EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF COMMUNITY WORKERS ENGAGING WITH SCHOOLS IN RELATION TO WORK WITH GENDER AND SEXUALITY DIVERSE YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract

Due to the specialised support required for some students, schools engage with community services to ensure the wellbeing needs of students are being met. However, little is known about the interactions between community workers and schools, particularly in relation to those working with gender and sexuality diverse young people. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community workers' perspectives of their interactions with secondary schools in Queensland as part of the work they do with gender and sexuality diverse young people. Semi-structured interviews were used to examine what community workers reported as the enablers and constraints in their day-to-day work practices and experiences. The interview data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Recommendations outline some strategies to improve community worker and school collaborations and the transformative possibilities for more inclusive schools for gender and sexuality diverse young people.

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List of Abbreviations

AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
AOD	Alcohol and other drugs
CYMHS	Child and Youth Mental Health Services
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
LGBTIQAP+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual, pansexual, plus other non-conforming identities
NGO	Non-government organisations
SSCA	Safe Schools Coalition Australia
SSM	Same sex marriage
YSC	Youth Support Coordinator

Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature: QUT Verified Signature

Date: 17/12/2020

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The focus of this qualitative study was to explore community worker perspectives of engagement with secondary schools in Queensland, in relation to working with gender and sexuality diverse young people. A key national survey of 'same-sex attracted and gender questioning' young people conducted in 2010 (Hillier et al., 2010) revealed important information about secondary schooling experiences of young people. Approximately half of the young people reported attending schools with no social support features for diverse sexualities, with 37% describing their school as homophobic (Hillier et al., 2010). Additionally, 80% of young people who reported having experienced abuse, also reported their verbal and physical homophobic abuse occurred at school (Hillier et al., 2010). Schools are increasingly recognising the need to address these concerning statistics for gender and sexuality diverse young people. Secondary schools alone are not able to meet all of the wellbeing needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people through internal school support systems (Michaelson, 2008). Therefore, engagement with external community services in order to address these specific concerns is needed. The problem is that there is little known about the engagement experiences between community workers and schools, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality diverse young people. My research was interested in exploring the perspectives of these community workers about their experiences with schools. So the research is from the perspective of community workers, working in the context of secondary schools in Queensland.

The first part of this introduction chapter provides an outline of this research project, an explanation of why this particular topic was chosen and some contextual

background information about community workers engagement with schools to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. I then move to discussing the significance of the research project as well providing details about the scope, some definitions, the overall thesis outline and conclusion.

Researcher positioning in this study

In this study, I use critical social work theory and queer theory, and this means that critical reflection and reflexivity is crucial in my study. As a researcher it is important to reflect on my own values, to question my own constructions of identity (Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010) and to name and position myself and my world view in the research (Fook & Gardner, 2007). It is in response to this notion of reflexivity that I begin this thesis with my own professional journey because it reflects my interest in this research area and the beginning of my curiosity about community - school interactions in relation to the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people. I have worked professionally as a community worker, employed by community-based organisations (non-government organisations) for over ten years. For many of these years, I was employed as a Youth Support Coordinator (YSC)[1], which involved

[1] YSC initiative was funded by the Queensland Department of Communities under a memorandum of understanding arrangement with Education Queensland

supporting young people in secondary schools through early-intervention initiatives and community work. This role involved working across various communities and secondary schools in South-East Queensland and created an awareness for me around the diversity of community - school relationships and practices. I realised that community workers, such as myself, had unique relationships with schools in different sites and there were many reasons for these unique relationships with each school including the leadership team and other individual school staff. For example, in my own experience, I was finding a range of enabling and constraining factors for my engagement with schools, including factors such as the history of community - school partnerships, attitudes and culture of the school leadership team, school funding (or lack thereof), willingness for external community engagement, local trends of student issues and needs and broader community factors. Given my YSC role was heavily focused on young people dis-engaging from schools and thus being considered 'at-risk', schools often referred young people that were described as being from minority groups, such as those of diverse genders and sexualities. Anecdotal stories from young people about their experiences in schools and some of the challenges of accessing community workers to meet their wellbeing needs piqued my interest in further exploring these relationships. What was it about some community - school relationships that enabled gender and sexuality diverse young people to access external services to meet their wellbeing needs? And conversely, what was it about some community - school relationships that constrained and created barriers for young people wanting to access external support services?

Some years later, when working in the field of vocational education (community services team member), I continued to hear stories from gender and

sexuality diverse tertiary students about their schooling experiences and about not being able to access external community services in order to meet their wellbeing needs. These shared experiences from young people added to my interest in exploring what factors led to certain community - school relationships and what factors enabled or constrained these relationships. It was at that point in my professional career, employed in a vocational education setting, that I decided I wanted to explore this field of research further.

Background: community workers in secondary schools

Community workers include a diverse range of workers with varying job titles and organisational contexts. In this research project I defined community workers as workers employed by community-based organisations, also known as non-government organisations (NGOs). Community workers may have job titles such as community worker, youth worker, youth and family support worker, social worker, program coordinator, as examples. The practice contexts for community workers in my study is diverse, with workers situated within different organisations and with multiple practice settings. For example, some community workers may meet with gender and sexuality diverse young people at school, while others may negotiate to meet young people outside of school, such as home visits or at the site of the organisation. The focus of my research was around how community workers interact with secondary schools in the work that they do and how they describe their everyday experiences of school interactions. In these secondary schooling contexts, there are a range of services that community workers provide to schools, individual staff and young people. These everyday work activities and practices may include: individual counselling for young people, early intervention group work for young people identified as needing or requesting support, professional development training

for school staff, resources and referral pathways to other external community services and organisations. So community workers have a diverse range of roles and can provide a wide range of different services within a school, depending on the unique relationship and needs of each secondary school.

Throughout the thesis document I have used the term 'school' or 'secondary schools' in an attempt at being succinct. When I refer to 'schools', I am including the school as an institution (such as policies), the principal and other school leaders, and individual school staff such as teachers and administration officers. In my study, participants may choose to discuss their experiences interacting with any one or more of these meanings behind the use of the word 'school'.

Gender and sexuality diverse young people

A significant amount of research in Australia has established that gender and sexuality diverse young people continue to experience high levels of school-based homophobic abuse (Hillier et al., 2010; Leonard, Lyons, & Bariola, 2015) with discrimination impacting on social and emotional wellbeing and school outcomes (Jones & Goddard, 2013; Kelly, Davis, & Schlesinger, 2015; Robinson, Bansel, Denson, & Ovenden, 2014). The majority of research around school engagement and gender and sexuality diversity continues to be underpinned by conservative, neo-liberal and progressive discourses (Rasmussen, 2016; Shannon, 2016). Therefore the majority of research around gender and sexuality diverse young people has a focus on deficits and risk which considers young people within discourses of 'woundedness' (Harwood & Rasmussen, 2004) and positioned as 'victims or heroes' (Allen, 2015a). While my study acknowledges the importance of research about homophobia, discrimination and negative outcomes, I wanted to explore practices that may lead to improvements in everyday experiences of community workers as

they engage with schools, and ultimately improve wellbeing outcomes for young people. In order to explore community workers' experiences outside of the dominant discourses based on conservatism, neo-liberalism and progressive ideology, I drew upon critical social work theory and queer theory to frame my research. Critical social work theory enabled me to draw on key theoretical principles of deconstruction and reconstruction, which involve both disrupting oppressive discourses as well as exploring transformative possibilities for different ways of doing things (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Queer theory added important theoretical considerations to my study by including a more comprehensive understanding of disrupting heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality (Levy & Johnson, 2012). Queer theory acknowledges the importance of diverse representations of gender and sexuality and intersections of identity (Robinson et al., 2014).

To be able to develop further insights into the interactions of community workers with schools, I drew upon a critical methodological framework using reflexive thematic analysis to be able to construct meaning from the interviews with community workers. My use of reflexive thematic analysis utilised Braun & Clarke's six phases of analysis (2019) to make clear the influence of my research question and theoretical framework. Critical reflection and reflexivity was incorporated into the analytic phases through the process of deconstruction and reconstruction to develop further understandings into potential transformative practices for community workers (Fook & Gardner, 2007). So while my study was not directly focused on gender and sexuality diverse young people, my objective was to add to the body of work around highlighting the importance of the interactions between community workers and schools and how their practices and collaborative work can be reflected upon and improved.

Community worker perspectives

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore community workers' perspectives about their experiences with secondary schools in Queensland, as part of the work they do to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. By exploring community worker perspectives, I hoped that the stories about the everyday work of this small group of community workers would add insights into how these interactions between community workers and schools could be improved. I examined what community workers reported as the enablers and constraints in their day-to-day work practices and interactions with schools. Recommendations from this study provide some transformative possibilities around improving community worker interactions with schools and could be the foundation for further research around designing a project to investigate the efficacy of the recommendations in practice.

The overarching research question in my study was:

> *What do community workers say about their interactions with schools, in relation to work with gender and sexuality diverse young people?".*

To answer this research question I interviewed four community workers, and analysed the interviews through reflexive thematic analysis.

Significance, Scope, and Definitions

Significance

This research is significant because there is little known about community worker and school interactions surrounding work with gender and sexuality diverse young people, from the perspective of community workers. Existing research is often focused on the perspectives of gender and sexuality diverse young people (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017) undertaken with or from the perspective of school

staff (Ferfolja & Stavrou, 2017) with a gap in knowledge around community workers' perspectives. Research that does exist on these community - school partnerships focuses on the school or government agenda of academic outcomes (Zyngier, 2013) or transitioning students to employment or further education (Broadbent & Cacciattolo, 2013). Therefore, there is a gap in our knowledge around the experiences of school engagement from a community worker perspective. Given that literature shows schools require the external support of community services to adequately meet the specialised needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people (Hillier et al., 2010; Mendoza & Wands, 2014), understanding more about how community services can effectively engage with schools to support these specific needs is important. My research aimed to contribute towards addressing this gap in the literature by highlighting the potential transformative practices of community worker – school interactions and collaborations.

In summary, the gaps in the literature that I was interested in addressing included:

- Community worker perspectives of their experiences of everyday interactions with schools (the enablers and constraints);
- Research that acknowledges the specialised needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people within secondary school settings
- Research that focuses on contributions towards transformative changes and improved practices in community-school engagement - rather than deficits, risks and framing gender and sexuality-diverse young people as 'wounded' or 'victims';

- Research conducted from a critical stance using theoretical perspectives of critical social work theory and queer theory - rather than conservative, neo-liberal or progressive theoretical underpinnings; and
- Research that methodologically uses critical reflection and reflexivity techniques within an overarching transformative objective.

Scope

The scope of this research was to focus on community workers interactions with secondary schools in Queensland, in the context of working with gender and sexuality diverse young people. It was outside the scope of this small research project to include other perspectives, such as school staff or young people. It was also not possible to include other types of schools in this study, such as primary schools. I interviewed four participants who identified themselves as community workers who have engaged with secondary schools around work with gender and sexuality diverse young people in Queensland.

Defining 'gender and sexuality diversity'

In relation to genders and sexualities research, terminology used is often vastly different, highly contested and sometimes different terms are used interchangeably. This can lead to confusion or contradictions. Throughout my thesis I use the term 'gender and sexuality diverse young people' when describing young people in the context of this study, or 'gender and sexuality diversity' when using the term more broadly (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017b). The exception to this is when I am describing research conducted by others who have selected a different term for use, or who have

researched a select group of people who are labelled in a particular way[2]. My use of the term 'gender and sexuality diverse' is in no way intended to be fixed and is not without its own complexity and critique. The term/acronym 'LGBTIQAP+', which is commonly used in practice and policy contexts, is used to describe people who identify with or identify fluidity with, but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and queer. In relation to queer theory, the use of the term 'LGBTIQAP+' is argued to have the potential to force identity into artificial categories rather than acknowledging diverse constructions of gender and sexuality (DePalma, 2013). Here the term 'diversity' refers to different sexualities than heterosexual and different genders than cisgender, with acknowledgement of the inevitable critique that this plays into the binary construct of heterosexual/cisgender and 'others'. While my use of the term 'gender and sexuality diversity' reflects my queer theoretical perspective around notions that identities are multiple and fluid (Carastathis, 2016), I also recognise the tentativeness of such terms which exist within 'diversity politics' (Falconer & Taylor, 2017) and within a history of cycles of 'sameness' and 'difference' tensions (Ghaziani, Taylor, & Stone, 2016).

Thesis Outline

In addition to this introduction chapter, the remainder of the thesis document includes a literature review in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework in Chapter 3, the methodology/research design in Chapter 4, the analysis in Chapter 5 and the final chapter is the conclusion. Chapter 2 explores constructions of gender and sexuality, and reviews the field of literatures related to the wellbeing of gender and sexuality-diverse young people, school responses to gender and sexuality diverse young

[2] When using a label because the research I am citing uses this particular term I will place the term used in inverted commas to mark this use as not necessarily being my own terminology choice

people, community services engaging with schools. I finish this chapter detailing the gaps and implications for future research. Chapter 3 explains how I foregrounded critical social work theory with additional insights drawn from queer theory as a conceptualisation for the analysis conducted as part of this research project. Chapter 4 outlines my research design, data collection techniques, the procedures of the analytic approaches including reflexive thematic analysis, as well as detailing considerations around ethics that relate to this project. Chapter 5 applies reflexive thematic analysis to the three themes, which included; wellbeing of young people (theme 1), community worker – school collaboration (theme 2) and critical reflection (theme 3). The final chapter summarises the research project and provides recommendations made as a result of findings. I also acknowledge the limitations of the research and explore the future possibilities for research in this field.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced my research topic and outlined my focus on exploring the perspectives of community workers around their interactions with secondary schools, in relation to their work with gender and sexuality diverse young people. To ensure I begin this thesis with reflexivity, which is important given my theoretical perspectives, I have outlined my professional motivation for my focus on this particular research topic. I explained the role and context of community workers to provide an understanding of how they relate and work with schools. To provide a context for the research project detailed here, I provided some information about why schools need to respond to the issues/needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people and how schools require resources and support from external community services to meet the needs of these young people. This study contributes to gaps in the literature around the perspectives of community workers in community school

engagement, and as such a project of appropriate scope was narrowed so that this qualitative study has been about community worker interactions with secondary schools in Queensland with community work reports being collected through semi-structured interviews with four community workers. Defining the term 'gender and sexuality diversity' was important in the context of ongoing debates and tensions around language and conceptual tensions around politics of diversity and constructions of 'sameness' and 'difference'. In the final section of this introductory chapter I gave a brief outline of the thesis chapters to follow, which begin with Chapter 2 exploring some key literature around gender and sexuality diverse young people and community - school engagement. I move now to review the literature in relevant fields for my research project.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The focus of this study has been to explore the perspectives of community workers who engage with secondary schools in Queensland in their work with gender and sexuality diverse young people. This chapter examines relevant literature surrounding differing constructions of gender and sexuality within education research. Literature related to the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people, what we know about schools' responses to gender and sexuality diversity, and community - school partnerships are also examined. Finally, I will outline gaps within the literature and implications for my own research.

Constructions of gender and sexuality in education research

Differing constructions of gender and sexuality in education research are examined in this section. The history of gender and sexuality diversity in education research in Australia in one where the field has been conceptualised in different ways as influenced across different times, by political influences, and popularity of a variety of theoretical perspectives. The discipline of inquiry and assumptions made by the researcher about gender and sexuality identity influence the perspectives taken by researchers in the field. Within the context of this literature review, it was important to understand what constitutes dominant and normalised practices in gender and sexuality education research. Education research literature has increasingly explored competing and highly contested discourses surrounding dominant neoliberal, conservative constructions, progressive constructions and critical, poststructural and queer constructions of gender and sexuality (Cover, Rasmussen, Aggleton, & Marshall, 2017; Harwood & Rasmussen, 2004; Jones,

2011; Rasmussen, 2016). There are many ways to frame the differing discourses to describe constructions of gender and sexuality, but within my study, I have chosen to use a framework described by Tiffany Jones (2011) as a way to help guide my literature around these contested constructions.

Jones (2011) provided a useful overview to frame sexuality education research over time and used a post-structuralist perspective to analyse 30 key research reports, books and articles to highlight the dominant perspectives and the under represented perspectives in the literature. Over the last 50 years or so, sexuality research has been informed by psychiatry (issues of sexual inversion), psychology (sick subject/object and their identity problems), the social and health sciences (HIV incidence and risk behaviour), and to the sexualities scholarship since the 1990's (including queer theory) (Jones, 2013). Depending on the research goals, Jones (2013) goes on to group the differing perspectives into categories including: conservative (maintaining the status quo), liberal (protection and rights), critical (exploring assumptions, inequities and social action) and post-modern (de-constructing 'truths' including post-structuralist and queer studies). Jones (2013) claimed that dominant discourses in sexuality education research are made up of notions of 'at risk victims' and negative discourses with only a small number of these studies - six out of thirty she reviewed - looking at the disruption or deconstruction of these traditional representations of sexuality. Those six studies drew on post-structuralist and queer theory to deconstruct and disrupt the biased and partial understandings of sex, gender and sexual identity by exploring notions of performativity, socio-cultural and historical perspectives of youth sexual identities (Jones, 2013). Jones (2011) made the observation that both critical and postmodern education orientations were underrepresented in education practices and research -

perhaps due to their complexity of concepts for educators and students -, whilst orientations such as conservative are dominant. In the section below, I present three broad distinctions for the ways in which education research constructs gender and sexuality, including conservative and neoliberal constructions, progressive constructions and critical/ poststructural/ queer constructions. In the sections that follow, I use these constructs to frame my presentation of literature within the field.

Conservative and neo-liberal constructions

In Australian education research, dominant constructions of gender and sexuality have been informed by conservative and neo-liberal discourses (Rasmussen, 2016; Shannon, 2016). However recently researchers have demonstrated how these ways of understanding gender and sexuality diversity are flawed. Australian schools operate within a conservative federal government framework (Rasmussen, 2017) where schools are facing the impacts of neo-liberalism and policy trends of pseudo-business practices (Gowlett, 2015). These conservative approaches that value neo-liberal discourses, as Gowlett (2015) describes, place pressure on schools as they work in an effort to be more publicly accountable. Gowlett (2015) highlighted this concerning shift in discourse by using the term 'new schooling accountabilities' to reflect these pressures of neo-liberal influences on practices such as managerial audit pressures, increased reporting and standardised measures and outcomes. Similarly, Shannon (2016) critiqued the shift of social responsibility from the state towards individuals and schools by using neoliberal notions of individualism and personal responsibility. Shannon (2016) went on to argue that sexuality education in Australia tends to be heteronormative and privileges traditional and religious views of heterosexuality and cisgender norms. Shannon & Smith (2015) articulate concerns about conservatism and neoliberalism

around notions of assimilation and homogeneity with policy and curriculum treating concepts like inclusiveness as superficial.

Neoliberal discourses surrounding schools and sex/sexuality education research often focus on risk-management (such as consequences including pregnancy and STIs) and this research usually sits within a health-based approach that reinforces 'natural', biological, scientific and heteronormative understandings of sexuality (McNeill, 2013). Allen (2008) also highlights the nature of schools reinforcing these conservative ideas about sex and sexualities that exclude opportunities for diversity. The framing of sex/sexuality education in schools may contribute to the way that teachers and schools view gender and sexuality diverse young people. Harwood and Rasmussen (2004) looked at the tendency of schools to associate young people identifying as gender or sexuality-diverse with what they termed 'woundedness' where young people are considered at risk of depression, suicide and other risk factors. Quinlivan (2002) problematised the juxtaposition of heterosexual young people being framed as normal while 'lesbian and gay youth' were framed as at risk within a model of deviance and needing help. Those young people that are depicted as 'victims' of homophobia are also often framed as 'resilient heroes' within the binary options that are reduced to either 'wounded' or 'hero' (Harwood & Rasmussen, 2004). Allen (2015a) critiques this tragic trope of portraying young people as wounded or as victims and pointed to a recent growing field of inquiry with research emerging from framings of strengths, resiliency and self-advocacy. Whilst typically, young people are represented negatively because of essentialist perspectives on genders and sexualities and heightened in contexts of neo-liberal agendas, progressive agendas continue to emerge as well.

Progressive constructions

Perspectives that are labelled as more 'progressive' around gender and sexuality diversity studies have often stemmed from a liberal perspective, such as the gay liberationist and feminist lesbian activist groups with assimilationist goals of highlighting similarities to the dominant heterosexual population (Jagose, 1996). This liberationist perspective is based on the concept of fighting for progress around increased inclusion, freedom, material inequities and rights to access social participation and legal protections enjoyed by others (Jagose, 1996). The concept of progress is grounded in a rational and enlightenment view that progress involves the linear progression that sees a 'truth' reveal itself and relies on perceived scientific facts to gain these normative rights and inclusions (Cover et al., 2017). This progressive approach that draws on scientific facts also values discourses of medicalisation and pathologising of 'LGBTI identities' (Harwood & Rasmussen, 2004). Even well-meaning discourses around clinical care, medical health and health promotion can focus on problems, victims, individual risky behaviours and other negative wellbeing issues which typically don't make links to broader social or political factors (Roffee & Waling, 2017). This pathologising of gender and sexuality diversity, as Rasmussen (2006) critiques, needs to consider other epistemologies that "can foster ethical ways of becoming subjects" (p.223). However, Shannon and Smith (2017) argue that the neoliberal and liberal political framework, including progressive perspectives, only allows individuals to exist within the parameters that hegemony allows and that concepts such as inclusion, tolerance and diversity continue to be dictated by this overall dominant framing.

Critical, poststructural and queer constructions

In contrast, critical, poststructural and queer constructions offer alternative framings as these approaches consider the liberal notion of minority groups aiming

for inclusion as simply reinforcing the position or category as 'other' than the norm (Cover et al., 2017). Poststructural and queer are not the same of course, but perspectives coming from the rich array of understandings of these research perspectives reject notions of rational, structural normative progress and problematize liberal notions of identity due to the exclusionist nature of identity categories (Jagose, 1996). Similarly, critical perspectives focus on challenging dominant neoliberal, conservative, modernist and progressive perspectives (Morley & Macfarlane, 2014). Critical social work perspectives within education research spaces look toward critically reflective and postmodern framings. Morley and Macfarlane (2014) make the observations that conservative and progressive approaches are modernist or positivist perspectives with neoliberal notions associated with globalisation and managerialism involving social control. In contrast, they observe that critical and postmodern perspectives focus on forms of resistance with ethical underpinnings (Morley & Macfarlane, 2014). Literature shows that it is not just schools that are being negatively impacted by neoliberal ideology, but also those organisations and services that schools engage to enhance their student wellbeing responses (Lynch, Forde & Lathouras, 2019).

The development of queer theoretical perspectives began to emerge in the early 2000s around queer education research, including the disruption of assumptions that result from common sense, essentialist thinking (Britzman, 1995), queer analytics of education institutions (Talburt, Rofes, & Rasmussen, 2004), queering heteronormativity (DePalma & Atkinson, 2007), sexualised subjectivities (Youdell, 2010) and sexuality education discourses (Jones, 2011). Historically, education research focused on 'LGBT' subjects and the need for the liberation of LGBT identifying people from discrimination (Allen, 2011). Queer research has sought to

move away from notions of "wounded identities" (Rasmussen, 2004) towards a way of challenging the normalisation of heterosexuality (Allen, 2011) and has been used as a mode of enquiry to disrupt common sense thinking (Britzman, 1995). Queer theory has enabled researchers to question the social order, and to not expect easy certainties (DePalma & Atkinson, 2007). There has been important work in the areas of deconstructing sexual binaries (Jagose, 1996), non-normative sexuality (Halperin, 2003), sex and gender norms (DePalma, 2013) and understanding identity as a cultural construct (Talburt & Steinberg, 2000).

A growing body of work is emerging that considers that queer theories need to not only focus on the anticipated fields of sexuality and gender studies (Gowlett, 2014; Rasmussen & Allen, 2014; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010) because this is limiting and constraining. Rasmussen & Allen (2014) have contributed to this contestation of the predictable tendency of queer theories as attaching queer concepts to queer bodies and suggest that queer theories should go beyond queer bodies and its subjects to explore changing assemblages of ideas that may appear in areas that are not necessarily expected. Although queer theory is not ones set of understandings – thus the oft used plural form – these ways of thinking can be considered to be quite cutting edge or confrontational (Britzman, 1995), especially in relation to conservative or liberal research. This does not mean that these theories should escape the need to be continuously renewed and disrupted (Rasmussen & Allen, 2014) with problems and limitations acknowledged. As Britzman (1995) argues, the 'queer' in queer theory does not depend on the identity of the researcher or researched but anticipates a precariousness and disruption to the logic of common sense thinking. This literature identifies the significance of not allowing the 'queer' in queer theory to be another identity added to the acronym 'LGBTIQ+'. Instead, as

queer theories continue to develop and crystallise there must be a strong political stance, a form of criticality and inquiry (Gowlett, 2014), a tactical practice to consider how social norms can be 'bent' (Youdell, 2010), a necessary reflection of identity politics (Rasmussen, 2009) and a way of thinking differently about people, events, places and their intersections (Allen & Rasmussen, 2015).

Whilst the majority of queer education research has focused on 'queer bodies' in secondary schools, there has been a growth in literature that is troubling the boundaries of queer theories in what Talburt and Rasmussen (2010) refer to as 'after-queer'. Talburt and Rasmussen (2010) frame 'after-queer' research as interrogating the limits of queer theory itself and problematising and imagining future research possibilities to avoid predictable tendencies that follow established theoretical perspectives. Allen (2015b) extended these ideas by exploring how heteronormative institutions such as universities could be examined by queering the queer pedagogy and developing new insights into undoing normative practices, even if this leaves an open and uncomfortable ending.

In summary, literature has shown that there are competing constructions of gender and sexuality in education research and these constructions shape the ways in which young people are framed and which discourses are dominant in the perspectives put forward. Although gender and sexuality diverse young people in schools are often situated within a conservative federal government framework informed by neo-liberal and progressive discourses, there is an increasing body of literature framed by critical, poststructural and queer perspectives. The theoretical chapter explores these latter perspectives which inform the construction of gender and sexuality that were used in this research project. Keeping in mind that there are differing constructions of gender and sexuality, the following section of the literature

review examines the ways in which the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people are often framed by problems and 'at-risk' discourses.

The wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people

I explored literature around problems and risks with issues including mental health, alcohol & other drug use, minority stress, social isolation, policing relations, bullying and homophobia being featured. Keeping in mind the different constructions of gender and sexuality education research already detailed, some of the following literature falls within a neoliberal, liberal and/or progressive approach to research due to the focus on risk, rights and inclusion discourses. This body of literature is significant in evidencing the problems experienced by young people. Keeping this in mind while also addressing research that moves towards a focus on strengths, self-advocacy, resistance and transformative social change is key.

Issues: problems and risk factors

Exploring the significance of why it is that in Australia gender and sexuality diverse young people continue to experience poorer health and wellbeing than the general population is important (Leonard et al., 2015). Issues contributing to poorer health and welling include high levels of homophobic bullying, discrimination, abuse, mental health issues and alcohol and drug misuse (Robinson et al., 2014). Many of these issues are frequently a part of the lives of young people in secondary schooling years, and this can result in significant impact on academic outcomes (Hillier et al., 2010). The third national study of the wellbeing of same sex attracted and gender questioning young people , *Writing Themselves In 3* (Hillier et al., 2010) highlighted that for young people there has been a steady rise in the levels of homophobic abuse, particularly in school settings. What wasn't clear from this study or other recent studies (Jones & Hillier, 2013; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, &

Bartkiewicz, 2012) is how community services and schools are working together to meet the needs of these young people.

Research conducted by Leonard et al (2015) has provided evidence that 'LGBT' people experience higher rates of mental health issues including anxiety, depression and psychological distress than the general population. This is supported by a significant piece of research that has been conducted across Australia called *Private Lives,* initially published in 2006 (Pitts, Mitchell, Smith, & Patel, 2006). The follow up research *Private Lives 2 was* published in 2012 (Leonard et al.) with accompanying reports on the state of mental health and wellbeing of 'LGBT' Australians. This research has been significant as it has revealed that mental health outcomes continue to be significantly worse for 'LGBT' people and has not improved since 2006 (Leonard et al., 2015). These findings are reflective of international research which highlights the mental health disparities between 'LGBT' people and the general population (Bogart, Revenson, Whitfield, & France, 2014; Morandini, Blaszczynski, Dar-Nimrod, & Ross, 2015). In Queensland, research that looked at the Queensland register of death, revealed higher suicide rates for 'LGBT' people in comparison to the general population, as well as reported incidences for 'LGBT' people prior to suicide of higher levels of depression, relationship problems and psychological distress (Skerrett, Kõlves, & De Leo, 2014). Research into suicide rates of gender and sexuality-diverse people is critical but still has significant limitations around reliability and issues such as under-estimating suicide rates due to the poor quality of indicators reported to the register of death.

Similarly, a Queensland study of substance misuse conducted in 2012, highlighted that in most categories of alcohol and other drug use 'same sex attracted young people' were at higher risk of consuming substances and more likely to

develop substance misuse problems later on (Kelly et al., 2015). The context of this research study was on the prevalence of substance use and links between homophobia and substance misuse. In some categories of substance use, such as illicit drugs, these were used by same sex attracted young people aged 14-17 years in 40% of respondents, compared with young people who did not report being same sex attracted being 15% (Kelly et al., 2015). The higher rates of substance misuse among same sex attracted young people indicated a need for improved alcohol and other drug (AOD) services or increased AOD service provision for gender and sexuality diverse young people as a specific target group.

Australian research has showed that gender and sexuality diverse people experience high levels of systematic disadvantage and psychological distress, also called minority stress (Morandini et al., 2015; Perales, 2016). One Australian study explored minority stress and community connectedness of 'lesbian, gay and bi-sexual people' in both urban and rural areas and revealed that there is a direct link between people experiencing minority stress and people becoming socially isolated, particularly in rural locations (Morandini et al., 2015). The problem for gender and sexuality diverse people that experience minority stress and discrimination consequently becoming socially isolated and disconnected from their community was also highlighted by Leonard's research (2015) where similar links were made.

'LGBT' young people are also over-represented in interactions with police, compared to the general youth population and this is often associated with interrelated issues of increased instances of homelessness and being excluded from school (Dwyer, 2013). Research conducted with 'LGBT' young people in Brisbane has highlighted the need for improved policing practices and reformed police behaviours, often due to inadequate police diversity training (Dwyer, 2015),

particularly in rural areas considered to be more dangerous spaces for 'LGBT' youth (Dwyer, Ball, & Barker, 2015).

Similarly issues of homophobic and transphobic abuse and bullying in schools have been linked to wellbeing and health. The third national study on the wellbeing of 'same sex attracted and gender questioning young people' found that just over 60% of respondents reported verbal homophobic abuse, 18% reported physical abuse and a further 26% reported other forms of homophobia (Hillier et al., 2010). Of great concern is that 80% of this homophobic abuse happened in school (Hillier et al., 2010). In response to this specific research that identifies some systemic concerns, recommendations have been made that there needs to be a focus on providing specific support services for gender and sexuality diverse young people, rather than having a general support strategy for all young people (Hillier et al., 2010; Perales, 2016). My research was interested in exploring how community workers are engaging with schools with the goal of collectively improving wellbeing outcomes for young people. Recommendations such as identifying the need for increased specific services for gender and sexuality diverse young people are often inevitably tied to government policy agendas and funding. It is for this reason, that although they are not research findings, I have included a brief section below on how some of the government policies, goals and strategies influence the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people.

Government influence on wellbeing: policy, goals and strategies

Education research surrounding the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people exists in a political environment where government education policy/goals/strategies impacts on the wellbeing of young people through such things as school protections and initiatives, funded services and everyday discourses.

Australian Education Ministers met in 2008 with the resulting Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) which aimed to set the agenda of equity and excellence in educational goals for young people. One of the goals of the Melbourne Declaration (2008) was to promote equity to,

> *"provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location"* (p.7).

Whilst this declaration was not mandated policy protection it did explicitly mention gender and sexuality considerations for future directions. However, this seemingly positive education reform development was criticised as a neo-liberal agenda of economic goals masquerading as genuine education reforms (Buchanan & Chapman, 2011). More recently the next iteration of the goals for Australian schooling, in the form of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Services Australia, 2019, p.5), was signed by all Australia's education ministers, and declared that:

> *"all young Australians [are provided] with access to high-quality education that is inclusive and free from any form of discrimination"*

In this newest national education declaration then, there is no mention at all of gender or sexuality when referring to young people and inclusive education. This generic discourse demonstrates a concerning lack of understanding of the unique issues connecting discrimination based on sexuality and gender to the poor educational outcomes for young people and a concerning roll back of acknowledging

the need measures to support this group of young people within the education systems of Australia.

An awareness of government policy and its influence on the education research environment is a crucial part of exploring literature surrounding support for gender and sexuality diverse students. Mixed levels of discrimination protection are provided by state and territory government policy across Australia and as Jones claims (2016) limited protection under individual school policies in most schools. Jones (2016) argues that if there is little policy protection for 'LGBTIQ' students at the top tier of government, then this will trickle down through state policy to the individual school policy, or lack thereof, to offer students little to no protection from homophobia and discrimination. This argument is strengthened by findings from multiple sources of research into the health and wellbeing of young people (Berman & Robinson, 2010; Hillier et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2014). It is not surprising then that Jones & Hillier (2012) made the connection in their research that there is a direct correlation between policy protection and the experiences of 'LGBTIQ' students and their feeling safe and protected in their school. In this research across three states in Australia, the authors found that the students that felt most protected were in Victoria (29.79% felt protected), followed by New South Wales (26.53% felt protected) and lastly Queensland (19.45% felt protected). These student experiences and feelings of safety at school match up with the level of student protection policies for 'LGBTIQ' students produced by state governments. Queensland fared the worst from a 'LGBTIQ' student perspective.

The Australian Federal government supported the development of an initiative aimed at improving educational outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse young people, through the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) Programme

(Australian Government, 2016). The program was developed from a successful state born project, which included training, support and resources towards increased support for students and capacity building for volunteer schools. Subsequently there have been public, media and political debates surrounding this initiative resulting in the Australian Government announcing a review in 2016 which was followed by conservative politicians condemning Safe Schools and as Shannon and Smith (2017) argued, sending a message that queer content is too controversial for schools. This connects with Ferfolja's (2013) argument that anti-discrimination legislation or policy around 'LGBTIQ' people is a mask to show acceptance and tolerance within dominant neoliberal discourses of heteronormativity, without any real change.

In Queensland, issues related to gender and sexuality diverse young people in education are dealt with in a general 'inclusive education policy statement' and very brief accompanying documents for parents, students and principals (Queensland Government, 2020). More broadly than education, recently the Queensland Government introduced strategies for young people to contribute to policy development, such as the Queensland Youth Strategy, which specifically outlined a number of 'vulnerable' groups including 'LGBTI' young people (Queensland Government, 2020a). The strategy highlighted some statistics around poor mental health, risk of suicide, abuse and homophobia, as well as some general commitments of building awareness of transgender identities, promoting discrimination law in Queensland and the opportunity of youth engagement through the 'Queensland Youth Engagement Panel'(Queensland Government, 2020b). Although the Queensland Government has a range of stated strategies for young people and their wellbeing, there is no mention of any targeted strategies to address issues being experienced by gender and sexuality diverse young people.

School responses to gender and sexuality diverse young people

The previous section explored some of the broader influences that government policies, goals and strategies have on the protection of gender and sexuality diverse young people from discrimination and homophobia. Literature will now be explored surrounding some of the supports, education programs and resources that sit within secondary schools that support gender and sexuality diversity for young people. Much of the following literature sits within a liberal and progressive approach to research due to the focus on student rights, safety and inclusion discourses.

In-school supports and education

Supporting gender and sexuality diverse young people effectively is not able to be achieved by schools alone nor by community services alone, which is a concept argued by the Victorian government (2010) in their 'Building respectful and safe schools: a resource for school communities' document. The idea of a community approach to building safe schools is also argued for in research conducted with members of the education community in Queensland schools (Michaelson, 2008). In this study it was revealed that despite some positive changes, homophobia is still rampant and schools are still failing 'GLBT' students. In Australia the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) Programme was the first nationally funded program of its type implemented by the Foundation for Young Australians (Australian Government, 2016). SSCA has changed over time with its national launch in 2014 and has been much debated since 2015/2016 where concerns from conservative parties were expressed with controversy and resistance (Jones et al., 2016). The aim of SSCA was to respond to the existing evidence of significant levels of homophobic and transphobic bullying occurring in schools (Robinson et al., 2014) by providing

school staff with resources to support 'LGBTI' students by addressing bullying and providing safe spaces that promote gender and sexuality diversity (McKinnon, Waitt, & Gorman-Murray, 2017). McKinnon et al (2017, p.146) argued that conservative politicians and opponents to Safe Schools claimed to be "protecting childhood innocence", but instead were trying to prevent Safe Schools from disrupting the existing privileged position of compulsory heterosexuality of Australian schooling. Negative public commentary from several conservative politicians and high profile commentators lead to an independent review of the program in 2016 and despite only minor recommendations around age-appropriateness of certain resources, the response from government was to announce no ongoing funding of Safe Schools after 2018 (Cover et al., 2017). Law (2017) interestingly pointed out that while the views of anti-Safe Schools conservatives such as LNP politicians, Australian Christian Lobby and Australian Marriage Alliance have been widely publicised, there has been an omission of the media publicising the voices of 'LGBTI' young people, non-partisan experts and education academics.

More broadly speaking, school-based sexuality education has been explored in numerous research studies both in Australia and in international literature. In Australia, recent literature has highlighted the ongoing issue of any curriculum content or sexuality education in schools that is non-heteronormative to be labelled as controversial, essentially silencing discussions that include gender and sexuality diversity (Shannon & Smith, 2015). Ferfolja and Ullman (2017a) argue that despite growing acceptance of gender and sexuality diversity in Australia, schools continue to marginalise young people through lack of visibility and inclusion. They go on to argue that due to poor institutional support as well as curriculum omissions, equity and inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity becomes a teachers' responsibility,

which can be a risk-taking activity for the teacher (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017a). International literature around sexuality education shows that despite some comprehensive resources and education tools for inclusive and safe school practices by GLSEN (2016) in the US, American schools mostly teach sexuality education from a heterosexual perspective that equates to a discourse of exclusion (Elia & Eliason, 2010). McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2017) explored schooling practices in New Zealand and observed that pedagogical practices that ignore gender and sexuality diversity reinforce heterosexual norms and silence alternative identities. They also discuss some transformative approaches used in schools such as 'LGBTQ' alliances that incorporate activism and multiple perspectives of young people (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017). To be able to meet the wellbeing needs of young people in schools, critical perspectives that are innovative and sustainable may have better outcomes of embedding social and emotional wellbeing practices into schools (Barry et al., 2017).

School responses to gender and sexuality diversity are inextricably linked to broader social and political influences and debates, such as the debates in recent years over same-sex marriage (SSM) in Australia. Despite ongoing trends leading up to the 'Australian Marriage Equality Postal Survey' revealing increased support for marriage equality in Australia, (Sloane & Robillard, 2017), public debates resulted in high levels of debate-related psychological stress and measurable negative outcomes on mental health for gender and sexuality diverse people (Ecker, Riggle, Rostosky & Byrnes, 2019; Sloane & Robillard, 2017). Webb, Chonody and Kavanagh (2017) conducted research into the underlying reasons for opposition to SSM in Australia, which included an exploration of language and discourse within media. Whilst they found that over 70% of respondents supported SSM, they also found that there was

evidence of heteronormative language in both supporters and opponents of SSM, which reflects the strong discourses from media that privilege and normalise heterosexuality, particularly in relation to parenting of children (Webb et al., 2017). 2017 saw the failed non-binding plebiscite on marriage equality pushed through the Senate, followed by the $122 million voluntary opinion poll by post conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Law, 2017). Despite a result representing support for legislative changes to legalise SSM, the resulting negative political and social discourse surrounding gender and sexuality during this time resulted in 'LGBTQ' people reporting direct increases in feeling more negative, lonely and depressed (Anderson, Georgantis, & Kapelles, 2017). These types of broader heteronormative political and social discourses around programs such as Safe Schools and those that occurred in the lead up to marriage equality need to be acknowledged as influences when exploring school responses to the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people, as well as the direct impact on the wellbeing of young people themselves.

Strengths-based approach: improving support for students

In relation to gender and sexuality diverse young people, a significant amount of research has focused on sexually risky behaviours, victimisation in schools and other negative outcomes (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Talburt et al., 2004). In previous sections of the literature review research was outlined relating to poorer health and welling outcomes including experiences of high levels of homophobic bullying, discrimination, abuse, mental health issues and alcohol and drug misuse (Leonard et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2014). Whilst it is important to acknowledge the impacts of institutional heteronormativity on gender and sexuality diverse young people, consideration also needs to be given to how this research positions young

people. For example, young people have often been positioned within discourses of 'woundedness', 'victims' or resilient 'heroes' (Allen, 2015a; Harwood & Rasmussen, 2004).

A small but growing trend in education literature has a focus on a strengths-based approach or resilience-focused research that highlights what is working to effectively support gender and sexuality diverse young people to meet their wellbeing support needs (Dwyer, 2013; Jones & Hillier, 2013; Leonard et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2014) and have happy healthy lives. Jones and Hillier (2013) responded to their observations about these at-risk framings of young people to explore some resilience-building initiatives and strategies for positive change to address discrimination and improve school experiences. Other recent research has highlighted the increased levels of social connectedness, resilience and wellbeing for those gender and sexuality-diverse young people that live in metropolitan areas of Australia and New Zealand, partly due to the access to support services that may not be available for those that live in rural and regional areas (Power et al., 2014). Mitra & Gross (2009) highlighted the importance of student voices to be included in order for improvements to occur, but also noted the importance of those positioned outside of the school environment, such as community workers, as being better equipped and more willing to enable these spaces for student voices to be heard. Interestingly, the Jones and Hillier (2013) research recommended that both education institutions and youth services need to work on building resilience and positive messages for gender and sexuality-diverse young people. Kosciw, Palmer and Kull (2015) explored a model of resilience in relation to 'outness' in school and looked at qualities of resilience and potential protective benefits to young people. Whilst this research focused on individuals and psychological wellbeing, there was acknowledgement of

broader community context and intersectional complexities at work, with some interesting recommendations around the need for greater resources needed for young people in schools and changes in curricula and policy standards (Kosciw et al., 2015). So, the conundrum for community workers and schools is about how to advocate for greater resources and supports for gender and sexuality diverse young people from a position of strength rather than as victims with 'wounded' discourses.

Community services engaging with schools

There is also a body of literature that has investigated the engagement of community services and schools broadly, and this highlights the gap of specific research surrounding community services - school engagement across Queensland in the context of gender and sexuality diversity.

Contextually, it is important to acknowledge there are limited community services in Queensland that are funded to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. The only funded 'LGBT' youth service organisation in Queensland, 'Open Doors Youth Service' has extremely limited funding and thus services that it can make available (Open Doors, 2016). The Queensland Government (2020) has listed on their webpage under the heading 'support for young people who identify as LGBTIQ+' links to services and groups. This page includes fifteen services or groups, with one specific 'LGBTIQ+' service (Open Doors) for young people with the remaining services either being general services that offer some 'LGBTIQ+' support groups (such as or Headspace and PCYC) or highly specific services that may only apply to specific situations (such as the 'LGBTI Legal Service'. A limited amount of literature has highlighted the nature of minimal services for gender and sexuality diverse young people and the need for increased funding to support

services and resources to address this obvious gap (Leonard et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2014).

Some literature exists around school community partnerships (Epstein, 2018), but there is a significant gap in literature that focuses on partnerships for the benefit of gender and sexuality diverse young people. A body of literature explores school - community partnerships around issues such as school attendance (Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2010), academic outcomes (Zyngier, 2013), transition from school to further education or employment (Broadbent & Cacciattolo, 2013; Kapitzke & Hay, 2011), health promotion and health care (Marks, Thomas, Rowe, & Harris, 2010; Mills et al., 2010) and refugee education (Taylor, 2008). This literature highlighted some important considerations for partnership work between community workers and schools, such as needing shared goals, transparency, and genuine relational investment (Marks et al., 2010; Mills et al., 2010). Other literature highlighted the gap in research of schools working with a community engagement approach (Powers, Wegmann, Blackman, & Swick, 2014). Although not specific to gender and sexuality diversity, there was an interesting study in Queensland that explored a shared engagement initiative between schools and Queensland Health's Child and Youth Mental Health Services (CYMHS). This study found that when the service - school relationship was strengthened by commitment, rather than schools simply 'offloading' referrals to CYMHS, the result was improved capacity-building within schools, improved referral pathways, improved cross-agency communication and better outcomes for young people (Mendoza & Wands, 2014). The concept of specialised services being available for young people around certain needs (such as mental health), was reflected in other research findings, such as Hillier et al. (2010) and Perales (2016) who found that there needs to be a focus on providing specific

support services for gender and sexuality diverse young people as well, rather than having a general support strategy for all young people.

The above literature highlighted that there has been some research around partnerships between community workers and schools, but that research was not specific to supporting gender and sexuality diverse young people. The issue of community organisation capacity was also discussed as a concern after recent funding cuts and therefore a limited number of specialised services available in Queensland to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. There is a gap in literature surrounding how community services and schools are engaging with each other to meet the needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people.

Gaps and implications for future research

The review of literature surrounding gender and sexuality diverse young people in Australia, school responses to gender and sexuality diversity and community services engaging with schools indicates some clear gaps in the literature as well as some recommendations for further research that is needed. The following are some key themes noted from this literature review and some identified gaps, including:

- The dominant research approaches continue to be conservative, neo-liberal/liberal and progressive approaches (Jones, 2011) with approaches such as poststructural and queer theory continuing to be under-represented, despite significant contributions to education research over the last two decades of theorists in these fields.
- Dominant discourse in literature has a focus on the 'problems' for gender and sexuality-diverse young people, including risk factors, health

implications, harm, poor outcomes and issues that need addressing. There is a need for further research that positions young people from a position of strength where studies may focus on resistance to dominant constructions of gender and sexuality, strengths, self-advocacy, social transformation and new possibilities for doing things differently.

- School responses often involve the 'othering' of gender and sexuality diverse young people and their needs where their voices are often excluded and silenced due to the perception of these needs to be considered as 'controversial', 'sensitive', 'too political' or other than normal.
- Although there is an acknowledgement that schools cannot adequately meet the needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people within the school system, there is very little literature suggesting how community services can effectively engage with schools to support these specialised needs.
- There needs to be a focus on providing specific support services for gender and sexuality diverse young people, rather than having a general support strategy for all young people (Hillier et al., 2010; Perales, 2016).

The above themes and gaps helped me to position my research project within the existing literature. I am also able to identify some implications for my research and to acknowledge some important considerations moving forward. This project aims to build on the under-represented literature that sits within queer theory and critical theory approaches rather than the dominant conservative or liberal approaches, and as such has focused on the possibilities of improving the engagement between community services and schools. Some implications that I

needed to consider for my research related to the fact that my research might be considered to be controversial, oppositional or disruptive due to my underpinning use of critical social work theory and queer theory that challenges dominant constructions of sexuality, gender and normalised practices. My aim is that this study might provide some additional insights for improving the interactions between community workers and schools in the work they are doing with gender and sexuality diverse young people in Queensland secondary schools.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

The focus of my research project was to explore the experiences shared by community workers about their interactions with secondary schools, in relation to their work with gender and sexuality diverse young people. I was interested in the perspectives of community workers about these everyday interactions with schools, the enablers and constraints in relationships and some potential recommendations for transformative practices. I explored dominant constructions of sex, gender and sexuality as identified in the talk of the community workers as participants. In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework underpinning my research. I foreground a critical social work perspective informed by poststructuralist theories and draw upon concepts from queer theory to add further insight into understanding framings of sex, gender and sexuality.

Critical social work theory

I foregrounded critical social work theory in my research project because it resonates with my own professional background as a social worker. Critical social work theories are plural as there are a range of differing principles and conceptualisations that inform critical social work theories, including critical modernist and poststructuralist theories (Morley & Macfarlane, 2012). My particular approach to critical social work theory is primarily informed by poststructuralist concepts, that embrace theoretical complexity and challenge notions of objectivity, certainty and grand truths of modernity (Badwall & Razack, 2012). It is this theoretical complexity and unsettling of taken for granted truths that also resonated

with my second theoretical influence, queer theory, which is discussed in the later part of this chapter.

Critical social work theory informed by poststructuralism comes from a constructionist or interpretivist perspective rather than a positivist belief that our social worlds are fixed or contain an objective truth (McNeill, 2006). Constructed knowledge is shaped by cultural, historical and political situations that are also informed by values of those who create the knowledge (Pease, 2009). To extend on this concept of values informing knowledge, Allan (2009a) highlights the importance of critically reflecting on any stated values such as 'social justice' and 'empowerment'. Values are often presented in the context of a set of universal values that are assumed to be common sense, such as those values promoted for professional social workers, including social justice and empowerment (Allan, 2009a). Critical reflection on any universal sets of values may ask who is represented within these values and whose voice is excluded? Allan's (2009a) work raises questions about the representation of a single voice or set of values put forth on behalf of all voices. Despite best intentions, there is always the possibility of some voices not being adequately represented or the possibility of some members having values forced upon them without an understanding of the complexities of marginalised populations or cultural context (Allan, 2009a). Rather than assuming common sense values and imposing a 'moral compass' towards my research design, my study has aimed to consider a more complex approach. I draw on relativist poststructural notions of a diversity of values and embrace complexity. Morley & Macfarlane (2014) argue that critical approaches to social work are imperative with explicit considerations around values and ethics in relation to emancipatory social change practices. Ife (2012) also highlights the fundamental concern of ethics in

social work as a profession with postmodern approaches being concerned with marginalised voices, diversity, acknowledging no right answer, embracing messiness, challenging impositions of a false order on natural chaos and critiquing dominant social, political and economic order. So, whilst my research approach respected the universal values often attached to the social work profession, I took a less fixed or perhaps more diverse view of values and ethics that considers the need for challenging dominant and normalised discourses.

My use of critical social work theory informed by poststructuralism has been informed by the following key theoretical principles:

- **Embrace complexity:** Embrace complexity, uncertainty and contradictions with multiples perspectives (Ablett & Morley, 2016; Morley & Macfarlane, 2014).
- **Deconstruct values:** Deconstruct implicit values and assumptions including power relations (Badwall & Razack, 2012; Healy, 2001).
- **Challenge and resist oppressive discourses:** Challenge/resist oppressive discourses through personal agency (Banks, 2001; Morley, 2013b).
- **Critical reflection and reflexivity:** Critical reflection and reflexivity (Askeland & Fook, 2009; Béres, Bowles, & Fook, 2011; Fook & Gardner, 2007) .
- **Reconstruct and transform:** Reconstruct ideas for transformative, socially just and emancipatory practices and explore new ways of thinking, ideas and alternatives for transformative practices (Fook & Askeland, 2006; Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

These principles combined to form my particular critical social work theoretical framework and are summarised in Figure 3.1 below. I have taken the above listed

key theoretical principles and broadly divided them into two sections, generally aligning to either a deconstruction or a reconstruction phase of research. I positioned the principle 'critical reflection and reflexivity' in the middle because it strongly applies to both the deconstruction and reconstruction phase of a research project.

Critical Social Work Theory

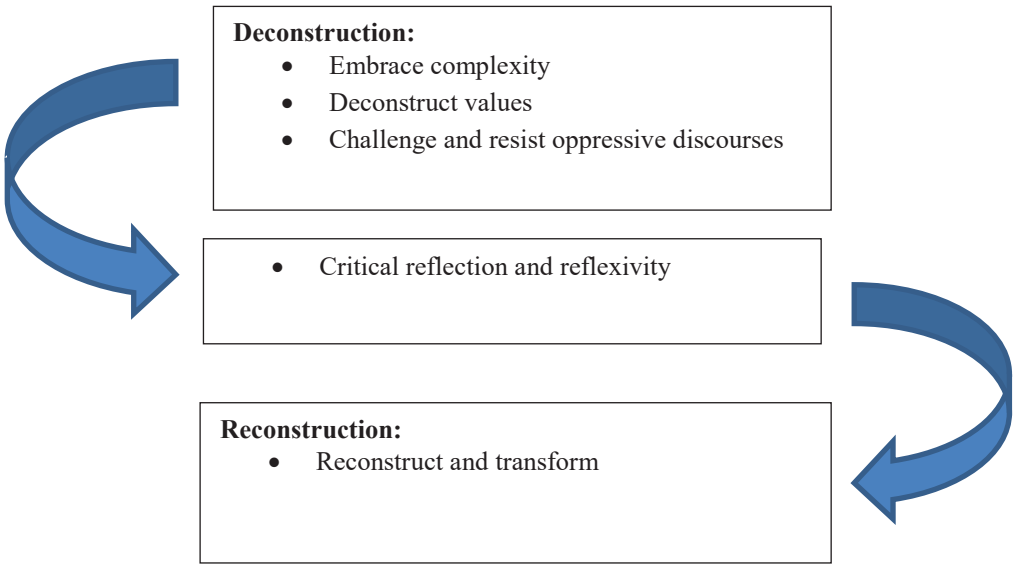

Figure 3.1: *Critical social work theoretical framework, adapted from (Fook & Gardner, 2007)*

In what follows, I unpack each of the principles in more detail to show how I consider each principle within my theoretical framework and how it applies to my research project. It is worth noting that the reference in the following sections to the social work profession are relevant due to many community workers being social workers, as well as because of my own professional identity as a social worker.

Embrace complexity: embracing complexity and multiple perspectives in critical social work theory

Critical social work theory is not a single unified approach to social work research and promotes the notion of drawing on the strengths of different theoretical positions as appropriate to the context of the research (Fook, 2016; Ife, 2012). Social

work as a discipline in Australia has been influenced by both modernist and postmodernist ideas (Healy, 2001). Some modernist influences have centred around structural forms of power (Daley, 2010), progressive universal human rights (Ife, 2012) and ideas of norms for social justice and empowerment (Badwall & Razack, 2012). Postmodern influences have centred around challenging universalist assumptions using a critical approach (Fook, 2016; Pease, 2009), deconstructing knowledge and power relations (Healy, 2001) and addressing difference and diversity (Quinn, 2003). Irrespective of theoretical underpinnings, continuing central concerns for social work researchers include a focus on concepts such as social justice, human rights (Allan, 2009b), anti-oppressive practice (Bryant, 2016), collective strategies (Baines, 2006), critical reflection (Fook & Gardner, 2007) and social change towards emancipatory practices (Morley & Macfarlane, 2014). As already mentioned, my approach to critical social work theory is informed by postmodern and poststructural concepts. This involves challenging hegemonic assumptions about a universal truth where power is possessed by few, as a top-down repressive force being imposed onto people (Healy, 2005). Instead, poststructural understandings of deconstructive notions of multiple truths and diversity of stories are required to sit within a space of complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity and contradictions (Morley & Macfarlane, 2014).

Deconstruct values: deconstructing assumptions around values, power and knowledge

Poststructuralist notions of power, knowledge and discourse have had a particular influence on critical social work theory. My use of critical social work theory draws upon poststructural thinking to be able to explore how knowledge is constructed, how dominant social discourses are enabled, how we see the concept of power and whose interests are being served or not served (Jagose, 1996). Knowledge

is viewed as socially constructed and consequently there must be multiple meanings and interpretations, and it becomes necessary to look at language and discourse in its particular social context to understand how these have been shaped by political, cultural and personal constructs (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014). There is an inextricable link between power and knowledge (Woolley, 2017) and an analysis of power requires the politicising of identities (Amigot & Pujal, 2009). Poststructuralism has heavily influenced current social work theorists around conceptualisations of power being exercised rather than possessed (Fook, 2016). Healy (2001) argued that social workers interested in empowerment or social justice could look to poststructural conceptualisations of power. Community workers could consider an analysis that explores not only the potential for power to be oppressive but also the productive use of power and indeed empowerment. Morley & Macfarlane (2014) urge the need for critiquing thinking and practices that could be complicit with dominant power relations and to reconstruct more helpful ways of thinking or doing that lead to social change. In practice, critical social work challenges oppressive systems of power and is underpinned by principles of caring, empathy, social justice and empowerment (Pease, 2002)**.** Theoretically, caution must be applied when analysing these types of discourses of helping and caring because in varying contexts benevolence can be acts of imperialism and doing good for others can promote neo-colonialism (Badwall & Razack, 2012).

The deconstruction of language, meaning and assumptions is critical in understanding the practice contexts of community workers (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Fook and Gardner (2007) warn that this deconstruction and unravelling of assumptions about power and control tends to lead people to construct binary opposites with dichotomous thinking. Hickson (2016) suggests that researchers

should instead "reconceptualise the ways that power is experienced and be open to new possibilities about what power is and how it can be used" (p.386). My research was particularly interested in exploring community workers' interactions and understandings of constructions of power in relation to school, systems of power, intersecting complexities surrounding these power relations and talk about being enabled or constrained in their work with schools.

Challenge and resist oppressive discourses: personal agency

In the previous section, I discussed the importance of the need for the deconstruction of power, knowledge and discourse through the critique of power relations in complex discursive environments. Before a process of reconstruction of conceptualisations of power and discourse can occur, it is first necessary to explore ways in which community workers already enact or see the potential for opportunities of resistance to dominant constructions of power by using personal or professional agency. As discussed earlier, critical social work theory was influenced by poststructuralism in relation to seeing power as not only oppressive but also potentially productive (Fook, 2016; Healy, 2001). To explore productive conceptualisations of power and discourse, I wanted to explore the ways in which community workers talk about resistance and agency.

From a critical modernist perspective power has been understood to be either negative or productive, but also as being top down, however from a poststructural way of thinking power is conceptualised as capillary power – that is as detailed by many theorists drawing on the work of Foucault (see for example Foucault, 1980) power that runs both ways. It is neither top-down, nor bottom-up but both. Within this shift to a view where power is not deterministic our interest can shift to what forms of resistance might occur (Jagose, 1996) within spaces as well. By this way of

thinking, wherever there is power there is also space for resistance. So, rather than constructing people as powerless victims within systems of power from a deterministic perspective, I was interested in the use of agency to engage in forms of resistance that influence situations and create opportunities for possibilities of change (Fook, 2016). Later in this chapter, I draw on some theoretical concepts from queer theory because I also had an interest in furthering understandings of resistance by framing marginalised sexual and gender identities not as victims of power but instead as capable of using productive and enabling approaches to power to rupture normative narratives (Cover et al., 2017). Poststructuralism acknowledges multiplicity, as is pointed out, so people can be both victims and producers of power and sometimes simultaneously. One such area for resistance and multiplicity is the taken for granted understanding of labelling practices around sexuality and gender identities and the notion of heterosexuality as natural and stable, with other sexualities (gay and lesbian for example) considered oppositional or binary. A binary construct of heterosexuality and homosexuality excludes the legitimacy of other sexuality options and reinforces 'othering' of identities considered to be deviant (Namaste, 1994). Poststructuralism resists other dualistic binaries as well, such as victim/hero (Allen, 2015a) and masculine/feminine (Souza, Brewis, & Rumens, 2016). It could be argued that modernist critical theory is considered 'oppositional or binary' because it contests heterosexism, which is of course useful and necessary, but queer theories and post structural ways of understanding would then argue that 'opposition' is not the only other option. Opposing such fixed identity categories and binary constructs leads to a deconstruction of sexuality and gender as part of everyday discursive practices such as language, behaviour, appearance and representations (Souza et al., 2016). Disrupting these assumptions by opposing or

resisting heteronormativity and other regulated social norms (Greteman, 2014) enables people to develop multiple and diverse discourses as a mode of resistance (Jagose, 1996).

So, rather than constructing people as powerless victims within systems of power from a deterministic perspective, I was interested in the use of agency to engage in forms of resistance that influence situations and create opportunities for possibilities of change (Fook, 2016). I explored what community workers reported about their experiences of community workers as they engaged in supporting gender and sexuality diverse young people. I considered such things as whether there was evidence that the community workers felt they were autonomous in their decisions, and to listen to stories of resistance and compliance.

In relation to community workers, it was important to explore the use of personal and professional agency to disrupt dominant discourses which may develop opportunities for change (Morley, 2013b). Allen (2008) discusses the importance of the concept of agency in relation to participants in the research process itself. According to Allen (2008), in her work with young people as participants, it is important to conduct non-exploitative research where the participants can be considered active social agents that occupy a space of a critically reflexive participant, rather than that of a passive subject. The framing of participants in this research as active social agents enabled opportunities of control and resistance to be recognised and teased out. I was interested in how community workers talked about resistance to dominant discourses and how they discussed any existing or potential agency in their work with schools. A focus on resistance and agency promotes discourse to be reconstructed in more enabling and productive ways.

Critical reflection and reflexivity

Critical reflection and reflexivity were key concepts that intertwined throughout my use of reflexive thematic analysis as an analytic tool. I unpack the terms critical reflection and reflexivity because they are often debated, conflated, used interchangeably or interpreted differently (Askeland & Fook, 2009; D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007). The concepts of critical reflection and reflexivity were considered throughout all phases of my research. In Figure 3.1, critical reflection and reflexivity were represented in the central text box as overlapping and being relevant to all aspects of my use of critical social work theory.

As a social worker (and as a community worker prior to that), both critical reflection and reflexivity have been essential characteristics of my professional discipline and practice. Critical reflection and reflexivity have been so embedded in my professional employment, code of ethics, application of practice theories and professional supervision that it indeed felt inevitable that they would play a significant role in my approach to research as well. My employment background has included positions such as youth worker, community worker, program coordinator and educator across community organisations and TAFE settings, all of which have involved engaging with both secondary school students and young people in tertiary education settings throughout South-East Queensland. Each of the positions that I held required me to reflect on my own values, my practice, my theoretical perspectives, self-awareness, making meaning of experiences, critical analysis of experiences and recommendations for improvement. The professional processes of learning from experience were promoted in both my discipline of social work as well as the education settings in which I worked. Reflecting on my own professional background gives me clarity around why these concepts of critical reflection and

reflexivity were so important for me to include in my use of critical social work theory.

As already mentioned, concepts of reflection, critical reflection, reflective practice and reflexivity are often used interchangeably or with unclear meaning attached (Askeland & Fook, 2009; D'Cruz et al., 2007). Different disciplines tend to use variations of these terms, which adds further complexity to the debated meaning and also leads to shifting usage of concepts to be contextually relevant (D'Cruz et al., 2007). I have drawn on understandings of critical reflection and reflexivity from both education and social work research. The concept of reflection can be seen as a way to explore or examine thinking for its underlying foundations and learning from experience (as cited in Askeland & Fook, 2009). The developed concept of reflective practice in professional learning circles - such as formal education settings explored improvements in practice through looking at hidden gaps (Askeland & Fook, 2009). The extended concept of critical reflection means that a deeper level of reflection is explored, looking at making meaning of experiences, hidden assumptions (Askeland & Fook, 2009), analysis of power relations and structures of domination (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Critical reflection increases self-awareness and encourages reflexivity by analysing one's own position within power relations, situations and practices (Askeland & Fook, 2009; Morley & Macfarlane, 2014).

Reflexivity is also a concept with a diversity of meanings and that is taken up from a diverse range of perspectives (Askeland & Fook, 2009). My understanding of reflexivity was informed primarily by social work research, but also by education research. Some common areas of focus for reflexivity include exploring self-awareness about how knowledge is being constructed (Askeland & Fook, 2009; D'Cruz et al., 2007), applying critical thinking skills (Hickson, 2016; Lay &

McGuire, 2010) and identifying how personal values, identities and social status impact on relationships within the research work (Reed, Miller, Nnawulezi, & Valenti, 2012; Yang, 2015). Critical reflexivity involves questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and re-analysing situations with a stance of uncertainty to enable continual self-reflexive learning and new possibilities (Fook, 2016). Pillow (2003) argues that most researchers tend to stick to the safer and less confronting aspects of reflexivity, which is to focus on writing about how social positions contribute to the production of knowledge. In her work, Pillow (2003) suggested that a more in-depth approach to reflexivity is to explore what she refers to as 'uncomfortable reflexivity' which involves the more difficult aspects of confessing complex, conflicted, untidy issues and value-laden struggles that expose personal biases and prejudices. This approach of recognising personal bias in research acknowledges the multiple, varied and contradictory versions of people's understandings that result in different or partial versions (McKenzie, 2005). Fook (2016) also promotes a more complex and deeper level of critical reflection and reflexivity by interrogating implicit values and assumptions through deconstruction and discourse analysis. My research focused on community workers engaging with schools who are often positioned in complex discursive fields. Rossiter (2011) highlighted the need for workers to acknowledge one's own positioning and the connections between discourse to either enable or constrict capacity for work and relationships.

Critical social work theory provided the desired theoretical understandings of critical reflection and reflexivity as general approaches. However, my research also looked to some more in-depth understandings of identity and positioning to provide some even richer insights into reflexivity. It has been argued that to critically explore

constructions of sex, gender and sexuality in research, the researcher first needs to begin with locating themselves within the research space (Allen, 2005). This self-awareness and positionality needs to be carefully considered to avoid some common traps of a researcher claiming to be a self-identified 'insider' or an 'authority' on the research subject (Couture, Zaidi, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2012; Pillow, 2003). An important concept that reflexivity raises is the notion of researcher positioning within what is termed 'insider' research where the researcher identifies with participants based on social status or identity (Couture et al., 2012). The very concept of insider/outsider status is a dichotomy presented as a single social status (Couture et al., 2012). Having to decide between only two opposing options of insider 'or' outsider researcher excludes diverse variations of identity. My research drew upon poststructural and queer theoretical concepts, to help me avoid dichotomous positioning around claims to 'insider/outsider' research positions. I took a stance that attempts to avoid dichotomous thinking and instead recognises the complexity of multiple and intersecting identities for both my own researcher identity as well as participant identities. These intersecting identities would also consider gender, class, age, power, race and other factors that position me in certain ways within my research (Couture et al., 2012). Positioning around 'researcher authority' and the relationship between researcher and participants is also crucial to consider (Pillow, 2003). So, for example, one important question to ask is whether the researcher is conducting research 'with' or 'on' participants. Research 'with' participants allows more opportunity for reciprocity and diverse representations from participants, rather than the more authoritarian approach of researching subjects. Deconstructing these notions of authority and power over participants was an aspect of reflexivity that I

considered throughout my research to ensure I was conducting research 'with' participants.

I drew upon theoretical concepts of critical reflection that enabled me to take a stance as a researcher who researches 'with' participants and acknowledges diverse and intersecting constructions of identity. I used critical reflexivity to reflect on my own values, assumptions and actions throughout the research process in relation to my role as a researcher, how I framed the work that I was doing and any influences or biases that impacted on the project. Critical reflection and reflexivity were intertwined in all aspects of this research project as indicated previously in Figure 3.1.

Reconstruct and transform: reconstructive ideas and transformative practices

Reconstruction occurs after a process of deconstruction of practice in relation to power, knowledge and discourse (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Reconstructing ideas and meanings can lead to affirmation of existing practices or identifying new knowledge or strategies for action and change (Akhter, 2015; Hickson, 2011). These processes of deconstruction and reconstruction were both intertwined with critical reflection and reflexivity (Fook, 2016), as shown in Figure 3.1 at the beginning of this chapter.

Morley & Dunstan (2013) drew on Fook's (2016) process of reconstruction to explore how social work field placement students could construct alternatives to dominant understandings of practice environments, power and discourse. Their research revealed the benefits of using a deconstructive as well as a reconstructive process, particularly in complex or conflictual environments (Morley & Dunstan, 2013). A process of reconstruction that reframes dominant and disempowering understandings of discursive environments may enable issues surrounding differing

disciplines, politics, tensions or different ideologies to transform into active learning opportunities (Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Theorising concepts of reconstruction supported my research by exploring the ways in which community workers can reframe or construct new meanings in their contextualised engagement work with schools that may lead to identifying strategies for transformative practices.

In summary, critical social work theory was chosen as part of my theoretical framework because it resonates with my own professional background as a social worker. The critical nature of enquiry of this theory also works well with my research question around asking what the experiences are of community workers engaging with schools to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. The principles of this theory that were highlighted, included; embracing complexity, deconstruction and reconstruction, challenging and resisting oppressive discourses, critical reflection and reflexivity and transformative possibilities for future change. To enable a more contextual critique and disruption of normalised notions of gender and sexuality, I also drew upon queer theory as an additional layer to my theoretical framework, and I move now to present these elements.

Queer theories

Engaging with queer theories provided my research study with an additional layer of understanding around diverse genders and sexualities in relation to identity politics and deconstructing identity, heteronormative discursive practices and enabled me to reconstruct more diverse understandings of gender and sexuality. Drawing on queer understandings provided my research with additional considerations around theoretical concepts of deconstruction and reconstruction, as follows:

Deconstruction:

- Disrupt the artificiality of gender and sexuality categories
- Deconstruct gender and sexuality binaries
- Consider 'queer' as a verb to support the process of 'queering'
- Critique dominant discourses of normalised gender and sexuality and how they position young people who are gender and sexuality-diverse in education spaces (Fook & Gardner, 2007)

Reconstruction:

- Diverse understandings and representations of gender and sexuality (Levy & Johnson, 2012)
- Acknowledge intersections of identity (Robinson et al., 2014)

The following diagram summarises the conceptual contributions that queer theoretical concepts added to critical social work theory in my theoretical framework. The diagram shows the previously outlined critical social work theory on the left-hand side with the additional concepts from queer theory presented on the right-hand side. Both theories are presented under headings of 'deconstruction' as well as 'reconstruction'. The concept of 'critical reflection and reflexivity' sits in the middle because it applies to both theories and intertwines throughout both deconstruction and reconstruction concepts.

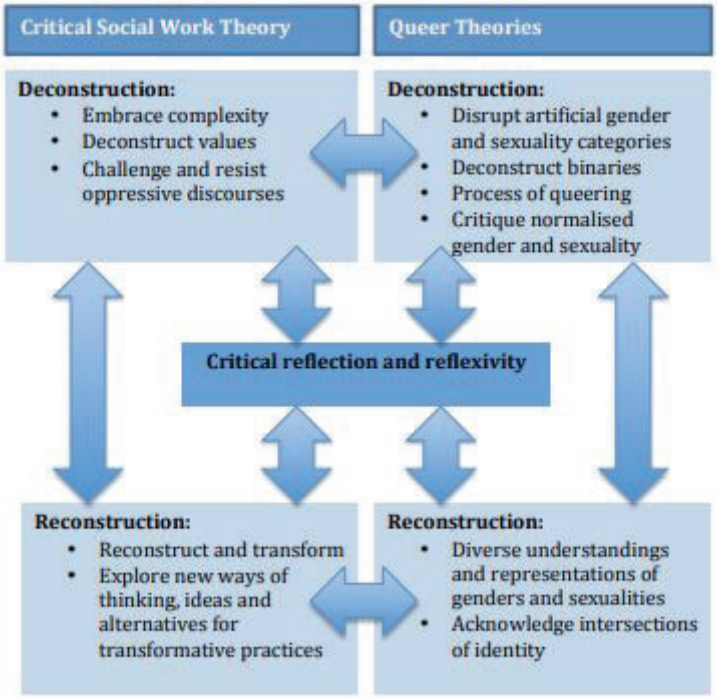

Figure 3.2: *Queer theory contributions to the theoretical framework, adapted from Fook & Gardner (2007)*

Queer theory emerged in the 1990s and is underpinned by ideas that sex/gender and sexuality are perceived as historically constructed ideas that become understood as normative categories and operate in discursive practices (DePalma, 2013). Queer theoretical concepts are inspired by poststructuralism and feminist perspectives which have many intersecting ideas and points of difference that continue to influence each theory in turn (Richardson, 2006). Queer theory argues that understandings of sexuality, gender and identity are socially constructed differently according to time and place and challenges essentialist and heteronormative assumptions about sex/gender and sexuality binaries (Levy & Johnson, 2012). It understands sexuality and gender as fluid, unstable and problematic (Souza et al., 2016). More recently, queer theorists have proposed that queer theories are not only a

theories about queer subjects or sexuality (Greteman, 2014), but that 'queering' invites the changing assemblages of ideas in places and spaces that are not necessarily anticipated (Rasmussen & Allen, 2014). And the term queer can be used in many different ways in relation to different areas as a non-specific area of enquiry (Halperin, 1995). Researchers that use queer theories are prepared to question and broaden their own understandings of conceptualisations of identity through reflexivity (Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010) and to consider how this can be applied in the research context. This questioning, reflexivity and openness to identity constructions and the disruption of heteronormative notions of sexuality and gender is what I aimed to incorporate into my methodological design. The queer theory I take forward, by its very intentions aims to continually reshape, reconsider and disrupt dominant discourses and emerging norms and to reinvent queer practices (Greteman, 2014). The two main theoretical concepts within queer theory that I explored below were the notion of queer identity and sex/gender and sexuality and its performativity.

Queer identities

Queer is not a fixed determinate term (Rasmussen & Allen, 2014) and rather than being just a shortened identity description that stands for all LGBTIQ+ identities, it is a political statement that relies on fluid rather than fixed identity constructions and people may identify as queer to defy the notion of categorisation of their identity (Levy & Johnson, 2012). Queer is also used as a verb to refer to the process of 'queering' or undermining stable positions and to 'queer' something is to question its foundations and to trouble understandings (Levy & Johnson, 2012). Queer theoretical understandings of identity challenge the foundational argument of gay and lesbian politics, which was the idea that marginalised identities (seen as

fixed and stable) came together in unity to represent human rights and legal protections and to be included or valued in society (Jagose, 1996). Queer theories challenge these foundational categories of identity politics due the inevitable exclusion of some identities (such as in this case bisexual and transgender) in representation by unified groups (Jagose, 1996). It is argued that identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory systems even when used by well-intentioned activists for liberatory purposes, such as by gay and lesbian movement over the last few decades of the 20th century (Jagose, 1996). Queer perspectives on sexuality and gender identity are further explored in the following sections.

Sex, gender and sexuality - performativity

The second notion of queer theory that I focused on for my theoretical framework was sex, gender and sexuality and the concept of performativity. Sexuality is constructed in dominant discourse as the assumption that heterosexuality is the default category as a natural occurrence with the typical other option being an oppositional category of homosexuality (Jagose, 1996). These socially constructed binaries do not allow for multiple or diverse sexualities resulting in a heteronormative discourse and social practices (Levy & Johnson, 2012). Foucault (1980) believed that sexuality was a production of networks of power which provided limited options of sexuality identity and that his analysis of sexuality over time showed that sexuality was fluid and constructed differently depending on the social context. In addition to Foucault's (1980) analysis of the historical and social constructions of sexuality, Butler (1993) explored the ways in which sexuality as an identity is performative and how identities are acted out on a daily basis and constituted through heteronormative discursive practices. Queer theory argues that to

explore constructs of sexuality (including heteronormativity) researchers must also discuss the separate but linked construction of sex and gender (DePalma, 2013). Gender is considered in dominant discourses as a natural and inevitable category linked to the assigned biological sex of a baby at birth, so if a baby is assigned to be female then the natural gender is also labelled as female (DePalma, 2013). These essentialist practices of assigning a sex at birth is limited to a particular range of cultural options available, which typically in Western cultures means forcing the biological diversity of sex based on genitalia only, into socially constructed normalised gender categories and this perpetuates oppositional ideals of boy/girl and man/woman (DePalma, 2013). Queering this idea that gender is an expression of natural sex deconstructs the idea of a gender binary and its social construction through normalising discourses (Claire & Alderson, 2013). The categories of sex and gender are produced by what Butler calls the 'heterosexual matrix' where the anatomy of the body categorises individuals as male/masculine or female/feminine identities (Butler, 1993). Gender identities are constructed by discursive norms and performativity affirms the power of the heterosexual matrix, which reproduces binary identities through the repetition of norms (Souza et al., 2016).

Acknowledging the diversity of sex, gender and sexuality is key to queer theories. However, some queer theorists have been critiqued as 'canonising' white foundational researchers while not questioning whiteness within power relations (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). Therefore, racist discourses and white racial privilege must not be unexamined when deconstructing dominant discourses (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). These more recent concerns for queer theories, coined as 'post-queer' theories (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016) or 'after-queer' education research (Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010) include engaging with issues of race, neo-liberal state,

nationalism, austerity, empire and citizenship (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016). The importance of intersections with variables such as ethnicity or cultural factors (Robinson et al., 2014) need to be addressed. An example of acknowledging these intersections is highlighted in Australian research with 'sistergirl' and 'brotherboy' Indigenous transgender communities (Kerry, 2014). This research suggested that Indigenous transgender people were faced with additional challenges such as racism which involved complex matrices of 'difference' that required unique attention to these intersections (Kerry, 2014). Queer theories have also been criticised for not adequately representing diverse gender voices in research fields, as noted by feminist authors in relation to the privileging of male voices for example (Amigot & Pujal, 2009).

Recent research within Australia has found that 'LGBTIQ+' young people often use identity terms interchangeably (Willis, 2012) and there is a trend of young people using more fluid and inconsistent identities (Jones et al., 2016). Butler (1990) contests the truth of gender as a natural category and states that it is a performative effect of reiterated acts within a highly regulatory frame. This recent shift further supports the need for researchers to reconsider the dominant constructs around sexuality and gender identity (as fixed identities) and for future research to continue to draw on queer theory to deconstruct existing understandings and to reconstruct more diverse understandings and representations of young people in research.

Queer theories have added a number of conceptual contributions to my theoretical framework and provided some more depth to understandings of gender and sexuality diversity. Just like critical social work theories these queer understandings, explore concepts around deconstruction and reconstruction. Where critical social work theory tends to focus more on critical reflection, queer theories

tend to focus more on reflexivity of researchers. Queer theory disrupts and critiques normalised discourses surrounding genders and sexualities and critiques artificial categories and binary constructs. Other significant concepts that queer theories added to the theoretical framework were notions of diversity of gender and sexuality identity representations and an acknowledgement of the interplay of intersections of identity.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has foregrounded critical social work theory to provide a theoretical framework that enabled a critique of the experiences of community workers who engage with schools to support gender and sexuality diversity. Critical social work theory provided a lens by which to both deconstruct and reconstruct complex discursive environments, such as community workers engagement with schools. Deconstruction interrogates implicit values and assumptions of dominant knowledge and power relations and acknowledges forms of resistance and agency. Reconstruction provides opportunities to construct new ways of thinking and alternatives for potentially transformative practices. Whilst critical social work theories provided the broad theoretical framework for this research, queer theories have added in-depth insights into particular discourses around identity and the artificiality of gender and sexuality categories and binaries. Queer theories have also contributed to the deconstruction of knowledge in relation to normalised gender and sexuality in education as well as the reconstruction of more diverse understandings and representations of gender and sexuality diversity. Intertwined throughout both sets of understandings was the significance of critical reflection and reflexivity. Recent developments in queer theory surrounding intersectionality and 'queering' of research also provided conceptual considerations for my research

project. Perhaps quite fittingly, as a conclusion for this theoretical chapter and my theoretical framework is the ongoing uncertainty of a finalised theoretical framework, due to ever-evolving ideas provided through critical reflection and reflexivity.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Research Design

The previous chapter explained the theoretical perspectives that have informed this study and chapter four details the methodology and research design of my research project. This chapter begins by outlining the critical methodological approach I took in my research design. By using reflexive thematic analysis to explore the experiences shared by community workers about their engagement with schools, I aimed to translate the critical underpinnings of my theoretical framework into the practicalities of both my research design and method of analysis. The research design section outlines the context of this study (community - school spaces) as experienced by community workers. This section also discussed my use of semi-structured interviews and the significance of using questions that reflected a critical and reflexive approach in my study. A brief overview of reflexive thematic analysis is provided as well as the specific research process I used for analysis in my study. This means that I outline more of the procedural process that I used for my approach to reflexive thematic analysis as a method and then share the application of this method with my specific data in the following analysis chapter. The final section of this chapter discusses some ethical considerations for this study including the use of critical reflection and reflexivity.

A critical methodological design

The design of this study reflects the theoretical underpinnings that influenced and shaped the assumptions and objectives of the research. Critical social work theory informed my interest in exploring the experiences shared by community workers through the deconstruction of assumptions and reconstruction of transformative possibilities. Queer theory shaped my interest in disrupting dominant

constructions of identity and helped me to think about how normative categories operate in discursive practices. Therefore, my chosen methodology and research design needed to reflect the critical stance of my theoretical perspectives when collecting and analysing data. In the following section, I explain what I mean by taking a *critical* stance and describe how I conceptualised this consideration of critical thinking as I engaged in analysing the data.

When I use the term *critical* I am not referring to the common usage meaning negative or to criticise. Instead the term is used to define a process where a researcher critically analyses taken for granted assumptions that are often not challenged (Meyer & Wodak, 2009). It is important to note that having a critical stance is not a position of holding superior ethics or standards, but realising and naming one's own positioning (interests, values, motives) in the very social systems and practices that the research is critiquing (Meyer & Wodak, 2009). I was concerned with concepts that focused on dominant discourses and power relations (Truong, 2015) with social structures and processes that marginalise and oppress. Drawing upon queer theory meant that I also sought to challenge dominant sexuality and gender narratives, heteronormative assumptions and systems of entrenched advantage (Scherer & Ball, 2011). As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) identify, using critical theories often means that there is an underlying transformative agenda within the research, a desire to ask questions about ideological or political power systems at play and a practical goal of improved outcomes. In the case of this study, it meant that there was an underlying goal of drawing on insights from community workers to contribute towards future improvements in community-school interactions, school policies and practices and consequently improved outcomes for the wellbeing of gender and sexuality-diverse young people.

Design of this study

The design section outlines the community worker context of practice with schools and discusses the community workers who were involved in this research project. The qualitative data collection approach and interview questions are also explained as well as the procedures used to collect the data in this section.

Context: community workers in schools

The context of this research was the spaces where community workers interact with secondary schools in Queensland. My research aimed to explore the perspectives of community workers of their interactions and work in secondary school sites by engaging in interviews with some of these community workers. Community workers shared their perspectives about what they believe *works* as they engage in these spaces. Discussions included their perspectives on the enablers and constraints of the work being done by themselves and colleagues. I was interested in the community workers' perspectives on their interactions with schools, which included interactions with the school as an institution and its processes, the school leadership team and individual school staff such as teachers and administration officers. Community workers work in diverse contexts and in diverse ways. For example, some community workers accessed students in school sites while others worked with students in different locations such as at their own organisation or in public spaces. The focus of my research was on community workers' perspectives of their interactions with schools as places where they conduct their work. Community workers often accessed and engaged secondary schools to negotiate their support services with students. In this study I was interested in investigating community workers' perspectives about their interactions with schools in the work that they do and also in how they would report any possible constraints and enablements.

Participants: community workers

Participants in this study were community workers in Queensland who interact with secondary schools to provide support services for gender and sexuality diverse young people. These community workers had a range of different position titles and qualification backgrounds, including, social work, psychology, community work and youth support work. Community workers are typically working in community-based organisations rather than in schools or government departments. Four participants who fitted these characteristics were interviewed. Although this is a small number, the in-depth qualitative analysis reveals valuable insights (Rubin & Babbie, 2016), and the study scope was appropriate to a small Master of Philosophy project conducted by a sole researcher. Community workers were invited to participate if they were currently working as a community worker based in Queensland, and if their role encompassed the support of gender and sexuality diverse young people who attend secondary school. Community workers were selected using purposive sampling. Approach emails were sent to community network email lists and practitioner networks (Hickson, 2016). I emailed contacts I had in the field with a flyer for distribution to other relevant community workers. Community workers who indicated interest were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview, which was conducted in person at a time and location that was convenient to each worker. It is worth noting that there were additional potential participants that had indicated initial interest, but due to time constraints in their work these interviews did not eventuate.

Data collection: semi-structured interviews

As a qualitative study, my research was interested in exploring in-depth the experiences of community workers in relation to the work they do in schools, specifically relating to gender and sexuality diverse young people. The face to face interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed ready for further analysis.

Interviews were semi-structured with an openness of questions which was important as it allowed for rich data and diversified researcher-participant interactions and data possibilities (Mancini, 2011). Semi-structured interviews allowed for more flexibility during the interview as compared to a pre-set interview guide, and enabled the participant to focus their conversation on issues they deemed as important (Brinkmann, 2014). Both my theoretical underpinnings (critical social work theory and queer theory) and my analysis framework (reflexive thematic analysis) influenced my decision to include both deconstructive and reconstructive questions within the semi-structured interviews. This deliberate choice allowed me to understand the hidden assumptions, power relations and constraints within these relationships, as well as the transformative possibilities for emancipatory practices. The interviews lasted between 25 and 49 minutes and included prompting questions of both a deconstructive and reconstructive nature.

Below are some examples of questions that were asked throughout the interviews that were shaped by my theoretical influences, and particularly Fook and Gardner's (2007) concepts around deconstructive-reconstructive processes of critical reflection and reflexivity. While the interviews progressed as conversations some of the questions included:

- In the context of supporting gender & sexuality-diverse young people, what is it like working with schools?
- In your experience, how do schools support or work with gender and sexuality-diverse young people? And in your organisation?
- What are the sorts of things that enable or constrain you to work with schools, for the benefit of gender and sexuality-diverse young people?

- How have these changed over time?
- Do you think your own views, beliefs, identity or values impact on your engagement with schools?
- Describe what sort of work you do and how you do it?
- Do you think there are any ways that things could work better for community workers? For schools? For gender and sexuality-diverse young people?
- Do you use critical reflection and/or reflexivity in your work with schools? If so, how?

Procedures

The overall research design, data collection and analysis were structured by the following stages and procedures outlined in Table 4.1. It was necessary to include substantial time for critically reflective and reflexive analysis throughout the research design phase so that when I approached the analysis of data, I had already been considering critical and reflexive framings of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Stage	Research design and methodology process
Stage 1	Recruitment of participants
Stage 2	Conducted semi-structured interviews
Stage 3	Critical reflection journal notes after each interview
Stage 4	Transcribed interviews
Stage 5	Analysis of text, applied reflexive thematic analysis
Stage 6	Critical reflection and reflexivity of analysis process
Stage 7	Writing of analysis and discussion chapter

Table 4.1: *Research design and methodology process*

Methodology

In this section, firstly I explain my use of reflexive thematic analysis as my method for a qualitative analysis of the transcribed interviews and how this analytic approach was informed by my theoretical perspectives (critical social work theory and queer theory). I then outline the specific analytic process that I used to actively engage with the data to interpret meaning which follow the procedures set out by Braun and Clarke (2019). I outline the overall process of analysis that I applied and then I will reveal the data analysis in the following chapter. The final section of this chapter discusses some ethical considerations throughout the various stages of data collection and analysis.

Reflexive thematic analysis

I have selected reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data produced in this study for various reasons. Reflexive thematic analysis is a more recent articulation by Braun and Clarke (2019) that builds upon their earlier thematic analysis work (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis seeks to clarify concepts around theoretical transparency, qualitative sensibility and reflexive procedures (2019) which they suggest their earlier work took for granted. The analytic process I used was based on Braun & Clarke's (2006) six phase approach and also reflects Braun & Clarke's (2019) recent revisions of their phrasing and conceptualisations to incorporate a more reflexive approach to thematic analysis.

Reflexive thematic analysis offers flexibility in relation to the researcher's chosen theoretical framework and has an ability to use a small sample size such as is evident in my study. The reflexive thematic analysis also has qualitative assumptions and enabled an exploratory approach that worked well with my critical and reflective framework (Clarke & Braun, 2017). I was drawn to reflexive thematic analysis because it made explicit the role that language plays in maintaining power and social relations, but it also foregrounds the transformative opportunities in practice contexts. Reflexive thematic analysis as an approach to analysis worked well with my use of critical social work theory and queer theory which enabled me to embrace post-structural traditions of opposing binary divisions between theory and methodology and acknowledging multiple interpretations (Luke, 1995) as well as always considering researcher subjectivity and reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Fook & Gardner, 2007). My use of reflexive thematic analysis attempted to avoid some of the common methodological traps of other approaches to thematic analysis

such as the tendencies to under-analyse, over-quote and to simply summarise the content of the data produced with my participants (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Reflexive thematic analysis provides a method for "identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p297). As a method it is theoretically flexible and can be applied across a range of different research paradigms and theoretical frameworks (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Theoretical flexibility does not mean that reflexive thematic analysis is homogenous or can be used without clear theoretical underpinnings. In fact, this approach requires researchers to clearly articulate the theory that informs their specific use of reflexive thematic analysis. Braun & Clarke (2019) recently reflected on their earlier work with thematic analysis published in 2006, and concluded that this earlier work made assumptions that researchers would just "get it" and share the same qualitative values and educational understanding of critical and reflexive approaches as the author did. However, the foundational work in thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) around flexibility and the organic nature of thematic analysis as a method was misunderstood by some researchers (Fugard & Potts, 2015) and therefore was used with quantitative logic which contradicted the intended use of thematic analysis as exploratory and having 'qualitative sensibility' (Braun & Clarke, 2016). What emerged from these types of misunderstandings of Braun and Clarke's (2006) intended qualitative approach to thematic analysis were problematic approaches that used (post) positivist frameworks with quantitative methods that were not at all qualitative or exploratory in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In recent work Braun and Clarke (2019) articulate the three main types of thematic analysis, which include an approach using reflexive thematic analysis, codebook approaches and coding reliability. Codebook approaches use approaches such as framework

analysis, template analysis and matrix analysis (see Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; King & Brooks, 2017; Miles & Huberman, 1994), that conceptualise themes as analytic inputs and domain summaries with use of structured codebooks (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Coding reliability approaches (see Boyatzis, 1998 and Guest et al., 2012) are concerned with the measurement of accuracy and reliability of coding, the calculation of inter-rater reliability scores and multiple independent coders (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

In contrast, within reflexive thematic analysis there is flexibility to consider different methods of reasoning in the analytic process. For example, approaches may have an inductive and/or deductive reasoning (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Analysis may also have a semantic approach to highlight explicit topics or features and/or a latent approach that explores underlying features in the coding. There may also be an essentialist or constructionist (or critical) framing (Braun & Clarke, 2019). My approach to reflexive thematic analysis has a critical framing that will draw upon both inductive and deductive reasoning as well as semantic and latent coding. In my analysis, a deductive method of reasoning produces codes derived from the theory, the research questions and the aims, followed by an inductive method of reasoning that produces codes derived from the data itself (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Swain, 2018).

My theoretical framework built on understandings of critical social work theory and queer theory, informed my desire to ensure analysis beyond description and summary. I wanted to bring a critical, qualitative and reflective approach to the forefront with an aim of subjective interpretations and meaning-making (Clarke & Braun, 2018). The very process of interpretation and making meaning out of selected data involves myself as the researcher playing an active role in creating and

constructing the analysis, which reflects my theory, research questions and aims of my research (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

Stages of reflexive thematic analysis

My analytic process is based on Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) six phase approach to thematic analysis, with an intentional reflexive approach throughout the phases. On the day of each interview conducted, I made notes as part of a critical reflection journal, which I briefly outline before moving to detail the first analytic phase. These stages are described below.

Initial critical reflection journal notes

I conducted four qualitative interviews with community workers who interacted with secondary schools as a part of their work with sexuality and gender diverse young people. The interviews were conducted in an informal, conversational manner to allow participants to share their experiences and stories and to potentially include discussions of issues that I did not anticipate. This was the reason why including an inductive approach to analysis as part of the process was important. Immediately following each interview, I wrote journal-style notes of my initial thoughts of the interview. My notes included any interesting observations about the interview (latent and semantic), reflections about the environmental context of the community organisation, reflected on my own assumptions and feelings during and after the interview and any initial thoughts about the correlation of the data collected and my theoretical framings that informed my research in this space.

Phase 1: Data familiarisation

The first step in my analytic process was to become familiar with the data that I had collected. This involved reading my journal notes again as well as

immersing myself in the audio-recorded interviews, transcribing the audio recordings, listening to the audio-recordings multiple times, reading the transcriptions multiple times and making further notes. Making notes involved highlighting key words on my hard copy printed transcriptions and writing comments about any initial thoughts. Becoming familiar with the data was starting the process of reading my data beyond the surface meaning of words and required me to ask questions, make comparisons, consider missing information, consider assumptions and constantly reflecting on my theoretical perspective and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Phase 2: Generation of initial codes

The data needed to be organised in a systematic and meaningful way to show interesting features (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second phase of the process firstly involved deductive coding, which meant looking at each of my interview questions (which were aligned with my research question and theoretical framework) and making notes on each transcript of initial deductive codes. These deductive codes were then summarised onto a code list. Additional codes were then added to this list of codes through inductive coding. Inductive coding involved looking at each interview transcript for interesting features and topics that were shared by participants. Each inductive code was also highlighted and/or noted in the transcript and then later added to a summary list of inductive codes.

The influence of critical social work theory and queer theory support non-dichotomous thinking and an emphasis on not making assumptions about knowledge production or rigid processes, which led me to incorporate both deductive and inductive reasoning in this phase. As mentioned, the research questions and

theoretical framework produced the initial codes from the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I developed codes associated with a combination of key theoretical concepts and codes associated with my research questions into a word document table, with these initial codes in the left column. I then pasted each participant's responses that related to these codes into a table. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms created for each person and in the extracts of the interview they are referred to by the first initial of their pseudonym. In the extract of the interview I am referred to with the first letter of my name, "E" to show interviewer extracts. See an example of this process in Table 4.2 below.

Deductive codes	Extracts of data from interviews
Constructions of gender & sexuality	***Riley (interview 1)*** R: "and teaching people about pronouns it's so simple" E: "yeah" R: "but yeah it's something that's not often done" E: "I'm starting to see that on websites now" R: "that's changing a little bit now" E: "with staff and yeah their preferred pronouns" R: "yeah which is really really cool so yeah" ***Frankie (interview 2)*** E: "yeah so that's a standard question for an intake formal process" F: "It is yeah so we'll always ask about um relationships I guess everyone probably has their own approach" E: "yeah" F: "about how it comes up but normally we gonna ask about relationships so ask in a non-gendered way um and then that kinda can lead into those aspects [pause] a lot of the time if they are gender diverse themselves um we might already know that from the referral"

Table 4.2: *Example of initial deductive coding process*

Once my deductive coding was complete, a number of initial codes emerged. The second part of my initial coding process used inductive reasoning to identify interesting words and features of the data that was a mix of semantic (descriptive of content) and latent (interpretative) codes which were noted systematically across the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process added some additional codes to the list of codes produced as a result of the deductive reasoning exercise. Inductive coding also involved me pasting codes onto a table. I worked through one interview at a time and generated codes from words, concepts or features mapped to the research questions in the transcript, with these initial codes noted in a word document table, in the left column. As I went through the interview transcripts I either added a new code if needed or added the participant's data extract to an existing code, always naming the participants by their pseudonym. See an example of this inductive process in Table 4.3 below.

Inductive codes	Extracts of data from interviews
Relationship with schools	***Jenny (interview 3)*** J: "yeah we've got a really great relationship with the majority of the schools" J: "so it's a kind of holistic approach um and we do that quite a lot especially at X high school and Y high school um because they've got you know school-based police officers so I feel like we all work really closely in those schools" ***Alison (interview 4)*** A: "I'm not sure if my role is as valued clearly as a guidance officer's role otherwise we would get paid the same [laughs] but um the role itself doesn't have the accountability and the um you know they are all about child protection as well so you know but I think the personal relationships it does help having those relationships with some of the staff there"

Table 4.3: *Example of initial inductive coding process*

Phase 3: Developing themes

In this phase, I focused on collating all coded data and developing preliminary themes that represented a pattern or meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Consistent with my theoretical framework and my research question, this process was very much an active, iterative process of constructing themes rather than 'discovering' themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Visual tools were helpful in this phase to explore themes and relationships between themes (similarities and overlaps) and included hand-written pieces of paper being moved around, tables of tentative themes and mind-maps being used to explore theme generation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial thematic map is shown in Figure 4.1 below.

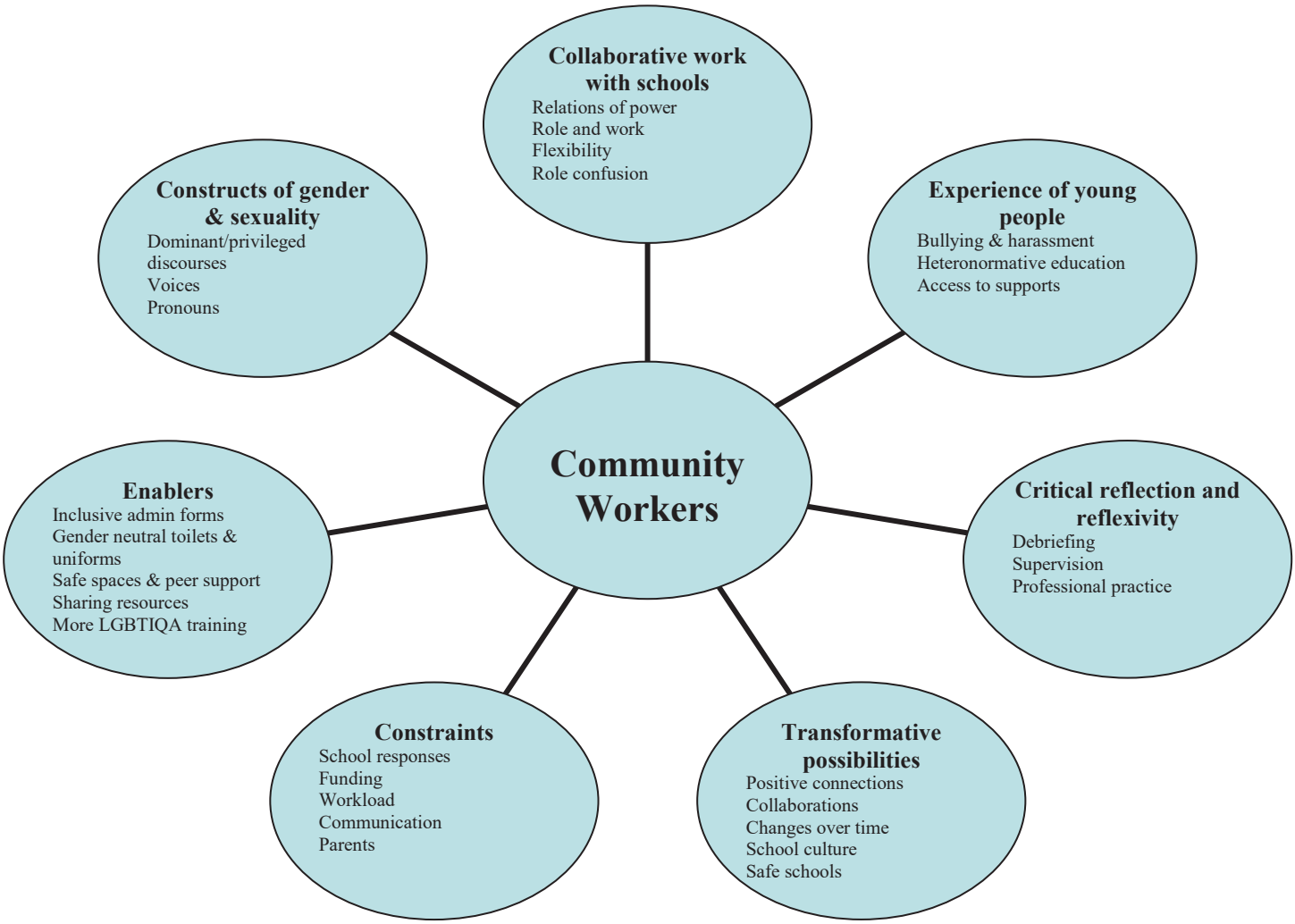

Figure 4.1: *Initial thematic map*

As previously mentioned, my development of themes attempted to avoid some of the common traps that Braun and Clarke (2019) caution against, such as avoiding simply having domain summary themes around shared topics.

Phase 4: Reviewing of themes

Phase 4 involved refining themes by going back through and checking the tentative themes against the coded extracts of data to consider if these still worked as a meaningful pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this review phase, some themes appeared problematic and at this stage I was involved in developing a new theme as well as removing a theme until there was a coherent set of themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The next part of this stage involved reviewing individual themes in the context of the entire data set as a thematic map to ensure the themes were meaningful and worked across the whole data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The final thematic map is shown in Figure 4.2 below and shows how the initial number of themes was revised down into three main final themes and related sub-themes.

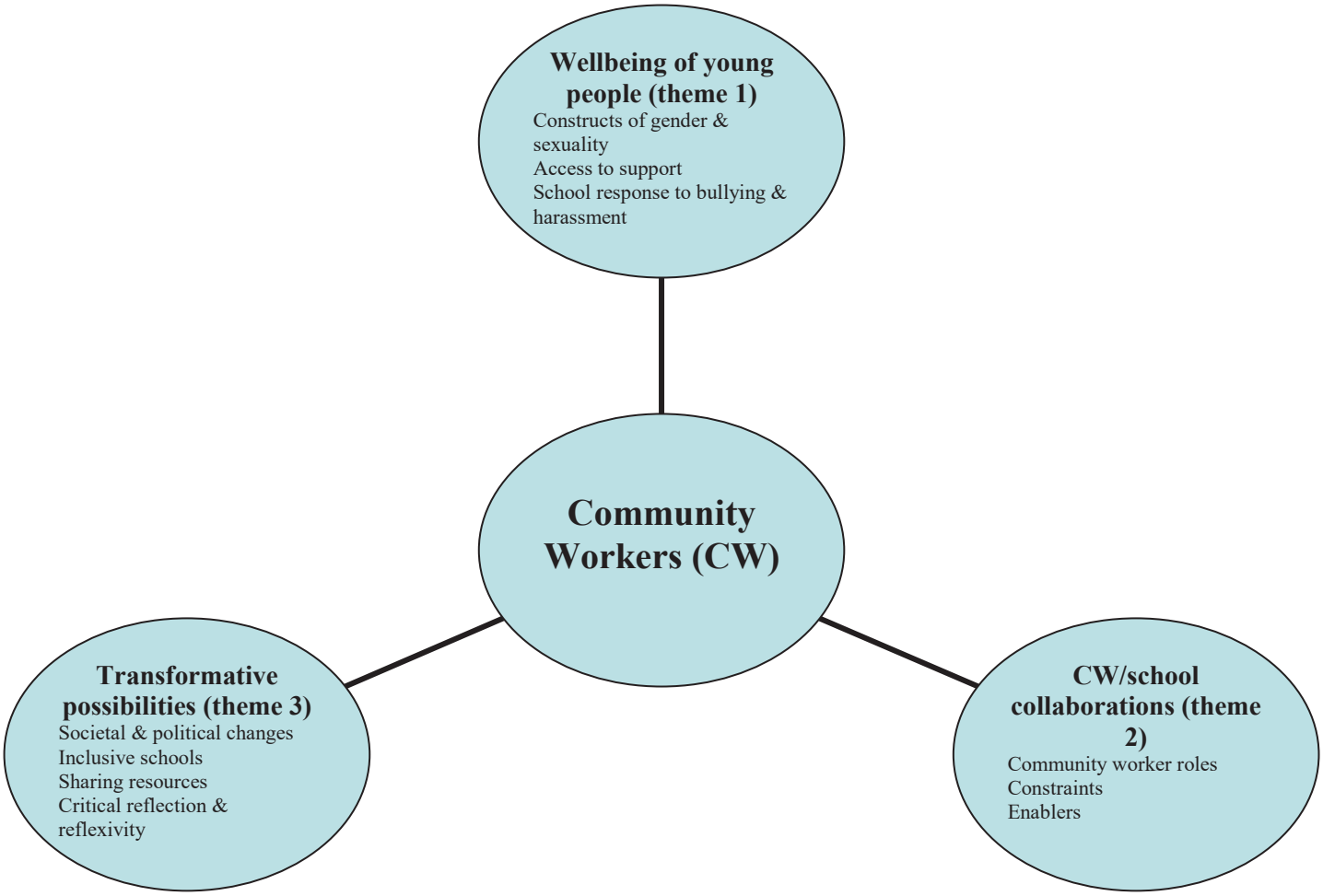

Figure 4.2: *Final thematic map*

A reflexive approach was taken here to consider my own subjective positioning in relation to the choices I actively made around the development of these themes and the way that I made sense of the data to construct coherent patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Swain, 2018; Wong & Ussher, 2009).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Phase 5 involved the refinement of the themes and being able to clearly describe what each theme was about individually and without overlap or repetitiveness with other themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Each theme needed to have a distinct focus and capture important aspects of the data which addressed both inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning related to my research questions and aim (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Analysis in this phase involved collating the data extracts within each theme, organising these into a coherent account that explains what was of interest and why (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and constructing a coherent analytic narrative (Clarke, Braun & Wooles, 2015). Analysis also involved selecting extracts to quote and interpreting these against the research questions and broader conceptual framework (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Phase 6: Producing the report

Phase 6 was the final phase of analysis and involved writing up of the analytic work that tells a story of my interpretation of the data within and across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In qualitative analysis this stage is very closely tied in with the previous stages and therefore the writing up of the analysis needs to provide enough data extracts that are "embedded within an analytic narrative that compellingly illustrates the story you are telling about your data, and your analytic narrative needs to go beyond description of the data, and make an argument in relation to your research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93). Therefore, careful selection of extracts was conducted to make meaning and to construct a coherent argument from the data.

Critical reflection and reflexivity

Critical reflection and reflexivity were recursive and occurred throughout all phases of my analytic journey. I incorporated this part of my analytic process alongside my six analytic phases, to encourage myself to actively go back through my analytic narrative to reflect on and articulate how my theoretical framework influenced my interpretations of the data, how my analysis responded to my research question and also how my own positioning influenced my constructed arguments. Whilst critical reflection and reflexivity was philosophically assumed to be done throughout the analytic work by Braun & Clarke (2006) and in their later work better articulated (2019), I felt as though it was important for me to explicitly outline exactly how this layer of analysis was being driven by my theoretical framework.

My theoretical framework was based on understandings from critical social work theory and queer theory, and as such both of these ways of thinking informed my methodological approach, so for me, the types of questions that I wanted to reflect upon as part of my methodology and analysis included:

- How are gender and sexuality diverse young people constructed and positioned, school staff and community workers? Which discourses are naturalised and privileged? (Claire & Alderson, 2013)
- What structures or social practices contribute to oppression or abuse of power? (Cover, Rasmussen, Aggleton, & Marshall, 2017)
- What are some of the enablements & constraints when engaging with schools?
- What are some of the socio-historical context conditions?

- How do participants understand critical reflection and reflexivity in relation to their practice?
- How might power serve as resistance or agency for community workers and schools?
- How could gender and sexuality diverse young people be more positively framed or represented?
- What could support emancipatory or transformative practices? (Hickson, 2011)
- Can we learn from critical reflection and reflexivity practices for future research and/or practice contexts? (Fook & Gardner, 2007)

Critical reflection was incorporated into my methodological technique to deepen an understanding of the main issues of interest (Hickson, 2016). Critical reflection can be used in diverse ways, either as a framework for research or to supplement other approaches. I used a critical reflection process throughout the reflexive thematic analysis, as well as more broadly throughout my analytic thinking. I was specifically guided by Fook and Gardner's (2007) two stage model of deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge, power, assumptions and discursive practices, using it as an analytic process. This critical reflection *model* is often used as an educational tool (Morley, 2013a) in the context of responding to critical incidents or in supervision sessions to reflect on practice to enable practitioners to seek new understandings of practice and new possibilities for empowerment and agency (Hickson, 2011). Fook and Gardner (2007) describe critical reflection as "a method or process for thinking in a particular way" (2009, p. 67) which involves "both

analysis and action – changed awareness that leads to changed practices" (2007, p. 67). In Fook and Gardner's (2007) model, there are two 'stages' which are generally facilitated in learning groups or small group supervision contexts. 'Stage 1' which examines implicit assumptions, values and beliefs and is designed to unsettle and create awareness of practices and 'Stage 2' which involves reflections designed to create new ideas and changed practices.

I adapted this critical reflection model intended for practice groups to a process of thinking for use alongside my reflexive thematic analysis. This critical reflection process encouraged me to bring my analysis back to my theory informing my interest in deconstructing assumptions, exploring power relations, reflecting on discursive practices and to seek new possibilities of transformative practices towards change. My adaptation of Fook and Gardner's (2007) critical reflection model formed the following analytic considerations as part of all stages of the reflexive thematic analysis:

1. Deconstruction - explore experiences of participants to interrogate the construction of knowledge, power relations and discursive practices. This stage of the critical reflection seeks to make explicit the underlying structural and social assumptions and taken for granted knowledge. Deconstruction of language/discourse and meaning will also disrupt assumptions. An awareness of the tendency for dichotomous thinking with binary opposites is important to consider, as well some of the missing constructions or themes. Awareness of reflexive positioning is also an important aspect of the deconstructive process for both participant and researcher.
2. Reconstruction – involves reconstructing practice experiences to affirm or seek out new ways of understanding discourse, power and practices to enable

> the participant's own agency to be used for emancipatory practices. Reconstruction often reveals missing themes, voices or perspectives to think differently and do things differently. Participants may reflect on new or desired practices, processes, strategies or relationships that could provide opportunities for agency or transforming their practices.

Critical reflection and reflexivity are both important processes that are woven throughout both the deconstructive and reconstructive questions of the analysis. While critical reflection is most often used as a process useful for practitioners in social work, it is also very useful as a research technique. Beres, Bowles & Fook (2011, p. 86) define critical reflection as:

> "making meaning from experience through a process of unearthing assumptions, particularly fundamental assumptions about power".

An important component of a critically reflective process is 'reflexivity' which focuses on the researcher's own social location and understanding one's own self in relation to others (Béres et al., 2011). Reflexivity may be explored in both the research design phase and the analysis phase of the study. I incorporated the concept of reflexivity into my research project in a number of ways, including, inclusion in the participant interview questions, and as an important part of my reflexive thematic analysis process.

The following table provides a brief overview of the stages of analysis that I used for my reflexive thematic analysis approach, as described in the above section.

Stage of Analysis	Key features
Initial critical reflection journal notes	Journal-style notes following each interview (latent and semantic)
Phase 1: Data familiarisation	Listening to interviews again and reading transcriptions multiple times, adding to the reflective notes above
Phase 2: Generation of initial codes	Deductive coding and inductive coding
Phase 3: Developing themes	Tentative themes explored, visual tools used
Phase 4: Reviewing of themes	Checking tentative themes against coded extracts, coherent patterns of meaning
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	Refinement of themes to ensure each has a distinct focus and is not simply descriptive but also addresses research questions by constructing a coherent analytic narrative (Clarke, Braun & Wooles, 2015)
Phase 6: Producing the report	Extracts of data embedded in my narrative to result in the writing up of a compelling analytic story (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Critical reflection and reflexivity	Influenced by my theoretical framework, and in particular critical social work theory by Fook and Gardner's (2007) model of critical reflection, which included stages of deconstruction and reconstruction

Table 4.4: *Stages of reflexive thematic analysis*

Ethics

An important ethical consideration in this research was the need for respect and dignity of participants due to the responsibility of researching human experiences with sensitivity (Ferguson, 2013). I followed the ethical principles set out for researchers in the national statement of ethical conduct in human research (NHMRC, 2018), where section 1.8 outlines principles of integrity, respect for persons, justice and beneficence. I also adhered to ethical principles outlined by my

professional body, the Australian Association of Social Workers and their *Code of Ethics 2010* and *Practice Standards for Social Workers* (section 4.3 relating to research) which include the underpinning values of respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity (AASW, 2017).

Researcher positionality and reflexivity were crucial ethical considerations in this study and were considered in the analysis of the data. As one researcher, I captured one of many possible interpretations of this qualitative study, at one point in time, all of which was influenced by my own world view and multiple identities, theoretical perspectives, positionality and analytic methods. My use of reflexive thematic analysis inevitably and intentionally reflects my subjective experiences and takes a position that has a focus on social groups who experience marginalisation (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Mearns, 2014). Reflexive thematic analysis as my chosen method of analysis sought to create awareness of my own values, ethics, positioning and practices with the aim of being self-reflexive (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Ferguson (2013) notes caution and ethical considerations around reporting any finality in qualitative studies because there will always be missing perspectives and the research can never really be considered complete.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I have outlined the critical methodological stance adopted when exploring the experiences shared by community workers about their interactions with secondary schools, in relation to gender and sexuality diverse young people. The research design section explained that the contextualised focus was on community workers' perspectives around their everyday interactions with secondary schools in Queensland, in relation to gender and sexuality diverse young people. Four participants were recruited in this small qualitative study. Reflexive thematic analysis

based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases for analysis were used to describe, interpret and explain the discursive practices shared by participants in the interviews conducted. I also described specifically how I incorporated a process of critical reflection and reflexivity throughout the analytic process. The final section shared some ethical considerations throughout the various stages of data collection and analysis. Upon reflection, it was during the writing of the methodology and research design chapter where I was starting to have a heightened realisation of the depth of the way critical reflection and reflexivity was already shaping the decisions and interpretations of the data and the way the research project was being actively constructed.

Chapter 5: Analysis

This research project has explored community workers' perspectives around their everyday interactions with secondary schools in Queensland, in relation to gender and sexuality diverse young people. To be able to improve the wellbeing of young people it is critical to identify some of the challenges and enablers in this collaborative work. After unpacking some of the community worker reports of their experiences, the remainder of the analysis chapter looks towards some possibilities for transformative practices. I provide a reflexive thematic analysis that is based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six phases for analysis. In the chapter that follows I discuss, interpret and evaluate the data collected by interviewing four community workers in Queensland who work with secondary schools to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. In the previous chapter I outlined the procedural steps involved in each of the six phases of the analytic process and explained my particular approach for each phase. The structure of this chapter presents the findings organised by the themes of this analysis. I have chosen to include details of the results and discussion sections of the project, alongside my analysis to reflect the qualitative nature of my particular approach to thematic analysis. The discussion has attempted to highlight connections between the data, my research questions, the literature review and areas of interest linked to my theoretical framework, where I have drawn on both critical social work theory and queer theory to help provide insight on the important issue of how community workers engage with schools.

The three themes that were developed through this analytic process were largely congruent with my research questions, literature review and theoretical framework. Considering the nature of reflexive thematic analysis, it is not surprising

that my subjective understanding and meaning making processes were highly influenced by my research questions and theoretical underpinnings. Predictably, I made sense of my data with the filter of these influences. However, I was surprised that the inductive coding in my analytic process did not stray further from my deductive coding and analysis. Part of this will have resulted from the fact that my deductively derived interview questions, although open-ended to promote inductive data, obviously did limit the type of responses received in the interviews. Upon reflection, the interview questions could have been constructed with more open-ended questions to promote a broader scope. It would also have been useful to include interview questions around the strengths-based work that community workers were already engaged in in order to produce data on the transformative work that community workers are involved in. The final three themes that were taken forward were developed using an analytic process based on Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) six phase approach to thematic analysis. The final themes were Theme 1: the wellbeing of young people; Theme 2: community worker – school collaboration and Theme 3: critical reflection. The remainder of this chapter details each of the three themes with discussions to make sense of the varied stories and experiences shared by the four community workers.

Wellbeing of young people (Theme 1)

The purpose of this research project was to explore community workers' reports of experiences in their work with schools with the underlying aim of improving the wellbeing of sexuality and gender diverse young people. It is important to hear how community workers talk about wellbeing in the context of support services, how sexuality and gender is constructed in schools and school responses to issues of bullying and harassment. The primary reason for community

workers to engage with schools is to provide support to young people. In the case of my research, the community workers were engaging with schools to better support young people who identify with diverse gender and/or sexuality. Considering the absence of young people's voices in my research project, I was particularly interested to hear from the community workers about their perceptions of the wellbeing of these young people. Theme 1 explores three sub-themes, which include: the ways in which the community workers talked about how gender and sexuality diversity is constructed; young people's access to support services, and school responses to bullying and harassment.

Constructions of gender and sexuality

The wellbeing of sexuality and gender diverse young people in schools is shaped by many factors, including the dominant discourses and constructions of sexuality and gender and how these impact on schooling experiences. How community workers talk about their interactions with school staff gives some indication of what young people may experience in relation to language, experiences and constructions of gender and sexuality in their schooling experiences.

Each community worker in this study used different language and terminology around how they named and described young people that identify with diverse genders and sexualities. As an example, the following labels were used within the community workers' talk about the diverse genders and sexualities young people who they supported: LGBT; LGBTI; LGBTIQ; LGBTIQ+; LGBTIQAP+; sexuality and gender diversity; same-sex and trans; and queer. These differences were not only between each participant but in many cases the same participant would use differing language within the one interview. For example, one participant used the term *LGBTIQAP+* at one point in their interview and later used the terms *gender diversity*

and *different sexualities.* This reflects queer theory literature that supports the idea that people often use these terms interchangeably and tentatively (Falconer & Taylor, 2017). This different and frequently changing terminologies in the community worker interviews as well as in literature reflects the changing nature of how we construct gender and sexuality and how workers can at times be unsure of which language to use.

How gender and sexuality is named and constructed translates to practice in school spaces and in community support services. One example of the significance of these constructions is with gender identity and pronouns. In one interview, the participant described the importance of the first point of contact for young people at schools and other services and the impact this has on their level of engagement and wellbeing:

Extract 5.1

> *Gatekeeping issues…people I think overlook that they go for the broader stuff and they don't look at that first point of contact and how negative your experience can be…we find that a lot of our young people that we speak with it's the same thing if they access a service and they walk in they're mis-gendered straight away or on the phone ringing up and they say yes sir if someone sounds masculine they go nah and they hang up and they'll not engage in that service … teaching people about pronouns it's so simple….but yeah it's something that's not often done.*
>
> *(Riley – interview with Emma at community organisation).*

In Extract 5.1, Riley discusses how the instance of workers mis-gendering young people is a common issue. In practice this can be taken up by a young person

as people wanting to force identity into categories rather than allowing for diverse constructions of gender (DePalma, 2013). Queer theories support the notion that constructions of gender and sexuality need to be fluid and multiple (Carastathis, 2016). So as Riley explains these practices of mis-gendering can result in young people disengaging from the service that they had approached for support – saying *nah* as they hang up. Obviously, this impacts on the service supports available for young people and can have implications for their wellbeing.

Another issue that one participant noted related to the wellbeing of sexuality and gender diverse young people in general was with parents or carers and their willingness to learn how to provide effective support:

Extract 5.2

> *I suppose parents is the biggest barrier one that I come up against um if parents aren't supportive or open to upskilling their knowledge around gender and sexuality issues then that can be quite a barrier ... probably the biggest challenge.*
>
> *(Frankie – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Although this study did not intend to focus on parents or family support, it is a significant factor to highlight, because if there is a lack of support from families, then the impact on sexuality and gender diverse young people could potentially be problematic in many areas of wellbeing. Lack of family support is one of many contributing factors to health disparities, including mental health and substance misuse, when comparing sexuality and gender diverse young people to their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Leonard et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2015). So, if lack of family support has a negative impact on wellbeing for young people, positive

family support can make a difference for young people. The positive difference could potentially be around access to support services or could be around positive constructions of gender and sexuality diversity.

Access to support: the challenges

An important contributing factor for the wellbeing of sexuality and gender diverse young people is access to appropriate support services to meet their needs. Sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people may access support at school from one or more of the school support team members, these include people in roles such as Guidance Officer, School Based Youth Health Nurse, School Based Police Officer, and more recently Chaplains. At times and in some contexts, other relevant school support workers and community workers are available as well. Referrals to community workers often come via a school support team but sometimes self-referrals by young people directly to the community organisation are also a possibility. The community workers interviewed in this study described a situation where the worker who was assigned the case seems to depend on the school and the scope of the community worker role enabled in that role by the school. One community worker who tends to support lots of young people living independently to remain engaged at school, described the process of referral decisions:

Extract 5.3

> *so if it's specifically around that it would probably come to me but if it's related directly to how they identify then it's something like that then I'd say the guidance officer would probably take that on.*
>
> *(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

The practice of guidance officers taking on the support role around sexual or gender identity wasn't echoed in other participant interviews. This suggests that different schools provide different school support teams, who in turn operate differently in different school settings. Consequently, young people in different schools have different access to support services, which in turn may impact on their opportunities for wellbeing.

While there is a possibility for young people to self-refer, this can be difficult for sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people, with many not knowing about the services that are available to them. One participant discussed these difficulties, that begin with knowing who they can access and the worry of whether the support they manage to gain will be framed as inclusive:

Extract 5.4

> *I just think just making sure everybody is aware upon first engaging with the school that there is that person they can go to if they want to talk about something coz I've had kids talk to me and say I don't even know where the school health nurse is or I don't know where the school counsellor is or whether they're going to like be friendly or not I think also if workers introduce themselves saying hi my name's this ... these are my pronouns and like that demonstrates straight away that you have a knowledge of what a pronoun is you might actually be gender diverse friendly.*
>
> *(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

So, pronouns were mentioned as a signifier of inclusive practice – *gender diverse friendliness* to take Riley's lead. A similar level of confusion for young

people and details of them not being sure about who to access in terms of the various roles amongst the support team staff was echoed by Alison as detailed in Extract 5.5:

Extract 5.5

> *sometimes people just see you and go oh you're the guidance officer or the nurse so they kind of put us altogether a little bit so it's about standing out and saying okay well you know I work for a community service outside of the school…we all operate a bit differently I guess it's just them choosing who they feel comfortable talking to so.*
>
> *(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

The above examples reflect the uncertainty of young people knowing where to go for support and how to choose an appropriate support person at school. This demonstrates that there is room for improvement with the coordination and promotion of supports within the school. Research suggests the importance of providing specialised support services for sexuality and gender diverse young people (in addition to general school support strategies), rather than having a generalist support strategy for all young people, such as that which can be provided by guidance officers (Hillier et al., 2010, Perales, 2016). If school support staff, such as guidance officers, are supporting young people around issues of identity, it is important to question their training and experience in sexuality and gender diversity needs and to expect that they critically reflect on their own constructions of gender and sexuality. Without this critical reflection, school support staff could be

reinforcing dominant, heteronormative discourses that may have further negative impacts on young peoples' mental health and wellbeing (Anderson, Georgantis, & Kapelles, 2017).

Most community workers in this study reflected on the increase in referrals they had experienced in recent years from schools and from young people themselves. One community worker described a specific trend and demand in their service delivery around gender identity and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD):

Extract 5.6

> *there's probably been a bigger increase in gender diverse young people than sexuality diverse young people that initially we had … us and um government services as well have said that they see similar with massive increases with trans presentations … it's like a really high prevalence of co-morbid ASD and trans kids and how to best support them … especially when they're younger um and my concern is that young ASD kids who struggle with their identity formation communication and fitting in as we know might be accidentally sort of encouraged towards identifying transgender.*
>
> *(Frankie – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

The concern expressed by Frankie of finding a balance between supporting young people with their gender identities and the caution around providing developmentally appropriate interventions is a significant practice issue with limited guidelines for workers to draw upon. This issue raises a familiar tension in this research and practice space around how we as practitioners and researchers are positioning young people. Queer theory has explored notions of positioning sexuality and gender diverse young people within discourses of 'woundedness' or 'victim

status' (Allen, 2015a: Harwood & Rasmussen, 2004) by schools and broader societal discourses. Furthermore, research shows that young people with intersections of sexuality and gender diversity and who are on the autism spectrum have higher risks of negative schooling experiences that highlight the need for school support practices to change (Gutmann & Lindstrom, 2015). Whilst research has been increasingly interested in this particular intersection of autism spectrum and sexuality and gender (Hillier, Gallop, Mendes, Tellez, Buckingham, Nizami, O'Toole, 2019), there are still gaps in this research space and what research there is out there is clearly not translating into accessible practice guidelines for workers on the ground such as Frankie.

Another challenge for young people in having access to and receiving appropriate services relates to a situation described by Frankie. This is around sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people attempting to access support services for an issue that is not necessarily related to their gender or sexuality identity, only to have their support needs assumed to relate to their gender or sexuality diversity. In a practical sense this can mean that instead of being asked about the problem they have presented with, the support worker instead focuses the session on their sexuality or gender identity:

Extract 5.7

they're like I'm fine with that that's not an issue any more I'm really anxious I want to talk about the anxiety I don't want to talk about my gender any more … that changed how I approached it from now … ask if it's an issue but if it's not an issue then we don't have to talk about it for the rest of the hour session we have.

(Frankie – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

In this extract, Frankie's key points reflect previous research from over six years ago. Jones and Hillier (2013) argue that we need to replace at-risk framings of these young people with more research and practice around the resilient voices of young people with strategies for positive changes (Jones & Hillier, 2013). This interview with Frankie shows that the at-risk framing of young people who identify with diverse sexualities and genders are still being reported by young people who access support services.

School responses to bullying and harassment

Another well reported feature of gender and sexuality diverse young people relates to the prevalence of bullying and harassment in schools. Research has shown for some time the high levels of homophobic abuse in schools with as much as 80% of this verbal and physical abuse occurring at school (Hillier et al., 2010). All community workers interviewed in this study discussed sexuality and gender diverse young people and the impact of bullying on their wellbeing. Participants' stories mirrored the significant amount of research (Leonard et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2014) around the prevalence of bullying and harassment experienced by sexuality and gender diverse young people:

Extract 5.8

> *during the postal vote our numbers doubled and we had more reports of verbal assault slurs people being more scared to go out anxiety and like people logging off social media and um being scared to open their letter boxes and we had a lot of young people here distressed.*
>
> *(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

The reported increase in service demands in recent years coinciding with recent funding cuts in Riley's community organisation is highly concerning, because research was already recommending increases in funding in this space (Leonard et al., 2015, Smith et al., 2014) prior to the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey. Increases in distressed young people and decreases in community services for sexuality and gender diverse young people impacts on the well-being of young people and on their ability to access support has implications for schools and how they might be addressing bullying and harassment within their spaces. This significant concern around funding cuts and higher demand on services reflects some literature that highlights the continuing issue of focusing on the 'risky' individual rather than making connections to broader political factors (Roffee & Waling, 2017), such as funding cuts.

The community workers also spoke of the specific bullying and harassment young people experienced while at school, particularly around gender diversity, and the various school responses:

Extract 5.9

> *when a young person was in the middle of changing schools um and had left the previous school from being bullied for identifying as male and then was looking at accessing their new school … they were I guess worried about the bullying you know occurring again in this new context but they were really supportive and open to our suggestions.*
>
> *(Frankie – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Whist the above example of a young person being bullied at school was met with support from the school, this was not the experience shared by all participants.

Extract 5.9 above, reflects some changing attitudes in schools being willing to try different support strategies and to work more with outside supports from community workers. In contrast to the above example of a supportive, proactive school response to bullying, another participant shared their concerns about one school's inadequate response to an instance of an older student who was being bullied by younger students for identifying as gay:

Extract 5.10

> *there's certainly bullying around um with people who identify as queer …he was being bullied like for a significant period of time… they were yelling out but it was derogatory around him identifying as gay …the way the school dealt with that was um oh just walk away (sigh) I was like arghhhh… I said no that's not going to resolve anything and that's cool you can just walk away but we'll really need to actually do a little bit of education around this stuff that's really not okay.*
>
> *(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Although generally participants did report that school responses were improving there are still instances of practices that need improving. The negative experience shared by Alison in extract 5.10 was an example of a school downplaying homophobic bullying and asking the young person being bullied to take on the responsibility of action in the form of ignoring the bullying. In this way, the situation was not being addressed effectively by the school. Alison explains that as a community worker she needed to challenge this example of a school response and call it out as an inappropriate response before different approaches were taken. Another negative experience around school responses to bullying was reflected by Jenny:

Extract 5.11

> *we have had a couple of schools that have tried to um like when we were doing the anti-bullying you know they've said we will get all the bullies in one room and yeah so yeah that makes things really difficult because we can't be seen to yeah so there's been a couple of curly moments but otherwise they're really on board and really engaged.*
>
> *(Jenny – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Despite all the literature around the management of bullying and harassment in schools, the above participants describe examples of schools not responding appropriately demonstrate that practice in schools is not necessarily based on best practice principles from research. It would be interesting to further investigate whether these types of ineffective responses to bullying are mirrored in cases of bullying across other domains, or if these types of responses are more likely to be specific to bullying of sexuality and gender diverse students. Some research suggests that not only are schools ineffective in responding to homophobic and transphobic bullying but teachers and schools also engage in anti-queer bullying through the discursive practices within schools that reinforce normative, heterosexual and hegemonic power structures (Preston, 2016). The poor response by the school to homophobic bullying described by Alison in Extract 5.10 seems to reiterate the

challenges around supporting young people as well as the need to change the culture of school responses to homophobic and transphobic bullying.

Theme 1 has focused on the wellbeing of young people and has highlighted the changing nature of the way gender and sexuality is constructed in schools and talked about by community workers. The challenges that the community workers highlighted as being faced by young people around their wellbeing included issues around lack of parental support as well as gatekeeping experienced at school and in other services. Bullying and harassment surrounding sexuality and gender diversity was reported as prevalent in schools and the school responses reported were varied. If changes to the prevalence of bullying and harassment in schools are to be made, schools will need to critically reflect on whether they are effectively supporting young people being bullied or whether they are adding to the negative experiences.

Community worker – school collaboration (Theme 2)

The aim of my study has been to investigate community workers perspectives on the engagement that is happening between community workers and schools in the context of supporting sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people. All four participants worked for community organisations and went into schools, however they reported varying relationships and degrees of connectedness with the schools in which they were tasked to work. Theme 2 explores the differing roles available to community workers in schools and the constraining and enabling factors the participants reported in developing positive relationships and working collaboratively with schools.

Community worker roles

Each of the four participants had different position titles, scope of practice and models of service delivery. Across the participants there are examples of the workers

discussing their role as relating to providing individual support, counselling, case management, group work, education presentations, co-facilitating information sessions and other types of community service work.

Interestingly, all participants spoke of the changing nature of community workers and being more welcomed into schools than previously. For example, Jenny reported:

Extract 5.12

> *we've been welcomed more and more so I guess schools are acknowledging that young people do need somewhere to go and that safe place to speak to a clinician so I do feel like there's a shift.*
>
> *(Jenny – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

This changing attitude from schools and different levels of relationships between community workers and schools was also noted by Frankie, who made the point of framing this as being related to the school leadership and their support for young people who identify as gender and sexuality diverse. See Extract 5.13 below:

Extract 5.13

> *I think generally schools are pretty supportive…sometimes there are schools that are pretty rigid…and not open to yeah providing those supports which could make it a bit easier um but that really varies between yeah who the principals and those kind of people are and what their ethos might be …it is more the actual staff themselves I think and how they support it.*
>
> *(Frankie – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

It is not surprising that this trend of increases in community workers in schools is happening, because literature has reflected this need for some time and the changing nature of schools' support teams being more collaborative and open to specialist services coming into schools (Hillier et al., 2010; Perales, 2016). It is interesting though that whether these issues are picked up in schools or not relies on the will of individuals rather than systemic change. Whilst the community workers in this study all felt as though their role was valued by the majority of schools that they worked within, and there were stories of positive collaborative work, there was also a sense of being on the *outer*:

Extract 5.14

> *I'm not directly employed by the school um I guess and I'm guided by (named own community organisation) so we do our training here we've you know, I do feel like I do operate from the outer…I'm not sure if my role is as valued clearly as a guidance officer's role … but I do think the personal relationships, it does help having those relationships with some of the staff here.*
>
> *(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

So it is important that individual school staff members recognise these issues, and that there are strong personal relationships between community workers and school staff . These issues are important in determining whether community workers are easily able to do their work. Although Alison described feeling on the *outer*, there was generally positive discussion about each of the participants' connections with schools. Research has documented how relationships are critical for the level of success for any collaboration (Epstein, 2018) and the findings of this research project supported these findings in relation to the work of community workers and their engagement with school staff.

Constraints

Community workers were asked to discuss the challenges and constraints to the work they do in schools for the benefit of sexuality and gender diverse young people. There were differing responses from the four participants. School culture and practical issues such as community service funding were repeated often by all of the community workers in the study. And despite discussing positive relationships with school staff, a common feature in all four interviews was descriptions of resistance from teachers and schools that the community workers had to deal with as well. For example, Alison reported:

Extract 5.15

> *I think there is that kind of schools are there to be you know just go there to learn we're not really here to look after you as in your mental health and your family issues ... sometimes schools refer to that as a welfare we don't want to be a welfare school ... I don't know if it's a lack of empathy I don't know so in terms of that I do feel frustrated quite a lot.*
>
> *(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Alison went on to describe the frustration she felt around encouraging teachers take some strategies of support up as part of their practice. She suggests this as a way to normalise conversations around sexuality and gender identity which is important for inclusion, as is making an effort to build relationships with students and asking about their general wellbeing as part of discussions. She puts forward her thinking about why these types of things receive push back from teachers in schools:

Extract 5.16

I can't say it's a lack of knowledge coz that's a cop out in a way but I do really feel there is a little bit of that culture like we have so much going on I'm a teacher that teaches this I really can't possibly be involved in other stuff … it's a terrible attitude but I feel like it's a really common one … that culture just needs to change and it's not that hard.

(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

The fact that some teachers resist having discussions with young people about their gender and sexuality, or even their general wellbeing has been discussed in other research as well, and likely results from a number of reasons. Ferfoljia & Ullman (2017) describe teacher resistance as often being related to poor institutional support, so that their discussions with students are considered to be a risk-taking activity by the teacher. Considering non-heteronormative practices in schools are still seen as controversial (Shannon & Smith, 2015), it is not surprising that teachers may be worried about having 'controversial' conversations with young people and not being supported by their schools. It is therefore critical that there is a shift in education policy and culture within each school to support teachers to engage more holistically with sexuality and gender diversity conversations with young people, without these interactions being considered controversial or risk-taking for teachers.

Riley discussed the additional barriers faced when trying to work within religious schools, but also identified the place of professional development and training in schools as a way to help break down teacher resistance:

Extract 5.17

we find a lot of resistance is mainly from the religious schools as you'd probably imagine … the ones that were involved more with the safe schools

have a lot more of an open um letting people come in and doing that sort of change.

(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

The experience shared by Riley of resistance from religious schools is not surprising given some of the research around the resistance from religious schools to explore anti-homophobia in schooling practices and policies (see for example Callaghan, 2016). Religious schools are also at the centre of current moves toward enabling a Religious Discrimination Bill in Australia[3]. The role of religion in schools, policy and discourse as well as the construct of religious freedom has changed over time. The perception of the problem surrounding religious freedom has changed from protecting diverse religious groups in a multicultural country to the current debate of how much should religious organisations be able to discriminate against diverse sexualities and genders (Poulos, 2019). It could be argued that it is therefore unsurprising that Riley was sharing an experience of more *resistance* in religious schools as a constraint.

So, the participants reported examples of school teacher resistance to dealing with issues related to gender and sexuality diverse young people, and issues related to school culture being a barrier to an effective support system for sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people. One participant, Alison, also described how one school principal expressed deep concern about the perceptions of parents and community members in relation to supporting a gender diverse student to use their preferred bathroom.

Extract 5.18

[3] The draft Religious Discrimination Bill 2019 (the Bill) looks at federal legislative protections for religious belief and activity including statements and expressions based on religious beliefs.

we don't want to upset the community and there was um I do remember this conversation actually a year ago we couldn't upset um the community and don't underestimate the community.

(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

The same community worker went on to discuss the level of genuine concern expressed by a collective of community organisations about publicly advertising a youth support group for sexuality and gender diverse young people:

Extract 5.19

they were worried about advertising in public because they were worried about the backlash so I'm not sure who in the community or what was happening that was clearly an issue to even just advertise a group.

(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

Fear of parental or community backlash is a real concern for teachers and schools in the work they do, especially in relation to gender and sexuality (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). Nicholas (2019) also highlighted this culture of fear experienced by those in the community that are seen as disrupting normative, binary assumptions about gender and sexuality in an attempt to contain queerness. If teachers fear backlash from parents and community agencies fear backlash from the broader community, then it raises the question of how much this fear prevents support services for sexuality and gender diverse young people, both at school and in the community. However, it was not clear what evidence of community views that teachers and school leaders were drawing on to make these assumptions about the potential for pushback for initiatives that support gender and sexuality diverse young people.

Another constraint that was discussed throughout the interviews was decreasing funding. Most community organisations rely primarily on government grants to fund their support services (Taylor &Farrell, 2017). Riley described how their community organisation funding was reported as having been recently reduced significantly, to the point that it changed what services they could offer:

Extract 5.20

> *at the time we had a team of four and I had a very different role to what I do now ... yes we had a lot more funding and did a lot more stuff in schools and more outreach capabilities ... now we actually have no individual support ... we are focusing mainly on the group programs brief interventions where we can refer people along ... ... with a very limited amount of hours and resourcing ... urgh it's always a bit of a barrier.*
>
> *(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Funding cuts are a significant barrier for community workers in their scope of practice, such as detailed by Riley in Extract 5.20 above. In that instance the range of services were reduced which lead to constraints on practice. These funding cuts are not just unfortunate or inconvenient for the individual community organisations. Instead, these reported funding cuts coincide with a systematic reduction in funding of particular services, which occur in line with national policies and priorities. Nicholas (2019) argues that there is resistance against anything perceived as challenging the white, liberal, heterosexual, cis-male dominant norms in Australian culture and politics at the moment. In recent years, at both a state and federal level, community organisations have had funding either ceased or the grant schemes they rely on discontinued under policy contexts of governance change and neoliberalism (Lynch, Forde & Lathouras, 2019). It is therefore not surprising that community

services that support sexuality and gender diverse young people are not given funding priority, because recent government discourse has been conservative and not aligned with positive gender and sexuality diversity. A lack of funding is a significant constraint for community workers to engage directly with schools to meet the needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people.

Enablers

While there were many instances of community workers discussing things that constrained the building of positive relationships between community workers and school staff, all four participants discussed the importance of relationships with key school staff. They described the positive relationships as enabling forces, allowing them to provide effective support for sexuality and gender diverse young people. Jenny shared the benefit of having a positive relationship with a school staff member and not just approaching someone in a particular role.

Extract 5.21

> *if you've got a key staff member that you're constantly in contact with I find that really helpful ...that makes my role a lot easier knowing when I'm going into a school knowing who that key person is ... engaging with that person as opposed to going to like the HOD.*
>
> *(Jenny – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

The significance of relational factors contributing to positive interactions between community workers and schools reflects literature in this field. Research shows that there needs to be a focus on relational practices in schools, with teachers and leader, to build interpersonal relationships with external services to promote effective collaborative work (Sanders, 2018).

Another enabler for successful collaboration discussed by participants related to schools being flexible. More than one participant shared examples of how this flexibility benefits young people and/or the collaborative work between schools and community workers. For example, in Extract 5.22 below Jenny discusses the positive effect of schools having flexibility around curriculum and processes such as timetabling:

Extract 5.22

> *I feel like schools are becoming really flexible and it's a little bit more individualised for the young person …a lot of young people that come into (community organisation name removed) their curriculum has become quite flexible um even to allow them to come to (community organisation name removed) during the day.*
>
> *(Jenny – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

In an era of schools being expected to provide more individualised programs for students, it can be a tension to balance flexibility of school programs and curricula with the additional demands that this places on teachers and parents (Forde, O'Brien & Patrick, 2016). Given some of these tensions within schools around teacher workload and pressures to be flexible, it was interesting to see such positive stories shared by community workers around flexibility happening on the ground in schools.

However, this flexibility cannot be assumed. Jenny also noted the need for reciprocity around flexibility and how this can help the community worker and school relationship if community workers are also flexible in their service delivery:

Extract 5.23

> *I think it comes down to flexibility I think with the schools … you have to be really flexible so even if you've got a week ahead that looks like it's quite structured and you know the schools will cancel last minute or they'll need to change times or um that's working with young people as well it's about being flexible.*
>
> *(Jenny – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Reciprocity is a key factor in successful community worker and school interactions and collaborations. There is an increase in research around school and community partnerships and what some of the key factors are in the success of these relationships, with reciprocity being one of the main factors (Hewitt, Roberts, Fletcher, Moore & Murphy, 2018). So, if both community workers and schools can commit to having a key point of contact for communication and can demonstrate flexibility and reciprocity, then collaborations are more likely to be successful.

Theme 2 has explored the diversity of community worker – school roles, relationships and interactions. Community workers in this study reported a general positive shift in school attitudes towards collaborative interdisciplinary work to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. Some of the enablers in the collaborative work reported included having a key contact point at school, reciprocal flexibility and good relational practices. However, there were also challenges identified by the community workers in this space, such as teacher and school fears of backlash, religious schools' resistance and decreased funding of community

services. These challenges shared by community workers constrained the relationships and support services available for gender and sexuality diverse young people.

Critical reflection (Theme 3)

My study was not only interested in some of the barriers or constraints of community workers and schools in their support for sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people, but has also investigated what is working well and what transformative possibilities are imagined by community workers. How could schools be more inclusive? What could practitioners coming together in this space potentially do better that may transform their collaborative work? These were some of the questions that framed my thinking.

As discussed in the theoretical chapter, the concept of critical reflection means that a deeper level of reflection is explored, looking at making meaning of experiences, hidden assumptions (Askeland & Fook, 2009), analysis of power relations and structures of domination (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Part of the process of reflexive thematic analysis for me as a researcher was to critically reflect on the various data and consider deeper patterns of meaning when constructing my themes. This critical reflection for me included considerations of meaning from participants' stories, hidden assumptions in the data (assumption being made by participants and by me as a researcher) and power relations in schooling contexts and government structures. My own critical reflection, as well as both deductive and inductive analysis, led to the construction of four sub-themes. The first sub-theme outlines some of the positive shifts in societal and political attitudes. The remaining sub-themes focus on what inclusive schools look like, the benefits of resource sharing and critical reflection and reflexivity of the four community workers.

Societal and political changes: Positive shifts

The community workers, in a general sense, acknowledged some positive shifts within the broader community and political landscape in relation to sexuality and gender diversity. Some of these changes related to school attitudes, some related to young peoples' perceptions of their community and some related to political changes in recent years. Participants seemed to have a sense of positivity around the future for sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people and the community-school spaces where they practice. All participants shared their perceptions of schools changing and welcoming outside of school supports more than ever before. For example, Jenny made the following comment:

Extract 5.24

> *so in my fifteen years of doing this working in the community sector and with young people I feel like it's really moving forward ...I don't know if acceptance is the right word it's yeah there's a lot more education there's a lot more resources the schools are really open to that support ... of course more can be done um but I do feel like it's coming along.*
>
> *(Jenny – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Research into this area shows that there have been significant improvements in school attitudes towards working with community services around communication and referral pathways (Epstein, 2018; Mendoza & Wands, 2014). Alison also reported recent positive attitudinal changes in school staff and the broader community around sexuality and gender diversity:

Extract 5.25

things have improved I feel like I can't list great changes but I feel there is just a shift in even when we are having conversations things are not as like you know challenged all the time ... we had a wear it purple day recently ... everyone got involved... we'd never done that before ... I hope it's not just tokenistic I think people just genuinely understand what that is about ... so hopefully the people feel that support.

(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

Perhaps the sense of uncertainty in Alison's perception of shifts in attitude result because social changes are not leading to improved outcomes for young people. Despite a general recognition of improved social and political attitudes around sexuality and gender diversity, these supposed improvements have not necessarily resulted in improved wellbeing outcomes for young people (Russell & Fish, 2019).

The impacts of the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey (commonly referred to as the *plebiscite* or *postal survey*) were referred to by participants in this study as well. A recent study of the impact of the Australian marriage equality postal survey (Ecker et al., 2019) found that the debate resulted in high levels of stress and had measurable negative impacts on mental health for *LGBTIQ* people. One participant discussed only the negative impacts of this postal survey on young people, but two other participants talked about some positive outcomes in their

practice contexts that resulted from the eventual result of the marriage survey as well.

Extract 5.26

> *I have seen a lot of changes this year and I don't know if it's because of the plebiscite the survey we had and now it's sort of more acceptable to talk about it and to have it out there coz I really feel like last year was more of a struggle to even just bring up the topic ... we are talking about it ...talking about different pronouns.*
>
> *(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Frankie provided a similar report of some of the possible benefits of this political and societal change but also some of the negative impacts:

Extract 5.27

> *I suppose the plebiscite was a big impact on young people and was definitely noticed in the community a lot of burn out around sort of discussing that and that being in the public frame for such a long period but ultimately now I think that it's all finished it's been a positive thing so young people that are feeling discriminated against based on their sexuality or um gender can sort of point to the fact that they majority of people were supportive ... I guess I have quoted no no that is just a small part of Australia sort of thing so that's kind of a positive outcome of that I think um of the policy change.*
>
> *(Frankie – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Although some community workers reported eventual positive re-framing of conversations about community *acceptance* as a result of the plebiscite, there was significant distress experienced by young people as a result of the debates around the plebiscite (Ecker et al., 2019). What we know historically is that these types of broader social and political debates around sexuality and gender are framed by dominant political groups and media outlets through heteronormative discourses. These dominant oppressive discourses cause an increase in feelings of isolation and negative outcomes by those considered the subject of debate (Anderson et al., 2017). So even though community workers re-framed the plebiscite into a positive societal and political shift in their discussions with young people, it does not take away from the negative impacts experienced by gender and sexuality diverse young people along the way.

Inclusive schools

Participants had varied ideas about how schools were being inclusive of sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people as well as presenting a range of ideas about how schools could improve on their inclusive practices. Three of the participants referred to their positive experiences of the Safe Schools Program[4] when asked about what they would like to see in the future. The Safe Schools Program aimed to reduce the levels of homophobia and transphobia experienced by young people in schools (Jones et al., 2016). One participant discussed the possible benefit of schools being able to promote themselves as safe places for sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people:

[4] The Safe Schools Program was the first nationally funded program aimed at reducing the bullying of LGBTI students in schools

Extract 5.28

> *unfortunately in Queensland we weren't able to see which schools had the support ... we ran training out of here and offered it out to school workers ... some of the resources on there are really helpful ... but they had to offer that for themselves ... unfortunately we weren't able to sort of identify which schools were safe which which would have been helpful in the sense of like when a young person in not at school and they're looking for a new school to go to and don't want it continued yeah experiences of discrimination or bullying um it would be nice to be able to refer to a safe school.*
>
> *(Frankie – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Although community workers talked about wanting Safe Schools programs and a list of 'safe schools' to refer to, it would be interesting to see if these comments would be mirrored by school support staff. If there was a list of 'safe schools' that were sexuality and gender diversity 'friendly', then surely this could raise issues of concern from schools about how they are perceived. And we know from research in this space that schools are reluctant to action or promote anything that can be deemed 'controversial' for fear of community backlash (Jones et al., 2016). Another concept that was discussed by a number of the participants in promoting inclusive schools was the concept of having safe spaces at school or peer support groups. An example of this safe place at school was shared by one participant:

Extract 5.29

I actually heard that some schools as well just having that peer support um space at schools un yeah that's one of the workers here he was part of that but I've heard that that's actually been really positive … I'm still hoping that we'll have that space where young people will just come together.

(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

This idea of a safe space in schools was echoed by Jenny as well:

Extract 5.30

some schools have adopted I guess their own … what they call a rainbow group so that is their own group of young people within the LGBTIQ+ community … that are really empowered to have their own niche group that is belonging to that particular school.

(Jenny – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

Providing safe spaces at schools in not a new idea, as queer peer support groups have been around for some time (Jones et al., 2013). Whilst safe spaces for young people are critical in schools, they will never be enough. There needs to be additional work done to challenge the school culture and the very need for these safe spaces in the first place. Colvin, Egan, and Coulter (2019) argue that in addition to safe spaces, there also needs to be a shift in teacher support and a generally more supportive school climate (Colvin, Egan & Coulter, 2019). In connection to this idea

of a safe space for young people, Riley took this concept further with comments around the facilitation considerations:

Extract 5.31

> *I think it would be really cool too is having like a staff member that identifies that is working to sort of have those safe spaces as well coz a lot of the times people run those things and maybe they're cisgender and straight and they don't quite understand sort of the complexities um of different bits and pieces.*
>
> *(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

I was particularly interested in this comment by Riley around the identity of facilitators. In social work and mental health networks there has been a trend for some time around practitioners with 'lived experience' delivering services (Profitt & Richards, 2017), particularly when they relate to minority identities, such as queer or Indigenous services. This debate centres around facilitators being peers of the groups they are running in addition to having their perspectives in the delivery of such services. Profitt and Richards (2017) argue that social work in queer spaces should include queer perspectives and lived experiences. As such the issue that Riley raised is a very contested space and raises issues of suitable staffing and support for staff who may be triggered themselves. Whether the lived experience facilitators were community workers or school staff, these contested spaces are still largely unsafe for workers (Tompkins, Kearns & Kukner, 2019), so there still needs to be some work done to create safe spaces for queer facilitators, teachers and allies.

Another significant discussion point throughout the interviews was around schools being inclusive in regards to toilets, uniforms and sex education. One participant shared some suggestions:

Extract 5.32

> *uniforms or toilets being non-gendered toilets um that would make a big difference to young people I think feeling supported at school … it's not about changing all of the toilets to gender non-specific toilets but you know having one that's available that's a non-gendered toilet would make it easier … as well as same sex sexual education …not being an extra thirty seconds on the end but make it part of the whole long discussion.*
>
> *(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

These suggested changes in relation to gender-neutral toilets and gender-neutral uniforms are reflected in literature around schooling experiences for young people in Australia and overseas (McMillan & Morton, 2019; Jones et al., 2016). Both critical social work theory (Fook, 2016) and queer theory (DePalma, 2013) highlight how problematic these types of oppressive, binary constructs are in relation to sexuality and gender identity.

Another area reported as potentially transformative is for schools and community services to have administrative forms such as intake and assessment forms or personal details forms that are genuinely inclusive. These forms often force young people to choose between binary constructs of identity and one participant described this issue in relation to school forms that need to be more inclusive:

Extract 5.33

> *being aware that it's not just the m and f box and there's also intersex people… having awareness of intersex people and the identities and what that actually means … for the non-binary folk it can be so so hard … there's so many like practical things you can do as an organisation or as a school and it's about knowing about events like IDAHOTB wear it purple day having that visibility so that people that maybe don't even identify themselves can show their support and um let other people know that they're accepted.*
>
> *(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Schools and schooling systems can and should change their enrolment processes to include all students. Changing identity markers so that they don't include gender or sex, in similar ways to how forms such as drivers' licences now work in some jurisdictions could be a way that schools could be more inclusive for gender and sexuality diverse young people.

Sharing resources

Improved sharing of resources to benefit sexuality diverse and gender diverse young people was a common thread of conversation throughout the four interviews. Jenny discussed the need for community workers to better share resources:

Extract 5.34

it's just really sharing those resources across all community agencies ... we do a lot of resource sharing so when we have particular resources that come in I guess around lgbtiq+ we do share that with the school and um vice versa so it's a great connection between yeah some of those key contacts in the schools ... we'll be going into the school then they'll see us use you know use the resource then they will go use the resources as well and um not only educate the young people but also colleagues.

(Jenny – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

Sharing resources was also talked about in terms of partnership work and keeping programs going after community service funding cuts:

Extract 5.35

we've partnered with them to be able to keep programs going so there's like a group over there that's an hour on a Thursday afternoon so I've participated in that as well ... it's promoting a lot of cross referral.

(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

There is limited research in this space specific to sharing resources between schools and community agencies in relation to sexuality and gender diversity. Research related to the sharing of general resources suggests that school staff are

more likely to share information amongst themselves than with external services (Thielking, Skues & Le, 2018), due to issues of time constraints, confidentiality and access to services. Therefore, further research into resources sharing within collaborative interdisciplinary spaces around sexuality and gender diversity would be beneficial and could potentially transform practices of improved resource sharing.

Community worker critical reflection and reflexivity

The final sub-theme of critical reflection (theme 3) is focused on critical reflection and reflexivity of the four community workers as practitioners. These are such integral concepts within my theoretical approach that draw on critical social work theory and queer theory for both research and as a social work practitioner. Therefore, I included a specific interview question asking about community workers' use of these concepts. What I found interesting is that the community workers all struggled to know how to answer this question, even with prompting. This surprised me because reflection and considering own positioning in relation to values and beliefs is such an instrumental part of most qualifications in community services. Participants gave varied responses when asked about how they think about or use critical reflection and reflexivity. This could be due to their differing qualification backgrounds, such as community services, social work and psychology. The main two things participants talked about were their professional supervision or debriefing and their reflections on the need for more professional development for either themselves or school staff around sexuality and gender diversity.

One participant described what critical reflection looked like in their organisation:

Extract 5.36

we are definitely always supported to do that whether that be through team reviews of our assessments or and have in our personal practice …that's part of what we are meant to do to improve our practice continually.

(Frankie – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

Morley and Dunstan, (2013) have talked about the importance of using reflective techniques in complex or conflictual environments, such as a deconstructive and reconstructive process to unpack and makes sense of experiences. None of the community workers discussed any specific reflection techniques used in supervision and instead only discussed informal debriefing in their examples. One community worker talked about the importance of debriefing after delivering sessions or presentations at schools and the lack of time and absence of schools debriefing after sessions:

Extract 5.37

People forget about workers have triggers too especially if they're part of the community they've probably been exposed to a lot of stuff … schools will sometimes you know say thank you and give us a card and have a bit of a chat but they don't really check in which I think would be a cool thing … everyone's so busy like the teachers have got the students there and we've got to get back to the office to do a thousand things … it would be good to have some of that critical kind of reflection.

(Riley – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).

The above example shared by Riley suggests that there is a lack of time both from the school perspective and the community worker perspective, and this is despite Riley describing a desire for some kind of critical reflection. So, it seems that

community workers all acknowledged the importance of critical reflection even though it was not happening in practice. On the other hand, debriefing was reported to be happening more commonly in practice and its importance was described by the community workers. For example, Alison said:

Extract 5.38

> *I do a lot of debriefing like I debrief with the nurse coz their room is next door to mine so we do quick debriefs … so I have supervisions where I do a bit of you know um a bit of reflection I mean that is only once a month.*
>
> *(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Critical reflection is an important undertaking for community workers because it provides an environment and the time to explore dominant understanding of one's practice context and key concepts around power, dominant discourses and agency (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Reflexivity is also critical for community workers to consider, both for those that identify as part of the sexuality and gender diverse community as well as those that work in this space that do not identify as part of this community. Reflexivity would support workers to explore their own values, assumptions, insider/outsider status and positioning in relation to their own intersecting constructions of identity (Couture et al., 2012; Pillow, 2003). So, the indication by participants that this is not occurring could mean not enough time is available for such activities or could also mean that critical reflection and reflexivity in not valued as much as it should be for this profession. Alison discussed the importance of professional development opportunities for school support staff to do more training around sexuality and gender diversity:

Extract 5.39

> *she has recently come back from training like having little things like say a rainbow flag in your room you know it's just a little reminder um but she's gone around and handed out these flags to deputies' offices and every space where young people hang out.*
>
> *(Alison – interview with Emma at Community Organisation).*

Although training that results in actions such as Alison described, with rainbow flags being distributed, helps to increase visibility of sexuality diversity, it could be considered to be tokenistic. The example shared by Alison made no mention of any resource sharing or the newly trained staff member challenging normative discourse or practices at the school. Morley and Dunstan (2013) may argue that critical reflection would hopefully result in some level of deconstruction and reframing of dominant and disempowering discourses towards genuine learning opportunities. Reflexivity in schooling and community worker practice contexts would ideally explore workers' own subjectivity and preconceptions around sexuality and gender constructions (Hjeltnes, Binder, Moltu & Dundas, 2015). This is necessary for schools as well as community worker roles in the transformative possibilities for future collaborative work.

Reflexive thematic analysis was an enticing analytic technique for me to use partly because I was interested in the reflective and reflexive nature of the space in

which community workers practice. I was also drawn to this specific approach to thematic analysis because it reminded me as a researcher to consider my own positioning in relation to participants and the data. My own professional background and identity as a social worker inevitably brought with it a particular subjective perspective, particularly with a background of being a community worker that interacted with schools in collaborative work around a diverse range of young people, including sexuality and gender diversity. So as Braun and Clarke (2017) would argue, I was looking at the interview data and noticing particular areas of interest and making my own interpretations of patterns of meaning, actively constructed around my own understanding. So, for example, at times I was finding myself focusing on particular aspects of the data due to relating more to those experiences than others. And I found myself, having to go back through the transcriptions multiples times to ensure I was not missing anything that could help my understanding of the data. Braun and Clarke (2019) also highlight the importance of naming your theoretical framework as part of a reflexive thematic analysis.

Critical reflection and reflexivity are an important aspect of community workers' practice, especially in contested spaces such as schools. Therefore, it was interesting to hear from community workers in this study that there was little engagement with either of these concepts, at a deeper level within their practice spaces or supervision received from their community organisations. So, what would improve the ability for community workers and their organisations to engage more effectively in critical reflection and reflexivity? Could it be time, support form schools, increased funding, or a shift in the broader influence of economic rationalism and the neoliberal constraints that impact on professional practice on the ground? In addition to the transformative possibilities of critical reflection and

reflexivity for community workers in their collaborative work with schools, these are also important considerations for researchers involved in these spaces.

Conclusion

Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2017, 2019) six phases of analysis, my reflexive thematic analysis, which I have taken up the more recent naming of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017) worked to remind me to ensure I was consistently considering my research question, my theoretical underpinnings and my own reflexive positioning throughout my interpretation and meaning making processes. The reflexive thematic analysis conducted resulted in the development of three themes from my data: Theme 1: wellbeing of young people; Theme 2: community worker – school collaboration and Theme 3: critical reflection. Upon reflection, my final three themes and sub-themes were remarkably congruent with my original research question, literature review and theoretical framework, perhaps suggesting a strong focus on deductive analysis and potentially room to improve my inductive analysis, or indeed the interview questions that helped to shape the data itself.

Theme 1 centred around the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people and highlighted the changing nature of the way gender and sexuality is constructed in schools and talked about by community workers. There were also experiences shared by the community workers I interviewed about the lack of parental support, gatekeeping issues experienced at school contact points, and the ongoing prevalence of bullying and harassment surrounding sexuality and gender diversity.

Theme 2 explored the diversity of community worker – school roles, relationships and interactions and found a general positive shift in school attitudes

towards collaborative interdisciplinary work to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. Enablers in the collaborative work were reported as including, having a key contact point at school, reciprocal flexibility and good relational practices. Constraints identified by the community workers in this space, included teachers and schools having a fear of community backlash, religious schools' resistance and decreased funding of community services.

The final theme that resulted from my analysis, Theme 3, focused on critical reflection and the possibilities in community worker – school practices to change. This theme highlighted some of the positive shifting societal and political attitudes around gender and sexuality diversity as well as some best practice around schools being inclusive spaces and the need for improved resource sharing. Critical reflection and reflexivity, although not happening as much in practice as what the four community workers would like, was raised as a crucial aspect of the community worker profession.

All three themes showed the varied practice experiences of community workers in their interactions with secondary schools. The final theme of critical reflection particularly helped to inform some possibilities for transformative practices outlined in the conclusion chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

It is critical to understand the experiences of community workers engaging with schools in their work to support gender and sexuality young people. If we understand what constrains and enables community worker and school collaborations, then we can begin to gain some insight into how these practices can be transformed towards positive changes. The previous chapter outlined a reflexive thematic analysis of these varied experiences of community workers and this chapter looks at the findings of the analytic work and where to from here. The conclusion chapter begins by re-visiting the research focus of this study and to reiterate the background context and need for this research project. A summary of what is known from the literature review is then outlined as well as discussion of where the gaps were identified in relation to the need for this study. The following part of this chapter provides an overview of the design and methodological procedures that shaped the data collection. Findings are shared that were generated from the three themes constructed as part of the reflexive thematic analysis as well as some of the limitations of this study. The final part of this chapter provides recommendations and implications for practice and a final summary.

This research focused on the perspectives of community workers about their experiences interacting with schools in their work with gender and sexuality diverse young people in schools and aimed to provide possible areas for improvement. Gender and sexuality diverse young people continue to report high levels of bullying and harassment in schools which is impacting negatively on their mental health and general wellbeing. Schools are increasingly recognising the need to address these concerning statistics in relation to experiences of gender and sexuality diverse young

people. However, secondary schools alone are not able to meet all of the wellbeing needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people through their internal school support systems. Therefore, there needs to be engagement with external community services in order to meet these specific wellbeing needs. The problem identified here is that there was little known about the engagement interactions between community workers and schools, particularly from community worker perspectives and in relation to gender and sexuality diverse young people.

Revisiting the research

This research was interested in exploring these community - school interactions in relation to their work with gender and sexuality diverse young people in secondary schools, from the perspective of community workers in the context of secondary schools in Queensland. The overarching research question in my study was:

> *What do community workers say about their interactions with schools, in relation to work with gender and sexuality diverse young people?".*

The significance of this research is that there is little known about community - school relationships surrounding the needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people, from the perspective of community workers. Existing literature is focused on the perspectives of gender and sexuality diverse young people (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017) or from the perspective of school staff (Ferfolja & Stavrou, 2017). So, there is a gap in knowledge around community workers' perspectives on their interactions with schools and the dimensions that could improve services provided to young people. Past research has demonstrated that schools require the external support of community services to adequately meet the specialised needs of gender and sexuality diverse young people (Hillier et al., 2010; Mendoza & Wands, 2014). However, there remains very little literature suggesting how community services

could effectively engage with schools to support these specific needs. This research aimed to contribute towards addressing this gap in the literature by having an underlying objective of providing insights into improved community worker – school collaboration for the benefit of gender and sexuality diverse young people.

The theoretical framework put forward to achieve the research foregrounded critical social work theory to provide a theoretical framework that enabled a critique of the interactions of community workers with schools in relation to their work with gender and sexuality diverse young people. Critical social work theory provided a lens in which to both deconstruct and reconstruct complex discursive environments, such as community workers engaging with schools. Deconstruction interrogates implicit values and assumptions of dominant knowledge and power relations and acknowledges forms of resistance and agency. Reconstruction provides opportunities to construct new ways of thinking and alternatives for potentially transformative practices.

Whilst critical social work theory provided the broad theoretical framework for this research, queer theories added in-depth insights into particular discourses around identity and the construction of gender and sexuality categories and binaries. Queer theoretical ways of thinking also contributed to ideas related to the deconstruction of knowledge in relation to normalised gender and sexuality identities in education as well as the reconstruction of more diverse understandings and representations of gender and sexuality diversity. Intertwined throughout both critical social work theory and queer theory was the concept of critical reflection and reflexivity, which I continued to consider into my analytic approach and findings.

Findings from this research

Four community workers were recruited in this small qualitative study in Queensland. Reflexive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six phases for analysis were used to describe, interpret and explain the experiences and discursive practices shared by participants. The process of critical reflection and reflexivity was also incorporated throughout the reflexive thematic analysis process.

The findings of the study were constructed under three themes and ten sub-themes. In the following, I use this thematic structure to present the findings of my analysis process.

Theme 1 focused on the wellbeing of young people and highlighted the changing nature of the way gender and sexuality was constructed in schools and talked about by community workers. The challenges faced by young people around their wellbeing relating to access to support included issues around lack of parental support as well as gatekeeping issues experienced at school and in other services. Bullying and harassment surrounding sexuality and gender diversity was reported as prevalent in schools and the school responses were varied. If changes to the prevalence of bullying and harassment in schools are to be made, schools will need to critically reflect on whether they are effectively supporting young people being bullied or whether they are adding to the negative experiences of those same young people.

Theme 2 explored the diversity of community worker – school roles, relationships and interactions. Community workers in this study reported a general positive shift in school attitudes towards collaborative interdisciplinary work to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. Some of the enablers in the

collaborative work included, having a key contact point at school, reciprocal flexibility and good relational practices. However, there were also challenges identified by these four community workers in this space, such as teacher and school fears of backlash, religious schools' resistance to working in this area, and decreased funding of community services. These challenges shared by community workers wre reported as constraining the relationships and support services available for gender and sexuality diverse young people.

Theme 3 focused on critical reflection and school practices that could potentially improve the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse young people in schools. This theme highlighted some of the positive shifting societal and political attitudes around gender and sexuality diversity as well as some best practice around schools being inclusive spaces and the need for improved resource sharing. Critical reflection and reflexivity, although not happening in an in-depth way in practice with the four community workers, was raised as a crucial aspect of the community worker profession.

The three analytic themes in this research project showed the diversity of practice experiences of community workers in their interactions with schools and the possibilities for critical reflection to lead to transformative practices between community workers and schools.

Limitations

A qualitative study with a small sample size has limitations related to its scope and the possibility of generalising to other contexts. However, that was not the purpose of this study. The in-depth and rich quality of analysis was intentionally highly contextualised with insights reflecting specifics such as location and time within political, social and institutional contexts. However, knowing more about the work of

those who are currently engaged in the complex work of community - school interactions for the benefit of gender and sexuality diverse young people provided important insights into the ways in which these practices may be improved.

Upon reflection, there were also some limitations around the design of this study in relation to the interview questions. It was only after my reflexive thematic analysis process and supervisory feedback that I realised that my interview questions were highly shaped towards a deductive reasoning. Looking to the future, this could be considered in the design of interview questions to encourage an increase in open-ended responses, or conversational style, to support inductive data.

While future studies may focus on larger numbers of participants sharing their stories or perhaps focus on the perspectives of school staff, young people or their families, this was not within the scope of this study conducted by one high degree researcher. Further research from these differing perspectives could enhance what we know about this area and provide further diverse experiences and insights in relation to community - school interactions.

Recommendations: Transformative possibilities

The concept of transformative possibilities for community worker – school practices, in relation to their work with gender and sexuality diverse young people, was the primary motivation for this research project. Throughout the literature review, theoretical framework, and in implementing the research, there has consistently been an interest in what is working well and what could be improved in community worker – school interactions and practices.

The following section of the conclusion chapter outlines some practical suggestions for improvements in practice in this field, including the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1

That schools and community workers develop more diverse understandings of constructions of gender and sexuality. The dominant representations and discourses around the artificiality of categories and binaries needs to change. In schools and community organisations this change needs to happen with all staff, including the first point of contact staff at reception.

Recommendation 2

Schools and community workers provide additional supports for gender and sexuality diverse young people where there is no support or a lack of parental/carer support.

Recommendation 3

Bullying and harassment of gender and sexuality diverse young people require more effective reporting procedures by schools and follow up supports implemented by schools referring to appropriate support services (internal and/or external support responses).

Recommendation 4

Allow the time and resources to implement strategies for enablers of collaborative work, such as having a key communication point in the school (relational work) and reciprocal flexibility in partnership work.

Recommendation 5

Schools need to provide an institution-wide supportive stance for teachers to have everyday conversations to support the wellbeing of gender and sexuality

diverse young people, and to avoid this activity being seen as an ‘at risk’ or controversial action by teachers and school staff.

Recommendation 6

Increased funding to community organisations could mean that their community workers can engage effectively with schools to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. Smaller steps towards this increased funding need may include advocacy and lobbying activities by schools and community workers.

Recommendation 7

Implementing strategies such as providing non-gendered toilets, non-gendered uniforms, and more inclusive administrative forms to reflect diverse constructions of gender and sexuality could be helpful in schools. It is also important for systems and school based leadership to provide and support safe spaces/peer support groups within schools.

Recommendation 8

Increased sharing of resources to support gender and sexuality diverse young people. This resource sharing particularly needs to be improved between community workers and school staff. There are already resources such as, information brochures, inclusive sex education material, you tube resources produced by community organisations and information around local support services and referral pathways available for use.

Recommendation 9

The ability for staff, particularly community workers to engage in more in-depth critical reflection and reflexivity supervision and activities. Working in

contested and complex spaces means that there is a need to address stress and triggers experienced by community workers in the field. Although de-briefing is happening, there is a need to provide the time, workload capacity and resources to enable these more in-depth critical reflection activities which are crucial to the community worker profession.

The above recommendations are not comprehensive but have been constructed from the data and subsequent analysis of this study. If community workers and schools were able to implement any one or more of these possibilities for transformative practices, then hopefully we would see some improved collaborative practices that may play some role in addressing wellbeing outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse young people in schools.

Future research

The purpose of this research project was to explore a small group of community worker reports about their interactions with schools, with an aim to highlight some possibilities for improved practices around working with sexuality and gender diverse young people in schools. Future research could potentially focus on either the voices of young people or school staff in their perceptions of what they think could be improved in this collaborative work between schools and outside agencies. Given that much of the existing literature continues to focus on the already known risks and negative wellbeing outcomes for young people, it would be beneficial for future research to have more of a focus on future possibilities for transformative practices. It would also be helpful to translate future research findings in this space into practical guidelines for practice, to be distributed to both schools and community organisations. And furthermore, future research could also explore whether my recommendations do indeed translate to improvements in interactions

between community workers and schools and ultimately on the implications of such changes on improved wellbeing outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse young people in those schools.

Summary

This conclusion chapter has revisited the purpose of this research project and the research question asked at the beginning of this study, which was:

> "*What do community workers say about their interactions with schools, in relation to work with gender and sexuality diverse young people?"*

The significance of the research is in relation to the lack of research around community workers experiences of working with schools to support young people. In this study I drew together a theoretical framework which was founded in critical social work theories and queer theories. The findings provided in this chapter were shared using the structure of three themes that were developed as part of the reflexive thematic analysis conducted. These included findings related to the wellbeing of young people (theme 1), community worker – school collaboration (theme 2) and critical reflection (theme 3). The limitation of this small research project was that the size and scope of the project only allowed for the perspectives of a small number of community workers. The three analytic themes were then developed into nine key recommendations for community worker – school collaborative practices. There was no capacity to explore the efficacy of the recommendations suggested here, however this could be the focus of research in the future. In addition future research was also suggested to explore the voices of young people and school staff in this collaborative space. Future research would always need to be strengths-based, and could be focused on providing practical guidelines for practice.

The purpose of this research project asking community workers' about their interactions with schools was to highlight the need for improved practices and for future collaborative work to focus on improving wellbeing outcomes for gender and sexuality diverse young people. I hope that in sharing some of the community workers' ideas about constraints and enablements of working in these collaborative practice spaces, there will be some discussion around some possibilities for transformative changes and that these conversations might lead to improved practices in these community worker – school spaces. The reflexive thematic analysis of this study led to nine recommendations for future transformative possibilities in this space. It is hoped that some of the recommendations from this research project may inspire further research about community – school collaborations and any applied transformative practices include an evaluation of what works and what could be further improved.

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