

Gender and Sexuality Diverse Student Inclusive Practices: Challenges Facing Educators

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Abstract

Inclusivity is at the heart of education in New Zealand and is founded on the key principle that every student deserves to feel like they belong in the school environment. One important aspect of inclusion is how Gender and Sexuality Diverse (GSD) students are being supported in educational settings. This critical literature review identified three key challenges facing educators that prevent GSD students from being fully included at school. Teachers require professional development in order to discuss GSD topics, bullying and harassment of GSD individuals are dealt with on an as-needs basis rather than address underlying issues, and a pervasive culture of heteronormativity both within educational environments and New Zealand society all contribute to GSD students feeling excluded from their learning environments. A clear recommendation drawn from the literature examined is that the best way to instigate change is to use schools for their fundamental purpose: learning. Schools need to learn strategies to make GSD students feel safe, teachers need to learn how to integrate GSD topics into their curriculum and address GSD issues within the school, and students need to learn how to understand the gender and sexuality diverse environments they are growing up in.

Keywords: *Gender, Sexuality, Diverse, Pre-Service Teacher, Education, New Zealand, Heteronormativity, Harassment*



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Introduction

New Zealand education is based on the fundamental principle that every learner deserves to feel like they belong in their classroom or centre. As outlined in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), educators have a duty to ensure that the background of each student is respected and the physical and mental needs of the learners are met, and that each ākonga feels safe and free to be themselves. Within the Master of Teaching and Learning program at the University of Canterbury, a major focus has been on building an inclusive learning environment, both from a theoretical perspective and through professional practice experiences. Specifically, this has included learners from diverse cultural backgrounds, those who have linguistic learning needs, as well as learners with physical or mental needs outside those of the normative student. Issues of gender and sexuality diverse (GSD) students have not been addressed and this literature review aims to attend to this knowledge gap.

Though many texts discuss methods and strategies for creating and sustaining inclusive classrooms for all students ([Alton-Lee, 2003](#); [Bishop & Berryman, 2009](#); [Fraser & Hill, 2016](#)) the focus of this literature review was to explore research that focused specifically on supporting GSD students in educational environments. The selected studies discuss a variety of issues facing educators in both primary and secondary sectors. From these it became apparent that there were three key themes

surrounding the inclusion of GSD students in schools: teachers feel ill prepared to address topics of GSD in their classes, gender issues *must not* be addressed *solely* as a response to bullying in schools, and the heteronormative dialogue that guides modern education must be challenged in order to create safe and inclusive learning environments for GSD students.

Teacher Readiness

Pre-service teachers are starting their careers without proper training to support GSD students in their classrooms and schools and it is becoming more of a challenge to provide systematic professional development for teachers ([Leonardi and Staley, 2015](#)). Through their idea of 'Teacher Institutes', a notion of empowering teachers' professional development around Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) topics through a collegial community approach, [Leonardi and Staley \(2015\)](#) identified the need for educators to be better educated on the issues, have understanding of beliefs surrounding the age appropriateness of the subject matter, and awareness that misconceptions can act as barrier to learning.

Parental disapproval, and the encouragement of sexual behaviour are just two reasons educators feel reluctant to initiate discussions on GSD topics. Elizabeth J. Meyer has written a variety of texts about educational gender issues in the United States and Canada, and her book *Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools* (2010) lays out and refutes many misconceptions. Citing

an Ontario study that states “fear of parental backlash is the most prevalent obstacle” (p. 79) to the inclusion of GSD topics in education, Meyer showed the strength this belief has in shaping our school environments. [Elizabeth Boskey \(2014\)](#) emphatically denounced this view, stating that studies prove the majority of parents support the inclusion of GSD topics in schools. Meyer (2010) was more cautious in encouraging teachers to ignore parental concerns, recommending a careful consideration of the students and school environment before jumping into topics around GSD, though she too pointed out that most parents are supportive of schools’ efforts to foster overall inclusion.

Another concern, this one expressed by both parents and teachers, surrounds the decision on when to introduce this topic to students. In her text on navigating GSD in schools, Jennifer Bryan (2012) acknowledged that age and maturity level are often concerns that manifest as barriers to the inclusion of gender or sexuality discussions in the classroom. She concluded that much of this dissent is based around the mistaken idea that these discussions will include information about sexual behaviour, rather than about relationships and identity. In the same vein, there is a fear that these types of discussions might sexualise children, but studies conducted under the *No Child Left Behind* guidelines show that “comprehensive sexuality education actually delays sexual experimentation” (Bryan, 2012, p. 6). The point Bryan makes is that society, social media, and marketers are already sexualising children, therefore teaching about gender or sexuality is needed to give students proper context to what they are exposed to on a daily basis.

[Boskey’s \(2014\)](#) work, though narrowly focused on sexuality education in schools, highlighted the fact that children can self-identify gender by age two, and concluded, based on research into early identity formation, that age-appropriate gender diversity topics could be developed for children in early primary school. These realities emphasized by Boskey are confirmed by Bryan (2012) and are addressed in [Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar’s \(2013\)](#) study which was designed to confirm whether or not primary school children were ready for a gender and sexuality inclusive education. The article explored the results of the first year of the study, which followed a single teacher in an American third grade classroom (which transitioned to fourth grade during the study) for four specific episodes designed to introduce and explore the ideas around gender diversity and gender non-conformity. The results showed learners gained a deeper understanding of gender diversity, and the lessons helped make the school safer and more supportive for GSD students ([Ryan et al., 2013](#)). However, the small sample size and the fact that the teacher was a lesbian may be a limitation to the study. The authors also noted that at the outset of the study they, as researchers, were writing from a gender normative world view, and that this lens may colour their study. Correspondingly, because the teacher at the heart of the study was gender nonconforming, the success of including GSD topics into her curriculum could have been influenced by her own identity.

While the research of both [Ryan et al. \(2013\)](#) and Bryan (2012) are US-centric, they echo findings in both the United Kingdom and Canada that the inclusion of GSD topics in curriculum helps make school communities safer and more inclusive for all students ([DePalma & Atkinson, 2010](#); Meyer, 2010).

If teachers are to develop safe and inclusive environments within their own classrooms, research shows they need to be better educated about GSD issues. [Leonardi and Staley \(2015\)](#) pushed for more pre-service teacher education programs and

professional development sessions to focus on filling gaps in educators’ knowledge, and outlined strategies and dialogues to approach GSD topics in their own practice. Bryan (2012) suggested that the use of accurate language is a vital step for both parents and educators towards open discussion about gender and sexuality diversity. Meyer (2010) reinforced this idea by stating that educators need to learn the language and skills in order to interrupt harassment at all ages. She then emphasised the need for teachers to question their own practice in order to identify how they can reinforce gender in practice and how they support heteronormativity (Meyer, 2010). DePalma and Atkinson expanded on the importance of the role of the teacher by synthesizing studies which show GSD students who “could not identify a single supportive adult in their schools” ([2010, p.1669](#)) did not feel as though they belonged. Combined, these researchers prove the need for educators to learn more about GSD in order to combat misconceptions and design age-appropriate inclusive lessons to implement in their classrooms.

Bullying Culture

Beyond the walls of the individual classroom, educators also need to address GSD issues within the wider school culture. Students who do not display the same gender identity as their perceived biological sex are subject to bullying, harassment, and feeling unsafe at school. New Zealand is not exempt from this behaviour, as a recent survey concluded that transgendered high school students experience significantly more health and well-being issues while at school than their non-transgendered peers. GSD ([Clark, Lucassen et al. 2014](#)). Most studies prefaced their findings by reiterating the devastating consequences of bullying towards gender nonconforming students. The killing of Matthew Shepard, and the murder of Larry King, victims of hate crimes against GSD individuals ([Boskey, 2014](#); Bryan, 2012), as well as the numerous suicides committed by those identifying as GSD ([Clark, et al. 2014](#)) are some extreme examples. As Meyer clarifies “for many students this is a matter of life or death” (2010, p.4) and teachers need to be prepared, or else face terrible consequences.

Meyer (2009) illustrated how the impacts of gendered harassment go beyond simply the person being bullied, and can negatively impact all students. She concluded that if schools and teachers do not intervene in bullying they are signalling their tacit compliance with this negative behaviour. In her later work she states that bullying and harassment peak at the beginning of a students’ schooling and again around puberty, putting the responsibility to prevent GSD related bullying on both primary and secondary teachers alike (Meyer, 2010).

Research conducted by [Ryan et al. \(2013\)](#) demonstrated how student’s lives are largely impacted by gender, and that reinforcing gender norms can lead to this culture of harassment. Meyer (2009) expands on this through synthesising research and showed that a schools culture is a determining factor of whether bullying behaviours increase or decrease. Her findings also showed that teachers who are more sensitised to these issues, because they themselves are GSD or have been marginalised, are more likely to intervene when they witness gendered harassment. Teachers must question how they reinforce gendered practice, support heterosexual practices, and present cultural information while at school in order to start challenging their own preconceptions (Meyer, 2010).

Beyond the individual teacher practice, [DePalma and Atkinson \(2010\)](#) argued that the tendency is to focus on issues of

bullying and harassment on a case by case basis, instead of challenging the fundamental social culture that drives these incidents. Targeting individuals will not institute the widespread culture change that is needed to make schools truly safe for GSD students. [Leonardi and Staley \(2015\)](#) affirmed this point of view, stating that intervening to prevent bullying does not challenge the fundamental institutional practices, and that professional development around GSD issues needs to be focused on system wide change. Only then can educators move past anti-bullying and address the larger pattern of heteronormativity that operates to marginalise GSD students within education systems.

Heteronormative Culture

The driving factor behind GSD students feeling unsafe and under represented at school is the institution's overall heteronormative culture ([Boskey, 2014](#); [DePalma & Atkinson, 2010](#); [Francis & Paechter, 2015](#); [Leonardi & Staley, 2015](#); [MacArthur, Higgins & Quinlivan, 2012](#); [Meyer, 2009, 2010](#); [Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012](#)). Meyer (2009, 2010) tirelessly reiterates how schools reflect and reinforce the dominant societal cultures. Society is, and historically has been, heteronormative; a system which privileges those who exhibit heterosexual gender behaviours and social expectations ([MacArthur et al., 2012](#)).

In schools, this heteronormativity is reflected in the culture, policies, and curriculum. [DePalma and Atkinson's \(2010\)](#) observations in the primary sector showed how children learn to reproduce cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality at a very young age, reflecting the heterosexual biases presented to them at school. Recognising that this transmission of dominant culture is not limited to schools, they posit that the starting point to address and challenge these issues is education.

[Toomey, McGuire, and Russell \(2012\)](#) conducted a study to determine what strategies to promote GSD student safety contributed to students' perceptions of safety. The 28 schools used were in California, which recognises gender identity and sexual orientation within its statewide non-discrimination code. This is a factor which may impact the findings, as the study has limited scope and was conducted in an area that already has institutional policies supporting GSD students. The data showed that students perceived their schools to be safer and have less harassment if there was an inclusive curriculum in place that supported gender nonconformity, and information supporting GSD issues was readily available, such as clubs like the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). The researchers also concluded that heteronormativity continues to be persistent, and recommends that schools must address these issues of gender nonconformity.

An overwhelming majority of the literature concludes that the most significant factor in making school environments safer and more inclusive is the creation and implementation of school wide policies, culture, and curriculum designed to promote and address GSD issues and topics ([Bryan, 2012](#); [DePalma & Atkinson, 2010](#); [MacArthur et al., 2012](#); [Meyer, 2009, 2010](#); [Ryan et al., 2013](#); [Toomey et al., 2012](#)). [Leonardi and Staley \(2015\)](#) reported that teachers who pursue professional development to address GSD related issues feel isolated and unsupported in applying what they learned in practice. Meyer (2010) emphasised the important role school culture plays in teaching and reinforcing cultural values. Both these works illustrate how imperative it is that education environments commit to change at an institutional level.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this literature review, most notably the lack of contemporary New Zealand sources. This is not to say that New Zealand is not producing literature in this field (see [Quinlivan & Town, 1999](#)), but updated, modern versions are few and far between.

An interesting observation is that although many of these studies recognise the negative impact of heteronormative society on GSD students, the studies themselves are written from a heteronormative perspective, and view the research from a gender binary lens. [Boskey \(2014\)](#) displays restrictive heteronormative speech throughout the article, notable when using the term "cross-gender" as it does not account for the entire spectrum between male and female. Meyer (2009) points out this trend in the research on harassment, emphasising how this rhetoric limits the amount of information available around GSD issues. [Francis and Paechter's \(2015\)](#) research on gender and education showed that issues of classification, essentialism, and reinforcing the gender binary continue to influence all research in this sector. Performance is analysed in regards to male or female, and research tends to record how subjects promote gender stereotypes, rather than interrogate the status quo. These limitations are perpetuating hierarchies and stereotypes in the very papers that are being produced to combat them.

Areas for Future Research

As gender studies in education have historically focused on the divide between male and female students ([Sadker & Silber, 2007](#)), further evidence of the pervasiveness of binary heteronormative influences, all aspects of the field are wide open for new studies incorporating the entire spectrum of GSD students.

One study noted the lack of research on inclusive elementary school curriculum in this field ([Ryan et al., 2013](#)) yet failed to reference [DePalma and Atkinson \(2010\)](#), [Bryan \(2012\)](#) or [Meyer's \(2009, 2010\)](#) more current works all of which specifically address GSD students in primary settings. This is one example of how valuable research in this field is being overlooked. Meyer (2009) recognises the same problem, stating that researchers of bullying and harassment do not address the works of other scholars in the same field. What is missing is a comprehensive summary of all relevant literature and data currently available addressing gender and sexuality diversity research. The last similar study in New Zealand was commissioned in 1999 ([Alton-Lee & Praat, 2000](#)) and reflects the binary divide between males and females that was the common view of students at that time. Given that society has since expanded the gender narrative to include an entire spectrum, an updated general survey is due.

Conclusion

Educators face many barriers when implementing GSD inclusive practices, not least of which are teacher preparedness, bullying and gendered harassment, and challenging the heteronormative rhetoric. These key themes grow from a discussion on the role of individual teachers, to the impact of teachers as a whole, to the significance of a schools' guiding culture. A clear recommendation drawn from these texts is that the best way to instigate change is to use schools for their fundamental purpose: learning. Schools need to learn strategies

to make GSD students feel safe, teachers need to learn how to integrate GSD topics into their curriculum and address GSD issues within the school, and students need to learn how to understand the gender and sexuality diverse environments they are growing up in. The findings prove that all members from all levels within schools play a significant role in making GSD students feel safe and welcomed in their educational environment.

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