

Volume 21 No. 1, April 2012
ISSN 1039-382X

Redress



Sexuality Education

JOURNAL OF THE ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN EDUCATORS

A CARROT INSTEAD OF A STICK

WILL THE **NEW NATIONAL CURRICULUM** ENSURE MORE HOLISTIC SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

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There are high hopes for the new Australian Curriculum in the Health and Physical Education area, particularly as sexuality education is a critical component of this domain. Those who have long been frustrated by the inconsistent delivery of sexuality education around Australia now see the possibility of schools in all states and territories committing to the same content and the same benchmarks and recalcitrant schools being 'forced' to come into line. This vision for the future sees the area being 'mandated' for the first time and some of the sensitivities around religion, culture and parental concern being overridden for the greater good.

In fact, we have in place now in Australia, the means by which these problems of inconsistency and non-compliance could have been resolved years ago if curriculum documentation was all that was required, and if 'mandating' was the solution. Within the national context as it currently exists, all states and territories have the responsibility of developing local curriculum frameworks [2]. Where, how and to what degree sexuality education is included varies substantially between jurisdictions. In most states and territories, however, content related to sexuality education is in fact compulsory until Year 10. The new national curriculum will certainly iron out some of the variations and can be expected to be forward thinking and comprehensive in its inclusions but it will only be as effective as any curriculum can if mandating what happens in the classroom is the necessary way forward.

We need to acknowledge that mandating sexuality education in Australia has manifestly not worked, and that the delivery of this area of the curriculum has been ad hoc and inconsistent across the whole country for many years. The contested nature of sexuality education, debates over whose role it is to do what, and indeed what constitutes too much too soon, or too little too late, still make it a hard area for some schools to tackle. Many schools prefer to side-step it entirely or to relegate it to a health day with local health professionals doing sessions on the easy bits, such as contraception or sexually transmissible diseases. State and territory education authorities have neither the resources nor the inclination to audit schools to a level that might police and punish inconsistencies and non-compliance. Effectively we have in place an honour system that is not going to change when the national curriculum is implemented.

This is not to say that there is not a lot of good teaching of sexuality education going on in many schools across Australia. A recent national survey of sexuality education teachers [3] indicated that teachers taught a wide range of topics but it was not, however, possible to assess the weighting of these topics or the depth to which they were taught. Factual topics (sexually transmissible diseases, HIV/AIDS, safe sex practices, reproduction and birth control



methods) as well as social aspects (managing peer influence, relationships and feelings, alcohol and decision-making, sexual activity and decision-making, and dealing with emotions) were among the most frequently taught topics. The pleasure of sexual behaviour/activity was taught by less than 50% of respondents and this may suggest that programs focus more strongly on negative outcomes of sexual behaviour rather than on the positives. However teachers did indicate that they would like to see included in the teaching curriculum topics on same-sex attraction, pleasure, communication and negotiation skills, sexual decision-making, respectful relationships and contraception, but to teach such topics they would need more resources and training. [3].

In a small window on the content of sexuality education courses across Australia, over 3,000 same-sex attracted and gender questioning young people taking part in a 2010 survey [1] nominated key messages they had been given in their sexuality education classes. The strongest messages were the factual and scientific ones such as: *How the body changes at puberty* (88%); *How humans mate and reproduce*; and *About protecting against sexual dangers, STDs, pregnancy* (both at 85%). However, many of these young people also received messages in their sexuality education about the more social aspects of the subject: *About sexual rights and responsibilities* (60%); *About creating healthy and good relationships* (58%); and *About making your own choices on sexual issues* (58%). *That males don't have to be 'manly' and females don't have to be 'girly'* (27%), *That experimenting with sexualities and pleasure is okay* (27%), and *That homophobia is wrong* (17%), were less commonly taught. These findings indicate that sexuality education is widespread but that quite conservative messages emphasising heterosexuality are the norm in many Australian schools.

We know that Australian young people in schools are generally sexually experienced and need their sexuality education to take account of their lives here and now, rather than preparing them for some future possibility. In a 2008 survey [4], for example, most students (78%) surveyed had experienced some form of sexual activity, with students in Year 12 more likely than those in Year 10 to be sexually experienced (88% vs. 70%). Levels of sexual intercourse have been relatively stable across the last decade [5; 4] with approximately 30% of Year 10 students and 50% of Year 12 students having had sexual intercourse. Oral sex is also common and increasing, and more likely for young men than young women.

It is clear that sexual behaviour and relationships are a central and pleasurable aspect of the lives of most Australian young people, and that it is important that this more challenging area of teaching and exploring is not side-stepped by teachers [3]. The majority of sexually active students are enjoying sexual behaviour, much of it within a steady relationship. In 2008 students reported on their feelings after the last sexual encounter and more than one-third of sexually active students reported that they felt 'extremely' good (40%), happy (42%), fantastic (38%) or loved (36%) after their last sexual encounter. In contrast, relatively small proportions of students reported feeling 'extremely' used (9%), regretful (7%), worried (7%), upset (4%) or guilty (3%) the last time they had sex. Young women, however, were less likely than young men to express consistently positive feelings after sex.

Though the numbers with negative feelings are small, a concerning finding in 2008 was that just under one-third



of the sample reported experiencing unwanted sex. Young women were significantly more likely than young men to have experienced sex when they did not want to (38% vs. 19%). There were no differences in rates of unwanted sex by year level. Students cited being too drunk (17%) or pressure from their partner (18%) as the most common reasons for having sex when they did not want to. This territory too is important if sexuality education is to relate realistically to young people's sexual lives. These are compelling findings that underline the importance of getting it right and mandating has clearly not worked to ensure all young people have these issues addressed in a way that resonates for them.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has very recently undertaken a piece of work to set standards for sexuality education in the European Region [7] and has taken an approach that is holistic and based on a human rights model. Simply put:

Holistic sexuality education gives children and young people unbiased, scientifically correct information on all aspects of sexuality and, at the same time, helps them to develop values, attitudes and skills to act upon this information. Thus it contributes to the development of respectful, open-minded attitudes and helps to build equitable societies.

Winkelman (2011); p.14

A holistic human rights approach to sexuality education incorporates the notions of "gender equality, self-determination and the acceptance of diversity" as a way of "contributing to a fair and compassionate society" [7]. It aspires to enabling young people to:

be able to develop as a sexual being, meaning to learn to express sexual feelings and needs, to experience sexuality in a pleasurable manner, and to develop one's own gender roles and sexual identity, and to reflect on sexuality and diverse norms and values with regards to human rights in order to develop one's own critical attitudes.

WHO, 2010

This aspirational document has much to offer the developers of the new Australian curriculum in particular, and sexuality educators in general. Australia has been generally slower than many other Western countries to embrace a human rights approach to sexual health and school education may well be the poorer for it. Here is the opportunity to move from the mandating 'stick' to what could constitute a very real 'carrot'.

If sexuality education is not seen as a difficult backwater of the curriculum, best dodged by any means available, but becomes instead an area legitimised by a strong connection to human rights, we might begin to win. If this area, more than others, can empower students to challenge gender stereotypes and think through issues of sexual diversity, it can become part of the realm of citizenship. If sexuality education can be promoted as a unique opportunity to engage with the real world of young people and support the development of their own aspirations and ideals, it may be seen by parents and educators as more essential.

The only way we have to improve sexuality education in Australia is to increase its perceived value to its stakeholders,



particularly young people. Packaging it as the WHO standards have done is a major step forward in such a project. While we need to be realistic about what curriculum alone can achieve, and we also need to be reminded that sexuality education is only a small component of Health and Physical Education, we can be optimistic about what ACARA is currently doing. The right people are doing the work and the right people are being consulted.

It will not be the curriculum documents alone that contribute to its potential success but a range of other supporting initiatives that are essential components of the implementation. At the Australian Research Centre In Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University we are working on a revision of the *Talking Sexual Health* materials to suit the new curriculum. These materials are still the most widely used resource across Australia despite the fact that they are a decade old, and they can be expected in their revised form to have a similar uptake. The final component that is necessary to see this area move forward is professional development for teachers both pre- and in-service. This is where government resourcing is most needed and where our advocacy is best placed if we want to see sexuality education in Australia be truly world class.

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