

Sexuality and Human Awareness

Sex education in schools is a very topical issue. It can also be a controversial one. There is no single approach and no standardised curriculum that is suitable for all classes and for all students. This article addresses the needs of children with special needs within the context of mainstream education.

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Sex Education needs to provide for the young at least some of the thinking skills needed in applying moral principles to individual situations, rather than imposing a moral code which has to be applied to any situation, however inappropriate. The latter, of course, is much easier – a rigid set of rules, which needs little thought – and is what many people seek, and what many others find hard to relinquish.

Man is not a wholly rational animal and much of sexual behaviour is not due to rational decisions. It is doubtful whether any girls under 16 years of age rationally desires a baby and yet the pregnancy rate for this group rises yearly. The lack of a secure self-image – hence a yielding to peer group pressures – may be one factor. Certainly a lack of knowledge of the power of physical attraction may be another.

With regard to sex education, many teachers evade their responsibility. They are reluctant to become involved in such an emotive subject. It is a reluctance tinged with fear of possible consequences to themselves or their career and they fall back upon the fallacious argument that parents are the ideal people to do it. They delude themselves that parenthood automatically confers some magical quality of intuition and knowledge concerning every aspect of a child's development. This is patently not so.

This view was put forward by Albert Chanter, one of the foremost experts in primary school sex education. Nevertheless, Chanter is very much aware of the danger of usurping a parent's rights and feelings in this matter and urges careful and well thought out action to ensure that the school complements the parental influence and enhances it rather than replaces it.

In Primary Schools, sex education usually takes place informally: children's questions are answered as they arise. Projects on animal rearing, class heights and weights, telling a story with pictures about birth or seeing a film about how the chicken gets into the egg, also develop sex education in the informal school setting.

More important than the transmission of facts is the provision of a climate of communication where children feel happy to ask questions and where a worried child can find supportive counselling from a reassuring adult.

Home

It is in the home that a child absorbs attitudes towards the body and its functions. Ideas about taboos, and feelings of acceptance or rejection and about his physical nature are influenced even by non-verbal communication. The puzzlement or shock which many children experience when they first meet the 'dirty joke' – often at school – is something which needs parental support in the highest degree.

It is often because parents are afraid of "what he'll come out with in front of other people" that they hesitate to give sex information to their children. It is understandable but sad that the *faux pas* made by children only half aware of social taboos, which are themselves questionable, should militate against the transmission of necessary knowledge. It is felt by many people that a parent loses a valuable dimension in his relationship with his child if open communication on sexual matters at an early age is not possible. Attitudes which are set at this early age are very difficult to overcome in later life.

School

The school may be seen as the second main agent in the fostering of sexual development. Its proper role is to complement, not to replace, the home. Unfortunately, possibly in decreasing numbers, some homes are either not capable or willing to fulfill their responsibilities in this area. This means that in such instances, the responsibility falls on the school – where the school is willing to accept such responsibility. The school provides the pupil with a setting where he discovers that he is not alone in wishing to gain enlightenment into his sexual nature.

The following reasons are put forward as a justification for the inclusion of Sex Education in a school curriculum:

1. If the child has a right to an education, then he is entitled to receive as complete an understanding of himself and of society as he is capable of grasping. This end would not be completely fulfilled if his education were to neglect his sexual nature.
2. Children and adolescents are naturally enquiring in regard to sexual matters. Better that their information be accurate and their attitudes properly formed than that they be left to glean what facts they can, with associated warped attitudes, from their ill-informed peers.
3. They need to be taught to behave in a socially acceptable manner in matters sexual.
4. They need to be informed to avoid exploitation.

5. If the pupil is to understand human nature, human relationships and life itself to the extent to which he is capable, then his education must take account of his sexuality.

6. If the school excludes discussions on human sexuality, this will serve to confirm the pupil in his view of sex as being a taboo subject, this inhibiting the development of a healthy and positive attitude.

(Department of Education. *Curriculum Guidelines for Schools for Moderately Handicapped Children, 1981*).

Primary Level

The goals of education should include the self-acceptance and self-direction of each individual. Positive guidance in building habits and concepts which form healthy, well adjusted individuals with positive images of themselves should be present from the earliest stages of development. A sex education programme should begin when the child starts school in order to gain success in establishing wholesome, natural attitudes.

The opportunity to teach children to accept their body parts and functions and to understand the development of living things is simplified and enhanced by the fact that their interest in sex is based on curiosity. Prior to adolescence children do not consider themselves sexual beings, and primary children usually do not concern themselves with the abstract relations of love and emotion. If there are inhibitions or reaction of shame and embarrassment they are usually the result of the subjects being ignored or referred to as something that a child should not talk about. The presentation of sex related subjects within the school situation in a natural honest manner helps a child overcome such feelings. Therefore, the questions asked by a child should be answered within the limits of his comprehension and within his present need for information.

Children with Special Needs

As in all areas of education, sex education should begin where the student is. Children of normal intelligence indicate where they are by asking questions to get the sex information they want and need. Mentally handicapped children may not be able to form the questions which get them their information. Many are not capable of understanding the biology involved. Being learning disabled may also prevent their making adequate social decisions and prevent them from anticipating the consequences of inappropriate behaviour. The intellectually handicapped child will not incidentally amass as much information as a normal child, yet the knowledge and the skills are necessary for all children. The teacher needs to anticipate and plan for the child with special educational needs.

Planning principles

If sex education is to be presented in its proper perspective, if it is to be more than biology and anatomy, more than an attempt to induce pupils to adopt someone

else's moral values, if it is to be the exploring of social attitudes and values enabling the child to find out who and what he is emotionally, socially and physically, then the teaching of sex information and the opportunities for growth in knowledge of oneself must be considered as experiences integral to the total curriculum.

Systematic Approach

It is not enough to present brief, isolated lessons on nocturnal emission and menstruation, or dating behaviour and reproduction. Pupils need help in understanding their feelings and coping with social situations which they will encounter. The teaching of specific information must be couched in a context which embraces the realities of life and the perspectives of the child.

A systematic approach implies a developmental emphasis with attention being given to offering relevant sex and social information at the primary level so a basis will be established for more mature experiences at the older levels.

Teacher Competencies

The knowledge and attitudes of the teacher represent other important variables in the successful implementation of a sex education programme. Knowledge of the subject matter is necessary but not sufficient for effective teaching in this area. The teacher must be capable of developing a relationship with his/her pupils which allows for effective communication. The pupils must feel free to ask questions and contribute to the discussion. Only when the teacher is able to reflect healthy attitudes and positive views towards the subject can maximum benefit for the pupil be the result. The values and attitudes of the typical classroom teacher are often very middle class and are not necessarily the values and attitudes of the child's home. In general the teacher represents a generation once or twice removed from the students. These factors seem to complicate the establishment of the kind of relationship desired, particularly at the primary and senior school level.

Parental Involvement

While parents are willing to concede responsibility to the school in most subject matter areas, this concession is not to be assumed in the area of sex education. This does not necessarily mean that objections should be anticipated but that parents should be kept aware of the information used and of the scope of the subject matter. They should also be involved in determining the direction of the programme. If parents are aware of the type of information that will be presented in the classroom and understand the rationale for teaching this material, they are less likely to fear or criticise the programme.

The following are some suggestions to help the teacher involve parents in a sex education programme. Not all suggestions will be applicable to all circumstances.

Planning Stage

Gaining parental and community support.

- (1) Ask specific parents to serve as an advisory ad hoc committee along with various auxiliary school personnel, such as school nurse, psychologist, etc., to discuss the rationale, material and teaching methods appropriate for a programme in sex education. This committee serves as a consultancy body in planning the programme and as a useful liaison in gaining community support.
- (2) Send a questionnaire to parents to survey their attitudes and opinions towards sex education.
- (3) Sponsor a film concerning sex education for viewing by members of the local community, parents, other staff.
- (4) Sponsor a lecture by a professional in the field of sex education at a community meeting. Such a lecture might be followed by a question and answer period involving parents and a panel of associated school personnel.

Message for the Teacher

Probably the most vital components of a comprehensive sex education programme should be the assistance provided to the teacher through orientation and workshop sessions. In the absence of these opportunities, the teacher must prepare him/herself. This will involve considerable reading, exchanging of ideas with fellow teachers and related professional persons, as well as self appraisal of own attitudes and values. Without this background on the part of the teacher the pupils will not attain maximum benefit from the programme. The teacher must carefully plan lessons and approach them with the belief that the subject matter is an integral and natural part of the total curriculum and with confidence in his/her ability to handle the information in an unbiased manner. Parents and teachers often scold children for using words which they or other adults cannot accept. It is not good to promote additional inhibitions regarding sex by inferring that it is dirty or bad. Most slang expressions with sex implications are devoid of logic. It seems reasonable to assume that a child who uses terms not considered proper, needs to be worked with, not reprimanded. He should first be asked what the word means and then asked why he used it. The child must be helped to use terms which are smarter as well as more appropriate. Lister Kirkendall (1965), an authority and pioneer in sex education has said:

The purpose of sex education is not primarily to control and suppress sex expressions as in the past, but to indicate the immense possibilities for human fulfillment that human sexuality offers.

This is a positive approach to the teaching of sex education but it is not always characteristic of our practice today. Many parents and educators seem to want sex education taught in schools so that pre-marital pregnancies are reduced, sexually transmitted disease is controlled and what adults see as a revolution in sexual mores, is offset. We need to be aware that there have been significant changes in sexual behaviour over the years which parents and youth need to understand. We

can't set up patterns for student thinking. We can teach them how to think, not what to think. We can help them through the confusing issues they face in their lives by, (1) helping them to broaden their knowledge about the subject, (2) encouraging them to express their feelings about the issues, (3) assisting them to develop a value system that will help them make choices between difficult alternatives in a time when standards are changing.

Ideally, sex education should offer the students a chance to assess a wide variety of behaviour and decide how it applies to the society in which they live, preparing them to decide on their own set of values within the parameters of acceptable social behaviour.

References

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