

Sexuality and Relationships Education

Queensland young peoples' rights to have their sexuality and relationships needs heard

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Good morning everyone. Similar to Karen, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we come together today. I also wish to pay respect to their elders and to their culture – the oldest living culture in the world.

I would also like to acknowledge the people who have made this forum possible, particularly:

- Ms Karen Struthers, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health
- Simon Blake, Chief Executive of Brook UK
- Christopher Macauley, Chief Executive of Family Planning Qld,
- Joe Ogilvie and other young people.

Thank you for the invitation to be part of this morning's forum and for the opportunity to contribute some thoughts to this important aspect of young people's development.

I'm particularly pleased to be here for a couple reasons. Firstly, I've had a long association with Family Planning Queensland that commenced when I was involved in P-10 curriculum development for Queensland schools in the 1990's - it's great to be able to participate in occasions like today to maintain and strengthen this professional relationship.

Since my earliest association with FPQ, I've continued to be impressed with this organisation's knowledge, expertise and professionalism, so much

so that last year when the Commission needed to train its staff in relation to children's sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases, we didn't hesitate to seek the services of FPQ.

Secondly, in working for the Commission for Children and Young People I'm delighted to be associated with any initiative that promotes the rights, interests and wellbeing of young Queenslanders.

As many people here today would be aware, a key responsibility of the Commission is to advocate for children and young people and to help make sure they are listened to and that their rights are respected.

In terms of **children's rights**, very few people in 2008 would argue against promoting children's rights to good health and a sound general education.

However, there continue to be a significant number of people who still dispute that sexuality and relationships education should be part of children's schooling experiences.

These people are well meaning, and believe that they are protecting children by denying them access to sexuality and relationships education. I am fairly sure if these same people were aware of the experiences of some of the more vulnerable children in our communities, they may quickly change their views.

Interestingly, sexuality and human relationships education are not new issues for Queensland's education system – once passionately opposed by

conservative State Governments, they have been a serious consideration of Queensland schools for almost two decades.

In fact, the current Years 1-10 Health and Physical Education Syllabus identifies core learning outcomes in this regard and there are specific teacher support materials to assist teachers to achieve these outcomes.

I say this with assurance because in the mid 90's I had overarching responsibility for managing the development of P-10 syllabuses and all of the associated teacher support materials. I still have very vivid memories of convincing members of the Curriculum Council at that time that sexuality and relationships education should be part of the core Years 1-10 curriculum for Queensland schools and that they should approve the materials that we had developed in this regard.

Unfortunately, for as long as there has been schools, there has been a demonstrable gap between the 'intended' curriculum and the 'realized' curriculum.

To my knowledge, there's never been any systematic monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the current Queensland HPE curriculum and consequently, its implementation tends to vary from school to school.

Not surprisingly, approaches to sexuality and human relationships education also vary significantly across schools.

So, why is this problematic?

Well, the research is very clear that those children and young people who don't have access to information and education tend to be more vulnerable and achieve poorer health and social outcomes.

The research also highlights that one of the most effective ways of connecting with children and young people is to involve them, give them space to ask questions, discuss and generate ideas.

Unfortunately, there continues to be a misconception that adults, experts, parents and carers know better than young people themselves about what they need.

I was very fortunate last year to witness first hand in the remote Indigenous community of Hopevale what a powerful difference listening to the voices of children and young people can make to adult decision-making.

This Cape York community is now very child focused and committed to making a difference to the health, safety and wellbeing in the long term. So much so, that in terms of planning what should be done to promote the health, safety and wellbeing of children, the local council invited a group of primary and secondary school aged children to provide direct input to the Council's decision-making process.

In the lead up to Council meeting, the children with the help of their teacher carefully planned what they wanted to say and then delivered their views

directly to the Mayor and local councilors. The impact of hearing the voices of the children and young people has now committed the Council to acting in ways that have never been done before. I have no doubt that the views of this group of children will result in significant improvements for kids in this community.

In contrast to this particular example, it has been my experience that young people tend not to be encouraged to participate in informing sexuality and relationships education programs. This is probably driven by a fear that they will want to know about controversial things, confronting things or personal things.

Surely, it is better to find out from young people what they need to know so that their needs can be addressed and met in a safe, evidence-based process rather than having to do it themselves through unnecessary risk taking or possible exploitation or even being sold a message as currently happens through the commercial media.

It is sobering to remember that young people under 18 years make up a quarter of Queensland's population. This represents nearly one million individuals and a significant group of them are sexually active.

The results of the 3rd national survey of nearly two and a half thousand Australian years 10, 11 and 12 students' sexual health (2002) highlights that:

- 1 in 4 Year 10 students have had sex
- 1 in 2 Year 12 students have had sex

- 5-9 per cent of students have experienced same sex attraction
- 90 per cent of sexually active young women who don't wish to conceive use contraception
- 12 per cent of teenagers report using the withdrawal method as contraception
- 1 in 4 students report unwanted sex
- 1 in 4 students were drunk or high at their last sexual encounter
- 66 per cent of sexually active Year 10 students report using condoms
- 51 per cent of sexually active Year 12 students report using condoms.

The 2007 Mission Australia survey of nearly 29 000 young Australians found that sexuality issues were identified in the list of top 15 issues of most importance or of most concern to young people - nearly one in ten respondents highlighted this issue.

So what does all of this mean for us?

It means that maintaining the status quo in relation to sexuality and human relationships education is denying some children one of their basic rights.

It means that our education system needs to establish some checks and balances to ensure that there are some curriculum guarantees in relation to sexuality and human relationships education.

It means taking notice of the research that demonstrates sexuality education programs are more effective when provided before young people

become sexually active, and when the programs emphasise skills and social norms.

It means promoting to the general community that sexuality education does not encourage increased or early sexual activity and that comprehensive sexuality education programs promote the adoption of more informed and safer sexual practices in sexually active youth.

And finally, it means we need to seriously listen to and engage with young people if we are going to get it right.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this morning's forum and I look forward to this forum being a catalyst for change that will result in improved outcomes for Queensland kids.

References

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