Sexual Health Issues in Adolescents:
An Examination of the Discourses of Sexuality within Health Education

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief, no material published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed

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Ethical clearance for this project was gained from the University of Tasmania’s Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network. The schools, the teachers and the students are anonymous.
Ethics reference: H0007438
Abstract

This thesis, ‘Sexual health issues in adolescents: an examination of the discourses of sexuality within health education’, is a feminist poststructural and critical ethnographic investigation of the production of knowledge and gendered subjectivities within a single Tasmanian secondary co-educational government school. The main focus of the research is on the ways in which power operates through dominant teaching practices to constitute particular versions of sexuality as the truth, and to what effect (Foucault 1980).

The research focuses upon teacher and student dominant discursive constructions of knowledge regarding sex, sexuality and sexual decision-making and its impact upon students’ production of gendered subjectivity and the sex education program’s potential for addressing issues of sexual violence, homophobia and sexual health. The thesis argues that current pedagogies within curriculum-based sex education classes reproduce binary versions of gender, which are inequitable and significantly limiting in terms of transforming homophobic, sexist and discriminatory attitudes.

The methodology for this thesis combines the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2000, 2006) and Foucauldian discourse analysis (Carabine 2001) to develop a framework for data collection and analysis which acknowledges how discourses and social practices construct both a representation of experience and a positioning of individuals as gendered subjects (Hiller 1998).

In conclusion, this thesis offers recommendations for an alternative model of curriculum-based sex education informed by feminist poststructuralist theory and based upon a critical pedagogical approach that focuses on the concept of sexual ethics. These recommendations are informed by the knowledge that critical pedagogies can become catalysts for change in the way sex education is currently perceived, by enabling the production of new knowledges, new discourses and new, more equitable pedagogical practices (Kamler 2001).
I would like to acknowledge my deepest and most sincere thanks to my supervisor, friend and colleague, Claire Hiller. Her passionate and honest commitment to teaching and learning has been the source of inspiration for many educators throughout Tasmania, and I am proud to acknowledge her as my own professional role model and scholarly advisor for many years. Through her continuing work in raising student teacher awareness to issues of social justice and equity in the classroom, she remains at the vanguard of transformative educational practices within Australia and has been a constant source of advice and support to me throughout this research.

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