

**A critical and interpretative investigation of the ethical dimension of
policies about school digital technologies**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines digital technologies policies designed for Australian schools and the ways they are understood and interpreted by students, school staff, teachers, principals and policy writers. This study explores the ways these research participant groups interpret and understand the ‘ethical dimension’ of schools’ digital technologies policies for teaching and learning. In this thesis the ethical dimension is considered to be a dynamic concept which encompasses various elements including; decisions, actions, values, issues, debates, education, discourses, and notions of right and wrong, in relation to ethics and uses of digital technologies in schools. In this study policy is taken to mean not only written texts but discursive processes, policy documents including national declarations, strategic plans and ‘acceptable use’ policies to guide the use of digital technologies in schools.

The research is situated in the context of changes that have occurred in Australia and internationally over the last decade that have seen a greater focus on the access to and use of digital technologies in schools. In Australian school education, the attention placed on digital technologies in schools has seen the release of policies at the national, state, territory, education office and school levels, to guide their use. Prominent among these policies has been the Digital Education Revolution policy, launched in 2007 and concluded in 2013.

This research aims to answers the question:

What does an investigation reveal about understandings of the ethical dimension of digital technologies policies and their implementation in school education?

The objective of this research is to examine the ethical dimension of digital technologies policies and to interpret and understand the responses of the research participants to the issues, silences, discourses and language, which characterise this dimension. In doing so, it is intended

that the research can allow the participants to have a voice that, may be different to the official discourses located in digital technologies policies.

The thesis takes a critical and interpretative approach to policies and examines the role of digital technologies policies as discourse. Interpretative theory is utilised as it provides a conceptual lens from which to interpret different perspectives and the implications of these in the construction of meaning in relation to schools' digital technologies policies. Critical theory is used in tandem with interpretative theory as it represents a conceptual basis from which to critique and question underlying assumptions and discourses that are associated with the ethical dimension of schools' digital technologies policies.

The research methods used are semi-structured interviews and policy document analysis. Policies from the national, state, territory, education office and school level were analysed and contribute to understanding the way the ethical dimension of digital technologies policies is represented as a discourse. Students, school staff, teachers, principals and policy writers participated in research interviews and their views and perspectives were canvassed in relation to the ethical use of digital technologies and the policies that are designed to regulate their use.

The thesis presents an argument that the ethical dimension of schools' digital technologies policies and use is an under-researched area, and there are gaps in understanding and knowledge in the literature which remain to be addressed. It is envisaged that the thesis can make a meaningful contribution to understand the ways in which schools' digital technologies policies are understood in school contexts. It is also envisaged that the findings from the research can inform policy development by analysing the voices and views of those in schools.

The findings of the policy analysis revealed that there is little attention given to the ethical dimension in digital technologies at the national level. A discourse of compliance and control pervades digital technologies policies from the state, education office and school levels, which reduces ethical considerations to technical, legal and regulatory requirements. The discourse is largely instrumentalist and neglects the educative dimension of digital technologies which has the capacity to engender their ethical use.

The findings from the interview conversations revealed that students, school staff and teachers perceive digital technologies policies to be difficult to understand, and not relevant to their situation and needs. They also expressed a desire to have greater consultation and participation in the formation and enactment of digital technologies policies, and they believe they are marginalised from these processes in their schools.

Arising from the analysis of the policies and interview conversations, an argument is presented that in the light of the prominent role played by digital technologies and their potential for enhancing all aspects of school education, more research is required to provide a more holistic and richer understanding of the policies that are constructed to control and mediate their use.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACMA	Australian Communications and Media Authority
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ACTDET	Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training
ACTETD	Australian Capital Territory Education and Training Directorate
AG	Australian Government
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
BBC	British Broadcasting Commission
BECTA	British Educational and Communications Technology Agency
CGCEO	Canberra and Goulburn Catholic Education Office
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DoE	Department of Education
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DER	Digital Education Revolution
ESA	Education Services Australia
ICT	Information Communication Technology
ISCA	Independent Schools Council of Australia
IT	Information Technology, can also be the name of the subject at school

MCEECDYA	Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NCEC	National Catholic Education Commission
NCU	National Copyright Unit
NSW	New South Wales
NSWDEC	New South Wales Department of Education and Communities
NSWDET	New South Wales Department of Education and Training
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SCEO	Sydney Catholic Education Office
SCSEEC	Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WEF	World Economic Forum

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GLOSSARY

This glossary is intended to explain the meaning of some of the terms and phrases used in the thesis. I recognise that there are other interpretations that can be applied to these terms, but for the purpose of this thesis, these terms are being used in the ways outlined below.

‘Acceptable use’ policy

A school policy which prescribes what is considered to be ‘acceptable’ and ‘correct’ behaviour in regard to specific events or the use of school equipment, including digital technologies. Students, teachers, school staff, and in some cases parents are required to give their consent to the content of these policies, and are usually required to sign them.

Blogs / Blogging

A Blog is a personal Internet site or page on which individuals can post opinions, comments and responses to issues. Blogging is the act of participating in online discussions by posting comments opinions and responses to a blog site or page on the Internet.

Bring your own device

A school policy which permits students, teachers and school staff to bring their own digital technologies devices such as smartphones, iPads and laptops, to school for the purpose of using them to facilitate and enhance educational endeavours. In some cases, the digital technologies devices, which are brought to school by students, teachers and school staff, may be used to access and use school databases and networks.

Cyber-bullying

An act of bullying that can take the form of harassment, humiliation or targeting someone by using digital technologies. This can involve sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature via the Internet.

Digital technologies

Digital technologies encompass a range of technologies, including computers, computer software, hardware and related peripherals such as data projectors, mobile phones, television, DVD, video, and interactive whiteboards. The term ‘digital technologies’, in this study, refers to their use in relation to teaching and learning or in supporting these areas, other uses of digital technologies in schools are not focused on in this study. Digital technologies are also implicated in social relationships and cultural understandings.

Digital literacy

The capacity to understand, use, interpret, and create information in multiple formats from a range of sources in a digital environment. The term also refers to being able to manipulate and reproduce information and images using digital technologies.

Macro policy

The term ‘macro’ level refers to policies from government education departments and educational bodies that operate at regional, state or national levels.

Micro policy

The term ‘micro’ is applied to policies which come from schools.

MP3 Player

A portable consumer electronic device or computer program that supports MP3 audio format and allows for the storage and the sharing of MP3 audio files.

Netiquette

The combination of two words Net from (Internet) and etiquette that refers to notions of manners and politeness. Netiquette is expressed through codes, customs, rules and guidelines, which are designed to guide interactions using the Internet. The aim of netiquette is to maintain ‘respectful’ and ‘civil’ forms of Internet communication and to avoid any style of communication that can cause frustration, annoyance or offence.

Participant voice

The concept of participant voice gives attention to the participants in research to express their views and understandings, and to explore the meanings and significance of their perspectives.

Research participants

In this study there are five groups who participated in the research. They are

Students from secondary schools in years 11 and 12, in the ACT.

Teachers both full time and part-time, in the ACT.

School staff those employed in non-teaching capacities in schools, including the areas of administration, finance, libraries and technical support in the ACT.

Principals and an assistant principal who are school leaders in the ACT.

Policy writers drawn from the Australian Government, a territory education department and a Catholic education office.

Sexting

A practice involving the use of mobile phones or other forms of digital technologies to transmit an image taken by a person of themselves or someone else in a semi-naked or naked state, or involving an action of a sexual nature.

Social media

Internet sites and applications that enable people to share content, participate in social communication and networking. Some of the more well-known social media Internet sites include YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

Social networking

A means of social communication using Internet sites, which usually involving sending and receiving messages in the form of written text and images.

Web conferencing

A service that allows for interactive conferencing, meetings, and presentations in real time via the Internet. Web conferencing facilitates connectivity through the Internet, which allows for visual and audio interaction between those in locations remote from each other.