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Exploring Young People's Understandings of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) plays an important role in supporting young people's sexual and emotional wellbeing by developing their knowledge and skills to navigate relationships, sexuality, and identity. However, concerns remain about whether current approaches adequately reflect young people's lived experiences and the complexities of contemporary sexual lives. In Aotearoa New Zealand, RSE has traditionally prioritised biological understandings of sexuality and risk prevention, with less emphasis on emotional, relational, and identity-based aspects of wellbeing.

I explored young people's understandings of school-based RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand and its relevance to their sexual and emotional wellbeing. Drawing on a contextualist epistemological framework, an anonymous online qualitative survey was conducted with 32 tertiary students aged 18 years and older who had completed school-based RSE within the previous five years. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis.

Four themes were developed: (1) RSE had limited usefulness and was incomplete; (2) RSE experienced as not inclusive; (3) how RSE was delivered shaped student engagement; and (4) informal sources became a substitute for RSE. Participants described RSE as largely focused on biology, sexual health risks, and pregnancy prevention, while emotional intimacy, communication, pleasure, diverse identities, and real-world relationship experiences were often absent or insufficiently addressed. When formal education did not meet their needs, participants actively sought knowledge through peers, online resources, and personal experience.

The findings highlight a disconnect between the RSE participants received and the knowledge and skills they considered necessary to navigate contemporary sexual and relational experiences. By centring young people's voices, the findings demonstrate the need for RSE that is more inclusive, relational, and responsive to young people's realities, moving beyond predominantly biological and risk-based approaches to better support lifelong sexual and emotional wellbeing.

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This project was evaluated as low risk by peer review and has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees.

I declare the use of AI tools which was limited to assisting with editing and proofreading of this thesis.

Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iii
List of Tables vi
Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review 1
1.1. Why RSE Matters: Sexual Rights and Wellbeing 2
1.2. RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand 4
1.3. How Well Does RSE Meet Young People's Needs? 7
1.3.1. Interactive and Practical RSE 8
1.3.2. Teaching Biology, Ignoring Social Realities 10
1.3.3. Gaps in Pleasure, Desire, and Relational Content 11
1.3.4. Marginalised Young People 13
1.3.5. Emotional and Relational Wellbeing 15
1.4. Young People's Experiences of RSE 16
1.4.1. Beyond Content: Classroom Delivery, Adult Gatekeeping, and Youth Engagement 17
1.4.2. Young Adulthood 18
1.5. Responsive RSE Framework 19
1.6. My Study 20
1.6.1. Aims and Research Question 21
1.6.2. Significance and Contribution of the Study 21
Conclusion 22
Chapter 2: Methodology 24
2.1. Theoretical Framework 24
2.1.1. Contextualism 24
2.1.2. Feminist Research Principles 25
2.1.3. Summary 26
2.2. Data Collection: Online Qualitative Survey 26
2.2.1. Recruitment 28
2.2.2. Response Rate 32
2.2.3. Participant Characteristics 34
2.3. Data Analysis 35
2.3.1. First Phase: Familiarisation 37
2.3.2. Second Phase: Coding 37

2.3.3. Third Phase: Theme Generation 38
2.4. Quality Assurance 39
2.5. Cultural Responsiveness 40
2.6. Ethical Considerations 41
2.6.1. Benefits to Participants 42
2.6.2. Consent 43
2.6.3. Confidentiality and Anonymity 45
2.6.4. Inclusivity 46
2.6.5. Potential Risks 46
Conclusion 47
Chapter 3: Analysis and Discussion 48
Theme 1: RSE Had Limited Usefulness and Was Incomplete 49
Theme 2: RSE Experienced as Not Inclusive 55
Theme 3: How RSE Was Delivered Shaped Student Engagement 59
Theme 4: Informal Sources Became a Substitute for RSE 64
Conclusion 68
Chapter 4: Conclusions 69
4.1. Key Findings 69
4.1.1. Retrospective Perspectives Highlight the Longer-Term Relevance of RSE 69
4.1.2. Participants Did Not Reject RSE; They Wanted It to Be More Complete 70
4.1.3. Informal Learning: Agency and Uneven Support 72
4.1.4. Reflection on Findings 73
4.2. Implications 74
4.3. Future Research 77
Conclusion 77
References 78
Appendix A: Survey Questions 94
Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet 98
Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Material 101

List of Tables

Table 1. Overview of Responses by Degree of Completion (N = 32) 33
Table 2. Age, Enrolment, Time Since Receiving School RSE (N = 32) 34
Table 3. Participant Characteristics (N = 32) 35
Table 4. Overview of Themes 48

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

In March 2025, the Ministry of Education withdrew the 2020 Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) guidelines, later introducing a proposed draft Health and Physical Education curriculum released on 28 October 2025, as its replacement. During the transition, schools were instructed to use the outdated 2007 Health and Physical Education curriculum while the new curriculum was being developed and reviewed. The draft outlined age-appropriate topics for Years 0–13, including relationships, consent, puberty, sexual health, online safety, and sexuality. However, it faced criticism for being less comprehensive than the 2020 guidelines, especially regarding gender diversity, sexuality, and the scope of certain topics (Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025). This shift has been widely challenged by educators and public health experts, who argued that the proposed curriculum ignored recent Education Review Office (ERO) (2024) findings and student input calling for more current, inclusive RSE, particularly considering issues like social media, pornography, and online harm (ERO, 2024; Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025). These developments have ignited national debate over RSE content and delivery. Yet young people's voices remain among the most marginalised, with their perspectives often overlooked or sidelined in discussions about what appropriate RSE should entail (Allen, 2008).

Despite being the primary beneficiaries of RSE, young people's perspectives remain underrepresented in research and debates about how well school-based RSE addresses their needs. Most studies focus on young people's experiences while still in school, highlighting their valued aspects, perceived gaps, and desired changes (Allen, 2008; Byers et al., 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Lee, 2023; Maibvisira et al., 2015). In contrast, less is known about how they reflect on these experiences after leaving school, as they manage relationships, sexuality, and identity more independently. This creates a gap in understanding whether and how young people perceive their previous RSE as relevant to the challenges of young adulthood.

Responding to the limited inclusion of young people's perspectives in RSE research and curriculum discussions, my research focused on young people's experiences and perspectives. Using a qualitative survey methodology, I investigated young adults' reflections on their experiences of the RSE they received during secondary school, particularly in terms of its relevance and applicability to their lives. As such, my study is informed by a contextualist epistemology, which understands knowledge as socially situated, and by feminist commitments

to reflexivity, power analysis, and the valuing of lived experience. This framework allowed me to prioritise participants' understandings of their experiences while recognising that these accounts are shaped by the research design and interpreted through the researcher's analytical lens. My study contributes to national research on RSE by providing a viewpoint that situates young peoples' personal experiences within larger social and cultural conversations about gender, sexuality, and young adulthood. These findings may contribute to the development of more inclusive, responsive, and meaningful approaches to RSE. This chapter provides the background and rationale for my study, beginning with an overview of RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, before examining existing research in the field.

1.1. Why RSE Matters: Sexual Rights and Wellbeing

RSE is a school-based programme that aims to provide young people with scientifically accurate, age-appropriate, and comprehensive information about relationships, sexuality, and sexual health, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to develop healthy relationships, make informed decisions, and support their sexual and reproductive wellbeing (UNESCO, 2026; WHO, 2006). The role of RSE is particularly important as young people transition into young adulthood, where they begin applying sexuality-related knowledge within more complex relational, emotional, and interpersonal contexts (Arnett, 2000).

RSE plays an important role in supporting young people's understandings and navigation of sexuality, relationships, intimacy, identity, and consent. Comprehensive and effectively implemented RSE therefore supports young people's sexual rights and wellbeing (UNESCO et al., 2018; WHO, 2026; Sell et al., 2023). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual wellbeing as a "state of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality" (WHO, 2006, p. 5), including safety, respect, and opportunities for satisfying sexual experiences free from violence, discrimination, and coercion. These dimensions of sexual wellbeing are closely connected to sexual rights, which are integral to wellbeing and have long been affirmed as fundamental human rights, with bodily integrity acknowledged as a key component of human dignity and freedom (WHO, 2006). Sexual and reproductive rights include access to accurate information, comprehensive education, bodily autonomy, and the ability to make informed decisions about sexuality, relationships, and health, as affirmed by the International Planned Parenthood Federation's Declaration of Sexual Rights and guidance from United Nations human rights bodies (Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025c).

Historically, school-based sexuality education constrained young people's opportunities to develop sexual agency by frequently framing sexuality through discourses of risk, harm, and vulnerability. In more recent years, rights-based approaches have arisen that position young people as capable decision-makers with sexual and reproductive rights, challenging educational practices that have typically prioritised protection, risk prevention, and adult control over sexuality related knowledge (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2023; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Parker et al., 2025). There is therefore a tension between these approaches, as reflected in the case of Aotearoa New Zealand's recent curriculum reforms. This tension exists alongside international frameworks that recognise sexual and reproductive health and rights as fundamental human rights (Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025a, 2025b).

By examining how sexual rights are contested and experienced within health and education systems, scholars in Aotearoa have broadened these conversations. For example, Huria et al. (2023) apply a reproductive justice lens to examine how colonisation and violations of tino rangatiratanga (Māori sovereignty) continue to erode Māori reproductive autonomy and access to equitable services. Their findings show that resolving systemic injustices and guaranteeing culturally sensitive approaches to sexual and reproductive health are essential to the realisation of sexual rights (Huria et al., 2023). These perspectives are relevant to RSE because education about sexuality is not simply the transmission of health information, but also a process through which young people develop and negotiate understandings of autonomy, agency, identity, and their rights within sexual and relational contexts.

However, the value and effectiveness of RSE is shaped not only by the topics included but also by how education is delivered. Therefore, examining young people's reflections requires attention not only to curriculum content but also to the pedagogical contexts in which learning occurs. Research on RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand highlights that classroom environments, opportunities for discussion, and the ability for students to ask questions influence whether RSE is experienced as relevant, safe, and meaningful (Allen, 2005, 2008; Pound et al., 2016; Dixon et al., 2024).

RSE that fails to reflect young people's realities risks leaving them underprepared to navigate their relationships and sexual lives. This includes recognising that young people actively interpret and negotiate sexuality-related knowledge within their own social, cultural, and relational contexts, and that their experiences of sexuality and relationships are diverse. Education which assumes heterosexuality, cisgender identity, or conventional relationship

pathways may fail to support students whose experiences differ from these norms (Ellis & Bentham, 2021). Against this broader importance of RSE, this research is both timely and significant given recent developments in Aotearoa New Zealand.

1.2. RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand

The recent policy shift has been interpreted as a reflection of broader tensions within sexuality education and moral authority in Aotearoa New Zealand and can be understood in light of the fraught history of school-based sexuality education. The historical foundations of RSE are characterised by early educational and policy responses to sexuality that favoured moral regulation, social control, and biomedical risk management. Public health concerns about unsafe and illegal abortions heavily influenced this early framing. Reports in 1937 indicated that approximately one in five pregnancies ended in abortion, with women dying from illegal procedures while most commonly being married and already caring for multiple children (Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, n.d.). While these findings catalysed the increased promotion of contraception use, there were broader concerns about teenage sexuality and the preservation of purity and social order. These concerns influenced sexuality education, which was mainly focused on population management and maternal safety at the time, reinforcing a biomedical approach to sexuality that prioritised prevention and control over relational or emotional wellbeing (Allen, 2005; Fine, 1988; McKay et al., 2014).

These ideals were reflected in early international educational initiatives, especially in the Global North, commonly described as ‘sex hygiene’, which focused on sexual purity, self-restraint, and getting ready for marriage (Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, n.d.). Such early models shaped Western educational approaches to sexuality and reinforced societal expectations that framed young people, especially young women, as sexually vulnerable and irresponsible (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2011). The developmental and anatomical aspects of RSE were not formally introduced into local school curricula until the 1987 health syllabus: *Understanding Change in Puberty* (Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, n.d.).

While this inclusion may have been seen as signalling a shift towards a more thorough model of RSE, earlier moralistic and biomedical assumptions continued to influence policy and education, reinforcing a Western, individualistic framing of sexual development. These developments provide the historical and theoretical foundations of RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand. They demonstrate how longstanding assumptions continue to shape how RSE is taught in schools, and why contemporary critiques seek to challenge the framework, advocating

for more holistic, culturally responsive, and intersectional approaches (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2023; Cammock et al., 2025; Dixon et al., 2022; ERO, 2024; Ellis & Bentham, 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2018; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; McGlashan Fainu & Fitzpatrick, 2025; Meehan, 2025; Monk, 2001; Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025a,; Veukiso-Ulugia, 2016).

Today, RSE is compulsory for students in Years 1-10 (ages 4-14), and falls under the Health and Physical Education learning area of the Curriculum. However, Aotearoa New Zealand is less prescriptive about what the curriculum should include, how it should be taught, and how much time should be allotted than some other nations (ERO, 2024). Most schools use the curriculum as a guide, with Ministry of Education guidelines providing additional support for developing their own RSE programmes. School boards must, however, consult with their communities at least every two years to ensure that local needs and values inform the programme delivery (ERO, 2024). However, many educators report needing greater guidance and support to confidently teach complex and evolving topics, including gender diversity and online safety, highlighting the value of the structured support which was provided by the 2020 RSE guidelines (Dixon et al., 2024). This uncertainty affects both teacher confidence and student wellbeing (Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025a; Allen, 2008).

Educators, parents, and public health professionals expressed concern that this development was likely to undermine progress toward comprehensive, inclusive, and evidence-based RSE, particularly by limiting the breadth and relevance of RSE for young people (University of Auckland, 2025; Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025a). The proposed draft Health and Physical Education replacement was critiqued as regressive compared to the 2020 guidelines. The draft curriculum replaces the term ‘Relationships and Sexuality Education’ with ‘Sex Education’, marking a return to earlier terminology and suggesting the removal of the former comprehensive approach (Ministry of Education, 2025; Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025a). The changes are evident in the removal of much of the content, creating several omissions in the draft curriculum, including:

(1) gender identity, gender diversity, or intersex variation, with inclusive language removed

(2) basic sexual information (e.g., bodily autonomy, conception)

(3) sexual health knowledge (e.g., condom use, contraception)

(4) safety education (e.g., sexual abuse, coercion, violence, and problematic relationship dynamics)

In addition to these content gaps, many topics are covered inconsistently (e.g., conception, contraception) or introduced later than may be appropriate. For example, puberty is not discussed until Year 5, despite many children entering puberty earlier. Discussion of menstruation does not begin until Year 6, and there is no information about its effects on sexual activity or the potential for unintended pregnancy. Additionally, despite evidence that young people encounter sexual content online around age 11 (Year 5), relevant information does not appear until Year 8 (Goldstein, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2025; Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025a). Consequently, the curriculum may fail to equip young people with the knowledge they need before they begin encountering these experiences.

Across education, public health, and advocacy sectors, the curriculum change has been criticised for undermining access to age-appropriate, evidence-informed, and best-practice RSE. The curriculum change has been framed as placing many young people at risk of missing out on essential learning that reflects the complexities of today's social and digital realities, including evolving understandings of gender and sexuality (Healy-Cullen et al., 2024a, 2024b). The potential loss of this learning is particularly concerning given the recognised need for RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand to be relevant, responsive, and comprehensive, reflecting the contemporary social and cultural contexts in which young people navigate sexuality and relationships (Allen, 2008, 2023; Dixon et al., 2022; ERO, 2024; Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025b; University of Auckland, 2025).

Educators are frequently caught between these competing demands: the expectation to deliver comprehensive, inclusive RSE that reflects young people's lived realities, and the expectation to navigate parental concerns, community values, political debate, and broader anxieties about what sexual knowledge is considered appropriate for young people. Additionally, the new draft curriculum provides limited guidance on when and how these topics should be taught, increasing the likelihood that students receive inconsistent or delayed learning.

The RSE curriculum changes, including the removal of the 2020 guidelines and the subsequent development of a new draft framework, affect all students but may have particular implications for young people from marginalised social groups, notably sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) youth, rangatahi Māori, and Pasifika young people. Scholars and educators have

highlighted that the 2020 guidelines were informed by culturally grounded principles such as collective care, respect, and cultural identity, and were intended to support inclusive and affirming approaches to RSE (Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Maibvisira et al., 2015; Redstone & Conn, 2011; Veukiso-Ulugia, 2013). These inclusive approaches enabled young people to see their identities and relational experiences reflected in the curriculum, fostering safety and belonging. The replacement of the 2020 guidelines has therefore been widely interpreted as a step backwards, potentially weakening culturally responsive and inclusive approaches to RSE, and limiting the representation of perspectives and identities that are important for young people's wellbeing (Dixon et al., 2022; Ellis & Bentham, 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2018).

1.3. How Well Does RSE Meet Young People's Needs?

The removal of the 2020 RSE guidelines and development of a new curriculum framework highlight broader questions about whose perspectives should inform RSE and how well existing approaches meet young people's needs. In this section, I consider research examining young people's experiences of RSE and the extent to which existing approaches address their needs.

RSE is intended to support sexual and emotional wellbeing, and effective RSE requires meaningful engagement with young people's perspectives so that education can address their varied needs, experiences, and values (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2023; Olmstead et al., 2020). However, research consistently demonstrates tensions between curriculum intentions and young people's experiences. Understanding these tensions requires examining not only what RSE contains, but also how young people interpret its relevance after leaving school.

Research from Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally suggests that the effectiveness of RSE cannot be evaluated solely by examining curriculum intentions or content coverage; rather, it must also be understood through young people's perceptions of whether education reflects their lived realities, life-stage needs, and experiences of sexuality and relationships (Allen, 2005; ERO, 2024; Pound et al., 2016). Across diverse contexts, young people generally recognise the value of RSE, while simultaneously identifying persistent gaps between what is taught in classrooms and what they require to navigate their sexual, emotional, and relational lives.

Young people frequently describe RSE as overly focused on biological knowledge and risk prevention, while lacking opportunities to explore the emotional, relational, practical, and

identity-related aspects of sexuality (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2011; Astle et al., 2021; Pound et al., 2016). Importantly, young people's critiques of RSE rarely represent a rejection of RSE itself. Rather, students often acknowledge the importance of foundational sexual health knowledge while questioning whether this information adequately prepares them for the complexity of real-world relationships, intimacy, and emotional experiences (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2011; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). The literature suggests that these gaps are therefore not simply related to missing information but reflect broader tensions regarding how sexuality is conceptualised within education (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2011; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

However, much of the existing literature examines RSE from the perspective of students while they remain within secondary education. Less is known about how young people retrospectively evaluate RSE once they leave school and begin navigating young adulthood with greater independence. This is an important gap because students' assessments of what is relevant or useful while at school may differ from how they understand the value of that education when applying it to their experiences of young adulthood. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this gap is particularly important given the limited research examining former students' perspectives at a time when RSE policy and curriculum are undergoing substantial change.

In the remainder of this section I examine how RSE does, and does not, meet young people's needs across five interconnected areas: (1) teaching approaches and student participation; (2) the dominance of biomedical and risk-focused models; (3) the inclusion of pleasure, intimacy, and relational experiences; (4) marginalised youth; and (5) emotional and relational wellbeing.

1.3.1. Interactive and Practical RSE

A consistent finding across local and international contexts is that young people want RSE that is interactive, participatory, and practical. Rather than viewing their education as the exchange of scientific facts, young people are looking for opportunities to participate in their RSE and to ask relevant questions, exchange viewpoints, and practise practical skills that enhance their sexual and emotional wellbeing (Allen, 2005; Meehan, 2025; Olmstead et al., 2020; Sell et al., 2023). This approach aligns with Freirean pedagogy, which emphasises learning as a dialogical and empowering process that actively engages students in challenging conventions and jointly creating meaning (Barlett, 2005).

However, the proposed new curriculum, the outdated 2007 Health and Physical Education curriculum, and other traditional approaches to RSE may position young people as passive

recipients of information, leading some to perceive their RSE as futile or irrelevant and encouraging them to seek information from other sources, typically from family, peers or online media (Meehan, 2025; Morison et al., 2022). Programmes with high levels of student engagement, such as curriculum co-creation or leadership opportunities, have been found to be among the most effective approaches to RSE (Allen, 2005; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Sell et al., 2023).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Allen (2005, 2008, 2011) has conducted extensive research with 16–19-year-old secondary school students, much of it qualitative. Her rich body of work supports the broader finding that young people want RSE that directly involves them in the learning process. The students participating in Allen's research expressed a strong desire for lessons that involved discussion, choice, and dialogue, where their voices mattered. This includes having the freedom to ask questions openly and direct conversations toward topics that feel relevant to their lived experiences. Across her research, young people repeatedly emphasise the need for "hands-on experiences" (Allen, 2005, p. 394) that could make their learning meaningful, such as condom demonstrations, role plays, and opportunities for open discussion (Allen, 2005). These activities could allow them to engage actively with information, explore their own ideas, and develop the confidence to apply what they learn in real situations. This disconnect between knowing and doing is central to Allen's critique. Young people often receive repeated messages about sexual health and risk prevention without opportunities to explore how these concepts operate within the complexity of real-life situations. For example, one participant described how "they always say to have safe sex like all the time" (Allen, 2008, p. 587), illustrating how RSE can become centred around the repetition of safety messages rather than creating space for critical discussion, decision-making, and practical application.

A key strength of Allen's (2005, 2008, 2011) work is its sustained focus on young people's perspectives and its challenge to the adult-centred assumptions that have historically shaped sexuality education. However, these studies were conducted more than a decade ago, and the social and technological contexts in which young people learn about sex and relationships have changed considerably, particularly with the rise of social media and online sexual health resources. Despite this, Allen's research remains highly relevant because it provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of how Aotearoa New Zealand students experience and evaluate school-based RSE.

Allen's findings about students' preference for active involvement link to the value of interactive, learner-centred teaching modes that are part of a more comprehensive educational philosophy already ingrained in other subjects in Aotearoa New Zealand schools (Allen, 2005). The failure to implement such strategies reflects RSE's broader adult-centred structure, in which decisions about what information young people receive and how it is delivered are largely controlled by adults (Allen; 2005, 2008, 2011).

1.3.2. Teaching Biology, Ignoring Social Realities

School-based RSE tends to remain dominated by biological and risk-focused content, which, while necessary, does not fully address the social realities related to sexuality or the priorities of young people. Findings from qualitative research in a range of locations report that students frequently state that they need teaching that covers emotional intimacy, sexual pleasure, identity, and relational skills in addition to anatomy, reproduction, and STI/pregnancy prevention (Allen, 2005, 2008; Macleod, 2009; Seaver, 2021). Narrowly focusing on risks, such as disease or unintended pregnancy, tends to reinforce a biomedical and individualistic view of sexuality, positioning RSE as the management of potential danger rather than the cultivation of wellbeing or agency. This approach can reproduce a deficit-based view of young people as risk-prone or vulnerable, undermining their sexual agency despite empowerment being a stated goal of RSE (Allen, 2005, 2008; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Morison, 2023).

While knowledge about anatomy, reproduction, and sexual health risks is important, it represents only one aspect of sexuality and does not equip young people to navigate the emotional, interpersonal, and social dimensions of their experiences. By positioning sexuality primarily through the lens of prevention and potential harm, RSE can overlook the ways young people understand intimacy, identity, communication, pleasure, and relationships. As a result, students may leave formal education with factual knowledge about sexual health but without the broader skills and understanding needed to apply this knowledge within real-life contexts (Allen, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2018).

In contrast to this biological-heavy approach, there is a growing shift toward comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), particularly across Western Europe, where countries such as Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands have established comprehensive approaches to sexuality education (Albert Sekhar et al., 2024). This shift has been supported by international guidance

from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNESCO, which promotes CSE as an age-appropriate, scientifically accurate, and culturally relevant approach that addresses the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social dimensions of sexuality (WHO, 2026; UNESCO, 2026). Rather than focusing primarily on preventing negative outcomes, comprehensive approaches aim to support young people's knowledge, agency, communication, relationships, and sexual and emotional wellbeing. CSE therefore extends beyond biological and risk-focused content to include relationships, rights, consent, gender, communication, decision-making, identity, and other skills relevant to navigating sexuality and relationships (World Health Organization, 2026). In Aotearoa New Zealand, these differing approaches are reflected in ongoing debates about the purpose and delivery of RSE. Concerns remain that classroom practice often continues to prioritise biological knowledge and risk prevention over relational, cultural, and emotional learning (Allen, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2018; Jeary-Graham & Macleod, 2017).

From this comprehensive perspective, attention is also given to the social and political contexts in which sexuality is understood and taught, including whose values, bodies, and identities are recognised within schools. Such an approach positions students as active participants in making sense of sexuality and health, encouraging them to question prevailing norms and connect learning to their own lives (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2011). RSE can therefore become a more dynamic and relational process that supports critical engagement with the realities of sexual wellbeing, better preparing young people to navigate the relationships, identities, and sexual health issues they encounter in their everyday lives, rather than reducing sexuality to biological processes and risk prevention (Fitzpatrick, 2018). This broader understanding of RSE provides an important basis for considering how young people experience and evaluate the education they receive.

1.3.3. Gaps in Pleasure, Desire, and Relational Content

Risk-focused and abstinence-oriented approaches have historically dominated school-based RSE, with sexuality often framed primarily in terms of preventing negative outcomes and discouraging sexual activity. This remains evident in parts of the United States, where some states continue to emphasise abstinence-only education, as well as across parts of Asia and the Pacific, where conservative sociocultural norms and attitudes can restrict access to comprehensive sexuality education (Albert Sekhar et al., 2024). In Aotearoa New Zealand, young people have similarly described an underlying assumption that they should not be having

sex, reinforcing a focus on prevention rather than broader engagement with sexuality and relationships (Allen, 2008). This risk-focused approach omits pleasure, desire, and relational content, reflecting a long-standing moral stance that young people should not engage in sexual activity. This emphasis on risk and abstinence can result in moral control over meaningful RSE content, effectively limiting students' access to knowledge about the positive and pleasurable dimensions of sexual encounters (Fine, 1988; Pound et al., 2016).

Students in Aotearoa New Zealand frequently express dissatisfaction with the limited scope of their RSE, desiring education that covers emotional connection, arousal, and mutual satisfaction, topics that are rarely discussed in classrooms (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2011; Allen & Carmody, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2022; Meehan, 2025). For example, more than half of the participants in Allen's (2008) survey indicated that they most wanted to learn about "how to make sexual activity enjoyable for both partners" (Allen, 2008, p. 578), while others asked for advice on intimacy, pleasure, and navigating relationships. Similar results have been reported globally with students continuing to demand more open discussions on pleasure, love, and desire, even in Norway, where RSE is regarded as more progressive (Helbekkmo et al., 2021).

Teachers' (and other adults') avoidance of discussing pleasure often stems from the belief that students are "too young" (Meehan, 2025, p. 1033), a stance that infantilises young people and constructs them as passive, at risk, and preferably non-sexual (Allen, 2008; Meehan, 2025; Monk, 2001). As Allen (2008) argues, when RSE omits discussions of pleasure, emotions, and relationships, it implicitly positions young people as not yet entitled to this knowledge and denies their capacity to make informed decisions about their own sexuality. Teachers' reluctance to address erotic or emotional aspects of sexuality appears to reflect broader societal discomfort about acknowledging young people as sexual beings. This discomfort, combined with the influence of abstinence-based and 'scare factor' approaches that frame sexuality primarily through risk and harm prevention, can contribute to the avoidance or minimisation of these topics in classroom practice (Allen, 2005, 2008; Pound et al., 2016; Meehan, 2025).

By framing sexuality as dangerous and avoiding discussions of desire, schools may unintentionally silence students' curiosity and exploration, reinforcing a gap between formal education and actual experience (Fine, 1988). This avoidance tends to lead students to search for 'real' representations of pleasure, bodies, and intimacy that are not available in formal education (Allen, 2008; Hillier et al., 2001). This reflects an active attempt to construct

knowledge in response to the persistent disconnect between what schools teach and what young people truly want and need to know (Allen, 2005; Healy-Cullen et al., 2024a).

1.3.4. Marginalised Young People

The removal of the 2020 guidelines and their replacement with the new draft curriculum are particularly significant for Māori, Pacific, and LGBTQ+ students, who were explicitly recognised in this framework. In terms of sexual and gender diversity, most RSE frameworks are based on the assumption that young people are heterosexual, cisgender, and able-bodied, with sexual experiences that fit normative ideas of sex, desire, and identity. This assumption tends to marginalise those whose identities, bodies, and behaviours do not align with these boundaries. Framing RSE around danger, disease, and risk may also be exclusionary, particularly for young women and LGBTQ+ students, who are already implicitly cast as vulnerable or in need of protection (Macleod, 2009; Morison, 2023). Sexual behaviours that deviate from normative sexual practice (chiefly penis-in-vagina intercourse) are often positioned as abnormal or inappropriate, thus reflecting the perpetuation of gendered and moral hierarchies within RSE (Allen, 2005).

In school settings, cisnormativity is embedded in education, where gender is treated as a simple binary, and a person's birth-assigned sex is assumed to determine their traits, behaviours, and desires as either masculine or feminine (Cui, 2024). Given the widespread shifts around gender norms in broader society, many more young people perceive gender and sexuality as fluid and diverse. However, this diversity is often overlooked within these cis-normative and binary frameworks. Research indicates that students are increasingly identifying as non-binary, bisexual, or pansexual, among other diverse identities, and they desire an education that reflects this diversity (Ellis & Bentham, 2021; McGlashan Fainu, & Fitzpatrick, 2025). In response to these limitations, inclusive RSE recognises diverse sexual and gender identities and incorporates student voices to enhance engagement, belonging, and emotional safety (O'Quinn & Fields, 2020; Ellis & Bentham, 2021). In contrast, when schools fail to recognise sexual orientations and gender identities beyond the 'straight, cis' norm, students may experience pressures that limit their ability to explore, affirm, and understand their identities (Cui, 2024; Ellis & Bentham, 2021).

From a meaning-making perspective, representation is not simply a matter of including additional topics; rather, it influences whether students perceive RSE as applicable to their own

lives. When young people cannot locate themselves within educational narratives, the knowledge provided may feel distant or irrelevant. Silence regarding sexual and gender diversity can act as a form of social control, privileging heteronormative and Eurocentric norms (Brickell, 2009). This exclusion can leave young people feeling underprepared to navigate their own identities, relationships, and sexual health, contributing to experiences of isolation, shame, and marginalisation (Epps et al., 2023).

These broader issues of representation are also reflected in the specific content included and excluded within RSE curricula. When curricula exclude discussions of diverse sexual experiences, bodies, and identities, they can reinforce the same inequalities they aim to reduce. For example, omitting topics such as painful intercourse, menstrual sexuality, transgender experiences, same-sex desire, and other diverse sexual practices can make these experiences invisible and suggest that heterosexual, cisgender experiences are the norm (Cui, 2024). As a result, underrepresented students may become less confident, disengaged, and miss opportunities to critically explore their identity and sexuality across diverse gender and sexual experiences (Ellis & Bentham, 2021).

In a similar way, the diverse cultural needs of young people in Aotearoa have not been fully addressed within RSE. RSE continues to be heavily influenced by Western biomedical and moralistic frameworks that focus on individual behaviour and risk rather than the relational, spiritual, and cultural aspects of Pacific and Māori worldviews (Clelland et al., 2024). The literature has shown that many Māori and Pacific students feel disconnected from their RSE, as it lacks cultural ways of knowing, such as the Māori values of whakapapa (genealogy), wairuatanga (spirituality), and whanaungatanga (relationships and connectedness) (Cammock et al., 2025; Durie, 1985, 2005; Le Grice & Braun, 2018; University of Auckland, 2025). Although the 2020 guidelines represented a positive step towards more culturally responsive and inclusive RSE, important gaps remained. The subsequent removal of the guidelines and development of a replacement curriculum therefore raise concerns about whether this progress will be maintained and whether the cultural diversity of young people in Aotearoa will be adequately reflected.

Pacific researchers and educators emphasise that the 2020 curriculum guidelines were built around key Pacific values such as whanaungatanga, collective care, and respect. Without these values, RSE risks reproducing Eurocentric and heteronormative assumptions about relationships, sexuality and wellbeing (University of Auckland, 2025). The resulting exclusion

can undermine cultural safety and the visibility of marginalised young people, reflecting ongoing tensions between Westernised educational structures and Indigenous and community-informed understandings of wellbeing (Durie, 1985; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Le Grice & Braun, 2018; Redstone & Conn, 2011; University of Auckland, 2025; Veukiso-Ulugia, 2016).

Therefore, the removal of the 2020 RSE guidelines creates a major setback in the movement for equity and cultural inclusion. Māori and Pacific values were purposefully incorporated into these guidelines to create an environment where students feel comfortable exploring their identities and relationships with others while also seeing themselves reflected. Within these culturally grounded frameworks, sexuality is treated as taonga (sacred) and treasured as an integral part of wellbeing linked to ancestry, spirituality, and a sense of community (Cammock et al., 2025; Le Grice & Braun, 2018). RSE that overlooks these perspectives fails to address power disparities and uphold principles of social justice, instead reinforcing existing inequities and social disadvantage (Cammock et al., 2025; Durie, 1985, 2005; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Le Grice & Braun, 2018; Walker et al., 2006).

1.3.5. Emotional and Relational Wellbeing

Young people frequently express interest in learning how to create healthy relationships, communicate effectively, and deal with breakups, which are precisely the skills they believe are most important to their emotional and sexual wellbeing (Allen, 2005; Halstead & Waite, 2003; Measor et al., 2000). As young people begin initiating intimate relationships, they consistently express a desire for greater attention to the emotional dimensions of sexuality and relationships within RSE. For example, Allen (2005) found that 53% of her participants wanted to learn more about dealing with breakups, arguing that this reflects young people's interest in emotional aspects of relationships, a finding also identified by Measor et al. (2000).

Responses from several studies similarly show that young people want their RSE to reflect their emotional and sexual maturity, their autonomy, and the reality that many are already engaged in relationships or sexual activity (Allen, 2005, 2008; Pound et al., 2016). Therefore, the absence of emotional and relational content represents more than a missing topic area; it reflects a narrower conceptualisation of sexual health that separates sexual behaviour from the interpersonal contexts through which sexuality is experienced.

These findings are highly relevant in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, where integrating emotional and spiritual dimensions into RSE would not only respond to what students identify

as important, but also align with culturally grounded models of holistic wellbeing that are emphasised nationally. This is particularly relevant for rangatahi Māori, for whom models of wellbeing provide culturally grounded ways of understanding the interconnected dimensions of health. Te Whare Tapa Whā, for example, is a Māori model of health based on four interconnected dimensions of wellbeing, including emotional and spiritual wellbeing, and provides a holistic framework for understanding health (Durie, 1985).

These findings are supported by a growing body of literature highlighting the importance of emotions and relationships in RSE curricula. Within this research, sexual and emotional wellbeing are increasingly understood as deeply interconnected, with international frameworks emphasising that healthy sexual development cannot be separated from emotional literacy, interpersonal skills, and relational safety (Halstead & Waite, 2003; UNESCO et al., 2018). Therefore, this literature indicates that effective RSE requires an integrated approach that includes the topics of intimacy, communication, and relational wellbeing (Allen, 2008; Garland-Levett, 2017; Halstead & Waite, 2003; Pound et al., 2016; UNESCO et al., 2018).

1.4. Young People's Experiences of RSE

The literature reviewed so far demonstrates that young people value RSE but frequently perceive it as incomplete, overly focused on biological and risk-based content, and insufficiently responsive to their emotional, relational, cultural, and sexual realities (Allen, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2023; Pound et al., 2016). However, this body of research largely captures young people's views while they are still participating in secondary school education. Research in Aotearoa New Zealand has reinforced that rangatahi Māori (young people) and diverse student groups frequently experience their RSE as incomplete, culturally disconnected, or insufficiently inclusive of gender and sexual diversity (Clelland et al., 2023; Family Planning New Zealand, 2019; Le Grice & Braun, 2018).

Despite this rich body of research, comparatively little is known about how young people retrospectively evaluate their RSE after leaving secondary school and entering young adulthood. This distinction is important because young adults may interpret the relevance and adequacy of their previous RSE differently when reflecting on it in relation to their own experiences of relationships, sexuality, and identity. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is particularly limited research examining how former students make sense of their school-based RSE as they transition into young adulthood.

1.4.1. Beyond Content: Classroom Delivery, Adult Gatekeeping, and Youth Engagement

A central critique across young people's experiences of RSE is the role of adult gatekeeping. Teachers, parents, and other adults can influence what information is considered appropriate to discuss based on their own discomfort, assumptions, or normative expectations. Research from Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, including qualitative studies examining young people's and teachers' experiences of RSE, highlights a persistent disconnect between what adults feel comfortable teaching and what young people want and need to know (Goldstein, 2020; Jeary-Graham & Macleod, 2015, 2017; Sánchez et al., 2023).

This disconnect can result in RSE being shaped more by adult anxieties than by young people's lived experiences and learning needs. The disconnect extends beyond curriculum content and is also reflected in classroom interactions, where teacher confidence, comfort, and communication styles influence whether young people experience RSE as a safe and meaningful space for discussion (Jackson & Weatherall, 2010). When teachers feel constrained by community expectations or personal discomfort, opportunities for open dialogue may be reduced, reinforcing young people's perceptions that sexuality is a topic surrounded by silence or embarrassment.

In contrast, much of the research with young people emphasises the importance of creating youth-led spaces where young people can freely ask questions, explore their thoughts, and discuss topics on their own terms, which is an important component of effective RSE (Allen, 2005, 2023; Clelland et al., 2024; Garland-Levett, 2017; Dixon et al., 2024; Kauer et al., 2025). International research demonstrates that young people value opportunities to ask questions, exchange perspectives, and explore topics such as relationships, desire, and pornography in ways that connect with their own experiences (Goldstein, 2020). This disconnect can leave RSE feeling impersonal and detached, reinforcing perceptions that adults are unable or unwilling to engage in meaningful conversations about sexual wellbeing (Jeary-Graham & Macleod, 2015, 2017; Sánchez et al., 2023).

Likewise, in Aotearoa New Zealand, young people consistently report that interactive, discussion-based, and student-centred approaches to RSE are more memorable and engaging than traditional teacher-led delivery (Allen, 2005; Clelland et al., 2024; Garland-Levett, 2017; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010). Rather than simply receiving information, young people want to be active participants in their learning, with youth-led and collaborative spaces allowing them

to reflect on sexuality, relationships, and wellbeing in ways that feel relevant to their lives (Allen, 2005, 2023; Clelland et al., 2024; Dixon et al., 2024; Kauer et al., 2025).

These findings regarding student-centred and participatory approaches to RSE suggest that meaningful RSE is shaped not only by what is taught, but by how learning environments are created and whether young people are positioned as passive recipients or active contributors to knowledge production. Ultimately, the body of research with young people suggests that the effectiveness of RSE depends not only on its content, but on how young people experience, interpret, and apply that learning within their own lives.

1.4.2. Young Adulthood

The transitional period from secondary school to tertiary education and young adulthood represents a life stage where young adults often gain greater independence, encounter new social environments, and explore intimate and sexual relationships with less parental oversight. Young adults may experience increasing sexual and romantic engagement during this period, including navigating alcohol use, hook-up culture, and evolving relational norms (Arnett, 2000; Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Garcia et al., 2012).

During this transition, individuals may face emotionally and relationally complex situations without feeling sufficiently prepared by their previous RSE. There is a significant gap in our understanding of how young adults interpret and apply the knowledge and skills they were taught, as much of the existing research focuses on behaviours and outcomes rather than their reflections on school-based RSE (Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Higgins et al., 2011; Seaver, 2021).

The limited studies available, such as those conducted by Astle et al. (2021) and Kuborn et al. (2023) with first-year university students aged 18–24 in the USA, reveal consistent themes. These participants frequently describe their prior RSE as inadequate for the realities of university life, expressing a desire for more holistic and practical guidance that addresses emotional readiness, consent, sexual agency, and the social and relational consequences of sexual activity (Astle et al., 2021; Kuborn et al., 2023). This suggests that, despite being frequently exposed to social pressures, peer norms, and sexualised media, young people may leave secondary school lacking the knowledge or self-assurance necessary to handle sexual and relational difficulties in young adulthood.

Many of the participants involved in these studies also reported feeling ashamed or confused about their sexual desires, suggesting that their previous education did not sufficiently normalise sexual exploration or provide the guidance needed to navigate relationships and emotional experiences as they transitioned into young adulthood (Astle et al., 2021; Kuborn et al., 2023). In addition, these participants consistently supported earlier, more frequent, and more thorough learning that incorporates discussions of pleasure, relational communication, and strategies for navigating sexual consent and decision-making (Astle et al., 2021; Kuborn et al., 2023).

Empirical research indicates that casual sexual experiences are relatively common among tertiary students, with estimates suggesting that 60–80% of tertiary students have had a casual sexual experience (Bogle, 2008; Fielder & Carey, 2010; Garcia et al., 2012; Seaver, 2021). Tertiary students may also encounter new social environments and expectations around relationships and sexuality, particularly during the transition into greater independence. These experiences highlight the importance of considering how young adults navigate relational boundaries, sexual norms, and intimacy entering adulthood (Astle et al., 2021; Kuborn et al., 2023; Olmstead et al., 2020; Seaver, 2021).

1.5. Responsive RSE Framework

It is well established from a variety of studies that to create a responsive RSE framework in Aotearoa New Zealand, transformation must happen at multiple levels. Meaningful delivery cannot be achieved through curriculum reform alone, as RSE requires attention to the wider social, cultural, and pedagogical contexts in which learning occurs (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2021; Clelland et al., 2023; Dixon et al., 2024; ERO, 2024; Elliott et al., 1998; Fitzpatrick, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick & Tinning, 2014; Garland-Levett, 2017; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Lee, 2023; Le Grice & Braun, 2018; Maibvisira et al., 2015; Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, 2025a, 2025b; Veukiso-Ulugia, 2013).

Research across national and international contexts suggests that RSE is most responsive when it is culturally grounded, relational, and collaboratively shaped with students, whānau, and wider communities (Dixon et al., 2022, 2024). This requires moving beyond one-way delivery models and creating opportunities for students to contribute their own perspectives, ask questions, and engage with issues in ways that reflect their lived experiences. Approaches that focus on youth participation and empowerment help drive this shift towards participatory learning (Mitra, 2004; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). When young people are involved as learners,

their perspectives, experiences, and knowledge influence discussions, making RSE more relevant and attuned to their needs. Collaborative methods that emphasise shared learning and dialogue tend to better reflect the diverse cultural and social backgrounds of young people (Allen, 2005, 2011, 2021; Dixon et al., 2022, 2024).

Although the literature demonstrates a clear desire among students to have their voices included in RSE, there is limited research examining the effectiveness of student-led approaches, which remain inconsistently incorporated into current curricula. Community consultation is another contested aspect of responsive RSE and remains a site of tension for schools to navigate. Competing values, parental resistance, and differing views among whānau about what is appropriate to include in RSE present significant barriers to implementing responsive RSE (Dixon et al., 2022; Dixon et al., 2024). When these tensions are not addressed, schools may struggle to deliver consistent content, leaving students with inconsistent and incomplete education (Dixon et al., 2022, 2024). In parallel, whānau engagement is important for incorporating cultural values and relational contexts into RSE, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand, where collective wellbeing and generational guidance are central to Māori frameworks of health.

However, opportunities to deliver responsive RSE are limited under the existing curriculum framework and recent curriculum changes, and there is minimal research examining how young people understand and apply their prior RSE as they move into young adulthood, leaving little evidence to guide the development of interactive, student-centred approaches.

1.6. My Study

Despite a substantial body of research examining current RSE policy, curriculum design, and approaches, there remains a limited understanding of how young people themselves evaluate and make sense of their RSE experiences. Although existing research has included young people's perspectives, much of this research has examined young people while they are still experiencing RSE at school, including what they value, what they perceive as lacking, and what improvements they would like to see. There is a need for research that examines how young people evaluate their RSE after leaving secondary school, particularly its relevance as they transition into young adulthood. This retrospective perspective also provides insight into how young people seek alternative sources of knowledge when formal education does not meet their perceived needs, and how these informal sources may shape their understandings of sexuality, relationships, and wellbeing. This reflection is important, as it allows young people

to assess the relevance and impact of RSE on their adult lives and wellbeing, and articulate what they want and need to be included, based on their current experiences.

1.6.1. Aims and Research Question

My study explored how tertiary students in Aotearoa New Zealand understand and make sense of their prior RSE, particularly its relevance to their lived experiences. The study is guided by the following question: How do tertiary students in Aotearoa New Zealand understand and make sense of their experiences of RSE? By centring young people's perspectives, I aimed to contribute to ongoing discussions about the relevance and future direction of the RSE curriculum.

1.6.2. Significance and Contribution of the Study

Overall, by exploring how tertiary students reflect on their prior RSE, my study aimed to contribute to policy and practice debates in Aotearoa by making RSE more responsive to youth experiences, and by giving voice to young people in a field often dominated by adult perspectives, priorities, and assumptions (Allen, 2005, 2008; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Mitra, 2004; Veukiso-Ulugia, 2016).

This research is important because young people's perspectives on their own RSE are rarely prioritised, despite being central to understanding how education shapes their sexual, relational, and emotional development. Central to this argument, my research responds directly to *what young people want* from RSE. In Aotearoa New Zealand, young people are actively expressing a desire for their RSE to be shaped by their input, rather than simply being designed for them. While adults often design policies and curricula, young people themselves are the ultimate recipients of RSE, and their reflections provide valuable insight into what they find useful, engaging, and meaningful for their sexual and relational development (Allen, 2005; Astle et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2025).

This research is particularly relevant during the transition to young adulthood and tertiary education, when students increasingly navigate sexual and relationship experiences with greater independence. For example, commentary from Aotearoa New Zealand university students (including Massey University, University of Auckland, University of Otago and Victoria University confession pages) presents discussions on dating and 'hook-up' culture, navigating experiences such as partner infidelity, intimacy in public spaces, and expressing

affection within social expectations, suggesting that involvement in intimacy and relationships is part of the university experience (Massey Meaningful Confessions, n.d.; University of Auckland Meaningful Confessions, n.d.; University of Otago Meaningful Confessions, n.d.; Victoria University of Wellington Confessions, n.d.). The frequent use of these forums to seek anonymous advice suggests that, while young adults are actively encountering these experiences within tertiary life, they may not always feel equipped to navigate them independently. Such experiences are also recognised within the literature (Arnett, 2000; Astle et al., 2021; Kuborn et al., 2023; Olmstead et al., 2020; Seaver, 2021). These discussions illustrate that young people actively encounter complex relational and social experiences beyond the classroom, highlighting the importance of considering whether earlier RSE adequately prepares them to understand and navigate these experiences.

Conclusion

RSE curricula in Aotearoa New Zealand cannot be fully aligned with the realities of young people, including their experiences of young adulthood, without understanding how RSE supports, or fails to support them. My research sought to address the persistent failure to meaningfully consult with and include young people in RSE research and practice. Existing research that is adult-centric, policy-focused, or largely quantitative often overlooks the relational and emotional aspects of young people's experiences. In this chapter, I have shown that while many studies highlight the importance of inclusivity and participation, fewer place young people's voices at the centre and recognise them as knowledge holders in their own right. Evidence from multiple countries suggests that young people are more likely to disengage from curricula developed without meaningful youth involvement, particularly when these approaches are perceived as irrelevant, disconnected from their realities, or overly moralistic and fear-based (Allen, 2005; Cheng et al., 2025; Elliott et al., 1998; Kabelka et al., 2025).

Although a substantial body of research has examined students' experiences of RSE while they remain at secondary school, there is comparatively little research exploring how young adults retrospectively interpret the relevance and impact of these experiences after leaving school. This gap is particularly evident in Aotearoa New Zealand, where little is known about how former students evaluate whether RSE prepared them for the relational, emotional, and sexual realities of young adulthood. Consequently, the voices of young adults remain largely absent from discussions informing curriculum development and educational reform.

The research I have reviewed therefore suggests that including young people in curriculum design is important, as it helps ensure that their learning is relevant, engaging, and responsive to their experiences. It allows students to take greater ownership of their learning and exercise agency, while also supporting the inclusion of diverse backgrounds and experiences (Allen, 2005, 2008; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Mitra, 2004; Veukiso-Ulugia, 2016).

This forms the basis of my research rationale and approach. The approach I took in my study positioned young people not simply as recipients of RSE but as knowledgeable interpreters whose reflections provide insight into how educational experiences translate into lived realities. By centring my participants' own perspectives, my study sought to understand how young people perceive the relationship between their RSE experiences and their wellbeing, relationships, and identity. In the following chapter, I discuss the methodological approach I adopted.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Given my study's focus on meaning-making and lived experience, I centred participants' accounts while recognising that their experiences were shaped by broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. In this chapter I outline the contextualist epistemological framework that underpins my study, as well as the methodological approach used to address the research aims and question. First, the theoretical contextualist framework is described, followed by an outline of the methodological approach, including the study participants and the rationale for their inclusion, the recruitment process, and the research procedure. Next, the ethical considerations are discussed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the management of potential risks. The chapter concludes with a summary of the data analysis method.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a contextualist epistemology, understanding the participants' accounts as situated within social, cultural, and institutional contexts and interpreted through the researcher's analytic engagement (Madill et al., 2000; Mjøset, 2009). My approach is also informed by feminist research principles, particularly reflexivity, attention to power relations, and valuing young people's accounts of their own experiences (Hesse-Bieber, 2013). I chose this framework because outcome-focused approaches to RSE tend to generalise learning through knowledge acquisition or behavioural change, rather than attending to young people's individual experiences. A contextualist framework was appropriate as it allowed me to prioritise students' individual reflections and how they constructed and interpreted the meaning of their RSE experiences within their social, cultural, and relational contexts (Cohen, 2022; Madill et al., 2000; Mjøset, 2009; Tracy, 2013; Wilkinson, 2000).

2.1.1. Contextualism

Contextualist epistemology understands knowledge as situated, provisional, and co-constructed, emerging through interactions between participants, researchers, and the specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which experiences occur (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994; Madill et al., 2000). Madill et al. (2000) describe contextualist research as recognising that "all knowledge is local, provisional, and situation dependent" (Madill et al., 2000, p. 9), suggesting that results vary according to the context in which data are collected and analysed. A contextualist approach was chosen because it treated my participants' accounts as situated

interpretations, rather than simplifying them into standardised results that treat all students' experiences as the same and overlook how they uniquely make sense of RSE.

While an alternative approach, such as an interpretivist paradigm, would have also enabled students to explore their thoughts and actively interpret their experiences of RSE, it was less appropriate for the aims of my study, because it risked treating their reflections as purely individual opinions. Such an approach may not sufficiently account for how situational and institutional contexts shape their experiences, including what content is taught, which topics are emphasised, and which are omitted in RSE (Wells & Giacco, 2025). A contextualist framework, however, addressed this limitation by allowing students' responses to be situated within broader relations of power and social context. This framework allowed me to examine how meanings were created, as well as the educational and social structures that shaped them (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994; Madill et al., 2000).

Contextualism draws from the concept of hermeneutics, which emphasises holistic interpretation. Meaning is derived through empathetic engagement with individuals' experiences while simultaneously considering the contexts in which those experiences occur (Tracy, 2013). This contextualist framework therefore supported a participant-led, open-ended exploration of how students made sense of their RSE within broader social and cultural contexts (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994; Madill et al., 2000).

2.1.2. Feminist Research Principles

Although my study is grounded primarily in a contextualist epistemology, it is also informed by feminist research principles (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Feminist scholars such as Crasnow (2006), Harding (1986), Hesse-Biber (2013), Longino (1993), and Wilkinson (2000) argue that knowledge is not a neutral or objective truth but is co-constructed through the interaction between researcher and participant. Feminist research principles also value lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge while drawing attention to whose voices are heard and whose experiences are overlooked (Wilkinson, 2000).

Research informed by feminist research principles, particularly Harding (1986), recognises that individuals in marginalised positions, due to gender, age, or cultural identity, may have insights into social phenomena that remain less accessible from more privileged positions. This perspective was relevant to understanding the systemic and cultural forces shaping RSE

experiences, such as how young people may be positioned as lacking sexual agency, with societal norms framing their sexuality as inappropriate or something adults must regulate, and how women's sexual desires may be culturally constrained or considered invisible, reflecting broader gendered power dynamics.

Drawing on Longino (1993), my methodological approach incorporated key aspects of feminist research, particularly by foregrounding participants' insider knowledge to illustrate the social relations and power dynamics that may shape RSE. By acknowledging multiple standpoints, I considered participants' experiences as shaped by specific social positions rather than treating them as universal, allowing attention to differences across gender, age, and cultural contexts. This approach enabled me to consider both personal experiences and the broader systems of power that shape them. Feminist research principles therefore informed my attention to power and the situated nature of participants' accounts (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Feminist research principles also informed my attention to how dominant institutional and cultural discourses may shape sexual knowledge, agency, and education for young people and women (Cohen et al., 2022).

2.1.3. Summary

The contextualist epistemological framework supported an analysis that attended to how students actively interpret and evaluate their RSE experiences within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. This framework allowed me to explore students' reflections on RSE, including their wellbeing and lived experiences, and to consider how they understood the relevance and usefulness of their RSE. However, it does not support definitive claims about RSE's effectiveness, nor does it quantify outcomes or generalise beyond the specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts of the participants. Instead, I provided contextualised interpretations of the students' reflections, highlighting the ways in which patterns of power, influence, and meaning emerged across their diverse experiences.

2.2. Data Collection: Online Qualitative Survey

My study employed a qualitative, open-ended online survey to explore students' lived experiences and interpretations of RSE (Braun et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was appropriate to the research question because it allowed participants to describe and interpret their experiences in their own words, consistent with the contextualist epistemological position that meaning is situated within social, cultural, and institutional

contexts. This was particularly important given the diversity of educational contexts and individual experiences across Aotearoa New Zealand.

The survey questions were self-administered, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences without the constraints of predetermined response categories. The survey explored students' experiences of school-based RSE, perceptions of its relevance and usefulness, experiences of inclusion or exclusion relating to gender, culture, and sexuality, and reflections on how RSE had influenced their current understandings of relationships, sexual experiences, and emotional wellbeing. Participants were also invited to provide broader reflections, allowing additional perspectives and unexpected themes to emerge.

The online format allowed for more effective data collection compared with interview methods and was expected to be more accessible, private, and secure for the participants, given the sensitivity of the topics (Braun et al., 2017). It allowed participants the opportunity to engage with the survey at a time and place that suited them, encouraging thoughtful reflection and considered responses. This format also enabled my study to reach students from different regions of Aotearoa New Zealand, increasing the diversity of perspectives included in the research. While I recognised that not all young people may have equal internet access, I specifically targeted tertiary students, who had reliable access to campus computer libraries and labs and online resources, and who were accustomed to engaging with online platforms for both academic and everyday purposes. This ensured that all participants could complete the survey without technological barriers. Additionally, the online approach was cost-efficient and helped maintain participant confidentiality while allowing for a wider and more varied participant pool (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

Although a sound choice for my study, there were limitations to using an online survey method. Most importantly, the absence of real-time follow-up restricted the ability to ask the participants for clarification or explore responses in greater depth. This limitation was addressed by the thoughtful creation of open-ended questions which covered all main areas this research aimed to investigate, as well as a section for any additional thoughts, perspectives and experiences. Another limitation was self-selection bias, as students who chose to participate may have had greater interest in, stronger opinions about, or different experiences of RSE than those who did not participate (Bethlehem, 2010). This potential bias may have influenced the perspectives represented in the findings. This limitation was mitigated through broad recruitment strategies across Aotearoa New Zealand to encourage participation from students

with varied experiences, backgrounds, and locations. However, as participation was voluntary, self-selection bias could not be fully eliminated.

The survey was conducted via *Qualtrics* to ensure accessibility, participant anonymity and secure storage of data (Evans & Mathur, 2005). It consisted of six open-ended questions, which were developed based on the research aims and review of the current literature on RSE, and the contextualist approach. The questions were designed to generate reflections on school-based RSE, its perceived relevance and usefulness, preparation for navigating relationships, inclusion of diverse identities, and the application of RSE learning in young adulthood and tertiary life. Participants were also invited to share any additional perspectives or experiences not captured by the preceding questions, providing an opportunity for unexpected themes to emerge. The full survey questionnaire is included in Appendix A, ensuring transparency in design and alignment with the research aims and theoretical framework.

Given the low-risk nature of my study and the open-ended qualitative design, a formal pilot was not conducted. However, I reviewed and completed the survey myself with a small number of peers to ensure clarity, readability, and ease of completion, providing an informal pre-test of the questions and instructions. This approach was appropriate as it still ensured that participants were able to respond meaningfully without the need for a full pilot, while maintaining the integrity and rigour of the research design. Any feedback that arose after the informal pilot informed minor adjustments to question wording and survey instructions, helping ensure that answers could be made easily and without confusion. Recruitment materials, including the participant information sheet (Appendix B) and social media and physical advertisements (Appendix C), provided details about voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the purpose of the study.

2.2.1. Recruitment

The survey responses were collected from tertiary students in Aotearoa New Zealand. Participants were eligible if they were aged 18 years and older, had completed school-based RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand within the past five years, and were able to read and write in English. The minimum age of 18 ensured that all participants were legally able to provide informed consent. I chose to recruit tertiary students for practical reasons and to enhance the data collected. Recruiting through educational institutions can be a reliable convenience-based approach to sexuality education research. However, prior research in Aotearoa New Zealand

highlights that "school-based sexuality research confronts a specific set of methodological challenges because its focus is sexuality" (Allen et al., 2015, p. 31), making ethics clearance and gaining permission from schools potentially challenging and time-consuming (Allen et al., 2015). Recruiting slightly older participants through tertiary institutions allowed me to avoid these delays, while also allowing convenience-based recruiting. More importantly, recruiting through secondary schools was not consistent with the focus of the present study, which sought to explore young people's reflections on RSE after leaving secondary school and as they transitioned into young adulthood. In addition, other research has shown that this cohort (tertiary students) is able to discuss the topic with greater freedom, insight, and reflexivity and those who have recently completed secondary school can reflect on their experiences sufficiently recently to generate detailed and credible data (Jeary-Graham & Macleod, 2015).

To capture recent experiences of the 2020 RSE curriculum, participants were required to have completed RSE within the past five years (at the time of recruitment). This timeframe was particularly important given the subsequent withdrawal of the 2020 RSE guidelines and the return to the 2007 Health and Physical Education curriculum during the development of their replacement. Recruiting participants who had recently experienced RSE under the 2020 guidelines therefore provided a basis for examining young people's experiences of this more contemporary approach to RSE, at a time of significant curriculum change. The five-year criterion also supported participants' ability to provide informed reflections on their experiences.

Participants were initially recruited as first-year tertiary students because this group was expected to be at a particularly relevant point of transition from secondary school into tertiary education and greater independence. During recruitment, however, it became apparent that restricting eligibility to first-year students was unnecessarily narrow and limited recruitment without being essential to addressing the research question. The eligibility criteria were therefore broadened to include tertiary students more generally, while retaining the requirements that participants were aged 18 years and older and had completed school-based RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand within the previous five years. These criteria maintained the study's focus on young adults with relatively recent experiences of school-based RSE and preserved relevance to the contemporary curriculum context. Broadening the tertiary student criterion also allowed greater variation in participants' experiences while remaining consistent with the study's focus on reflecting on RSE after secondary school.

The final eligibility criteria were designed to capture young people at a key point of transition into independent sexual and relational decision-making. While some age variation was anticipated, the focus remained on young people's recent experiences of school-based RSE and their transition into young adulthood, rather than accounts shaped by a longer period of distance from schooling. Selecting this group was both a practical and theoretically grounded choice. Recruiting from tertiary settings allowed for efficient access to a large pool of participants who could provide full informed consent without the ethical and logistical challenges associated with school-aged youth (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; APA, 2017).

Although participants could come from any tertiary setting, university students were expected to make up the majority because of their greater accessibility and wider recruitment reach. This recruitment expectation may have resulted in an over-representation of more privileged socio-economic backgrounds, as structural positions, including class, can influence RSE experiences (Tracy, 2013). In keeping with the study's contextualist epistemological approach, this potential over-representation was acknowledged and considered in the analysis in terms of how it may have shaped the findings.

Participants were recruited from tertiary institutions across Aotearoa New Zealand using a multi-platform approach. This included sharing the survey link through university forums, student groups, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Reddit. Flyers with a QR code were also distributed in common student areas such as libraries, where possible, to increase reach.

In addition, I approached relevant organisations with a focus on sexual health and wellbeing, such as Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa, to assist with promoting the study through their networks, with a summary of the research aims and eligibility criteria provided. Participants were encouraged to share the survey with peers, and those who completed the survey went into a draw to receive a Koha gift voucher as an incentive. Before beginning the survey, the participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time.

Similar research designs have been used effectively by researchers in other contexts (e.g. Astle et al., 2021; Jeary-Graham & Macleod, 2015, 2016; Kuborn et al., 2023; Young et al., 2023). Jeary-Graham and Macleod's (2015, 2016) research suggests that young adults can offer rich personal narratives about their educational experiences, as demonstrated by successfully

involving them in focus group discussions to examine how they understand sexuality education. Similarly, Young et al. (2023) examined Pacific tertiary students' retrospective perspectives on sexual and reproductive health education, identifying both strengths and weaknesses and offering insights for enhancing RSE programmes.

Young people's perspectives are particularly valuable, given that their voices have often been marginalised in RSE research, policy, and decision-making processes (Allen, 2005, 2008; Jeary-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Maibvisira et al., 2015). By choosing young adults who had recently completed secondary school, my study was able to examine how students understood and assessed their education in relation to sexual, relational, and emotional wellbeing. This approach helped to develop a youth-focused understanding of RSE that addressed current policy discussions and curriculum gaps.

I deliberately included participants of all genders, including women and men, to examine how gendered power relations operate relationally within RSE. From a contextualist standpoint informed by feminist research principles, gender was understood not as a fixed attribute but as a social position that can shape access to knowledge, authority, and legitimacy, as well as the meanings participants make of sexuality, relationships, and education (Harding, 1986; Hesse-Biber, 2013). Including participants of all genders allowed me to explore how RSE reflects and reproduces gendered norms, such as the marginalisation of women's sexual desire, differential expectations placed on young men, women, and LGBTQ+ people regarding responsibility, consent, and sexual behaviour, and assumptions about sexual agency (Cohen et al., 2022). Gender was, however, not treated as a variable for measurement or direct comparison, but as an analytic lens through which participants' accounts were interpreted.

This participant group was able to provide the most relevant insight into how young people understand the relationship between their RSE experiences and their own wellbeing, relationships, and identity. Allen's (2005, 2008, 2011) research suggests that when young people are provided with the space and opportunity to reflect, they can offer critical and detailed accounts of how school-based RSE has shaped their understandings of sex, sexuality, relationships, and wellbeing. A key strength of Allen's research is its focus on young people's own perspectives and experiences, providing valuable insight into how RSE is received and interpreted by those directly involved. For example, Allen (2008) observed that her participants were able to clearly identify what was lacking and what was beneficial in their RSE, including open discussions about pleasure, identity and sexual orientation, and the emotional aspects of

relationships. Allen and Allen (2021) also highlighted that young people use these opportunities to question normative discourses and express their agency, providing important context for understanding how RSE messages are absorbed, rejected, or reinterpreted in their daily lives.

Parker et al. (2020) similarly found that students could identify how cultural and familial norms shaped their views on sexuality, as well as recognise gaps in the knowledge and skills needed to manage their sexual health independently. Although Parker et al.'s findings are situated within a specific cultural and educational context, the study provides useful evidence of young people's ability to critically reflect on the influences shaping their understandings of sexuality. Research with female international university students in Australia also demonstrated students' ability to identify limitations in prior sexual health education and articulate the need for more culturally appropriate and practical resources (Burchard et al., 2011). Although my study focused on tertiary students, the existing literature highlights the importance of considering how young people's backgrounds and experiences shape their interpretations of sexual health education. Collectively, this literature supports the use of tertiary students as a relevant group for reflecting on the strengths and limitations of school-based RSE.

Although these studies are situated within different cultural and educational contexts, they demonstrate that young people can critically reflect on their sexual health education, identify its limitations, and articulate what they need from it. This supports the use of tertiary students as a participant group for examining how school-based RSE is understood and evaluated after secondary school.

2.2.2. Response Rate

A sample of approximately 50–100 completed surveys was considered adequate for developing reflective observations and meaningful qualitative analysis, depending on the depth and length of responses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I therefore aimed to obtain approximately 50–60 completed surveys, which was considered feasible within the available time and recruitment constraints. During recruitment, the eligibility criterion was broadened from first-year tertiary students to tertiary students more generally, while retaining the requirements that participants were aged 18 years and older and had completed school-based RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand within the previous five years. The survey received 92 total responses. I then used *Qualtrics* fraud detection tools to ensure the validity of responses, specifically identifying submissions from participants who met the inclusion criteria and had provided informed

consent by clicking the consent button. As an additional quality assurance step, a secondary review of responses was undertaken independently in consultation with my supervisor, with both assessments aligning in confirming data suitability for inclusion.

Following data screening and eligibility checks, 32 responses were identified as valid and met the inclusion criteria. This resulted in a smaller final sample than I originally anticipated. While below the initial target range, the retained dataset still provided sufficient depth for qualitative analysis, particularly given the richness of the open-ended responses and variation in participant engagement. Overall, text volume was substantial for a qualitative online survey. The median per-participant total across open-ended questions was approximately 209 words, with a mean of approximately 313 words. Word counts ranged from 26 to 1,069 words, indicating considerable variation in depth of engagement, with a subset of participants providing particularly rich narrative accounts. In addition, the completion rates indicated strong overall engagement with the survey, suggesting that the majority of respondents engaged fully with the qualitative component, while a small proportion provided partial but still analytically useful responses. In total, 27 of 32 participants answered all six open-ended questions, four answered five questions, and one answered three questions.

Table 1 summarises the number of valid responses and the extent to which participants completed the open-ended questions, distinguishing between full and partial completion.

Table 1.

Overview of Responses by Degree of Completion (N = 32)

Responses	**n**
Responded in full (6/6 open-ended questions)	27
Responded partially (5/6 open-ended questions)	4
Responded partially (3/6 open-ended questions)	1
Total	32

The variation in response completeness and length may be due to the cognitive and time demands associated with open-ended survey questions, which can contribute to participant fatigue, particularly in online survey formats (Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009). It may also reflect differing levels of engagement with the topic, with some participants offering extensive reflections on their experiences of RSE, while others provided more limited input. In addition, recruitment and contextual factors may have influenced participation patterns. As with other

research involving young people and sensitive topics such as relationships and sexuality education, participation can be shaped by accessibility of the population, willingness to disclose personal experiences, and varying levels of comfort engaging with sensitive content in an anonymous online format (Braun et al., 2017).

2.2.3. Participant Characteristics

Participants were asked to submit demographic information, which showed that most participants were currently enrolled at university (91%), with a smaller proportion enrolled in polytechnic study (9%). In relation to time since they received school-based RSE, most participants reported that they had completed RSE 3–5 years ago (62%), while just over a third had received it within the last 1–2 years (38%). Most of the participants were aged 18–20 years (78%), with the remaining participants aged 21–25 years (22%) (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Age, Enrolment, Time Since Receiving School RSE (N = 32)

	n	**%**
Age		
18–20	25	78
21–25	7	22
Total	32	100
Current enrolment		
University	29	91
Polytechnic	3	9
Total	32	100
Time since receiving school RSE		
Within the last 1–2 years	12	38
3–5 years ago	20	62
Total	32	100

Table 3 (below) provides other relevant participant characteristics. The participant group included substantial gender diversity, with approximately two-thirds identifying as cisgender and one-third identifying as gender diverse. Among cisgender participants, most identified as female/woman, while gender-diverse participants predominantly identified as non-binary/genderqueer, with individual participants identifying as transgender, butch, and unlabelled. Participants also represented a range of ethnic identities, although most identified

as European/Pākehā/NZ European (72%). There was considerable diversity in sexual identity, with heterosexual participants representing approximately one-third of the group and bisexual participants representing a further one-third. The remaining participants identified as asexual spectrum (16%), lesbian (9%), queer (6%), gay (3%), or unsure/questioning (3%).

Table 3.

Participant Characteristics (N = 32)

	n	%
Gender		
Female/woman (cisgender)	17	53
Gender diverse	9	28
Male/man (cisgender)	5	16
Unspecified	1	3
Total	32	100
Ethnicity		
European/Pākehā/NZ European	23	72
Asian	3	9
Māori	1	3
Latin American	1	3
Not specified	4	13
Total	32	100
Sexual Identity		
Heterosexual	11	35
Bisexual	9	28
Queer	2	6
Asexual spectrum	5	16
Lesbian	3	9
Gay	1	3
Unsure/questioning	1	3
Total	32	100

2.3. Data Analysis

I analysed the data using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021a, 2021b). RTA was selected because it enabled me to identify and interpret patterns of meaning

across my participants' accounts while recognising my active role in developing themes and interpreting the data. Reflexive thematic analysis aligns with the study's contextualist epistemological framework by treating meaning as situated and shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts, while simultaneously acknowledging the researcher as an active co-constructor of meaning (Hawkey & Ussher, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b; Sweet, 2020). Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is widely valued for its flexibility and applicability across a range of qualitative research paradigms. However, this flexibility has also been associated with inconsistent applications when researchers do not clearly articulate their epistemological assumptions and analytic procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Nowell et al., 2017). In the present study, this was addressed by explicitly situating the analysis within a contextualist framework and by documenting each stage of the reflexive thematic analysis process. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, knowledge is understood as actively constructed rather than simply discovered, emerging through the interaction between researcher and data (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). As such, the findings presented here reflect my interpretive engagement with participants' accounts rather than an objective or detached representation of their experiences.

RTA allowed for flexibility when exploring participants' subjective perspectives of RSE in detail, rather than just giving a simple 'effective or not' score, while also keeping in mind the context that shaped those experiences. For example, in relation to my study, instead of asking participants to score whether RSE 'worked' or not, RTA enabled a deeper investigation of how each individual understood their experiences, including recounts of what felt empowering, confusing, or embarrassing for them. Analysing these reflections allowed me to identify patterns in how institutional practices, cultural norms, and social expectations influenced students' experiences of RSE and their wellbeing. For instance, a participant's reflection about feeling 'unsupported' when learning certain RSE topics might indicate gaps in the curriculum concerning sexual agency, including autonomy, decision-making, and relationship navigation.

I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to analysis, which involved three main phases (1) initial data familiarisation, (2) coding, and (3) theme development (viz., generating initial themes, refining and naming themes). This structured yet iterative process supported a recursive approach to analysis, allowing movement between stages as themes were developed and refined in response to the data.

2.3.1. First Phase: Familiarisation

I read each participant's response individually as it was received through Qualtrics, ensuring that each account was first understood in its own context before any comparison or grouping occurred. This approach supported a commitment to treating participants as distinct individuals with unique perspectives, rather than immediately reducing responses into categories (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). I repeatedly read the dataset to facilitate immersion in the data.

2.3.2. Second Phase: Coding

Following familiarisation, I systematically coded the dataset using an inductive approach. I generated codes directly from participants' responses, focusing on identifying meaningful segments of text that reflected their experiences of RSE. My coding was both semantic and interpretive, capturing explicit statements while also considering underlying meanings within participants' accounts. I paid attention not only to what participants said, but also to how experiences were described, reflecting the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis. I reviewed responses holistically rather than by individual survey questions. My coding process was iterative and recursive. As I analysed new responses, I revisited and refined earlier codes to ensure consistency and conceptual clarity. I merged some codes where overlap existed, while others were adjusted to better reflect distinctions in meaning.

Reflexivity also involved sustained attention to my own positionality and its influence on interpretation. In line with contextualist and feminist research approaches, I remained aware that my assumptions about relationships, sexuality education, and wellbeing shaped how I engaged with and interpreted the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Clarke, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Trainor & Bundon, 2021). This included critically considering why certain patterns appeared significant, how they aligned with my expectations, and where alternative interpretations may have been possible. I organised codes in a spreadsheet to allow for comparison across participants while maintaining links to the original data. I recognised my position as both an insider and a researcher, as I share similarities in age and social context with my participants, which may have influenced how I engaged with and interpreted the data (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Trainor & Bundon, 2021). This positionality required ongoing critical reflection on how my assumptions, experiences, and social positioning could shape both the research process and the meanings generated.

I used colour coding to highlight key sections of text and recurring ideas, with initial links made to broad conceptual areas such as contraception, safety, consent, relationships, and wellbeing. This process supported early identification of recurring ideas across the dataset while maintaining openness to new or unexpected patterns. Throughout this phase, I recorded reflective notes as they emerged during engagement with the data. These included early observations about the importance the participants placed on feeling safe both emotionally and physically when navigating relationships or uncomfortable situations, as well as the frequent emphasis on consent as a key topic within RSE. These notes remained exploratory and were not treated as fixed codes but instead formed the foundation for later analytic development. In response, I made a conscious effort to remain aware of how power operated within the research relationship, particularly in shaping the questions asked and the interpretations formed (Clarke, 2002; Trainor & Bundon, 2021).

2.3.3. Third Phase: Theme Generation

During coding, several recurring patterns became apparent. For example, the participants frequently highlighted the importance of being provided with resources that supported both emotional wellbeing and physical safety when navigating relationships and sexual situations. I then examined related codes to identify broader patterns of shared meaning across the dataset. I grouped codes into preliminary thematic categories that reflected recurring aspects of the participants' experiences of RSE. This process involved repeated movement between coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure that emerging themes remained grounded in my participants' accounts. I aimed to foreground my participants' own narratives and meaning-making processes in order to support a more grounded and contextually sensitive analysis, particularly in relation to issues of gender, identity, and power (Hawkey & Ussher, 2022). Throughout this phase, I continually refined codes, merging, separating, or reallocating them as the relationships between concepts became clearer. Thereafter, I reviewed all my preliminary themes against both coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure they accurately represented the participants' accounts. This involved checking whether each theme was supported by sufficient and coherent data and whether it meaningfully contributed to answering the research question.

I refined themes through an iterative process of merging overlapping categories, separating broader themes into more specific sub-themes, and removing elements that did not contribute to the overall analytic narrative. I revisited the dataset multiple times to ensure that themes

remained grounded in my participants' lived experiences rather than reflecting superficial groupings of data. Once refined, I clearly defined each theme to establish its scope and central meaning. This involved identifying what each theme captured in relation to my participants' experiences of RSE and how it contributed to understanding the dataset.

I developed the theme names to reflect my participants' accounts in a clear and concise manner while remaining grounded in the language and meanings present in the data. I selected representative extracts across the dataset to support each theme and ensure interpretations remained closely tied to my participants' voices. I engaged in supervisory discussions to support the refinement of theme boundaries, interpretation, and naming decisions throughout this phase.

2.4. Quality Assurance

Credibility was enhanced by ensuring each theme was supported by multiple participants' extracts rather than isolated quotations, demonstrating that interpretations reflected patterns across the dataset rather than individual accounts. During analysis, I revisited the full dataset to check that themes accurately represented my participants' responses and remained grounded in the data. An audit trail was maintained throughout the coding process, documenting code development, theme refinement, and the analytical decisions made at each stage to provide transparency regarding how findings were generated. Together, these strategies supported a rigorous and transparent analytic process while producing contextually situated interpretations of the participants' experiences of RSE.

The quality of my research was strengthened through trustworthiness, transparency, and methodological consistency. Trustworthiness was ensured by regularly referencing my participants' original responses during coding and theme development, considering diverse and conflicting perspectives, and grounding interpretations in the dataset. Transparency was maintained by documenting the development and refinement of codes and themes, along with keeping a clear record of analytical decisions. Methodological coherence was achieved by aligning the research question, the contextualist epistemology, open-ended survey design, reflexive thematic analysis, and interpretation of my participants' accounts. Reflexivity also involved critically reflecting on how my own assumptions and experiences shaped what I observed, prioritised, and interpreted during analysis. Collectively, these processes enabled the production of interpretations that were both theoretically informed and sensitive to contextual

factors, illuminating how students understand RSE in relation to their wellbeing and social, educational, and cultural backgrounds.

Reflexivity was an ongoing and integral feature of this research process, recognising that my own standpoint inevitably shaped each stage of the study, from data collection through to interpretation and analysis (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). I maintained a reflexive research journal throughout the analytic process as a key strategy for enhancing transparency and credibility. This journal was used to document evolving interpretations, early impressions of the data, and moments of uncertainty or interpretive shift. Rather than treating analysis as linear, journaling supported an ongoing awareness of how my assumptions, values, and emotional responses shaped engagement with the participants' accounts (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). Consistent with Morison (2025), reflexivity was approached as an active practice rather than a methodological add-on, requiring sustained attention to how interpretations were formed, challenged, and refined over time.

In addition to reflexive journaling, regular supervisory discussions were used throughout coding and theme development to question initial interpretations, consider alternative meanings, and refine analytic decisions. These discussions were important in ensuring that findings remained grounded in the participants' accounts rather than reflecting my own assumptions.

Reflexivity was therefore not a separate stage of the research process, but an ongoing analytic practice embedded throughout data familiarisation, coding, and theme development (Morison, 2025). This reflexive practice shaped how meaning was constructed, interpreted, and presented. I therefore understood the analysis as one situated interpretation of the dataset, influenced by my engagement with the data, the methodological framework of reflexive thematic analysis, and the broader social context in which the research is located (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021a, 2021b; Clarke, 2002; Trainor & Bundon, 2021).

2.5. Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness was a central consideration because the participants' experiences and understandings of RSE were shaped by their diverse social and cultural contexts. Cultural responsiveness was embedded throughout the research design, including the development of survey questions, interpretation of findings, and reporting of results. I ensured that all questions were written in an inclusive, respectful, and non-judgmental manner, with careful attention to

language that avoided deficit framing or assumptions about the participants' experiences. This consideration was particularly important in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, where research practice is informed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi and expectations of culturally responsive and equitable research engagement (Durie, 2005; New Zealand Psychological Society et al., 2012).

In line with these principles, I acknowledged the importance of recognising tangata whenua and Māori perspectives in relation to RSE, including holistic, relational, and whānau-centred understandings of wellbeing (Durie, 1985, 2005). While Māori experiences were not the specific focus of my study, I ensured that Māori participants' responses were treated with respect and avoided generalising across cultural groups or interpreting data in ways that pathologised or privileged a single worldview.

Where ethnicity data was collected, the information was used to provide contextual understanding of the sample and to support transparency in reporting, rather than to make deficit-based comparisons. I also took care to consider cultural context during analysis, particularly when interpreting experiences that may have been shaped by identity, whānau structures, and broader social or cultural values. This approach included being reflexive about my own positionality and ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than imposed assumptions.

I followed culturally appropriate processes for individual and collective consent (Hudson et al., 2010). In my study, this meant that although each participant's consent was sought individually, I also acknowledged that some research topics might call for more extensive group consideration, especially research topics involved culturally significant or tapu (sacred) knowledge (Durie, 2005; Walker et al., 2006). Participants were provided with the option to involve whānau in decision-making if they wished. By doing so, I supported cultural values such as whakawhanaungatanga (positive and trusting relationships), even though the study was conducted remotely (Durie, 2005; Walker et al., 2006).

2.6. Ethical Considerations

In my study, ethical practice was guided by principles of respect, autonomy, beneficence, and justice, alongside attention to cultural safety and inclusivity. These principles were applied not only as procedural requirements but as ongoing considerations throughout recruitment, data collection, analysis, and reporting of the findings.

A key ethical priority in my research was ensuring that the participants from diverse social, cultural, and demographic backgrounds were appropriately represented. I acknowledged variation across gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion, and socioeconomic status, and recognised that some individuals may require additional consideration where vulnerability may affect decision-making or participation (Alderson & Morrow, 2020; HRC, 2021; Liamputtong, 2007). In particular, I intentionally included participants of all genders to capture a broader range of perspectives and address gaps in existing research that often centres on limited or homogenous samples (Cohen et al., 2021; Ellis & Bentham, 2021). To support this diversity, I distributed recruitment materials through multiple channels, including social media and physical advertisements, to provide opportunities for participation across different groups.

I also applied inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure informed consent and methodological coherence. I limited participation to individuals aged 18 years and older, as individuals under this age are more likely to require additional ethical safeguards and may not be able to provide fully independent informed consent within the scope of this online study (Alderson & Morrow, 2020; HRC, 2021). I also excluded participants who completed schooling before major curriculum changes (pre-2020) to ensure relevance and comparability of experiences within contemporary contexts of RSE.

2.6.1. Benefits to Participants

Participation in the study did not involve direct individual benefit; however, participants had the opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences of RSE in a structured and confidential setting. Providing a space for participants' perspectives contributed to addressing gaps in existing research, particularly in relation to diverse experiences across gender and educational contexts. While the study was not designed to provide therapeutic benefit, some participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to research on RSE. Several participants thanked me for conducting the research, commented positively on the topic or questions, and expressed a desire for further research or discussion in this area. These responses suggest that participation was viewed by some as a meaningful opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and contribute to a broader understanding of RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand. This may support future improvements in educational approaches by highlighting areas of strength and identifying gaps or limitations within current practice.

Participants were also offered the opportunity to receive a summary of the research findings through a separate form. Twenty participants opted to receive a copy of the results, which was

provided following completion of the study. This ensured transparency and allowed the participants to engage with the outcomes of the research if they wished, although receiving the summary was not required as part of participation. Care was taken throughout the study to ensure that participation was respectful and non-intrusive, particularly given the potentially personal nature of the topic (Decker et al., 2011; Liamputtong, 2007).

2.6.2. Consent

Informed consent is a fundamental ethical requirement in research, reflecting the principle that participants are autonomous individuals (HRC, 2021; Resnik, 2018). I followed the Massey University (2026) guidelines when developing my study design. All participants were provided with clear and detailed information about the study before deciding whether they wanted to participate. An online information sheet explained the research purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and how their data would be used. Before beginning the survey, participants were required to confirm their informed consent by selecting an agreement checkbox and declaration (HRC, 2021; APA, 2017). According to the Health Research Council of New Zealand (HRC) (2021) and the American Psychological Association (2017), participants must be able to comprehend the research, receive all pertinent information, and voluntarily consent to participate without being coerced or subjected to undue influence.

Due to the digital nature of the study, I took additional care to ensure that participants had immediate access to key information throughout the survey. A dedicated introductory page reiterated voluntary participation, withdrawal rights, and available support contacts in case participants experienced distress (Massey University, 2026). This approach was intended to minimise unintentional harm by ensuring that participants had immediate access to support information and were not required to progress through the study without first being reminded of their rights and available support pathways (Massey University, 2026; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions via email or other channels of communication if necessary. Additional precautions were taken in the online format to guarantee that consent was truly informed rather than superficially understood (HRC, 2021; Massey University, 2026). These precautions included presenting important points in bullet form, applying obvious "I consent" checkboxes, and verifying participant understanding before moving forward. This approach aligned with the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), which

highlights that informed consent should ensure participants are provided with sufficient information, can comprehend it, and give voluntary agreement, reflecting respect for their autonomy (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Consent went beyond procedural compliance and guaranteed that participants understood their rights, including the ability to withdraw at any time without penalty, in alignment with Braun and Clarke's (2013, 2021a) emphasis on ethical reflexivity. Throughout the research process, I actively considered power dynamics and participant vulnerability.

As my study was conducted entirely online with no direct contact with participants, only individuals able to provide informed consent themselves were eligible to participate. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older to minimise potential harm and ensure that they were all able to provide informed consent independently (HRC, 2021; Massey University, 2026). Given that the study explored potentially sensitive topics related to RSE, including participants under the age of 18 would have increased the ethical complexity and risk, as minors are considered a potentially vulnerable population requiring additional protections, including parental or guardian consent (HRC, 2021; Alderson & Morrow, 2020).

Restricting participation to adults helped ensure that participants had the capacity to make an informed, voluntary decision about participation while reducing potential ethical risks associated with involving younger participants. Consequently, proxy consent from guardians or authorised representatives was not sought, as it would not have been appropriate within the design of this anonymous online study (Alderson & Morrow, 2020; HRC, 2021). Overall, these procedures ensured informed, voluntary, and ethically sound consent that complied with both domestic and international standards (APA, 2017; HRC, 2021; Massey University, 2026; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979; New Zealand Psychological Society et al., 2012).

This criterion also aligned with the aim of the study, which sought to understand how tertiary students reflect on and evaluate the longer-term relevance of their RSE after leaving secondary school. Existing research in Aotearoa New Zealand has primarily examined students' experiences while they are still at school, with comparatively little research exploring how these experiences are understood retrospectively or how they relate to wellbeing and relationships in young adulthood. Focusing on participants who had left school, therefore,

addressed an identified gap in the literature while remaining consistent with the aims of the research.

2.6.3. Confidentiality and Anonymity

All participant responses were collected anonymously to protect participant privacy. The Qualtrics platform used for the survey did not store identifying details, and names, email addresses, or other personal information were not recorded. In addition, data sets were stored securely, and access was limited to the researcher and supervisor. Beyond these procedural protections, confidentiality was also considered during data analysis and reporting to minimise the possibility of participant identification (Tolich, 2004; Wiles et al., 2008).

Maintaining confidentiality is especially important in studies examining sensitive topics such as relationships and sexuality because sharing personal experiences can carry significant social risks, such as fear of stigma, judgment, or unintentional peer identification (Decker et al., 2011; Wiles et al., 2008). All data sets were used strictly for academic research purposes. The findings were presented in the thesis in a manner that maintained participant confidentiality. To address this, I carefully reviewed all qualitative data to remove or mask any information that could inadvertently identify a participant (e.g., unique life circumstances, location details) before including quotations in my thesis. For this reason, I took active steps during analysis and writing to ensure that participant voices were represented without compromising anonymity, including carefully selecting quotations and, where necessary, slightly generalising or removing contextual detail while retaining meaning.

Additionally, I used a separate linked survey for participants who wished to receive a summary of the study results and/or enter the draw for a Koha voucher. This second survey collected participants' email addresses only if they chose to opt in. The separate form was not linked to their survey responses in any way. There was no identifying code or shared dataset between the two surveys, ensuring that participant responses remained anonymous and could not be connected to their contact details. This separation was an intentional data protection measure designed to ensure that the participants could not be identified based on their responses (HRC, 2021; Massey University, 2026). The primary survey and opt-in contact form were stored independently, with access restricted to me, and were used solely for distributing study results and managing the Koha draw.

2.6.4. Inclusivity

As mentioned in the recruitment section, the recruitment extended beyond tertiary-based channels wherever possible. Although the study focused on tertiary students, participants were recruited through a range of online platforms, including social media and community networks, rather than solely through tertiary mailing lists or psychology student pools. This approach aimed to increase diversity in participants' cultural backgrounds, gender identities, socioeconomic circumstances, and educational experiences. Capturing a diverse range of perspectives is particularly important given that experiences of RSE are shaped by social and cultural contexts (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021; Le Grice & Braun, 2018). My study sought to understand how these experiences are reflected upon across a range of lived experiences rather than within a single student cohort.

The study was intentionally inclusive of participants of all genders, gender identities, and sexual orientations, recognising that RSE is designed to support the health and wellbeing of all young people (UNESCO et al., 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). While experiences of RSE may differ across genders, understanding these differences was essential to evaluating the longer-term relevance and impact of RSE in young adulthood. Creating an inclusive research environment was both an ethical priority and a methodological strength, as it enabled participants to share their perspectives respectfully, in an affirming environment, and free from discrimination or harm (HRC, 2021; Massey University, 2026).

I therefore used inclusive language in survey materials and demographic questions and provided participants with opportunities to self-identify where appropriate, rather than restricting responses to predefined categories. Including a diverse range of participants also strengthened the study by capturing perspectives that have often been underrepresented in previous research. As the aim of this research was to understand how tertiary students reflect on the longer-term relevance of their RSE experiences, ensuring representation across different genders and sexual orientations provided a richer understanding of how RSE may have influenced wellbeing, relationships, and identity in young adulthood.

2.6.5. Potential Risks

Although considerable care was taken to ensure the ethical standing of this research, confidentiality could not always be guaranteed despite careful data management, particularly in qualitative research where participants could be indirectly identified due to detailed

contextual information (APA, 2017; HRC, 2021; Wiles et al., 2008). As part of the consent process, I ensured that these limitations were clearly noted to participants before beginning the survey.

Given the delicate nature of RSE and the possibility of themes like coercion, sexual assault, or harm, this potential for distress posed an ethical risk for the study. Although the research was classified as low risk, asking participants to reflect on their RSE experiences could have brought up memories or thoughts related to upsetting personal experiences. Particularly for participants who had been harmed or had received insufficient support in educational or relational contexts, such reflections could have caused emotional discomfort, distress, or a re-evaluation of prior experiences (Decker et al., 2011).

Both Wiles et al. (2008) and the American Psychological Association (2017) contend that researchers have an ethical duty to be transparent with participants regarding the limits of confidentiality, especially in situations where disclosure may be required by law or professional obligations if there is a risk of harm to the participant or others. Participants were informed of any circumstances in which confidentiality might need to be breached (such as disclosing harm to oneself or others), as well as the protocols that would be followed in these situations. The survey concluded with a list of relevant support services (such as university counselling services).

Conclusion

My methodological approach focused on prioritising young people's perspectives and understanding how they derived meaning from their experiences with RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rooted in a contextualist epistemology, my research recognised the participants as experts of their own lives, while also acknowledging that broader social, cultural, and educational factors influenced their experiences. An anonymous online qualitative survey combined with reflexive thematic analysis offered a flexible, accessible way to gather diverse reflections from recent school-based RSE participants. This approach was appropriate for addressing the research question, providing contextualised insights into young people's understandings of RSE, its strengths and limitations, and its relevance to their lived experiences, thus informing the findings presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Analysis and Discussion

In line with contextualist epistemology (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994; Wilkinson, 2000), I examined how meaning emerged through participants' experiences of RSE. By treating the participants' accounts as situated and co-produced within social, cultural, and institutional contexts, this analysis suggests that understandings of RSE are shaped by schooling practices, cultural norms, and dominant discourses (Madill et al., 2000; Tracy, 2013). Feminist research principles informed how I attended to the role of power and social context in the production of these understandings (Hesse-Biber, 2013). The core argument is that the significance of the participants' perspectives lies not only in what they say about RSE, but also in how their understandings are situated within broader social, cultural, and educational contexts. Therefore, examining these situated meanings was central to my study.

As outlined in the research aim, I explored how the participants in my study made sense of their prior RSE experiences, particularly the perceived relevance to their lives, identities, relationships, and emotional wellbeing. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b) enabled me to engage with the complexity, contradictions, and variability within the participants' accounts, with themes developed inductively and grounded in the research aims and the study's epistemological position. This approach allowed for an interpretive yet critically situated reading of the data, in which the participants' experiences were understood as both personally meaningful and socially produced. In doing so, the analysis foregrounds how RSE was experienced not only as curriculum content but also as a relational and cultural practice shaped by broader systems that determine what knowledge is included or excluded. The findings are organised into four interrelated themes that collectively illustrate how the participants evaluated the adequacy, inclusivity, and impact of their RSE. These are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4.

Overview of Themes

Theme	Key Understandings of the Participants' Experiences of RSE
1	RSE had limited usefulness and was incomplete
2	RSE experienced as not inclusive
3	How RSE was delivered shaped student engagement
4	Informal sources became a substitute for RSE

Across these themes, the analysis highlighted a persistent tension between intended curriculum outcomes and student meaning-making, with RSE often perceived as inconsistently delivered and irrelevant across diverse student contexts. This aligns with the broader consensus in both Aotearoa New Zealand and international literature (Allen, 2005, 2023; Clelland et al., 2024; Dixon et al., 2024; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Pound et al., 2016; Silva et al., 2024).

Participant quotations were minimally edited for clarity where necessary, without altering meaning. Where clarification was required, additions were indicated using square brackets. The analysis is presented as a reflexive interpretation of the dataset rather than a definitive account of reality. Throughout the writing process, ongoing reflection and supervisory engagement supported analytical decisions and ensured consistency with reflexive thematic analysis principles.

Theme 1: RSE Had Limited Usefulness and Was Incomplete

This theme captures a spectrum of perceived usefulness from the participants' accounts, where RSE was not remembered as entirely useless, but also commonly described as inadequate. Some participants positioned RSE as adequate or useful in parts, while others felt it offered very little beyond basic biological or risk-based information. The participants' reflections suggested that although RSE provided a foundation of basic anatomical knowledge, it often did not include the emotional, relational and practical aspects of sexuality that came to the fore later in life. This echoes international findings (Astle et al., 2021; Kuborn et al., 2023). Consequently, several participants described leaving school with gaps in their knowledge about relationships, intimacy, communication and how to handle sexual experiences in adulthood.

Participants' recollections of RSE as primarily biological suggest that it was commonly understood as the transmission of factual information about bodies, reproduction, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections. While this content was often recognised as important, the participants' accounts indicate that it became the dominant lens through which sexuality was framed. This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating that school-based RSE frequently prioritises biological knowledge and health outcomes over broader discussions of relationships, identity, pleasure, communication, and emotional wellbeing (Allen, 2005; Fine, 1988). As a result, sexuality was constructed primarily as a biomedical topic rather than a social and relational aspect of human experience. One participant captured this narrowness by stating: "Everything was very textbook - this is how contraception works, this is what STDs look like, this is how a pregnancy happens" (Participant 3).

Several other participants similarly described their RSE experiences as “stating the obvious”, “clinical and unhelpful”, and “outdated theories.” The description of RSE as “very textbook” suggests a detached and decontextualised form of learning, where sexuality was presented as objective biological knowledge rather than something connected to lived experience. Rather than equipping students to navigate relationships or understand themselves, sexuality was understood as a problem to be managed. This framing reflects what has been outlined in the literature as a biomedical or danger and disease model of RSE, where teaching is dominated by anatomy, reproduction, and the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Allen, 2005, 2008; Macleod, 2009; Seaver, 2021). Within this framework, sexual health becomes synonymous with avoiding negative outcomes rather than promoting wellbeing, pleasure, intimacy, or healthy relationships.

The key topics almost all participants recalled learning about were contraception, STIs, and pregnancy, which collectively situated RSE within a framework of reproduction and risk. This framing was often experienced through directive or cautionary messaging, for example, “don’t get pregnant too early” (Participant 10), alongside visually impactful content such as “we had to look at photos of STDs, and a video of a woman giving birth” (Participant 3). Together, these accounts suggest an emphasis on deterrence and risk-awareness rather than broader relational or experiential understanding. When classroom discussion is largely centred on contraception, STIs, and pregnancy, students are implicitly taught that sex is primarily associated with risk, responsibility, and negative consequences. The hidden curriculum is therefore not only what is explicitly taught, but also what sex and sexuality come to represent through this framing. In this sense, sexuality becomes constructed as something to be managed or prevented rather than a normal aspect of human development involving connection, intimacy, communication, pleasure, and identity (Allen, 2005, 2008; Macleod, 2009).

However, the participants’ accounts do not suggest that biological knowledge itself was viewed as unnecessary. Rather, participants described wanting knowledge that extended beyond isolated facts about contraception, reproduction, and sexual health, and instead helped them understand how sexuality operates within real relationships and everyday life. As one participant explained: “There was a huge emphasis on menstruation and consent, hardly ever touched on anything past that” (Participant 14), illustrating that the issue was not the inclusion of biological content itself, but the limited breadth and depth of what was taught.

This limitation was further illustrated through the participants' reflections on the types of biological knowledge they valued. Rather than rejecting biology, participants described wanting biological knowledge that was practical, embodied, and applicable. When biological knowledge was delivered in a way that is meaningful and connected to understanding the body, participants described it as empowering:

> **Extract 1:** Learning more about the female reproductive organs made me more confident in making decisions in and caring about my sexual health. (Participant 19)
>
> **Extract 2:** How to look after your body before, after, and during intimacy. This allows to keep young people safe when they start to explore their sexuality and sex life. (Participant 15)
>
> **Extract 3:** More knowledge on what actually happens during reproduction - especially with how it relates to pregnancy, abortions, IVF, and genetics. Some basic knowledge on what traits can/can't be inherited, and how embryos develop. (Participant 25)

These extracts complicate the critique of biological RSE by demonstrating that the participants did value biological knowledge when it supported bodily understanding and agency. The issue was not the presence of biology, but the reduction of sexuality to biology alone. The participants' accounts suggest that biological knowledge became meaningful when it was expansive, applied, and connected to lived experiences rather than delivered as narrow information about risk categories.

The value the participants placed on consent further illustrates that they did not necessarily view RSE content as irrelevant, but rather that its usefulness was often dependent on whether it connected to practical and relational experiences. Across the data, consent was identified as one of the most emphasised and important topics within what the participants were taught in RSE, with more than half of participants (18 out of 32) describing it as their most significant takeaway. This finding is illustrated in the following participant account: "At some point, we watched both the 'tea' and 'bicycle' videos about consent, which later became a kind of cultural touchstone for the students" (Participant 27).

Multiple participants referred to specific learning models, such as the "cup of tea" consent video, which appeared to be a clear example of successful, shared understanding among students. A few participants mentioned that they still found this example helpful in different

areas of their lives, particularly for understanding how to say no, not only in relational or sexual situations. Consent learning was valued because it made an abstract concept easier to understand by providing clear examples of what consent looks like in practice. These accounts were supported through other participants' statements such as "consent is extremely important" (Participant 14), "we were very clearly taught about consent" (Participant 6), and "the biggest learning moments were consent" (Participant 15). Unlike some other areas of RSE, consent was not experienced as simply textbook information, but as knowledge that could be applied to real situations.

Participants consistently noted that critical topics such as communication, boundaries, intimacy, conflict resolution, and emotional wellbeing were either not included or not taught in sufficient depth. This created a divide between RSE learning and real-life relational experiences, as illustrated in the following extracts:

> **Extract 4:** I think taking a deeper look into RSE, like discussing your first heartbreak, pressures around losing virginity, and how to navigate interpersonal teenage relationships would have been good. (Participant 3)

> **Extract 5:** It never covered communication, or love or intimacy that I remember. (Participant 32)

The wish for "deeper" exploration in extract 4 suggests that the participants were not asking for entirely new subjects but were seeking greater depth within the existing topics. However, the participants felt that these experiences were largely absent from RSE despite being central to developing their understandings of relationships and sexuality (Allen, 2011; Allen & Carmody, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2022; Meehan, 2025).

This gap was particularly evident in relation to communication and relationship navigation. While RSE appeared to provide some preparation for initiating relationships or engaging in sexual health behaviours, the participants described feeling less prepared for the emotional complexity involved in maintaining or ending relationships. One participant explained: "I experienced a break-up for the first time. I felt unprepared for it because most education goes into how to start a relationship and not how to end it or how to know it had to be ended" (Participant 1). This finding closely reflects Allen's (2005) observation that young people wanted greater attention to the emotional dimensions of relationships, with 53% of participants identifying "dealing with break-ups" (Allen, 2005, p. 399) as a topic they wished to learn more

about. Allen argued that this finding reflected a broader desire for sexuality education that acknowledged young people's emotional involvement in relationships, a concern also identified by Measor et al. (2000). Similarly, the present findings suggest that while school-based RSE provided some preparation for relationship formation and sexual health behaviours, it offered little guidance for the emotional and interpersonal complexities of maintaining or ending relationships. Skills such as recognising when a relationship is no longer healthy, communicating effectively during conflict, managing emotional distress, or processing feelings of uncertainty were not recalled as part of RSE. This pattern points to a broader issue of temporal relevance, where RSE was experienced as focused on immediate risks and early-stage experiences rather than the full life course of relationships.

The participants' reflections show they felt prepared to start relationships but not to handle emotional complexities or endings. This suggests RSE focuses on relationship initiation rather than the full relational experience. This focus reflects a broader pattern in which desire, pleasure, intimacy, identity, communication, conflict, and negotiation are not left out; they are treated as unteachable, making them appear dangerous or inappropriate (Meehan, 2025). Consequently, RSE not only leaves out certain content but also creates a hierarchy of knowledge, allowing only specific aspects of sexuality to be acknowledged within educational settings.

Similarly, another participant identified the longer-term impact of these gaps: “I think a blind spot that has continued into my adulthood is wisdom and understanding of relationships as well as emotional intelligence” (Participant 29). Describing this gap as a “blind spot” suggests a limitation beyond simply missing information. Instead, participants described an absence of opportunities to develop ways of understanding relationships, emotions, and themselves within relational contexts. This suggests that RSE affects not only what students recall about sexuality, but also what they are equipped to recognise as important knowledge.

These limitations became increasingly visible as participants transitioned into young adulthood and began navigating relationships and sexuality independently. Although some participants acknowledged that aspects of RSE were useful in a general or theoretical sense, many described a clear disconnect between what they were taught at school and what they later needed when navigating relationships and sexual experiences. As one participant explained: “As a 20-year-old, there’s a lot that’s missing that I wish I had learned” (Participant 9), and similarly: “When

actually in a sexual situation, I would shut down and not be able to communicate properly" (Participant 8).

These accounts illustrate that the limitations of RSE became most apparent when participants were required to apply this knowledge within real-life situations. The participants did not attribute these gaps to forgetting what they had learned at school; rather, they described RSE as providing limited preparation for the experiences they later encountered. This aligns with literature highlighting that young people often navigate emotionally and relationally complex situations during young adulthood without feeling adequately prepared by prior RSE (Arnett, 2000; Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Higgins et al., 2011; Seaver, 2021).

The perceived disconnect between RSE and young adulthood was further captured by many participants with statements such as "honestly, none of it is really relevant" (Participant 3), "I don't often find myself referring back to anything I learnt in those classes" (Participant 5), and "my school RSE does not feel relevant as ultimately it taught me nothing" (Participant 18). These accounts suggest that the participants' concerns were not that RSE lacked information, but that the knowledge provided did not translate into something they could apply within their everyday lives.

Another participant similarly explained: "I did not come into adulthood prepared for what it's actually like out there in the real world" (Participant 29). This suggests that the perceived usefulness of RSE became clearer when the participants encountered situations in their young adult lives requiring relational autonomy, emotional decision-making, and sexual agency.

This gap was particularly evident during the transition from teenage relationships into adult intimacy. One participant reflected:

> **Extract 6**: I think becoming a young adult was hard in terms of relationships; intimacy and sexuality was the jump from having a teenage relationship to having adult relationships… Also, experiencing one-night stands in young adulthood was, in hindsight, gross and very dehumanising. (Participant 3)

Rather than suggesting that particular sexual experiences are inherently negative, this reflection highlights the importance of preparing young people to interpret their sexual experiences, understand boundaries, and recognise the emotional dimensions of intimacy. Young adults may encounter changing forms of intimacy within tertiary and social environments, including hook-

up culture and less formalised relationship structures, which can involve complex emotional and relational experiences (Garcia et al., 2012; Olmstead et al., 2020). This participant's reflection therefore aligns with literature showing that navigating intimacy during young adulthood can involve experiences that are difficult to interpret and manage without adequate preparation (Astle et al., 2021; Kuborn et al., 2023). The account above also raises questions about whether RSE provides sufficient opportunities to discuss the emotional realities of experiences such as casual sex and one-night stands, including how to recognise discomfort, establish boundaries, and make sense of experiences that may feel negative or dehumanising in retrospect. These findings suggest that greater attention to the realities of young adulthood may be needed within RSE, rather than focusing predominantly on the initiation of relationships or the prevention of sexual health risks.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that the participants' concerns were not centred on the absence of RSE, but on the limitations of what RSE provided. Participants valued knowledge that supported safety, bodily understanding, and consent; however, they described a curriculum that primarily prepared them to recognise and avoid the dangers and diseases associated with sex, rather than navigate the broader realities of sexuality and relationships. By prioritising biological knowledge and risk prevention and limiting attention to communication, intimacy, emotional experiences, and relational decision-making, RSE was experienced as having limited relevance once the participants entered young adulthood. In this sense, my participants' accounts suggest a misalignment between the stated purpose of RSE, and the knowledge they perceived as important for supporting lifelong sexual and relational wellbeing.

Theme 2: RSE Experienced as Not Inclusive

The theme of RSE not feeling inclusive was prominent across the data, with many participants repeatedly describing RSE as built around a narrow idea of who young people are expected to be: heterosexual, cisgender, gender-conforming, sexually active, and eventually partnered. Rather than reflecting the diversity of the participants' lived realities, RSE was often experienced as implicitly centred on a normative sexual and relational pathway. Importantly, concerns about inclusivity were not raised only by the participants whose identities were marginalised within these frameworks; instead, most participants broadly identified inclusivity as an important feature of meaningful RSE.

The participants emphasised that inclusion should move beyond token acknowledgement and instead meaningfully recognise a wide range of bodies, identities, relationships, and sexual

experiences. While many participants highlighted the absence or marginalisation of queer identities, they did so within a broader critique of how RSE constructs whose experiences are considered central, and whose experiences are positioned as additional or peripheral. For example, Participant 21 argued that "swapping out a straight couple for a homosexual one does not constitute as inclusivity in my eyes," highlighting a desire for inclusion that extends beyond simply adding diverse examples to existing RSE content. Rather, the participants' accounts indicated that meaningful inclusion required a shift in how relationships and sexuality were conceptualised throughout the curriculum.

This perspective was distinct from accounts of participants who described experiencing exclusion within RSE. Participant 16, for instance, reflected that "these classes ended up being useless for me and only made me feel less than my heterosexual classmates," highlighting the personal impact of RSE experienced as centred on heterosexuality. The feeling of being "less than" indicates that heteronormativity is not only present at the level of content but also produces a hierarchy of relational legitimacy. This reflects how assumed heterosexuality operates as a silent benchmark, where 'normal' relationships are implicitly understood as male-female pairings oriented toward reproduction, often framed through deeply embedded cultural narratives of 'mummy and daddy making a baby' and biological reproduction as the primary purpose of sex (often centred on penis-in-vagina intercourse) (Allen, 2005). Within this framing, non-heterosexual identities are positioned as deviations from an assumed natural order, suggesting that heteronormativity in RSE extends beyond limited representation by treating heterosexuality as the assumed norm rather than one of many sexual identities (Ellis & Bentham, 2021).

Transgender young people were also especially absent, according to my participants' accounts of their RSE experiences. One participant powerfully stated that:

> **Extract 7:** There was zero mention of anything for transgender youth. Not any sexual education on how sex might be different, not about how that may change how you view your body, not about how to protect yourself from dangerous sexual situations, not anything at all. (Participant 16)

This extract captures the participants' perceptions that transgender identities were absent from their RSE experiences, suggesting that the curriculum did not provide opportunities for all young people to see themselves reflected within RSE. Rather than experiencing RSE as

relevant to diverse gender identities and bodies, participants described an education system that appeared to centre cisgender experiences as the assumed norm. This suggests that RSE may continue to be structured around cis-normative understandings of bodies, sexuality, and relationships, limiting its ability to support young people navigating diverse identities (Cui, 2024; Ellis & Bentham, 2021).

The extract also highlights how this absence extends beyond identity recognition to wellbeing-related knowledge and belonging. The participant explicitly notes the lack of guidance around how sex might differ, how embodiment and body image may be experienced, and how to navigate safety in sexual situations. This suggests that RSE not only excludes transgender experiences at a representational level but also fails to provide the applied, protective knowledge that supports sexual health and wellbeing that participants perceived as being available for cisgender students. In doing so, it reinforces a curriculum model where cisgender experiences are treated as universal, while trans experiences are rendered unintelligible or outside the scope of formal education. These findings align with literature highlighting that the exclusion of diverse gender identities from RSE limits opportunities for identity exploration and reinforces feelings of invisibility among underrepresented students (Goldstein, 2020; Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017).

This theme further illustrates how exclusion operated through gendered and cis-normative assumptions. Others described RSE as reinforcing rigid gendered ideas about men and women, especially one participant who recalled:

> **Extract 8:** They spoke about the 'mentality' of a man versus a woman, and treated it as an objective fact that a difference in sex changed a person's brain and how they behave. Which, to me, felt like an excuse to behave badly. (Participant 16)

This extract illustrates how exclusion in RSE is not only about omission, but also about the active reproduction of gendered assumptions that position heterosexual masculinity and femininity as natural and inevitable frameworks for behaviour. The participant's recollection that teachers framed sex through the "mentality of a man versus a woman" and explained behaviour through inherent sex differences suggests that RSE continues to reinforce cis-normative and essentialist understandings of gender. This aligns with the literature, which argues that RSE often reproduces binary constructions of gender where masculinity and

femininity are treated as biologically determined rather than socially constructed (Allen, 2005; Ellis & Bentham, 2021).

The participant's critique that this framing felt like "an excuse to behave badly" is particularly significant, as it exposes how such narratives can function to normalise harmful gendered scripts. The reference implicitly connects to wider cultural discourses such as 'boys will be boys', where negative male behaviour is naturalised and excused through assumed biological difference. In this sense, RSE does not simply describe gender differences but risks reinforcing them in ways that legitimise unequal expectations around behaviour, responsibility, and emotional accountability in relationships. This reflects the broader argument in the literature that RSE continues to privilege cis-normative and heteronormative frameworks in which gender is treated as binary, stable, and predictive of behaviour, despite increasing social recognition of gender diversity and fluidity (McGlashan Fainu & Fitzpatrick, 2025; O'Quinn & Fields, 2020). The participants' accounts suggest that when gender differences were presented as fixed or inevitable, RSE risked reinforcing understandings of relationships through essentialised differences rather than through communication, social learning, and power relations.

A further layer of this theme was that RSE appeared to assume that young people would eventually want to have sex, be in a relationship, or have a conventional romantic future. This meant that aromantic and asexual experiences were also made invisible. As one participant explained:

> **Extract 9:** I couldn't help but feel it was made to be expected for everyone to be in a relationship at some point. I was never told that there was an option to not be, and that that option was just as valid. (Participant 13)

This extract extends the theme of exclusion by demonstrating how RSE not only centres heterosexuality, but also implicitly constructs relationships and sexual activity as universal expectations of development. The statement "I was never told that there was an option to not be" is particularly significant because it highlights absence at the level of possibility, not just representation. In other words, RSE is not only omitting aromantic or asexual identities; it is presenting a developmental narrative in which partnership and sexual activity are assumed endpoints of a 'normal' life course.

As described by multiple participants, without any recognition of aromantic and asexual possibilities, some students may be left to interpret their identities in isolation, without validation or structured guidance from education. This lack of recognition may mean that students who do not experience attraction or desire in these expected ways are left without a legitimised framework to understand themselves, leading one participant to feel that they were "broken" or that "something is wrong with me" (Participant 24), while another described "never [having] a way to label what I felt" (Participant 13). Such exclusion can create epistemic invisibility, where their lived experience is not just unacknowledged but rendered unintelligible within the educational context. In practical terms, students may be left to interpret their identities without guidance, validation, or language provided by formal education, increasing the likelihood of confusion or internalised doubt about whether their experiences are 'normal'.

At a broader level, this pattern reflects how RSE can operate through an implicit assumption of an "expected self," a curriculum assumption that young people will eventually desire relationships and sexual engagement. The consequence is that those outside this assumed trajectory may be positioned as deviations from an unspoken norm, rather than as equally valid variations of human experience. This reinforces a narrow relational script and limits the capacity of RSE to support diverse sexual and relational identities, leaving some young people without recognition, reassurance, or practical guidance for navigating their own lived realities

To conclude, this theme demonstrates how RSE reflects broader societal and institutional norms, including dominant expectations about what relationships should look like. These expectations extend to assumptions about what young people 'should' know and how men and women 'should' behave. This can result in a selective presentation of RSE, where heterosexuality is not explicitly enforced but is repeatedly centred through examples, language, and assumed relational trajectories. As a result, heteronormativity can be reproduced not only through omission but through the quiet normalisation of one relational model as the norm against which others are understood.

Theme 3: How RSE Was Delivered Shaped Student Engagement

This theme explores how the delivery of RSE shaped the meaning participants made of the subject and their feelings towards it. The participants described how teaching approaches, educator attitudes, classroom dynamics, and opportunities for discussion influenced whether RSE felt comfortable to engage with. The way information was presented often affected not only what students learned, but also how they interpreted the value of the content itself. For

some, supportive and open teaching approaches fostered engagement and positive perceptions of RSE, while for others, uncomfortable, judgemental, or superficial delivery contributed to disinterest, embarrassment, or disengagement. This echoes previous findings in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond (Allen, 2005, 2008, 2011; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Pound et al., 2016). Together, these accounts suggest that the participants' experiences of RSE were shaped as much by how it was delivered as by the content that was taught, influencing the meanings they attached to sexuality education and its perceived usefulness in their lives.

Across the data, teacher delivery had a significant impact on whether the participants had felt comfortable, engaged, respected, and able to learn. Many participants described their classroom environment as "awkward", "uncomfortable", "overly serious", or even "dismissive", while others reflected on teachers who created positive environments that encouraged participation. For example, one participant reflected on their experience: "The teacher tried to make it a safe and open environment to ask questions" (Participant 1). This extract suggests that when teachers actively fostered openness and safety, it significantly shaped how students experienced RSE, making them more willing to engage with sensitive or personal topics, consistent with research highlighting the importance of supportive and open classroom environments in facilitating student engagement (Dixon et al., 2025).

A classroom environment framed as "safe and open" reduces embarrassment and hesitation, which in turn allows students to move from passive reception to active engagement with the material. This highlights the important role of teacher delivery in not just conveying information, but in shaping whether students perceive RSE as a space where their questions are valid, their curiosity is respected, and their learning needs are taken seriously. Moreover, other participants discussed the value of anonymous question boxes that allowed them to ask questions without fear of embarrassment, while stating that they "loved" having a space where they felt comfortable doing so. These experiences suggest that when teachers allowed open dialogue in the classroom, students felt more comfortable engaging with RSE topics.

However, many participants described delivery styles that created barriers to learning. A recurring concern was that RSE felt overly formal or scripted. As one participant explained: "I think it would have been nicer if the teachers were less robotic while delivering RSE information... there wasn't too much room for open discussion" (Participant 3). This extract suggests that overly structured and scripted delivery styles may limit students' sense of engagement and agency within RSE. In this context, describing delivery as "robotic" reflects

how RSE can become constrained by a highly structured, compliance-driven curriculum, in which teaching is experienced as procedural rather than relational. As a result, the curriculum is experienced as something that is performed rather than facilitated, with information transmitted in a way that prioritises coverage of material over dialogue or exploration.

To build on this discussion, the participants further reflected on the limitations of a strict teaching approach and emphasised the need for more comprehensive and dialogical RSE. For example, Participant 16 described how "the lecture style approach made us miss out on the conversations that should have been happening," highlighting the perceived loss of opportunities for discussion and engagement when RSE was delivered primarily through teacher-led instruction. Another participant focused more specifically on the underlying values conveyed through RSE, suggesting the importance of "fostering an environment that is less about what is 'right' and more about what keeps our youth safe and educated" (Participant 9).

Across participants' responses, these accounts indicated that highly structured, curriculum-focused approaches offered few opportunities for meaningful discussion, reflection, or student engagement. Instead of encouraging participation, some participants felt they were being talked at rather than engaged with. The emphasis on what is 'right' and 'wrong' reflected a broader concern that RSE could be presented as a set of rules about what young people should or should not do. This approach restricted opportunities for dialogue, reflection, or deeper understanding, with participants' accounts suggesting that young people were often told what was acceptable or unacceptable when exploring sex, sexuality, and relationships. Consequently, RSE could become focused on compliance, emphasising correct behaviour over lived experiences or understanding of relationships (Jeary-Graham & Macleod, 2015, 2016; Sánchez et al., 2023).

The participants further described how teachers' tone could create an unwanted atmosphere in the classroom. Several participants felt that RSE was treated as something awkward or taboo, which in turn made them hesitant to be involved. One participant reflected that:

> **Extract 10:** It gives the whole topic a taboo feeling which it doesn't need, it needs to be more normalised so that it feels easier to reach out to others or help...I think it needs to be taught like any other subject, if you're taught it with this taboo stereotype it makes you feel stupid for having questions, when that's healthy! (Participant 14)

This extended reflection captures how delivering RSE in a way that feels awkward or taboo may contribute to the reproduction of wider societal stigma around sex and relationships. When

these topics were positioned as uncomfortable or slightly inappropriate to discuss, they could signal that curiosity, questioning, or seeking help in these areas was abnormal. This may discourage engagement and reinforce the societal stigma, which positions sex and relationships as awkward or inappropriate topics rather than normal, healthy areas for discussion and learning.

For some participants, poor delivery had long-term consequences. One participant recalled: “I think I felt very uncomfortable in that class because of the teacher attempted to make it "fun". She had a very similar tone to the giggly (and sometimes crude) students” (Participant 29). This account highlights that participants called for RSE to be regarded seriously within their education. By contrasting the teacher’s tone with the “giggly” students', the participant implies that the educator did not clearly differentiate between teacher and student roles, which undermines the seriousness of the topic. Instead of promoting normal conversations about sex and relationships, this approach seems to have reinforced the idea that these topics are embarrassing, funny, or not worth taking seriously.

Beyond classroom atmosphere and teacher delivery, participants also emphasised that meaningful engagement depended on having opportunities to actively contribute to the learning process. Rather than viewing RSE as something that could be effectively delivered through passive information transmission, participants positioned effective RSE as responsive to students’ questions, experiences, and needs. Their accounts suggested that engagement was not only shaped by whether teachers created a comfortable environment, but also by whether students were given meaningful opportunities to participate in shaping discussions and exploring topics relevant to their lives.

Importantly, these findings challenge the idea that increasing engagement in RSE requires making the content more fun. The participants instead prioritised authenticity, professionalism, and confidence from educators, and described actually wanting to know the ‘nitty-gritty’ details. The problem wasn't the humour itself, but that its delivery style undermined the content's credibility and hindered the classroom’s ability to support meaningful discussion. Across this theme, the participants consistently described the ideal classroom as one where students felt safe to ask questions, where discussion was encouraged, and where sex and relationships were approached as normal and important topics rather than awkward, taboo, or performative ones.

The participants also suggested that young people should have a greater role in shaping what is taught, challenging traditional adult-led approaches to RSE. As two participants mentioned: “It could also be good if more opportunities were allowed for students to ask questions, and to have more focus on topics that could aid them” (Participant 20), and “It’d be good too to have students have a say in what they want to learn but also be able to ask questions anonymously” (Participant 5).

These views are consistent with Allen’s (2005, 2008, 2011) findings that young people value opportunities to direct conversations toward issues that matter to them and participate in the construction of knowledge rather than simply receiving information. The participants’ accounts similarly positioned RSE as a process of making sense of information through discussion, questioning, and connection to lived experience. For example, Participant 27 stated: “Be willing to adapt the curriculum to the class…if we actually got the space to talk freely with a lesson to start us off, then maybe people could have actually had a worthwhile discussion and learning experience.”

The implication is that young people are not a homogeneous group with identical questions, experiences, or concerns. Instead, the participant highlighted a desire for RSE to be responsive to the realities of those in the room, rather than delivered as a fixed, decontextualised programme. Such comments challenge the view of RSE as primarily the delivery of information, highlighting instead the importance of conversation, reflection, and shared meaning-making in helping students connect what they learn to their own experiences. The desire for a more interactive approach was further illustrated by participants who reflected on experiences where their questions were dismissed or left unexplored. One participant described their experience:

> **Extract 11:** Each student was given a type of birth control to research and explain to the class. I asked the teacher a question about my assigned contraceptive, and she replied with "we don't have to be doctors." This blatant shutting down of my pursuit of knowledge stands out to me to this day (Participant 29)

This incident was significant for the participant because it was experienced not only as the absence of an answer, but as a dismissal of their attempt to engage more deeply with the topic. In this sense, the account illustrates the participants’ broader desire for RSE to be more dialogical and responsive, where young people are positioned as active contributors to learning

rather than passive recipients of predetermined information. This aligns with broader critiques of traditional didactic approaches to RSE, where adult expertise can dominate the learning process and limit opportunities for young people's perspectives and lived experiences to inform discussions (Allen, 2005, 2008; Monk, 2001).

These findings concur with the literature advocating for relational, collaborative, and student-centred approaches to RSE. The participants consistently expressed a desire not only to ask questions but to actively shape and contribute to what is taught, positioning themselves as knowledgeable about their own needs. This reflects a broader view of young people as active participants in their learning rather than passive recipients of information. This desire for greater involvement aligns with critical and socio-cultural models of RSE, which position young people as active contributors to learning, with agency, autonomy, and dialogue viewed as essential components of effective education (Allen, 2005, 2011, 2021; Dixon, Clelland, & Blair, 2022; Dixon et al., 2024; Fitzpatrick, 2013).

Theme 4: Informal Sources Became a Substitute for RSE

Another prominent theme emerging from the data was that in the absence of comprehensive RSE, most of the participants reported actively turning to informal sources of education and self-directed learning to develop their understanding of sexuality and relationships. Rather than relying on formal education alone, the participants described becoming agents of their own learning, actively seeking information and making sense of their experiences through friends, family, media, and personal relationships. This demonstrates that the participants in my study exercised agency in seeking out alternative sources of sexual knowledge when they perceived formal RSE as insufficient. This aligns with research demonstrating that young people may seek sexual health information through sources outside formal RSE, including online and informal sources (Magee et al., 2012; Silva et al., 2024). However, this also shifts responsibility for navigating complex sexual and relational information onto young people themselves, often without the structured guidance needed to evaluate or contextualise what they encountered.

A major finding in the data was the significant role of the Internet and social media in shaping participants' understanding of sexuality and relationships. For some, these platforms provided exposure to information that was not available in school. Others similarly described online spaces such as *Social media, YouTube, TikTok*, and online forums as key sources of sex education, although some participants also acknowledged the negatives of this exposure as being unfiltered or occurring at a very young age, such as "expectations and societal standards"

(Participant 5), “tends to portray a very strange and unrealistic version of sex” (Participant 23), and “warped standards for a “good” or “bad” relationship” (Participant 5).

The participants described learning practical sexual health knowledge through social media rather than formal education. As illustrated by several participants:

> **Extract 12:** I learned more about how people actually have sex through social media because this wasn't talked about in school, and I am more exposed to this information through the internet. (Participant 1)

> **Extract 13:** …as well as online using social media, such as *Reddit, TikTok,* and *YouTube*, and porn (there is a pornstar that, apart from making sexual content, sits down and educates her audience about sexual health and healthy relationships), I found these to be very helpful, and I still learn new things every day. (Participant 15).

> **Extract 14:** Just learned the other day (on Instagram) that you should use barrier contraception for fingering, etc. Yesterday, *TikTok* taught me that you shouldn't use sex toys with different partners (without thoroughly disinfecting/cleaning the toys in between, and/or using barrier contraception on the toys). It makes sense looking back in hindsight, but I would never have thought about it if *TikTok* hadn’t pushed this video onto my algorithm. (Participant 25)

These extracts demonstrate not only that the participants turned to social media for sexual health information, but also that they actively compensated for what they perceived as gaps in formal RSE. Rather than indicating a lack of interest in RSE, the participants’ accounts demonstrate curiosity, initiative, and a desire to access information relevant to their lives. However, relying on informal digital spaces means that this learning is shaped by what information is available and visible to them, rather than by a structured educational framework.

This resonates with international research suggesting that digital spaces have further expanded opportunities for young people to seek sexual information outside traditional educational settings. The internet provides anonymity, privacy, and control over searches, which can be particularly significant for young people seeking information about topics associated with stigma or embarrassment (Magee et al., 2012). For LGBTQ+ young people especially, online spaces may provide access to information and communities that are unavailable or difficult to access in offline environments (Magee et al., 2012). However, online sexual information-

seeking is rarely addressed in RSE curricula, or addressed in ways that young people find meaningful and empowering (Healy-Cullen et al., 2024b; Healy-Cullen & Morison, 2024).

My findings suggest that young people are not encountering highly specialised sexual knowledge online, but rather basic applied information that would typically be expected within comprehensive RSE. Their accounts therefore illustrate that young people are capable of identifying their own learning needs and actively seeking solutions; however, the responsibility for finding this information is unevenly placed on individuals and depends on the quality and accessibility of informal sources.

In addition to this, the participants described learning through their own lived experiences, mentioning personal relationships as their most meaningful source of knowledge. One participant reflected: “Everything regarding my own understanding and feelings around relationships and sexuality etc. has been formed around my own experiences and feelings” (Participant 3). This demonstrates that without formal RSE, participants may be required to interpret and learn from their own experiences.

For some, this involved coping with challenging situations like abusive relationships or early sexual encounters, which served as important learning moments in the absence of formal education. This reliance on personal experience as a primary learning tool exposes a key limitation of formalised RSE: it doesn't stop young people from facing sexuality in real life, but it influences whether those experiences are supported or left open to personal interpretation. In environments lacking RSE, whether due to absence, inadequacy, or disconnect from real-life contexts, young people still need to manage sexual and relational situations, but without the guidance that could help them interpret these experiences safely and critically.

This is particularly significant given that young adulthood is a period in which sexual exploration is both developmentally normative and relatively common. Research indicates that approximately 54% of young people aged 15–19 report having had some form of sexual experience (ACT for Youth, 2024). These estimates illustrate why RSE needs to prepare young people for experiences they may encounter while still at school. In this sense, the question is not whether young people will encounter sexuality, but how well-equipped they are to understand, negotiate, and reflect on those encounters when they occur.

Peers and friends were also consistently identified as a central and trusted source of support and information, aligning with research showing that peers represent one of the most common

informal sources of sexuality knowledge because they offer spaces where young people feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics (Silva et al., 2024; Whitfield et al., 2013). The participants described friends as relatable and non-judgmental sources to learn and ask questions. As two participants noted:

> **Extract 15:** Friends who share their experiences have taught me the most about relationships, because they are with people I know and relate to. (Participant 8)

> **Extract 16:** Definitely a lot through my friends. They feel like a safe space that often had more experience in situations than I did so being able to ask 'dumb' questions helped me out. (Participant 14)

These extracts suggest that peer networks function as informal educational spaces where young people collectively construct and negotiate knowledge about sexuality and relationships. Importantly, the emphasis on "people I know and relate to" highlights that trust in peer knowledge is grounded less in formal expertise and more in shared experiences and a sense of familiarity. Relatability therefore shaped what participants considered credible and meaningful, as information from people with similar experiences felt more trustworthy and accessible. This reduced the perceived social risk of discussing sensitive topics and created an environment in which participants felt more comfortable expressing uncertainty without fear of judgement.

Family also played an important role for some participants, particularly where open communication was encouraged from an early age. One participant illustrated this parental support clearly: "My parents have also been quite good, starting from when I was maybe eight or younger, they would have conversations about RSE-type topics, usually just because of some other conversation we'd been having that would lead into it nicely" (Participant 27). This account highlights the importance of responsive and normalised communication, where RSE-related discussions are not treated as isolated or formal lessons, but are instead embedded within everyday family interactions. The reference to conversations beginning "from when I was maybe eight or younger" suggests that early, gradual exposure allows sexuality-related topics to be framed as a routine part of life rather than a restricted or taboo subject. In this way, learning is built over time, enabling understanding to develop incrementally alongside emotional and cognitive maturity.

Importantly, Participant 27's description of conversations emerging "out of some other conversation" indicates that effective familial RSE often relies on spontaneity and contextual

relevance rather than structured delivery. This integration into everyday dialogue may reduce discomfort and encourage openness, as discussions are not positioned as formal education but as natural extensions of relational communication. Others similarly named parents as key educators who facilitated early understanding of sexuality and relationships, suggesting that when such communication is present, family environments can provide a foundational framework that supports later learning.

These findings suggest that participants actively sought, assessed, and shared information about sexuality and relationships when their RSE fell short. This aligns with research showing that young people may turn to informal and online sources when formal education does not meet their information needs (Magee et al., 2012; Silva et al., 2024). However, seeking knowledge beyond the classroom should not be interpreted simply as disengagement from RSE, but as evidence of participants' active meaning-making and agency. More broadly, research suggests that young people navigate sexuality through multiple sources, interpreting information in relation to their own experiences, relationships, and perceived needs (Healy-Cullen & Morison, 2024; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2022).

Conclusion

To conclude, these findings suggest that RSE is more responsive when it does not attempt to delay or distance young people from sexual knowledge, but when it acknowledges that such experiences are already occurring and integrates this reality into its pedagogical approach. Rather than positioning sexuality as something external to adolescence, a more responsive framework would support young people to interpret their lived experiences with critical awareness, emotional literacy, and access to accurate, non-judgemental information. Importantly, the participants identified these limitations despite having relatively recent experiences of the 2020 RSE curriculum, suggesting that significant gaps remained even within this more contemporary framework. In the context of the subsequent withdrawal of the 2020 guidelines, these findings raise concerns about whether current curriculum changes address the gaps identified by the participants or may instead further reduce the relevance and responsiveness of RSE to young people's lives.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

I examined how young people retrospectively made sense of their experiences of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) after leaving secondary school, particularly its relevance to their sexual, relational, and emotional wellbeing. Using a contextualist epistemology and reflexive thematic analysis, the study explored how participants perceived the usefulness, limitations, and longer-term relevance of their RSE experiences. Rather than evaluating RSE solely in terms of what participants remembered being taught, I considered how its value and limitations became apparent when they encountered experiences that required them to apply, adapt, or supplement what they had learned.

In this chapter I consider these contributions and their implications for understanding RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand. I then reflect on the methodological and interpretive considerations that shaped the research before identifying directions for future research.

4.1. Key Findings

The findings suggest that participants did not view RSE as wholly ineffective or unnecessary. Rather, they valued foundational knowledge relating to sexual health, contraception, reproduction, safety, and consent, while identifying a significant gap between this knowledge and the broader relational, emotional, and identity-related dimensions of sexuality. Three key contributions were developed from these findings. First, the participants' accounts demonstrate the value of considering the relevance of RSE beyond the point of delivery, as some limitations became more apparent when they encountered experiences that could not be readily addressed through their school-based education. Second, the participants' accounts demonstrate that the concern was not with sexual health or risk-focused education itself, but with its dominance at the expense of other dimensions of sexual and relational wellbeing. Third, the participants' reliance on informal sources of learning demonstrates both young people's agency in making sense of sexuality and relationships and the uneven responsibility placed on individuals when formal education does not adequately address their experiences.

4.1.1. Retrospective Perspectives Highlight the Longer-Term Relevance of RSE

The first contribution of this research concerns the value of examining RSE retrospectively. The participants' understandings of what was useful, missing, or insufficient in their school-based education were shaped by experiences they encountered after leaving secondary school. In reflecting on relationships, intimacy, communication, conflict, break-ups, changing

identities, and more complex negotiations of consent, participants were able to evaluate their prior education against experiences that they had not necessarily been in a position to anticipate while at school.

This retrospective perspective is significant because it demonstrates that the relevance of RSE cannot be fully understood only at the point at which it is delivered. As participants navigated new relational and sexual experiences, they became more aware of what their school-based education had not adequately prepared them for. The findings therefore suggest that the usefulness of RSE may become clearer over time, as young people encounter new relational and sexual contexts and interpret their earlier education in light of these experiences.

This also highlights the value of the research design. By recruiting tertiary students who had recently completed school-based RSE, rather than examining students while they were still receiving it, the study enabled participants to reflect on their education from the standpoint of subsequent lived experience. This perspective provided insight into dimensions of RSE that may be difficult to identify in evaluations conducted immediately after delivery. Participants were not merely recalling what they had been taught; they were evaluating whether that learning had remained relevant when they encountered the realities of relationships, sexuality, and wellbeing beyond school.

Consequently, this study contributes to RSE research by highlighting the importance of considering longer-term relevance when evaluating sexuality education. Evaluations conducted at the point of delivery remain valuable for understanding knowledge, attitudes, and immediate learning outcomes. However, they may not capture whether young people later perceive their education as useful when navigating experiences that extend beyond the classroom. Retrospective perspectives can therefore provide an important additional lens through which the relevance and adequacy of RSE can be understood.

4.1.2. Participants Did Not Reject RSE; They Wanted It to Be More Complete

The second contribution of this research is the distinction between dissatisfaction with RSE and rejection of RSE itself. Participants did not dismiss the importance of sexual health or safety education. Instead, they valued foundational knowledge about contraception, pregnancy, reproduction, sexually transmitted infections, safety, and consent, while describing this knowledge as insufficient when it was not connected to the wider realities of sexuality and relationships.

The participants' accounts reinforce existing research suggesting that, while schools are important sources of sexual health information, young people may experience formal sexuality education as incomplete (Silva et al., 2024). The present findings extend this literature by illustrating how participants understood this incompleteness. Their concerns were not only that particular topics had been omitted, but that RSE often provided limited opportunities for students to connect sexual health knowledge with communication, emotional wellbeing, intimacy, pleasure, identity, diversity, and relationship skills.

These findings align with approaches to RSE that conceptualise sexuality as a relational, embodied, and contextual aspect of human development, rather than viewing it primarily through biological, risk-focused, and disease-prevention frameworks (Allen, 2005, 2011; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Macleod, 2009). The participants' accounts therefore support a broader conceptualisation of sexual wellbeing that encompasses both harm prevention and the development of positive, healthy, and fulfilling relationships.

Importantly, this distinction also changes how the participants' critiques of RSE can be understood. Their accounts do not support an interpretation that young people want less formal education or that biomedical content is irrelevant. Rather, they suggest that foundational sexual health knowledge becomes more meaningful when it is situated within a broader understanding of sexuality and relationships. This study therefore does not propose replacing biomedical or risk-focused RSE, but instead understands these forms of knowledge as one component of a more comprehensive approach to sexual and relational wellbeing.

The findings further indicate that comprehensiveness concerns not only what is included in RSE but also how young people are enabled to engage with that content. The participants' emphasis on discussion, participation, teacher attitudes, and classroom environments suggests that adding topics alone may not address the limitations they identified. Where RSE was experienced as highly structured, lecture-based, or focused on what young people should or should not do, the participants described fewer opportunities to ask questions, explore uncertainty, reflect on different experiences, or connect classroom learning with their own lives. This supports local and international research identifying young people's desire for more participatory and responsive approaches to RSE (Allen, 2005, 2008; Pound et al., 2016). Although qualitative findings cannot be generalised across contexts, the recurrence of similar concerns across both local and international research suggests that young people's desire for

sexuality education that is interactive, relevant, and responsive is not unique to the present participant group.

4.1.3. Informal Learning: Agency and Uneven Support

The third contribution of this research concerns the role of informal learning. Participants described turning to peers, family, digital media, and personal experiences when formal RSE did not provide sufficient opportunities to address questions or situations they encountered. This resonates with research showing that young people draw on multiple sources, including parents, peers, teachers, healthcare professionals, online resources, and personal experiences, when developing understandings of sexuality and relationships (Silva et al., 2024; Whitfield et al., 2013).

Young people's understandings of sexuality are shaped across formal and informal learning contexts, which can provide opportunities for exploration, discussion, and meaning-making (Healy-Cullen et al., 2024a, 2024b). The participants' reliance on informal sources therefore reflects the broader role these contexts can play in developing sexual and relational knowledge when formal education does not address all of their questions or experiences.

The participants demonstrated agency by seeking information, drawing on others' experiences, asking questions, and reflecting on their own experiences to make sense of sexuality and relationships. However, when formal RSE was experienced as incomplete, they described relying on themselves and their informal networks to fill the gaps left by their education. These sources vary in their accuracy, inclusivity, accessibility, and capacity to provide appropriate support. The issue, therefore, is not that young people learn about sexuality outside school, but that gaps in formal education can leave them to navigate complex aspects of sexuality through sources that may not consistently provide reliable, comprehensive, or affirming information.

This finding highlights an important tension within young people's sexual learning. On one hand, the participants were not passive recipients of information, as they actively sought out and constructed understandings from multiple sources and experiences. On the other hand, the need to supplement formal RSE shows that responsibility for sexuality education can become unevenly distributed when formal learning does not adequately address young people's questions and experiences. RSE therefore has an important role not only in providing information, but also in providing a reliable foundation through which young people can critically interpret the information and experiences they encounter elsewhere.

Taken together, these three contributions suggest that the relevance of RSE extends beyond the immediate acquisition of sexual health knowledge. My participants' accounts demonstrate that the usefulness of RSE is shaped by whether they can draw on that education when navigating the changing relational, emotional, and sexual contexts of their lives. The findings therefore support an understanding of RSE as an ongoing foundation for sexual and relational wellbeing rather than a discrete set of lessons delivered during adolescence. This perspective has implications for how RSE is conceptualised, evaluated, and delivered in Aotearoa New Zealand, as discussed in Section 4.2.

4.1.4. Reflection on Findings

Overall, the findings of my study contribute to the growing body of qualitative RSE research by centring the retrospective perspectives of young people, an area that has received comparatively little attention. By exploring participants' experiences after leaving secondary school, I was able to identify aspects of RSE that only became apparent as participants entered young adulthood and began applying their learning in everyday relational contexts. The use of a contextualist epistemology further enabled participants' voices and lived experiences to remain central throughout the analysis.

Of course, these findings need to be considered in relation to the research design, which will have shaped the findings. The use of an anonymous online qualitative survey provided participants with flexibility and privacy but limited opportunities to explore responses further through follow-up questioning. Another key consideration is recruitment and the final group of participants. Recruiting participants who had recently left secondary school was one of the study's key strengths, because, as I indicated above, this retrospective perspective allowed participants to reflect on and identify what was missing from RSE as they entered young adulthood, in ways they were less able to recognise while they were still at school.

While the use of a qualitative online survey and a tertiary-educated sample limit the extent to which findings can be generalised across all young people in Aotearoa New Zealand, this approach provided valuable insight into how young adults interpret the lasting impact of their RSE experiences. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of considering not only what young people learn, but how that learning supports them as they move through different stages of relational and sexual development.

Participants were recruited primarily from tertiary education settings, meaning the findings may not reflect the experiences of young adults who are not engaged in further education. The sample was also predominantly New Zealand European, limiting the extent to which the findings represent the experiences of Māori and other ethnic communities.

My position as the researcher also shaped the research process and interpretation of these findings. My interest in RSE and sexual and relational wellbeing informed the development of the research question, the aspects of the participants' accounts that I attended to during analysis, and the interpretation of patterns across the dataset. My use of a contextualist epistemology meant that the participants' experiences were understood as situated within broader social, cultural, and educational contexts, rather than treated as objective accounts that could be separated from those contexts. This positioning supported my focus on the participants' experiences of what was absent, limited, or meaningful within their RSE, while also requiring ongoing reflexivity regarding how my own assumptions and understandings shaped the analytic process. The themes presented in this thesis therefore represent an interpretation of the participants' accounts rather than a neutral or objective representation of their experiences.

4.2. Implications

The findings have important implications for RSE curriculum, policy, and practice. Notably, the fact that the participants did not oppose RSE but sought a more comprehensive approach indicates that it should retain core sexual health and safety topics while broadening the scope of subjects and skills covered. While education on contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and consent remains vital, the participants' insights revealed that this knowledge can become irrelevant if it is not tied to the broader relational and emotional aspects of sexuality. These findings are particularly relevant given the withdrawal of the 2020 RSE guidelines and the subsequent development of a revised curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand. I therefore consider it important that current curriculum changes respond to the gaps identified by young people, particularly in relation to the relational, emotional, and practical aspects of sexuality education.

In practice, this means integrating topics such as communication, emotional intimacy, relationship development and breakdown, sexual pleasure, identity, boundaries, self-esteem, and navigating changing relationships alongside existing sexual health content. Instead of viewing these as optional add-ons, they could be woven throughout RSE to help young people see how sexual health knowledge applies within real-life relationships and situations. For

instance, lessons on consent could also include communication, negotiation, boundaries, changing one's mind, and how consent functions in ongoing relationships, while discussions about contraception and sexual health could be linked to partner communication, decision-making, and emotional wellbeing. Such an approach could address the participants' concerns that the issue was not the inclusion of sexual health or risk information but its overshadowing by other aspects of sexuality and wellbeing.

Second, the finding that informal learning demonstrated young people's agency while also exposing uneven support suggests that RSE should provide greater opportunities for students to actively contribute to and shape their learning. The participants described turning to peers, family, online sources, and personal experiences when formal RSE did not address questions they later encountered. This demonstrates that young people are already actively seeking information and making meaning about sexuality and relationships; however, relying on informal sources may leave individuals with differing access to accurate, inclusive, and supportive information.

In practice, a more student-centred approach could involve creating structured opportunities for young people to identify questions and topics they want addressed, using anonymous question boxes or digital submissions, incorporating student-generated scenarios into classroom discussion, and allowing lessons to respond to issues emerging within students' social and developmental contexts. This would not mean allowing students to determine the entire curriculum, but rather creating opportunities for their questions and experiences to inform how required content is explored. Teaching could also use discussion, case scenarios, small-group activities, and opportunities for students to consider different perspectives rather than relying primarily on teacher-led information delivery. This approach would recognise young people as knowledgeable contributors to RSE while ensuring that their informal learning is supplemented by accurate, inclusive, and professionally supported information.

Third, the retrospective nature of the participants' accounts has implications for how RSE is designed to remain relevant as young people move beyond secondary school, and how its relevance is evaluated. Some participants were able to identify gaps in their school-based education only after encountering experiences such as relationships, intimacy, break-ups, communication difficulties, changing identities, and decisions about their sexual and emotional wellbeing. This suggests that RSE needs to provide knowledge and skills that can remain

relevant as young people move beyond school, rather than focusing only on information that can be demonstrated immediately following instruction.

In practice, this could involve designing RSE around skills that can be applied across different stages of young people's lives, including communicating needs and boundaries, navigating relationship changes, managing emotions, recognising healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics, seeking sexual health information and support, and critically evaluating information encountered through peers and digital media. Curriculum content could therefore be framed around realistic situations that young people may encounter during and after secondary school, rather than assuming that the relevance of RSE ends when formal schooling does.

This finding suggests that RSE should be evaluated not only on what students learn at the time, but also on whether that learning remains useful as they navigate relationships, sexuality, and wellbeing beyond school. Retrospective feedback from young adults could complement immediate evaluations by showing what knowledge and skills remained useful and what they later found to be missing.

I found that participants emphasised that teacher attitudes, classroom environments, and opportunities for open dialogue strongly influenced whether RSE felt relevant and engaging. Their accounts challenge traditional models of sexuality education that position young people primarily as recipients of information, instead supporting approaches that recognise their experiences and perspectives as important to shaping responsive education. This is consistent with international research showing that young people value RSE that provides opportunities for discussion, participation, and responsiveness (Astle et al., 2020; Helbekkmo et al., 2021; Pound et al., 2016).

Overall, my findings do not imply that strengthening RSE means replacing existing sexual health education. Rather, what is needed is broadening and connecting it to the relational, emotional, practical, and developmental contexts in which young people use that knowledge. The findings indicate that effective RSE should provide foundational knowledge, create space for young people's questions and perspectives, and equip them with skills that remain applicable as their relationships and circumstances change. This approach would respond directly to the participants' retrospective accounts by recognising that the usefulness of RSE may only become fully apparent when young people begin applying their learning beyond the classroom.

4.3. Future Research

My research has demonstrated the value of considering young people's perspectives beyond secondary school. Research that examines how RSE is experienced across the transition from adolescence into young adulthood would be valuable in Aotearoa New Zealand, across a range of contexts and with different groups of young people. Longitudinal studies following young people beyond secondary school would provide valuable insight into how the relevance of RSE changes over time and how educational experiences influence later relational and sexual wellbeing. Further research is also needed with Māori, Pacific, LGBTQ+, and other underrepresented communities to understand how diverse experiences are represented within current RSE provision. Finally, exploring educators' perspectives on delivering more collaborative, student-centred, and relational approaches to RSE may help identify opportunities for curriculum development and classroom practice.

Conclusion

Overall, I found that participants valued aspects of their RSE, particularly around consent and sexual health, yet consistently identified a disconnect between RSE learning and the relational, emotional, and practical realities they later encountered. Importantly, I found that many of these limitations only became apparent once participants were required to navigate relationships independently, suggesting that the relevance of RSE extends far beyond adolescence.

By foregrounding young people's retrospective accounts, I argue that RSE should not only aim to prevent harm but also equip young people with the knowledge, confidence, and relational skills necessary to support wellbeing throughout young adulthood. Ultimately, I advocate for an RSE curriculum that is inclusive, practical, relational, and responsive to young people's evolving lives. I also found that the relevance of RSE cannot be fully evaluated at the point of delivery, as its usefulness and limitations may only become clear when young people apply what they have learned to relationships, sexuality, and wellbeing beyond school.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

Information Page:

Young People's Understandings of RSE

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this survey!

This anonymous survey invites tertiary students to share their experiences of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in New Zealand. The questions focus on what you remember, what felt relevant (or not), and how RSE connects to your current understandings of relationships and wellbeing.

Why take part? Your input will help us understand how tertiary students experience RSE in New Zealand, which can inform future education and support.

Participation is completely voluntary. The survey is expected to take approximately 30–45 minutes to complete, and you may withdraw at any time.

Should you choose to participate, you will have the option to enter a prize draw for the chance to win one of ten $40 virtual Prezzy vouchers as compensation for your time.

A full Participant Information Sheet is available below:
Participant Information Sheet

This project was evaluated as low risk by peer review and has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. For concerns about the ethical conduct of this research, you wish to raise (with someone other than the researchers) contact: humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

If you feel you need support, you can contact the following free services:
Support Services

Consent:

By clicking the consent box, I AGREE to participate in this research and CONFIRM that I understand the following:

The researcher is interested in my experiences with RSE. By participating, I can share my understanding and help improve curriculum.

Participation involves completing a survey, taking about 30-45 minutes of my time.

I can change my mind about taking part.

I don't have to submit my responses after giving consent.

I can choose not to answer any question and have access to support contacts if needed.

I can contact the researcher with any concerns about my participation.

- All research material will be kept confidential and destroyed five years post-study.
- A summary of the findings and draw entry will be available via a link at the end of the survey

Do you consent to participate?
- Yes
- No

Screening questions:

To begin, please answer the following questions to determine if you are eligible to take part.

1. To verify you are human, please type 'Yes' in the box below
2. Are you currently a student at a tertiary institution in Aotearoa New Zealand?
3. When did you last receive school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in New Zealand? (Please select the option that best applies to you.)
    - Within the last 1–2 years
    - 3–5 years ago
    - 6–8 years ago
    - 9–10 years ago
    - Not sure / can't remember

Section 1: Demographic information

1. What type of tertiary institution are you currently enrolled in?
    - University
    - Polytechnic
    - Wānanga
    - Other (please specify):
2. How old are you?
    - Less than 18
    - 18 – 20
    - 21 – 25
3. With which gender do you most identify?
    - Self-describe:
    - Prefer not to say
4. What are your ethnic origins or ancestory? (Select all that apply)
    - African

- Asian (Indian, Chinese, Filipina/o etc.)
- European/Pakeha/NZ European
- Latin American
- Māori
- Middle Eastern
- Pasifika (Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island Māori etc.)
- Prefer not to say
- Self-describe: _____

5. What is your sexual orientation?
   - Self-describe: _____
   - Prefer not to say

Section 2: Open-ended questions

The following questions are about your understanding and experiences of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in New Zealand.
There are no right or wrong answers. You can write as much or as little as you want—whatever feels comfortable to you. The more details you give, the better we can understand your experiences. Remember, you don't have to answer every question, and if you're not sure about something, feel free to skip it.
You can also take a break and return later if you don't want to finish the survey all at once.
Your responses are anonymous, and we really appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts.

Q1. Looking back, what was Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) like at your school?
e.g., what was emphasised; what was the tone; what was it like to be in those classes; what (if anything) stands out.

Q2. In what ways does your school RSE feel relevant to your life now — and in what ways does it feel not relevant?
e.g., relationships; sexuality; intimacy; communication; boundaries; wellbeing.

Q3. What do you wish had been done differently in your RSE — and why?
e.g., missing topics; depth; delivery/teaching approach; who was included/excluded.

Q4. Thinking about the move from school to young adulthood/university, what have been the biggest learning moments or challenges for you in relationships/intimacy/sexuality?
e.g., what prepared you; what didn't; what you had to figure out yourself; what that was like.

Q5. Where have you learned most about relationships, sexuality, or yourself (beyond school) — and why those sources?
e.g., friends/peers; whānau; internet/social media; porn; partners; health services; cultural/religious spaces.

Q6. If you could advise schools designing RSE now, what should they prioritise, so it better supports young people's wellbeing?
e.g., whose voices should be centred; what would "good" look like; what would make it safer/more inclusive/more useful.

Optional final invitation
You're welcome to use this space to share anything else that feels relevant to you, even if it doesn't directly relate to the questions above.

Thank you

Would you like to provide an email address to (a) receive study results and/or (b) be entered for the koha/draw for the chance to win one of ten $40 virtual Prezzy vouchers

- Yes, take me to the separate form
- No, ill finish here

If you choose 'Yes', you will be redirected to a separate form to enter your email. Your email will not be linked to your survey responses.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study. Your responses are greatly appreciated.

If you wish to contact the research team about this study, please use the following contact details:

Supervisor
Dr Tracy Morison
Associate Professor, School of Psychology
Massey University
Private Bag 102904
North Shore, Auckland, 0745
Email: T.Morison@massey.ac.nz
Telephone: +6469519216 ext. 86216

Researcher
Melody Brogan
Auckland Campus, School of Psychology
Private Bag 102904
North Shore, Auckland, 0745
Email: Melody.Brogan.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Exploring Young People's Understandings of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in New Zealand and Its Relevance to Their Sexual and Emotional Wellbeing

INFORMATION SHEET

Thank you for taking part in this qualitative survey regarding your experiences with Relationships and Sexuality Education.

About the Researcher

Kia ora, my name is Melody Brogan, and I am currently completing my Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University, under the supervision of Dr. Tracy Morison, in the School of Health Psychology. This research is part of the requirements for my degree and reflects my interest in youth wellbeing, relationship dynamics, and the role of education in shaping young people's experiences in Aotearoa.
I was born and raised in rural Northland, New Zealand, and identify as a Pākehā cisgender woman.

What is the research about?

I am interested in hearing about tertiary students' experiences of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Aotearoa New Zealand. My focus is on your own experiences, reflections, and understandings, on how you remember RSE being taught, what felt helpful or unhelpful, and whether you feel it was relevant at the time and now. I want to explore how young people make sense of the relationships and sexuality education they received and how it may have shaped their current understandings of sex, relationships, identity, and emotional wellbeing.
This research aims to centre student voices and contribute to ongoing conversations about how RSE can be made more inclusive, meaningful, and responsive to the realities of young people in Aotearoa.

Eligibility Criteria

You are eligible to complete this survey if you:

- Are a university or tertiary student currently living in Aotearoa New Zealand
- Are aged 18 years or older
- Have completed school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in New Zealand within the past 5 years
- Are able to read and write in English

Invitation to Participate

You are warmly invited to take part in this study if you meet the eligibility criteria. Your participation is entirely voluntary. There is no obligation to take part, and choosing not to participate will have no negative consequences. If you do choose to take part, you will be asked to complete an online survey where you can reflect on your experiences and share your thoughts.

What will I be asked to do?

You will complete an anonymous survey online about your experiences of school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Aotearoa New Zealand. The questions will ask you to reflect on how you made sense of the content, the relevance and usefulness of the RSE you received, and how it has influenced your current understandings of sex, relationships, identity, and wellbeing.

- You are free to complete the survey in your own time, so take as long as you need. Depending on the detail of your answers, the average time for the survey is estimated to be roughly 30 to 45 minutes.
- Please share your own thoughts and feelings - there are no right or wrong answers.
- If a question feels like it could be answered with a simple yes or no, try to explain a little about why you feel that way.

Description of Discomforts or Risks

Key ethical issues include informed consent, anonymity, cultural sensitivity, and participant wellbeing:

- **Informed consent:** Participants will receive a clear information sheet explaining the study purpose, what participation involves, their rights, and their ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Digital consent will be obtained before survey participation.
- **Anonymity/confidentiality:** The online survey will be anonymous, hosted securely on Qualtrics. No identifying data will be collected. Participants can complete it in private at their own pace.
- **Cultural safety:** Questions will be inclusive and respectful, with attention to Māori perspectives in line with Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations.
- **Participant wellbeing:** A list of relevant support services will be provided at the end of the survey in case participants wish to discuss any issues that arise.

Privacy

- All information you provide in this online survey is anonymous. This means there will be nothing linking your identity to your responses.
- The survey is hosted securely on Qualtrics, and no names or identifying details will be collected.
- You can complete the survey privately, at your own pace, and skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Participant Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question
- Withdraw from the study at any time before submitting the survey
- Ask any questions about the study at any point during your participation
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be shown
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings once the research is completed

Further support

Further support can be found by contacting the following free services:
Lifeline – 0800 543 354
Rape Crisis – 0800 883 300
*Women's refuge crisis lin*e – 0800 733 843
HELP – (04) 801 6655 (Wellington only)

Tu Wahine Trust – (09) 838 8700 (West Auckland only)
National counselling – free call or text 1737
Family planning – http://www.familyplanning.org.nz

If you would prefer to speak with a registered psychologist, the following websites can help you find a practitioner in your area:

New Zealand Psychological Society – www.psychology.org.nz
New Zealand College of Clinical Psychologists – www.nzccp.co.nz

Thank you again for your time and contribution to this research.

Researcher

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Wellington 6140

Email: 20003513@massey.ac.nz

Supervisor

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This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics,

telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Material

