Secondary Schools Diversity Groups:
RAINBOW SAFETY FIRST

A resource for secondary school staff who are exploring the idea of starting a diversity group. We share some of our learnings based on our own experience of running an inquiry-based, co-constructed and co-facilitated Queer-Straight Alliance.

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"It helped me come out I guess. I'm trans, and I wouldn't have come out if it wasn't for Skittles. I could come into the place without explaining myself, which I have to do everywhere else. I wouldn't be happy without having been able to come out."

SKITTLES

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2018 SCHOOL MAGAZINE ARTICLE WRITTEN BY A YEAR 9 STUDENT:

Love, hope and acceptance, that is the foundation of Skittles for we are more than a group of people; we are a family.

But what exactly is Skittles?

Skittles is a group where no matter what your culture, race or even the colour of your face, we come together as one.

We meet up every Thursday lunchtime, and if you were to walk through those doors, you would see people catching up with each other, some having a milo or a coffee, whichever you prefer. We share what's on our mind and we are often met by inspirational people such as hip hop artist MEER who not only inspire us to the fullest but also help guide us.

Sometimes, coming to an environment which is safe and where you know you will never be judged can help.

As soon as students enter those doors, they enter a room which may look ordinary at first, but holds the power of making so many memories and spreading so much love.

When I first joined Skittles I didn't really know much about it, I was new at school and didn't have many friends, but Skittles has helped me find the confidence to raise my voice for the better. Skittles has helped me feel good about myself, accepting myself for who I am.

Gay, bisexual or transgender, black, white or brown, you are loved. Skittles is where you are accepted for who you are, the way you are.

This year, Skittles put up stalls at health day and peace week. We gave out Skittles (literally) and also sold some delicious cupcakes and gave out pride badges.

The leaders, the teachers, and all the students are so welcoming and everyone is so supportive. I often find coming to skittles a great place to get advice for any sort of situation and a place full of new experiences.

Acceptance, is what we stand for, love is what we strive for, and hope is what binds us all together as one.

Skittles is where I found my second home, and you can find yours too.

'For I myself am made of flaws, stitched together with good intentions'
-Roald Dahl.

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Skittles stationary created by students.

A cake baked by Mount Roskill Grammar rainbow students for the rainbow bake sale.

1. OUR VISION

Our diversity group is an ongoing journey of co-creating a culture of inclusion, belonging and connectedness for staff and students from all parts of the rainbow and beyond. Our paramount focus is to support our rainbow youth in creating hope for a future in which "it gets better". We want to lift spirits and we want to enable our diverse youth to create a vision for a positive, authentic life as a rainbow person. We aim to co-create a culture of diversity within a community of diversity.

Our secondary goal is to work with students to co-create a socially-just, rainbow affirming school environment. When a school community becomes rainbow inclusive and diversity affirming and it moves away from the notion of "othering", this ultimately enhances whanaungatanga[1] and manaakitanga[2] for all.

Our model embraces these two goals in unison, but rainbow students' needs and rainbow safety are our priority. Our group is about co-constructing, co-leading and co-facilitating: students and staff working collaboratively.

[1] Whanaungatanga is used in regards to fostering relationships and cherishing diversity, creating and nurturing inclusion, belonging and connectedness.

[2] The definition of manaakitanga is to uplift and nurture the mana (prestige, strength or power) of each person.

2. PREFACE: THE STORY OF OUR COLLABORATION

MARGARET:

As a counselling student working on my Masters' research dissertation (Hoogendoorn, 1999) I interviewed rainbow school leavers on their experience with school counsellors. I discovered the painful reality that few rainbow youth had experienced secondary school counselling as helpful. Counsellors were described by research participants as quick to sidestep the issue of diverse sexualities to avoid entering the "minefield", instead retreating to the safer ground of "comfortable topics". This fuelled my determination to create a counselling service where diversity is explicitly explored, affirmed and celebrated.

Having a different sexuality is not a "counselling issue". It is homophobia and heterosexism, not diverse sexualities and gender identities that are the pathological variable in the development of suicidal thinking and behaviours. So inevitably, it's in our own social school context where we have to do the hard yards: creating a safer, rainbow-inclusive school. As a Counsellor I am in the uncomfortable position of witnessing the harm that homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity create first hand. This has propelled my fierce commitment to do what I can to make my school community, which I feel privileged to be part of, the most socially just environment possible. "Skittles", the diversity group we have co-constructed over the last decade, is an important vehicle for this endeavour.

Several developments in culture change, both in secondary schools and in wider society, have supported our diversity work over the last two decades.

Same-sex marriage legislation was passed in 2015.

Schools became acknowledged as a primary suicide prevention agency in the 1998 Ministry of Education and National Health Committee guide 'Young people at risk of suicide: a guide for schools'. It stated: *"The single most important factor in the prevention of suicide in the school environment is to address the causes of mental health and personal adjustment problems in young people".*

Connectedness was identified as a key factor towards wellbeing and to preventing suicidal ideation. The University of Auckland Youth 2012 research undeniably shows that our rainbow youth are overrepresented amongst those at risk. Both inclusion and connectedness are vital foci in our work to lift rainbow wellbeing. As teachers and counsellors we are ideally positioned to provide these key protective factors to counter suicidal thinking. Diversity groups significantly contribute to this. They can be both a powerful therapeutic tool and a potent springboard for social action towards a more socially just and inclusive school environment and society.

A Ministry of Education publication I found beneficial was Teacher Professional Learning and Development (2007). It promotes a culture of teacher-led-inquiry, "an inquiry habit of mind", to challenge prevailing discourses. An Inquiry Cycle is used to systematically access student voice feedback. This culture of teacher-led inquiry encourages the engagement with evidence in focussing on "what works" towards desirable social and educational outcomes. This inquiry approach became a powerful vehicle for the development of our diversity group.

For several years I ran the group as my formal inquiry, which I used towards my performance appraisal. Student, ex-student and staff feedback systemically informed me where and how the group was making a positive difference, and how I could develop the group further. A colourful, dynamic, inclusive rainbow community developed, and ex-students and past staff liked coming back to present, so the group stretched beyond the students "currently on the roll". Students let me know about their desire to help co-construct and co-facilitate, so we organically grew towards an authentic model of staff-students co-construction and co-facilitation.

A fundamental paradigm shift occurred in the relationship between staff and students. The dynamic and vibrant journey toward restorative practices in the first decade of this century supported me in sitting comfortably and explicitly with a "high support, high control" (Wachtel, 2005) approach. Restorative practices are about working **WITH** students, seeking authentic collaboration, and giving students optimal agency in their learning. It also gave me a powerful tool to address homo- and transphobic behaviours that I experienced as effective. It contributed in healing the harm to the staff/students that had been hurt, and it led to behaviour change of wrongdoers.

Working collaboratively with colleagues has been crucial in this journey. I have facilitated and co-facilitated the diversity group of our school for well over a decade. At times I have had rich collegial support with running sessions, including from "out" teachers who already played an important role in providing support for rainbow students in the school.

The diversity group grew organically from my counselling practice. Initially my primary focus was on the support of my rainbow clients, who I would invite to bring "supportive friends". This way a model evolved which I later discovered to be known as a "Queer-Straight Alliance" in American literature. Knowing many of the participants as clients, I was well-aware of the vulnerability and at-risk status of some of the students and of the level of anxiety in joining the group. Safety mattered like in no other forum.

Running the group has been deeply rewarding and uplifting. It has also been deeply demanding and emotionally exhausting. This exhaustion came from being in overdrive due to singlehandedly needing to ensure safety for such a large group of diverse youth. Although I was well aware that continuity and consistency would be ideal, I struggled to sustain this on my own on a weekly basis.

In 2015 University Health Education lecturer Hayley McGlashan contacted me requesting to "shadow" my work with the Roskill diversity group. Experiencing the power of a committed and emotionally present co-facilitator made running the group on a weekly basis sustainable. A large, diverse group of over 50 regular attendees developed. Connectedness and whanaungatanga flourished with the regularity and predictability of meetings. Hayley shared my passion for this work and the belief that this work deeply matters. It was a breakthrough realisation that having a fully-present adult co-facilitator made such a difference.

HAYLEY:

In my Master's research which looked at the experiences of gay males in physical education, I was disturbed by what I perceived as the marginalisation of LGBTQI+ youth in schools and, more specifically, in health and physical education (HPE). The young men shared narratives of being physically and verbally abused and ostracised by their peers if they deviated from normative gender identities, usually associated with heteronormativity. 'Heteronormativity is the cultural bias in favour of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature, and against same-sex relationships of a sexual nature' (Birkenhead & Rands, 2012, pg. 8). Heteronormativity acts to place heterosexuality as the natural and accepted form of sexual orientation. It reinforces socially constructed gender norms which act to contend that any gender or sexual identity variance from the norm is seen as deviant (Warner, 1993).

The (re)construction of students' sexual identities cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how dominant understandings of gender and sexuality are reproduced in everyday life, including in educational institutions. Heteronormativity regulates the accepted gendered forms of movement, language, dress, use of space, extra-curricular activities, preferred literature, academic subject choice, relationships and ultimately identity 'performance' in schools. These notions are extremely harmful to queer youth and as aforementioned, the young gay men who shared their experiences with me highlighted the realities of homophobic norms which still exist in some schools.

Following the completion of my dissertation I was anxious to find some good practice in schools which worked to support LGBTQI+ youth. Mount Roskill Grammar was recommended to me by colleagues and by the Education Review Office as a good practice school in regards to supporting queer youth. I approached Margaret asking if I could shadow her within the diversity group (Skittles). I was fortunate enough to co-facilitate the group alongside Margaret and the students for the year of 2016. This resource will draw on our experiences in building the group to be a thriving, inclusive and co-lead (with students) QSA.

Staff at lunchtime promoting Skittles.

3. RATIONALE: WHY THIS RESOURCE?

Societal attitudes towards the rainbow community have vastly improved over the last decades with the decriminalization of male homosexuality and with same sex marriage rights. However, the need to fight for rainbow youth wellbeing in the face of heteronormativity and bi/homo/transphobia is still acute. The Youth'12 report highlights that same/both-sex attracted youth are approximately five times more likely to have made a suicide attempt in the last 12 months, thus, there is an urgent need to support our queer rangatahi. Secondary school environments are often unsafe for rainbow youth. The need to fight against both external and internalized bi/homo/transphobia for many youth is still very real. If we take our role of functioning as a primary suicide prevention agent seriously (Ministry of Education, 1998) we cannot afford to ignore the need to support this high risk population. This need is highlighted in the following quote from a Rainbow student (Sari, 2016):

"Sometimes it can be a little bit isolating in school when most of the people are heterosexual and you are not. So it's nice to have that group of people who understand you."

Over the years, we have both fielded many requests about the "how to" of initiating a diversity group. It's been impossible to answer this question in a concise manner, explaining there is no recipe, no formula. Instead, it is a challenging, indefinite, rich project that takes immense dedication and a deliberate inquiry-based approach. You need to develop a pathway of your own, with your own students that works within your own unique school culture.

This resource is _our_ response to this "how to" question, but we cannot tell you how to do it. We hope that this resource will fuel your determination to run an inquiry of your own.

InsideOUT and Rainbow Youth have has provided an excellent resource titled Starting and Strengthening Rainbow Diversity Groups. Our resource adds to this by focussing on the lived realities and complexities of starting and maintaining a safe, diversity affirming group. Schools are complicated environments with a high level of pressure and at times overwhelming workloads and stresses. It requires immense dedication and passion to maintain a diversity group on top of the many other demands for both staff and students.

LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

In this resource we use the terms 'rainbow', 'LGBTQI+' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex plus) and 'queer' (a reclaimed word used with pride by many rainbow youth) interchangeably. 'Allies' is our word for non-rainbow people with a commitment to create a society and school environment inclusive of sex, gender and sexually diverse individuals. All student names in this resource are pseudonyms.

4. THE 2018 EDUCATIONAL REVIEW OFFICE REPORT ON SEXUALITY EDUCATION

The latest Sexuality Education Review titled Promoting Wellbeing Through Sexuality Education which ERO undertook in 2018 highlighted Mount Roskill Grammar as a 'good practice' school in this area.

ERO wrote the following:

STUDENTS SUPPORTING ONE ANOTHER:

This story highlights how student leadership groups can greatly contribute to students' sense of wellbeing and belonging. This very large co-educational secondary school has had a large and active queer-straight alliance group for a number of years. The guidance counsellor, who also has oversight of the Peer Sexuality Support Programme, very capably supports the group, and other teachers from across the school. Guidance and pastoral care staff said that the school has an explicit focus on retaining gender-diverse students until the end of Year 13. The queer-straight alliance group contributes to achieving this goal. ERO met with a family member of a student who had transitioned from male to female while at the school. There was initially some bullying from other students, but the school set up a restorative process to address this, and involved the whole whanau. The school's response and support meant that the student eventually achieved her education goals, and became a role model within the group, for other transitioning students. When the students of the group heard that ERO were coming to their school, they were enthusiastic to meet us and speak about what the group meant to them. We ended up meeting with around 30 students, who together represented almost all of the group.

For guidance on creating an inclusive and supportive environment for sex-, gender-, and sexuality-diverse students, see the Inclusive Education guide on TKI.

Specific comments from the students to ERO about their engagement with the diversity group include:

"It's been a wonderful time, it's like our little nook, our little corner of the school where it's a safe place, filled with allies and rainbow community"

"It's about having a sense of community, somewhere to go where you know people share your opinions and experiences, and you can feel safe"

"Honestly, it has personally helped me so much. Knowing there are people that you can identify with, that support is so empowering. People always say there are no safe spaces in the 'real world', but here we are, in the real world, and it's safe!"

"It is this family that's just there, you're not forced to go there, but you're always welcome there. What matters when we come is not the labels that you put on yourself, or that others put on you. Respect each other and you're a good person, that's all you need to say"

ERO continued to write:

While the primary focus of the group is on supporting one another, they have also engaged in a number of awareness raising events. After the Orlando nightclub shooting in June 2016, many of the students in the group were upset and wanted to address it within the school.

"We knew a lot of people were shaken by the Orlando shooting, to see people we connected with to go through that. We needed to bring it up in front of the school, to let us know that we were there, the wonderful student services counselling we have. It was really empowering (though scary) to get up there and talk about it".

Ultimately, students and their whānau alike appreciate how the group and the broader school help sex-, gender- and sexuality-diverse students to feel that they belong and care for their wellbeing. What came through very strongly was the sense of belonging and acceptance the group gave to its members. Even in a broadly supportive school context, having a separate safe space was extremely important to these young people.

One whānau member told ERO:

"As long as they're happy, I'm happy. I love them for who they are. The key points are support and love, that's what these kids need."

Rainbow biscuits baked by a student for a fundraiser.

5. OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A DIVERSITY GROUP

SAFETY FIRST

A "recipe" or a formula for diversity group initiation does not exist, or indeed, is dangerous. Thus, running a diversity group cannot be a tick box activity. Diversity groups are never neutral: they are for better or worse. "Do no harm" is a priority ethical principle over "do good". Good intentions are not enough.

Well intended, but naive practice that is not grounded in careful, authentic collaboration with the rainbow youth in a school can cause harm by exacerbating expressions of bi/homo/transphobia.

For example, promotion methods that may work for other social justice and support groups in your school, like using school "daily notices" or assembly presentations, are dangerous in this context. These methods risk drawing attention to rainbow students, increasing marginalisation and possibly discouraging students from 'coming out'.

To extend invitations to students, we use a combination of verbal invitations, Facebook reminders (on a "secret page", not accessible to non-members) and invitation notes that are delivered to class by a runner.

Having weekly meetings, using the same lunchtime each week, creates a routine of attending for many participants. However, students have indicated they still value a paper invitation as well. On these notes it is safest to invite to a "lunchtime meeting", the participant will know what it is for. Explicitly stating that the invite is for the diversity group could place rainbow students at risk of unwanted 'exposure'.

START UNDER THE RADAR

Start the group from a place that is 'under the radar', and let the group evolve safely and with a certain level of discretion. Keep the safety of your LGBTQI+ students as your paramount focus. If you encounter well-meaning straight-identified students with an enthusiasm for promoting the group at assembly, you need to intervene as this could be harmful for the LGBTQI+ students. Rainbow students themselves may not feel safe to object, and you risk losing them. Later on, when the group has run for some time, let students be in charge of deciding where and when they want to move above this radar. Wait for them to initiate these sorts of action.

You need to access the voice of rainbow students in such a way that they feel safe to be honest. Only queer students themselves know what is safe for them in the larger student community, and what is not. If students initiate an event that is public, it is vital that there is an absence of pressure to participate.
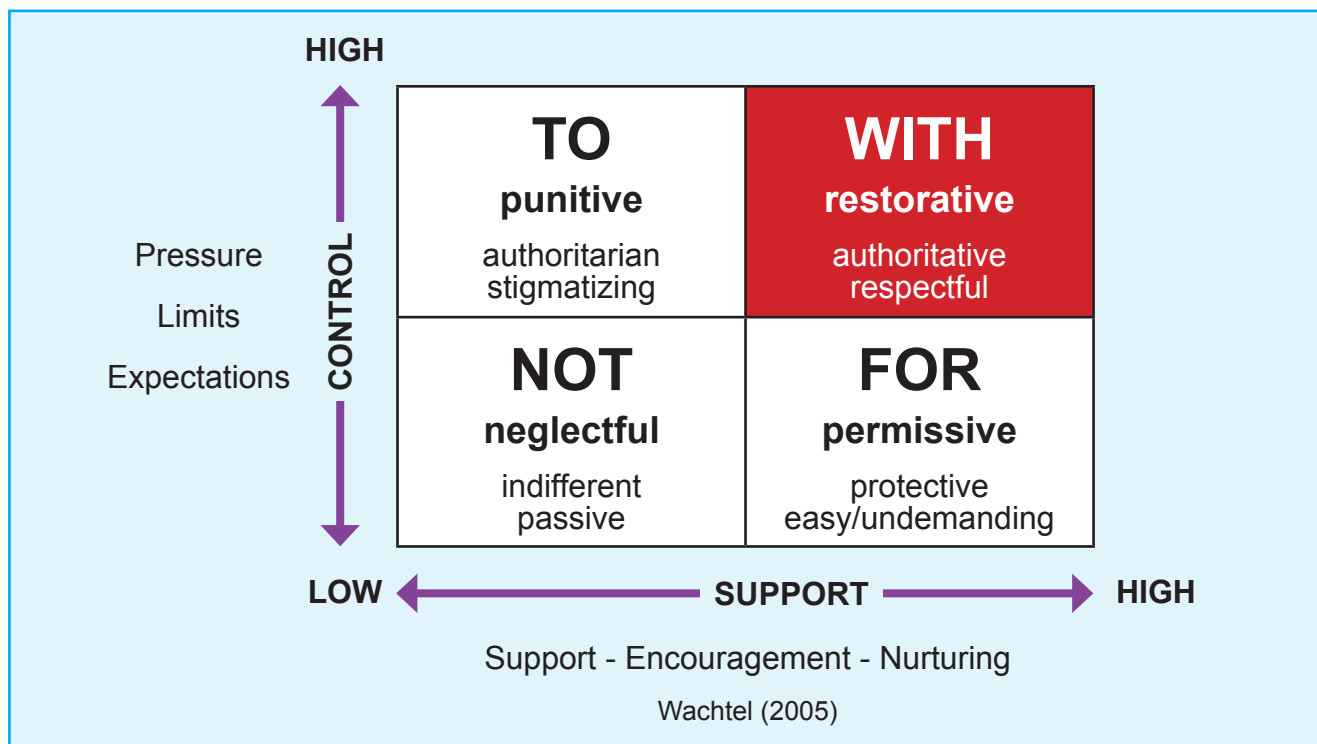
WORK **WITH** STUDENTS: HIGH CONTROL, HIGH SUPPORT.

Groups cannot be just 'student-led'. A safe group requires a co-construction process between staff and students. Very few projects, if any, in a school setting are genuinely 'student-led'. Many rainbow youth have fabulous leadership skills and the capability to co-facilitate diversity groups. However, adult co-facilitation is vital to create the necessary safety to support the more vulnerable and quiet young people to come out of the woodwork and join.

Although many youth express explicit pride and joy in attending a diversity group, for those most at risk it can feel acutely unsafe for fear of being 'outed'. The fear of judgment and the fear of bi/homo/transphobic violence or rejection are still very real for some students. It takes ongoing care and fierce determination to create a venue that is experienced as safe.

Create a spacious process of authentic co-construction of the group and its purpose and strategies **WITH** the students (so fitting within the "high support, high control" restorative window of the social discipline window):

HIGH

Pressure
Limits
Expectations

CONTROL

TO	WITH
punitive	**restorative**
authoritarian stigmatizing	authoritative respectful
NOT	FOR
neglectful	**permissive**
indifferent passive	protective easy/undemanding

LOW ← **SUPPORT** → **HIGH**

Support - Encouragement - Nurturing

Wachtel (2005)

A restorative high-support, high-control practice is integral to the success of the group. 'High control' is imperative in order to ensure safety, and to ensure that conversations steer in the direction of hope and effective social activism. Social action needs to be guided by staff with a strong inside knowledge of school culture, so students can be supported in developing strategies that have a good chance of success.

Staff need to be willing to be in high control and willing to make active decisions. The content of guest speaker presentations needs to be checked pre-delivery. This ensures students are left with a message of hope and excitement about their future if traumatic experiences (like bullying and violence) are shared. Although the realities of bi/homo/transphobia need to be open for exploration and discussion, the ultimate focus needs to be on an exploration and a celebration of diversity, and the co-construction of an alternative model of diverse gender identities and sexualities.

In case this all sounds daunting, to reassure you: It's more than worth the effort.

6. WHERE TO START?

The following three steps are essential starting points:

1. BECOME EXPLICITLY RAINBOW AFFIRMING

If you are not already doing this, start by creating rainbow visibility for your own educational (teaching, senior leadership or counselling) practice. Let students know you hold a firm, diversity affirming view, and explicitly communicate this. Youth will hold an expectation that you are bi/homo/transphobic unless they receive explicit rainbow affirming signals from you. This includes consistently and explicitly challenging prejudice towards people with diverse gender and sexual identities.

Don't underestimate the significant impact on the wellbeing of rainbow colleagues and students you will have during this process. Just by being explicit about your support for the rainbow community, by wearing a rainbow ribbon and by making your active support for sexual and gender diversity visual with posters in your classroom, offices and waiting rooms you will have an impact and communicate you are safe to talk to.

2. USE SENSITIVE NETWORKING TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

When rainbow community members see you as "safe" (rainbow supportive) they are more likely to seek you out and talk with you. Organically and gently build rapport with rainbow youth through building and maintaining authentic relationships. Be vigilant about rainbow students' and colleagues' safety, and be known for being willing to support and intervene. Once you have built a range of warm relationships with a group of rainbow students and their peers, you can discuss starting a group with them, or invite them to a meeting. This process cannot be rushed, and needs to be organic. Allow the group to evolve over time.

3. START THE GROUP SMALL-SCALE AND SLOWLY: INVITE RAINBOW STUDENTS WITH THEIR FRIENDS.

Use an inclusive Queer Straight Alliance (QSA) model from the start. Make it clear to rainbow students that they can bring their supportive friends. QSA's are student-centred groups where LGBTQI+ students along with their straight and questioning allies gather for conversation, learning activities, and mutual support (McGlashan and Fitzpatrick, 2017).

Focus on inclusion: all students and staff are welcome irrespective of gender and sexual identity. This is highlighted in the vision of our group which we (a student leader and/or staff member) share at the start of each meeting: (it needs repeating on a weekly basis because new members may be present):

"Welcome to Skittles! Thank you for coming!

Skittles is our school's diversity group. We are a group of staff and students who celebrate sexual and gender diversity and actively work towards social justice at our school. It doesn't matter if you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, straight or questioning – everyone is welcome here.

Together we create a culture of kindness and inclusion, and we fight prejudice and discrimination against people with different sexualities and gender identities."

One of the surprising learnings of our intensive inquiry process (which includes gaining student's reflections on the group) was that students who identify as heterosexual have expressed tremendous therapeutic benefit for themselves about coming and experiencing the group. As seen in this quote from a heterosexual student in the group:

Something I really like about Skittles is that no one really assumes your sexuality, no one really cares either and it is just a place where you can be yourself.

Many of the students expressed feeling completely safe and not judged. So it affirmed our belief that a queer straight alliance model helps people of all backgrounds to experience non-judgemental acceptance of everyone no matter where they are on the rainbow. This is highlighted in the following quote by Wachtel (2005):

"Where social capital—a network of relationships—is already well established, it is easier to … create a healthy and positive organizational environment. Social capital is defined as the connections among individuals, and the trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviours that bind us together and make cooperative action possible."

7. GROWING YOUR JOURNEY

A. USE AN INQUIRY APPROACH AND BUILD IT INTO YOUR PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

If you have to do an annual inquiry for professional development and performance appraisal purposes in your school, make this process your inquiry. Build it in.

In your inquiry, access student voice on an ongoing and systematic basis. This can be achieved by trialling meetings and initiatives with students, and then gaining feedback from students afterwards. Feedback could be gathered through open rounds at meetings as well as through Survey Monkey and Google Docs. Having face-to-face conversations with students individually, or in a small peer-group, can be helpful. After ensuring the students understand the conversation is confidential (you being trustworthy is crucial to your success in this context), a question like "how is the group going for you?" can be a simple starter.

B. RECRUIT STAFF ALLIES

By all means start the process by yourself with students, but look out for staff allies. To create safe and sustainable practice with regular meetings, it helps to have two thoroughly committed and passionate staff to co-facilitate a diversity group with the students. Ideally you have allies who are committed to prioritising the meeting, no matter how busy with other demands. If you work as a counsellor, include talk about your diversity work in your introduction talk with new staff. This will help to garner interest from staff.

Having two staff with 'antennae' for social dynamics is vital if a group consists of over eight students. It also means that if a staff member is absent, the group still runs. In our experience cancellation leads to an immediate loss of motivation amongst students. Predictability and continuity are paramount.

On top of the two key staff who are committed to prioritise the group, there are other roles for staff. Some staff may not feel able to take on a facilitation role, but be happy to attend at times. The presence of other "Out" rainbow staff (willing to be known as LGBTQI+) as well as rainbow-supportive teachers is worth its weight in gold. Their presence expands the sense of a rainbow-safe community within the school. The normalising impact of 'out' and supportive staff is immeasurable.

When talking to the students in our diversity group about the staff presence within the group, the students did indeed look to the staff as support figures, as seen in the following quotes:

Libra: *I believe that this year there are actually even more teachers in the group, and to be honest, I think it's really cool that they're there. I think it's really great to know for sure that we have lgbt/allied teachers that we can turn to for support/can trust. They never really led the sessions or told us off for language or anything, they just kinda, chilled with us I guess? And yeah it was pretty much just supportive.*

Mika: *Yeah, I like teachers coming too, it seemed as if they cared about you, breaking that 'teacher-student barrier'.*

John: *I think that it's great they come because students can feel more comfortable, understood and supported both at Skittles and around the school. And it also helps the teachers and students feel more comfortable talking to each other even in passing about any topics but especially Skittles related.*

Suni: *I reckon it was good involving teachers from my perspective. It makes students feel like they aren't alone.*

Tai: I*t's all like family, it's not like the teachers feel different to you, we call each other by our first names.*

However, there is a need for active management of the staff/student ratio. Maintaining an inquiry model with student feedback can help to identify the presence of too many staff if it becomes oppressive, controlling or restrictive - as we found in the following feedback from Aria:

Aria: *I can see how kids who weren't out would find it weird having them there so I'm glad that Skittles was primarily students.*

C. HAVE REGULAR MEETINGS

Develop a flow of predictable, regular meetings. We have found that weekly meetings in a consistent and safe place support the development of a routine of regular attendance from core staff and students. This is an essential pre-requisite for the growth of whanaungatanga.

D. KEEP AN OPEN AND FLEXIBLE MIND

Conceptualize the school's rainbow community as ongoing and vibrant and existing beyond those who attend the diversity group. Treat it as an open and continually changing community. There will be rainbow staff and students who will never attend. Keep them in mind.

We propose a model where once a student is a member, the group is utterly optional at all times and attendance is flexible. A flexible mind is required of staff as the composition of the group may be different each group: roll with those who do turn up. It can be disappointing to witness great role models stop attending as they approach the end of their school life, but it needs respecting. Even when seniors have stopped attending, we bring school leavers back for a final 'end of year' meeting at the start of term four to share some parting words/advice to the younger students with an explicit invitation. This leads to wonderful celebrations with moving words of wisdom.

E. MAINTAIN THE BALANCE BETWEEN SUPPORT AND ACTIVISM

Create a model where the need for culture change and the need to actively support rainbow youth are addressed equally. If you run a support group focussed on just queer youth, you could miss the opportunity to increase the rainbow affirming culture of the wider school. If you run a Queer Straight Alliance without a high level of safe and inclusive facilitation, high-need and vulnerable rainbow students are likely to feel uncomfortable and unsafe about attending.

F. TALK AND WALK THE TALK OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Familiarise yourself with social constructivist theory, and walk this talk with your students. Promote fluidity and continuum thinking, and challenge heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). Both gender and sexuality need to be conceptualised as a fluid continuum.

We suggest that self, or other, 'labelling' is not encouraged. Students should not be asked to use labels to define their identity. LGBTQI+ and allies come together as one, and it is our shared humanity and our commitment to challenge heteronormativity that brings us together. 'Preferred pronoun' rounds or 'self-labelling rounds' (a common practice in LGBTQI+ support groups) need to be avoided, as they encourage binary thinking and a pressure to move away from questioning and unsureness. Being uncertain and questioning should be affirmed as valid positions. This practice minimises the possibility of straight students explicitly stating their straight identity. (E.g. "Although I am heterosexual/straight, I think….”), which is alienating for the rainbow students. The last thing they need is to be exposed to non-rainbow students feeling the need to 'come out' as straight.

G. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Although the Social Discipline Window was developed to describe the four basic approaches to addressing behaviour that needs to be changed, it equally applies to creating effective support and activism groups. This is reinforced by the following quote by Wachtel (2005), "The fundamental premise in Restorative Practices is that people are happier, more cooperative and more likely to make positive changes when those in positions of authority do things with them rather than to them or for them".

Restorative justice conferencing is ideally suited for addressing bi/homo/transphobic bullying. Students knowing they can request a restorative conference creates tremendous faith in the school system. Knowing and experiencing that the school "walks the talk" of expecting respect and inclusion for all, and not ignoring bi/homo/transphobic bullying, matters deeply. Restorative Justice processes work, but need to be run by highly skilled facilitators, capable of explicitly naming the behaviours as biphobic, homophobic or transphobic (as opposed to vague and unhelpful terms like 'inappropriate behaviour'). Bi/homo/transphobic harassment need to be explicitly named in a school's sexual harassment policy.

H. DEVELOP PROGRAMMES THAT SUPPORT A RAINBOW-AFFIRMING WIDER SCHOOL CULTURE

Peer Mediation Service

Our Peer Mediation service, with over 200 trained Peer Mediators, has been a powerful way to initiate and sustain a social justice movement in the school. It also has created a community of belonging. The ongoing training of our "advanced mediators" (second year mediators) has provided great opportunities for a large group of students to participate in workshops about diverse sexualities and gender identities. Many students choose to wear a rainbow ribbon after this workshop as a signal they are rainbow supportive.

Mediators do not just provide mediation for their peers, they are expected and trained to function as 'ambassadors of social justice', and expected to speak up (or refer to a safe adult) if they witness an injustice, including bi/homo/transphobic harassment.

To start a Peer Mediation service, consult with the Peace Foundation. It is a time-effective, potent and proven way to create a culture of social safety in a school (for further evidence see, Connor and Buccahan, 2017).

Peer Sexuality Support Programme (PSSP)

If you are lucky enough to be part of this Auckland District Health Board (ADHB) programme in your school, PSSP students are your natural allies and co-leaders.

If you are in the Auckland region and not part of this programme, apply to join. It is a sound and safe preliminary step to developing a rainbow network. The staff of the ADHB's Sexual Health Education Unit run the programme and provide outstanding training to the students. PSSP participation in diversity Group co-leadership can be an expectation for all PSSP students.

Sexuality Education

Educators on education about bi/homo/transphobia, heteronormativity and cisnormativity. 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 (2015, p.11).

These guidelines should underpin all forms of sexuality education in schools and if drawn on effectively all staff and students within your school should be well educated on the needs and rights of sex, gender and sexually diverse individuals.

I. SUPPORT FROM SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Support from key members in the senior leadership team who are able to place the diversity vision within the school's overarching values is extremely helpful. However, even without active support it is still possible and important to establish rainbow support within your school.

Our colleagues in senior leadership can be inundated with moral concerns and hostility about a wide range of issues from parents and community members. They may be concerned that rainbow support groups may be misinterpreted by certain community members as promoting and encouraging diverse sexualities. This may lead to hesitancy and reluctance to promise immediate support.

We strongly recommend you take your time to build collaborative relationships with your Senior Leaders and co-construct a way of conceptualising the place of a diversity group within the school's larger vision. Using the Suicide Prevention literature from the Ministry of Education, and using the Ministry of Education's National Education Guidelines (1993) is a sound and safe way to start this.

The development of a diversity group can never be a tick box activity, or an "added extra". It is a moral responsibility and it requires prioritising.

J. CO-CONSTRUCTING EXPLICIT EXPECTATIONS

Active co-leadership of the group with the students enables an authentic, safe and productive environment. Connectedness is our gold, it is the key to providing hope that 'it will get better' and to help prevent suicidal thoughts. Creating a forum of inclusion has significant therapeutic power and is crucial for rainbow youth who feel marginalised in a heteronormative school environment. It is vital that all students that attend the diversity group experience an acute sense of inclusion and welcome. In order to create and maintain a safe and productive space we suggest that staff and students co-construct a group culture through a group social contract. Some examples of meaningful content for this context could be:

Note, these are our suggestions, but it is important you co-create your own with your rangatahi.

1. The right to pass - no student should ever be pressured into verbally contributing. Coming to observe, or just listen, needs to be affirmed and validated.

2. An expectation that students arrive at the latest 10 minutes into the lunchtime, after that the door will close to minimise interruption and protect emotional safety.

3. An absence of pressure to articulate where students position themselves on the continuum of gender and sexual diversity. The freedom to use labels, to be unsure or questioning and/or to refuse to label should be explicit.

4. An expectation that all staff and students join the circle and share an ethos of kindness and inclusion.

5. An expectation that all conversations focus on a broad ethos of tolerance and inclusion for all humans and a tolerance for all genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities and religions.

6. An expectation to all participate in education and to question and share with an open mind. "Ignorance fuels prejudice".

6. The use of cell phones is distracting and phones need to be left in bags.

7. When food is shared, come together as a group to bless the food. And, this blessing can be from anyone in the group, religious or not.

8. 'One at the time'. No interrupting, all contributions are valued.

K. CO-CREATING THE GROUP CULTURE AND A WEEKLY AGENDA

A powerful way of ensuring all voices are heard when co-constructing is to hand out a white board pen to all attendees so they themselves write up their suggestions on the whiteboard. Create an explicit culture of welcoming (and not dismissing/ ridiculing) all suggestions.

Once all have contributed on the whiteboard a 'rounds' format can be used where students explain their contribution one at a time (if willing).

'Rounds' (in which students can pass without needing to apologise) optimise the chance that all participants feel part of the group and their contribution is heard. A 'one at the time' agreement is crucial. Many students struggle to speak up in larger groups, and being unable to contribute may cause feelings of exclusion. An authoritative presence of staff members and an explicitly co-constructed group contract are vital.

One safe round at the very start is recommended: a simple name round will suffice, or a 'favourite movie' or "favourite book" can be added to the self-introduction. The principle behind the "round" is simple: once you have spoken, you feel part of a group. Asking students to discuss a topic in groups of two or three (always use a flexible number to minimise students finding themselves excluded) is also a safe way to involve all participants. It can function as a warm-up, or simply a satisfying opportunity to connect and share.

With whole group discussion, if the energy does not flow, or students feel unable to ask questions or share thoughts, go back to small group discussions.

L. USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Google Docs can be helpful in brainstorming and planning sessions and communicating with students: all can partake in contributing at the same time. Anonymous Survey Monkeys can be a discrete way to access student voice especially if you want to access the voice of the more quiet students. We recommend that students do the Survey Monkey inside your session to avoid ending up with a non-representative sample of students responding.

If social media are used to add to the co-creation and running of the diversity group, they need to be co-administered by staff and one or two senior members in the group. On Facebook, a 'secret page' can be used, which means that students who are not in the group cannot see the page. Only people who are members of the group can contribute to the page. We have found it to be a very useful and time effective method to alert students to the content of meetings, and to debrief following meetings.

The group Facebook page can also be a forum for discussion, but in our experience it can be perceived as too public to add, or even 'like' posts. Many students are reticent to contribute, and they may have good reasons to feel unsafe. It is however, a great way to share uplifting quotes, video and music clips, to promote meeting times and the agenda, and it adds a sense of community.

M. MEETING SPACE

It is important to meet in the same room or space as this adds to a feeling of safety and security for the students. An ideal setting is a room with a flexible circle of chairs and/or cushions or beanbags. Be authoritative: it is your responsibility as staff to ensure that all participants are sitting inside the circle. Sitting outside of the circle inevitably leads to students not participating and not experiencing belonging. The explicit culture of an absence of pressure to verbally contribute **makes it safer** for students to join the circle.

Ideally the room should be in a relatively private part of the school yet accessible. We walk over to the area five or ten minutes before the meeting to unlock the door, turn the heaters on in the winter and set up the cushions or chairs in a circle if they are not already. We have a kitchen next to our meeting space (the "Sunshine Room") which we open at the start of the meeting time so that students can make hot drinks or heat their lunch. The kitchen acts as a meeting space for the students where they can quickly catch up after they drop their bags into the Sunshine Room.

Rainbow flags in the Sunshine Room.

We hang flags over the door of the Sunshine Room and along the walls, alongside numerous rainbow supportive posters. The room is also decorated with art work created by the group in an arts and crafts session. This allows the students to feel a sense of ownership and pride in the room and contribute to the visible material on the wall which is diversity affirming.

Rainbow art in the sunshine room.

If food can be organised (e.g. fruit, pizza for an end of term celebration) it adds to the whanau feeling of the group. Many of the students in our group enjoyed bringing rainbow baking along.

An end of term Skittles celebration.

Rainbow baking at an end of term Skittles celebration.

8. SO WHAT DO YOU "DO" IN A MEETING?

It is vital that ultimately the agenda of meetings is co-constructed with students. However, initially it can help to initiate some presentations by trained, skilled facilitators to bring students in. A good example is the Inside Out programme, which was launched by Dr. John Fenaughty in 2016.

Here are some examples of activities that have worked well for our group:

- Shared lunch meeting with members of other school's diversity groups:
  The ongoing highlight of our group in the last 15 years has been the "Shared lunch" meet-up with diversity groups from other schools. We have a neighbouring school with whom we have an ongoing "sister group" relationship. These meeting are looked forward to by students with absolute joy. It is an opportunity for the students to share food and take turns in the facilitation. Ex-students come back to school for this event. The joy is being together to celebrate rainbow pride and the reminder that they are not alone… diversity is everywhere. The joy of connecting is key.

- LGBTQI+ book reviews:
  Students and/or staff volunteer to discuss a book they have enjoyed. Alternatively, invite the school librarian, an English teacher with a passion for books on diversity or the owner of a bookshop with a good LGBTQI+ selection.

- Rainbow characters in movies and television (PowerPoint presentation plus discussion).

- Sessions on the wonderful American It gets better campaign, showing some of their many inspirational YouTube clips.

  *"Our mission is to uplift, empower and connect LGBTQI+ youth around the globe. We can make it **better** for lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender young people"*
  (Quote from the campaign)

- Invite ex-students back to talk about their past experiences as a rainbow student in the community of our school, and compare it to their life now. The focus needs to be on what helped them not only survive, but thrive. This fits in with the 'It gets better' project. Ex-students seem usually keen to return and talk, and they have often shared that they felt touched and privileged to be invited.

- Inspirational rainbow adult guest speakers. (Poets, authors, musicians, church pastors, Rainbow Task Force members from banks and businesses, politicians, sports people.)

  Active management of content is helpful to ensure stories about being bullied, despair and feeling excluded in teenage years are balanced with strategies for resilience, and inspirational evidence of how good life can become. Students need to be left with a hopeful and uplifting end. Question asking also needs to be managed with sensitivity: it can be daunting for students to ask questions in front of a large group. Questions can be written anonymously, or small groups can brainstorm questions for the guest speaker. Guest speakers need to be aware and ACTIVELY supported in reaching this important uplifting part of their message before the end of the meeting when the bell goes. Having the bell interrupt an incomplete message or an unresolved story can be damaging. If your timetable allows, create opportunities to stay behind at the end of a meeting for a small-group or individual conversation with the guest speaker.

- Rainbow theme music videos:

  Again, active staff management is important. Some videos may contain (bi/homo/transphobic) violence, and are not appropriate for a group with a range of ages and levels of resilience. Especially with a rapid increase of junior students joining diversity groups, care is needed. A co-constructed contract between staff and students is essential to ensure safety in this process.

- Rainbow arts and crafts.(Your students who access rainbow social media sites will have ideas about this.)

- Organising diversity stalls/ booth for expos.

- Organising the annual international "Day of Silence".

The focus of the day is on using silence to raise awareness, and then breaking the silence and committing to continuously making the school a safer place for rainbow students.

The Day of Silence is often described by participants as a moving, solemn and powerful experience. They draw attention to the silencing effect of bi/homo/transphobia by electing to stay silent for a day and by having this choice made visible by having mouth taped up.

We start the (remarkably time-consuming) taping up process half an hour before school starts, and ensure all students depart for Period 1 in time as to minimise disruption to classes.

We expect that participants join a Skittles meeting to raise motivation and organise the details. On the day, they have a sticker on their chest and/or a statement on their mobile phone to explain to others who ask why they are taped up.

Staff are sent an email in advance.

Participants meet at lunchtime in our group space, and "untape" temporarily to have a shared lunch together.

Contact InsideOUT.org,nz for support, or dayofsilence.org.nz/.

- Organising Rainbow cake stalls to raise funds for InsideOUT, Rainbow Youth, your local rainbow support group or the school's diversity group. Consistently a favourite with students!

- A staff facilitated discussion on responding to and challenging bi/homo/transphobic put downs in a constructive and safe manner:

  This can be followed by posting the discussion summary on the Facebook page such as we have below:

Great conversations about calling people out for being homo-/transphobic today! ❤❤❤❤

In summary:

• Only call people out if you feel safe to do it.

• EDUCATE...remember prejudice stems from ignorance. For example say

"What did you mean by that?"

"Tell me more about your intentions when you said that?"

"Do you know where the word "faggot" comes from?"

• Ok to make ignorant people feel a bit silly, but avoid sarcasm... "If they go low, you go HIGH" (Michelle Obama)

• You can reclaim words that were used in a dismissive way, and use them with pride:

"So what if I'm gay?"

"Interesting that you spotted that!"

"PROUD to be queer!", "Proud to be trans" 😊 *:)*

- Interpersonal connecting through 'Speed dating': Facilitate students to connect with and talk to a wide range of peers in the group (for three minutes at a time) though setting up short conversations with a list of prepared, co-constructed topics. It helps to start with safe topics (e.g. favourite movies) and move towards more challenging conversation topics when a routine of "moving seats" at the bell is established. This activity provides great safety for new students, as a safe and predictable facilitation of multiple contacts with other students.

- As needs arise, support student initiatives to prepare for an assembly event. Our students ran a moving assembly presentation to acknowledge the Orlando shooting in 2016.

- Student speeches (speeches on diversity, and 'coming out' speeches often already performed in English for NCEA assessment purposes).

- Guest speakers from support agencies.

- Guest presenters: Rainbow Youth, trained presenters of the excellent 'Inside Out' programme.

- A "Farewell to our leavers" celebration at the end of each school year. These sessions are moving and memorable. Being on the brink of leaving school can create safety to speak to the importance the group has had for them.

  Some questions that can be asked by the facilitators include:

  "Which session of Skittles was your favourite?"

  "Who has been the most memorable guest speaker for you?"

  "What has supported you to become proud about who you are?"

  "What advice do you want to give to younger rainbow students?"

  Following this, open the circle to invite the expression of gratitude to those who are leaving.

- Discussions about school policies around sexual and gender diversity (uniforms, gender neutral bathrooms) and supporting initiatives to promote positive change.

- Addressing broader concerns for the rainbow community inside the school, nationally and internationally.

9. TRAINING A CORE GROUP OF STUDENT LEADERS: AN ADDITION FOR WELL-ESTABLISHED GROUPS

Once a strong core of committed students has developed in your group, you may want to consider training a small core of students who express enthusiasm to help with the manaakitanga practices in the group. This is especially recommended if you are the staff member that runs the group without collegial support, as it will enhance safety and it will create sustainability.

In our group we became aware that even socially capable and empathetic students rarely welcome newcomers. Furthermore, they usually stay firmly ensconced in their friendship groups within meetings. Of course meetings are in their lunchtime, and their need to relax with friends is utterly legitimate. However, this healthy desire to connect with friends inevitably leaves the responsibility with staff to welcome students and facilitate connections. This can make the informal pre-meeting time excessively hard work for staff. This increases the risk of staff exhaustion and burnout.

When we worked together in 2016, this was not an issue, but after Hayley's departure at the end of the year, I (Margaret) sorely missed her input in co-hosting. As staff we inevitably have a stronger awareness of the less socially equipped and marginalised students and we work towards minimising any feelings of exclusion or isolation. We can however, train our student leaders to become skilled in this also.

In 2018, I trialled three interactive training sessions with a core of six student co-leaders. The topics included:

A. The psychology of fundamental human psychological needs. The Maslow hierarchy of human needs. (Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory in psychology proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" in Psychological Review).

B. Anxiety around coming to a new group: What underlies this anxiety? How can we ease this anxiety?

To motivate, I brainstorm with the group which "anxious thoughts" students may encounter as they decide to join SKITTLES, and as they walk towards the venue. For this brainstorm, the leaders drew on their very own experience. Thoughts were written on a whiteboard, with all students writing at the same time to minimise anxiety and optimise engagement.

C. Strategies for welcoming, connecting and facilitating in an inclusive way:

The power of eye contact when students approach the venue, and when they step through the door. Reaching out with a verbal welcome (e.g. "Welcome to Skittles"). Ensuring the arrangement of seats is inclusive: a circle, always, or a U-shape if the projector screen needs to visible.

D. Creating an ethos of shared responsibility for wellbeing of attendees.

E. Co-constructing a "Code of Ethics", an agreed upon set of philosophical beliefs that lead to inclusive and healthy social practices.

At the end of each student co-led session, we de-briefed the use of inclusion and belonging strategies. To communicate as a leadership group, especially to set up meetings at a time that works for everyone, we used a "group chat" on Facebook.

The emphasis in the training and follow-up was on simple skills: making eye contact, introducing yourself and linking the students with someone else in the group. These student leaders had shared the observation that students are quick to simply walk away if they feel awkward or isolated on arrival. The immediacy and authentic warmth in how students are welcomed is of vital importance.

Training a core of leaders in these basic skills significantly lowered the pressure on me by having the task of proactive welcoming shared. "Topping up" was needed twice a term to ensure the awareness of the power of these skills was kept alive. It can be a big expectation for students to add another meeting in their busy school agendas. It is important that these training sessions are well-prepared, genuinely collaborative and enjoyable and that food is provided. A whiteboard pen for each participant, and devices (smartphones) on tables to use Google doc. technology, can contribute significantly to create an immediate sense of being an active part of the collaboration.
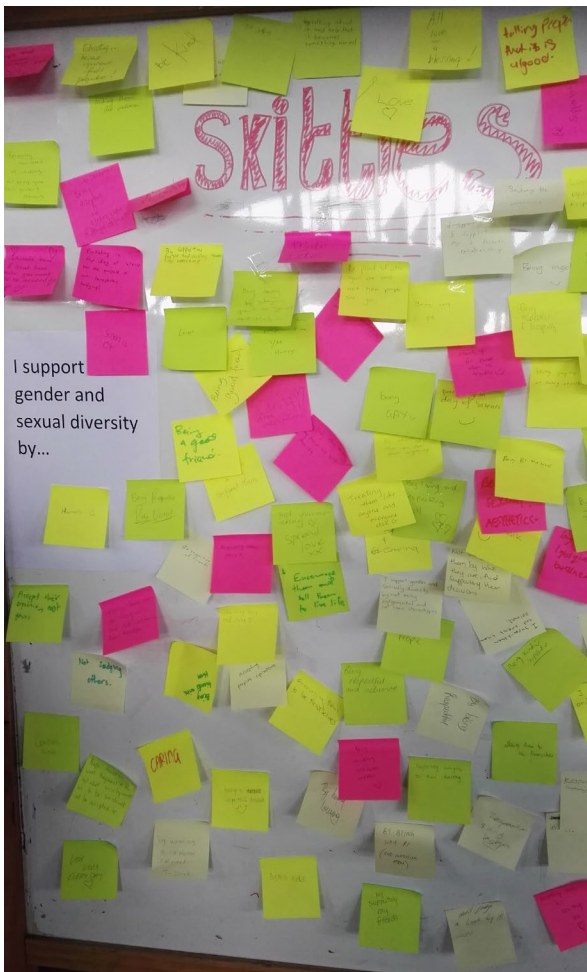
Activity board at a lunchtime Health Expo. The Diversity booth was set up and run by Skittles students.

10. SUMMARY

Initiating and developing a diversity group is a challenging, indefinite and rich project. It requires passion and dedication. There is no formula, there is no recipe. We invite you to embrace the vision of running a diversity group as an authentic and ongoing inquiry WITH your students. This will enable the development of a group which meets the needs in your own unique school environment.

A thorough connection with the rainbow students in your school is a prerequisite to being able to engage in this journey safely. The safety of your rainbow students needs to be the paramount principle throughout.

We have proposed attending to the need of BOTH creating a more inclusive school environment AND providing therapeutic inclusion and affirmation for rainbow rangatahi. Our proposed focus for the group is the co-creation of a culture of inclusion, belonging and connectedness as well as supporting our diverse youth in creating hope for a future in which it gets better. We need to support our rainbow youth to create a vision for a positive, authentic life as a rainbow person.

When we move away from 'othering', the social wellbeing and mana of all school members is enhanced.

Art work made in Skittles session. The workshop was co-facilitated by Skittles students and Art teacher

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