

DEVELOPING A CURRICULUM IN
SEX EDUCATION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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For American youth today, not only have the usual physical and psychological problems of maturation been present, but these have been compounded by a society whose mass media have exploited sex as a marketing tool. Can the schools continue to ignore such a vital sphere of human existence? This study was initiated to determine the feasibility of introducing sex education in the curriculum as early as kindergarten and continuing it each year thereafter in the elementary school.

From the ever-expanding literature on sex education it was sought to discover what has been going on in this field. This included investigation of philosophies and procedures utilized in the initiation of programs, in addition to the problems encountered in establishing them. A variety of curricula in actual use in elementary schools as well as some planned as guides were also studied. Finally, the author was a member of a subcommittee of the Family Life and Sex Education Curriculum Committee in Darien, Connecticut.

The evidence has indicated that there has been a rapidly increasing amount of activity in the field of sex education in recent years. With this has come a change in interpretation from a strictly biological emphasis. The authorities have been stressing the psychological and sociological implications. Sex education has been defined as human relations, with its goal as self-realization for students.

Traditionally, the home and church have been considered the proper sources for imparting such knowledge. But since it has been demonstrated that they have defaulted, many have concluded that the schools should assume this responsibility, in cooperation with parents whenever possible.

There has been disagreement as to the age and grade at which instruction should be introduced. However, most authorities have stressed the importance of the early years in attitude formation and have advocated the start of the school program in kindergarten.

Much has been written about the procedures for initiating a sex education program. There has been one point on which agreement has been total. For a successful experience, not only teachers and school personnel should be involved, but also parents and the entire community. Despite compliance with this and other recommendations, problems have developed. These problems have been primarily with parents and teachers. This has been one reason why such strong emphasis has been placed on parental involvement and cooperation. As for teachers, the most frequently suggested solution has been additional training in this sensitive area.

Underlying the development of a sex education curriculum has been the question of whether or not it should be a separate entity or integrated into other subjects as science, history, English, and so forth. However, the latter has proven difficult to accomplish in structured fashion. Therefore, the most frequent approach has been to create a sequential curricu-

lum as part of the health education program. But tailoring of the curriculum to individual community needs has been deemed essential.

Another underlying principle has been in the controversial sphere of attitudes and values. The general opinion of the experts has been that facts should be presented and alternatives suggested in an effort to enable children to make their own responsible decisions.

There has been tremendous diversity in the sex education curricula which have been developed. They have varied in content and in the grade level at which instruction has been introduced. There have also been areas of agreement in methods, materials, and timing. In large part, the tendency has been to deal with concepts of home and family, plant and animal growth in the primary grades. The most universal point of agreement has been in placing the study of human growth and reproduction in grades five and six. Usually, the boy-girl dating relationship has been dealt with in grades seven and eight. A prime feature of most curricula has been repetition. Concepts have been reiterated many times, always at a depth consonant with the age and grade level.

Sex education faces many challenges. It differs from other subjects because of its peculiarly sensitive nature. What constitutes a good program is still a moot question. Progress in implementing curricula has been slow. A thoughtfully conceived program can fail without qualified teachers. One area in which there is need for additional research is in evaluation.

Even with a sex education program in effect, the school may not be the prime determinant in the sex education of a child, but it surely can be a constructive force.