

**Holt, M. (2021). Sexual orientation equality in schools: Teacher advocacy and action research. Palgrave Macmillan**

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## BOOK REVIEW

Holt, M. (2021). *Sexual orientation equality in schools: Teacher advocacy and action research*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Reviewed by Jessica Traynor, Master's student, McGill University.

In a world where sexual and gender diversity is highly politicized and debated, *Sexual Orientation Equality in Schools: Teacher Advocacy and Action Research* by Matthew Holt feels like a relevant read for educators. The research informing the book occurs in Australia, where Holt sets out to learn about teachers' perspectives on the LGBTIQ community. The acronym LGBTIQ includes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or other sexual and/or gender diverse communities. Throughout this review, I use this acronym interchangeably with the term *queer*, which describes "people who hold gender and/or sexual identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming" (Weise, 2022, p. 484).

This book holds space for unpacking a variety of perspectives, biases and even fears of both members of these communities and non-community members who are educators. Each chapter builds on the previous one, making it an easy-to-understand read for those who may have limited knowledge of LGBTIQ people/communities or of the Australian context. The book offers readers a plethora of background information on the Australian socio-political landscape before introducing the study and deeply reflecting on its results and implications.

The first three chapters of the book explore how LGBTIQ people and communities are treated in Australia, both in general and within schools. These chapters provide an overview of educational policy and support in place for LGBTIQ students. The discussion is framed by the notion of hegemony (i.e., the upholding of power), social expectations, and ideological masculinity. I appreciated the inclusion of Dahl's (2012) insights that hegemonic femininity cannot exist considering the power upheld by masculine ideologies, and that systemic power imbalance impacts peoples' experiences based on both gender and sexual orientation (i.e., whether they identified as queer or straight). Chapter three also contains a discussion on neoliberalism, and how its focus on the independent actions of others contrasts with the collaborative nature and understandings of Social Justice Education.

In Chapter 4, Holt focuses on critical theory, highlighting the interlinking structures that impact people who embody multiple forms of oppression. What was missing from the book was a mention or discussion of intersectionality, which would directly complement the

discussion. For instance, one of the sections in this chapter addressed oppression faced by people of color alongside oppression faced by LGBTIQ people, but the section would have benefited from a more robust discussion of how these oppressions are not merely additive, but are overlapping and interlocking.

Chapter 5 addresses social transformations, with a discussion on oppression centered on Freire's (1968) notion of Praxis. Holt highlights that Praxis concerns an individual's relationship to ideologies regarding a specific social group, which he suggests has implications for educational policy. The book also offers some criticism of Freire's ideas. Citing Glass (2001), Holt questions Freire's oppressor-oppressed binary, pointing out that people can potentially be a part of both of these groups at the same time. This stands out as another example of an intersectional understanding of power dynamics. I appreciate how this book holds itself accountable to acknowledge the variance of experiences that LGBTIQ people may have depending on other aspects of their identity.

Chapter 6 delves into the outline of Holt's own study. Holt's work focuses around 4 overarching research questions: "(1) What are overarching teacher perspectives regarding LGBTIQ inequality in schools? (2) What are teacher perspectives regarding their role in improving equality for LGBTIQ students in schools? (3) Can teachers change their beliefs and behaviors regarding sexual orientation?" and "(4) What are the supports required for teachers to engage and commit to advocacy for LGBTIQ inequality?" (p. 50) The Action Research focused mainly on two components: having teachers involved in 5 group workshops, and then having them reflect on their experiences through guided observations. Holt notes that while the size of the group moving through the study was fairly small, there was "enough variation within the group to represent significant groups and significant perspectives within social cultures" (p. 111).

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on how participants engaged with inequality, and how this then related to their engagement with queerness in the classroom. One theme from chapter 7 revolved around how gender norms have been experienced by some as forms of social oppression. One of the group members, Jack, described his view of masculinity vs. femininity as being natural to men and women. Through questioning, Jack was able to understand that his beliefs here aligned with the hegemonic hierarchy around gender which has allowed those performing masculinity to present as the dominant, successful group in most societies. It was indicated in Chapter 8 that the workshops intended to support openness to growth and accountability of the teachers. Jack's behavior was analyzed as being from a place of "disconnection from his role as a change agent" (p. 152), but through compassionate and accountability-based conversations, he demonstrated empathy and openness to learning from and listening to the others' perspectives in the group. This example of growth highlights the importance of the framing and environment in which conversations around queer issues are taking place; in this case, the environment proved to be successful in allowing Jack to not feel immediately alienated and continue engaging with the workshops' content.

Chapter 9, which focuses on risk-taking and barriers to this work, featured the analysis of the interviewees' experiences and reflections. To me, one of the most interesting insights

from the data analysis centered on a question I have recurrently seen throughout teaching social justice perspectives in education: when should one “call out” students who are offending others, and when should one operate with empathy and compassion towards those with differing beliefs? Teachers had varying opinions on how to handle insensitive and/or hateful comments towards LGBTIQ people. They expressed a need to consider the intentions of the students who voice such comments and the harm that their comments could cause to students belonging to, or having a loved one from within, the queer community. While no singular group-wide “answer” is reached about this complex type question, reading this discussion could be validating to teachers who are nervous and unsure about how to handle insensitivity/hate in their classrooms, and could support their thinking in preparation for a potential student-related outburst.

Chapters 10 and 11 focus on applying the topics explored in this study to the classroom. Modeling behaviors that encourage celebration of, and discourage violence/harm towards, the queer community are discussed as being beneficial to the well-being of students, and many of these behaviors center on the use of language. One participant’s reflection focused on their awareness of using gendered language such as calling students “girls” and “boys” in the classroom (p. 205), while another participant shared that they had started using math problems examples which contained queer characters (p. 206). Among other implications, chapter 11 highlighted how reflective spaces can provide opportunities for teachers to learn about and unpack complex social issues. This chapter, along with the rest of the book, contains many additional insights and draws connections to implications in the classroom that could help prompt reflection and potentially change in the actions of those working in an educational context.

I highly recommend this book not only to practicing teachers, but to educational administrators and researchers as well. The discussion provides examples to shift the mindset and consider new ways to actively support LGBTIQ people. Much of the latter half of the book is dispersed with quotes and dialogues that are connected to the book’s first half; this content division makes for a purposeful and engaging read. Overall, I was impressed with the depth of responses and reflections given by the teachers, and I believe that a wide variety of readers will also find themselves able to relate to the feelings of these educators, regardless of how they feel connected to the queer community prior to starting the book. ■

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

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**Jessica Traynor** is a Master's student in Educational Studies at McGill University. Traynor holds an honours degree from Wilfrid Laurier University ('21), a Bachelor of Education from Queen's University ('22), and is certified to teach music and French at the high school level in Ontario. Jessica is particularly passionate about inclusion and accessibility in musical and educational spheres and has experience facilitating music and leadership workshops. She currently works in instructional and curricular design at the college level. Her graduate research at McGill focuses on highlighting strategies used by high school music teachers to increase classroom and extracurricular engagement.

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