How literacy resources contribute to a gender inclusive classroom

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ABSTRACT

The New Zealand Curriculum requires schools to be inclusive of all areas of diversity, highlighting the need for schools to ensure children of all genders feel physically and emotionally safe. Children develop concepts and expectations of gender norms at school which can influence self-esteem. Gender-inclusive classrooms are a safe environment for children to explore and express gender identities. One way that gender-inclusive classrooms can be achieved is through children's literature, which can result in less bullying at school and higher self-esteem in gender-diverse children. The research question for this study is: what are New Zealand primary school teachers' understandings of how literacy resources contribute to gender-inclusive classrooms? Semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data to answer this question. Data were analysed through a thematic approach and revealed a need for professional development for primary school teachers in Aotearoa to confidently incorporate gender-inclusive and queer literacy resources for a gender-inclusive classroom.

KEYWORDS
Gender-inclusiveness, primary classrooms, literacy resources

Introduction and background

Teachers in Aotearoa are required to ensure their students' gender identities are affirmed, and an awareness of gender diversity is developed. This is evident in the New Zealand Curriculum which states, "the curriculum is non-sexist, non-racist, and non-discriminatory" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). Gender-inclusive classrooms are a safe environment for children to explore and express their gender identities. Through gender-inclusive classrooms, children who do not identify within social gender binaries are less likely to be bullied and harassed, resulting in an increased ability to learn and develop positive self-esteem (Neimi, 2016; New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.).

However, despite the requirement of all schools to be inclusive, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2021) reports that queer and gender diverse people continue to suffer discrimination at school. Furthermore, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (n.d.) highlights issues related to queer and gender-diverse people are often unaddressed. As a primary school teacher and a queer person, I have experienced and witnessed the positive impact gender-inclusive classrooms have on the wellbeing of students. Furthermore, Stachowiak (2018) explains that gender-diverse students will feel safer at school when conversations involving genders outside the traditional binaries are normalised.

The purpose of this study is to describe teachers' perspectives on using children's literature to develop a gender-inclusive classroom. Both enablers and barriers of teachers utilising gender diverse and queer literature are examined, with a detailed discussion of how teachers can overcome these barriers.

Key definitions

From the literature, there is agreement on the differentiation between the terms 'gender' and 'sex'. Gender is defined as how a person identifies on the gender spectrum, and sex is a biological term describing a person's anatomy (Chapman, 2015; DePalma, 2013; Keddie, 2003; New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d., 2020). To encompass all genders and sexualities outside the social binary, the term 'queer' is used (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Sandretto, 2018). It is important to note that the term 'queer' is "a reclaimed word in a positive sense to describe non-normative sexual or gender identities" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 48). The terms gender, sex, and queer will be used with these definitions throughout this article.

Literature review

According to the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (2017), teachers report many schools do not ensure sexually and gender diverse students feel safe and included, despite the New Zealand Curriculum explicitly outlining the requirements of schools to be an inclusive environment for all areas of diversity (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007). One way to support all children in feeling physically and emotionally safe at school is through inclusive classrooms (Neimi, 2016; New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.). This literature review will examine gender-inclusive classrooms, through the mindset of feminist post-structuralist theory and queer theory. Children's literacy will be evaluated as a tool to develop gender-inclusive classrooms, and barriers to gender-inclusive classrooms will be explored.

Feminist post-structuralist theory and queer theory

Feminist post-structuralist theory can be used to understand the intersection of the classroom environment and gender identity. Feminist post-structuralist theory explains how children develop their own gender identities from early childhood through gender expressions they observe around them and the policing of gender boundaries from parents, teachers, and peers (Blaise, 2010; Blaise &

Taylor, 2012). A feminist post-structuralist view of gender in the classroom enables teachers to understand how gender stereotypes are perpetuated in classrooms and provides strategies that can be used to prevent ongoing gender inequity (Blaise, 2009; Campbell et al., 2017; Chapman, 2015; Keddie, 2003; MacNaughton, 1997; Mayeza, 2016).

Queer theory, developed from feminist post-structuralist ideas, explains how gender norms are perpetuated in society by dominant gender stereotypes (Blaise, 2010; Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Sandretto, 2018). Queer theory shows how gender identity is influenced by these dominant gender stereotypes which are normalised within society through hierarchical heterosexual discourses (Blaise, 2010; Staley & Leonardi, 2016). With this mindset, it is clear that teachers and other students play a significant role in how a child explores and develops their own gender identity. Understanding both queer theory, and feminist post-structuralist theory, can enable teachers to see the impact the classroom's social environment has on children's gender identity development.

Gender inclusive classrooms

Inclusive education is defined by the Ministry of Education as "how we develop and design our learning spaces and activities so that all learners are affirmed in their identity and can learn and participate together" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.). Furthermore, a gender-inclusive classroom is one "that acknowledges and affirms the gender and sexuality diversity of every student" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.). Therefore, through a feminist post-structuralist mindset and queer theory, a gender-inclusive classroom is a learning environment that supports students who fit outside traditional gender expectations and social binaries.

Gender-inclusive classrooms in New Zealand are supported by the Māori concept of *manaakitanga*. In the classroom, manaakitanga is defined as "creating a welcoming, caring and creative learning environment that treats everyone with respect and dignity" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.). Manaakitanga underpins a gender-inclusive classroom because it supports students in exploring and expressing their gender identity, free from judgement or harassment. With manaakitanga at the centre, teachers can apply a feminist post-structuralist mindset and queer theory to address gender norms and biases within their teaching practices.

Additionally, queer students are more likely to experience inclusion when conversations involving genders outside the traditional binaries are normalised (Neimi, 2016; New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.; Stachowiak, 2018). In order to do so, teachers need to familiarise themselves with key queer terms (New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.). In New Zealand, there are many different cultural terms and understandings of gender diversity. These key terms are nuanced with various cultural understandings that are not always translatable (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020). For example, *takatāpui* is a Māori term, *faʻafafine* is a Sāmoan term, and *vakasalewalewa* is a Fijian term, all of which are used for people who identify as sexually and gender diverse but do not have direct English translations. Therefore, the concept of manaakitanga is evident when teachers use the correct language to develop safe environments where gender-diverse students are treated with respect and dignity (Stachowiak, 2018).

Breaking down gender stereotypes through literacy resources

Students whose exposure is restricted to heteronormative texts learn to encourage gender stereotypes and police their peers who step outside the gender binaries (Blaise, 2009; Chapman, 2015; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007). As Staley and Leonardi (2016, p. 212) state, "because curricula are largely heteronormative, students are rarely afforded opportunities to engage with content that positively reflects queer identities and experiences". This means that without proactive and responsive teachers, or diverse representation in literacy resources, classrooms can easily become spaces of exclusion for gender-diverse children. Conversely, the research of Neimi (2016) highlights how children become more accepting of diversity in society through exposure to diverse people and families.

Furthermore, children's literature can be used as a tool to disrupt social constructs of gender perpetuated through dominant heterosexual discourses (Blaise, 2010; Staley & Leonardi, 2016). As Davies and Saltmarsh (2007, p. 14) discuss, "there is a growing tendency to view popular texts as potential sites for teachers to provide a space in which dominant narratives can be disrupted and alternative subject positions and gender identities explored". With the use of feminist post-structuralist theory and queer theory, carefully selected literacy resources can be used to dismantle negative gender stereotypes (Chick, 2014; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020; Rodríguez-Mena, 2019; Sandretto, 2018).

Additionally, as Stachowiak (2018, p. 29) highlights, children's literacy can be used "to do the work of creating an environment that is gender inclusive". However, because popular children's literacy resources in primary schools rarely address issues affecting gender diversity, teachers need to confront their own biases and develop a critical queer mindset within their literacy practices (Cosier, 2016; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Sandretto, 2018). More specifically, teachers can develop their students' queer critical literacy skills by sharing their journey and modelling how they overcome their own gender biases (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Sandretto, 2018).

Barriers to gender inclusive classrooms

One key challenge in developing gender-inclusive classrooms is teachers' fears. Teachers' fears stem from their personal discomfort with gender diversity, and the possible reaction of school communities and school leaders (Chick, 2014; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). When guided by their fears, teachers allow concepts of gender stereotypes to be perpetuated in their classrooms (Blaise, 2009; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Keddie, 2003; Meyer et al., 2018; Neary, 2018; Van Leent, 2017). Through teachers' choice of literacy resources, children receive messages about 'right' and 'wrong' ways of expressing gender which can harm their self-esteem (Hamilton et al., 2006; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013).

However, a powerful tool to overcome the barrier of teachers' fear is *ako*, a Māori concept describing how both teacher and students can learn together (New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.). Teachers and students can learn to apply a critical queer lens to literacy, through ako. An example of this is presented by Allan et al. (2008) who draw on data from a UK-based research study.

Teachers in this study used traditional fairy tales to prompt discussions and questions about the "embeddedness of heterosexuality" (Allan et al., 2008, p. 317). As a result, teachers were able to overcome their fears and learn with their students about the importance of gender representation in children's literature.

Another barrier often faced by teachers is not understanding how to address gender diversity issues due to the limited support and guidance (Van Leent, 2017). In response to this, the New Zealand Ministry of Education released a guide in 2020 to support teachers, leaders, and boards of trustees in the teaching of relationships and sexuality for Years 1 to 8. The Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) guide focuses on gender diversity and inclusion from the world view of Māori and Pacific people. Te Ao Māori concepts of manaakitanga, ako, and *hauora* (wellbeing) underpin many of the concepts presented in the RSE guide, which are also key concepts guiding a gender-inclusive classroom (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020).

Summary

From the literature, it is evident that developing a gender-inclusive classroom is an important aspect of ensuring all children feel safe and supported at school. A gender-inclusive classroom can be achieved through the guiding Māori concepts of manaakitanga, ako, and hauora, and with the help of children's literacy resources when used with a feminist post-structuralist and queer theory mindset. Teachers may need to develop their skills in using literacy resources effectively, by overcoming their fears, with the support of school policies and senior management.

Methodology

The research question for this study is: What are New Zealand primary school teachers' understandings of how literacy resources contribute to gender-inclusive classrooms?

This article draws on two main theories to provide a framework for research: feminist post-structuralist theory and queer theory. Feminist post-structuralist theory explains gender as a social construct and as such, children take an active role in developing their own gender identity in relation to the world around them. Additionally, queer theory explains gender not as a natural trait one is born with, but as a complex construction of a person's experiences based on gender norms of heterosexual discourses.

Data collection and subsequent analysis for this research are based on feminist post-structuralist theory and queer theory. Care was taken to ensure the researcher's views did not impact the results of this study. Furthermore, interview questions were developed to gather understanding of how dominant, hierarchical social discourses are seen in children's literacy resources and the impact they have on a gender-inclusive classroom.

This study consisted of six individual, face-to-face interviews with Auckland primary school teachers. The participants of this research were each working at five different Auckland primary schools at the

time of being interviewed. They represent a diverse range of experiences, teaching environments, and school communities.

The six teachers and their classes were:

Teacher A: Classroom teacher of Year 1s, Team Leader of junior school, 13 years teaching experience.

Teacher B: Beginning Teacher, currently in first year of teaching, teaching Year 5 & 6s.

Teacher C: Teacher of Year 3 & 4s in a modern learning environment, third year of teaching.

Teacher D: Classroom teacher of Year 1 & 2s, 15 years of teaching experience.

Teacher E: Classroom teacher of Year 5 & 6s, Digital Tech Curriculum leader, literacy leader, 6 years of teaching experience.

Teacher F: Classroom teacher, library leader, over 20 years of experience in a variety of education sectors including special needs specialist teacher, and librarian.

Qualitative data for this research was collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to gather rich, detailed data for in-depth analysis. The interview questions were carefully designed to put participants at ease, develop rapport, and provide opportunities for honest answers. The interview began with questions asking the participant to describe their teaching experience, school environment and community. Questions then progressed to complex topics organised by the following domains: gender diversity and inclusion, and children's literacy resources. These domains were chosen to allow the interview to progress naturally and as such, provided opportunities for interview participants to develop and share their opinions (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013).

The researcher ensured early questions did not restrict what interviewees felt they could say later on, by starting with broad orienting questions and asking more specific questions later in the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Feminist post-structuralist theory and queer theory were used to develop interview questions in order to elicit relevant information which would help to answer the overarching research question. For example, interview participants were asked: Describe how gender is represented in children's literacy resources; How would you feel about initiating a discussion with your class about gender representation in traditional fairy tales; and, If you were to read a story to your class about Cinderella falling in love with a female character, how do you think your class would react?

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher in a document that was saved in the researcher's personal password-protected account. Data was analysed through a thematic approach. Each transcript was coded line by line on paper, using open codes. This line-by-line coding ensured the codes were analytical and prevented the researcher from incorporating their own personal world views and biases into the coding (Gibbs, 2018). Each open code was defined to ensure clarity and consistency across transcripts. A table was used to collate open codes, the source of each open code,

and researcher notes across all transcripts. Once each transcript had been coded and collated in the table, the open codes were sorted into major themes for a thematic analysis of the data.

This research upheld ethics according to Massey University's Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants (2017). A low-risks ethics application was submitted, and approval was granted for this professional inquiry on June 5th 2021. The interview participants all gave their full, written consent. As this was a New Zealand-based research project, participant confidentiality was of high importance. To ensure confidentiality, only the researcher had access to transcripts and interview notes. Any identifying information such as participants' names and names of schools were removed when reporting the findings of this research.

Findings

The findings of this study revealed four major themes: teachers' understandings of gender diversity; their understandings of how to develop a gender-inclusive classroom; their perceptions of barriers to utilising gender-inclusive literature; and teachers' ability to develop critical literacy. The findings are presented below within each major theme and subsequent sub-themes.

Teachers' understanding of gender diversity

In this study, all six teachers agreed that gender is a personal choice and it is how a person chooses to identify. For example, Teacher A stated, "gender is anything that you want it to be, anything you describe it to be". Out of the six teacher participants, four teachers expressed an understanding of gender as being fluid and changeable. As Teacher B explained, gender diversity is "being flexible in their genders". Similarly, Teacher D explained gender diversity as "how you choose to identify as a boy or a girl or something fluid or something indeterminate". Overall, teachers agreed that gender diversity is an expression of a person's identity.

A sub-theme of gender differences emerged from the data. Teachers A and C both adhered to the belief that it is necessary to account for gender differences, adjusting their teaching particularly to cater to boys. Teacher A said, "I want to hook in those boys, because the girls are kind of listening to most things, but not necessarily the boys". Teacher C said, "we're a very boy-heavy class" therefore we are "constantly breaking up learning with going outside and then coming back in" because "boys need to move a bit more". In comparison, gender differences were discussed through the idea of female empowerment by four teachers. Teacher E said, "we're pretty big on girl power". Other teachers highlighted how they addressed female empowerment by teaching their female students that they were not limited by the stereotypes presented in children's literature.

Teachers' understanding of how to develop a gender-inclusive classroom

Each of the six teachers interviewed were able to identify aspects of a gender-inclusive classroom and strategies for developing one. Teacher D described a gender-inclusive classroom as one where you would "see some experimentation and see freedom". Additionally, Teacher F identified the teacher's role in developing a gender-inclusive classroom. They said, "kids who are trying to get their

heads around where they fit, we have to be open to that and accept wherever they're at in that journey". Teacher B identified "normalising a lot of vocabulary around gender" as being an important aspect in gender-inclusive classrooms.

Additionally, all six teachers discussed the importance of exposure and representation as a way to normalise gender diversity and develop a gender-inclusive classroom. Teacher B expressed the importance of being exposed to "people who identify with lots of different genders" as a key element of gender-inclusive classrooms. Teacher D highlighted the importance of exposure by "showing them broad ways of what it is to be a girl, not just one sort of narrow kind of framework, broad examples of what it is to be a boy…". All six teachers agreed that through exposure children develop an awareness of diversity which can allow them to be more inclusive.

Stereotypes emerged as a sub-theme of teachers' understandings of how to develop a gender-inclusive classroom. Five teachers addressed stereotypes but with some disparities in their opinions. Teacher C described their classroom as "quite stereotypical" because "boy learners and our girl learners" require different teaching approaches. This belief stands in contrast to Teacher F's idea that teachers should avoid, "boxing kids, [because] every kid is their own individual unique person". Teacher F's belief in dismantling stereotypes aligns closely with the beliefs of Teacher B who said a gender-inclusive classroom is about, "making sure everyone feels safe and comfortable in their own skin and whatever gender they may identify to". This shows the impact teachers' beliefs in gender stereotypes have on their teaching approaches.

Teachers' perception of barriers to utilising gender-inclusive literature

All six teachers described diversity of families as a barrier to how they use queer literature in their classrooms. Fear of how diverse families would react led three of these six teachers to exercise caution in their approach. However, teachers who felt they had the support of their senior leadership team expressed less fear and less caution. Teacher B said they felt their senior leadership team were "fully supportive" and "really celebrated" gender-inclusive literacy resources. Teacher D also felt "completely well supported", and Teacher F said their senior management team were "totally supportive". Each of these teachers did not mention feeling fearful in their interviews. They also expressed less cautiousness, despite diverse families being identified as a barrier.

Age was identified by two teachers as another barrier to utilising queer literature, however, there were disparities in other teachers' beliefs. Teachers A and B expressed challenges based on the age of their students, which prevented them from incorporating queer literature as part of their common teaching practice. Teacher A stated, "not to five-year-olds, only because I might feel extremely uncomfortable". Additionally, Teacher B said, "I have found it kind of tricky to find age-appropriate literature". In contrast, Teacher F did not see age as a barrier to utilising queer literature. When prompting a discussion with their students, Teacher F mentioned, "but then you've always got the kids who, especially with the younger ones, that someone else will always go, no that's rubbish, you know, like girls can do anything". This shows that teachers have differing opinions on age as a barrier.

Finally, teachers' understanding of the curriculum emerged from the data as a barrier. This significantly impacts teachers' confidence and ability to utilise queer literature in their teaching

practices. One teacher identified the curriculum as limiting their choices. Teacher A stated, "I think government policy needs to change and to back up teachers". This teacher's belief was that the curriculum did not support teachers to effectively provide gender-diverse literature to their students. In contrast, Teachers B, D, and E had all had professional development in this area, and they discussed the requirement of the curriculum to develop gender-inclusive classrooms.

Teachers' ability to develop critical literacy

Two teachers discussed critical literacy with an awareness of how literacy could be used to develop a gender-inclusive classroom, and the ways in which they developed critical literacy in their classes. Teacher B said, "I suppose my questions would just be getting them to criticise and hopefully think more critically about the norms that are being placed by those fairy tales". Similarly, Teacher F said, "we talk about information literacy and being critical thinkers … I present perspectives, and I teach kids to seek different perspectives".

Furthermore, five teachers revealed an awareness of gender representation and how this could be used to move beyond surface reading, towards critical literacy. Teacher E discussed, "I think literacy is such a good way of getting kids to know about gender pronouns and people's identity". Additionally, Teacher B spoke of, "making it really normal to talk about those things" in regards to gender diversity in literacy resources. Teacher F discussed ways in which literacy resources have changed over the past 20 years, saying, "there's so much greater variety of people and books" which allowed them to develop critical literacy in their class.

Additionally, two teachers identified the need to lean into the discomfort associated with developing critical literacy skills within their class. When discussing their experience of reading a gender-diverse picture book to their class, Teacher D identified how they leaned into their fear and discomfort, "then I thought no, just go for it. I think it should be okay". Likewise, Teacher B identified, "I suppose for me it would just mean, like being comfortable to talk about those things" as a necessary prerequisite for developing critical literacy skills. These two teachers highlighted their own sense of discomfort at developing critical literacy skills with gender-inclusive literacy resources and the need for teachers to lean into this discomfort.

Summary

Overall, there was a real sense that these teachers were passionate about their profession and understood the important role they had in developing an inclusive environment for all their students. These teachers were aware of the impact literacy resources have on children, however, the knowledge of how to effectively utilise literacy resources to contribute to gender inclusion varied, as did their comfort in disrupting commonly held narratives about gender. The relevance of these findings will be discussed forthwith in relation to existing literature.

Discussion

In this section, the findings from the research will be discussed in relation to the existing body of literature. Convergent and divergent findings are identified and organised into the four key themes summarised above: teachers' understandings of gender diversity; teachers' understandings of how to develop a gender-inclusive classroom; teachers' perception of barriers to utilising gender-inclusive literature; and teachers' ability to develop critical literacy.

Teachers' understandings of gender diversity

Based on queer theory, gender identity is developed by individuals and influenced by dominant social discourses and stereotypes which are normalised in society (Blaise, 2010). Queer theory is used to explain and describe actions that aim to unsettle social binaries and gender expectations (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013). The findings in this study are aligned with existing research and literature as teachers describe gender through a queer theory mindset. Teachers A, B, D, and E discussed ways in which gender is fluid, personal, and not prescribed by the anatomy a person is born with.

However, two teachers discussed a need to account for gender differences in their teaching practices. This divergence from queer theory impacted on how these teachers developed lesson plans and approach teaching resources. Teachers A and C explained boys need more support in literacy and require a more active learning environment, as opposed to girls, who have the ability to listen quietly for sustained periods of time. Based on feminist post-structuralist theory, children develop their gender identity through their interactions with others, and people's actions towards them (Blaise, 2009; Campbell et al., 2017; Chapman, 2015; Keddie, 2003; MacNaughton, 1997; Mayeza, 2016). The purposeful actions of these two teachers in adjusting their teaching practices based on gender, show they are unaware of feminist post-structuralist theory and therefore will be delivering subconscious messages to their students on how they should 'act' due to their gender.

In contrast, a sub-theme of female empowerment emerged from the data, showing a close alignment with feminist post-structuralist theory which explains the development of gender identities through environmental factors, such as teachers and peers within their classroom (Blaise, 2010; Blaise & Taylor, 2012). An understanding of this concept was expressed by Teacher E, who aimed to expose female students to a range of experiences outside female gender binaries. Although their female students will benefit from this, students who do not identify as female may be negatively impacted. Based on feminist post-structuralist theory, all students, not only those who identify as female, should be exposed to experiences outside of societal gender binaries.

Teachers' understandings of how to develop a gender-inclusive classroom

In order to develop a gender-inclusive classroom, teachers need to incorporate manaakitanga (New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.). In this study, Teachers B and F identified the role of teachers in developing manaakitanga to provide a gender-inclusive classroom. They discussed ways teachers can create a learning environment where everyone feels welcome and is treated with respect, through normalising gender-inclusive vocabulary and providing opportunities for students to explore their gender identity. However, teachers need to self-reflect and address their own unconscious biases if

they are to show manaakitanga and develop an environment for gender exploration and for diverse gender expression to be normalised (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Chick, 2014; DePalma, 2013; Van Leent, 2017).

Furthermore, based on a feminist post-structuralist mindset, Chapman's (2015) research purports teachers have a significant impact on either reinforcing or breaking down gender stereotypes. In this research, all six teachers agreed that they were in a position to have such an impact. Teacher D discussed how children can be exposed to different ways of expressing one's gender, particularly through representation in children's literacy resources. This was supported by Teachers B and F, whose belief in normalising gender-diverse vocabulary, literacy resources, people, and perspectives, aligned with feminist post-structuralist theory.

Additionally, using inclusive language, normalising gender-diverse conversations, and ensuring the use of correct terms, are key aspects of developing a gender-inclusive classroom (Neimi, 2016; New Zealand Ministry of Education, n.d.; Stachowiak, 2018). Being a multicultural society, New Zealand teachers especially have a responsibility to understand the correct terminology for their students (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020), particularly as Te Ao Māori and Pacific world views incorporate nuanced understandings of gender diversity. In this study, Teachers B, D, and F showed an awareness of the impact using inclusive language has on a gender-inclusive classroom. However, these teachers did not identify the importance of understanding cultural terms and the nuances surrounding gender-diverse language.

Teachers' perception of barriers to utilising gender-inclusive literature

Teachers experience fear, which acts as a barrier to utilising queer literature in their classrooms. This fear stems from what teachers anticipate to be a negative response from the wider school community (Chick, 2014; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). The findings of this study show that teachers were fearful of how the diverse families of their students would react to queer literature, which led to a cautious approach. All six teachers discussed their fears and how it impacted their decisions. However, Teachers B, D, and F identified the support of their senior leadership team as a way to overcome their fear. To support teachers with such fears, the New Zealand Ministry of Education's Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) guide was released in 2020, however, the teachers in this study were not aware of it.

Additionally, age emerged as a sub-theme in teachers' perception of barriers, however not in the manner described by other researchers. Age was seen as a barrier because teachers found it challenging to locate appropriate literacy resources. Teachers A and B expressed a desire to utilise more gender-inclusive literature but were not able to find suitable books for some of their younger students. However, this view was not held by all teachers in this study. For example, Teacher F discussed ways in which their younger students could engage meaningfully in discussions around gender diversity when utilising gender-diverse literacy resources. Therefore, the sub-theme of age within this study has divergent results from other research.

Teachers' ability to develop critical literacy

Due to the limited access to children's queer-themed literacy resources, teachers need to utilise critical literacy with queer intent in their teaching practices (Sandretto, 2018). In doing so, students are able to develop a wider perspective on gender diversity which leads to a gender-inclusive classroom (Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Ryan et al., 2013). Critical literacy with queer intent allows teachers and students to become aware of harmful stereotypes found in children's literacy resources, and to dismantle the hierarchical social discourses associated with these stereotypes (Sandretto, 2018). Teachers must model how to apply critical literacy skills with queer intent for students to be able to develop the skills themselves (Allan et al., 2008). This aligns with the findings of this study: two teachers showed an understanding of the effect critical literacy skills can have on breaking down gender stereotypes within their own classes, and an awareness of how this leads to a gender-inclusive classroom. Importantly, it can be uncomfortable for teachers so they must be able to lean into their discomfort in order to provide their students with the opportunity to develop critical literacy with queer intent (Staley & Leonardi, 2016).

Summary

In summary, the findings of this research are largely consistent with those of current literature. However, key exceptions include the impact of gender differences on teaching practices, a focus on female empowerment, lack of ongoing self-reflection, and limited understanding of the cultural impact on gender diversity.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this research suggest that although teachers are willing and passionate about utilising literacy resources to create gender-inclusive classrooms, they experience barriers that prevent them from developing critical literacy skills that will enable them to do so. As reflected in the literature, teachers are fearful of how diverse families of their students will react to gender-inclusive literature, which leads them to adopt a cautious approach. Conversely, a divergence from the literature is found where some teachers in this study discussed ways in which gender differences impact on their teaching practices. Additionally, teachers in this study did not show an awareness of the need for understanding cultural terms and the nuances surrounding gender-diverse language in different cultures, which is a significant aspect of being a teacher in Aotearoa.

The implications of these findings reveal a need for professional development for teachers in Aotearoa. Through professional development, teachers will gain knowledge and understanding of the existing support systems provided by the Ministry of Education. Additionally, support from schools' senior management can allow teachers to more confidently utilise literacy resources to contribute to a gender-inclusive classroom. It is important to note a limitation of this research is the number of teachers interviewed, making it difficult to draw conclusions. Further research should involve more teachers from across Aotearoa, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the type of support and professional development teachers need to effectively utilise literacy resources to contribute to gender-inclusive classrooms.

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