBTIQ community into the dominant heteronormative gender binary paradigm, further entrenching the "traditional culture of silence, omission, and assumption" summarised by feminists [1]. At the same time, the policy demonstrates a tendency to impose categorisations of gender and identity comparable to the male/female division of the binary of gender, demonstrating specific norms and expectations of certain behaviours and roles. With heteronormative and binary gender classifications considered as dominant and privileged, while non-binary sexualities are regarded as marginalised communities, it rationalises the differentiated categorisation and distribution of power.

The policy text presents and promotes the concept of "inclusive" with a positive approach to the public, to express the message of inclusive education being "recognised".

This process presents a definite status of power distribution, i.e. the power holders determine the definition of inclusive, rendering it recognisable, while determining the extent of being inclusive as well as the approach to being inclusive. In this case, the dominant gender ideology, the heteronormative-dominant conception of binary gender categorisation, retains its authority. By allocating certain power to the LGBTIQ group (as a problematic group), the social status of the LGBTIQ group is adjusted within a controlled range - which means being included and equally treated. This process ostensibly responds to gender inequality; however, it simplifies and conceals the complex political contradictions of sexuality and gender through achieving "uniformity". In addition, the policy encourages the participation of students in decision-making processes to achieve supportive and inclusive outcomes. The emphasis on the prescriptive condition of "working with students with confirmed gender identities" further reinforces the promotion of a constructed, categorised gender ideology [4]. To categorise genders through the interactions of individuals within the environment.

3.3 The Underlying Subtext of Political Discourses

In relation to the previous analysis, the selected policy text demonstrates the underlying tendencies regarding gender politics within Australian society. The gender norms involved are predetermined by the dominant concepts, grounded in the heteronormative-dominant concept of binary gender divisions, while having a sustained and dynamic engagement with power discourses. Norms and regulations regarding genders underlying policy texts are presented through the progress of problematisation and the logic alongside, rather than being intuitively specified and regulated. The approach of providing individuals and schools with alternatives is ostensibly highly individualised and diversified, however, the premises of the heteronormative paradigm are still maintained in practice. The non-heteronormative groups (LGBTIQ groups) are categorised in terms of the binary division of gender (e.g. homosexual/bisexual categorisation). The guidance provided to individuals with fluid/unsettled gender identities is directed towards such categorisation as well. In other words, within this policy text, the tendency towards a unified, normalised binary categorisation of gender persists in a subtextual approach, which controls and enhances the dominant gender ideology. The school as the place of identity construction and implementation reinforces the reception of relevant information of students, which leads individuals to shape their ideology within a heteronormative patriarchal perspective, meanwhile, subliminally emphasises their adherence to gender norms and regulations.

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4. Suggestion

Through the critical policy analysis of the policy texts, the authors argue that the ambiguous discourse in the texts constitutes one of the principal reasons for the disparities between educational frameworks and practices as well as for the insignificant results. Firstly, a unifying consensus on the theoretical frameworks for defining violence has not been reached, which contributes to the ambiguity of individuals' recognition of violence. Formal definitions of bullying and violence are disconnected from teenagers' perceptions and experiences, i.e., there is variability in perceptions and understandings of bullying among various groups of individuals with diverse experiences [1]. The failure of students, teachers and other campus administrators to reach a clear judgement on bullying, and the tendency to remain silent and/or to participate as members of the dominant group, further exacerbates the problem. Meanwhile, the lack of knowledge and avoidance regarding LGBTIQ exacerbates the issue of gender-based bullying and inequality as well. Therefore, further in-depth research is required to refine the definitions, as well as further investment in targeted and knowledge-based training related to gender education - including for students, teachers, and other administrators on campuses - is essential for individuals to recognise, and to respond to, gender-based bullying.

In addition, ambiguous discourses and subtexts underlying the policy text reinforce the emphasis on the dominant concept of heteronormativity, which leads to a divergence between the content and the objectives of the policy, thus contributing to suboptimal practice. Therefore, a detailed critical review of policy texts is needed in order to identify and respond to problems effectively and promptly. Furthermore, the perspective of teenagers should be integrated into the research to provide a more practical and responsive approach to the issue of gender-based bullying.

5. Conclusion

While Australia has never lacked for attention regarding bullying, particularly gender-based bullying in high school schools, the current situation of the issue remains unpromising. This thesis presents an in-depth investigation of implicit policy discourses and tendencies from the perspective of existing policy texts, as well as the distributional state of power that it represents. The concept of heteronormativity remains at the centre of power, and the policy discourse demonstrates a tendency towards a simplistic and unified binary categorisation for complex gender identities. Approaching issues of complex identities and gender inequality from this premise is undoubtedly impotent. The underlying political discourses require critical examinations from diverse contexts and perspectives to ensure a prompt identification and reaction to issues – with this process being sustained and dynamic, therefore requires greater research attention. This thesis provides a new perspective for understanding and overcoming the persistent gender-based bullying issue. However, further theoretical research and practical support in the future are needed - to provide teenagers with a positive living and educational environment, while guiding and supporting individuals in identity construction more effectively, as well as to further pursue gender equality.

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