

Let's talk about sex

The trouble is, apparently, we don't. At least, that would be the opinion of commentators after the recent revelations revealed in an online petition by senior girls from private schools about sexual abuse by their male counterparts. (SMH 20/2/21 *Hundreds of students claim sexual assault.*) The extent and explicitness of their admissions have shocked the community and raised alarm bells about what schools, parents, churches and media, including the Internet, are teaching young people, especially boys, about sex and in particular, given the Brittany Higgins case, respect for women.

Principals respond

The effect of the publication of these testimonies brought a quick response from principals who, to their credit, were not defensive, but acknowledged a wider community problem and that their schools must be part of any solution. Needless-to-say, this problem also exists with students from public and Catholic schools, how be it I suspect with less of a sense of privilege and entitlement. Principals assured their school communities and the public generally, that programs were in place which taught that *non-consensual sex is a crime and this message is given unequivocally* (Riverview Principal, Paul Hine). Other principals spoke about advice to parents relating to outside school activities, including parties, and how schools engaged specialist speakers to assist with their teaching programs. Several boy's school principals indicated a review of existing programs to strengthen these messages. (SMH 23/2/21 *Schools to tackle dark culture.*)

Questioning school sex education programs

The assurances of principals were short lived as a series of criticisms were launched about sex education in schools and in families.

Katrina Mason (SMH 22/2/21) a researcher in the area of rape and sexual assault wrote about young people: *They are right to be frustrated: comprehensive education about relationships and sexuality, from a young age, is known to protect sexual wellbeing.* She says that *Schools should be the main site of intervention and that governments have the power to mandate such programs.*

Sarah Golsby-Smith, head of learning, PLC Sydney puts the view that *Porn has poisoned youth sex culture* (SMH 26/2/21). While supporting a focus on consent, she says it *would be far outclassed by the hours of access young men have to hardcore porn, in which women are routinely debased, violated and used for patriarchal pleasure.* She supports *explicit conversations about consent and about loving relationships, wherein women and men are respected as human beings, not as commodities for someone else's pleasure.*

But sex educator Jenny Walsh (SMH 27/2/21) said *porn was often used as a bit of a scapegoat for the problem of consent*, and in the same article, Professor Kath Albury says *porn allows people to evade the issue about how poor sex education is.*

In *Parents back more teaching on sex ethics*, Caitlin Fitzsimmons (SMH 28/2/21) advocates *teaching about sexual consent from Year 7 or even primary school.* She highlights unsupervised access to alcohol and drugs at parties in private homes for young children as well as teens. The Principal of Trinity Tim Bowden (SMH 5/3/21) says: *Parents who allow underage school students to throw drunken parties with secluded spaces are creating environments for sexual assault.* Similarly, Kings

Headmaster Tony George, *questions whether drunk boys recall consent lessons.* (SMH 5/3/21)

Dr Melissa Kang author and long-term responder in *Dolly* magazine's *Dear Doctor*, criticises the focus on stranger danger rather than sexual abuse amongst peers and within families and highlights the need for these discussions before the drinking of alcohol sets in.

Her daughter Georgia Carr, a doctoral candidate in sex education at Sydney University, praises many of the teachers she has observed in her studies of educational classrooms saying they are *confident, unembarrassed and knowledgeable*, but she has some harsh words about the curriculum in terms of the latitude teachers have to pick and choose what they teach leading to great variability between schools and between classrooms within schools. Given recent political storms like the Safe Schools Program many teachers are reluctant to discuss controversial topics. Many are also concerned about the lack of resources and training. She concludes *teachers understandably stick with what fits with their existing beliefs, interests and practices.*

While representing a variety of opinions, all these commentaries point to a fundamental problem about the lack of respect men have for women and how, or whether, sex education in schools can solve the problem.

The issues with sex education in schools

Curriculum

To allow for local variations in the beliefs and values of different school systems, the NSW curriculum is explicit in factual areas related to anatomy and medical issues but far less explicit about sexual behaviours in relationships. Some parents see the curriculum as too explicit, while others believe it never addresses many of the real issues facing young people.

Who teaches about sex?

Personal Development, as a euphemism for sex education, was introduced into secondary schools in the mid 1970s. The curriculum had a strong focus on relationships and the place of sex in those relationships. It was taught by interested teachers drawn from across the subjects and who were provided with some training and guidelines to communicate with parents. The advantage of this system was the commitment of the teachers to the subject, but the drawback was the lack of training and allocating specialist teachers away from their specialist area.

In 1990, the newly created Board of Studies took responsibility for the curriculum and included Personal Development into a new learning area *Personal development, health and physical education*. An advantage was that teacher training institutions could train their teachers in all three areas. But the downside was that existing teachers in this learning area, with a mainly physical education background and some health education training, didn't see much difference between health education and personal development resulting in a weaker focus on relationships. Over the years, the focus on health has dominated classrooms to the detriment of personal development with generalised curriculum references only a guide to more relationally focused teaching.

As Georgia Carr notes above, there are some excellent teachers of sex education but there are many who have a focus on health and avoid the difficult and controversial and have an aversion to the nitty gritty of sexual behaviours in relationships.

Parents

In all schools, there is potential conflict between what students, teachers and schools might want for sex education and what parents want. Christians are, as a group, historically conservative about sex education with some preferring that the whole matter be left to the home and the church. The problem here is that apparently few parents talk with their children about sex. And let's face it, what teenagers are likely to seek their parent's advice when it comes to relationships and sex. Their peers, the Internet and other publications are likely more valued. Yet, students rate highly their sex education at school, where family boundaries to difficult subjects may be crossed.

Schools in all systems provide various amounts of detail about their sex education programs and often require parent permission for students to participate. Some parents ask for their children to be excluded from some lessons but rarely from all.

Christian, and other religious schools, need to take care that overly conservative attitudes do not restrict the curriculum or fail to address the questions and concerns of students. Parent concerns are to be addressed, but approaches that leave questions unanswered, information omitted and issues unengaged do not respect the students, be they male or female.

Given information about the school's program, parents have the opportunity to engage their children in discussion of controversial issues and provide different perspectives. Students are more likely to adopt family values if they have been able to access and discuss a range of views.

Experts

In the 1970s, there was little sex education in primary schools and schools often availed themselves of the *Family Life Movement* (a Christian organisation) parent and child evenings so that their children could learn the basics. Afterwards, parents could answer any questions their child had. These one-off events were helpful but did not constitute a sustained program of sex education.

In the 1990s, new Personal Development, Health and Physical Education Programs were introduced in both primary and secondary schools by the Board of Studies for all school systems. Some schools continued to have visiting speakers who would handle the more sensitive areas of the curriculum to provide support for teachers. Sometimes the motivation in Christian and religious schools for inviting these speakers was to overlay their religious teaching on sexuality. There is nothing wrong with this, except that the visiting speaker does not know the students and is unlikely to unearth all their questions and get to the matters that really concern students. This is one of the continuing concerns of the commentators quoted above. Personal Development lessons have always been based on the quality of the relationship between teachers and their students, a relationship that involves trust and a safe environment to talk.

Christian perspectives

Christians have diverse views on matters relating to sex reflecting different Biblical interpretations. They are likely to agree that sex was created by God for procreation and intimacy in relationships, but differences occur around what is meant by *sex*, *intimacy* and *relationships*. The reason for disagreement is that in the Fall, sexuality like everything else, was corrupted. Reconciling the world that God intended and what we now have is complicated.

Biblical principles and beliefs lead to behavioural outcomes and can determine the content and how sex education is to be taught. However, these principles and beliefs are not easily applied in a school system for programs in sexuality. Practical decisions have to be made about what is appropriate for students at various ages to deal with real world situations and how controversial subject matter is included. Christians have a variety of positions in areas like contraception, artificial insemination, abortion and homosexuality.

Nonetheless, there are some matters that can be agreed on and they include - a self-giving love for others that respects the worth of every individual because they are created in the image of God and loved by God who gave his own son as a sacrifice for their sins. Understanding these matters leads to respect. For Christians, sex education is most assuredly a theological matter. In the Christian life being created in God's image is about reflecting his character in everything and sexual abuse and rape have no place. Thus, Christian and church schools have the opportunity to integrate religious education and sex education programs.

Churches

Caring relationships that respect students ought to be the hallmark of youth work in churches. Authentic adults who model a Christian lifestyle can have far more influence on teens than most parents and teachers. Unfortunately, churches have lost credibility through the child abuse scandals of the last thirty years and are not trusted widely by the community to provide the teaching and role models they claim. Churches have been reticent to be involved in sex education programs and, if at all, left it to occasional discussions and question and answer sessions, rather than any systematic teaching. Of course, there are exceptions, but it will be some time before the wider community trusts churches to conduct sex education programs for young people. They will need to earn respect, acknowledge a range of community and Christian positions, all while pursuing their own Biblical interpretations.

Personal responsibility

Teenagers express a growing responsibility towards others as their focus moves from self to others including the wider community. Accepting responsibility for one's own behaviour is enshrined in our laws at various ages. Individuals can make very bad decisions that can affect their lives for years to come. Both teenage boys and girls need to have a greater awareness of the danger posed by situational circumstances and avoid them. Whether it is the consumption of alcohol, the use of the Internet, the sharing of drugs, accepting a lift home or the friends that are kept, such matters need to be included in sex education programs. Risk avoidance is fundamental to surviving the teenage years and most of it rests on assessing risk and developing and exercising self-control.

In conclusion

In India over recent years, there has been a mass movement against endemic sexual abuse and rape of women. While the causes are deeply cultural and caste based, it comes as no surprise to know that sex education does not exist in Indian schools and is consigned to a science unit on reproduction for those students who make it to secondary school. There is a connection.

In the current climate, respect for women is to be taught, modelled and advocated by the whole community. In schools, caring teachers in all systems can help to affect change by respecting women and tackling sensitive and difficult issues in all classrooms, but particularly in sex education lessons.

Christian parents and churches and other Christian institutions all have a role to play, but as students have highly rated their school programs (teachers) and value their teaching and therein lies the greatest opportunity for change within the whole community.

Christian teachers in all systems cannot afford to be disempowered by conservative views of sex education that fail to meet the needs of students. Called to love God and to love others as themselves they need to model this in all relationships. Students need more teaching about relationships and how sexuality operates in those relationships if our community is to address, and not sweep away in the next news cycle, the key issue of respect for women. As Asher Learmonth, Cranbrook's Head Prefect (SMH 26/2/21) said to his peers: *identify this sexist and reductive attitude within yourself, with the boys you go out with. Change the way you view women.*

Relationship focused sex education can make a huge contribution to changing respect for women amongst young people.

John Gore