

Teaching sexuality and relationships education (SRE): Getting it right for pre-service teachers.

**Dr Lorel Mayberry
February 2014**

Background

In October 2013, the Western Australian Centre for Health Promotion Research (WACHPR), School of Public Health, in partnership with the Department of Sexology and School of Education at Curtin University, was awarded the tender from the Communicable Disease Control Directorate, WA Department of Health for the *Provision of professional development services in sexual health/ sexuality and relationships education (SRE) to practising and pre-service teachers.*

This report focuses on the **pre-service** element of the tender, that is, the collection of information from pre-service teachers that will be used to plan, develop, pilot and evaluate a specific course/unit in SRE. This unit will be situated within the School of Education at Curtin University but offered to students from all universities in Perth (Curtin, ECU, Murdoch, UWA and Notre Dame).

As a component of the planning and development of the unit, the tender called for a focus group to be facilitated with a minimum of 10 pre-service teachers. From November 2013 to February 2014, Dr Lorel Mayberry gathered information from 15 pre-service teachers about the content and assessments of the proposed unit.

Introduction

Lorel held a focus group with eight students on November 2nd 2013 at Curtin University. The timing of the email recruitment invitation and the focus group was strategic to ensure feedback was gained from students prior to the end of semester. Whilst many other students expressed their willingness to participate in the focus groups, it proved difficult to gather a large group of students in the one place at the same time. The focus group lasted for over 90 minutes.

Lorel recruited the eight students by approaching four individuals and a small group of four students who were working/eating lunch in the Student Common Room and Abacus Computer Lab in the School of Education at Curtin University.

In addition to the focus group, seven additional students provided information through written responses via email (n=6) and in an opportunistic discussion (n=1). The six respondents, who emailed their responses, had been forwarded the focus questions and explanatory email by another participant or a colleague known to the researcher. See Appendix 1 – *Email to pre-service teachers*. The opportunistic interview was conducted in February, 2014.

Discussion comments and the written responses were designed to gather information from the pre-service teachers in regard to the following questions:

1. How do you feel about talking about sexuality with children/young people?
2. How competent do you think you are to teach *sexuality education and relationships education (SRE)*?
3. What would you like to see covered in a unit about teaching *sexuality and relationships education (SRE)*?
4. What assessments would be the most relevant for you?

Abbreviations

ECU – Edith Cowan University

UWA – University of Western Australia

ECE – Early Childhood Education pre-service teachers

Pr – Primary Education pre-service teachers

Sec – Secondary Education pre-service teachers

Participants' demographics

Fifteen participants responded to the four questions – see Table 1 below for a breakdown of the participants' gender; the university they are attending and the pre-service course they are enrolled in; and the method of data collection.

Table 1. Participants' demographics

Participants							
Gender	Age	Pre-service university	Course	Data collection			
female n=10	18-21 n=9	Curtin n=11	ECE n=2	Focus group n=8			
male n=4	22-26 n=2	Murdoch n=2	Primary 6	Email n=6			
transgender n=1	> 26 n=3	ECU n=1	Secondary n=7	Phone n=1			
	unknown n=1	Notre Dame n=1					
15	15	15	15	15		TOTALS	15

Eight participants took part in the focus group/interviews at the Faculty of Education, Curtin University:

- 6 female and 2 male
- Of those participants - 7 students were 18-21 years old; 1 student was older than 26 years old

Six participants emailed their responses:

- 3 females, 2 males, 1 transgender
- Of those participants - 3 students were 18-21 years old; 2 students were older than 26 years old; 1 – age unknown
- 5 students were forwarded the questions via an email from another participant or via a contact known to the researcher

1 participant participated in a phone interview:

- 1 female – 24 years old

Pre-service teachers' perspectives

Question 1: How do you feel about talking about sexuality with children/young people?

Seven participants felt confident to discuss sexuality with their students. The reasons they gave for this confidence included:

- *"Mum was a nurse and taught me about my body."*
- *"Studying sexology gave me confidence." (n=5)*

Eight participants did not feel confident to discuss sexuality with their future students. Some examples of comments were:

- *"I have no sexuality education from my parents. I also don't think parents of students are in favour of their children knowing too much about sex too early." (Pri)*
 - *"I would freak out – hell what would I say?"*
 - *"I have no idea about what to say and where to start."*
 - *"Young children don't need to know about sex - not really relevant for me." (Pri)*
 - *"We did a health/phys ed unit and it was useless – almost nothing about health at all and nothing that was at all controversial like sex or drugs." (Curtin Pri)*
 - *"It is just not me. I wouldn't teach that." (Sec)*
 - *"I will teach maths and science subjects – I don't want to teach that."*
 - *"I don't think the parents would like that being discussed. No I don't feel confident." (Sec)*
 - *"I would freeze. I don't think all teachers are up to teaching about sex. This hasn't been covered in the course [secondary teaching]. I think students go and see the school nurse if they have those sort of problems and questions."*

Five pre-service teachers had completed at least one of the undergraduate sexology units at Curtin University. All of the former sexology students expressed their willingness to discuss sexuality. One of the participants who had completed two sexology units said:

I have studied sexology and I feel entirely comfortable, but I don't think I am the norm. I think many adults think children/teenagers aren't "ready" to talk about sexuality or that it isn't appropriate, or that they'll offend someone and it's all too hard. Not talking about sex with young people doesn't make them not do it – it just makes them do it unsafely, or feel shame because they think they're abnormal, or hide something because they're afraid to ask or misunderstand something about their own development. I believe all aspects of sexuality should be covered in schools – it is an integral part of being human. It is the job of the adults, including the parents, to make it safe and comfortable to talk about.

Seven of 15 pre-service teachers indicated some degree of confidence to discuss sexuality, and of those seven, five were former sexology students.

The most common reason for respondents' lack of willingness to discuss sexuality with future students was a lack of knowledge about 'what to say' and 'how much to say'. Fear of parent reactions was uppermost for eight respondents. Five pre-service secondary teachers were adamant that they would not be expected to teach sexuality education in their roles as maths/science/biology teachers. One student said, *"I don't think sexuality is part of a pre-schooler's life. I don't know but I think that sort of topic starts at high school."*

Question 2: How competent do you think you are to teach SRE?

With few exceptions, the pre-service teachers reported not being competent to teach SRE. They cited a number of reasons including:

- *"I wouldn't know what to teach or how to approach it." "I haven't seen it taught when I have been on prac." (n=12)*
- *"I would be scared that parents would not agree and therefore not give their permission." (n=10)*
- *"We haven't learnt anything about the curriculum or where to get lesson ideas from. Is there any materials that make this a little easier?" (n=5)*
- *"I would feel nervous about the sort of questions I would get." (n=4)*
- *"I don't think all secondary school teachers have to teach this subject. I think the phys ed teachers do that – and that's not me."*
- *"Not competent at all – I will be working in a Catholic School and they don't teach about sex."*
- *"I think this should be covered at uni in our teaching course. We have covered nothing about sexuality. At this point, I think it is something I would avoid if I could."*
- *"I know a little bit about STIs and contraception but I don't think I would teach that to primary students."*
- *"I think it is a very important subject in terms of both sexuality and relationships in life however I feel nervous about introducing the subject. To find a 'hook' to engage students and strategies to deal with sensitive topics would make me feel more confident."*

With the exception of three, who had studied sexology, no one mentioned the WA materials/online resources *Growing and developing healthy relationships*. The former sexology students were also aware of sexual health agencies. One said, "I might not know what to teach when and for what age, but I know lots of resources and agencies." Another said, *"I have learnt an immense amount in Sexology 280 and think it would be an ideal unit to include in into the education degrees. It was on my last prac with a year 6/7 class that I*

actually spoke to students for about 15 minutes about personal hygiene as some of them had very poor hygiene and the teacher told me he was simply too embarrassed to say anything”.

Almost half the participants said or implied that they would not teach SRE. The reasons included: unaware that primary or ECE teachers taught SRE; uncomfortable and, therefore, would avoid teaching SRE; a belief that school students would be difficult to ‘control’ in SRE classes and questions could be embarrassing; fear of the reaction of others, eg. parents and other teachers; lack of SRE role models; and lack of knowledge about SRE content and strategies.

Question 3: What would you like to see covered in a unit about teaching SRE?

Whilst some participants focused on the ‘biology’ of sexuality (eg. reproduction, contraception, STI’s, anatomy), many participants commented more broadly on sexuality related topics. The topics cited included:

- Correct language/terminology of body parts, puberty. (n=8)
- *“How to stop the backlash and get parents onside.”* (n=8)
- STI’s – causes, signs and symptoms, treatment and where to seek help. (n=7)
- *“Stopping young people getting pregnant.”* Reproduction, pregnancy and contraception. (n=7)
- *“Current and not boring”; “relevant”; “interactive and learning from others” “getting students to participate and feel safe to talk.”* (n=7)
- Resources (n=6) *“How to use GDHR – I heard about it in sexology but I would like time to discuss this.”*
- *“Gender roles and sexual diversity.”* (n=5)
- *“Answering tricky questions.”* (n=4)
- *“Dangers of the internet and media,”* sexting and porn. (n=4)
- *“How to cover the emotional topics such as rejection, first time sex, staying a virgin.”* (n=4)
- *“More on agencies that can help – I know about FPWA and SARC.”* (n=3)
- *“Sex toys.”* (n=1)
- *“Assessing lessons.”* (n=1)

Two participants, who had studied sexology previously, said:

- *“I think this education would make a big difference when it comes to children and sexual abuse. Date rape and other risky events should be discussed. Plus personal hygiene, awareness of sexual infections, contraception and simply knowing more*

about your own body. Talk about pleasure, not just the negatives. Knowing that everyone is different and deserves respect. We are all sexual beings.”

- *“I would like to see the elimination of the words ‘dirty’ and ‘wrong’ within an adolescent’s thoughts towards sexuality. They need to learn to feel comfortable with their thoughts and feelings about their own sexuality. I would also like to learn how to teach about things like pleasure and intimacy as well as the basic STI and pregnancy information that students are given.”*

These two responses above show a broader awareness of sexuality beyond the biological aspects. They see the benefit in taking a positive approach to sexuality education with opportunities for examining attitudes and values related to sexuality; affirming diversity; and reducing risky behaviours.

Whilst the majority of respondents focussed on the sexuality **topics**, some requested information on relevant resources, strategies and curriculum. Almost half of the participants requested information that could come under the umbrella of ‘creating a conducive environment’ for discussing sexual health and relationships. For example, *“safety to ask questions”, “how to build confidence for our students to talk about sex”, and “how to set respect for guidelines in the class”*. One student mentioned ‘assessment of SRE’.

Question 4: What assessments would be the most relevant for you?

Assessments are a necessary aspect of university courses, including Education courses. With this in mind, respondents were questioned about relevant assessment items. This question drew opposing responses. The most relevant university assessment (7) was reported as oral presentations. *“As a Group or individually, present a lesson – gives us a large range of ideas.” “Present different strategies for grouping students or getting pupils talking.”* Two participants, however, wrote of their dislike for group work. *“Anything but group projects – unfair for the hardest workers and others can cruise.”*

Five participants mentioned writing a program or lesson plans. One said, *“Make it real and something we can actually use on prac and in our future class.”*

Two said that gathering teaching resources, eg. pamphlets, websites, worksheets, would be useful.

Reflective writing was mentioned by two participants because reflection papers could “provide a good opportunity for people to talk privately about their reaction to the content and their confidence with teaching it”.

The other assessments were: professional papers on sexuality topics (5); e-test (1); and debating a topic (1).

The creation of a program in teaching something to do with sexuality or perhaps a research project where we could interview students confidentially about what they would like to learn then report back to the class.

This respondent referred to a research project. Due to the time constraints of a semester, information from current research could be incorporated into the unit and not as a distinct research project. This research could include: school students’ perceptions of SRE; school students’ knowledge; and attitudes/values and skills in relation to sexuality and relationships.

In summary, pre-service teachers appeared to value assessments that involved them discussing, debating and presenting about sexuality topics. Reaction to group projects was mixed. The written assessments cited as the most relevant for them were compiling lessons, and writing a professional paper on a controversial topic related to the unit.

Unsolicited comments:

Seven students spoke openly or wrote that they recognised the importance of sexuality education. Responses included:

- “I never received any kind of sex education at school and really wish that I had.”
- “I want to teach in the special area because I think I will get to know my students at a much deeper level.” [Sec]
- “I will be the first person to enrol in this new unit.”
- “Good luck getting this happening. I need it and I am sure I am not the only one.”
- “I believe all aspects of sexuality should be covered in schools – it is an integral part of being human. It is the job of the adults to make it safe and comfortable to talk about.”
- “I am disappointed I miss out because I am finishing this semester.”

Recommendations

It is clear from the responses that pre-service teachers feel that there is a lack of SRE within their pre-service courses. With the exception of the five participants who had previously studied sexology units at Curtin University, participants lacked confidence in and awareness of the content, ie. the breadth of topics covered in SRE.

Although seven participants expressed positive comments about a unit educating about SRE, very few participants reported they were confident or competent to teach in this area. Participants had limited, or no knowledge, about relevant curriculum materials and resources (such as health agencies). They feared parent or community 'backlash' if they taught controversial topics in SRE and seemed unaware of the importance of working in partnership with parents. There was a strong sense that, for many, if they could avoid teaching SRE they would.

With these findings in mind, the recommendations fall into four major categories.

1. Confidence and SRE content

Firstly, increasing the students' **confidence** to teach SRE is essential. This is intertwined with opportunities to explore values, beliefs and attitudes, access to the key **content** and observing best practices or effective **strategies** for teaching SRE. Many respondents focused on the sexuality topics, rather than the knowledge, skills and attributes required to plan, teach and evaluate SRE. With limited time allocated for this unit (one semester - 3 hours per week for 12 weeks), it would not be possible, nor appropriate, to focus on the key sexuality content (biological, social and psychological). Sexology 280 and 380, which are undergraduate unit/s, are available from the Department of Sexology at Curtin University.

While it is important to take into account pre-service teachers' views on the content of an SRE unit, more than half the respondents showed that they were not conversant with the many dimensions of sexuality. They, therefore, have a limited view of the full array of topics they could be required to teach in a comprehensive SRE curriculum. In addition, very few respondents appeared to be aware of existing SRE curriculum and frameworks.

The SRE unit should:

- situate SRE explicitly within the current Draft Australian Curriculum: HPE (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority [ACARA]); and K-10 Syllabus overview HPE (WA School Curriculum and Standards Authority [SCSA]);

- reflect evidence-based research that supports the need for, and the value of, effective comprehensive SRE;
- be positive in focus and inclusive of gender, diversity, and sexual orientation;
- model strategies and resources that explore the multiple aspects of sexuality including biological, social, psychological, cultural, legal and spiritual.
- provide opportunities to tackle sensitive issues, eg. answering tricky questions; presenting to peers on a relevant sexual health topic; considering dilemmas; responding to discrimination;
- model and demonstrate strategies for nurturing a safe, supportive classroom environment;
- highlight the importance of a cross-curricular approach;
- explore effective tools for assessing SRE;
- include university assessments/assignments that are practical and transferable to a classroom environment;
- encourage pre-service teachers to expand their knowledge of sexuality, and explore their attitudes and values by enrolling in Sexology 280 & 380 in Sexology, Curtin University; and
- inform pre-service teachers about professional development opportunities locally, eg. Quarterly Forums (Department of Health, WA), nationally and internationally to keep current in SRE.

2. Resources

Secondly, provide pre-service teachers with how to access the multitude of quality **resources** that are available to enhance the effective teaching of SRE. The ability to critically assess resources should also be included. Resources include:

- WA online comprehensive resource – *Growing and developing healthy relationships*;
- other quality Australian resources such as – *Catching on early*, *Talking sexual health*, *Tagged* (Cybersafety);
- sexual health agencies eg. FPWA Sexual Health Services, Sexual Assault Resource Centre, seccca, WA AIDS Council;
- websites that support the teaching of SRE, eg. <http://www.ansellsex-ed.org.au/>; and
- quality websites and resources that are appropriate for young people, such as www.hormonefactory.org and puberty pamphlets (Department of Health, WA); and
- resources/websites suitable for specific communities, ie. Aboriginal communities and CALD, eg. *It's all one curriculum. Guidelines and activities for a unified approach to sexuality, gender, HIV and human rights education*.

3. Parents and community

Thirdly, participants were particularly concerned that they were unprepared to work with perceived **parent** and community ‘backlash’ regarding SRE. The SRE unit should:

- show evidence-based research that demonstrates parents’ support for SRE;
- examine resources for parents, eg. *Talk soon: Talk often*; and
- empower pre-service teachers to advocate for SRE and build skills to communicate with parents about SRE.

4. Promoting the pre-service unit – Semester 1, 2014

Finally, it is vital that the opportunity to enrol a unit focussing on SRE is **promoted** widely both on and off the four universities in Perth (Curtin, ECU, Murdoch, UWA and Notre Dame). Many students are unaware of the importance, broad content and positive outcomes of effective comprehensive SRE. Prior experience during their school years as well as with existing ‘health and physical education’ units may also influence the likelihood, or not, that they would enrol in an elective.

Use the opportunity to educate pre-service teachers about SRE and the topics that will be covered. Emphasise ‘what’s in it for them’. Promote the unit widely:

- email a flyer to existing database of pre-service teachers. Flyer – eg. What is SRE? The importance of SRE. Why should you enrol in the unit on SRE? Encourage them to forward the email to other students studying teaching;
- make use of PR at Curtin (Susanna) – media releases showcasing the ‘exciting new SRE unit for pre-service teachers’;
- display flyers/posters in Education faculties at all four universities. Distribute information/posters to health education coordinators at all four universities;
- make use of existing e-newsletters, eg. FPWA; and
- prior to subject enrolments for second semester, request access to education classes – give brief overview of the unit to pre-service teachers.

Conclusion

The respondents said that they want a unit that will: increase their awareness of the SRE content; enhance confidence to tackle these sensitive issues; provide strategies for positive engagement with parents; give access to relevant, stimulating programs, sexual

health agencies and resources; include relevant and practical assessment pieces; and classroom strategies for teaching comprehensive SRE effectively.

According to Leahy and McCuaig (2013) and Ollis (2010), Australian in-service teachers also lacked confidence to teach SRE, and felt unsupported to tackle this controversial area. Therefore, it is unlikely that pre-service teachers will have the opportunity to observe competent and confident teaching of SRE during their practicum experiences in their pre-service course.

This SRE unit is essential if WA pre-service teachers are to be prepared with the knowledge, skills and confidence to effectively teach evidence-based and developmentally appropriate SRE.

References

Leahy, D., & McCuaig, L. (2013). *Supporting teachers to teach relationships and sexuality education. Executive summary*. Brisbane, Qld: Family Planning Queensland.

Ollis, D. (2010). 'I haven't changed bigots but...': Reflection on the impact of teacher professional learning in sexuality education. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 10(2), 217-230.

Population Council International Sexuality and HIV Curriculum Working Group. (2009). *It's all one curriculum. Guidelines and activities for a unified approach to sexuality, gender, HIV and human rights education*. New York: Population Council.

Walsh, J. (2012). *Talk soon. Talk often. A guide for parents talking to their kids about sex*. Perth, WA: Department of Health, Government of Western Australia.

Appendix 1 – Email to pre-service teachers

Dear pre-service teacher,

I am thrilled to say that the WA Department of Health is funding the development of a new unit for pre-service teachers. This unit will focus on teaching of the sexuality (for primary and secondary teachers).

I would really appreciate it if you (and your family/friends who are enrolled in a teaching course (Education)) would respond to the 4 questions attached and email the responses back to me before next Tuesday 5th November. **Your feedback is crucial and will guide the development of the unit.**

I (Lorel) will be coordinating and facilitating this unit in second semester next year. Whilst I will be running the unit at the School of Education at Curtin University, the unit will be open to Education students enrolled **at any university**. Please keep in touch and I will send you the details of the unit (Unit name, number, etc) as soon as they become available.

Students studying at a university other than Curtin, can also attend. Once the unit is finalised and officially appearing on the system, you will need to communicate with the enrolment officer at your university and request a 'cross-institutional enrolment form'.

I urge you to encourage other teaching students to also respond to these questions. I will do my utmost to deliver a stimulating and practical unit.

Many thanks for your time.

Kind regards
Lorel

*This study has been approved under Curtin University's process for lower-risk Studies (Approval Number **SPH-77-2013**). This process complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Chapter 5.1.7 and Chapters 5.1.18-5.1.21).*

For further information on this study contact the researchers named above or the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee. c/- Office of Research and Development, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845 or by telephoning 9266 9223 or by emailing hrec@curtin.edu.au.

Dr Lorel Mayberry

Department of Sexology | School of Public Health | Faculty of Health Sciences
Researcher | WA Centre for Health Promotion Research | Curtin University
President | Borderless Friendship WA Inc | www.borderlessfriendship.org

Curtin University
Email | L.Mayberry@curtin.edu.au

Focus questions

Pre-service teaching unit – *Sexuality and relationships education (SRE)*

.....University ECE, Primary or Secondary (Please circle)

Gender Age:

1. How do you feel about talking about sexuality with children/young people?

2. How competent do you think you are to teach *sexuality and relationships education (SRE)*?

3. What would you like to see covered in a unit about teaching SRE?

4. What assessments would be the most relevant for you?

Your feedback will guide the development of a new unit for pre-service teachers. Many thanks for your participation.

Kind regards
Dr Lorel Mayberry
Department of Sexology
Curtin University, Western Australia
L.Mayberry@curtin.edu.au