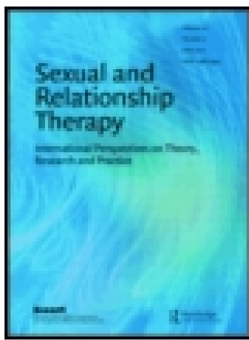

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INAUGURAL DEBATE

Sex education in schools is insufficient to support adolescents in the 21st century

A summary of Sexual and Relationship Therapy's inaugural debate, held at the 8th Congress of the European Federation of Sexology in Prague, 5 June 2006

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Introduction

> "The twin concepts of innocence and ignorance are vehicles for adult double standard. A child is ignorant if she doesn't know what adults want her to know, but innocent if she doesn't know what adults don't want her to know." (J. Kitzinger, in LEVINE 2002)

The inclusion of sex as an educational subject in the curricula of schools is a recent phenomenon, but in some countries today it is scheduled formally and accepted as an educational norm. The introduction of sex education in schools is probably a reflection of radical psychosocial change in the last 40 years: the Pill, the women's movement, mass communication and the internet have combined to create different sexual values and mores. It is, nonetheless, questionable whether sex education, as it stands, supports young people sufficiently in the midst of rapidly changing attitudes to sex and sexuality.

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Adolescents' needs

Consider first what adolescents need. Arguably, they are under great pressure to be sexually active and explorative. More sex, earlier sex, peer pressure and distorted media images make it difficult for adolescents to make sense of, and cope with, their emerging sexuality. Wellings *et al.* (2001) found that as young people reach puberty, they are not only adapting to new biological, psychological and social roles, they are also doing so with a lack of information, knowledge and support. Positive sex education means avoiding blaming or shaming adolescents about their sexual feelings and responses; it also means avoiding delivering messages that sex is not enjoyable. Whatever their gender or orientation, adolescents do need sound information, sexually positive role models, emotional support, relationship support and opportunities to develop as individuals and independent sexual decision-makers.

An appropriate environment?

A second consideration is whether schools are an appropriate environment for teaching young people about sex. Arguably sex education in schools is a pragmatic response to a social need, which is not met in any other social area or institution, and probably it is best met in schools. Worldwide, many schools still provide no sex education; some countries have no statutory requirement for sex education or provide sex education only for pupils well over the age of puberty (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999).

Goffman (1963) regarded the school as a total institution, in which relationships between people of different genders, generations and social status are arranged and organized. Although co-education enables boys and girls to learn to live together in a social space (Giami, 1978), there is evidence that gender stereotypes are constructed through the structures and practices of schooling itself (Kehily, 2002). Therefore, it is important to develop educational policies that address how social relationships are orchestrated and managed within schools as micro-social systems (Renold, 2000).

The question of religious bias also arises. Do schools in a state education system have a responsibility to maintain the standards of lay education, free from any religious influence? In a letter written to Dr. M. Fürst, Freud (1907) expressed regret that no sex education was provided in the non-religious classes in French primary schools. In other words, Freud was stressing the need to develop an open space for teaching sexual matters outside the realm of religion. In Europe today, the resurgence of religious fanaticism and activism makes it even more important to create a space where sexual matters can be taught to children and adolescents in an open and free fashion, outside the negative influence of religion on sexual health. In most European countries, some kind of religious training still has a legitimate place in state schools. One exception is France, where since 1905 church and state have been separate entities. Nearly 60 years later, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1974), based on the recommendations of its working group on sexual health, maintained that sexual taboos and myths, derived from many countries and subcultures, were obstacles to sexual well-being and sex education. The working group asserted that

religious or culturally induced sexual guilt and secrecy made it hard for partners to experience sexual enjoyment, and that the notion that sex is sinful, unless done for procreation, may provoke feelings of guilt about using contraception.

The content of sex education

If schools are, therefore, less than the ideal place for sex education, but maybe the best available option, the next point to consider is the content of sex coverage in curricula. Surveys have shown significant restrictions in schools in terms of time spent on sex education, themes covered and open discussion of social, religious and cultural aspects of sexuality (De Graaf *et al.,* 2005). This is true even in the Netherlands, which has an extremely low pregnancy rate (Ohlrichs, 2004b). Most sex education in schools today concentrates on technical aspects of sex, such as the physiological processes involved in reproduction, and on negative issues or risks involved in sexual activity, rather than the emotional and relational aspects and the potential health benefits.

Different kinds of discourse are present in schools. One type is boys' and girls' lay discourse that is developed in the playground and found in graffiti on toilet walls and other hidden places. These discourses reveal the "Obscene Folklore of the Child" (Gaignebet, 1974, title page). This is the hidden knowledge of children and adolescents that they express in their own words (Renold, 2004). The other type is the explicit discourse of public morality involving the rules and norms of acceptable social behaviour and gender relations. This discourse can be supported by a system of sanctions and punishments in cases of visible violation (such as gender violence or sexual harassment). Existing sex education may include the instructional scientific and medical discourse on sex that appears, for example, in text books covering the biology of reproduction. Sexual information is supposedly value-free, but when based mainly on the teaching of reproductive biology, it can be interpreted as a moral choice excluding the dimension of pleasure and the diversity of sexual orientation and life styles (Lupton, 1995; Irvine, 2002). In France, some religious groups have wanted to forbid girls to attend biology courses. State schools have the duty to maintain a strong sense of obligation to treat boys and girls equally in these matters, and avoid or limit stereotypes.

Another crucial factor in sex education provision is teacher training, which generally does not cover the topic of sex; teachers may lack the knowledge or skill to facilitate sexual themes in a safe and supportive way; they may be struggling with their own sexual issues, greatly reducing the chances of their discussing sex in an informed, relaxed and confident way with their pupils. Further constraints are lack of funds to purchase new materials or to pay for specialist sex educators. Schools and teachers may also have many external pressures which undermine their ability to provide appropriate sex education. In the UK, for example, anti-contraception and termination lobbies sent 'hate mail' to a teacher running sex education classes, whilst in the Netherlands, the Government began cutting financial subsidies to support institutions providing sex education classes five years ago.

Is there an abyss between adolescents' needs and the provision of sex education? First consider key statistics. The worldwide teenage pregnancy rate stands at 10%

(UNICEF, 2001; Save the Children, 2005). Half of all new HIV infections occur in young people aged 15–24 (UNAIDS, 2004), and the number of sexually active girls has quadrupled over the past 50 years (Wells & Twenge, 2005). Anecdotal evidence also suggests a general lack of social awareness in young people in the Netherlands, as demonstrated by the case of a 15-year-old sex-offender, who was unable to recognise girls' non-verbal signals of refusal.

Adolescents face a barrage of inaccurate, unrealistic media messages on sexuality, particularly about body image, sexual performance, making sexual approaches and gay or lesbian issues (Ohlrichs, 2004a). According to Ohlrichs (2004a), who is an advice columnist for *BreakOut*, one of the largest Dutch magazines for adolescents, letters received from young people show no increase in knowledge or emotional literacy when compared to letters written two decades ago. Similar findings have been drawn from UK studies (Quilliam, 2004), which provide evidence of young people's lack of practical knowledge of sex, their emotional illiteracy, their lack of personal empowerment and their inability to make sexual decisions independent of peer and media pressure. A survey of European adult women recalling their experience of school sex education also reflected these concerns: in particular, these women identified a need for emotional teaching and support in sex education, especially around assertiveness and sexual confidence (Quilliam, 2004). In this respect, times have not changed, according to studies of adolescents' perceptions and criticisms of sex education (De Graaf *et al.,* 2005; Family Planning Association, 2004; Massault, 2004; Measor *et al.,* 2000). These studies highlight the lack of practical and social information offered in classes, the heterosexual bias and the lack of emotional and relationship support. Measor *et al.* (2004) found that young people are furious about the inadequate nature of sex education provided.

State schools need to help children and adolescents to deal with pornography and other media-led sexual discourse, such as advertising, by using the same kind of critical analysis that they teach in literature or art. Failing to train teachers in these skills leaves children and adolescents without any tools to understand, interpret, manage and cope with pornography (Williams, 2004). Sadly, the development of such training is rarely contemplated, since in most European countries the exposure of children and adolescents to sexually explicit messages is considered a legal offence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, state schools should:

- provide young people with tools for critical analysis, which may help them to read the world around them, to develop democracy and human rights by trusting them to make their own decisions instead of imposing moral norms. This includes teaching them to conduct critical analyses of pornography to protect them from the violence of the images
- develop adolescents' knowledge and understanding about contraceptive and STI prevention

- help to promote inter-gender understanding and prevent gender-biased violence by increasing co-educational settings
- take a realistic and positive attitude towards the pleasures of sexual relations (as is done, for example, in the more recently developed sex educational material produced for schools in the Netherlands, such as www.seksuelevorming.nl)
- develop adolescents' ability to communicate about sexuality and related emotions, enabling them to understand each other's preferences and boundaries and make their sexual experiences pleasurable to both partners.

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