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Special education in schools: Building an evidence base for programs with students with intellectual disabilities

Research Brief

What is the problem?

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities acknowledges the rights of people with disability to “sexual health, safety in relationships and a full and meaningful social and intimate life.” UNESCO’s International Guidelines on Sexuality Education states that all youths including those with disability are entitled to sex education presented in an accessible way (UNESCO, 2018).

Research shows that the sex education students with intellectual disability receive is inadequate (Strnadová et al., 2021) and that this results in increased risk of:

- Being up to 4 times more likely to be sexually abused compared to typically developing peers (Barnard-Brak et al., 2014);
- Exploitation and abuse (Stein et al., 2018);
- Unintended pregnancy and sexually transmissible infections ([Carter et al., 2021](#));
- Further exclusion of these students due to the inability to fully exercise their self-determination skills and agency in regard to their sexual life (Rowe & Wright, 2017).

What is wrong with sex education for students with intellectual disability?

- Sexual health-related information is rarely available in accessible formats and topics made available are narrowly focused and limited in scope (McDaniels & Fleming, 2016);
- While contraception and safe sex tend to be the main topics taught at school; topics such as planning for parenting, gender identities, diverse sexualities, healthy relationships, and masturbation are frequently neglected (Strnadová et al., 2021);
- Programs are generally heteronormative and adopt a medical and biological view of sex and sexuality (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2012).

The importance of sex education

Sex education is critical for a successful transition to post school life:

- It enables students to develop knowledge and skills (Swango-Wilson, 2011);
- Resources students to make informed choices regarding their sexuality and relationships (Phasha & Runo, 2017);
- Supports self-determination and counteracts over reliance on adults.

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The research team conducted a research evaluation of the pilot of the Rights and Relationships program, developed by the Intellectual Disability Rights Service (IDRS). The program was piloted with nine Year 12 participants in the Disability Support unit at Matraville Sports High School, in Chiefy, NSW. The pilot was a collaboration between IDRS, Self Advocacy Sydney and UNSW.

The program teaches participants with intellectual disability:

- Practical strategies about how to recognise and respond to inappropriate behaviours and harmful situations;
- Builds their decision-making abilities and supports the development of healthy sexual identities; and
- Introduces and familiarizes students with appropriate supports (including legal) as required.

The evaluation of the Rights and Relationships Program indicated that it fills an identified gap in the curriculum and is an accessible program that is relevant and appropriate for high school students with intellectual disability. Specifically, the program had a positive impact on the students' knowledge and awareness in two key areas, Apprehended violence orders (AVOs) and consent.

Study 2 has led to a further evaluation of the Rights and Relationships program being currently undertaken with 8 high schools (metropolitan and regional) and 8 adult disability services to assess its appropriateness and effectiveness for expansion to other NSW high schools and adult disability services. This evaluation uses a developmental evaluation approach which is focused on constant revision and enhancement of the program throughout all phases of the rollout and evaluation. This project is due for completion in 2023.

Key insights

- A comprehensive sex, rights and relationships education program for students and adults with intellectual disability must include a wide range of topics in accessible formats.
- Students should be consulted on the sex education topics that are of relevance and interest to them.
- Delivery of information in sex education programs should be inclusive and students' level of support needs must be considered.
- Individual Learning Plan meetings could provide the space to discuss students' preferred topics, and the level of support and adjustments needed in the delivery of sex education programs.
- Program collaborations between schools, NGO's and universities can support the development and implementation of relevant, effective and accessible sex education programs for students with intellectual disability.



Research Brief



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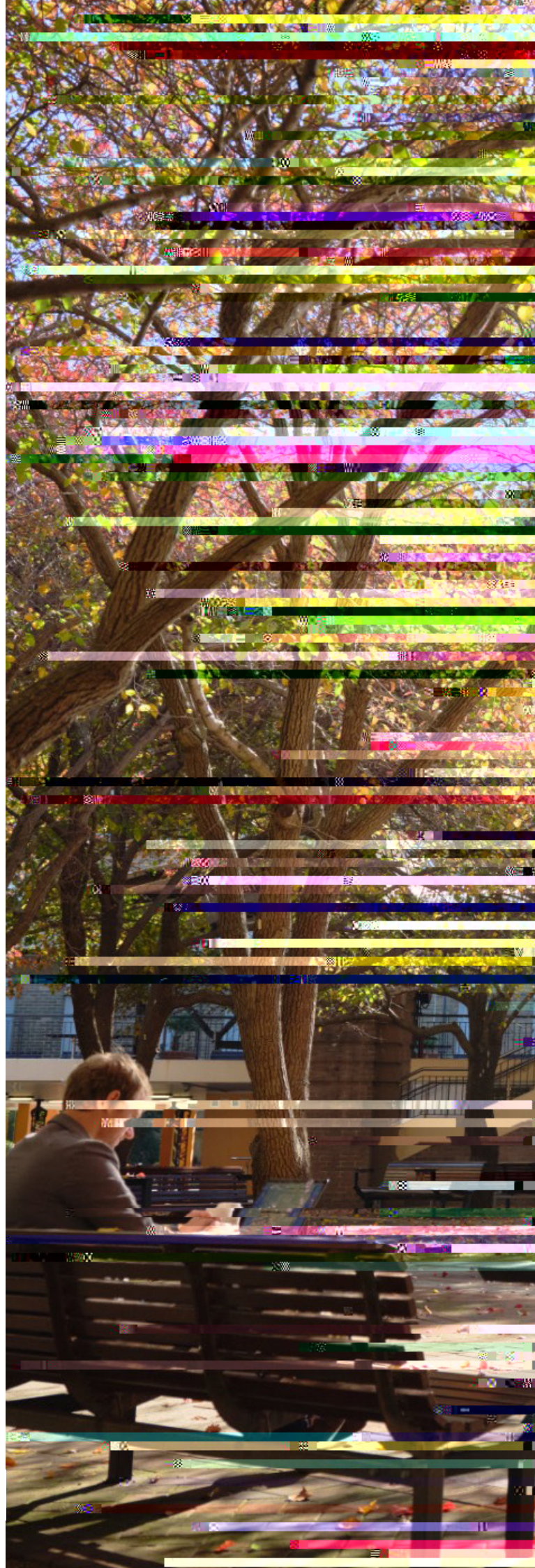
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