

Trans and non-binary young people's perspectives on relationships and sexuality education

Authors:

Power J¹, Kauer, S and Bourne, A

¹ Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University,

Background:

Transgender and non-binary young people (hereafter referred to as trans) often experience exclusion or alienation from school-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE) due to dominance of heteronormative and cisgender perspectives. This paper reports findings from the Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health (SSASH) survey relating to trans students' experiences of RSE.

Methods:

SSASH is a periodic cross-sectional survey of school-aged young people aged 14–18. This analysis uses data from 2018, 2021, and 2024. Recruitment for all surveys was undertaken via social media advertising. The 2024 survey (N=4336) also engaged a professional survey panel. Students answered questions on RSE access, and perceived relevance. Chi-square analysis compared trans and cisgender responses. Open text responses from 2018, 2021, and 2024 were analysed thematically.

Results:

In 2024, trans students were just as likely as cisgender students to have received RSE and shared similarly low perceptions of relevance, with less than half of all students finding it relevant. However, trans students were more likely to opt out of RSE.

In 2024, 69 trans students described their preferences for RSE. Students wanted content beyond STI prevention, including emotional and social aspects of sex, relationships, and consent – delivered by knowledgeable teachers or those with lived experience. They emphasised the need for less awkward, more inclusive environments, suggesting smaller groups, humour, and frank discussions.

In 2018 and 2021, 256 trans students shared their RSE experiences. Many described RSE as cisgender and hetero normative. While some appreciated learning about condoms and contraception, others reported discomfort or feeling unsafe due to their gender or sexuality. Challenging topics, such as abortion and sexual assault, were often not included.

Conclusion:

Although trans students have access to RSE, it often lacks inclusivity and relevance. To address their heightened vulnerability to poor sexual health outcomes, RSE must explicitly include trans perspectives.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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