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LGBTQ youth, activism, and school: challenging sexuality and gender norms

Purpose:

Previous research examining the experiences of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer) youth in schools suggests that schools are not inclusive places for non-heterosexual students. Some scholars, however, suggest that a continued focus on how these young people are marginalised is itself a problem, and that research should also focus on strengths and what is working. This paper examines the activities of a group of LGBTQ students in one school in Auckland, New Zealand.

Methodology:

The study employed a critical ethnographic approach in a diverse co-educational, public high school in Auckland, New Zealand. The researcher spent 3-5 days per week at the school throughout three terms (32 weeks) of the 2016 school year and participated, observed and interviewed students and teachers. Post structural theory was used to analyse the ethnographic materials.

Findings:

The study found that LGBTQ students actively challenged the heteronorms of their school. They met regularly to discuss issues, support each other and to plan activist initiatives. These initiatives, in turn, impacted the environment of the school and made LGBTQ students more visible. This visibility, however, also created tensions as students grappled with their identities and the public space of school.

Originality/Value:

Despite a wealth of research in education on the exclusion of young people at the intersection of gender, sexuality and other identity positions, there is very little research that reports on school wide health promotion initiatives that both engage young people as leaders and participants in their schools, and work towards creating safe and empowering spaces for LGBTQ youth.

Key words: gender, sexuality, schools, LGBTQ, health promotion, youth

Article classification: Research paper

LGBTQ youth, activism, and school: Challenging sexuality and gender norms

Introduction

Magdalena, one of the school counsellors and the 'teacher in charge' of the Rainbow group, stood at the classroom door and welcomed each student as they arrived. The students sat in a circle of chairs, or on the ground on brightly coloured cushions. In an excited voice Magdalena thanked everyone for coming to the first Rainbow meeting of the year. Magdalena introduced herself and explained her role in the group, stating that she was also a counsellor in the school and that her door was always open. She then talked about the purpose of the Rainbow group: 'we are a group who celebrate diversity and actively work towards social justice at Kahukura High School. It doesn't matter if you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, straight or questioning – everyone is welcome here'. The senior students around the room gave a few little cheers and clapped.

This narrative draws on the first author's experience with a rainbow group at a diverse high school in New Zealand as part of a critical ethnographic study of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer)¹ students. As the opening story suggests, the group provided a space for students in the school, it also enabled them to take action to challenge exclusionary practices and the marginalization of non-heterosexual students. While in many ways exemplifying what can be considered a 'critical' approach to gender and sexuality, students in the group also experienced the messiness of being in a diverse group. The activities of this group of students, and the teacher, Magdalena, are particularly interesting given the substantial and compelling evidence that schools tend to reinforce and reinscribe narrow gender and sexuality norms (Paechter 2000, Paechter 2006, Youdell 2005, Youdell 2011). This is evident in both the wider school and in school-based sexuality and health education classes. Allen (2005) for example, argues that sexuality education classes tend to reinforce biological notions of sex and sexuality, while excluding discussion of diversity, desire and romantic relationships (Allen 2005, Allen 2004, Allen 2007a, Allen 2007b, Allen, Rasmussen & Quinlivan 2014, Epstein, Johnson 1998). Mayo (2009) argues, however, that highlighting the problems associated with LGBTQ youth in schools tends to portray these young people as victims, rather than individuals who have agency and resilience (Mayo, 2014). Lucassen et al (2014), likewise, advise against problematising lesbian and gay students and rather advocate for a focus on their strengths. However, Talburt and Rasmussen (Rasmussen 2010, Talburt, Rasmussen 2010, Talburt 2010) have argued that focussing solely on 'liberatory and emancipatory' objectives actually emphasises homonormative notions of LGBTQ inclusion that end up privileging white middle-class queer subjectivities. Talburt and Rasmussen suggest that there needs to be a critical understanding of the complexities of queer research (and, indeed, schools); they question whether emancipatory

intentions may actually result in homogenising LGBTQ youth. Kumashiro (2015, p. 1) notes that the subjectivities of queer youth reflect complex identity articulations, and he argues that “everyday practices in schools often comply with or contribute to racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression”.

While there is a body of work on sexuality support groups in schools (see, for example, Elliot 2016, Mayo 2013, Quinlivan 2013), there are few examples of positive school cultures for LGBTQ students. In this paper, we consider how critical practices within schools both open up new possibilities for students, and complex gender and sexuality articulations. We employ the theoretical tools of Foucault (power and resistance) and Butler (the heterosexual matrix and intelligible subjects) to conceptualise and interpret the relations of power evident in LGBTQ students’ interactions in this school, and how the critical practices of the Rainbow group allowed them to both explore their own identities and engage the wider school. We first provide background to the research, before introducing the theoretical framework and the methodology. We then explore two key themes that emerged from the research and end with some conclusions.

Background: Heteronormativity, pedagogy and schooling

There are many opportunities for schools to employ critical approaches to teaching, curricular, and wider school environments. Such approaches may help to open up space for gender norms to be exposed, challenged and critiqued by students. Elsewhere (Fitzpatrick and McGlashan 2016) we argue that, what we call ‘straight pedagogy’ actively reinforces both the heterosexual matrix and normative forms of gender and sexuality. Pedagogical practices that ignore gender and sexuality serve to silence alternative identities. There is potential, however, for schools to engage with transformative and critical approaches (Fitzpatrick and Enright 2017). Ukpokodu (2009) argues that transformative approaches to schooling are “an activist pedagogy combining the elements of constructivist and critical pedagogy” (p.43). He notes that such moves should centralise students’ perspectives, but also require a critical examination of “beliefs, values, and knowledge with the goal of developing a reflective knowledge base, an appreciation for multiple perspectives, and a sense of critical consciousness and agency” (Ukpokodu 2009, p. 43). This, of course, is complex, messy and often at odds with power relations operating in schools and wider social contexts.

One critical approach evident in schools is the facilitation of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) or, what many in New Zealand are referring to as, a Queer- Straight Alliance (Quinlivan 2013; Quinlivan, 2015). QSA’s vary considerably in their makeup and intention (See Quinlivan, 2015; Talburt,

Rasmussen 2010; Quinlivan 2013; Youdell 2011; Mayo 2009; Kosciw et al. 2012). However, they are commonly known as an extracurricular, student-centred group where (LGBTQ) students, along with their heterosexual and questioning allies, gather for conversation, learning activities, and mutual support (Mayo 2013). Quinlivan (2013) discusses some of the tensions inherent in school based QSA's, both within the group itself, and in relation to wider school politics. She argues that, if the intent of the QSA is to provide a safe space for queer youth who need support, then this can position them as 'abnormal' or 'at risk' and further increase the divide between being heterosexual and being queer. However, Quinlivan (2015, 2013) and others (Mayo 2013; Mayo 2009b, Talburt and Rasmussen 2010) also highlight how critical approaches to learning in QSA's can allow for the exploration of fluid subjectivities and non-normative understandings of gender and sexuality.

Recent moves in the New Zealand education system may make such approaches more possible or, at least, more visible. The New Zealand Ministry of Education recently released a revised policy document: *Sexuality Education: A guide for principals, boards of trustees and teachers* (Ministry of Education 2015). The guide was written to support school boards, principals, and teachers to deliver effective, quality, sexuality education programs. This guide takes a socio-critical approach, and explicitly advises schools to review the gendered nature of their environments and make changes, not only to curriculum, but to school toilets, uniforms, and exclusionary cultures. The guide states that:

Sexuality education in New Zealand schools supports and acknowledges diversity among students. Schools should work to question gender stereotypes, and assumptions about sexuality. School programmes and the wider school environment should take opportunities to acknowledge the sexual diversity of New Zealand communities and recognise the rights of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and other sexual and gender identities. (Ministry of Education 2015, p 11).

Wider social and political moves are also making gender and sexuality issues more visible. The New Zealand government recently included a third gender option on passports ('Gender X') and the term, 'gender diverse' will now be used in addition to 'male' and 'female' in the reporting of official government-sponsored national statistics (Statistics New Zealand 2014). In addition, recent attention on transgender issues globally is also impacting gender norms. Not only are trans people becoming more visible, but the tone of this exposure has dramatically shifted from a rhetoric of perversion, deviance and pathology (see Richardson 2010) to one of understanding, and even celebration (Lovelock 2016). This commentary is, however, also raising questions about gender

binaries (Bornstein, Bergman 2010, Elliot 2009). Large-scale survey research with New Zealand youth in schools also shows interesting shifts over the last 15 years. The most recent New Zealand *Youth2000 survey series*, a survey of over 9000 13-17 year olds between 2001 – 2012, (Lucassen et al. 2014) shows that, in 2012, a majority (53.1%) of same/both sex attracted young people had ‘come out’² to someone close to them about their sexuality (in the previous study in 2001 the figure was only 31.3%). However, Lucassen et al (2014), also noted that, despite some positive changes, “same/both-sex attracted young people are often exposed to environments that are challenging and discriminatory, and this in turn affects their wellbeing” (p. 5). The report states that, youth who are same/both sex attracted are more likely than opposite-sex attracted students to be bullied or physically harmed at school (Lucassen et al, 2014, p. 5).

Given these changing social contexts, we are interested in whether it is now more possible for students to trouble gender at school, to engage with what Atkinson and Depalma (2009, p. 19) call “queering consensual heteronormativity”, and to make schools better and more inclusive places for LGBTQ students.

Theoretical framework

In this study, we employ the poststructuralist theories of Foucault and Butler to understand the experiences and actions of the LGBTQ students in this school. Foucault’s underpinning desire was to ‘understand how people, throughout history, have created knowledge about humans and how such knowledge has shaped the experience of being ‘human’’ (Markula and Pringle 2006, p. 24).

Understanding power was central to this analysis. For Foucault, power is:

...exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved... but the overall effect of its strategic positions- an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated (Foucault 1995, p. 26-27).

Discourses of sexuality can both transmit and produce power as well as challenge it by providing spaces for resistance (Nixon and Givens 2007, p. 453)

When sexuality is recognised as discursively constituted it is possible to see the role that schools play as social institutions. As Quinlivan (2013, s. 57) states ‘Given the structural, ideological and affectively normative cultures of schools, researching queer sexualities and difference will produce conundrums’. These institutions ‘reflect and constitute the broader socio-political discourses in operation, including those that uphold the constructed superiority of heterosexuality’ (Ferfolja 2008, p. 108) and heteronormativity. Heterosexuality then is generally accepted as ‘normal’ and is, therefore, associated with a range of dominant discourses (such as men being expected to be masculine), not only because it is widely accepted, but because it is also securely entrenched in

powerful institutions. As a consequence, non-heterosexual and non gender-conforming students are more likely to experience marginalisation in schools (Allen 2007b, Epstein, Johnson 1994, Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford 2003, Quinlivan 2006). Foucault (1980, p. 142) argued that 'there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised'. Indeed, the LGBTQ youth in this study employed particular strategies to negotiate the gender and sexuality norms of their school.

Butler (1999, p. 24) maintains that gendered relations of power exist within a kind of matrix wherein sexuality is a product of "regulatory practices that generate coherent identities... and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine'". Butler and Youdell (2005, p. 250) refers to this as a sex-gender-sexuality constellation. Such a constellation, Butler argues, constitutes sex, gender and sexuality in particular ways "that open up possibilities and set limits for 'who' a student can be". Within this constellation:

the female body is already feminized, the feminine is already heterosexual, the hetero-feminine is already female. Sex-gender-sexuality, then, are not causally related; rather, they exist in abiding constellations in which to name one category of the constellation is to silently infer further categories. (Butler, 2005, p. 256)

The power of this constellation is partly to do with what (or who) is intelligible, including in school contexts. We are interested here, however, in understanding whether, given the changing social contexts outlined further above, LGBTQ students are challenging the seemingly 'natural' nature of such constellations, and how they are engaging issues of gender and sexuality in their schools.

We next outline the methodology before exploring the key themes of the research.

Methodology

In this study, a critical ethnographic approach was employed to explore how one group of LGBTQ students challenged gender and sexuality norms in their school. The school (which we given the pseudonym Kahukura High School) is located in Auckland, New Zealand and is a large (2000 students) co-educational, culturally diverse, state high school (Years 9-13; students aged 13-18).

Traditional ethnography involves researchers becoming part of the community of people involved in the research, living alongside them in the hope that a better understanding of their lives will result (Denzin 1997, Tedlock 2000). The traditional approach tends to emphasize the researcher's role in controlling interactions in the field and in reporting their findings in a disengaged way. Critical ethnography on the other hand, examines the assumptions behind this methodology and applies critical social theory to ethnographic materials and methods (Madison 2012).

Thomas (1993) describes critical ethnography as “conventional ethnography with a political purpose” (p.4). This approach places the focus on issues of equity, juxtaposing an in-depth epistemological account alongside an analysis of societal issues. Madison (2005, p. 5) argues that “critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain” (p.5). She defines ethical responsibility as a “compelling sense of duty and commitment based on morals principles of human freedom and well-being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of living beings” (p.5). Critical ethnographers aim to disrupt the status quo, unsettle both neutrality and taken for granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and relations of power. This methodology then requires researchers to move from ‘what is’ to ‘what could be’ (Thomas 1993; Carspecken 1996; Noblit, Flores and Murillo 2004).

Critical ethnography then was the overarching methodology within which the following methods were employed: interviews, observations, conversations, narrative inquiry and immersion in the field of study (Madison 2012; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Fitzpatrick and May 2015). The researcher – Hayley - was present for 3-5 days per week at the school throughout three terms (32 weeks) of the 2016 school year. During her time at the school, Hayley engaged in conversations with teachers, students, and management. She experienced school life at Kahukura High School, observing classroom lessons, visits from outside providers, assemblies, award evenings, school performances, cultural groups and a range of student-led groups. She also analysed school policy documents that focussed on LGBTQ identities in order to understand the 'political' nature of sexual and gender diversity within the school. Using a critical ethnographic approach enables us to explore how teachers' and students' understandings of sexuality are framed by wider social and political circumstances. In the wider study, we also draw on narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), utilising observations, focus groups and semi-structured interviews to weave together narratives of students' experiences, and analyses of the culture of sexuality within the school, including discourses, sexuality education programmes and school policies.

Trust, respect and reciprocity were fundamental in this research. Trust was developed through a dialogue of honesty, and Hayley was explicit about her own intentions as a researcher. She shared her desire to ‘walk’ with the rainbow students within multiple contexts, to engage with and immerse herself in the lives of LGBTQ at Kahukura. Madison (2005) suggests that “dialogue” between the researcher and the Other is the first step in mitigating and exposing relations of power within research. This was especially important because Hayley identifies as heterosexual. The second author, Katie, also identifies as heterosexual. We both work in the fields of health and sexuality education, and engage in ethnographic research across multiple school contexts. Herdt and Boxer (1993 p, xix) argue that ‘when our identities remain hidden to the reader, it is difficult to both

understand the conduct and validity of the research and to compare the results (positive or negative) to other studies'. Both of us are aware of the slipperiness of trying to talk about gender and sexuality (Rasmussen 2010; Paechter 2006) and also of our own, unfixed and fluid gendered subjectivities. Our own gendered embodiments could be labeled 'cis gendered' although, like all subjectivities, these are both shifting and contextual. We each experience heterosexual privilege, but our respective family environments are anything but normative.

The primary space of observation and participation in this ethnography was the schools' sexual and gender diversity group, which we will refer to as the *Rainbow group*. The group was established in 2012 by one of the school counsellors (Magdalena), who continues to facilitate the group as well as numerous other health promotion initiatives in the school. Magdalena has been working at the school for 21 years. She is the head of guidance in the school and has three other counsellors in her team. All four of the counsellors are, or have been, teachers and also drive numerous school-wide health and wellbeing initiatives. We would like to note here that, while the connection between counselling and queer youth is fraught historically in schools (see, Quinlivan 2013, Youdell 2011), we lack the space in this article to explore this tension. In total, the study included 30 students and 5 staff members (all names, including the school name, are pseudonyms). The participants in this study were not only diverse in regards to sexual and gender identities but they also represented a range of ethnic, cultural, religious and social class identities.

There is not room in this paper to report on all of the themes that emerged in this study. This article focuses on two key themes: complex identities and the use of pronouns, and being an activist group in the school. These two themes are explored in the following two sections.

Findings

Complex identities and the use of pronouns

The existence of the Rainbow group provided space for queer subjectivities and, furthermore, legitimation of intelligible subjects (Butler 2004). In the preface of *Gender Trouble*, Butler stated that 'If there is a positive normative task in *Gender Trouble*, it is to insist upon the extension of this legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible' (1999, p. 24). Drawing on both Butler and Foucault, Youdell (2005) states that 'identity categories, including those of gender and sexuality, *constitute* subjects. These categorical names are central to the performative constitution of the subject who is unintelligible, if not unimaginable, without these.' (2005, p. 252). Making the unintelligible intelligible was a key task for some members of the Rainbow group at Kahukura High School. Tensions of intelligibility were evident in the groups' use of pronouns (he,

she, them) to name themselves. Students would use the naming of pronouns to establish and assert their identities. For example, if a student who appeared to be masculine, used the pronoun 'she', then gender norms were disrupted but discussion of pronouns was a constant source of tension in the group. In the very first meeting of the year one student, Tiata, wanted to begin with a round of names and pronouns. Magdalena resisted this request and used her power as a facilitator to stop this from happening. She suggested, instead, that students just share their names. Her intention in doing this was to 'protect' the transgender students (from having to choose a particular pronoun and label themselves as 'he', 'she' or 'them'). However, in subsequent meetings, as the students developed more confidence and autonomy, some began to assert the use of pronouns and use them as a form of celebration of their intelligible (named) gender categories. Magdalena eventually relinquished her fear of 'outing' the trans students and joined in this practice. For the remainder of the year each meeting started with students introducing themselves along with their preferred pronoun (examples are 'he', 'him', 'she', 'her', 'they', 'them'). From observation, the cis-gendered students (those who conformed to expected gender norms, e.g. a boy who is masculine) within the group relished this opportunity to celebrate their congruent sex/gender identities. Through this practice, they named and owned stable identities. In some ways, while the naming of pronouns exposed gender categories, it also reinforced sex/gender binaries by allowing those who did perform normative gender identities to further their legitimacy. However, those students within the group who identified as transgender also subscribed to the pronoun practice as a celebration of their queer identities. Those students used the gender pronoun that represented their gender performance. For example, the four transgender females in the group always used the pronouns she/her with flamboyant confidence. Some students also used pronouns to disrupt gender labels by changing their pronouns at each meeting, or by refusing to use pronouns at all. Although pronouns might achieve intelligibility by attributing a clear label, for many queer people 'intelligibility' is not desirable and is actually at odds with their politics. The use of shifting pronouns illustrates the parody of heteronorms and thus, actively 'troubles' the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1999). Through the use of diverse and fluid pronouns, the students in this study were rendering themselves as queer subjects, while also pointing out the potential fluidity of gender identities. Socratis, for example, (who used them/their most often for their preferred pronoun) quite commonly moved between gender and sexual identities when introducing themselves; they reflected that 'from a young age we think that sex is just about the act of sex and then we learn it can be used interchangeably with gender, but I didn't know there was space for this to be different until I joined the Rainbow group'. Socratis continues to explore this in a follow up interview. At this point they were in the process of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and explained that they were currently experiencing gender

dysphoria which was why they quite often moved between gender and sexual identities. Socratis did desire to be a male, however, did not feel comfortable having sex-reassignment surgery (SRS). Socratis explained that they did not want to forgo their queer identity and had no intention of identifying as a heterosexual male. Socratis stated in the second interview with Hayley: “I just don’t feel straight even though I guess I am... I still want to be queer. I like being queer”. Socratis is, and will remain ‘biologically’ female, but will identify as male and, yet does not want to be seen as straight. They are remaining unintelligible to resist gender norms (Elliot 2009). Transgender people who refuse the sex/gender binary can be seen by those within the gay/lesbian, queer framework to be more politically progressive than transsexual people and are often praised for not conceding to the sex/gender binary (Elliot 2009, Namaste 2005). Students then within the Kahukura Rainbow group who had the desire to be, not only the opposite gender, but also the opposite sex, resisted the use of pronouns because there was not always a clear congruence for them within the binary system. As one student, Vinny - a transman, who says he will one day have SRS but for now uses testosterone and chest binders - explains ‘testosterone makes me feel comfortable enough for it not to be overly dysphoric for me anymore’. It was often not until Vinny began to see physical changes that Vinny felt comfortable to claim his right to live as a man.

Foucault (1978) describes subjectivity as something made not found. He argues that it is constantly being re-worked as people engage with different ideas, contexts and others. Indeed, gender norms and the production of certain intelligible subjects contributed to the messiness of the LGBTQ students’ subjectivities. The groups’ navigation of gender pronouns highlights how they contested homogeneity and continued, even when seeking legitimation, to disrupt heteronorms.

This resistance moved beyond the binds of the group and into the wider school. The group engaged in practices of activism, to create a culture within their school that ‘reflected and accepted sexual and gender difference and multiplicity’ also (Elliot 2016, p. 50). One example was the group’s involvement in the school’s Peace Week ‘Embracing Diversity and Anti Violence Day’.

Being an activist group in the school

Peace week at Kahukura High School is a weeklong event which Sue (another one of the school counsellors) organises with the student peer mediators. The peer mediators were a group of students who worked on conflict resolution, helping others and ‘increasing peace’ at Kahukura High School. Around 200 students apply at the beginning of each year, and 100 are selected to take part in the initial training process with The New Zealand Peace Foundation. Many of the Rainbow group were also peer mediators. Mediators learnt “to respect diversity and to value differences” (Kahukura

High School website, 2016). The role of the mediators is, not only to help students resolve conflict behind closed doors in a confidential mediation room, it is also about being “Ambassadors of Social Justice” (Kahukura High School website, 2016). Mediators were supposed to lead in the school community by “promoting and modelling fairness and respect for others, watching out for harassment and bullying, and by supporting students to get help when needed” (Kahukura High School website, 2016). Mediators led in the celebration of International Peace Week at Kahukura High School during the week of the 8th -12th August. Peace week is a student-driven and student-owned campaign, where all the mediators are meant to collaborate together.

During peace week, mediators and school counsellors organised a number of activities, such as: a peace assembly presentation; face painting; peace badge making; the wearing of white ribbons for peace; painted peace banners and t-shirts. On the Wednesday of peace week, they facilitated an “Embracing Diversity and Anti Violence Day”. On this day, the hall was filled with information stalls from outside agencies and NGOs such as Manalive³, SHINE⁴, Rape Prevention Education (RPE), Youthline⁵, Fonua Ola⁶, plus student run stalls such as the Rainbow Group; ‘Violence is not ok campaign’⁷; Peer Sexuality Support Programme (PSSP), Amnesty International, Live4Tomorrow⁸, Body Image Leaders (BILS), Refugee awareness, Crane making and Peace Badge making. The Rainbow group were involved in the lunchtime expo and had organised their own stand. Tiata organised the Rainbow group members on Monday and Tuesday to make the banners and to plan the design and purpose of their stand. The group made little ‘sandwich boards’ which said ‘Rainbow Group – gender and sexual diversity – do you have a rainbow flag?’ The Rainbow group decided to reward students who came to the stand, and those wearing a rainbow ribbon shirt pin, by giving them rainbow candy. They also sourced brochures containing information about gender and sexual diversity and relationships to hand out to students. Over the two days before the expo, members of the group worked on two dazzling brightly-coloured and glitter-covered flags. One was the bisexual flag⁹ with the words ‘gender and sexual diversity’ written on it and the other was a bright rainbow with ‘Rainbow Group’ boldly written in the middle of the flag.

The day arrived and the group were full of energy and excitement. The students worked together to create their shrine to the Rainbow group. Pushing some tables together and hanging a bright rainbow flag which said PEACE over them to create the atmosphere. The students set to staking their claim to the area they had, and hung their flags with delight up high behind their stand. They poured big bowls full of rainbow coloured candy and placed them around the tables. The LGBTQ brochures were displayed in rainbow shapes over the tables, reading: ‘You, Me / Us – Our People our Relationships’, ‘Affirming Diversity’ and ‘Queer and Trans 101 – A super simple comic guide’. On a

concrete beam beside the stand, the group hung a poster picturing two young men sitting together, the words 'It's OK to be who you are' were written on the poster.

The bell rang and students started flowing out of the classrooms and racing to the hall to be the first to get the giveaways and prizes at the stalls. The Rainbow group rushed around urgently trying to complete their stand. Asti, who identifies as bisexual, exclaimed 'quick, quick – who is going to put the [sandwich] boards on?!' The group all looked at each other, panicked. The hall was filling up and the realisation hit. For some, this was their first time been associated with the Rainbow group in a public space. The students suddenly realised that walking around the hall and out into the playground with a sign that said 'Rainbow Group – Gender and Sexual Diversity' was an extremely visible and isolating action. Two members of the group, Rushdi and Tiva, finally decided they would wear the boards; they both identified as heterosexual. The other board was taped to the stand.

Foucault (1984) notes that collectivity is inexplicably related to issues of power. He states that "We are all governed and, as such, bound by solidarity" (p.1526). Golder (2013, p. 183) also explains that '...if this solidarity is not natural, it is not unthinkable. For all subjective protest has meaning only if it can connect with a 'concrete' we, whatever the form that this may take'. The solidarity of the Rainbow group inhered in their united presence at the stand. In this sense the group were strategically reinstating homogeneity, an explicit contrast to the desire for heterogeneity exemplified in the discussion of pronouns. It was clear that they felt 'safe' behind the Rainbow stand but less so if they 'stepped out' into the school grounds alone. Those who identified as LGBTQ did not feel comfortable walking around alone, making a 'subjective protest' with their sandwich boards as they were not 'bound by solidarity' – they were isolated and in a position of vulnerability. Indeed, the power of the heterosexual matrix, heteronormativity and cisnormativity were more keenly felt when students were alone and away from the rainbow group. Reflecting on this in a later discussion, Hayley asked Raven about this:

Hayley: Was everyone supportive that you talked to that came up to the stand?

Raven: Yeah, I think so yeah.

Hayley : Did anyone ask any questions?

Raven: I saw one guy he was like 'What is this?' I said: 'We are the Rainbow group, we support gender and sexual diversity, do you support equal rights?' He was like 'Yeah, of course!' So I gave him a handful of candy and a high five.

Hayley : Cool, how did it make you feel?

Raven: It was fun, like I enjoyed it because, like, people, I don't know, could see our group.

It was clear, however, that the group felt torn between having an activist presence in the school, and being too exposed. Magdalena was also torn. She commented that, 'I love the passion the students have, however, I still feel protective of them'. Magdalena's worries did not preclude her support of the students' actions, but she wanted them to be cautious. The tension which Magdalena felt between increasing the visibility of the LGBTQ students while also maintaining safety was mirrored in the Rainbow students' actions and thoughts. This was evident in the group's hesitation to wear the sandwich board; only those who identified as heterosexual felt confident to do so. Hayley later asked Socratis about this:

Hayley: So why do you think this year was the first time the Rainbow group had a stand at the Peace stall?

Socratis: Um, because Magdalena had wanted to keep it on the low down.

Hayley : What are your thoughts about that?

Socratis: Well it's good because we don't want to 'out' anyone. But, at the same time, we've got these people who aren't out that want to come but don't know anyone, you know.

It is evident from this discussion that the group experienced tensions between visibility and exposure. The Rainbow group was the most visible it had ever been in 2016. However, the thoughts, and ultimately actions of the group gave greater visibility to the students themselves, not only to the narrow nature of gender categories consistent with the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1999). Butler (2004, p. 218) notes that "if gender is performative, then it follows that the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance". For students to question the reality of (only) binary gendered performance potentially exposed them. As Skyes (2011, p. 94) argues "The proximity and possibility of lesbian, bi, queer and gay sexualities threaten to reveal this phantasy...to reveal the constructed ontological basis of heterosexuality". While students were comfortable naming and questioning gender norms within the Rainbow group meetings, moving out to do this (alone) in the wider school was more challenging. Indeed, the messiness of the desire to be heterogeneous yet sometimes 'needing' to perform homogeneity was evident here. However, this did not prevent them from continuing the peace week stall, nor did it prevent them from strategically identifying collectively and publically as Rainbow group members. While the 'compulsory system' of heteronorms (Butler, 1999) continues to circumscribe possibilities in this school, students were also (perhaps) beginning to trouble it publically in the school. Atkinson and Depalma (2009, p. 21) argue

that engaging in 'unbelieving the matrix' might actually begin from, not only collective struggle, but such "a place of uncertainty".

Conclusion

While evidence suggests that schools remain problematic and constraining spaces for LGBTQ students and staff, wider social and political shifts are impacting school environments. This article reported on a critical ethnographic study, the purpose of which was to explore how LGBTQ students experience schooling, and how an active Rainbow group at the school challenged narrow conceptualisations of gender and sexuality. Contestation for heterogeneity within the group ultimately opened up what was possible for the students to achieve beyond the group. In this sense, these students grappled with ways to explore and express their own diverse identity positions, yet strategically join as one to challenge wider school culture. In so doing, the students in this study demonstrated their own use of capillary power. Conscious of the limits of capillary power, they engaged in collective action. As Foucault (1995, p. 26-27) states, '...power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions...' The strategic actions that students undertook in the wider school highlighted heteronormative power, but also challenged it. Such moves invariably create feelings of exposure and uncertainty. Atkinson and Depalma (2009) note, however, that such uncertainty can be productive in shifting attention away from the power of the heterosexual matrix, and moving toward 'queering' practices in schools.

In this study, the critical practices of the school counsellor, Magdalena, were central in opening up possibilities for the LGBTQ students. The Rainbow group she created and facilitated provided a space for students to explore their own uncertainties, to express diverse identities and to engage in processes of legitimation and making-intelligible (and, for some, embracing un-intelligibility). The group provided space for the Rainbow students to recognise the parody of heteronorms and to begin to trouble the constraints of the heterosexual matrix in the wider school. These meetings, actions, discussions and initiatives were moments of resistance in the school: times when a greater diversity of gender and sexual identities were visible. For students, this resistance to heteronormative practices meant a more inclusive culture was possible. As Raven said about the Rainbow group stall at Peace Week 'It's good because it makes me think it is getting more inclusive at school because now we are actually doing that'. But, students also wanted to remain 'queer', they liked being queer. The Rainbow group navigated the complexities of intersectional subjectivities

within the group in a battle for heterogeneity – in a desire to remain queer. Indeed, this battle continued to reproduce intelligible subjects and to reinstate forms of othering within a celebration of difference and equality.

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Notes

¹ In this article, we use particular terminology when discussing gender and sexually diverse identities. We have chosen to use the acronym LGBTQ, and the terms 'rainbow' and 'queer'. While terminology is contested in the field of gender and sexuality, these terms are generally accepted as inclusive of a range of identities, while also signalling gender fluidity (de Lauretis, 1991; Warner 1993; Jagose, 1996).

² Lucassen et al (2014) defined the term 'come out' to mean that those attracted to the same/both sex told people close to them about their sexuality

³ ManAlive is a community group who work to promote positive manhood and strong relationships through a range of integrated services (<http://manalive.org.nz/>).

⁴ Shine is a national domestic abuse charity and runs a domestic abuse helpline to help keep people safe from domestic abuse and family violence (<http://www.2shine.org.nz/>).

⁵ Youthline is a national organisation which was 'established to ensure young people know where to get help and can access support when they need it. At the core of Youthline's work is the development of leadership and personal skills in young people' (<https://www.youthline.co.nz/>).

⁶ Fonua Ola is a social services which predominantly supports the local Pacific community within New Zealand, with strengths based social services (www.fonuaola.org.nz/).

⁷ 'Violence is not ok' campaign is a student led group at Kahukura Highschool who actively work to promote safer relationships and advocate against domestic violence.

⁸ Live4Tomorrow is a student led group at Kahukura Highschool who work to promote messages around inclusion and empathy. The focus on de-stigmatising mental health and to increase awareness and acceptance of mental health.

⁹ The bisexual flag is three horizontal strips: pink, lavender, and blue (ratio 2:1:2). The pink color represents sexual attraction to the same sex only (gay and lesbian), The blue represents sexual attraction to the opposite sex only (straight) and the resultant overlap color purple represents sexual attraction to both sexes.