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The Experiences of Rainbow Students in Relationship and Sexuality Education

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Abstract: Discrimination within the school environment can significantly impact a rainbow student's academic outcomes and well-being. Rainbow-inclusive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) can act as a protective factor against discrimination. Previous literature has focused on the challenges rainbow students face in the education setting. The literature has adequately outlined the

role of curriculum, pedagogy, and policies that positively and negatively affect rainbow students. A paucity of literature exists on rainbow students in the relationships and sexuality education classroom. There is no existing research that examines Article 2 (nondiscrimination) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and rainbow students in Aotearoa New Zealand. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of nine rainbow secondary school students (aged 13–17) in the relationships and sexuality education classroom of New Zealand. The study also sought to understand how the participants' experiences uphold Article 2 of the UNCRC. The exploration employed a qualitative approach to answer the question, "How do rainbow students make sense of their lived experiences of relationships and sexuality education?" The study found that the essence of RSE was heteronormativity, which appears throughout the three superordinate themes: exclusion and silencing, interpersonal relationships, and rainbow topics for inclusion and visibility. In addition, the participants' experiences demonstrated that further affirmative action must be taken to uphold rainbow students' rights to Article 2 of the UNCRC.

Keywords: student voice; inclusive education; LGBTQ+; child rights

Introduction

Development during the adolescent years can be a challenging and complex time for all young people. However, those who identify as gender or sexuality diverse can lack some protective factors that support young people

through this period of their life (Birkett et al., 2009). A key challenge for rainbow students is the pervasive societal assumptions of heterosexuality as “normal,” described as “heteronormativity” (L. Smith, 2015). This notion exists throughout the school climate, curriculum, and practices within educational institutions and can influence the marginalization and silencing of rainbow students’ voices (Gunn, 2015).

The Ministry of Education in New Zealand recently released the new curriculum policy document, *Relationships and Sexuality Education—A Guide for Teachers, Leaders, and Boards of Trustees* (Ministry of Education, 2020), as a revision of *Sexuality Education: A guide for principals, board of trustees, and teachers* (Ministry of Education, 2015). The policy document exists alongside the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and assists in shaping the delivery of relationship and sexuality education (RSE) as a curriculum learning area within the health and physical education curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). The revised policy offers increased attention toward celebrating diversity and a clear direction toward rainbow-friendly education. The guide acknowledges gender and sexuality diversity among students and recognizes the necessity for education and advocacy on diversity in learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). In principle, the policy outlines a consistent, inclusive, and holistic approach to RSE. In practice, the responsibility of implementing and delivering inclusive RSE lies within the schools, boards of trustees, and the broader community, indicating that learning opportunities vary across schools. There are no obligations that require educators to teach all learning aspects recommended within the new policy

guidelines, and schools can opt out of teaching RSE (Fitzpatrick, 2018). The literature demonstrates that rainbow students who receive rainbow-inclusive sexuality education feel more supported and safer within the school environment. Inclusive practices can be a crucial factor in supporting young people. In addition, comprehensive RSE promotes positive sexual health outcomes and empowerment for young people (Haberland & Rogow, 2015). Exclusion of RSE or important topics such as gender and sexuality could be detrimental to all students' learning and well-being (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Throughout this article, various terms and abbreviations are used to describe gender and sexuality diverse individuals. These terms include *rainbow*, *gender and sexuality diverse*, *LGBTQIA+*, *LGBT+*, *LGBT*, and *LGB*. This language reflects the evolving understanding of the rainbow community and the shift toward increased visibility, recognition, and equality (Nababan & Debineva, 2019). The umbrella terms of rainbow and sex, sexuality, and gender diversity are used throughout. These terms refer to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex, transgender, trans, non-binary, and, further, any individuals whose identity differs from heterosexual and cisgender.

Background

The RSE guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2020) acknowledge New Zealand's obligation to maintain and teach human rights within education under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It aligns with the educational obligations to action strategies that uphold the rights of children and young people as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC, 1989). The UNCRC advocates and seeks to ensure that the New Zealand government considers the best interests of all children throughout the decision-making process in policies or services involving children. The United Nations recognizes the 54 articles within the UNCRC as vital for a child to survive, grow, participate, and reach their full potential. Four fundamental principles within the UNCRC embody the overall attitude toward children and their rights and provide a foundational component for implementing these in matters concerning the child: Article 2 (nondiscrimination), Article 3 (best interests of the child), Article 6 (survival, development, and protection), and Article 12 (participation). Article 2 identifies that the child has the right to be protected against any form of discrimination and that affirmative action should promote these rights.

General Comment No. 5: General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003) outlines the duty to recognize children “whose rights demand special measures” and address discrimination through “legislation, administration, and resource allocation, as well as educational measures to change attitudes” (p. 4). Article 12 expresses that educational decisions should be informed through student participation. Understanding students’ opinions and beliefs in educational matters encourages safe, supportive, and effective learning environments for all students (Lundy, 2007). Article 12 should not be deemed optional within educational matters. Rather, it should be viewed as a legal obligation.

Student Voice in Education

The literature argues that regard for student voice in educational practice assists in the “indivisibility, interdependence and interconnectedness” of children and young people in their environments (Lundy, 2007, p. 932). Lundy’s (2007) model of participation guides the implementation of Article 12, ensuring that due weight is given to student voices and that those voices inform matters affecting students. Lundy (2007) acknowledges that children are more capable than we perceive them to be. It is recommended that Article 12 be considered in conjunction with Article 2 of the UNCRC in a way that “builds self-esteem” and prepares disadvantaged and marginalized students “to take responsibility for their own lives” (Lundy, 2007, p. 933). Several studies emphasize the significance of considering children’s perspectives as part of the decision-making process where matters affect the child (Bourke & MacDonald, 2018; Lundy, 2007). In support of Article 12 (UNCRC, 1989), the literature confirms that children’s and young people’s opinions should be valued and reflected within schools and school policy (Bourke & MacDonald, 2018; Lundy, 2007).

Bourke and MacDonald (2018) report on a large-scale quantitative design that was implemented to understand the impact of student voice on a young person’s educational experience concerning a specific well-being program in secondary schools. The study found that empowering student voice increased student engagement in their learning. Additionally, it was established that students can influence educational decisions such as policy and pedagogical

approaches when provided with the platform to share their opinion (Bourke & MacDonald, 2018).

An international study that included five countries, including New Zealand, explored student voice within education (Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015). The extensive study imparts significant insight into student voice by capturing authentic views using open-ended surveys. The researchers established that students felt willing and able to share their perspectives of local contexts across all five nations and wanted to be a part of planning matters that affect children's futures. Students also felt underestimated when their voices were not heard, communicating that their developmental, social, and academic expectations and experiences were invalidated when unheard. The students wanted adults to gain insight into their dissatisfaction and use this understanding to improve the outcome for others, acknowledging their perspectives (Sargeant & Gillett-Swan, 2015).

The current literature affirms the necessary and essential role children's rights play in a learning environment. The literature identifies that the embodiment of Article 12 in education creates empowerment for students and improves outcomes. Conversely, the literature highlights that the absence of student voice can cause unfavorable outcomes for students. The following section considers rainbow students' rights within education, focusing on children's rights and nondiscrimination.

Discrimination Against Rainbow Students

The concept of nondiscrimination emerges within much of the literature on children's rights and gender and sexuality. Currently, there is limited research investigating rainbow students' right to Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989). Sandberg (2015), a member of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, indicates that in Article 2 the UNCRC fails to identify gender and sexuality diverse individuals as a marginalized group and sheds light on the problematic effects this omission could have on upholding rainbow rights. Sandberg also argues that the UNCRC's lack of recognition does not limit the rights of the rainbow community, however, as nondiscrimination applies to all people.

Formal equity (policy and legislation) does not consistently translate to successful measures of substantive equity (values, beliefs, and actions) for rainbow students (De Wet, 2017). De Wet's (2017) international survey determined that students are less aware of substantive equality and the heteronormative and heterosexist ideas and practices that underpin educational settings. This finding corresponds with the existing inconsistency between formal and substantive equality within the beliefs and actions of students. Students believe in rainbow equality but demonstrate subtle discrimination toward the rainbow community. De Wet (2017) states that the "language of sexual equality should be heard in policy, curriculum, discourses and all other aspects of teacher education" (p. 129). We must address discrimination through law, policy, and transformative action that addresses an individual's values and beliefs.

Heteronormativity Within the School Environment

The universal construct of heteronormativity exists as a global phenomenon throughout the education system. Numerous studies suggest that heteronormativity underpins the pedagogy, curriculum, and climate of a school (Birkett et al., 2009; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Dessel et al., 2017; Meyer et al., 2015). The pedagogical role of these heteronormative environments impacts rainbow students' well-being. The literature indicates that 84.9% of teachers support LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, but in practice, only 61.8% demonstrate this belief within their pedagogy (Meyer et al., 2015). These results concur with Taylor and colleagues' (2016) study, which found that teachers who value and acknowledge the importance of LGBTQ inclusion within their practice may still fall short within this area of their teaching. Additionally, some teachers did not support LGBTQ rights, and these beliefs were reflected in their practice. Prior research has also argued that enhanced implementation of LGBTQ-inclusive teacher training, LGBTQ-inclusive policy, as well as antihomophobic and antitransphobic policies across all schools increased student safety and wellbeing (Taylor et al., 2016).

Studies employing student participation determine that nondiscrimination and harassment policies can act as protective factors for the well-being and safety of rainbow youth (Birkett et al., 2009; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009). Chesir-Teran and Hughes (2009) determined that rates of perceived victimization, intolerance, and LGB-harassment among peers exist primarily in schools that lack inclusive policies and programs. In contrast, rainbow-inclusive policies,

practices, and resources combat heterosexism in schools. Building on Chesir-Teran and Hughes's (2009) work, Birkett and colleagues (2009) suggest that rainbow-inclusive policies and practices actively model inclusive behavior and create supportive school environments, which have the effect of lowering the rates of alcohol use, truancy, feelings of depression, and suicidality that arise from homophobic teasing, bullying, and questioning sexuality diverse students (Birkett et al., 2009).

The literature highlights the benefits of LGBTQIA+-inclusive curricula (Meyer et al., 2015; Millett, 2019; Snapp, Burdge, et al., 2015; Snapp, McGuire, et al., 2015). Implementing a curriculum that reflects gender and sexuality diversity provides the opportunity for valuable conversation on systematic oppression within the LGBTQIA+ community, providing a platform to challenge the existing heteronormative education system (Millet, 2019; Snapp, Burdge, et al., 2015).

Snapp, McGuire, and colleagues' (2015) large quantitative study ($n = 1,232$) sought data on LGBTQ-inclusive education across different curriculum areas. The study found that the health curriculum had the potential to provide the safest school environments for students. Snapp, Burdge, et al. (2015) highlighted that queer and social justice frameworks support LGBTQ students by questioning heteronormativity and creating learning that reflects LGBTQ identities (Snapp, Burge, et al., 2015). Millett (2019) reinforced these ideas by arguing that the introduction of LGBTQIA+ ideas allows students to challenge their thinking around gender and sexuality identities, disrupting heteronormativity.

Heteronormative School Environments in New Zealand

The literature within New Zealand supports the international evidence that heteronormativity underpins much of the educational system. The voice of 10 queer and questioning high-school students demonstrated the negative impact of heteronormative social practices at school (Sexton, 2012). The participants reported that being “out” at school prompted teasing, bullying, and homophobia, and as a consequence, some students would “hide” and “silence” their queer identities. When these issues were addressed at school, students shared that such practices were no longer an issue (Sexton, 2012).

Denny et al. (2016) report a correlation between school climate and depressive symptoms and suicidality rates among rainbow students. Their study determined that LGB students were at lower risk of mental health concerns when they experienced supportive educational environments.

In a study by Dessel et al. (2017), gender and sexuality diverse students reported that their teachers’ use of oppressive language led to mistrust, feelings of victimization, and exclusion in the school environment, lowering self-esteem and academic outcomes. The study emphasized that teachers must be equipped with inclusive vocabulary and implement anti-LGBTQ harassment policies to create equal opportunity for all students.

Hidden heteronormativity also exists within New Zealand’s curriculum (Carpenter & Lee, 2010). The research suggests that the lack of LGBT+ visibility in the curriculum can create unsupportive and exclusive learning environments (Carpenter & Lee, 2010). Similarly, Sexton (2012), demonstrated that students

felt unsafe and uncomfortable being out about their sexuality with peers at school because of discrimination (Carpenter & Lee, 2010). In a later study, Lee and Carpenter (2015) added that heteronormative practices could be explained by inadequate teacher preparation on rainbow diversity.

Sexuality Education Curriculum

The literature concludes that sexuality education does not meet the needs of all students (Abbott et al., 2015; Jarpe-Ratner, 2020). Two studies by Allen (2005, 2009) reported students' perceptions of sexuality education in New Zealand. Although the results were skewed toward heterosexual participants (91%), several significant findings were distinguished. These findings demonstrated that students would like a wider breadth of topics (including rainbow diversity), more time on the subject, and competent and confident teacher practice (Allen, 2005). Allen's (2009) study then considered the students' views of teacher practice of sexuality education and what best practice looked like to them. Allen's (2009) study confirmed that students perceive competent pedagogical practice as knowledgeable, relatable, and experienced.

More recent literature suggests that sexuality education has begun progressing towards rainbow-inclusive education (Abbott et al., 2015; JarpeRatner, 2020). However, Abbott and colleagues' (2015) discursive analyses propose that the current strategies applied by British teachers to account for LGBT+ inclusivity instead isolate and problematize the LGBT+ community. The heteronormative lens subsists in the participants' experiences of sexuality education which fails to match the experiences and needs of rainbow students

(Abbott et al., 2015). Jarpe-Ratner (2020) identifies that truly inclusive curriculum practice demonstrates rainbow topics throughout the entire curriculum rather than a one-off session. Moreover, educating effectively requires the appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes on sex, sexuality, and gender. As a result, students feel safer and more supported (Abbott et al., 2015; Jarpe-Ratner, 2020).

Sexuality Education Curriculum in New Zealand and Rainbow Students

Coleman and colleagues (2010) reveal where gaps remain in sexuality education across schools in New Zealand. Most relevant to rainbow needs was the absence of sexuality diverse messages. Students discerned that their teachers were uncomfortable teaching rainbow sexuality education and thus avoid discussion on rainbow topics within the classroom. They further perceived that the heterosexist climate of their schools provoked hostility and uncomfortable moments between teachers and students, which restricts student learning.

Young bisexual women in New Zealand secondary schools are experiencing misrecognition and bi-misogyny in the sexuality education classroom because of their sexual identity (McAllum, 2018). Bisexual students experienced peer exclusion once out about their sexuality, felt unsafe in sexual education due to teacher attitudes, and felt a sense of “straight pressure” or “heteroconformity” at school. McAllum (2018) gathered data through focus groups, reflective journals, and individual interviews with young bisexual women. This research was able to capture the issues faced by these young people. Further, the thematic analysis created a platform for quality discussion on the attitudes and practices of students and teachers in health and sexuality

education, demonstrating the impact they have on a young bisexual woman. McAllum's (2018) research highlights the responsibility teachers have in ensuring that their teaching is relevant and inclusive for all students, and thus appropriately trained and qualified teachers are needed to teach health and sexual education.

The Present Study

A substantial body of literature reveals the discrimination and adversity that gender and sexuality diverse students face in educational contexts, including in the sexuality education classroom. In addition, the literature identifies that the implementation of rainbow-inclusive curriculum, pedagogy, and practice promotes rainbow students' learning and well-being. However, it does not appear that rainbow students are experiencing inclusive education. Studies have identified that New Zealand schools' heteronormative assumptions and attitudes create unsupportive and discriminatory learning environments for rainbow students. New Zealand's literature falls short in addressing relationships and sexuality education for rainbow students. In addition, no current literature exists about how schools currently uphold rainbow rights under Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989). Based on this gap within the literature, this research explored the lived experiences of rainbow students in New Zealand's RSE classrooms, using the lens of Article 2 of the UNCRC.

Method

This study involved interviewing nine young people to explore their lived experiences in an attempt to understand their personal and social worlds

(Creswell & Poth, 2016). The present study's design explores rainbow students' lived experiences of RSE (Ministry of Education, 2020) in secondary schools (years 9–13) in New Zealand, aiming to understand how rainbow students' experiences of Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989) are upheld in RSE. The overarching question of this research was: How do rainbow students make sense of their lived experience of RSE?

The recruitment process aimed to secure participants who identified as a part of the rainbow community and had lived experiences of RSE. The study participants ($n = 9$) consented to participate in this study voluntarily. Participants were recruited through the RainbowYOUTH organization and schools nationwide. The Massey University Human Ethics Committee granted ethics approval before the study commencement (Massey University, 2017).

The researcher (first author) provided an information sheet outlining the research aim, involvement, duration, and confidentiality. All participants provided written consent to participate in the research and were given opportunities to withdraw from the study at any time throughout the research process. The participants and researcher engaged in ongoing consent before the data collection.

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted on an individual basis. All interviews took place either at school or over video call and lasted 30–60 minutes. The researcher used a digital audio recorder to record all responses.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted across five phases. Phase one involved reading the raw data multiple times and forming written transcripts (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Phase two investigated the semantic content and language use within the transcripts. The researcher marked any meaning units identified within the statements and made additional memos about meaning shifts within the transcripts. Next, the researcher established all data across participants' transcripts for analysis, drawing upon relationships, processes, places, values, and principles (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

In phase three, the researcher determined emergent themes within the data using a "hermeneutic circle" process (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). This process allowed the researcher to recognize significant parts of the text while still understanding it as a whole. Emergent themes were grouped accordingly with concise and meaningful statements.

Phase four located patterns and connections across the emergent themes. They were put in priority order (most to least meaningful), and some were discarded. The most meaningful themes (superordinate and subordinate) were interpreted and identified across the transcripts using these strategies: abstraction, subsumption, contextualization, numeration, and data function. Through these strategies several patterns and connections were identified to capture the participants' experiences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

The first four phases for each participant's data were then repeated, the researcher began to search for patterns across all nine cases. The researcher

then rearranged the data into superordinate themes and subthemes that represented the data set as a whole (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Findings

Participants described heteronormativity as being at the heart of the RSE experience. The three superordinate themes, *exclusion and silencing*, *interpersonal relationships*, and *rainbow discussions for inclusion and visibility*, are presented below as the subthemes. These themes formulate the essential structure of the participants' lived experiences.

Exclusion and Silencing

For participants, heteronormative messaging in RSE functioned to exclude and silence rainbow students in the classroom. Participants felt their teachers demonstrated a bias towards cis-heterosexual students' needs. While listening to one student, the frustration in their voice is audible:

It kind of makes you feel like they're trying to pander to like, you know, the class was filled with a lot of like, very straight boys at the time. And it kind of felt like they were trying to please them instead of include us. (Francis, year 13)

Participants believed their teachers and peers were uninterested in rainbow topics in RSE. Exclusion of rainbow topics manifests distress, shame, and confusion about sexual orientation:

Like, it's kind of depressing because it's like, you know, it's when people act like your existence isn't appropriate for everyone. And it's like, you know, there's nothing wrong with me for existing.... At first, I was like

ashamed of myself, and I was like, I shouldn't have to be ashamed for my existence, and it's like, I'm mad about it and slightly bitter about it. [] It's like, you know, just when you get tired and stuff kind of builds up and it's like, you can tell people are just trying to ignore aspects of you. And then it's like you can't erase me, I'm here! (Mary, year 13)

Participants struggled to comprehend how the RSE content related to them. They dismissed this learning as irrelevant and unhelpful: "I can't really say anything regarding that concern... In fact, there's not a lot of material that we learn about regarding [rainbow topics]" (Talia, year 12). Participants also felt there was not enough time to discuss important topics comprehensively, and they assumed the time shortage meant rainbow discussions became secondary to the rest of the curriculum.

Gender-inclusive, gender-correct language and respect for students' chosen names influenced participants' experiences of an inclusive environment in RSE. Rachel (year 12) noted the importance of these practices, highlighting her teacher's effort to use "they" pronouns in RSE. Rachel explained that it not only "makes everyone feel better," but it also educates students to do the same. In contrast, another participant described disrespectful language as harmful: "[It] makes me not feel good... in like, a space underneath my ribcage. It just feels nasty" (Alex, year 12).

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships within and outside RSE affected the participants' RSE experiences and determined how comfortable students felt

attending and participating in class discussions. Participants reported negative teacher attitudes toward the rainbow community. One participant expressed that their teacher made jokes that “can definitely hurt people like, emotionally” (Louise, year 12). Another articulated the mishandling of rainbow discrimination: “The school doesn’t handle it the greatest, it’s definitely more about appearance and not what the kids feel” (Stephanie, year 10). Other participants felt their teachers were misinformed and ill-educated on the rainbow community. One participant described a teacher’s “childish mentality” toward rainbow people (Louise, year 12). These experiences contributed to an unwillingness to participate in classroom discussions.

Six of nine participants stated overall satisfaction with their peer relationships; all nine participants described some form of prejudice or queerphobia at school but expected and tolerated it. One participant stated it “just makes normal school life harder” (Stephanie, year 10). One student described his belief behind the transphobia he experienced in this way: There’s lots of people who don’t accept transpeople, but there are more people who do. And it’s not that people go, “Ahhh, I hate transpeople!”

They go, “Oh, I’m very ignorant, and I don’t know what to say about this topic.” So it’s not that I’m being harmed by intentional hate, it’s people’s ignorance, like accidentally stepping on a pin. (Alex, year 12)

Participants perceived having supportive friendships as a safeguard in the RSE classroom:

In health class, when [] there were things that weren't quite accurate. And I would tell my friends, on occasion, my friends would speak up for me and say those things for the teacher. And that was really positive. I really liked that. (Alex, year 12)

Additionally, participants indicated that their friends make them feel included, visible, and accepted:

People [friends] let me talk, basically and like, you know, when we talk about things, like when we talk about relationships and stuff like I had a girlfriend for a year, and I could just talk about it and that was nice. (Mary, year 13)

Rainbow Discussion for Inclusion and Visibility

Participants indicated rainbow topics and discussions within RSE were highly valued and considered essential for all students' learning:

[Relationships and sexuality education is] crucial. It's such an important topic for everybody. Umm, important relationships and our relationships with other people, define us as people. And when we don't have healthy relationships with other people, then our own lives... They... [sighs] the opposite of benefit. They suck. (Alex year 12)

Rainbow discussion was seen by participants as a means of inclusion, visibility, and advocacy. Students expressed they were pleased to see some rainbow topics in RSE, although most were not pleased that this subject was addressed in a one-off lesson rather than included in all lessons. Participants felt

more supported at school when teachers were comfortable discussing rainbow topics. Most participants believed normalizing rainbow topics in the curriculum would enhance feelings of inclusion and visibility. Students felt the current delivery of rainbow topics was “uncomfortable” and “awkward.”

It wasn't great. Like it was they didn't go near any depth of it at all. But that it showed me like the first sign of like, like rainbow inclusion and sex ed, and technically the only but it yeah, it showed a little bit of it. It just was like, okay, at least they're including something that makes you feel included. (Rachel, year 12)

The RSE classroom was viewed as one of the only places at school where people “willingly bring up the gays.” In contrast, “tokenism” of rainbow topics in some students' experiences reinforced heterosexism: “It feels forced because they have to [talk about it] because they, everyone's so used to just not talking about it. It's like, you can have a conversation” (Mary, year 13).

Discussion

This study explored the lived accounts of RSE through the voices of nine rainbow students in New Zealand. The study aimed to understand better how rainbow students make sense of their experiences of RSE. The study also aimed to understand how these experiences uphold Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989).

The study revealed three superordinate themes which reflected this group of rainbow students' experiences of RSE: exclusion and silencing, interpersonal relationships, and rainbow discussion for inclusion and visibility. The identified themes are interconnected and together reveal the reality and meaning of the

participants' lived experiences. The study determined that discrimination often goes undetected in RSE predominately due to the focus on heterosexuality in practice, curriculum, and attitudes. Consequently, the RSE classroom does not fully uphold the participants' rights in Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989).

Contributing Factors That Construct Rainbow Students Experiences in RSE

The findings indicate both the affirmative and unfavorable measures that occur within the participants' experiences of RSE throughout curriculum, pedagogy, and interpersonal relationships. These factors intrinsically influenced the attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions that rainbow students have of the RSE classroom. Notably, the participants' experiences highlighted that rainbow students feel safer, more supported, and included in spaces where their identity is acknowledged, valued, and given equitable weight to their cis or heterosexual counterparts. Rainbow-inclusive RSE acts as a protective factor for rainbow students at school. Overall, these findings align with Snapp, McGuire, et al. (2015) and McAllum (2018).

Rainbow Students' Rights to Nondiscrimination

The participants' experiences outline the various characteristics of RSE which uphold or abandon rainbow students' rights to nondiscrimination through Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989). Schools in New Zealand are responsible for ensuring all appropriate measures are in place to protect students from discrimination within education. The findings confirm that many schools attempt to provide rainbow content within the RSE curriculum, but heterosexuality maintains a privileged position in the RSE classroom. Participants raised

concerns about current classroom practices as being insufficient to support rainbow students. Participants viewed their teachers' position in shaping the classroom as essential to the deconstruction of heterosexuality and the segregation this heteronormativity causes between them and their cis-hetero counterparts.

Participants did not feel overtly discriminated against but instead experienced mostly covert discrimination concealed by unsatisfactory pedagogical practices and curriculum content. While participants acknowledged and appreciated when their teachers attempted to incorporate rainbow-inclusive topics, there was a sense of disheartenment in most teachers' lack of knowledge and skill in teaching these topics effectively. These findings build upon the literature of Allen (2005, 2009) and Jarpe-Ratner (2020) and further reiterate the importance of teacher training, knowledge, and skills.

Rainbow students are acutely aware of their teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the rainbow community. Even though some participants believed their teachers' attitudes toward the rainbow community were negative, some participants identified that their teachers do not necessarily have ill intent to make students feel excluded, invisible, or devalued. Instead, they do not have the education to support them in the classroom. These results reflect previous studies' findings that determine the inconsistencies in teacher attitudes and practice of rainbow-inclusion (Meyer et al., 2015). Furthermore, results from this study may contribute to previous findings, which suggest that while teachers support rainbow-inclusive education they might not be comfortable teaching on such topics due to

their lack of education and fear of offending or exposing rainbow students (Taylor et al., 2016).

Rainbow-Inclusive RSE

This study brought meaningful insight into what RSE means to the participants and why the subject is important to them. The participants' experiences recognized RSE as significant to their well-being, participation, and learning. The participants were concerned not only with their own learning but also with their questioning and cis-heterosexual counterparts. The international literature concurs with the participants' views, demonstrating value in challenging heteronormativity in the classroom and implementing rainbow topics throughout the curriculum (Meyer et al., 2015; Millett, 2019; Snapp, Burdge, et al., 2015; Snapp, McGuire, et al., 2015). Implementing a rainbow-inclusive RSE curriculum can construct more equitable learning environments (Snapp, Burdge, et al., 2015).

Rainbow students recognize rainbow-inclusive practices and curriculum as a measure of advocacy for the rainbow community. Rainbow students believe they may encounter fewer experiences of discrimination if individuals receive appropriate rainbow education. They want to feel and be treated as equal to their peers. Gunn (2015) describes how the curriculum can be used as a tool to advocate and empower gender and sexuality diversity beyond the "heteronorm."

The findings from this research study demonstrate an optimistic development for the future of RSE in New Zealand if schools continue to expand their measures toward rainbow inclusion. Through this study, it is apparent that

schools have begun to consider rainbow-inclusive learning in RSE. This finding is in contrast to Lee and Carpenter (2015), who expressed that rainbow students' experiences were inadequate and unsafe, and no indicators of rainbow discussion were evident. Furthermore, the participants' experiences drew attention to rainbow-inclusive RSE to measure visibility and demarginalization.

This study has demonstrated that participants' experiences in RSE do not fully empower rainbow students to embrace their identities and form healthy and respectful relationships. These experiences highlight a gap within the implementation of RSE. Palkki and Caldwell's (2018) study recognized the power of rainbow-inclusive education for rainbow students and the perception of safety and visibility this practice adds. Comprehensive RSE empowers marginalized young people to perceive themselves as equal within society; protect their health; and become capable, active members of society (Haberland & Rogow, 2015).

It could also be inferred that, according to the time allocated to the subject, many schools do not value RSE in the same way they do other subject areas. The participants viewed the lack of time to teach RSE as problematic and felt that perhaps more time would create space for rainbow discussion.

Conclusion

This research allowed nine rainbow students to share their lived experiences of RSE. The study investigated these experiences in line with participants' right to nondiscrimination, as stated in the UNCRC (1989). Heteronormativity was the essence of the nine students' experiences and was found throughout the three superordinate themes, exclusion and silencing,

rainbow discussion for visibility and inclusion, and interpersonal relationships. The study found that participants did not perceive their experiences of RSE to be overtly discriminatory but acted to marginalize, exclude, and silence the students in subtle ways.

Therefore, rainbow students' rights under Article 2 of the UNCRC (1989) were not being met in several ways, including teacher practice, the curriculum, and interactions with others. The rainbow students' experiences shed light on the issue that schools continue to provide RSE that primarily considers the needs of heterosexual students. Rainbow students desire to be seen and considered within RSE and perceive RSE as important for their learning and well-being. However, the current lack of conversation around gender and sexuality education in the classroom reinforces marginalization. For this reason, schools must choose to recognize how their curriculum and practice disempower rainbow students' and actively work to change this situation.

Implications

The current research indicates a positive shift in attitudes toward the rainbow community compared to prior research findings. The participants predominantly feel accepted in their classroom climate and have protective peer relationships. These factors appear to assist the mitigation of overt discrimination in RSE. However, heteronormativity remained the dominant narrative within RSE, presenting itself as a silent form of discrimination (Fitzpatrick, 2018). This study focused on student voice to provide significant insight into improving RSE in New Zealand's schools. It is valuable to understand the experiences of RSE through

the perspective of rainbow students as it is their learning and well-being that must be considered. This research gives confidence that continued and increased advocacy and conversations that disrupt heteronormative thinking will enhance acceptance and belonging and move from tolerance to inclusion.

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