

Australian Education Union



Submission

to the

Senate Standing Committee

Environment, Communications and the Arts Inquiry

into the Sexualisation of Children

in the Contemporary Media Environment

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Australian Education Union has a membership of almost 170,000 educators who work in public schools, colleges, early childhood and vocational settings in all states and territories of Australia. Members include teachers and allied educational staff, principals and administrators mainly in government school and TAFE systems.
- 1.2 The AEU represents its members industrially and professionally in diverse forums. This includes the maintenance of comprehensive industrial protection and representation through industrial awards and agreements in all industrial tribunals in Australia. This involves industrial research, negotiation and advocacy over a wide range of matters including salaries and teaching and learning conditions.
- 1.3 The AEU wishes to make a few statements to the Senate Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment, as the issue affects our students in schools but also has been identified as a concern by members.
- 1.4 The AEU's statements in this submission centre mostly around:
 - Section b) of the terms of reference, regarding the “influence on cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs”; and
 - Section c) “including the role of school-based sexuality and reproductive health education”.

2. Current Context

- 2.1 The AEU understands the susceptibility of children and young people to a range of external influences and that the role of education is critical to providing awareness, prevention and coping/resilience measures.
- 2.2 AEU members have indeed noticed and report their concerns regarding sexualizing imagery, products and influences. In a recent survey conducted of women members of the AEU, the vast majority reported that they were either “very concerned” (51.8%) or “moderately concerned” (40.6%) about the issue of “*Body image, eating disorders, self-esteem and self-harm for girls and women.*” AEU women who responded to the survey believe the issue is “extremely prevalent” (27.6%) or “well known” (58.2%) in their experience and as such almost 60% of their workplaces, (mainly schools) have already responded to this issue locally, whether by targeted programs, integrated units in health and human relationships education or other student wellbeing avenues.

- 2.3 While some of the issues above have complex trigger factors and eating disorders, which themselves can have less to do with food obsession or negative body image but more about ‘self control’ and deprivation, there still lies at the heart of these issues external messages about normality and ideals sexual or otherwise.
- 2.4 The AEU believes it is essential that educators are supported in dealing with potential threats to students’ wellbeing but also that where children and young people are exposed to sexual abuse, it is the responsibility of the whole community to interrogate contributing factors and work toward their prevention.
- 2.5 This Inquiry is based on the observation that children are now much more heavily targeted by advertisers and marketers than they were in the past, and at the same time the media is becoming increasingly important in their lives.
- 2.6 The Australia Institute has stated that the most significant sources of premature sexualisation are girls’ magazines and advertising material and that “each month twenty per cent of six-year-old girls and almost half of ten- and eleven year-old girls read at least one of the most popular girls’ magazines – *Barbie Magazine*, *Total Girl* and *Disney Girl*.” (Rush et al, 2006, pv)
- 2.7 Further the AEU accepts the focus of expert opinion reported in the press which tends to focus on the most significant risks involved with such popular culture: “unrealistic body images, and the implications of these for health and self-esteem; the dangers to children’s own sexuality as a result of corporate-led sexualisation; or the dangers of sexualised children provoking pedophilic attention.” (Rush et al, 2006, p9)
- 2.8 There are clearly gender differences in the concentration of attention and the resulting consequences for adult life, however in the main the community is right to be concerned for the capacity of children to develop healthy body image and for self-esteem to be compromised when children pick up the message that being sexy is the way to be successful and feel good about oneself. (Rush et al, 2006, pv)
- 2.9 Further, we as a community must be intervening when children’s general sexual and emotional development can be affected to the degree that children focus on sexualizing themselves rather than pursuing other more age-appropriate developmental activities. (Rush et al, 2006, pvi)
- 2.10 However, again as the Australia Institute points out, children rarely suffer harm as a result of exposure to a single case of sexualising material. Rather, harm is caused by the cumulative exposure to sexualising material from a range of sources. (Rush et al, 2006, pvi.).

This is why the AEU's focus is ensuring children's coping mechanisms and understandings of the influences in their lives are provided early and that education systems play their important role supplementing parents' and whole of community efforts toward preventing sexual exploitation.

3. AEU's views

- 3.1 The AEU has very clear policy on "Health and human relationships including sex and sexuality education" (as attached to this submission) which covers many of the issues pertinent to this Inquiry.
- 3.2 The AEU notes that there are a number of views regarding influences on cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs, and the extent to which children and young people have the tools to filter and process these influences.
- 3.3 The AEU notes in particular, research currently being undertaken by Professor Catharine Lumby (from the University of NSW) which assesses the media consumption of girls and young women and their ability to contextualize and critique the messages aimed toward them. Lumby observes that the young women in the study *are* adept at filtering all sorts of potentially harmful mediums. The AEU would hope this was the norm. However we do also note that many children who may not have the necessary critical literacy skills and do not have the same level of social advantage are susceptible to negative sexual and otherwise messaging.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 Certainly, it is the AEU's view that children are subject to marketing and other media attention at younger and younger ages and that we must be limiting this sexualising pressure at its source – advertisers and marketers.
- 4.2 Schools remain a haven for children from exploitation. Given the desire of markets to enter schools, policy makers should ensure that children are protected from the exploitative aspects of the market whilst at school (and beyond).
- 4.3 For our part, the AEU strongly believes there is an important role for age appropriate and comprehensive education around health and human relationships (as described in our policy attached) which would provide the necessary tools to deal with external sexualising influences and to conduct healthy relationships into the future.

References

Rush, E. & La Nauze, A. (2006) "Letting Children Be Children Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia" Australia Institute Discussion Paper Number 93, ISSN 1322-5421.

http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/submissions/sub16_att2.pdf

AEU Gender Equity Policy 2008

Excerpt from “Health and human relationships including sex and sexuality education” :

7.4.1 *At all stages of life, girls and women are at risk of sexual violence and exploitation. Understanding the implications of gender relations, abuses of power, sexual health and wellbeing and expressions of sexuality can be valuable protection against manifestations of gender inequity.*

7.4.2 *For reasons specifically including:*

- *sexual exploitation;*
- *sexual health (HIV AIDS, STIs and fertility);*
- *sexual identities;*
- *violence in partnerships;*
- *equity issues related to pregnant and parenting students, and*
- *negative body image, self esteem and self harm.*

The AEU believes that for both girls and boys there is a need for early continuous human relations and sexuality education within comprehensive educational programs.

7.4.3 *First and foremost, the AEU considers that:*

- *It is preferable to include comprehensive sex education programs within broad health and human relationships education curricula (which includes areas such as safety, environmental and consumer health).*
- *Health and human relationships programs should be counter-sexist and culturally sensitive.*
- *Health and human relationships should be developed in a manner that encourages critical thinking and considered decision making by students.*
- *Health and human relationships programs should reflect the interests and concerns of, in particular, students and other members of the school community.*

7.4.4 *The AEU believes that human relations and sexuality education should be designed to help students to:*

sexual health

- *Understand risks to and take responsibility for the sexual health of themselves and others.*
- *Make decisions and act on the basis of knowledge and not on the basis of ignorance, fear and unquestioned prejudice, and to*
- *Prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).*

fertility

- *Have a full understanding of the human reproductive system for both sexes and the fertility implications for themselves and others*
- *Know about contraception methods, their practical use, and of options and rights regarding emergency contraception and unplanned pregnancy.*

sexual exploitation

- *Understand boundaries relating to their sexual rights and unwanted intrusions,*
- *Resisting and recognising the early sexualisation of young girls and children.*

violence in partnerships

- *Negotiate healthy human relations that include physical, emotional, psychological and financial safety and independence*
- *Recognise the signs of unhealthy and abusive situations in theirs and others' relationships*
- *Know where to seek advice and support when challenging or leaving abusive relationships*

Body image, self esteem and self harm

- *Enable girls to develop a positive body image, gives strategies to prevent self harm and strategies to build and maintain a healthy self esteem.*