

Sex, Sexuality and Relationships Education in Schools: can a national approach ever be achieved? Introduction

Peter Aggleton

Welcome to the ASHA/ASHM Conference session on sex, sexuality and relationships education in school. This is a pre-recorded session since our contributors – from Australia, New Zealand and Canada come from very different times zones.

My name is Peter Aggleton, and I am based in the Centre for Social Research at UNSW Sydney, in the School of Sociology at ANU, and in the Centre for Gender and Global Health at UCL in London.

Like other contributors, I have worked on issues relevant to sex, sexuality and relationship education for a long time – over 30 years in my case.

Internationally, I have contributed to WHO's efforts to develop a framework for sexual health program development – where sex, sexuality and relationships education is a key part. I was also a member of the advisory group supporting UNESCO in the development of the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. For UNAIDS, I have led regional assessments of provision for sex, sexuality and HIV education in Asia-Pacific and beyond.

At country level, I have worked closely with colleagues in Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria to strengthen work on sex, sexuality and relationships in schools. With colleagues in New Zealand, I have contributed to the development of the recently published national Guide for Teachers, Leaders and Boards of Trustees on Relationships and Sexuality Education.

In all of this work, and across a very diverse range of contexts, a number of issues recur. Two of the most important of them are as follows

- Is there a need for **coherence** and **consistency** in what we teach young people about sex, gender, sexuality and relationships?
- How do we ensure that national, regional and local **differences are taken into account** in teaching and learning about sex, sexuality, gender and relationships?

Crucially, are the answers to these two questions complementary or contradictory?

These are the key issues that – in different ways – contributors to this symposium will discuss.

But before this happens, I would like to say a few brief words about the current situation.

First, we live in the world in which there is much debate about what sex, sexuality and relationships should be about.

Polarised positions exist between those favouring abstinence-based approaches (not that popular in Australia and New Zealand but advocated more strongly in the USA and other parts of the world) and those promoting a more positive perspective, with an emphasis on pleasure, equity and equality in relationships, and a comprehensive range of prevention options. In between these two extremes exist a variety of alternatives.

Second, opinions differ about what should be focused on as part of sex, sexuality and relationships education. In the time available I'd like to mention just **fifteen** different approaches.

- STIs and HIV
- Unwanted pregnancy
- Safer sexual practices
- Agreement and consent
- Puberty and biological change
- Relationships (plural) and sexuality education
- Sex and relationship (singular) education
- Respectful relationships
- Ethical relationships
- Gender and human rights
- Gender and sexual diversity
- Education for parenthood and family life
- Life skills education
- Moral perspectives on sex and relationships
- No sex at all

This list goes on.... and a key question to be thought about and answered is would we find this diversity of opinion in any other field of education – in the teaching of Science and Mathematics, for example or even in Languages and History?

Importantly, each and every one of these positions has its strong advocates – locally, nationally and internationally. Within the UN system, for example, UNFPA currently argues for a focus on gender and human rights, while UNESCO and UNAIDS both promote a wider set of concerns – including concern for HIV and gender and sexual diversity and difference, as part of their approach to ‘comprehensive’ sexuality education.

Clearly sex, sexuality and relationships education is at something of a **pre-paradigmatic stage** and consent has yet to be won about what it should involve, who should deliver it (parents, teachers, health professionals, all of these), and what its goals should be.

Regardless of these differences, as in all aspects of sexual health, dialogue and debate is a good thing – for it is through debate that we can come to **understand our differences**, and it is through discussion that **common ground** can be identified.

Identifying common ground is what this session aims to achieve and in the different presentations that follow you will encounter some of the key issues conceptually, programmatically and with respect to policy and practice.

Our presenters are all experts with many years' experience working in their respective fields. We begin with Professor Kerry Robinson. Kerry is Director of the Diversity & Human Rights Research Center at Western Sydney University and will be talking about the **Politics of and challenges to initiating a National Curriculum on Sexuality and Relationships Education in Australia.**

Kerry is followed by Dr Cristyn Davies from the Discipline of Child & Adolescent Health in the Faculty of Medicine and Health at The University of Sydney. She will be talking **Barriers and facilitators to implementing sexual health education in schools** based on research and consultancy undertaken in Australia as well as internationally.

Next, Associate Professor Katie Fitzpatrick from the Faculty of Education & Social Work at the University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand then follows with a presentation entitled **A world of possibility?** This focuses on Focusing on recent developments in New Zealand where a national approach to teaching about relationships and sexuality has in policy terms been achieved.

Then Bonnie Lee, Manager Schools and Community at Family Planning Victoria offers a grassroots perspective, describing some of the work FPV has been supporting with teachers working in schools. She stresses the importance of family planning organisations working in partnership with schools, not to undertake the work for them but to support and empower teachers in their roles.

Finally, Associate Professor Jen Gilbert from the Faculty of Education at York University in Canada offers some international reflections on what others have talked about and what needs to be done.

We hope very much you enjoy this session, and it encourages you to think.

Much remains to be done in this important but often contentious field, and it only by people like ourselves working in the education, health and community sectors working together that progress will be made.