

The politics of and challenges to initiating a national curriculum on sexuality and relationships education in Australia

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Sex, Sexuality and relationships education in schools: can a national curriculum ever be achieved?

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Current position of sexuality education

- Australia has a current National Curriculum - Health & PE syllabus includes relationships & sexuality education – **has not been fully incorporated into school programs across all States & Territories:**
 - Diversity of approaches across Australia – differing perspectives on what knowledge is included, how it is taught, who teaches it, age at which this learning starts;
 - School education / school curricula are traditionally the responsibility of individual States & Territories;
 - The National Curriculum is currently under review;
 - A National Curriculum may always be precarious.

Issues hindering a national approach

- **Different political climates across States & Territories:**
 - Conservative or progressive govts can impact sexuality education;
 - **Respectful Relationships Education** in Victoria, with its current comparatively progressive State Government, has a more comprehensive / inclusive / research-based / ongoing and integrated approach to sexuality education, than the **Sexuality Education** in the more conservative state of NSW;
 - Sexuality education is often contentious – e.g. inclusion of sexuality and gender identity / diversity often excluded – exacerbated by conservative media;
 - Education Depts / schools doing more innovative, inclusive and comprehensive work could be undermined by a national approach.

Issues hindering a national approach

- **Different opinions/values of key stakeholders - young people, parents, teachers, and community members:**
 - Sexuality education not only varies across State/Territories, but across individual schools – often dependent on school policies, the perspectives and motivations of individual principals, teachers, school communities /parents.

Young People

- Disjuncture between young people's perspectives of their needs & sexuality education, especially for same-sex attracted and gender diverse young people;
- Accessing information from other sources e.g. the internet & peers – minimal opportunities to build sexuality literacy skills.

Issues hindering a national approach

Parents

- Of 342 Australian parents/carers of primary school children, 71% viewed sexuality education important and relevant to their children:
 - Matter of children's rights
 - Countering negative narratives / shame & dirty
 - Awareness of bodies & physical safety
- Parents with oppositional views:
 - Fears of emotional unreadiness / accessing information 'too early'
 - Loss of childhood innocence
 - Undermine family values / morals (e.g. LGBTQ issues)
- Can remove children from sexuality education.

Issues hindering a national approach

Teachers

- Clashes in values, morals, beliefs between schools / individual teachers and families;
- Lack of confidence in what can be taught in sexuality education;
- Family values/morals are vastly different and generic courses can not cater for all;
- Schools also have a responsibility to provide children with knowledge to prepare them for their future lives;
- Open discussions between schools and families necessary to build some reconciliation/compromise/consensus;
- Of 157 Australian teachers, 79% believed sexuality education should be a shared process between schools & families;
- 35% of parents & 18% of teachers - family responsibility alone.

Another approach to a National Curriculum

- Access to inclusive & comprehensive sexuality education is social justice / Human Rights issue.
- Responsibility of schools, families, health care professionals, and communities – a consortium of educators, students, parents, school leaders, and health professionals:
 - Devising shared ethos/goals - monitored, evaluated, revised
 - Allow for local interpretation of goals within the spirit of original aims
- Finding consensus on these goals may not be about everyone getting everything they want in this curriculum, but rather agreement on a broader shared ethos.

Potential Goals

- Goals could be based on why access to inclusive and comprehensive sexuality education is crucial to young people:
 - Building sexuality literacy skills;
 - Developing ethical gendered and sexual subjects;
 - Understanding the importance of consent and respect in relationships;
 - Respecting gender and sexuality diversity and the intersections of these with other aspects of identity;
 - Building awareness and understanding of one's rights as gendered and sexual citizens;
 - Building confidence, competency, and agency in order to become informed and critically thinking gendered and sexual subjects; and
 - Fostering health and wellbeing.

References

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