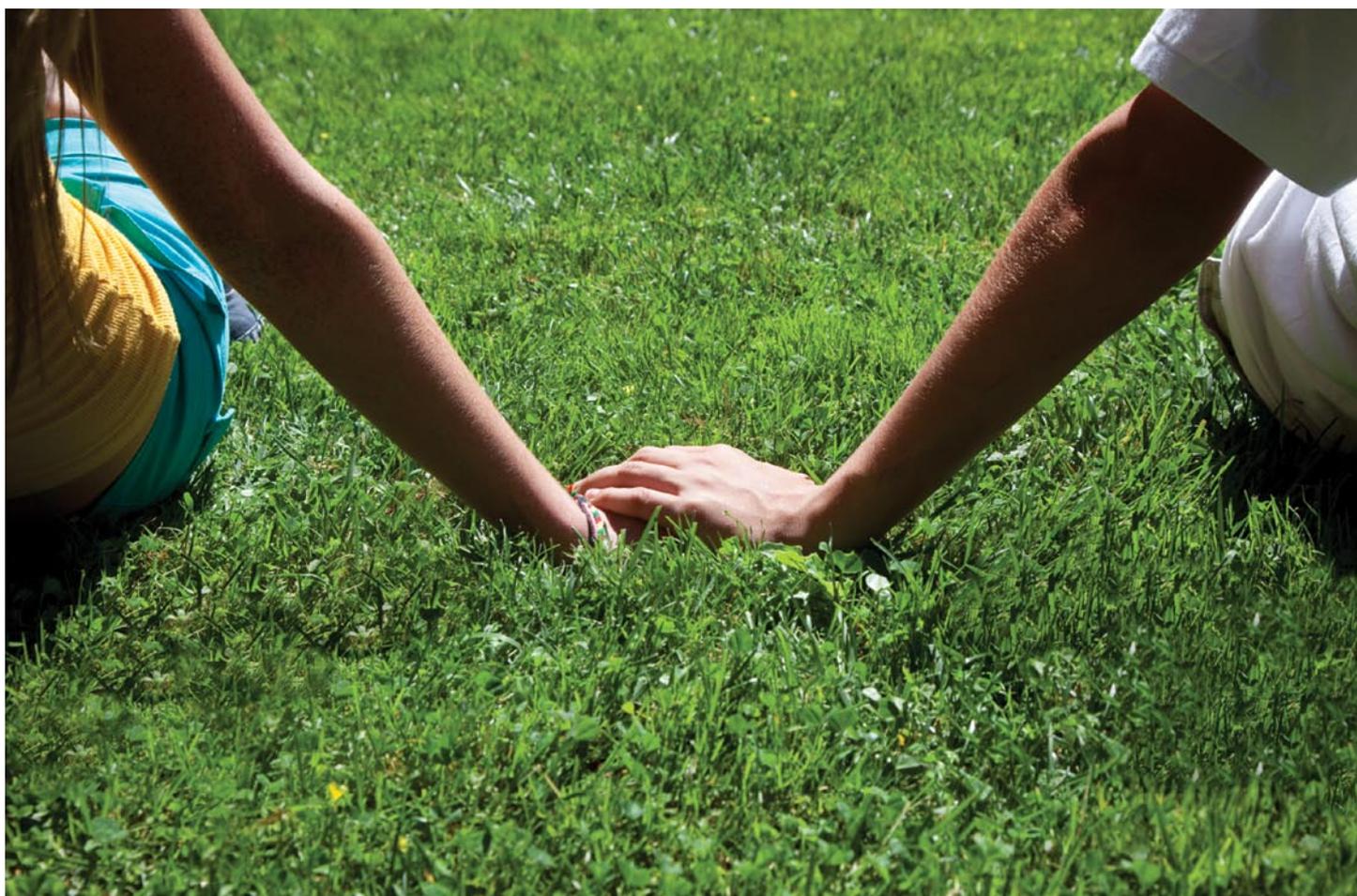


How close is Australia to best practice sexuality education?

Assoc Prof Anne Mitchell and Dr Marisa Schlichthorst, La Trobe University, Melbourne, survey the state of play in Australia compared to UNESCO Guidelines



In December last year the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) released the final version of their *International Guidelines on Sexuality Education*, confirming what we already know – that sexuality education done well really makes a difference. While the Guidelines are somewhat focussed on the prevention of HIV/AIDS, they are highly relevant to the kind of work we are doing here in Australia and provide an excellent resource for Australian schools.

The Guidelines: Part 1

The Guidelines are in two parts. The first covers

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the evidence-base for this work. As this can be sometimes hard to pull together when you are under pressure to explain why you do what you do, it is a very accessible and up to date resource.

The authors reviewed 87 projects they deemed relevant that had evaluated school projects and shown demonstrated effects on the sexual behaviour of participants. These

were used as the database with an additional 11 studies of abstinence only programmes being analysed separately.

Of the 87 core projects, more than one-third were found to delay the initiation of intercourse, about one-third decreased the frequency of intercourse, more than one-third decreased the number of sexual partners, and nearly all studies demonstrated an increase in knowledge. There was very strong evidence that more than one-third of the programmes increased condom or contraceptive use and that more than half reduced sexual risk taking.

Abstinence programmes

Predictably, the abstinence only programmes were less successful with only two showing any evidence of delaying sexual intercourse or reducing the frequency of sex, and one reducing the number of sexual partners. It is clear that sexuality education done well can make a difference to the safety of young people.

The Guidelines: Part 2

The evidence drawn from this meta-evaluation is used in the second part of the Guidelines to distil elements of best practice, some of which are already evident in programmes currently run in Australian schools. These elements are far simpler than the ones we have previously worked with, coming down to only four. These are the key elements that are commonly found accompanying measurable improvement in student knowledge and behaviour, and the ones that most deserve our attention and advocacy to preserve a curriculum area which is often under threat.

The first two elements are connected and are probably the most challenging for schools in that they are about time. Good programmes require at least 12 sessions. A shortage of time and a crowded curriculum is far more likely to be the reason our sexuality education programmes are inadequate, rather than prudishness or a belief that they are not worthwhile.

Space to teach what is complex and important is a struggle for all teachers in this area. Space to do so repeatedly is even harder to argue for, and the second element of best practice is sequential sessions over several years.

Some schools in Australia do run sexuality education over three or four years, repeating essential learnings and introducing new age appropriate material. However, for most this is aspirational with by far the majority of schools running one programme in Year 9 or 10. Any sexuality education is far better than none at all and we need to value what we do as well as looking to the national curriculum to advocate for its expansion.

Support by school managers

Also entirely intuitive is the third element – support and supervision by school managers. Schools where the programme relies on individual, albeit passionate and committed, teachers are vulnerable to change when the teachers move on or when there is some kind of political fall out. Many of us have seen programmes de-railed by a small but vocal group of parents who are given this power. A whole school commitment to the values that privilege sexuality education as essential for young people requires strong and committed leadership. Without such leadership schools may be putting time and energy into programmes that are not optimal. Given the preciousness of the time we have for this work, we want it to

be optimal. The evidence base of the UNESCO Guidelines should provide a safe rationale for school leaders to stand strong.

Trained teachers

The final element is about teachers. Essential to the conduct of best practice sexuality education are capable and motivated teachers who receive quality training. This is territory that is often taken for granted. In sexuality education we do have capable and motivated teachers. Those who take it on generally believe in it and find ways to respond to the needs of students and encourage their growth and independence. Unfortunately in Australia it is unlikely that they have received quality training either pre-service or in-service to any great extent. While more universities are providing some pre-service training in the area, it is unlikely that most of our current workforce have had this advantage. There is excellent in-service training for teachers run in all states and territories by family planning organisations, universities, education departments and private providers. Nevertheless these courses are short term and piecemeal, reflecting again the difficulties of time and resources, and of getting teachers out of class.

La Trobe online survey project

Our sexuality education workforce is one about which we know little. There appears to be no baseline specialist training it is possible to require of teachers taking on this work and very little information about those who volunteer for it, or who are conscripted. We know little about the training that might be most useful to them at different points of their career or what resources they might need to do their job easily and well.

This dearth of knowledge is being addressed in 2010 by the Australian Research Centre In Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University. This Centre, which conducts the five-yearly national survey of secondary students and sexual health (http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/assets/downloads/reports/SSASH_2008_Final_Report.pdf) is now seeking to provide the other half of the data set which is needed to give us our own Australian evidence on which to base best practice.

The study is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and will, to some extent, mirror similar surveys conducted in other western countries.

Researchers will select 300 secondary schools randomly around Australia and, with the permission of the principal, invite all the sexuality education teachers at each of these schools to participate in an online survey in August this year.

The sample will reflect the profile of Australian secondary schools. The survey will look at what is currently being provided in the school and what the facilitators of, or barriers to improvements might be. It will explore the

working world of the teacher, the resources that work best and the additional ones that are needed. It will look at training and how it can be streamlined to best support teachers in their important work. It will seek to consult teachers, the real experts in this field, about what they see as best practice, what informs their work and what inspires them to keep doing it.

Results from the survey of students over the years have been used extensively to shape policies and programmes and to develop new teaching resources. It is likely that the teacher survey results will also be used for the same purpose and will assist with planning that looks towards a national curriculum.

Research is always an imposition on the time of participants but we do hope that this Australian first will attract the interest and involvement of those in the 300 schools yet to be selected.

Sexuality resources clearinghouse

As a more immediate gesture towards supporting sexuality education teachers, The Australian Research Centre In Sex, Health and Society has entered into a partnership with Ansell to develop a clearinghouse of resources and information for schools. The site has been operational since January 2010 and is moderated by an experienced classroom teacher. The opportunity to share resources and ideas, ask questions and interact with peers has been taken up widely across Australia. Ansell is providing free education kits for those who subscribe to the site. It represents, along with participation in the teachers survey, an opportunity to support and showcase current practice and maximise what resources we have.

The UNESCO Guidelines are available from the site at www.ansellsex-ed.org.au along with almost everything a teacher might need, except more time.

Conclusion

Best practice in education requires a multi-pronged approach which recognises all the players that contribute. Hearing from teachers is a real step forward for us to enable us to understand more about this seldom-documented curriculum area and to really understand its value to students and the ways in which it can be strengthened.

International Guidelines on Sexuality Education (2009) developed by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation) available at: http://www.unesco.org/en/education/dynamic-content-single-view/news/just_published_international_guidelines_on_sexuality_education/back/9195/cHash/f9771c5c55/