

# Australian Curriculum Review – Consultation

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Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is a feminist organisation, leading change towards women's empowerment, women's health, the prevention of violence against women and ultimately, gender equality, in rural and regional Victoria. We apply a gendered lens to the factors and environments that shape women's health and wellbeing in rural and regional Victoria. Our expertise is in gender and climate justice, gender equity, the prevention of violence against women, women's economic empowerment and sexual and reproductive health rights.

Under the impact area of sexual and reproductive health rights, WHGNE is committed to ongoing consultation with priority groups to better support their sexual and reproductive health needs, meaningful collaboration, undertaking research, advocating for the adoption of sex-positive sexuality and consent education in schools, and showcasing best-practice sexual and reproductive health rights initiatives.

As such, WHGNE makes several key recommendations to the Australian curriculum regarding consent, respectful relationships and sexuality education:

## **1. Consult with young people.**

Children and young people have the right to be heard in all matters that affect them (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Often, decisions are made about children's education through consultation with their parents, adults and experts without consulting the children and young people themselves. This is particularly true in an educational setting where consultation with parents and teachers is prioritised over consultation with the students.

Despite state-based and nation-wide surveys of young people, where it is evident that many students want to have some input into what and how they learn in sexuality and relationships education (Johnson et al., 2016), it is unclear how young people have been consulted in the development of the Australian curriculum.

National and state-based research has found that many students have requested relationship and sexuality education that focuses on gender diversity, violence in relationships, intimacy, sexual pleasure and love, and less of the biological aspects of sexuality (Johnson et al., 2016). Additionally, many young people reported that they wanted further information about 'how to have sex', 'sexual pleasure', 'masturbation', 'different sexual acts' and 'pornography' (Johnson et al., 2016).

WHGNE recognises that young people are experts in their own lives and should be meaningfully consulted in the development, implementation, and evaluation of a curriculum that will have a long-lasting impact on their ability to negotiate consent, engage in respectful relationships and experience sexual pleasure.

## **2. The implementation of a multi-component, integrated health promotion strategy that goes beyond just the curriculum.**

WHGNE recognises Victoria's Respectful Relationships whole-of-school approach as an example of best-practice when it comes to ensuring an enabling school environment that promotes respectful relationships and prevents gender-based violence. The whole-of-school approach is built upon the socio-ecological model. As such, it includes a number of elements that are outside the curriculum-based teaching and learning, such as school leadership and commitment, a professional learning strategy, community partnerships, support for staff and students and the school culture and environment (Victorian State Government, 2018).

WHGNE goes as far as to recommend that an effective, strategic approach to respectful relationships, consent and sexuality education sits beyond the scope of the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum and is embedded across the school environment as a [general capability](#). As identified by ACARA, general capabilities 'are not stand-alone subjects' and are taught through the learning areas in 'authentic and meaningful ways.' A respectful relationships initiative, such as the approach taken by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET), aligns closely with the revised elements in the Australian curriculum's [personal and social capability](#).

An effective multi-component health promotion strategy to respectful relationships acknowledges the significant role that online technologies play in young people's relationships. Not only are young people receiving critical messages about what relationships look like, and how they should behave in relationships, from social media, but social media is a crucial part of the relationships that they themselves are involved in. The benefits of social media for wellbeing can be maximised by valuing the positive possibilities of young people's social media use. That is, good practice in research, policy and service design should focus on the multiple dimensions that support and strengthen young people's social media use, such as:

- fostering 'digital age literacies' among young people which span media, internet and social-emotional literacies that consider not only the safe use of social media but the moral and ethical repercussions of their everyday practices; and
- promoting peer and intergenerational capacities and support (online and offline) to foster skills, promote shared understandings and maximise positive opportunities for young people's wellbeing and relationships (Swist et al., 2015).

Extensive international research has found that sexuality education has the most impact when complemented with community-based strategies, such as condom distribution and youth-friendly health service providers (UNESCO, 2018). This is especially important for those young people who may not be engaged in formal education.

Around 28% of the Australian population live in rural and remote areas (ABS, 2019). In general, remote and very remote areas have a higher proportion of young people when compared to major cities (ABS, 2019). In areas outside of the major cities, young people face unique barriers in accessing youth-friendly health services, particularly sexual and reproductive health services.

For example, young people in rural and remote parts of Victoria have greater difficulty accessing a diverse range of contraceptive options (Women's Health Victoria 2017). In a survey of young people in

northeast Victoria and the Goulburn Valley, concerns about the availability of condoms were raised due to very limited access to free condoms or needing to ask for them at the counter (YACVic ,2013).

Young people in rural and regional areas face additional barriers due to a (perceived or actual) lack of privacy and confidentiality to explore contraceptive options with their health care provider. Coupled with outdated attitudes resulting in the stigmatisation of young people seeking support for their sexual health care, young people living in rural and regional areas may feel they are not able to explore contraceptive options with local health care providers (YACVic, 2013).

WHGNE recommends an integrated approach across both the whole-of-school and community as integral to promoting and upholding young people's sexual and reproductive health rights.

## **2. Consent, respectful relationships and sexuality education should be gender transformative, sex-positive and inclusive.**

WHGNE fully supports the inclusion of navigating power imbalances in relationships in the revised Australian curriculum. However, WHGNE recommends that a gender-transformative approach is used, focusing on both individual and structural forms of inequality and power imbalance, which seeks to challenge binary ways of thinking (Varley & Rich, 2019). Young people must be well equipped to analyse the social and cultural structures that create and uphold these power imbalances, including gender norms and stereotypes. They should be able to unpack and challenge these power dynamics in a way that will allow them to relate ethically to the people around them, including in sexual relationships. Like most of the other recommendations made by WHGNE, the implementation of a gender-transformative approach is most effective when it is implemented in organisations where it is embedded at an organisational level.

Sex positivity 'celebrates sexuality as a part of life that can enhance happiness, bringing energy and celebration' (IPPF 2016). Sex-positive sexuality education effectively achieves two things: shifts the focus to the enjoyable, pleasurable parts of sexual experiences, rather than solely working to prevent negative experiences; and acknowledges the risks associated with sexuality, without reinforcing fear, shame or taboo surrounding the sexualities of young people (IPPF 2016).

Discussion of pleasure should also make up an important part of sexuality and consent education. To exclude elements of positivity and pleasure from comprehensive sexuality education creates a disproportionate focus on the negative health and emotional consequences of sex, which 'risks reinforcing notions that power inequalities, abuse, coercion and violation are, and will always be, the norm' (IPPF 2016).

Positive outcomes of sex education are often reported around measures and outcomes like delayed initiation of sexual intercourse, decreased frequency of sexual intercourse, decreased number of sexual partners, reduced risk-taking, increased use of condoms and increased use of contraception (UNESCO, 2018). While WHGNE recognises the importance of contraception use, measures of effectiveness for consent, respectful relationships and sexuality education should also be sex-positive. There is room here for a more nuanced approach to measuring the effectiveness of content delivery such as confidence in communicating in relationships and sexual experiences and ability to access appropriate information to inform sexual and relationship decision-making.

Many Australians don't identify as cisgender or heterosexual (Fisher et al., 2018). In 2018, a national survey of secondary students and sexual health found that 35% of students indicated an attraction to the same gender or to multiple genders (Fisher et al., 2018). A retrospective study found that same-sex attracted young people reported that the school-based education they received was not relevant to them, was heteronormative and when diverse sexualities were mentioned it was tokenistic (Hillier et al., 2010). Therefore, WHGNE recommends that in the revision of the Australian curriculum diverse gender identities and sexualities are recognised, affirmed and celebrated.

Any resources provided to support the delivery of the curriculum should be intersectional and take into consideration the different identities of young people who are negotiating sexual experiences. We recommend that existing literature about negotiating pleasure and equality in sexual situations, tailored to the needs of young women, girls and other marginalised adolescents and young people is improved. We acknowledge that this requires efforts to develop specific resources and trainings and that, in line with our first recommendation, young people should be consulted with (IPPF, 2016).

Given that pornography is widely recognized as an 'important part of young people's sexual socialization and media landscapes' (Crabbe & Flood, 2021), WHGNE recommends that it be included as a key topic of the consent, respectful relationships and sexuality curriculum. WHGNE fully supports the recommendations made by Crabbe & Flood (2021) in the proposed practice framework for school-based education to address pornography's influence on young people as necessary for their capacity to navigate modern relationships. This practice framework incorporates a comprehensive analysis of gender, power and violence, and is built on sex-positive and inclusivity.

It's important to reiterate here the importance of recommendation 2, the whole-of school and community approach, as research from related fields indicates that consent, respectful relationships, and pornography education is more effective if implemented using a combination of strategies that include structural change (Crabbe & Flood, 2021).

### **3. Curriculum content should be delivered by appropriately skilled and confident staff.**

When young people were surveyed about what they wanted in teachers of sexuality and relationships education, most students reported that they wanted their teachers to be 'respectful', 'have a sense of humour' and 'relate well to students' (Johnson et al., 2016). These same respondents identified the need for 'better teachers' and 'more teacher training (Johnson et al., 2016). Other research found that students noted concerns around teachers biases, opinions and uncomfortableness with the material which impacted on their ability to deliver relationships and sexuality education in an objective and effective manner (Waling et al., 2020). International studies with young people have highlighted preferences for more experienced and open-minded educators to deliver sexuality education (Ezer et al., 2019).

Where students have had relationships and sexuality education delivered by an external facilitator, they reported that these experts were 'more informative, inclusive, objective, and comfortable than classes with their teachers.' (Waling et al., 2020).

For the delivery of this curriculum content to be effective, it needs to be delivered by appropriately skilled and confident staff. Currently, key barriers to the delivery of consent, respectful relationships and sexuality education include teachers' capacity and need for professional development (Chambers et al.,

2017). In general, teachers are committed to their student's education, as well as their health and wellbeing. They want to be able to ensure they receive timely access to honest information about consent, respectful relationships and sexuality. However, they don't feel confident in their ability to deliver content.

Based on the responses by young people and students in several studies and the extensive barriers faced by teachers in the confident delivery of this curriculum content, WHGNE recommends that external expert facilitators deliver consent, respectful relationship and sexuality education. However, in line with recommendation 2, WHGNE recommends that sexuality education delivered by external facilitators is complemented with changes to the school environment that support a safe and respectful setting for learning and developing relationships (a whole-of-school approach).

#### **4. Consent, respectful relationships and sexuality education should be mandatory.**

As it currently stands, the roll-out of consent, respectful relationships and sexuality education is managed by state and territory governments. How states and territories interpret the national curriculum and implement it in practice varies across the country. While WHGNE supports the tailoring of consent, respectful relationships, and sexuality education to suit the wide variety of state, territory, and school contexts, it is important that all students are able to access the information they need to lead fulfilling relationships and make informed decisions about sex.

Given the widespread impact of gender-based violence in Australia, WHGNE recommends that the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority enforce additional requirements in the delivery of consent, respectful relationships and sexuality education across states and territories. All schools that receive government funding should be required to deliver this curriculum content to a high standard. Further guidance should be provided by ACARA to support schools in meeting these requirements and reduce the impacts of the current discretionary approach to implementation.

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