Teaching Gender and Sexual Diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand: How Hierarchies and Surveillance Shape What is Possible

Katie Graham1 · Karen Nairn2 · Gareth J. Treharne1

Received: 31 October 2021 / Accepted: 10 July 2022 / Published online: 31 July 2022 © The Author(s) 2022

Abstract
The ways that gender and sexuality are included within secondary school teaching has implications for students’ understandings and ongoing wellbeing. In this research we interviewed nine educators who work in secondary schools in Te Wai Pounamu (the South Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand) about how they approach gender and sexuality within their teaching and what informs these approaches. Foucauldian discourse analysis was used to analyse the interview data. Educators’ approaches to gender and sexuality were shaped by the subject(s) they teach, educational context, and subjectivity in relation to their own gender and sexuality. Educators were conscious of the systems of hierarchy and surveillance within education settings, which often limited their willingness to include content that explored gender and sexual diversity. These findings help inform efforts to create more inclusive school environments and suggest that educators need to feel safe including diverse discourses of gender and sexuality within their teaching.

Keywords Gender · Sexuality · Foucauldian discourse analysis · Teaching

Introduction

All young people within Aotearoa/New Zealand are required to participate in education until age 16. For most of these young people this means attending state funded secondary schools, which are places of considerable disciplinary power (Allen, 2013; Graham et al., 2017). Disciplinary power can be conceptualised as a force that normalises particular hierarchies through repetition and surveillance (Foucault, 1977). The result is that particular actions (e.g., students wearing gender specific...
uniforms) and subjectivities (e.g., masculine men) are normalised while others are marginalised (e.g., feminine men). These hierarchies of normativity are reinforced through the discursive practices within classroom teaching and the wider school environment (Allen, 2013; Graham et al., 2017). Discursive practices are the range of activities that educators perform within education settings that have the potential to shape students’ understandings of gender and sexuality (e.g., explicit teaching, responses to homophobic bullying).

Hierarchies of knowledge reinforced and produced through disciplinary practices within secondary schools often reinforce what we refer to as ‘restrictive’ discourses of gender and sexuality. The term restrictive discourses is used to refer to a set of discourses which include constructions of gender and sexuality that have a limited range of valued subjectivities and therefore restrict the way that people can ‘appropriately’ enact their gender and sexuality (e.g., biological essentialism). Circulation of these discourses can result in homophobic and misogynistic bullying which negatively impacts the health and wellbeing of students (Clark et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2014; Wilson & Cariola, 2020). Queer and trans students are often worst affected by the dominance of restrictive discourses of gender and sexuality and these students feel less safe at school than their peers (Fleming et al., 2021). Negative school experiences make queer and trans students more likely to drop out of school (Allen, 2019; Johnson et al., 2014) which has the potential to perpetuate their already marginalised subjectivities. Queer and trans teachers are also impacted by school environments where restrictive discourses circulate. Some of these teachers choose not to share their gender or sexuality due to fears of negative reactions from students, school communities and other staff (Ferfolja, 2007, 2008; Rasmussen et al., 2017).

Past research has documented the continued reproduction of restrictive discourses of gender and sexuality within secondary schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand, but this research has primarily involved students and focused on the sexuality education curriculum (Allen, 2019; Sexton, 2012). There is a scarcity of research that explores how gender and sexuality are constructed within teaching of other secondary school subjects in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Educators’ voices are also absent from much of the existing qualitative research on gender and sexuality in teaching, with other school staff or students used to gauge educators’ practices (Ellis & Bentham, 2020; Painter, 2008). This limits the ability to understand what shapes educators’ discursive practices related to gender and sexuality. In this paper, we explore educators’ perspectives about the inclusion of gender and sexuality within secondary schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Specifically, we focus on what shapes their discursive practices relating to gender and sexuality within their teaching and interactions with students. Exploring the considerations that inform these educators’ teaching provides insights into what shapes the wider cultural norms of gender and sexuality within secondary education settings.

We begin this paper by providing a summary of what is known about the inclusion of gender and sexuality within secondary schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We then provide details of our research methods, followed by our analysis with a focus on the discursive and disciplinary forces that shape educators’ approaches to gender and sexuality. Finally, we summarise the implications of our findings for the
education sector including suggestions to help increase the inclusion of diverse practices of gender and sexuality within education.

**Research on Gender and Sexuality Within Secondary Education**

The majority of research exploring the inclusion of gender and sexuality within secondary schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand focuses on the sexuality education curriculum (e.g., Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Allen, 2007; Allen & Carmody, 2012; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Fitzpatrick, 2018). This research indicates that teaching of sexuality education often focuses on the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and teenage pregnancy, with content framed within discourses of biological essentialism (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Elliott, 2003; Ellis & Bentham, 2020). These discourses tend to normalise heterosexuality and restrict gender to binary notions of women and men, characterised by biologically determined sexual behaviours and attraction (Elliott, 2003; Gavey, 2019). Framing gender and sexuality within these discourses constructs limited acceptable femininities and masculinities and excludes people who are trans or queer (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Allen, 2019; Graham et al., 2017). When queer and trans subjectivities are mentioned, students have described it as being tokenistic and lacking depth (Ellis & Bentham, 2020). For many years researchers in both Aotearoa/New Zealand and overseas have critiqued the application of sexuality education and advocated for alternative frameworks (e.g., a discourse of desire) that would allow sexuality education to be more effectively and inclusively taught (Allen & Carmody, 2012; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Elliott, 2003; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006).

Much of the research outlined above has been taken into consideration within the formal sexuality education curriculum within Aotearoa/New Zealand. This curriculum continues to be updated and the current version (along with associated documents e.g., Relationships and Sexuality Education: A Guide for teachers, leaders and Boards of Trustees) outlines approaches to sexuality education that are inclusive and integrated across a range of school subjects. But sexuality education is the only subject where boards must consult with the community about the content (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2021). Each school’s community therefore has the potential to influence their school’s approach to sexuality education. The inclusion of consultation has the potential to conflict with the inclusive and integrated goals of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum. While some students in Aotearoa/New Zealand might be receiving the idealised version of this curriculum, research continues to indicate varied experiences of sexuality education and unfortunately many students feel excluded (Ellis & Bentham, 2020).

Outside of sexuality education the inclusion of diverse discourses of gender and sexuality is also varied. A few participants in Painter’s (2008) research with students from Otago schools recounted examples of critical teaching around gender and sexuality through the use of films, essays and debates. But a large number of students from the same study reported learning nothing about gender and
sexuality outside of sexuality education (Painter, 2008). In a more recent survey conducted in Aotearoa/New Zealand, about half (50.7%) of the 16 to 19 year old participants indicated their education included diverse representations of gender and sexuality outside of sexuality education (Ellis & Bentham, 2020). The inclusion of diversity most commonly presented itself in the form of teachers and students challenging heteronormative and cisnormative bullying (Ellis & Bentham, 2020).

When restrictive discourses of gender and sexuality go unchallenged they contribute to normalisation of gender policing and harassment (Graham et al., 2017). Bullying and harassment of those who do not fit within expected gender norms has been documented in New Zealand (Sexton, 2012) and overseas (de Jong, 2014; Meyer, 2008; Robinson et al., 2014; Wilson & Cariola, 2020). This bullying is especially common for queer and trans students who do not feel as safe at school as their peers (Flemming et al. 2021), and negative experiences make them more likely to drop out of school (Allen, 2019). The consequences of restrictive discourses show how important it is to better understand what informs teachers’ approaches to gender and sexuality within education. Understanding this will help develop ways to disrupt restrictive discourses and create more inclusive learning environments. Fostering inclusivity aligns with the expectations laid out by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. The Secondary School Code of Professional Responsibility requires that education environments be safe for all students (New Zealand Education Council, 2017). The New Zealand curriculum document’s goals and principles include creating learners who are “positive in their own identity” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p.8), “respect themselves, others and human rights” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p.10), and experience a curriculum that is “forward thinking and inclusive” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 9). How gender and sexuality are represented and reproduced within education has consequences for all students, determining whether the goals set out in the curriculum document are achieved or not.

Research evidence cited above demonstrates that when restrictive discourses of gender and sexuality are dominant within schools, they are not safe spaces for queer and trans students. Students are not the only ones affected by these restrictive discourses, research from Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia indicates queer teachers also face harassment and feel the need to hide their sexuality (Ferfolja, 2007, 2008; Rasmussen et al., 2017).

Educators are significant figures within education settings, so understanding their views on including gender and sexuality in the formal and informal curriculum is important. Within Aotearoa/New Zealand there is limited research about how educators include gender and sexuality within their teaching. Research that included some school staff (Painter, 2008 included Principals and Counsellors) along with students’ perceptions of school staff (Ellis & Bentham, 2020; Painter, 2008) identified concerns about the consequences of including queer content, limiting its inclusion. In particular, concerns about the reaction of parents and conservative school communities limited what educators felt comfortable teaching. Students in Ellis and Bentham’s research also reflected on how teachers’ limited knowledge restricted their ability to comprehensively cover topics related to queer sexualities (Ellis & Bentham, 2020). While these studies provide an indication of the factors that shape
the discursive practices around sexuality within education they did not focus on educators. These studies relied on other school staff or students’ reports to speculate on what might be driving educators’ discursive practices. The research reported here included interviews with educators to provide greater understanding of the various forces that shape their approaches to teaching gender and sexuality in secondary schools.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with nine educators from four different secondary schools. The schools were recruited as part of a larger project (Graham, 2019) that involved interviewing both students and educators from secondary schools within Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Secondary schools were recruited via communication with the school Principal. The schools are referred to using the pseudonyms Riverview High, Parkview High, Rural High and Littletown High. At the time of data collection, the decile allocated to each of the four schools ranged between 6 and 10, indicating the socio-economic status of each school’s community tended to be towards the higher end of the range (10 being the highest and 1 the lowest) (Ministry of Education, 2021). All schools included students in year 7 to 13 (students aged from 10 to 18), and student rolls ranged from approximately 180 to 700. Three of the schools were co-educational while one (Parkview High) was a single-sex boys’ school. One important thing to note is that these four schools all had principals that were willing to have a university researcher talk to school staff and students about gender and sexuality in teaching. Allowing this research to be conducted within their school could be read as some indication of support for developing more inclusive school environments. Schools unwilling to approve research like this, present particular contexts where teachers are likely to face similar but possibly more restrictive contextual challenges than the ones we report here.

Interviews were conducted by the first author who is a gay Pākehā woman who was in her late 20 s when this data was collected. The interview was the first time she met most of the teachers, the exception were the two teachers from Rural High who she met during an initial visit to the school. The interviews focused on whether educators thought gender and sexuality were relevant to their teaching, how they included gender and sexuality within their teaching, and their perception of the broader school environment. All interviews took place in a quiet room on the participant’s school campus. Prior to the interview, participants gave consent and then completed a short demographic questionnaire.

Of the nine secondary educators, eight were teachers (two from each of the four schools) and the nineth educator worked in a student support role at Riverview High. Educators ranged in age from 24–50 years with two participants in their 20 s, three in their 30 s, three in their 40 s and one in their 50 s. Six recorded their gender as female and three as male; all were cisgender. All recorded their ethnicity as New Zealand European. Two of the men recorded their sexuality as gay and the remaining seven participants recorded their sexuality as straight. Participants’ teaching
experience ranged from 1–15 years with five participants having 1–5 years experience and four having 10–15. The participants teaching subjects were English, Home Economics, PE and Health, Science and Social Studies. Throughout this paper pseudonyms are used to refer to the educators, some of which were chosen by the participants.

**Theoretical Framework and Discourse Analysis**

Foucauldian discourse analysis was the main analytical tool. In this study, the focus was on educators’ and students’ use of language and the way that they constructed particular discourses about gender and sexuality (Foucault, 1972). Foucault defines discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). This definition emphasises the active, constructive role of language. Discourse analysis is a common approach to exploring constructions of gender and sexuality within education (Allen, 2007; Middleton, 1998; Smith et al., 2016). It is a useful tool for critically examining the discourses that circulate within education settings and their material outcomes (Foucault, 1977; Parker, 2015).

Power is central to Foucault’s notion of discourse, and is reproduced through language (Foucault, 1977; Parker, 2015; Willig, 2008). Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power is particularly relevant for our analysis. In the introduction, we outlined the role disciplinary power plays in reproducing hierarchies of gender and sexuality (Foucault, 1972, 1977; Parker, 1992). Disciplinary power is central to the function and organisation of schools. Educators occupy a unique space within education settings where they are both enforcers of, and subject to, surveillance (Middleton, 1998; Murphy, 2013). They enforce disciplinary power through their teaching and monitoring of students’ behaviour (e.g., ensuring homework is complete, managing disruptions in the classroom). At the same time, educators are the subjects of surveillance by students and school leaders, with their practices monitored to ensure they align with the expectations of those in leadership positions (Murphy, 2013). Surveillance by others is what initiates the process of normalisation. The repetition of this surveillance and correction of an individual’s behaviour along with the constant possibility of surveillance results in this process being internalised so that the behaviour becomes a part of an individual’s ‘normal’ routine (Foucault, 1977).

Foucault noted that teaching settings were reliant on surveillance for their efficacy (Foucault, 1977). While students are obvious targets of surveillance, Middleton (1998) notes that all individuals within education “channel power: students and teachers police each other’s outward appearance, deportment and behaviour, although it is the teacher who officially has the power over students” (Middleton, 1998, p. 21). We use Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore educators’ teaching practices and the role disciplinary power – especially surveillance—plays in these practices.

Analysis was guided by methods laid out by Parker (1992) and Willig (2008). All transcripts were repeatedly read and coded with initial discursive constructs. This initial coding focused on educators’ approaches to education and inclusion of gender and sexuality within their teaching. Initial discursive constructs included aspects of
educators’ roles within education (e.g., professionalism, social justice and limits of role) along with constructions of gender and sexuality (e.g., biological essentialism, diverse inclusion, and gender and sexuality as controversial). Initial ideas were then read numerous times with a focus on the systems of power at play (e.g., disciplinary power), the ways particular subjectivities were constructed (e.g., who was valued, who was marginalised), how constructions of subjectivities might affect lived experience (e.g., is this different for someone who is gay compared to someone who is heterosexual), how the discursive ideas influenced possible practices (e.g., what topics were seen as inappropriate to teach), and how the discursive ideas linked to historical constructions of gender and sexuality (e.g., were these ideas similar or different from those in the past). We turn now to our analysis.

**What Discursive and Disciplinary Forces Shaped Teachers’ Education Practices**

The nine educators within this research had different approaches to the inclusion of gender and sexuality within their formal teaching and broader interactions with students. These approaches were shaped by disciplinary power, educational context, teaching subject and educators’ subjectivities.

**Maintaining Professional Boundaries**

Spot, a science teacher from Rural High, indicated the importance of developing boundaries around the types of interactions she had with students and ensuring that these interactions aligned with her skill set.

“I’ve got really clear guidelines about what I’ll talk about and what I won’t. I don’t have the skills to deal with how kids feel about stuff, you know like I don’t have that health training, so yeah I’ll stick to biology only.

Spot indicated that her specialised skill set restricted her discursive practices by limiting her to only teaching or talking with students about the biology of sex and not the emotionality of other topics related to gender and sexuality. While Spot clearly articulated the boundaries of her role as being informed by her training, she also indicated that following her personal guidelines was about meeting the expectations of others. “I don’t mind talking about it at all, but I don’t know what sort of, the school’s expectation of what you talk about is. And I don’t want kids to go and you know…cause issues.” The discourses Spot drew upon and how she positioned her teaching within them were aimed at ensuring that her teaching practices did not “cause issues”. Spot’s experience speaks to disciplinary power and surveillance. It suggests that “kids” form a surveillance network where any of her teaching practices or interactions with students has the potential to be reported to someone in authority. Her practices could “cause issues” if deemed as not fitting with expectations of her conduct.
While Spot indicated that she did not know what the school’s expectations were, at another point in the interview she talked about gender and sexuality as controversial topics within school settings and mentioned school policy that aligned with this idea of controversy.

I think you just have to be mindful of the families that kids come from. […] When they do sexual health, they send a note out to all parents to say if you want your kid removed, you know, let us know kind of thing. And I know that some are, that’s the parents’ choice. […] Same thing happens with evolution, like we have to send out a letter about that as well […] anything that’s controversial you know.

Spot noted the institutional practice of sending out letters to inform parents about “controversial” topics. The labelling of topics as controversial, and taking action in relation to this label, helps to maintain the status of these topics as controversial. So, while Spot indicated that she was not aware of the schools’ expectations regarding the teaching of gender and sexuality, policies like this likely informed her understandings of school expectations and in turn her personal guidelines. Important to note is that sending letters to parents about removing their child from sexuality education, while not required, is consistent with sexuality education policy in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Within this policy, parents are able to have their child removed from sexuality education and schools are required to consult parents about sexuality education every two years (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2021). The continued construction of gender and sexuality as controversial is maintained by both the individual school and the broader policies of the Ministry of Education. These policies single out sexuality education as distinct from other areas of learning and it is unsurprising that it creates uncertainties for educators.

Tracy, a health teacher from Littletown High, provided another example of someone who was uncertain about school leaders’ expectations when she faced complicated situations with students.

A student after a lesson, said “Miss I think I’m bisexual” and she burst into tears and said […] “I haven’t told anyone but I just felt like I could talk to you.” […] I thought cool we’ve obviously created a really safe space we’ve had some […] great conversations and […] I felt quite proud that she sort of said that to me. I wasn’t quite sure where to go to from there though, you know so I said “Ok, so what would you like to do? Like did you want some help talking to your parents?” she said “No, no I’m just we’re not that far yet I just wanted to talk about it.” And I thought well I don’t know how in my role or my job as a teacher what would I sort of do with information like that in the future. So that’s something that I sort of have to look into. […] I wasn’t uncomfortable with it at all. I’d just have to know what the boundaries were I guess. Like what the expectations would be or what I could or couldn’t do to steer that student where they needed.

While Tracy felt comfortable talking with this student, she also indicated the importance of having guidelines that provided her and other teachers with clear
“expectations”. Without clear guidelines around the boundaries of their role, educators are forced to make decisions about how to act and face the potential consequences of their action or inaction.

Tracy’s recollection of this conversation suggests that even at the time she was conscious of her lack of knowledge about the schools’ expectations in such situations, which created caution around her actions. By creating “safe spaces” within their health education classrooms and “having great conversations” about sex and sexuality, health teachers might be particularly likely to have students share such things. Despite training that enables them to feel comfortable and confident with their teaching content, a school’s lack of guidelines might limit their confidence in situations like those Tracy experienced.

Without clear indications from school management, educators have to find ways to ‘read’ the school and based on this reading make decisions about content that would be deemed appropriate by the school community. Educators’ subjectivities shaped the readings of their schools as we demonstrate next.

Conflicting Subjectivities

Personally, I’m just a little bit more cautious about [including sexuality] explicitly. If it’s sort of [...] authentically in a text [then I would], but I probably wouldn’t say, “Right boys, today we’re going to study a text that’s all about gay characters.” I think that would be a step too far for our boys, they’re generally a little bit more conservative and their families are a bit more conservative than you might expect at a different school, so I’m just cautious how to do that. I’m also very wary [...] all the students here especially in the senior school, they know that I’m gay, they know that I recently came out. I don’t want to be seen as having a recruitment drive for anything like that. You know it’s part of sort of [...] keeping myself safe.

Matthew, an English teacher from Parkview High, explained how explicitly teaching content about sexuality did not align with the conservative nature of families in this particular school community. Matthew’s subjectivity as a gay man added to his concerns about parents’ reactions. He hypothesised that parents would be upset about the content and see him as trying to push a personal agenda, something heterosexual educators in the study did not talk about. In this way Matthew appears to see his queer subjectivity as at odds with his role as a teacher. To help balance these two conflicting subjectivities, Matthew policed his own behaviour in anticipation of heightened surveillance of his practices. Matthew’s fears about parents’ reactions to his teaching speaks to students’ power within the classroom in relation to the surveillance of teachers. While Matthew might appear to be the one in control, he was acutely aware of his students reporting his actions to their parents or those higher up the hierarchical structure of schooling (Foucault, 1977; Middleton, 1998).

Matthew’s fears about teaching content on sexuality also links to historical discourses. The ‘gay agenda’ and the idea that queer teachers might recruit vulnerable young people is a fear that conservatives have been propagating since the 1970s (Graydon, 2011; Jackson, 2007). When queer teachers work in schools or
communities they read as conservative, their teaching is likely to be constrained due to what they deem as safe for them to teach. Heterosexual teachers within the same conservative school environments were unlikely to be affected by these constraints or accused of having a personal agenda because they are protected by their assumed heteronormativity.

Teachers can also be limited by schools who provide them with explicit directives for teaching gender and sexuality. Matthew reflected on a previous teaching job where he was given very clear instructions not to talk about the diversity of gender and sexuality.

I used to teach year 13 religious studies at a Catholic school and part of that was sex and sexuality. […] I conformed completely with the doctrine. And we didn’t go anywhere near sexuality as being a spectrum it was all… focused on relationships. And I was under very clear instruction you know not even to discuss things like contraception, because Catholic school context and all of that.

The previous examples indicate that without clear instructions, educators are required to make decisions about what the school would deem as appropriate and operate within an imagined boundary of acceptable teaching. In contrast at the Catholic school, Matthew was given clear instructions which meant he had less room to manoeuvre because not following them would have been outright resistance.

**Diverse Inclusion**

While educators in schools without clear directives might be able to resist dominant discourses circulating within the school without fear of the consequences, they still face challenges in bringing about change.

I brought it [diversity of gender and sexuality] up last year because I saw the new recommendations come out from the Ministry. And I pointed it out to senior leadership that it’s actually there in this great report that they all read and actually mentioned that we’re going to have to, well I think that they should address it. […] Yeah so, I just spoke to them about it, but nothing’s come of it since then.

Dale, a science teacher from Parkview High, actively took steps with the aim of making school practices more inclusive of diverse genders and sexualities. Despite talking to the senior leadership team, nothing happened. Dale identified how changes at the level of school leadership are particularly important. While the Ministry of Education have some “great reports” and resources, educators’ experiences quoted thus far demonstrate how school management needs to support these reports for educators to feel confident changing their practices.

Chris, an English teacher from Riverview High, is an example of a teacher who taught “a range of different material” related to gender and sexuality in an effort to “compensate for some of what I perceive to be a lack in my own education”. Chris, like Matthew is also a gay man, but his school context allowed him to feel confident teaching content related to gender and sexuality. When asked about the policy or
guidelines from the school that informed his teaching around gender and sexuality he indicated:

I just would assume that the school’s policy would be to do the stuff I’m doing (laughs). I can’t imagine a school like this having a policy that was any different. You know like it would be to represent the variety and identities of the kids and it would be to be open minded and responsive to the students’ requirements.

While Chris’ approach to gender and sexuality was quite different to some of the educators already quoted it is clear that the same systems of power shaped his approach. While Chris was still part of a system of surveillance and discipline, he was confident his teaching would align with school policy and therefore was not concerned about potential consequences.

Chris suggested that unlike himself, many teachers were uncertain about what was appropriate for the classroom and those who had control over nationwide resources could play a role in influencing this.

I think if you end up with resources that do reflect the whole spectrum of possibilities in terms of the way people can be then that’s providing an imperative to teachers to do that. […] Here’s your English literature 2.6 close reading exercise and it happens to be about a lesbian couple with a child. Then it’s not, the examination is not of the lesbian couple with a child but that just says this material is suitable for the classroom and if it comes from an official source then it’s kind of got an official sanction attached to it. Like clearly that content is seen as suitable for a classroom.

Chris described how teachers looked to those in positions of power and the resources that they create as a guide to understand what was “suitable for the classroom”. This again serves to position teachers within hierarchical education structures where they are often looking to those in positions of greater power to guide their classroom practices. While Chris was optimistic that nationwide resources could help to indicate the appropriateness of talking and teaching about diverse genders and sexualities within the classroom, data from other participants suggests that this might be context dependent. Chris worked in a school which he read as being inclusive of diverse genders and sexualities. In contrast, other participants (e.g., Spot and Matthew) reflected on working in schools within conservative communities where they were conscious of limiting their teaching to ensure it aligned with the communities’ values. For educators working in conservative schools, nationwide resources are unlikely to achieve change unless accompanied by an indication from school leadership that they also support the inclusion of such content within classroom teaching.

**Conclusion**

From our analysis of interviews with nine educators, we found their discursive practices in relation to gender and sexuality were shaped by their teaching subject, skill set, subjectivities and educational contexts. Educators’ estimations of their schools’
position within conservative or liberal communities played a large role in how willing educators were to include diverse discourses of gender and sexuality in their teaching and interactions with students. Our findings demonstrate how educators are influenced by complex systems of hierarchy and surveillance within education settings. While some were able to include diverse discourses within their teaching, others were concerned about potential consequences, which limited their inclusion of content representing diverse genders and sexualities.

The Ministry of Education provides resources which guide educators about how to implement more inclusive classroom and schoolwide practices (see Ministry of Education, n.d.). In schools where there is already support of diverse discourses of gender and sexuality, teachers are likely to feel more confident using these resources. Teachers in schools where attitudes towards inclusion of gender and sexuality are unknown, are likely to still be influenced by concerns about the potential consequences of including such content. Along with this the Ministry of Education continues to construct sexuality education as a distinct area of learning that is treated differently from other learning areas within secondary education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2021). This adds to confusion around what is and is not appropriate to teach, and educators are uncertain about the implications of including sexuality content within their English and Science lessons.

An important question raised by our findings is whether the Ministry of Education could be doing more to ensure that teachers are supported in including diverse discourses of gender and sexuality in their teaching. Teachers who include diverse discourses of gender and sexuality contribute to creating a safer school environment for both teachers and students, but this is difficult to achieve if teachers feel unsafe challenging restrictive discourses to begin with. Ensuring that all schools are inclusive spaces for queer and trans students is particularly important given school home zones and the number of small communities within Aotearoa/New Zealand, which means many students have no choice about the school they attend. Making secondary schools more inclusive will also improve the experiences of students with queer and trans family members, and help implement the inclusive aims and principles laid out for all students in the New Zealand Secondary school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2015). While the Ministry of Education continue to release excellent guidelines and recommendations, they also have policies in place that single out sexuality content as distinct. There are also contradictions between the inclusive and school wide education approach embedded within the sexuality education curriculum and the requirement of community consultation and parental choice. These contradictions raise questions. For example, if sexuality content is included within other subjects does this require content consultation and approval as part of the sexuality education curriculum? How can a student be removed from a school wide approach to sexuality education when aspects of the content are integrated across subject areas? Does this mean a parent can have them removed from an English, Science or Math lesson? If the Ministry of Education policies continue to construct sexuality content as distinct from any other learning content then it makes sense that teachers also see it as a distinct teaching and question how appropriate it is to include sexuality content within their classroom.
Previous research exploring discourses of gender and sexuality identified restrictive discursive practices as dominant within many secondary schools in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Our findings show that teachers’ attempts to operate within hierarchical systems of surveillance without clear guidelines could explain some of this. While educators in this study were willing to enact more inclusive teaching around gender and sexuality, their fears about the potential consequences from school leaders and parents limited their teaching practices. If we want to see more inclusive teaching practices within classrooms, then change is needed from those higher up within the hierarchical organisation of education including the Ministry of Education and leaders within schools.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

References

Abel, G., & Fitzgerald, L. (2006). ‘When you come to it you feel like a dork asking a guy to put a condom on’: Is sex education addressing young people’s understandings of risk? Sex Education, 6(2), 105–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810600578750

Allen, L. (2007). Doing ‘It’ differently: relinquishing the disease and pregnancy prevention focus in sexuality education. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 28(5), 575–588.

Allen, L. (2013). Behind the bike sheds: Sexual geographies of schooling. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 34(1), 56–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.704719

Allen, L. (2019). Bearing witness: Straight students talk about homophobia at school. Sex Education, 19(6), 661–674. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2019.1581604

Allen, L., & Carmody, M. (2012). ‘Pleasure has no passport’: Re-visiting the potential of pleasure in sexuality education. Sex Education, 12(4), 455–468. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2012.677208

Clark, T. C., Lucassen, M. F. G., Bullen, P., Denny, S. J., Fleming, T. M., Robinson, E. M., & Rossen, F. V. (2014). The Health and well-being of transgender high school students: Results from the New Zealand adolescent health survey (Youth’12). Journal of Adolescent Health, 55(1), 93–99. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.11.008

New Zealand Education Council. (2017). Our Code Our Standards: Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession. Retrieved, from https://teachingcouncil.nz/sites/default/files/Our%20Code%20Our%20Standards%20web%20booklet%20FINAL.pdf

de Jong, D. (2014). ‘I think it would be a very sensitive topic …’ school social work, gender variance, and the silencing of differences. Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 24(7), 869–879. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.914995

Diorio, J. A., & Munro, J. A. (2000). Doing Harm in the Name of Protection: Menstruation as a topic for sex education. Gender & Education, 12(3), 347–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250050122249

Elliott, K. J. (2003). The hostile vagina: Reading vaginal discourse in a school health text. Sex Education, 3(2), 133.
Ellis, S. J., & Bentham, R. M. (2020). Inclusion of LGBTIQ perspectives in school-based sexuality education in Aotearoa/New Zealand: An exploratory study. *Sex Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2020.1863776

Ferfolja, T. (2007). Teacher negotiations of sexual subjectivities. *Gender and Education, 19*(5), 569–586. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250701535584

Ferfolja, T. (2008). Discourses that silence: Teachers and anti-lesbian harassment. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 29*(1), 107–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300701802805

Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*(1), 29–54. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.58.1.ut0468k1v2n2n8242

Fine, M., & McClelland, S. (2006). Sexuality education and desire: Still missing after all these years. *Harvard Educational Review, 76*(3), 297–338.

Fitzpatrick, K. (2018). Sexuality education in New Zealand: A policy for social justice? *Sex Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1446824

Fleming, T., Archer, D., King-Finau, T., Dewhirst, M., & Clark, T. (2021). *Youth19 safety and violence brief*. Youth 19 and The Adolescent Health Research Group.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (A. Sheridan (trans.)). New York: Pantheon Books

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan (trans.)). Vintage Books

Graham, K. (2019). “It often rests on the shoulders of a passionate individual”: Exploring the discursive constructions of gender and sexuality within education setting in Aotearoa New Zealand. PhD Thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Gavey, N. (2019). *Just Sex?: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Graham, K., Treharne, G. J., & Nairn, K. (2017). Using Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power to critically examine the construction of gender in secondary schools. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc.12302/full

Graydon, M. (2011). “Kids not rights, is their craving”: Sex education, gay rights, and the threat of gay teachers. *Canadian Review of Sociology/revue Canadienne De Sociologie, 48*(3), 313–339.

Jackson, J. M. (2007). *Unmasking identities: An exploration of the lives of gay and lesbian teachers*. Lexington Books.

Johnson, C. W., Singh, A. A., & Gonzalez, M. (2014). “It’s Complicated”: Collective memories of transgender, queer, and questioning youth in high school. *Journal of Homosexuality, 61*(3), 419–434. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.842436

Meyer, E. J. (2008). A feminist reframing of bullying and harassment: Transforming schools through critical pedagogy. *McGill Journal of Education/revue Des Sciences De L’éducation De McGill, 43*(1), 33–48.

Middleton, S. (1998). *Disciplining sexuality: Foucault, life histories, and education*. Columbia University.

Ministry of Education. (2015). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Learning Media Limited.

Murphy, M. (2013). *Social theory and education research: understanding foucault, habermas bourdieu and derrida*. Routledge.

New Zealand Ministry of Education. (2021). *Practical information about education for parents and careers: Relationships and sexuality education*. Retrieved from https://www.education.govt.nz/school/funding-and-financials/resourcing/operational-funding/school-decile-ratings/

Painter, H. (2008). How Safe and Inclusive are Otago Secondary Schools? A report on the implementation of recommendations from the ‘Safety In Our Schools - Ko te haumaru I o tatou kura’ Action Kit. Dunedin, New Zealand: O.U.S.A Queer Support.

Parker, I. (1992). *Discourse dynamics: Critical analysis for social and individual psychology*. Routledge.

Parker, I. (2015). Critical discursive psychology. *Palgrave Macmillan UK*. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137505279

Rasmussen, M. L., Sanjikdar, F., Allen, L., Quinlivan, K., & Bromdal, A. (2017). Homophobia, transphobia, young people and the question of responsibility. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 38*(1), 30–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1104850

Robinson, K. H., Bansel, P., Denson, N., Ovenden, G., & Davies, C. (2014). *Growing up queer: issues facing young Australians who are gender variant and sexuality diverse*. Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.

Sexton, S. (2012). Queer Otago secondary students’ views of their schooling environment. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies, 47*(1), 93–105.
Smith, L., Nairn, K., & Sandretto, S. (2016). Complicating hetero-normative spaces at school formals in New Zealand. *Gender, Place & Culture, 23*(5), 589–606. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1034245

Willig, C. (2008). Foucauldian discourse analysis. In C. Willig (Ed.), *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 112–131). Open University Press.

Wilson, C., & Cariola, L. A. (2020). LGBTQI+ youth and mental health: A systematic review of qualitative research. *Adolescent Research Review, 5*(2), 187–211. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-019-00118-w

**Publisher’s Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.