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What are Quebec children being taught in sex ed about gender identity?

It might not be what you think, and it might not be as much as you think.

Hayley Juhl • Montreal Gazette

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Laval Junior Academy teacher Katie Vrugink doesn't think Quebec's mandated five to 10 hours of sexuality education is enough. If the curriculum were to change and she was forbidden from discussing gender in the classroom, she'd consider a different career path, she says. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Sexuality education has become a flashpoint for protests in Montreal and across Canada in recent months, sparked by anger over gender-neutral washrooms and the institution of pronoun policies in various schools. The anti-LGBTQ2+ rhetoric has gotten louder and the entirety of the sex ed system has come under the microscope.

Many protesters believe sexuality should be taught only by parents and that gender discussions have no place in the classroom.

Parents are left to wonder: What exactly is being taught in Quebec classrooms about sex and gender? Are children being recruited onto a woke bandwagon, as some politicians have suggested.

For teachers and leading experts in the field of gender study, those lingering questions about sexuality education must be addressed. The more parents understand the education process, the less fear there will

be, they say. In fact, many experts argue the curriculum doesn't go far enough to explain the existence — and needs — of those whose identities do not neatly fall into male or female categories.

Concordia University's Simone de Beauvoir Institute principal Kimberely Manning, a researcher who has worked for more than a decade with parents of trans youth, says schools have a responsibility to meet the challenge of a diverse society, "and right now, we're not meeting that bar."

We're talking about the next generation of young people, Manning says.

"They need to have adults who are guiding them through what is a very tricky, challenging time at a very frightening moment in history. They need to be shepherded through this time so they don't end up targeting people because they're different."

Manning points to the politicization of the issue in the United States, where trans youth are easy scapegoats because most of them don't vote and because it gets the evangelical base "fired up." Those issues have been translated into the Canadian context, she says.

Schools can be incredibly hostile places and Manning believes youth should be introduced to different ways of understanding and expressing gender across cultures and history.

"I'll be frank," Manning says. "In Quebec, there is no training in place in a systematic way for educators."



That the sex ed curriculum starts at a young age in school scares people, says Jamie Quinn, the pedagogical consultant in sexuality education for the English Montreal School Board, “but sexuality is so much more than intercourse — it’s about the whole human being, who we are, what we like, what our interests are.” PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

Sexuality education has been in Quebec schools for 40 years, but today’s mandatory curriculum was only introduced in 2018. It is designed to guide students to understand themselves, navigate interpersonal relationships and develop good judgment. It begins in kindergarten, when students learn the correct names for body parts.

That it starts that young scares people, says Jamie Quinn, the pedagogical consultant in sexuality education for the English Montreal School Board, “but sexuality is so much more than intercourse — it’s about the whole human being, who we are, what we like, what our interests are. It’s giving them the tools to be able to properly communicate about their own bodies.”



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“A child tells their parent, ‘I heard penis’ or ‘I heard vulva in my class today’ and then the parent with their adult brain goes, ‘Oh my God, my child learned about sex,’ whereas in a child’s brain, they learned a new word,” Quinn says. “Mommy calls it a ‘peepee’ but they’ve learned the word ‘penis.’ It used to be ‘butterfly,’ but now they know ‘vulva.’”

She calls it a comprehensive sexuality education based on accurate information, values and equality. The content builds progressively as children move through the grades and in no way supercedes a parent’s right to teach their children, she says.

“As educators, we want to encourage parents to be involved, we’re complementing each other,” Quinn says. “Parents have the opportunity to say to their children, ‘OK, that exists in the world, but in our family, we do it this way.’”

The existence of gender roles and stereotypes and the importance of respect for differences are introduced in school to 6-to-7-year-olds. They begin to look critically at stereotypes when they are around 8. The next step, when they are 9 to 10, is to consider inequalities between genders and how gender norms affect how they express themselves.

As they near the end of elementary school, they talk about how discrimination based on gender expression and identity or sexual orientation affects people. They are asked to consider their role in respecting diversity.

By high school, the curriculum turns to the role of puberty and how representations in media and society affect their identities. They consider how one can be comfortable with their sexuality throughout their lives.

“Identity is really difficult for parents because they don’t want their child to be different from anyone else,” Quinn says. “We know what being different in society can look like. We don’t want to put our child in a situation where they aren’t secure. That makes them a target for discrimination.”

For trans kids, Manning says, “parents are often dragged into this process, including by young children, very reluctantly because it’s terrifying. The terror is not so much about who their child is, but about the kinds of transphobia their child will experience as they age. Even young people who have very loving relationships with their parents may not feel safe coming out to their parents because there’s a lot to lose.”



Joanna Johnson in her classroom at a private high school in Toronto. She integrates sex ed into all her classes, from social studies to history. Photo courtesy of Joanna Johnson, Instagram mon

People don't "just decide on a gender identity," says retired Concordia University professor Hilary Rose, who has graduate degrees in child and family development. She has published research on LGB youth, family policy and at-risk youth.

"It would be like deciding on our skin colour or our height," Rose says. "It's not easy to transition — it's extremely difficult — it's not something children just 'decide' to do one day."

Rose notes that in Saskatchewan youth under 16 require parental permission before they can change their name, while they can get an abortion at any age without telling their family. The age restriction for both in Quebec is 14, she says: "Developmentally, I think 14 is a reasonable age at which youth can begin to assert their own needs and rights without parental consent."

Changing a name or pronoun before starting high school avoids administrative and social repercussions, she says.

"If youth have to wait until 16 to change their name without parental permission (due to fear of family rejection, getting kicked out of the house, physical and emotional violence), they are already close to finishing high school, and they have spent four or five years living with a name that does not reflect who they are — imagine what that does to their mental health."

Transgender youth are 7.6 times more likely to attempt suicide than other youth, according to a study published in 2022 in the Canadian Medical Association Journal.

Manning notes: "To the extent they're experiencing harm, then the rights of parents, by law, are moot."

For Joanna Johnson, a teacher at a Toronto private high school who has more than 2.6 million followers on TikTok (as @unlearn16), "this isn't about indoctrination, this is about education."

When Johnson teaches political science to Grade 12 students, "there's a whole section in the textbook on LGBTQ2+ rights," she says. When she's teaching history class, HIV comes up — "and I can't speak about HIV without speaking about how you transmit HIV, which is incredibly important."

She says "we do a huge friggin' disservice" to children by not talking about such issues. "I'm not going to hold hostage education about things that are legitimately putting people and lives at risk because of something you want to hide from your kid. I can't do that for you."

In Quebec, parents cannot opt out of sexuality education, though there are measures in place if a family believes their child should be exempted from a portion of the content. The parents must show that part of the curriculum could cause psychological harm, such as to a child who has been sexually abused, or prove the teachings infringe on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

“The process is to first have a conversation with the administration, who breaks down the content to the guardian. Usually when they hear what the content is, it appeases their minds, as they thought it was something different.” Quinn says it is rare for families to continue the opt-out process after they’ve had a discussion with the principal.

If the caregiver still wishes to have their child exempted, their request will go to a committee at the board level, which will make a decision.

Quebec’s Education Ministry sets the mandatory hours of sex education at five to 10 hours per school year, but does not actually verify whether schools are fulfilling the requirements. In fact, every Quebec school has the autonomy to decide when and by whom sexuality education will be taught. A committee will design a curriculum that could include teachers or outside organizations. The plan goes to the school’s governing board for approval. The only part of the plan the governing board can reject is the hiring of an outside organization.

Laval Junior Academy teacher Katie Vruggink doesn’t think five to 10 hours is enough. If the curriculum were to change and she was forbidden from discussing gender in the classroom, she’d consider a different career path, she says.

“At that point, we’re harming children by not giving them information, and allowing homophobia and transphobia to run rampant.”

Vruggink says she intervenes when she overhears unkind things being said to queer kids. Last year, she knew of around 30 kids who identified as queer. Of those, three were openly transgender.

“My room was one of the only places my kids felt safe to eat lunch,” she says. “We do these kids a disservice by not engaging in that conversation. It’s rough out there right now, and unless there’s a change in society where people start seeing them more as people, not ideas, it’s going to be hard for them.”

Detailed information about the sexuality education curriculum in Quebec can be found at education.gouv.qc.ca.

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