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978-0-521-09858-8 - Sex Education: Rationale and Reaction

Edited by Rex S. Rogers

Excerpt

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SECTION A

Sex Education: Theory, Practice and Perspective

Overview

This first section concentrates on the clarification of what we understand by sex education and on how society has come to bring such instruction into the normal scholastic framework. At the most basic level, a concern with sex education must stem from the recognition that human socio-sexual development is a *learning*¹ process (see Fig. 1). Such a view has not always been held for, in the past, sex has tended to be seen as an innate ‘animal passion’. Our present more environmental thinking is a result of both clinical and experimental studies of the way in which specific learning opportunities affect sexual behaviour. Indeed one of the few points of agreement between the two sides of the ‘permissiveness’ debate is that man’s sexual expression depends on his socialisation – society being seen by both as having the power to produce sexuality that is ‘responsible’ or sexuality that is ‘free’.

It is appropriate, therefore, to begin with a paper which speculates on the exact role that learning plays in sexuality. In Chapter 1, Wright poses the question ‘Sex: Instinct or Appetite?’. By this he means to contrast the view that sex is a drive which man merely learns to channel (rather as we do in ‘potty training’) with the view that sex is a taste (other examples being things like food preferences which are environmentally determined and have little to do with real hunger). The latter view, which Wright favours, calls into question the Freudian notion of a sexual drive (libido) which could be ‘dammed up’ and so produce psycho-sexual disorders. Nevertheless, it justifies sex education in another sense by pointing out how malleable the sexual appetite is.

It will not escape the reader’s attention that there is a sting to the tail of Wright’s article, a felt need for sex ‘... to be linked with affection, tenderness and awareness of the feelings of others’. This is, in fact, a very commonly set objective for sex education and one towards which the editor feels both sympathy and unease. Neither

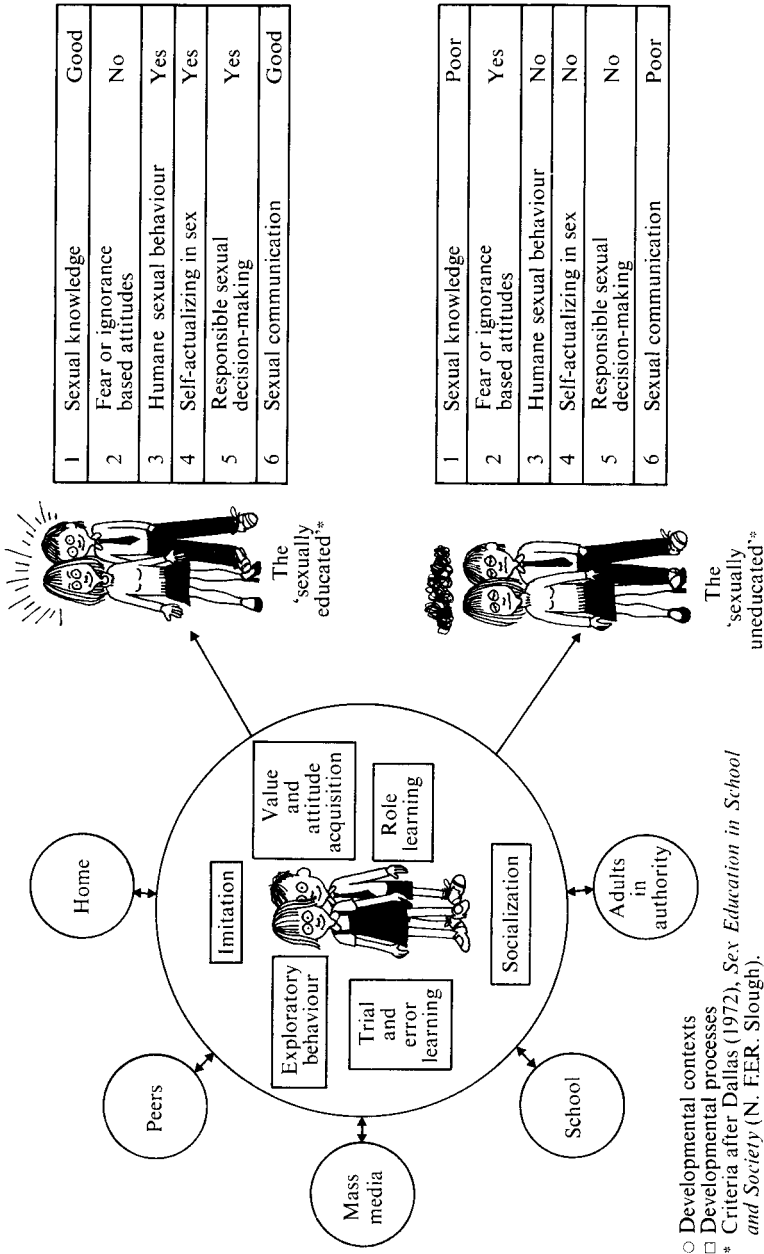


Figure 1. Socio-sexual development

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the decision to establish a clear linkage between the provision of information and the tutoring of ethical skills and emotional sensitivity, nor the imposition of deliberate separation of these aspects of sex education is without its problems. Integration is very dependent on the individual teacher's possession of the wherewithall to avoid 'indoctrination' – i.e. the imposition of a *particular* morality onto sexuality. If he fails in this then his value either as a source of information or as a mentor is compromised. Separation, while it avoids (perhaps dodges) this problem, raises other difficulties. Most obviously, those of facing the pupil with a 'clinical' or 'plumbing' approach to knowledge on the one hand and a moral education that is attenuated by its abstraction from the concrete and factual on the other.

My own view is that some kind of compromise is possible – the straight presentation of facts pertaining to sexuality wherever they arise 'naturally' in the curriculum (biology, health education, social studies, domestic science); plus the coverage of sexuality within a *broadly conceived* scheme of moral education (i.e. one that does not place emphasis either on particular areas like sex or on particular ways of construing morality).

Many educationalists, however, take the position that sex education has to be seen as a highly integrated endeavour. Such a view is skillfully presented by Harris (Chapter 2). Arguing from the perspective of moral education (a recent and burgeoning area which now boasts its own journal), Harris attempts the unenviable task of seeking to clarify the terms of reference of the sex educator. The value of such statements of position can be better understood by considering the current status of sex education. Numbers of well-intentioned people (e.g. teachers, health education officers, producers of teaching aids and those specialising in family life education and moral education) are all engaged in what can be broadly labelled sexual instruction. The chances are high, however, that the umbrella of 'sex education' hides a diversity so wide that it includes approaches in direct conflict – a state of affairs I have tried to illustrate in Table 1. In such a situation, there are many advantages which accrue from the generation of well-formulated statements of specific positions such as the view expressed in Chapter 2. For one thing, they create backcloths against which our own attitudes can be seen with more clarity. Further, when we have formal statements, it becomes possible to generate debate about their

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Table 1. *Variables in formal sex education schemes*

(1) Underlying value-assumptions	(2) Curriculum definition	(3) Overall aims
Often not explained. These tend to 'move with the times'	The content of most sex education schemes fit into one or more of the following rubrics:	Often linked to (1). The following is adopted from Dallas (1972) <i>op. cit.</i>
Who benefits? recipient society government parents	Biological emphases Medicine V.D. contraception Biology facts of life animal analogies	Adequate knowledge Attitudes not based on fear or ignorance Humane sexual behaviour
Ethical basis Christian humanistic pragmatic	Psychology sex is communication	Self-actualising in sex
Moral tone restrictive permissive	varieties of gratification	Responsible sexual decision-making Adequate sexual communication
	Sociological emphases Education preparation for menstruation child molesters Sociology relativism of morals our own system's values Law age of consent sexual offences Aesthetics enjoyment of sex love states Morality why we have sexual morals education for moral development Societal costs population control illegitimacy	

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(4) Specific aims	(5) Locus of contact	(6) Implementation techniques	(7) Assessment and evaluation
Where the major effects are to be expected	Where the potential recipients are to be reached	How the aims are to be achieved	How aim achievement is to be gauged
Attitudes changed Knowledge gained errors corrected Behaviour changed improved	Places of work Hospital/clinic Home Clubs School	Individual or group approach Sexes mixed/segregated Group discussions Lectures/classes 'Expert' speakers Films/T.V./ Audio-visual aids Practice (if appropriate) Follow-up facilities Role-playing	Formal examination Questionnaire/test Subjective assessment Behavioural effects

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underlying assumptions and so refinements in conceptualisation can emerge. Finally, when we have explicit aims, we can set about satisfying ourselves that they are, in fact, being achieved.

The moral educator's approach *in practice* is well illustrated in the extracts from McPhail *et al.* in Chapter 3. This material is from the companion rationale to the ambitious 'Lifeline' moral education project of the Schools Council. The selections cover both the general structure of the courses and some examples from the unit specifically focussed on sex. By referring to Table 1 of this Overview, the interested reader can trace the particular structure that the moral education position imposes on sex education and contrast it with the type of scheme that would result from a more biological orientation. A good example of the problematic issues raised by the moral education approach to sexuality can be found in the 'Consequences' material where the situation is posed '*... tries to kiss his girl-friend while driving*'. My own reaction to this is that it has nothing to do with sex but a lot to do with good road sense! This can be seen by substituting '*... tries to do yoga exercises while driving*'. In either case the innocent in logic is left with the faulty deduction:

Kissing a girl (yoga exercises) while driving can
cause accidents
Accidents are bad
Hence, sex (yoga) is potentially dangerous.

Although sex education does not have to be seen as an exclusively school-based venture (we could, for example, look to home, youth services or the ordinary mass media as other channels), there are good grounds for regarding the educational system as the major source of information. This stems from the unique role of the school as the single agent to which everybody in society has (at least in theory) equal access. It is also often true that it is easier to change the habits of institutions than those of individuals – so that to see all schools giving sexual instruction is a viable goal², whereas to see all parents instructing their children is not.

It is therefore of great importance to explore the current situation in British schools. An adequate understanding of the weaknesses and strengths of the current position seems a necessary pre-requisite to the planning of sex education courses, the development of better teaching aids and the improvement of provisions for instructing teachers in putting the topic across. In this context, the paper by

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Burke (Chapter 4) is of great value for it reviews the attitudes and activities of educationalists at both the central and local government levels. In addition, the author discusses the role played by non-governmental bodies and reviews some of the few researches in the area. The valuable appendices include some examples of curricula.

Despite a very obvious need for such data, we lack exact information about the extent to which sex education is included in individual school curricula. As Burke's paper makes clear, many L.E.A.s have developed sex education schemes; others have not. Even where schemes are promoted or external aids like schools broadcasts are available, the very autonomy of individual schools insures that levels of implementation vary greatly. A very good guide to current attitudes and practices is given in the article by Harris (Chapter 5). The information is not based on a random sample but a sufficiently large number of schools were sampled to yield information that must be fairly typical. Any complacency from those favouring sex education about the present situation is likely to be shattered by the finding that, despite an ever lowering age of physical development, over half of junior school heads felt that girls should not be informed before the event about menstruation or that half the primary schools never mentioned mating, conception and pregnancy.

Among the points raised by Harris in discussing his findings is the importance of better teacher-training in improving our efforts in the sex education field. No single institution seems better able to affect change in the whole current pattern of sexual instruction than the Colleges of Education. Yet, in 1964, a survey by Norman Greaves (Chapter 6) revealed that the adequacy of teacher-training in this area is very doubtful. More than half the schemes lasted less than six hours and they were seen not so much as covering how to teach sex education as 'primarily . . . for the personal benefit of the students in forming their own set of values . . .' One of the functions I hope the present publication will serve is to provide material that will prove useful to Colleges and Departments of Education in designing courses intended to help trainee teachers in the aims and techniques of sexual instruction.

In Chapter 7, Gill, Reid and Smith provide some broader perspectives on sex education: a review of typical press comment (Gill *et al.* concentrate on the Scottish press – the editor's own

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informal reading south of the border has shown much the same pattern), and a study of parental views. The average parent sampled accepted the need for a positive attempt at sex education (see Chapter 11 and Chapter 18 for further confirmation of parental approval). Additionally, about half of the parents mentioned school as a preferred agent of instruction. Some effects of seeing Grampian Television's 'Living and Growing' series (Chapter 16) on parental attitudes were also examined. These last statistics suggest that confidence in school as an agent of sex education and acceptance of the need for sex education may be enhanced by parental exposure to potential teaching aids.

The work of Masters and Johnson has popularly become almost synonymous with sexual research. It is fitting, therefore, to end this section with an extract from their writings (Chapter 8). In the paper selected they talk not about their more famous pure research but about the counselling side of their work. The term 'sexual re-education' seems to fit this well as the therapy is concerned in part with rectifying the effects of inadequate or maladjustive early learning. It is obviously tempting when one considers the prevalence of distressing psycho-sexual disorders like impotence and frigidity to wonder how far the frequency of such problems could be reduced by adequate sex education. As is noted in Section C, however, such evidence is very hard to collect and the question remains unanswered. Nevertheless, the success of Masters and Johnson-type therapeutic techniques are powerful evidence that a broad-based sex education programme (including factual information, attitude manipulation, practice and counselling in relationships) can have major behavioural consequences.

NOTES

1 Not to be confused with saying that it has been *taught* in the sense of imposed on a passive organism by an all-powerful environment. Modern psychological thinking about learning sees it as more like the whole process of seeking out food and then digesting it. Equally, this view recognises that such learning ultimately represents an *interaction* between the given (genetic factors – including sex gender) and the acquired (all those elements of sexuality derived from the socialising community).

2 It also, of course, means a generation of up-coming parents who have at least the *knowledge* with which to instruct *their* children.

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1 Sex: Instinct or Appetite?

DEREK WRIGHT

Sex is usually thought of as one of the instincts, and as such classed with hunger and thirst. It is notoriously difficult to define precisely what an instinct is; but in everyday usage it refers to an urge which directs behaviour and which is generated by a biological need. On the analogy with hunger and thirst, it follows that deprivation of sexual satisfaction should lead to an increase in need. So when someone apparently does not go in for sexual activity, we are left wondering what he does about this need. Healthy living, we presume, requires regular sexual 'outlets'. When this is not possible we expect the sex urge to find more indirect and devious ways of expressing itself.

Until recently psychologists themselves held a similar view to this. Behaviourist psychologists classed sex as a primary drive and they assumed that the principles which govern behaviour instigated by hunger will also apply to sexual behaviour. Freud's view of sex is similar. He defines 'libido' as 'psychic energy' – the tension or excitation that is seeking discharge through behaviour. At any particular time, according to Freud, libido exists in a finite quantity and it originates in internal bodily processes. It differs from other instinctual energies, he says, in that it is highly displaceable, and easily repressed, sublimated or diverted into forms of behaviour which have no obvious connection with sexuality. This highly mobile quality of the libido enabled Freud to discover its presence in creative art, science and so on.

In the last decade or so, there has been a burgeoning of research in this field, much of it directed towards the biology and physiology of sex. Discrepancies have emerged between the way sex seems to act, and the way hunger or thirst do.

Admittedly, the determining influence of genetic structure has

Derek Wright, 'Sex: instinct or appetite?' This article first appeared in *New Society* (22 May 1969), pp. 791–3..