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Let's talk about sex

by Gary Boyle



Photo courtesy of Netflix

Read the following story by Melalin Mahavongtrakul from the *Bangkok Post*. Then, answer the questions that follow.

Sex is rarely a topic discussed freely in Thailand. Talking about sex brings either embarrassment, shame or laughter. This explains the **controversy** behind Netflix's teen show *Sex Education*.

HOT TOPIC

Released last month, it was unsurprising that some Thai **conservatives** were upset about the show, despite it being received positively from critics and general audiences worldwide. *Sex Education* follows an awkward teen boy giving sex advice at his school. Over the course of eight episodes, the series covers a diverse range of issues experienced by today's teens: masturbation, abortion, homosexuality, sexting, bullying and more. It also features profanity and nudity.

A political party complained about the show, saying, "*Sex Education* may suit Western society where teens get to learn about sex education both from home and at school. In Thai society, however, they haven't learnt the topic correctly, which may lead to other social problems."

WHAT TEACHERS TEACH

At an all-male secondary school in Bangkok, teacher Nalin (not her real name) said her students start learning about sex as part of the health-education class in Mathayom 1, beginning by studying different systems in the body then progressing to other topics through the years. Topics that are covered include sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), how to use condoms, looking out for risky situations that may lead to sex, how to prevent that from happening, and more.

Nalin also makes an effort to teach them to be gentlemen, respect women and refrain from premarital sex.

"We follow the textbooks and work on worksheets. Kids also do some role-playing in class," she said. "They are quite interested in the topic. They don't really get naughty about it either. Most of them are shy."

WHAT YOUTHS WANT TO LEARN

"I studied sex education in vocational school once a week. We learned what each STD is about, but not how to seek treatment, test, or even advice if we have it," said Kritthanit Ditthabanjong, 21, head of corporate communication at the Thai Network of Youth Living with HIV, and editor-in-chief of Songsue.co, which reports on Thai media through the eyes of younger generations.

The reactions he saw in class were those of mockery and laughter. Nobody seemed to take the lessons seriously. But outside of classroom, there were discussions among peers about terminating unwanted pregnancies and where to get tested for HIV, among others.

"Sex education is not just about having sex. And I'd want kids today to learn about gender, sexuality, diversity, fluidity, and that everyone regardless of differences can coexist in society," he added.

HOW IT SHOULD BE DONE

A recent Unicef survey was conducted among 8,837 secondary and vocational students and 692 teachers in six provinces. It also found that most teachers taught their sex-ed classes through lectures, and not so much through demonstration, like how to put on a condom. About half the teachers said they weren't trained on how to teach sex education properly. About half the students also said they feel embarrassed and uncomfortable discussing the subject in class.

In general, the topic of sex is still largely closed in the country, and the classroom environment may not encourage effective learning about it, either. Sirirath Chunnasart from Unicef Thailand said she's not surprised many people reacted negatively to Netflix's *Sex Education*. She added that, for people who advocate comprehensive sexuality education, they tend to admire the series for bringing to light and reflecting issues teenagers are facing.

"Everything in the current curriculum and education was designed by people of previous generations. In order to bring about changes, we also have to change the way we work. Listening to youths, their feedback, and how each decision is affecting them is important. They should be allowed to get involved, not just be a receiver at the end," she said.

Vocabulary

controversy (n): public discussion and argument about something that many people strongly disagree about

conservative (n): a person who prefers traditional styles and ideas

Section 1: Read through the story and answer the following questions.

1. When was *Sex Education* first shown in Thailand?
2. The show is about a confident teenage boy. True or false?
3. The show features bad language. True or false?
4. When do Nalin's students start learning about sex?
5. How often did Kritthanon have sex ed classes?
6. How many secondary students did the Unicef survey speak to?
a. 8,837. b. 692. c. The story does not say.

7. Who was not surprised that *Sex Education* caused controversy?

- a. Sirirath. b. The writer of the story. c. Both a and b.

8. Should the show be banned in Thailand?

- a. Yes. b. No. c. The story does not say.

Section 2: Specify whether each of the following words is used in the story as a verb, noun, adjective or adverb.

9. respect.

10. advice.

11. regardless.

12. properly.

13. comprehensive.

Section 3: Read the following passage. Then, fill in the blanks with the correct words from the choices given.

"Teenagers are mostly asked to14.... the lesson, not to discuss it. And with just lectures and not so much demonstration, it's worrying how15.... their learning is or16.... they'll be able to apply what they learn ..17.. real life," said Sirirath. "The Thai cultural context is also limiting. Students don't feel comfortable discussing sex. Girls also face a18...., as they will be thought of negatively if they talk about the subject19...."

14. a. memorise b. memory c. remembered

15. a. effect b. affect c. effective

16. a. despite b. whether c. unless

17. a. on b. in c. for

18. a. challenging b. challenged c. challenge

19. a. openly b. outside c. open

Section 4: Find a word used in the story that matches the following definitions.

20. Not comfortable.
21. People in general.
22. Happening before marriage.
23. A range of many people that are very different from each other.
24. To support something publicly.

Section 5: Discussion questions:

1. Have you seen the show?
2. Did you enjoy it? Which character did you like most, and why?
3. Do you think that the show should be banned in Thailand?
4. What are your ideas about the teaching of sex in schools?

For the answers, find the story online at www.bangkokpost.com/learning

If you have any questions or feedback, please contact the Editor at garyb@bangkokpost.co.th