

MEDIA RELEASE

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Tasmanian teachers need better support to teach sex education, says researcher

Teachers taking sex education lessons within the State's new Health and Wellbeing curriculum must be supported with better training and professional development, a University of Tasmania researcher says.

Recent UTAS PhD graduate, Dr Jo Winckle, believes that while teachers and schools do a great job under challenging circumstances, the lack of comprehensive and sequential sex education programs in Tasmania places its young people at greater risk of homophobic bullying, sexual harassment and assault, cyber bullying, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

During research for her PhD thesis '*Sexual Health Issues in Adolescents*', Dr Winckle observed sex education classes in primary schools, secondary schools and colleges for three years, focussing especially on the teaching practices and language used to convey the attitudes of both teachers and students.

"A good sex education program helps students develop self esteem, sexual ethics, personal communication and relationship building skills; it should be a highly valued part of our school curriculum that is resourced and assessed like other subjects," Dr Winckle said.

"Too often teachers are left to teach sex education when they have little or no training in the field."

Dr Winckle believes the lack of teacher skills in this area will adversely impact on the lives of Tasmanian students until the training issue is addressed. She found:

- Many sex education lessons plans are fact-based and biological, ignoring issues of ethics, values, emotions and moral obligations in sexual behaviour;
- Sexual diversity is rarely discussed in sex education classes, which can affirm homophobic and bullying attitudes among some students and lead to feelings of depression, self-harm or suicide in students who are unsure about their sexuality;
- Many teachers believe sex education is not valued in their school: it is rarely assessed, is sometimes delivered at ad hoc times only when the need arises, and does not receive the same support or resources for at-risk students that English and numeracy receive;
- Few schools conduct pre or post-testing in sex education classes to determine whether students have learnt anything new, extended their knowledge or altered their views on sex or sexual decision-making;

- Gendered stereotypes, sexual stereotypes, sexual innuendo, slang and sexist language are still dominant in classrooms;
- Many sex education classes create an ethos where girls are silenced and boys feel encouraged to dominate. Often, questions are asked only by boys; when girls ask questions they become targets for jokes and verbal abuse from the boys.

Dr Winckle said that her observations of sex education classes, complete with student feedback, are evidence that teachers need specific, high-level skills to facilitate classroom discussions about relationships, especially because students often have strongly stereotypical attitudes about gender characteristics.

Sex education in Tasmanian schools is taught within the Health and Wellbeing syllabus, launched in October 2007 and covering kindergarten to Year 10.

Individual schools are responsible for developing their own timelines to implement the syllabus.

“I believe that the Tasmanian Department of Education’s new Health and Wellbeing syllabus is excellent. It encapsulates everything that is necessary for designing, teaching and assessing a rigorous and ethical sex education program,” Dr Winckle said.

“But a good, strong syllabus is not enough. Principals and grade co-ordinators need curriculum support and guidance to understand how this syllabus translates into a comprehensive and sequential sex education program at the school level, and classroom teachers need to be given support and training to develop and practice the skills and strategies needed at the classroom level.”

“The whole notion of why we want to have sex, the role of emotions in sexual relationships, the issue of consensual and non-consensual sex (and what that might look like) were typically absent from the sex education classes I observed.

“It is much easier for teachers who have had no or little training to talk about body parts, their role in sexual reproduction and contraception - and who can blame them?”

“Tasmania has the second highest national rate of teenage pregnancies, second only to the Northern Territory. We should be concerned about that and seriously consider the effectiveness of our current approach to teaching sex education.”

Dr Winckle is available TODAY ONLY to discuss her research, at Family Planning, 2 Midwood St, Newtown. Ph. 0400 054941.

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