

Queer Ontario

Consultative Response

Regarding the Ontario Progressive Conservative (PC) Government's Plan to Scrap the 2015 Sexual Health Education Curriculum

Date: December 15, 2018

The election of Doug Ford of the Ontario Progressive Conservatives brought with it a fulfillment of a campaign item to scrap the existing sex education curriculum that was updated in 2015. PC Education Minister, Lisa Thompson announced on July 11, 2018 that the existing Sexual Health Education program would no longer apply to Ontario Secondary school curriculum in the Fall. This produced consternation and anger among many advocates that have called for the development of accurate, evidence-based, and comprehensive sexual health education in the health curriculum in Ontario's education system.

Putting young people at risk

In light of recent events of increased awareness in the wake of the #MeToo social media movement combatting sexual harassment and gender-based and sexual violence, the elimination of sections of the curriculum pertaining to enhancing awareness around informed consent is especially worrying. With the Ontario PCs move to eliminate the 2015 Curriculum, students will no longer learn the importance of clear and honest communication with a sexual or romantic partner about aspects of negotiation and consent, including the crucial aspect of knowing that silence does not indicate consent.

Another area of concern is the clear promotion of "abstinence" from sexual activity as a way to fully guarantee safety from sexually transmitted infections (STI), including the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Not only is this message a fear-based one that attempts to promote a values-based choice to avoid unwanted pregnancies, HIV and other STIs, but it fails to account for mounting and irrefutable evidence that abstinence campaigns in fact do not lower the teenage pregnancy rates, nor the rates of sexually transmitted infections.¹ In fact, they may put young people at greater risk of adverse events due to the promotion of abstinence instead of clear, specific, and informed choices related to specific risk-behaviours. Such an approach to sex education substitutes stark moral choices instead of accurate information that increases a sense

¹ Alexander McKay, et al. *Core Principles of Comprehensive Sexual Health Education for Canadians*, Toronto: SIECCAN, 2018, Draft Edition. Accessed December 9, 2018. <http://sieccan.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SIECCAN-DRAFT-Core-Principles-of-Comprehensive-Sexual-Health-Education.pdf>

of personal control and responsibility. Moreover, comprehensive sexuality education undertaken in a respectful and non-judgmental manner promotes respect for young people's choices and their ability to make decisions based on accurate information.

Contravening the Charter of Human Rights and the Protection of Gender and Sexual Minorities

Queer Ontario is very concerned with the elimination of equity-driven gender-responsive and sexual orientation diversity. By reverting to a dangerously out-of-date 1998 curriculum, the PC Ontario government is effectively contravening important provisions of the *Canadian Charter of Human Rights* that guarantees protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

Additionally, by downplaying or eliminating the elements in the 2015 curriculum that stressed human sexual and gender diversity, the Ontario government is contravening Canada's Sexual Health Education Guidelines for comprehensive and effective sexual health information. These guidelines have implemented a broad-based human rights framework for comprehensive and effective sexuality health education that includes as one of its central philosophical pillars the following: "does not discriminate on the basis of age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, physical/cognitive abilities and religious background in terms of access to relevant, appropriate, accurate and comprehensive information."²

A Public Education Issue – Not Just a Concern for Parents

Queer Ontario recognizes sexuality education must be informed by the best social science, pedagogical, sexualities, and medical research. In addition, we recognize the need to alleviate inequalities that disproportionately set out different contexts and challenges for young people toward realizing their sexual health due to structural inequalities and cultural frameworks. Sexual health education is a crucial component to realizing education for citizenship and thus needs to be framed as a public issue -- one that parents have an important stake for the transmission of cultural values -- but not to the extent of superseding the universally accessible and publicly governed health framework provision of high-quality sexual health education.

Sigmund Freud addressed this issue in an Open Letter written in 1907 in response to a question put to him about the suitability of parents being the sole provider of sex education to their children. His response was unequivocal – sexuality education needs to remain within the framework of public education.³ Freud reminds us that adults also

² *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education*, Public Health Agency of Canada, (Ottawa: Minister of Health, 2008 Edition, p. 11). Available: <http://sieccan.org/pdf/guidelines-eng.pdf>

³ Freud, "On the Sexual Enlightenment of Children" in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Writings*, pp. 171-181, London: Penguin, 1991 [1907]. Freud writes: "There does not seem to me to be a single good reason for denying children the enlightenment which their thirst for knowledge demands. To be sure, if it is the purpose of educators to stifle the child's power of independent thought as early as possible, in

need quality sexuality education and is skeptical of parents providing sex education to their children as he sees that sexual ignorance has been cultivated in them as well. Freud considers what he calls “the sexual enlightenment of children” undertaken in public education to be fundamental to ethical citizenship.

Inclusion and participation of children and youth – A social justice framework for young people.

A sexuality social justice framework arose to address the dimensions of inequalities, participation, agency and social and political contexts in which young people reside and which affects their ability to individually and collectively realize sexual health and safety. The Sexuality Education Justice (SEJ) Framework,⁴ developed in the U.S. to combat abstinence-only education, goes further than public health frameworks for comprehensive sexuality education (as good as these are) in order to address the specific contexts and dilemmas in which culturally, sexually, and gender diverse youth face in their everyday lives as they navigate the systems of power that shape their realities. These programs aim to be specific about the realities that young people face, including their experiences and ideas within the programming and delivery of sexual health education. Their participation and ideas are built into a holistic vision of sexual health that includes the kinds of dilemmas that young people face in their everyday lives, and includes practical ways to negotiate sexual activity, recognize the impact of power relations and learn how to leverage human resources in their communities to make informed decisions about their bodies, gender identity, sexuality, relationships, and general well-being. The oft-quoted motto: Nothing about us, without us, is very relevant when it comes to generating programs for sexual health that touches on both the most intimate dimension of being human, coupled with the realities of inequalities and social relations of power that young people navigate.

Pleasure and power

Sexual health education can be improved further, and realize goals of advancing equity within its program delivery, by developing ways to address the issues of pleasure and power. Progressive critics of sexual education programs have pointed to the inordinate focus on disease, unwanted pregnancy and other adverse events that can accompany sexual behaviour; what is often neglected is the affirmation of desires, and the value of pleasure for human health and well-being. Accounts of adolescent sexuality tend to get conflated with risky behaviour, and this regime of risk becomes abstracted from a richer qualitative account of the meanings, feelings and desires that surround sexuality and its practices. Sexuality researchers Michelle Fine (1988), Deborah Tolman (2005) and

favour of the ‘goodness’ which they think so much of, they cannot set about this better than by deceiving him in sexual matters and intimidating him in matters of religion” (p. 178).

⁴ For SEJ programs see: Forward Together (2010, July 3) “Introducing the New Sex Ed: Empowered Youth Strengthening Communities!” <https://forwardtogether.org/tools/lets-get-it-on/>.

Jessica Fields (2008)⁵ offer useful frameworks in which to understand young women's "dilemmas of desire" and how they are played out with respect to racialized, classed and gendered systems of inequalities. Tolman writes that accounts of adolescent sexuality tend to get conflated with risky behaviour, and this regime of risk becomes abstracted from a richer qualitative account of the meanings, feelings and desires that surround sexuality and its practices. The meanings that girls and women produce about sexual behaviour and desire remain unaccounted for in the plethora of studies on adolescent girls' sexuality, which are mostly geared to a ruthless surveillance of sexual norms and sexual decision making "outcomes" for a range of identifiable risk factors (Tolman, 2005: 9-10). Her study, focusing on girls, is one of a small but growing number of approaches to adolescent sexuality that attends to the qualitative experiences of young people's sexual feelings, desires and practices in the context of their own lived experience. Together, these authors' studies reveal the need for young people to develop a language for their own desires, feelings and erotic practices that make them more able to voice the kinds of conundrums around embodied desire that can augment social and sexual awareness contributing to understanding gendered power arrangements to negotiate sexual pleasure-seeking.

Queer Ontario is a provincial network of gender and sexually diverse individuals — and their allies — who are committed to questioning, challenging, and reforming the laws, institutional practices, and social norms that regulate queer people. Operating under liberationist and sex-positive principles, we fight for accessibility, recognition, and pluralism, using social media and other tactics to engage in political action, public education, and coalition-building.

Contact person:

Robert Teixeira
Queer Ontario
Spokesperson

Sessional Instructor
Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences and School of Interdisciplinary Studies
Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD U)
100 McCaul Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5T 1W1

Contact information:

Email: rteixeira@faculty.ocadu.ca

⁵ Fine, M. "Sexuality, Schooling and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire." *Harvard Educational Review*, 1988, 58(1): 29-53; D. Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire, 2nd Edition*, (Cambridge: Harvard, 2005); J. Fields, *Risky Lessons: Sex Education and Social Inequality* (Rutgers, 2008).