

Sex Education and the Changing Curriculum

Amy S. Whaley
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Introduction

Sex education is a very sensitive topic, and when the curriculum is changed or broadened, controversy arises concerning subject matter, morals, and teaching style. New issues that must be dealt with in sex education classes include AIDS and new diseases, homosexuality, and sexual and emotional intimacy. These new issues are products of societal change, and it is necessary for the curriculum of sex education classes to change and include these topics. The sex education programs in schools should provide factual and current information to students, and the information should be appropriate for the grade level to which it is presented. This research paper is organized into the following sections: significance of the topic, review of the literature, summary of the qualitative data, personal opinion on the topic, conclusion and references.

Significance of the Topic

Sex education is a necessary component of the overall curriculum because the information it provides will be vital to the health, or even life, of the students. The curriculum needs to be changing to adapt to new issues in society, but educators and administrators are distracted by controversy about morals and values. Morals and values are important, but the necessary information about sex and diseases must take precedence. A broader sex education curriculum that includes the topics of sexual diversity and emotional intimacy is necessary for students who already know the basic biological information about

sex. Sex education programs must be made more inclusive of new issues so that students will be more aware of the health risks and emotional effects of sexual relations and more understanding of sexual diversity.

Review of the Literature

Sex Education, Schools and Teachers

In the preparation of teachers, morals and ethics have been studied in the curriculum. Beyer (1991) states that moral commitment and moral discourse should be a central part of the teacher education program. This issue is important because teachers are confronted with ethical questions concerning subject matter and responsibilities to students and parents when teaching sex education. Teachers must be committed to their own values and still teach with the best interests of the students in mind.

Schools and teachers also need to be aware of how the characters of children are being shaped in the classroom. Morals and values of the teacher are a part of sex education, but the students' values also are important in the sex education classroom. The curriculum for sex education should allow for students and teachers to discuss and share values, rather than have a set of morals imposed on the sex education program (Kohn 1991).

The sex education teachers in schools today are often undertrained in the curriculum of this area, and frequently,

these teachers make assumptions about students in this sensitive area. The major focus of sex education teachers should be to make students feel comfortable with themselves and their behaviors and to respect their individuality (Krueger 1993).

Curriculum controversy also brings up the issue of excusing children from sex education classes for religious objections. Some parents have argued in court that sex education classes constitute an establishment of a religion, state morality, or a religion of secularism, but the courts have continually ruled that sex education classes are public health measures. The rulings also stated that sex education classes can be taught without the influences of individual views on sexual morality. Health and sex information that is uncensored by religious belief needs to be made available simply for the general welfare of public school students (First 1992).

Concerning the progress of sex education in America's schools, many American adults, particularly parents of school-age children, support sex education in schools and the inclusion of sensitive areas such as birth control and abortion. Studies have also shown that students with more knowledge through sex education are more likely to use contraceptives or even abstain from sexual activity. To continue the progress, teachers must be provided with appropriate materials for teaching sex education, and they also need school administrations, parents, and communities to actively support and encourage sex education programs (Donovan 1992).

Sexuality Education

Sexuality education involves putting the act of sex into perspective by focusing on other issues such as friendship, trust, and intimacy. Sex education is taught in a limited number of schools, and the incorporation of sexuality education is rarely seen in these programs (Gordon 1990).

Sexuality education has faced many barriers since the 1970s when advocates pushed to broaden sex education to include social, emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of being human. Sexuality education needs to be considered in a more realistic perspective in terms of overcoming the barriers and teaching young people to be capable, healthy and responsible (Scales 1990).

There are also times when sexuality education is not effective, particularly in small groups. The ineffectiveness can stem from disruptive group members, hesitancy to talk, polarization, storytelling, inappropriate risk taking, hyperactivity and unsatisfactory interactions. The best approach for a sexuality educator to overcome these difficulties would be to set realistic goals, accept the situation when it does not work, and keep in mind that student learning and interactions are priorities (McMurray 1992).

New Curriculum Topics

Recently, the sex education curriculums have begun to include sexual diversity as a major component. Public schools are beginning to become aware of the diversity of sexual

orientation among teenagers, and this awareness has resulted in counseling programs and anti-slur/anti-discrimination policies. The acknowledgment of sexual diversity in schools introduces topics of sexual identity and the development of one's identity into the sex education curriculum. By including sexual diversity in sex education programs, educators hope to help all students become more understanding and accepting of this diversity (Sears 1991).

Adolescents are sexually active at younger ages, with many becoming mothers and fathers before they are 16 years old. This creates a need for emotional education that includes mature, appropriate, interpersonal emotional intimacy to be added to sex education programs. Adolescents are physically ready for sexual intimacy much earlier than they are ready for emotional intimacy. Many young people also have difficulty expressing their feelings. Although sex education programs may be adequate concerning physical information, they do not always address the need of adolescents to nurture and preserve emotional intimacy (Shaughnessy and Shakesby 1992).

Summary of the Qualitative Data

Interview Questions

The following questions were asked of the participants:

1. Tell me about the sex education program in your school.
2. Based on your knowledge of the program, discuss the quality of the content and literature.

3. Tell me how the program/curriculum has changed/adapted to meet the needs of societal changes.

Participants

The following educators were selected by the researcher to participate in the study. Participant A was a female high school English teacher in an inner city school with a mixed socioeconomic level. This teacher had just completed her internship. Participant B was a male middle school physical education teacher in a small town school that has a high percentage of students from low income families. He has 23 years of teaching experience. Participant C is a first grade teacher in a rural school with a mixed socioeconomic level. This participant has been teaching for five years. During the interview sessions, notes were taken for later analysis by the researcher.

Summary of the Data

In response to question one, Participant A, B, and C all stated that they knew very little about the sex education programs at their schools, but they proceeded to describe what they did know. Participant A said that there was no specific course, but sex education was incorporated into family living, home economics, and health classes. The teachers of these courses integrate sex education into their regular course material. Participant B replied that sex education was taught as a part of eighth grade science called "family life." Sixth and seventh graders received no organized instruction other than

annual assemblies about biological changes. Participant C stated that first graders attended a program by the sheriff's department to make them aware of sexual abuse and what they should do. These children were not exposed to any other sex education, but Participant C said she thought fourth and fifth graders did have some sex education instruction.

In response to question two, Participant A said that the home economics classes attended special programs at the KAMA Health Discovery Center to enrich their sex education programs. The programs at her school did focus on AIDS, sexually-transmitted diseases and biological functions of sex. Participant B stated that the family life program had adequate audio-visual and printed materials, and the program includes information about AIDS and sexually-transmitted diseases. Participant C replied that the sexual abuse program for first graders provided excellent information to make the children aware of the possibility, and the program stresses that it is not the child's fault.

In response to question three, Participant A described the teen parenting program at her high school. This is a special class to help girls who become pregnant, and the program also provides child care after the baby is born. Participant A thought more should be done to emphasize the responsibility of the fathers. She also stated that the sex education classes need to focus on more preventive measures. Participant B said that the program at his school had not changed significantly

since its implementation four years ago. Participant C replied that the sexual abuse awareness program was relatively new, and the presentation is updated each year.

Personal Opinion on the Topic

Based on the results of the study, the researcher sees the need for sex and sexuality education that includes more information than just biological functions. The literature describes some excellent ways to educate students about emotional intimacy, and the researcher thinks this should be a component of all sex education programs. The researcher thinks that the support from the courts and most adults will make the transition from sex education to sexuality education occur more quickly and easily. The interviews make it very apparent to the researcher that the present sex education programs are not providing necessary information to all students who need it. Sex education should be more intense in middle school to possibly prevent some of the problems of pregnancy, disease, and promiscuity in high school. Overall, the researcher sees the need for more and better sex education beginning early in junior high school. By broadening the sex education curriculum, the researcher believes that students will benefit by being more informed, healthy, and responsible.

Conclusion

Research shows that a shift from traditional sex education to sexuality education that focuses more on emotions would provide a better means of instruction for adolescents. Morals and values are important in sex education, but factual and pertinent information should be the core of the curriculum. Interviews with educators provide evidence that teachers are not very informed about the sex education programs within their own schools, and this also indicates that the sex education programs receive very little attention compared to other curricular areas. The changes that need to be made in sex education curriculums would result in more knowledgeable students and a reduction in social problems that are related to sexual activity.

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