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The changing landscape of relationships and sexuality education in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools

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THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This literature review seeks to offer understanding about how relationships and sexuality education (RSE) has evolved in the 21st century in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools. The perceived demand for schools to address significant social issues, such as how youth navigate the world of relationships and sexualities, can be a challenge for the education sector. A traditional-narrative review was conducted to investigate how the experiences of RSE have changed from 1999 to 2022 to understand if RSE is evolving adequately for young people. Thirteen empirical studies were analysed that explored experiences of RSE programmes, which were discussed alongside relevant literature. Findings in the literature highlight gaps in policy and practice, with suggestions for further work that could keep RSE heading in a direction that empowers youth.

Keywords

Relationships and sexuality education; health education; education policy; secondary education

Introduction

Quality sexuality education can benefit society, yet it continues to be a contentious topic for schools (Allen, 2021). Society places a heavy weight on the education sector to shape the future of nations and tackle significant issues, such as those pertaining to young people and sex. However, as demonstrated often in the media, disagreements around how RSE should be taught come up frequently (e.g., Chittock, 2022; Cooper, 2022; RNZ, 2021). As we have arrived in the digital age, so have new concerns about how young people navigate relationships and learning about sex online. The Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC, 2018) found most New Zealanders have seen pornography by the age of 17 years old, which often brings exposure to violence or misconceptions about reality. Such issues have most New Zealanders agreeing that protecting children from online harm is difficult, so they appreciate the importance of education (Te Mana Whakaatu Classification Office, 2022). The Ministry of Education (MoE, 2020) considers these concerns around youth in their policy guidelines for secondary schools, indicating that effective RSE could help support online safety, empower individuals, and contribute to a better society.

The topic interests me due to my personal experience of RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand schools and due to my professional growth as a secondary school teacher. My formal RSE experience in high school during the early 2010s was minimal, with only a few taught lessons, so I do not recall taking away anything of significance. Fortunately, I could learn from family, friends, and the internet. However, I was not sufficiently prepared to navigate the real world when I understood myself as being part of the LGBTQIA+ community after completing school. Instead of having practical knowledge about HIV, I was only familiar with the derogatory nature of the words “gay” and “AIDS” that were said on the school grounds. Further exploration of the topic online and in social settings indicated I was not alone in my experiences. Consequently, this motivated me to understand how RSE had been developing and if it was addressing present-day realities. I am aware my position as a cis-gendered gay Pākehā male would have an influence on the research, but I hoped that by shedding light on the field I could contribute to continued improvement. As Allen (2021) contended, the more we talk about RSE and breathe fresh air into the topic, the more collective opportunity we will have for positive change.

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The purpose of my research was to provide something of value to educators and policymakers who play a role in providing impactful experiences of RSE. By better understanding RSE, we can learn alongside students and ideally better equip them for the modern-day complexities of sex and relationships. This review analyses research literature to answer the question: How have experiences of RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools changed over the 21st century?

The term RSE was chosen for this review to reflect the latest title given to the learning area by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2020), but when referring to the learning area prior to 2020, the older terms are used. The review will initially provide a background to sex education prior to 1999 and how its intentions have developed. Then, the research methods are described, followed by the findings. Findings have been divided into three sections to reflect the major updates to RSE policy: “1999–2015”, “2015–2020”, and “2020–2022”. The subsequent discussion section then explores the evolving path of RSE before final conclusive comments are made that aim to stimulate further research.

Background and policy updates

The realm of RSE has been variable and dynamic across the globe, with historical trends swaying some governments into including RSE in formal education. In other words, countries have used various forms of sex education as a health response, such as to stop the spread of venereal diseases after World Wars I and II, or to limit the impacts of the HIV pandemic (Zimmerman, 2015). This was evident in Aotearoa New Zealand when the government used sex education as a population health response following the arrival of HIV in the 1980s. Learning in schools in the earlier 1900s was less about “sex” education and rather centred on family values, moral behaviour, and social hygiene (Allen, 2005).

The findings are arranged in sections to reflect periods demarcated by Ministry of Education policy updates to the field. For reference, Figure 1 is a timeline that shows Ministry of Education publications and the number of reviewed studies from each period (1999–2015, 2015–2020, and 2020–2022). Prior to 1999, there were no formal requirements for schools to teach any form of sex education. Instead, it was left to individual schools to make such decisions and school boards could veto them (Sinkinson, 2009). Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 1999) was updated by the New Zealand Ministry of Education in 1999 and it included the specific learning area of sexuality education (SE). From 2001 onwards, it became mandatory for schools to teach some form of SE. The Ministry guidelines (MoE, 2002) were released to accompany the 1999 curriculum update and assist schools in developing their SE programmes (see Figure 1 for a timeline reference). The new term “sexuality education” replaced “sex education” to promote learning to go beyond the genital nature of sex and reflect the human nature of sexuality that links with society, attitudes, and relationships (Sinkinson, 2009).

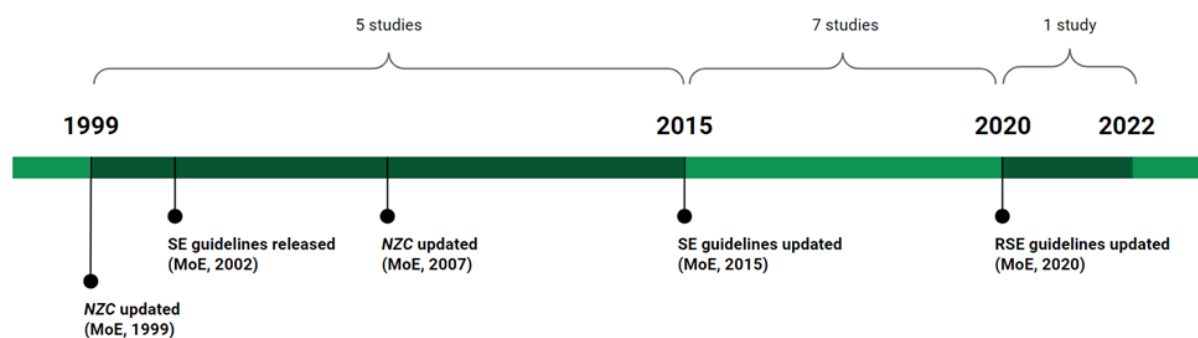


Figure 1. Timeline of Ministry of Education publications and number of reviewed studies from each period (1999–2015, 2015–2020, and 2020–2022).

In 2007, the Ministry updated the New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007), which was still in place in late 2022, when this review was undertaken. The structure remained very similar to the 1999 update in that the Health and Physical Education (HPE) strand of the NZC was compulsory for students in Year 9 and Year 10, when students are typically ages 13–15 (Hargreaves, 2013; Sinkinson, 2009). Health was then usually taught as an optional standalone subject for senior years 11–13, when students are typically ages 15–18. Schools can choose which learning areas, such as SE, under the NZC to implement in their HPE lessons (Fitzpatrick, 2018). The curriculum structure in Aotearoa New Zealand allows schools to construct local curricula based on their interpretations of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC). Although, when designing their SE programmes, schools must have a consultation process with the community.

The next set of SE guidelines was not released until 2015 (MoE, 2015), which came with supplementary resources and was designed to replace the previous publication. This update saw the inclusion of cultural, gender, and sexual diversity in teaching and learning. Similarly, the Ministry’s guidelines (MoE, 2020) then replaced the previous policy, which came in separate primary and secondary school versions. The more comprehensive guidelines emphasised a whole-school approach to RSE that further unpacked how to cater for diverse learners.

Methods

This traditional-narrative literature review was conducted after reviewing the NZC and RSE guideline policies, with the review process and methods being influenced by Efron and Ravid (2019). Engaging with policy documents helped refine the research question and an examination of their references led to associated literature that was considered for data collection alongside sources returned through digital database searching. Digital literature databases were also searched to extend the catchment of data by using the terms: “high school”, “secondary school”, “curriculum”, “sex”, “sexuality”, “sexualities”, “education”, “health”, “young people”, “rangatahi”, “experience”, “Aotearoa”, and “New Zealand”, along with alternating combinations of each. The research was focused on Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools, where students are typically aged 13–18 years, or literature that had data from young people within this same age range. Both qualitative and quantitative data that captured experiences of RSE that fit within the 1999–2022 period were included. Consequently, I found 13 empirical studies that met my criteria which were divided into sections marked by policy updates (see Figure 1). The collected data was then analysed through a synthesis matrix, allowing ideas and themes from 1999 to 2022 to be constructed.

Findings

From sex to sexuality: 1999–2015

Across 16 years from 1999–2015, I found five empirical studies, with notable strengths and weaknesses, that provided insight into student experiences. The literature mostly centred on how SE could be improved, with authors critiquing SE programmes. Abel and Fitzgerald (2006), Allen (2005), the Education Review Office (ERO, 2007), and Hargreaves (2013) each conducted studies that collected data directly from schools, while Sinkinson (2009) interviewed beginner teachers about their past experiences of SE. All studies were transparent with their methods and provided detailed findings, although some of the ERO’s (2007) data did not distinguish between primary and secondary schools. Abel and Fitzgerald (2006) and Allen (2005) sought students’ voices, the former targeting ages 14–15 and the latter ages 16–19. Abel and Fitzgerald’s (2006) study focused on one high school in Christchurch. In contrast, Allen’s (2005) research was based on 15 schools and reported on data from 1180 student volunteers, whose sexual orientation and ethnicity characteristics were included. Similarly, Hargreaves’ (2013) respondents were also self-selected, and the study helped add a perspective from teachers, just as ERO (2007) usefully added a perspective from governance. However, it is noted that a Māori perspective was lacking in the literature.

Overall, the five studies from this period made it clear that students were not experiencing enough SE time. ERO's (2007) report on SE in schools compared schools against a recommended 14 hours or more of annual SE lesson time. ERO found that the average reported hours of SE students in secondary schools had access to was eight hours in Year 9 and eleven hours in Year 10. Average hours increased for senior year levels, some up to 30, likely for those students who chose to pursue Health as a subject. However, some schools only provided one hour per year at each year level. Allen's (2005) study sought student voice by surveying senior school students about SE. Many students revealed they were dissatisfied with the amount of SE time provided, with it often being too narrow, too little, or too late. An 18-year-old female student participant wanted "school to spend more time teaching sexuality education" (Allen, 2005, p. 393). Moreover, 67 per cent of students thought SE should continue to be compulsory through Years 12 and 13. This reflected student concerns that SE is not being taught at a time when students are experiencing their first sexual encounters (Allen, 2005). Despite the critiques of SE hours, Sinkinson (2009) revealed her younger participants, who had experienced the post-1999 curriculum, received much more SE time versus those who went through high school prior to 1999. Thus, the studies showed that hours given to SE had increased somewhat under the new curriculum, but more were wanted.

The studies conducted in this period also showed that learning in SE was not engaging for students or catering to diverse learners. These two points were raised, and the association between them, in Allen's work (2006, 2011), where she expanded on her 2005 study. The focus of SE was often around the physiological aspects of sex or contraception; it arguably followed a limited narrative around the "coital imperative", as topics like homosexuality, emotions, and pleasure were often omitted (Allen, 2005, 2011). Schools often covered ideas that students were already aware of while leaving out learning that would be of interest. As a result, uninteresting SE disengaged students (Allen, 2011). Instead, students explained to Allen (2005) that they wanted to practise handling condoms, see contraception pills in person, have spokespersons living with HIV visit, or learn "more of the emotional implications of being sexually active or your sexual preferences" (Allen, 2005, p. 399). For students who fell outside of the heteronormative narrative, they could not access valuable knowledge and had their "othering" affirmed. Consequently, the lack of meaningful learning in class prompted students to seek information elsewhere, such as through their peers or pornography (Allen, 2006, 2011).

Abel and Fitzgerald (2006) interviewed 42 students from one high school about their SE experiences and found trends similar to those discussed by Allen (2005) and ERO (2007). A recurrent theme from Abel and Fitzgerald's (2006) respondents was the risk-based teaching of SE that failed to connect with students' everyday realities. Teaching centred on the dangers of diseases and avoiding pregnancy, without helpful detail or empowering conversations that appreciated subjectivity. The students wanted SE that could be contextually relevant to their lives by teaching about sexual pleasure, communication skills with sexual partners, and practical applications behind contraception and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention. Instead, like Allen's (2005) interviewees, Abel and Fitzgerald's (2006) respondents lost interest in SE as the material was repetitive from previous years, disengaging, and did not value students.

Studies also showed that HPE as a curriculum area was not as valued as other subjects. Hargreaves' (2013) study engaged with Health education teachers who reported that the hours they had in the timetable for Health were limited. For Year 9 and Year 10, lesson time averaged 0–2 hours per week compared to other curriculum areas that get 3–4 hours per week. Consequently, since Health received less time, so did its learning areas like SE. Allen (2011) argued that subjects of the body, like Health, are often given lower status in the curriculum versus subjects of the mind, like Mathematics. This also influenced the professional development teachers had access to, which likely contributed to why teachers were not approaching SE critically or with strong pedagogy (Allen, 2011; Sinkinson, 2009). Consequently, students may not have been experiencing the full potential of what an SE programme could offer due to such barriers put on HPE.

Introducing diversity: 2015–2020

This time period was shorter than previous with only five years between SE guideline updates, yet there were seven notable empirical studies related to experiences. This showed that more discussion was being had around the topic, perhaps reflecting societal shifts. Some research published after 2020 was included in this section as the data was collected prior to MoE's (2020) update (i.e., Clark et al., 2022; Ellis & Bentham, 2021). A wide range of schools and young people were included in all the studies which helped strengthen the results:

- ERO (2018) represented 21 percent of secondary schools
- Clark et al. (2022) sampled between 4000 and 7000 students aged 13–18 in each wave
- Classification Office (2020) interviewed 52 people aged 13–18 years
- Denison et al. (2018) reached saturation after interviewing 24 university students
- Ellis and Bentham (2021) had 73 respondents aged 16–19
- OFLC (2018) surveyed 2000 youth aged 14–17 years

Family Planning (2019) had 1100 young people in their survey, but as 32 per cent were above 20 years old, it meant data would have also captured learning that occurred prior to this section's defined time period. The broad sampling covered a fair spread of the population, with most studies also discussing (to some degree) dimensions of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality of their participants.

A significant concern raised across studies was that students were not experiencing the desired amount of SE lesson time within a year and across all year levels. ERO (2018) conducted another study into SE that sampled 116 schools meant to represent the nation. They graded schools against compliance standards and found that SE was often not prioritised. Most schools did not meet ERO's (2007) recommended 12–15 hours of annual SE class time, with an already crowded curriculum being raised as a contributing factor. Moreover, students disclosed directly to ERO that they desired more time (ERO, 2018). For example, a surveyed student said:

It should be talked about till the end of our school years since like Year 11, 12 and 13 are the years when people become the legal age and that's when they will be experimenting with their bodies and their sexuality ... It's not enough to tell someone something and hope they remember it for the rest of their life. (ERO, 2018, p. 8)

Young people wanted SE to continue in their senior years, regardless of what subjects they chose, to help strengthen their knowledge and have it be more relevant in their later years of high school. Similarly, Denison et al. (2018) acknowledged this after interviewing university students about STI attitudes and practices. Participants reflected on their time in high school and wanted SE to have had practical STI information that went beyond the compulsory teachings that only went up to Year 10, so it could better align with the timing of their first sexual experiences.

A notable concern raised in two studies was how many young people were not experiencing any SE. Family Planning (2019) conducted a large-scale survey of varying ages and found that 88 per cent of respondents received some form of SE at school, with just 66 per cent saying it was useful. Likewise, Ellis and Bentham (2021) revealed that only 76.7 per cent of their respondents were taught SE at some point. This highlighted that significant portions of students did not experience formal SE during secondary school.

Reviews of SE teaching and learning showed limited breadth and depth to the topics being taught. The voices of young people highlighted that they wanted more in-depth topics covered other than just anatomy (ERO, 2018; Family Planning, 2019). A student told ERO (2018) how the bare minimum is covered with the "harder" subjects usually left out. While the student does not define "harder" subjects, they could be referencing sexual violence and pornography, two topics ERO (2018) found least covered by schools. In fact, only 22 per cent of schools had an SE programme that covered the full range of topics ERO expected. Although, ERO did outline the increased coverage of gender stereotypes and

sexuality diversity being taught in schools. Similar patterns were seen in other studies which also found students wanted pornography to be covered (Classification Office, 2020; Family Planning, 2019). However, only 27 per cent of Family Planning's (2019) respondents and a third of Ellis and Bentham's (2021) respondents were taught about same-sex relationships and gender diversity, which sometimes was only covered lightly anyway, showing further inconsistencies among schools.

Students who felt under-valued by their teachers, or felt that they did not have a voice in their learning, had poorer experiences of SE. Clark et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study from 2001 to 2019 with young people and found that Māori youth were experiencing racism in education settings with greater barriers to health services compared to Pākehā. Consequently, Māori tracked behind Pākehā in reported contraception use, which reflected part of a wider issue of the Eurocentric structures in place (Clark et al., 2022). Moreover, many students felt undervalued when their input towards SE went unheard, such as wanting more topics covered by teachers (ERO, 2018; Family Planning, 2019). Since their needs were not being addressed in class, students often sought information online to supplement their learning (Classification Office, 2020; Family Planning, 2019; OFLC, 2018). Family Planning (2019) found that 80 per cent of their respondents did this and OFLC (2018) reported that many young people were using pornography as a learning tool. This raised concerns because of the influential nature of pornography and students may lack a critical approach when "porn literacy" is missing from SE (OFLC, 2018). A study from the Classification Office (2020) contended that young people's viewpoints differ greatly from adults, especially around porn, so by valuing all students and hearing their voices it could improve outcomes.

Experiences of SE were very different from school to school due to the variable interpretations of policy (Classification Office, 2020; Fitzpatrick, 2018). Because schools can deliver the curriculum how they see fit, learning objectives within HPE can be chosen, so SE can sometimes be neglected (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Subsequently, this contributed to the varying levels of compliance amongst schools in ERO's (2018) report. Only 53.4 per cent of schools were teaching SE "well" or "very well", meaning compliant across all measured domains (ERO, 2018). Alongside many underperforming schools, ERO (2018) identified that several schools had superb practices and provided learners with positive SE experiences. Consequently, ERO used such schools as case studies so other schools could refer to them when reflecting on their own local curricula.

Adding the 'R' to RSE: 2020–2022

The literature for these two years was limited in scope but was enough to offer some demonstration of what RSE was looking like post-2020. Dixon et al.'s (2022) study was the sole empirical study found which was supplemented by Dixon and Robertson's (2022) research. Dixon et al. (2022) conducted an anonymous online survey that collected 191 responses from a large geographic spread of secondary school teachers to understand the dynamics of RSE through a teacher's lens. As a result, Dixon et al. (2022) contended there were gaps between policy and practice which was also reflected in Dixon and Robertson's (2022) findings.

Dixon et al. (2022) found themes much like those found in the studies from the previous years, where teachers raised concerns about RSE time, pedagogy, and student engagement. Firstly, respondents suggested that not enough schools met recommended RSE hours, with 46 per cent of Year 9 getting less than 10 hours and 38 per cent of Year 10 getting less than 10 hours. Secondly, pornography and online safety were topics still being less commonly covered. On the other hand, several schools did stand out as doing well and were making conscious efforts to meet guidelines. A teacher contested, "I believe we do quite a good job here but get frustrated with the constant battle of students and media saying things are not being taught but have in fact been, i.e. consent" (Dixon et al., 2022, p. 33). Teachers disclosed barriers that inhibited them from facilitating a meaningful experience for students, such as restricted professional development, timetabling constraints, or limited support from school leaders. Moreover, it was complex for teachers to upskill their pedagogical content knowledge and include RSE in meaningful ways for seniors when it was not compulsory, not perceived as a valued

subject, or if they were working in a religious school. Ultimately, Dixon et al. (2022) highlighted how students' experiences with RSE varied among schools due to such various factors disclosed by teachers.

A landscape of variable experiences

Student experiences of RSE have varied considerably across Aotearoa New Zealand, with a general pattern of improvement seen in RSE programmes as time progressed. From 1999 to 2022, policy made progressive developments as each publication by the Ministry of Education (MoE 2002, 2015, 2020) guided schools into covering more depth and breadth in their RSE teaching and learning. It appears policymakers have been more aware of the political and social conditions surrounding education. For example, there was a shift from the medical intervention mindset around STI and unplanned pregnancy reduction in earlier SE to more holistic approaches in later RSE that foster positive interpersonal relationships and where diverse learners and indigenous knowledges are valued. These shifts have moved in conjunction with society's growing expectations of schools since the 1900s (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). The literature has then shown that despite variability still existing among schools, overall learner experiences have improved in a similar manner, where more meaningful experiences of RSE programmes were taking place as time progressed. These changes also moved alongside young people's growing awareness of gender and sexuality concepts and previously more taboo topics, like pornography, becoming less taboo (Classification Office, 2020). Hence, ERO's (2007, 2018) reports reflected such developments when indicating the uptake in "effective" SE across the nation. Consequently, many learners were experiencing more meaningful RSE in 2022 compared to 1999.

While the proportion of schools considered to have satisfactory RSE programmes increased, many schools continued to have underwhelming RSE programmes from 1999 to 2022. Student and teacher responses in studies, in addition to ERO reports, tell us that schools have been slow at implementing policy updates, and many were not adequately meeting the needs of learners. The main recurrent themes were that numerous schools were not achieving the recommended time for RSE, covering a comprehensive range of topics, or engaging students purposefully. Thus, despite general improvements to RSE over time, there continued to be a significant number of students missing out on meaningful RSE each year. Fortunately, with time, more data was being collected into why RSE continued to vary so much among schools. The findings suggest the lower value given to learning areas like HPE (and RSE within it), timetabling constraints, restrictions to professional development, and the process of how schools construct curricula were the leading factors behind poorer RSE experiences. Scholars discussed these findings over two decades, repeatedly highlighting the concerning number of schools not providing high impact RSE and how such factors were involved (Allen, 2011, 2021; Dixon et al., 2022; Hargreaves, 2013). Hence, Allen's (2011) argument was evident that schools typically prioritise subjects of the mind, like Maths and English, over RSE despite that dealing with relationships and sex is more common in adult life than using Pythagoras' theorem or reciting poetry.

Education policies were updated at a slow rate and often delayed with regard to the current issues students were facing, likely also slowing the rate at which schools updated their RSE programmes. Since 1999, the RSE guidelines have only been updated three times, with new ideas added years after students had already wanted them. Considering HPE is mandated for just Year 9 and Year 10, that meant many learners passed through school experiencing a most likely out-of-date RSE programme. Moreover, some components of policy showed little change with each update. Since Allen's (2005) study and right up to Dixon et al.'s (2022) research, students and teachers have wanted more RSE time in the curriculum. However, MoE (2015, 2020) and ERO (2018) continued to recommend 12–15 annual hours, with no concrete hours set for seniors, even though 17 continued to be the average age students had their first sexual experience and where RSE would be more relevant (Allen, 2005; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). Consequently, school leaders could be led to believe official recommendations are enough despite student and teacher responses saying otherwise. Fortunately, schools have the ability to respond to the current needs of learners, regardless of the rate of policy updates, considering they must review their RSE programmes every two years through community consultation. Although, perhaps not enough

consultation is happening within the schools themselves. Thus, these ideas can raise questions about whether we are evolving appropriately enough together with our students.

There is potential for RSE to continue on a positive path despite the many barriers that were raised in the studies. All schools have the opportunity to provide meaningful RSE to young people, including faith-based schools. Private schools may not have to follow the NZC but alongside state schools, they must regard government-set learning priorities, which emphasises putting our learners at the centre and supporting their wellbeing (ERO, 2021). Thus, investing in a strong RSE programme should be something for all schools to consider. In particular, creating an engaging RSE programme would align with the Ministry's (MoE, 2022) vision to better engage young people in learning. Student disengagement was an issue raised in the literature (Allen, 2011; Dixon et al., 2022), so bringing in more innovative approaches to RSE may prove rewarding. Allen (2021) emphasised going beyond traditional pedagogies to stimulate student interest, such as using digital technologies or designing sensuous experiences where touch and smell are considered. Students would then better value RSE lessons when their interests are captured. Therefore, by trying to overcome the barriers and strengthen student engagement in RSE, we can help validate and progress the field while giving our learners meaningful experiences.

Conclusion

This literature review sought to provide an understanding of how RSE has evolved in the 21st century in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools. Student experiences of RSE varied considerably in the years from 1999 to 2022 and reflected how the field has developed. Policy has progressed along with learning in classrooms, where there is more depth and breadth to RSE teaching and learning than ever seen before, showing how many have worked hard towards improving the field. However, there are apparent gaps in policy and practice that have limited the availability of the full, meaningful experiences that students deserve. For instance, more time and value have continually been wanted of the subject, with indications that RSE has been evolving too slowly for the realities of our young people and the modern issues they encounter. After illuminating how the landscape of RSE has changed, I suggest further research and support for how we can close gaps in policy and practice, with momentum, to ensure we continue to empower our learners and put them first.

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