

Respectful relationships curriculum aims to change a generation

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Victoria is leading the way in educating students about respectful relationships, gender differences and family violence but it's a minefield of sensitivities about definitions and levels of responsibility.

Twenty two year-old Joely Mitchell's public high school in Melbourne's north-east gave her a crash course in gender inequality issues – for all the wrong reasons.

The school offered an elective called "girl's science", which excluded boys, who were busied by that other science – conventionally known as science. But girls learnt how to make soap, moisturiser and make-up.



Campaigning for change: Rosie Batty has been at the forefront of educating the community about family violence. *Eddie Jim*

There was also the rating system the boys devised in year seven to assess girls' attractiveness.

"Having that from an early age completely dictates how you feel about yourself and your self-worth," says Mitchell. "It makes you think, 'Oh crap, all these boys care about is how I look.'

She recalls all these distinctions and divisions as hard to deal with as a teenager even though "when I was that young I didn't necessarily attribute that to gender inequality or anything like that".

If Mitchell was 12 now, instead of 22, she might have a completely different experience at secondary school. She'd be entering an educational system that the Andrews government hopes will have a significant role in improving a generation's interpersonal relations.

Now, the Victorian government is tackling these issues by introducing respectful relationships education (RRE) into the curriculum from prep to year 10. RRE, along with the Safe Schools

program supporting sexual and gender diversity and Victoria's recently concluded [Royal Commission into Family Violence](#), has put gender relations front and centre across the state, in a way unheard of when Joely Mitchell was at school.

A spokesperson for Victoria's Education Minister James Merlino says the RRE program aims to help students build healthy relationships and challenge the negative attitudes – including prejudice, discrimination and harassment – that can lead to violence. It will be included in the health and physical education and personal and social capacity domains of the Victorian curriculum.

Our Watch, the non-profit campaigner to end violence against women and children, is evaluating the pilot study Respectful Relationships Education in Schools (RREiS), which was a trial of RRE in 19 Victorian state secondary schools in years eight-10. Our Watch is assessing its impact on knowledge, attitudes and school culture and will pass its evaluation to the Victorian department of education and training (DET) before the end of next month.

Cara Gleeson, Our Watch's policy and projects manager for children and young people, says Our Watch is part of an ensemble of advocates and key organisations in the violence prevention sector.

"There have been fantastic high-level commitments to make changes to curriculum and to syllabus ... but we know this work is complex and schools and teachers require ongoing support, resources and training if they are able to integrate this work into the way they educate Australian children," she said.

Last December, Our Watch issued a report "Respectful Relationships Education in Schools", which examined the power of the Australian education system to address gender-based violence.

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Emily Maguire, CEO of the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria

Our Watch conducted a review of best practice in RRE informed by an analysis of more than 60 reports, evaluations, papers and articles, filtering international and national evidence into seven key elements of good practice RRE.

Gleeson says it's still unknown how Australian governments will use this in their vision of RRE in schools.

The report shows that one of the central tenets of best-practice RRE is a whole-school approach to RRE, promoting gender equality and addressing the drivers of gender-based violence wherever in the school it is.

Belinda O'Meara is the student wellbeing co-ordinator at Gisborne Secondary College, one of the 19 Victorian schools who participated in the RREiS trials.

She says implementing a whole-school approach to RRE required leadership briefings, whole-staff briefings, staff training and curriculum training.

"If the government wants this to be effectively delivered in all schools, it needs to invest in staff training and trust in those teachers to deliver the curriculum to meet the needs of their students," she said.

"I understand that you don't want to dilute the program, but it must be adapted to the school situation."

A 2012 University of Wollongong paper evaluated similar programs in schools and said respectful relationships educators shouldn't be surprised to find uneven results.

Mitchell says the programs she recalls during high school were a little shoddy.

"You'd all sit in a circle and you'd be told to close your eyes and they'd ask you to put your hand up if you weren't happy with a part of your body or whatever," she says. "Everyone would put their hands up and everyone would open their eyes and everyone would have their hands in the air."

"Those sort of classes that we would have maybe once every two years were just really awkward."

Deakin University RRE expert Dr Debbie Ollis says some in the education sector are more at ease with the term RRE (the solution) than GBV (the problem).

"Back in 2010, there was quite a bit of opposition from the male teachers who said, 'Look, I'm really happy using this term respectful relationships. I can understand that. But I don't like this thing called gender-based violence.'

"But in some ways I think it's trying to build support and bring people on board."

"I've been a real critic of using that term [RRE] but over time I've come to understand that it really has built some bridges and it has been a way to bring people on board."

Emily Maguire, CEO of the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, says the term "respectful relationships", on the other hand, is problematic for some because it doesn't explicitly denote gendered-violence and intimate relationships.

"You say respectful relationships to people on the street and they will think bullying," she says.

The 2014 report "School-Related Gender-Based Violence", a background research paper prepared for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, identifies that the social construct of gender is "often conflated with 'female' ",so that GBV is often interpreted to mean "violence against women".

But violence is perpetrated within and across gender lines, the report adds.

Maguire says the ambiguity of GBV can be problematic but it has political merits.

"It was a political decision to try to make something palatable to a broader population," says Maguire, of the term GBV. "Now with Rosie Batty, we all talk about family violence and violence against women and it's not as confronting for people.

"In 2008-2009, when the term started to be used, talking about violence against women or a feminist approach to something was quite confronting for people."

The term GBV also covers family violence, domestic violence and men's violence against women. As a result, sometimes, two people talking about GBV can be talking about two different things.

Our Watch's evidence paper uses GBV in place of "violence against

women" because the former better reaches its audience.

RRE is also acknowledged to have crossover resonance for violence issues experienced by same-sex attracted, queer, intersex and trans young people.

"Men mostly perpetrate all of the violence against everyone," says Maguire. "However men are also mostly the victims of violence, but the violence they experience is different.

"All we're saying is that you need to have different approaches.

"In order to address men's violence against women, you need to have a particular approach and then to address men's violence against other men, you need to have a particular approach."

Best practice indicates the approach to RRE needs to be overtly feminist.

Catherine Manning, CEO of RRE provider SEED Workshops, says part of her workshops educate students about feminism, exploring its history through women's suffrage and other historical struggles and achievements.

Usually, she says, the most resistance is from those who know the least.

In some instances schools perceived feminism as a threat to their ideology and religion.

"One male teacher whose students absolutely loved the program – their feedback was fantastic – emailed and said that he felt it was a bit of a feminist agenda," says Manning.

"I sent him a link to scholarly articles and recent events in the media

that have pointed out the links between gendered violence and attitudes towards women, and he came around in the end."

"A High Price to Pay", a November 2015 report prepared by PricewaterhouseCoopers Australia for Our Watch and VicHealth, estimates violence against women costs Australia \$21.7 billion per year.

Our Watch's report highlights figures that show, in Australia, an average of one woman a week is murdered by a current or former partner and thousands more are injured or live in fear; one in three women has experienced physical assault and one in five sexual assault; one in four have also experienced violence perpetrated by an intimate partner.

Dr Samara McPhedran, a senior research fellow in Griffith University's violence research and prevention program, says homicide data in Australia is the most reliable because it's a crime that almost always registers on the police radar, but there are barriers to measuring all the nuances that define the problem of violence in general.

"Our official statistics tend to under-report what's going on," says McPhedran. "And if you look at community-based surveys, they are a better way to get a picture of how common the problem really is. But again, those surveys are generally based on a sample of people taken as representative of an entire population and that might not be correct..."

Our Watch's report adopts a broad definition of violence against women that includes physical, sexual, emotional, cultural/spiritual violence and financial abuse inside and outside the domestic setting.

Getting a really clear picture beyond key statistics on how much GBV is occurring is extremely difficult, according to McPhedran.

"A lot of violence can go unreported and it's very difficult to get an accurate picture of what's really happening in the community," says McPhedran.

Types of violence problems can also be defined in individual communities, as shown by Griffith University's "The Preventing Youth Sexual Violence and Abuse in West Cairns and Aurukun Report" (withheld for three years by Queensland government before its March 2016 release), which shows the annual rate of sexual offences in one far-north Queensland community is 6.6 times more than the rest of Queensland.

Gleeson says many in violence prevention say the figures haven't historically ignited a proportionate response.

"This is an area that has never received an adequate amount of funding as of yet (they say)," she says.

Maguire says one of the problems of talking about social issues such as GBV within schools is that issues get pitted against one another.

"You talk about racism or homophobia or bullying or violence against women; those things are not seen as school core business and we compete with each other for time..."

"Gender inequality is everywhere. We need to address it but we need to address it in a way that supports the intentions and activities of all of those other social justice issues."