

Life talks with those involved at every level to diagnose the problem with sex ed in Thailand

STORY: MELALIN MAHAVONGTRAKUL

# BAD EDUCATION?



Netflix's *Sex Education* deals with teenagers navigating the social and sexual aspects of their lives.

Sex is rarely a topic we discuss freely in Thailand. Shunned in our conservative culture, sex — as a topic of discussion — is received with either embarrassment, shame or laughter, not to be taken seriously or with a straight face.

Such a mindset clearly explains the controversy behind Netflix's teen dramedy *Sex Education*, released last month. It was quite unsurprising that some Thai conservatives are throwing a fit at this hit show, despite it being received positively from critics and general audiences worldwide. *Sex Education* follows an awkward teen boy running underground sex counselling 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 pro-

fanity, a clear shot of a penis, and sex scenes between adolescents.

Ponlamuang Thai Party last month lobbied a complaint to the Office of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) regarding the series' raunchiness. On the document given to the NBTC, the party explains: "*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."

The document also cites the high rate of teen pregnancy and sexual violations among the problems that need to be eradicated in the country, and asks the NBTC to consider taking down *Sex Education*'s promotional materials that are plastered throughout the city, as they may encourage sexual urges.

Here, *Life* explores sex education and sexual dialogue in Thailand — from the perspectives of a teacher, a learner and a teen-health advocate.

### 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 from studying different systems in the body then progressing to other topics through the years. Topics that are covered include sexually transmitted diseases (STD), 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.



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“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.”

Some of the questions students have brought up in class revolve around sexual intercourse, disease prevention and masturbation.

“They do wonder if it’s bad for their health if they masturbate frequently. Sometimes, students see information online and want to know more about it. But they don’t really ask deep or personal questions. They tend to talk more among themselves, not really to teachers. Maybe they don’t dare to discuss the problem with us,” the teacher reported.

### WHAT YOUTHS WANT TO LEARN

“I studied sex education in vocational school, like, once a week. It felt like a free period, really. We learned what each STD

is about, but not how to seek treatment, test, or even advice if we have it,” said Kritthanan Dithabanjong, 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 observed 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.

Back in his younger days, the internet became a friend in need when Kritthanan had questions. Having watched *Sex Education*, he feels the series does reflect society by showing how kids don’t really dare discuss sex with adults, and so they turn to alternatives to gain the information they need.

“At times, the matter of sex is treated as a joke by adults, though certain issues are big for

teenagers. And when adults don’t listen to them enough, or are not willing to keep an open mind on the topic, kids are unable to discuss it seriously with them too. They don’t trust adults enough to open up.

“To make adults and kids come together, both sides have to find common ground and make it a safe space for discussion,” he said. “At least, teenagers should feel comfortable enough to discuss different issues with their family.”

### HOW IT SHOULD BE DONE

Are current sex-education lessons being provided in schools enough to fully equip teenagers as they go about their daily lives? Sirirath Chunnasart, adolescent and HIV/Aids officer at Unicef Thailand, says that Thai schools have to step up and comprehensively cover sexuality in their curricula. Sexuality education is also promoted by Unesco in order to empower youths to lead a healthy lifestyle.

While most people have an idea of what sex education entails, not many quite grasp the concept of sexuality education, which also covers topics like reproductive health, well-being, human rights, gender equality, consent and more.

Research commissioned by Unicef on sexuality education in Thailand found that the topics generally taught include gender roles, physical and emotional development, and other basics. However, sensitive subjects like safe abortion, safe sex for same-sex couples, LGBT rights, respecting different gender identities, and even what medication to take once a person is exposed to HIV, are rarely mentioned.

The 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.

“Teenagers are mostly asked to memorise the lesson, not to discuss it. And with just lectures and not so much demonstration, it’s worrying how effective their learning is or whether they’ll be able to apply what they learn in real life,” said Sirirath. “The Thai cultural context is also limiting. Students don’t feel comfortable discussing sex. Girls also face a stigma, as they will be perceived negatively if they talk about

the subject openly.”

The teachers and even school executives also face certain limitations. They may feel uncomfortable teaching the subject and believe it may encourage teens to have sex early if they are provided with a lot of information. Some parents may also not want their children to learn about sex.

In general, the topic of sex is still largely sealed off in the country, and the classroom environment may not encourage effective learning about it, either. Hence, Sirirath 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.

“I think our current situation already speaks for itself on what happens if we continue to make sex undiscussable,” Sirirath added. Teen pregnancy, STDs, and sexual harassment and violence still run rampant in the country. She suggested that education is the key to reducing it, with proven results. Several countries in Europe, especially Scandinavia, teach the subject to children from the time they’re young, selecting elements that suit each stage of a child’s development.

“Small children get to learn how to differentiate between good and bad touches. They learn about unacceptable acts that others can’t perform on them, and this has to do with knowing and respecting their own body. As they get older, the lessons continue to add on to that. Then, they’ll know and can decide when they’re ready to have their first sexual experience,”

said Sirirath, adding that the age adolescents have sex for the first time has gone up to 18-19 years old in those countries. Thailand, on the contrary, has seen this number falling to 14-15 years old on average.

There have also been ongoing efforts to improve the situation regarding sex education in the country, from both the Ministry of Education itself to civil-society organisations. Organisations like Path2health and others have been working with teachers to teach sex education for years. An e-learning site is also in development for teachers to gain know-how in navigating sex-ed classes effectively.

As for youths themselves, there is an online consultation service called Love Care Station they can access at [lovecaresation.com](http://lovecaresation.com). The site offers information, a webboard and anonymous consultation through online chat.

It’s crucial to teach youths the “full package”, Sirirath insisted, in order for them to be fully informed enough to make a decision. It is indeed difficult to fight with deeply rooted conservative ideology, though one way to do so is to involve teenagers themselves “every step of the way” in designing the teaching process and giving them access to healthcare services.

“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.