



With respect to consent: The language of sex education

In 2020, teachers and students at a NSW public school took part in a study about the language of sex education. This report summarises the study, including why it was done, who took part and the results of the research.

The full results of the study are available via the QR code or through the University Library: Carr, G. (2023) [*With respect to consent: The language of sex education*](#). The University of Sydney: Sydney, Australia.



SCAN HERE FOR RESULTS

What was the motivation for the study?

- Sex education has been shown to improve a range of outcomes, including health outcomes like increased use of condoms, and social outcomes like greater confidence and self-identity (UNESCO 2018).
- Most research in sex education comes from medicine/public health and usually focuses on outcomes that can be quantified. Typically, researchers will take a before-and-after snapshot – looking at a particular measure (e.g. the rates of Chlamydia, students' knowledge about different types of contraception) and seeing if it improves after receiving sex education. This style of research has provided plenty of evidence that sex education can have a positive impact, but relatively little is known about what goes on in these classrooms in order to lead to those outcomes.
- This study thus sought to describe **what actually goes on inside sex education classrooms**. It filmed sex education lessons over the course of a school term and analysed the teaching practices in detail.

Who took part in the study?

- Two Personal Development, Health & Physical Education (PDHPE) teachers, one man and one woman, and some of the students in their classes
- The study followed these two teachers during a 10-week unit on sex education in year 9 (Stage 5, students approx. 15-16 years old)

What was the school profile?

- All-girls Sydney public school
- Median SES (ACARA 2020)
- Mainstream but with some gifted and talented classes
- High proportion of students who speak a language other than English
- Significant refugee cohort

What did the study involve?

- Filming sex education lessons for 10 weeks (15 lessons) from July-September 2020
- Collecting assessment tasks written by students
- Interviewing the teachers before and after the school term

How was the data analysed?

The data was analysed using tools from educational linguistics, specifically Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL, Halliday & Matthiessen 2014) and genre pedagogy (Rose & Martin 2012). These approaches have been used to study primary, secondary and tertiary education across a range of subjects, including English, science, history and business studies.

What did the study find?

The major findings of this study relate to two topics: **consent** and **respect**.

Consent

- Consent is taught in relation to the law, with a **technical legal definition**
- Students have to understand the legal definition of consent, but they also have to **understand how to apply this law in everyday life** (e.g. *What if both people are really drunk, can there be consent? What if he took the condom off part way without telling her, is that consent?*)



- One of the outputs of this study is a **teaching resource** which links the **law on consent** with how this might look in a **real situation**
- This resource also breaks down the legal definition into a series of questions that develops a '**consent checklist**' (e.g. *Do you want to?* and *Are you being honest?*)



Respect

- Respect is taught by **making it a value** that the class and school rallies around
- Respect **can mean a lot of different things**: it can be something you do (e.g. *you respect the other person*), something you are (e.g. *we are respectful and kind to each other*) and an abstract concept all on its own (e.g. *respect is really important*)
- Once respect has been established as a **shared value**, it is used to discuss all sorts of different topics and scenarios where people have conflicting opinions
- Respect is useful for understanding **how to behave towards others** in these scenarios even if you have mixed or negative feelings (e.g. *It's OK feel a little bit freaked out, but we need to still be respectful*)



- One of the outputs of this study is a **teaching resource** which outlines **strategies for navigating complex topics** that are covered in sex education. Some of the strategies include recognising different opinions (e.g. *different people have different views on this...*) and separating feelings from behaviours (e.g. *Regardless of how you feel, regardless of whether you culturally or religiously disagree with them, those people deserve to be treated with that same respect*)

What did teachers think of the study?

"I was really really pleased with how this unit went, I think I've probably enjoyed teaching this unit the most out of any in a long time. Not just in what I was doing, but the way the kids were interacting with what we were doing and opening up and being really involved in what we were doing too. So I could see that they were getting a huge amount of benefit out of the lessons, it wasn't just me getting all excited about the topic."

"My class seems to understand consent really really well which, thank god. If they got nothing else out of the entire topic, I'm glad they understood that."

"I don't know if I've ever quite had a class that was so different in some of their views, this class had a really a huge mix. Which was a great thing at times, and also a difficult thing at times. It's not like that's a regular teaching problem, but just **with this topic there was a little more diversity of opinion and thought.**"

Where can I learn more about the study?

- The full results of the study can be accessed through [The University of Sydney Library](#)
- In the future, the results from this study will appear in academic publications such as books and journals. The students who took part in this study, and the school itself, will remain anonymous. The teachers in this study agreed to be identified, and so their names and images may appear in publications of this research.
- For more information about the study, including any publications, contact: georgia.carr@sydney.edu.au

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This project was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (Project Number 2019/820) and the State Education Research Approvals Process (SERAP 2019354) and conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

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