

Celine Cooper: Conversations about sex are happening everywhere, except our classrooms



CELINE COOPER, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

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A sexual-education poster hangs at Head and Hands in N.D.G.

John Mahoney / Montreal Gazette files

There is an extraordinary conversation happening right now in Canada about sex, power, consent and society.

It's happening online, across multiple social-media platforms. It's taking place on the radio, on television, around the dinner table and in the streets. Where the conversation is not happening, not officially at least, are in the spaces with the potential for real impact: in Quebec elementary and secondary schools.

Since the story featuring a certain former CBC Radio host broke a couple of weeks ago (I will not name him lest his name colonize any

more space in this debate), the Twitter hashtag [#BeenRapedNeverReported](https://twitter.com/search?f=realtime&q=%23BeenRapedNeverReported&src=typd) (<https://twitter.com/search?f=realtime&q=%23BeenRapedNeverReported&src=typd>), which was launched by Montreal Gazette journalist Sue Montgomery and former Toronto Star columnist Antonia Zerbisias, has gone viral. Last Wednesday, a French version — [#AgressionNonDénoncée](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23AgressionNonDenoncee&src=tyah) (<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23AgressionNonDenoncee&src=tyah>) — was started up by La Fédération des femmes du Québec. Within hours of its debut on the web, it was flooded with stories from survivors of sexual aggression, rape and assault.

Last week, a friend of mine took to Facebook to post some Montreal-based suggestions on how to follow up with the hashtag activism. It was through her that I learned there is no mandatory sex education in our schools in Quebec. Under the 2005 education reform, the government annulled formal sexual education in the province's secondary schools and encouraged teachers to integrate sex education into core subjects.

I was stunned. I had no idea.

Organizations like Head and Hands, La Fédération des femmes du Québec and others have been highly vocal in calling for more sex education in our schools. Last year, reporter [Cindy Sherwin at CTV Montreal](#) put together a terrific story on this topic. (<http://montreal.ctvnews.ca/sex-in-the-dark-a-lack-of-education-1.1165828>)

I spoke with Dr. Laurie Betito, a clinical psychologist and president of the Sexual Health Network of Quebec. She told me that it's not entirely fair to say that there is no sex education in Quebec.

“The real problem,” she said, “is that it’s not mandatory.”

She explained that the 2005 education reform was fine in theory, but the issue is that it gives teachers the option to choose whether or not to incorporate sex education into their curriculum. Many teachers are not always comfortable or don’t feel equipped to teach it. At their own discretion, some schools bring in outside organizations — like Heads and Hands or the Sexual Health Network of Quebec — to fill in the gaps. Other schools don’t.

The take-away? There is no uniform approach to making sure young people in our province have the knowledge, tools and life skills they need to make informed choices about their sex life. This is a problem.

Whether parents approve of it or not, children are being exposed to sexual information at a far earlier age due in large part to the Internet. And with or without sex education, young people are going to experiment. Some will have negative and unwanted experiences. As parents, teachers, health-care professionals and policy-makers, we all have a role to play in making sure they have the education they need to navigate these waters.

Quality sex education moves beyond talk of avoiding pregnancy, and protecting yourself from sexually transmitted infections (which, by the way, are on the rise in Quebec). It is also about teaching healthy attitudes about sexual identity and behaviour, relationships and intimacy. But perhaps most importantly — and vitally, in the context of the current conversation surrounding #BeenRapedNeverReported — young people need to know that human sexuality is multi-dimensional, that there are many different ways of expressing it, but that it should never hurt or diminish you as a human being. Ever.

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