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# **Sex Education:**

## **A discourse of sexuality**

### **Abstract**

*In spite of the difficulties surrounding the issue of whether or not the schools should provide sex education classes, it is clear that adolescents need accurate information about sexual interactions and a way to examine and reflect upon this significant aspect of their lives as well as to consider their own responsibilities. The schools can make a useful contribution in this area, yet problems will result from too narrow or partial an approach to decisions about the content of such a programme.*

### **Résumé**

*En dépit du caractère épineux de la question de savoir si oui ou non les écoles doivent offrir des cours d'éducation sexuelle, il est clair que les adolescents ont besoin d'informations précises sur les interactions sexuelles et de moyens de réfléchir à cet aspect important de leur existence qui n'est pas sans incidence sur leur sens des responsabilités. Les écoles peuvent offrir une précieuse contribution à cet égard même s'il faut s'attendre à des problèmes dus à l'étroitesse ou à la partialité des décisions portant sur le contenu de ce genre de programme.*

As young people grow up to take their places as adult members of the society they will have emerged through adolescence having been surrounded by the influences of their home, their family with its network of relationships, their peers, the school, and the society in which they live. By adolescence they will have reached physical sexual maturity and their

attitudes will have been largely formed. They will have some correct information, some misinformed ideas, and some degree of interest as well as some notions about the possibility of finding out anything they do not now know and, perhaps most importantly, some feeling of self-esteem. They will have learned a great deal about sexuality whether or not anyone has consciously undertaken to teach them a particular content and, in spite of any particular content taught, they will have also received ideas and influences from many other sources. Many young people will have already become sexually active by the time they leave high school (Dawson, 1986; Herold, 1984). Who belongs to that group is not evident for there is no public ceremony to mark the initiated. But the statistical fact indicates that adolescents need to have accurate information about sexual interactions and they need to learn how to deal responsibly with this significant force in their lives. From whom should they learn or from whom will they learn?

Should those responsible for the education of young people speak of "sex" to high school students, or should they be silent? Should they remain silent because it is a domain of information and attitude over which parents should have complete control? Should they remain silent because drawing attention to this might seem to sanction the sexual exploration and activity of young people? Should they remain silent if they do not know what to say, either as individuals or as representatives of society's views, or if they do not know what young people need individually or as the next generation of responsible adults?

### *Family's role in sex education*

A strong conservative claim that only parents should teach (their own) children about sex and that this should remain a right and responsibility of the parents in the private realm of the family often successfully opposes the introduction of sex education in the schools, even though there is widespread support for such programmes among teachers and the general public (Parsons, 1983, p. 44). But not all parents are well enough informed or willing to teach their children even minimum biological facts of reproduction. Other than avoiding controversy, the results of leaving the subject of sexuality to parents have not been good. Many young people are woefully ignorant of the facts which they need in order to make responsible decisions. If the subject of sexuality is left entirely to parents, for those young people who have parents who have been unable or unwilling to speak to their children, this area remains shrouded in silence, and they are less able to question what has been given to them in their particular situation.

There are children who have been, and others who will be, abused by their parents either sexually, physically, emotionally, or through neglect.

As well some adults have negative, restrictive, and prejudicial attitudes which they transmit to their children. Unless there is some forum which will allow these young people to consider, perhaps a little dispassionately, their own family background with respect to sexuality they will be less able to be free of their situation. Some individuals may indeed find some way of doing this themselves or have help in doing so, but for many the whole topic of sexuality remains inarticulated and inaccessible for reflection and intervention. The fact that there are many parents unable and unwilling to ensure that their children have even basic information about the issues of sexuality, and some who may in fact transmit partial and harmful attitudes, suggests that educators should not remain silent about sex based on the reason that parents ought to have complete control about this topic.

It is not a matter of deciding if the schools ought to have the exclusive responsibility for the topic of sexuality. It is rather a question of whether the schools can or should have some positive contribution to offer young people, many of whom are confused and unable to approach these questions with any clarity of thought or feeling.

In any case, amongst all the spheres which help to form every individual's attitude about the expression of sexuality, the family will provide one of the strongest influences. Whether the parents wish the responsibility or not, whether they ever speak to their children or not about the issues involved, the way which the parents and other members of the household behave; the nature of the relationships between them; the domestic arrangements; the attitudes about men, women, and children which are evident; the ease or difficulty expressing affection, physically and emotionally; and the respect each person in the family is given will all affect the kinds of relationships which each young person growing up in that environment will be able to have, including expressions of sexuality. Each child has a nature unlike any other child's, so the effect of any particular situation on any one will not be predictable, but every individual will have been strongly influenced by the family situation through which he/she has grown up.

#### *School's role in sex education*

It has often been suggested that offering sex education courses in the public school system would increase the incidence of premarital sexual activity. It has been documented by some researchers that more young people, especially more young women, engage in sexual intercourse at a younger age than was previously the case (Zelnick & Kantner, 1977). There have been many reasons given to explain why this may be so. Changes in the behaviour patterns of young people are related to changes in many features of the society, but it is a complex relationship which cannot be

understood by isolating one or more aspects and ignoring others. One of the reasons cited for this perceived increase is a relatively freer accessibility of information about sexual activity and contraception. This is not confirmed by studies which are made about adolescent sexual behaviour (*New York Times*, March 13, 1985).

The rates of sexual activity among teenagers are roughly the same in the United States, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Canada, although exposure to sex education courses is significantly greater in many of these countries. Those countries with the lowest rates of teenage pregnancy do not have the highest abortion rates. (The United States has by far the highest abortion rate, along with the highest pregnancy rate.) The lowest rates of teenage pregnancy occur in those countries with liberal attitudes toward sex, easily accessible contraceptive services, and comprehensive programs in sex education. (Gutmann, 1987, p. 110)

The sexual exploration and activity of young people is not increased by sex education programmes in the schools (Zabin *et al.*, 1986; Zelnik & Kantner, 1977). Physical sexual development takes place as a part of the natural process of growth during adolescence and, as young people's bodies change, the way they express themselves and relate to themselves and to others should change. As they become more independent of the care and protection of their parents, young people must learn to take responsibility for all aspects of their own lives, including sexuality, and one of the ways they will be able to do this is to explore all aspects of sexuality and to make discoveries about themselves and others within the larger cultural context. Helping them to be as sensitive, as thoughtful, and as careful as possible in the process is far more important than preventing sexual exploration and activity, and, as difficult as the first might seem to be, it may be even more possible than the second.

Sexuality is not only a matter of reproductive function and specific sexual response, although it includes these important aspects. Each of us is born either male or female. The implications of this fact upon our lives and how we respond to its limitations and possibilities constitutes the nature of our sexuality. It is concerned with the most intimate aspects of our lives, with the question of personal identity and self-image, and it is a factor in all our relationships.

### *Influence of the media*

Even if schools do not introduce the topic of sexuality, all young people will be influenced by the information, images, and attitudes presented

in the media. This important medium of exchange between members of the society is a powerful force in the shaping of our expectations and our aspirations, but the assumptions and the ideals transmitted by this means are generally unexamined and hence unquestioned.

Films, television programming, magazines, advertising, and musical lyrics provide a constant barrage of sexual innuendo and explicit sexual reference and display for everyone in the society. Attention is drawn to sexual images because one's attention is captured by such reference. As competition for our attention increases and as we become less surprised, and therefore less noticing of what is presented, commercial interests and advertisers use more sensational images which are at the very limits of acceptability, or they make use of those images which will feed our romantic and sexual fantasies. It is a vicious circle because our ideals and our romantic and sexual fantasies are very often shaped by the images which have been represented in the media (Kilbourne, 1987).

The ideals, as they are represented in the media, of a sexually desirable female and a sexually powerful male, attainable with the purchase of the right products or services and an undertaking of certain practices, have consequences for all those who are impressed by these, including young people. In order to be a little freer of the control which these images have over our imaginations and our aspirations, we need to be able to examine the assumptions held and the motivations which support these images of an ideal or images which aim to elicit a sexual response. Can a school sex education programme undertake to make visible those influences which have a far more potent effect on us when they are invisible? Amongst other things, a programme of sex education should draw attention to those influences on our sexuality which are hidden and those which need to be examined and reflected upon in order to allow individuals to find responsible and fulfilling ways of expressing their own sexuality within the society. Sexual exploration and activity of young people will take place whether or not a course in sex education is offered, but a discourse about sexuality will become more audible, not be increased, if sex education is offered. We might, of course, choose to remain silent about sex if we wish young people to remain silent about the issues which they will face in any case.

Yet it is clear, with the increase in the incidence of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), that it is more and more important that sexually active young people know how to protect themselves as well as they can and that they become familiar and comfortable with ways of communicating with one another about these issues. Sex education has a crucial role to play in the effort to slow the spread of these diseases.

### *The content of sex education*

Even if it is agreed that it would be useful to provide some information and to allow an opportunity for discussion about the topic of sexuality, perhaps until it is clear what should be taught, teachers should remain silent. The content of any sex education course is bound to conflict with the convictions of some parents. Whether or not teachers intend to remain neutral it is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss issues of sexuality without imparting attitudes. There is no specifiable set of behaviours which could be said to constitute correct sexual activity, and there is no moral position, with regard to sexuality, which might be agreed to be the right one. Since sexual behaviour is a private and intimate matter, it may seem that the appropriate way of dealing with this many-faceted topic in the schools would be to remain silent, but this is an evasion of the responsibility to provide students with a way of coming to understand the many issues surrounding sexuality. Teaching young people how to reflect upon the issues involved and to take charge of their own lives is very different from teaching sexual behaviour. Instead of requiring silence from those who do not know how each person should act, perhaps silence should be required from those who are convinced that their own decisions ought to be the ones which everyone should choose.

In light of these considerations, even if it is clear that sex ought to be spoken about with young people in the schools, there seem to be many problems which surround the issue.

More and more schools understand that they have an obligation to provide their students with accurate information about the facts of reproduction, contraception, and the prevention of STDs, but they may avoid a discussion of other aspects of sexuality because of the difficulty in dealing with attitudinal questions for which there are no clearly definable answers of right and wrong. Such an approach has some value but it is limited. Students need biological, anatomical, and medical information, but sex should be presented to young people as something more than a biological function and the results of that function; (biological) sexuality also brings responsibilities. The personal, social, ethical, and moral issues which surround sexuality must also be discussed in any programme of sex education if young people are expected to take account of these considerations. Silence in this regard may be understood to imply that these issues are not important.

If a programme of sex education is introduced in order to decrease the incidence of STDs and unwanted pregnancy the content of the course will concentrate on the possible dangers of unprotected sexual intercourse, the prevention of STDs and a recognition of disease symptoms, the methods of

treatment, and the prevention of pregnancy. While such information is useful, an emphasis on the possible negative aspects of sex without a celebration of the positive aspects instills fear and produces inhibitions. Michelle Fine (1988) has labeled this kind of programme a **discourse of victimization**, and she points out that this kind of discussion portrays young women as victims of male predators. The paradoxical message implied in such a course is that a woman can gain protection through marriage to one of the men she fears in another context (p. 31).

On the other hand, if the objective of a course in sex education is to ensure that young people engage in less premarital sexual activity, then the programme will present judgemental and moralistic standards and call for self-control and abstinence outside a heterosexual marriage. Fine has called such a legalistic approach a **discourse of individual morality** (p. 32), which is a little misleading, because the type of programme which supports the imposition of a cultural or religious morality upon individuals does not suggest that individuals should develop a responsible attitude concerning the issues surrounding sexuality and about their own sexual expression. A study of the understandings of sexuality and the moral injunctions from different religious and cultural traditions may provide a useful way to encourage discussion about the requirement of moral and legal standards and the assumptions upon which they are based.

Another method of approaching the topic of sexual behaviour of young people is by means of a study of statistical information about the activities, the opinions, the questions, and the concerns of adolescents (Herold, 1984). Any statistical survey will be limited by the techniques used to gather data, by the questions asked, and the interpretive methods used in presenting the information. How any statistical survey can be useful is not clear although statistics may serve to show the wide range of sexual behaviour which exists. A descriptive study which tabulates the experiences and the opinions of many individuals does not result in expert advice, nor can it provide a statement of what might be considered "normal", although it is sometimes expected to do so, and there is often a subtle implication that it does do so. The qualitative aspect of sexuality and the importance of the relationship cannot be included in a statistical report, yet young people do need to learn to connect the physiological acts of sexual interaction with these other considerations.

Concluding that there is no one moral stance which ought to be taught may result in an attitude of relativism. The gathering of opinion and the reportage of personal experience, likes, and dislikes resembles a statistical survey in its attempt to provide a description of the facts without imposing value judgements upon the students. But no discussion of sexuality can remain morally neutral; an attempt to do so will imply that

sexual virtue lies in self-expression, which very soon becomes self-interested and selfish. The fact that there is no one standard which could guide the sexual behaviour of every individual does not mean that standards are not necessary. To find how conscience could be developed so that responsibility could be taken for all relationships, including sexual ones, is a more difficult problem than either discovering what is pleasant, or setting out rules of conduct as established by an external authority.

*What could be offered?*

To offer a programme of sex education in the schools is to offer a discourse of sexuality to the students. Providing a way of speaking about the issues involved allows young people to find a way of reflecting upon them, a necessary condition for taking charge of their sexuality and becoming responsible for their relationships. As students become adults they are expected to take this responsibility; perhaps it is something which can be learned. A silence about sexuality perpetuates victimization. Cases of abuse and harassment are the most obvious examples, but more often people are victims of hidden influences such as the ideals and assumptions which are imposed upon them by the media, the consequences of the traditional hierarchy of power with respect to gender and class, and established notions of what is natural or virtuous behaviour.

Recently the concept of sexuality has been understood as a construction which includes a cluster of issues related only because society has agreed that they are sexual issues. Although the issues range from reproductive to moral and political, they are all associated with gender in the broadest sense. Because silence has surrounded some of the topics which involve the more intimate aspects of sexuality, other aspects such as those dealing with issues of gender roles and power relationships have also been surrounded by silence. When any of these topics is discussed all areas of sexuality are open to question. Sexuality has become a topic of rational deliberation and scientific investigation. However, with an over-enthusiasm of this kind of approach, we may lose an appreciation of the potential for delight and fulfilment or the opposite, for a degradation and despair, with sexual expression. Also, an understanding of the possibility of reaching our highest aspirations, or losing sight of them altogether, may be lost. An art and a philosophy of sex is needed as well as a science of sexuality, so that the aesthetic sense can be acknowledged and ethical concerns can be met, along with the desire to understand the processes.

In this increasingly complex society many traditions and cultures co-exist, technology has given us the possibility of many more choices than were previously possible, and among individuals there is a wide range of sexual preference, orientation, and behaviour. Each of us must face



questions about how we should live. Many of the most difficult choices involve sexual issues. Educators need to provide young people with a language with which to address the problems and with a practice of seeing what the consequences of particular choices are. It is difficult to decide on the content of a programme of sex education and once that is decided many problems will arise concerning the methods of teaching it. Even with an ideal programme the students will still not know how to solve all the problems which they will inevitably confront, but they may know better how to approach them.

Sexuality involves many very complex issues and the way in which one's sexuality is accepted and expressed has profound implications for society and for the life of every individual. How can young people be helped to understand themselves as sexual beings without a fear or without an excessive imagination or preoccupation? All of the difficulties outlined above result from a partiality of content or approach to the subject of sexuality when it is discussed in a course. Perhaps what is needed is an acknowledgement of the necessity of examining the global aspects of sexuality, i.e., the concepts of masculinity and femininity, as they are presently understood in the social context and as they might be understood more broadly; the way the images of ideals are developed in the society and influence behaviours, aspirations, and expectations of others; the issue of the traditional hierarchy of power and the consequences it has had in the society; the biological, psychological, and sociological "facts of life"; encouragement of young people to have wonderful, caring, and intimate relationships in which they will find delight and self-affirmation in sexual expression and for which they will take responsibility.

## NOTE

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