

# Why isn't sex ed pedagogy included in formal teacher training?

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Education student Brent Saccucci says sex education in schools needs to be more realistic, comprehensive and relevant to youth. Credit: Faculty of Education

Brent Saccucci is serious about sex education. Through his work with organizations like the Comprehensive Health Education Workers (CHEW) Project, Camp fYrefly and the Edmonton Pride Centre, the fourth-year University of Alberta education student has sought out

opportunities to talk with young people and provide the information, support and resources to make positive choices about their relationships, their bodies and their health.

But Saccucci says that not all pre-service teachers in Alberta are being prepared to have those important conversations in the classroom.

"I find it really problematic that there's no formal training around [sex education](#) in teacher education programs in our province," Saccucci says. "It's not in the coursework, but it's not an elective either."

And though recent public discourse about accommodating sexual and gender minority students in public and faith-based schools seems to reflect progress in recognizing the needs of youth, Saccucci says the type and quality of sexual health information they receive in class can vary greatly, often focusing on potential negative consequences of sex such as unwanted pregnancy or [sexually transmitted infections](#).

"I think the current state is one that's not far from conservative at all. I think we've come further in understanding gender and sexual diversity as it relates to LGBTQ identities, but we find it very taboo to talk about sex itself. It makes people feel uncomfortable," he says. "I don't think a lot of pre-service teachers I've met identify as sex-positive educators—and that's part of the problem."

The vagueness of the curricular objectives set out by Alberta Education for teaching about sex and sexuality can further intimidate teachers who are already hesitant to approach a complex and sometimes difficult topic. But Saccucci says sex education in schools needs to be realistic, comprehensive and relevant to students to be effective.

## **Matching youth curriculum to youth culture**

"I think teachers who are in tune with youth culture know what they have to talk about. Like when you talk about sexual health, you have to talk to kids about porn, and if you don't talk to kids about porn you're lying to yourself," he says. "It's like saying, 'I'm only going to teach these texts from the 1920s.' They have merit, but it's not a student-centred approach so kids won't care."

André P. Grace, a professor in the U of A's Department of Educational Psychology and faculty director of the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS), agrees that it's no longer sufficient to talk about the birds and bees with a generation of students who are immersed in a digital realm with its particular set of hazards, from online pornography to sexting.

"We have to recognize who adolescents are today, the ways they socialize, the power of the Internet in their lives, the fact that they are becoming sexually active at younger and younger ages, and so we need to be really up front about all of these topics in the classroom," Grace says.

## **Sexual health linked with mental health**

The need for comprehensive [sexual health education](#) is even greater for students who may be struggling with questions about their sexual or gender identity, Grace says.

"The connection we make is that your sexual health is directly related to your [mental health](#). So youth, particularly sexual and gender minority youth, if they are expressing stress over who they are as sexual and gendered people, that can lead them to make poor decisions about engaging in sex," Grace says. "But as my research indicates, there isn't even a set curriculum fully implemented across high schools in Edmonton Public. There are no instructional objectives that specifically focus on what sexual and gender minority students need to know to be

healthy and safe. If these students get any sexual [health education](#) at all, it tends to focus on heterosexuals and not on LGBTQ youth."

The CHEW Project, which Grace helped found with support from the Public Health Agency of Canada in 2014, was formed in response to rising rates of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections among 15- to 29-year-olds in Edmonton. The CHEW Project works with a growing contingent of HIV-positive young people, and staff members have dealt with a number of suicides since the project began. While more oriented toward providing services to youth with pressing sexual health needs, Grace says the CHEW Project does accept invitations to present in classrooms, but that this is a stopgap measure requiring a more permanent solution.

"I think we're at a point in this province where programs like the CHEW Project or programs provided by the Calgary Sexual Health Centre are doing work the schools should be doing in core curriculum and instruction. We're happy to do it, but our outreach only reaches a portion of the total student population. It would be nice to see schools doing this work for all students in their care, doing it well, and just bringing us in as a resource."

Grace says sexual health education shouldn't be peripheral to core educational requirements, but it's up to the province to provide teachers with sufficient learning objectives, guidelines and policies that support them in their specific educational setting.

"Our ministry of education needs to do a better job in providing a core curriculum for sexual health education that is inclusive and is pretty explicit in addressing topics like consent, cybersex, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, all these things kids need to know about," he says. "We need to talk about the connection between mental health and sexual health and get teachers very aware that, based on

where a young person is in terms of their cognitive development, that really impacts how they need to talk about sexual health. It has to be done in age-appropriate ways and with the holistic development of the young person in mind."

## **"Policy is protection"**

Grace adds that the recent controversy about policies to accommodate sexual and gender minority students in Alberta's faith-based schools overlooks the fact that public school efforts to develop those policies have followed a similar trajectory involving diverse interest groups and perspectives. As Grace points out, making space for sexual and gender minority students in our schools has never been easy.

"I don't think we should say public schools are doing it well and Catholic schools need to do a better job, because the reality is all schools are called to do a really good job when it comes to [sexual health](#) education," Grace says. "I think in the Catholic and public school contexts there are lots of people who genuinely want the best for children and youth, and are doing their best in some difficult situations to make sure culturally difficult policy happens. The policy-making is a huge piece, because policy is protection, and once you have policy in place you can think about regulations at the district level that allow you to implement the policy properly."

Until provincial education policies and teacher education catch up with the need for comprehensive health education in Alberta schools, Saccucci says he'll continue to work with the CHEW Project and other community organizations to make sure youth are getting the information and supports they need.

"We know that teaching sex education doesn't promote sex," Saccucci says. "We know that the biggest benefit of sex ed is that students feel

they have control over their bodies and have more meaningful relationships. To ignore those things is a disservice to them."

Provided by University of Alberta

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