

Giving girls sex education lessons at school will not solve society's problems

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The sexual abuse and harassment scandal that has dominated our press in recent weeks has been shocking in terms of its scale and prevalence and reveals a world that seems dominated by danger, particularly for women. As the Headteacher of a girls' school, I am often left wondering how I am going to tackle such issues with my pupils. I need to ensure they leave school in the best possible place to thrive within what is clearly a challenging environment.

Speaking on Question Time, Secretary of State for Education Justine Greening MP, referenced changes to Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) as a possible mitigation of the crisis in masculinity consistently shown by the sexual harassment revelations. Changes to SRE are to be welcomed, but this is a facile answer to a complex issue. This is not a case of individuals misunderstanding how to behave when making romantic advances, nor is it an issue of consent.

It is an issue of power and abuse of that power.

Defeatist though it sounds, I want my pupils to be prepared for this. I want them to leave school with a mindset that is prepared to challenge authority, challenge injustice and speak out. I want them to leave school as rebels with a cause.

I do not say this with only the recent issues in Hollywood and Westminster in mind. I say this thinking about a whole host of issues: the gender pay gap, boardroom inequality and a lack of representation in politics and public institutions. Young people need to be going into higher education and the world of work with the courage to challenge the status quo and to make change happen.

Enabling such a mindset is something all schools should be striving for. At St Albans High School for Girls, it underpins a vast amount of our day-to-day work. I

encourage pupils to come to me with topics they feel strongly about, and will then ask them to stand behind their beliefs, and give a school assembly on the topic. In recent weeks, we have had pupils deliver assemblies on International Women's Day, the Holocaust and the environmental impact of palm oil.

Beyond this, we have seen pupils drive changes and challenges to the school's activities. Pupils have campaigned successfully for 'meat-free Mondays' and also in respect of introducing gender neutral summer uniforms. And it doesn't stop at inward facing issues, one group has just started a campaign against the tampon tax. Really though, what they are campaigning for is not relevant; it is the fact they are doing it. It is the fact that they have identified something that they believe should be changed and have the confidence to try and force that change.

The notion of schools instilling character in pupils is not an original one, but that does not detract from its importance. Soft skills are still not nearly prominent enough in teaching. Enabling and nurturing attributes like leadership and decisiveness needs to be a key part of our curriculum. These are vital characteristics of a mindset that is prepared to challenge beyond the classroom, in relation to employability and the wider world.

Over the past 12 months, and largely due to Trump's presidency, I have seen our girls become aware of women's rights in a way that I haven't seen in 25 years of teaching. I have found it hugely encouraging, and do not doubt that their awareness will be representative of their peers nationally. Awareness is an important first step, and one that will provide a strong base upon which to build, however it is only a base. Having the courage to fight back is what will lead to change.

With any luck, the prominence of recent high profile harassment and abuse cases will act as a deterrent – or better still an education – to any individual who may otherwise have been guilty of these crimes in the future. Unfortunately, I suspect that may be wishful thinking, and in fact this is a stain that we will be stuck with, both in the workplace and elsewhere, for some time. Our young people need to be ready to challenge this, leaving school with fire in their bellies and the mindset to effect change successfully.

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The original article can be found [here](#).