

Our study must include sex not only as a physical entity but as an emotional and social entity.

Considerations in a Philosophy of Sex Education

GREG R. FOSTER

Health Education Institute
Hinsdale Health Museum, Illinois

PHILOSOPHY in its truest sense is a system of principles for the conduct of life. To Webster, it is a study of human morals, character, and behavior. Should a philosophy be applied to sex education? If so, could it be used as a guide in constructing a teaching program for parents and school personnel? The answers to these questions are affirmative. In the construction of such a program, attitudes and values must be examined first.

In our society there are certain attitudes which are held by people to be "good" and others "bad." Those considered bad are the ones which impugn strong religious faith, good citizenship, the healthy outlook, etc. We of the older generation tend to look upon the new morality of the younger as being a bad outlook or an unhealthy attitude pursued. We say that the new morality proposed by some teen-agers today is accountable for the mischief they cause. A rationalization for the new morality is that sexual standards change with time. The putative change, however, is not great enough to go against the val-

ues and attitudes passed down to us through generations.

In Deuteronomy and Leviticus there appear definitions clearly outlined on rules of conduct and responsibility. Basically, these rules or codes have not changed through the centuries. They remain to the present day strong building blocks for the teaching of family living. The codes identify the family unit as the foundation of society. Their value has been demonstrated.

Today we see a deviation from the basic codes of responsibility and conduct. This is observed in advertisements, entertainment, and literary media. The deviations contribute to a major problem faced today—the breakdown of family life in our society. Presumably it would be thought that more families would spend together the leisure time brought us by the new technologies. Often, however, the freedom of more leisure time brings about loneliness. Loneliness combined with a search for love can never be righted by a frontal attack for a desired love.

The moral problems we face today

are not inherited. We do not inherit sexual attitudes. Rather, our attitudes evolve from social, economic, and political necessity. Often they evolve out of fear, guilt, or shame. A philosophy of sex education must assume by necessity the fact that attitudes can be revised or changed. We accept the fact that sexual standards of the day change just as man's environment changes. The basic rules do not change.

Our study must include sex not only as a physical entity but as an emotional and social entity. Sex is a mysterious and complicated part of us. It is intimately personal and yet connotes vast social implications. The best traditions and attitudes of past generations must be included in a philosophy and not be diluted by modern needs. Our approach must be positive and not negative. Limiting ourselves as teachers to the dangers of unwanted pregnancies or of venereal diseases is approaching the job in a negative fashion. Instilling fear is not a healthy basis for the development of a sexual philosophy. Sex is concurrent with a mature understanding of the role of sex in life. It is a function which contributes to the growth of character. With positive emphasis we promote the emotional outgrowth of a future man-wife relationship.

A philosophy of sex education must be imbued with the instilling of self-determination. By this I mean that one has or will accept the responsibility for the making of his future. As educators we cannot inspire a desire for learning this. We are not teaching to set the mind on fire. Rather, we are teaching about the world, its social order, and about the child himself. We hope that the child will become more and more

sensitive to the claims made upon him. With such knowledge, he will not be able to ignore the questions as to what his responsibility is to the community, school, and family.¹

Three Factors

If we base a philosophy on the above we must investigate three factors which will influence our thinking and presentation. These are the linguistic, aesthetic, and ethical factors which support a sound philosophy. No one of these is more important than the other two.

1. The linguistic factor encompasses verbal expression of thoughts. The expression is limited and controlled by the forms of their expression, viz., by language in the most comprehensive sense. Are we flexible in communication of sex information and education to all age levels? Can we simplify our terms so as to be understood by a fifth grader as well as a tenth grader? Language conditions the way in which our questions are put and the way in which our answers are formulated. We must know biological facts as well as the social, emotional, and psychological implications of sex because the language we express them in will condition our reasoning.

Of course, the language we use is a record of intellectual activity of past generations and, as a result, it embodies and serves to perpetuate its errors as well as its truths. Reticence or guilt feelings can be imparted if we are not watchful. We must be ready to supple-

¹ Harry S. Broudy. *Building a Philosophy of Education*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. p. 244.

**for Regular Classroom Work
or Special Remedial Programs**

**Continental's
Liquid Duplicating Materials...**

... modern, convenient, effective teaching aids that provide great flexibility of usage. No grade level is indicated on the pages so that the teacher can select materials from various levels to use according to students' needs.

Over 220 titles in preprinted carbon masters for liquid duplicating

MATHEMATICS (modern, transitional, and traditional)

ENGLISH

READING READINESS

READING-THINKING SKILLS — PHONICS

SCIENCE — HEALTH — SOCIAL STUDIES

OUTLINE MAPS

GUIDANCE — SPECIAL EDUCATION



For information about these publications, write for a Complete Catalog.

THE CONTINENTAL PRESS, INC.
Elizabethtown, Pa. 17022

ment our inherited language with parts of everyday speech.

2. The second factor is aesthetic. How well do we present the facts? Is the procedure sufficiently pleasing to the mind? Are we clumsy or refined? Constant revising and polishing of our technique is an absolute requirement if we are to remain sincere, frank, and unbiased. This does not mean varnishing the presentation with sugared eloquence.

3. In our revision we must be concerned with the ethical factor. This involves the "good" and the "bad," the true, the normal, and the abnormal entities regarding sex. What is said must not go against healthy attitudes or religious beliefs already established. Ethical considerations enter into the presentation. Our knowledge must be shaped

rationally instead of capriciously. We should dispense it in order that every man can be rational in making choices. This is an ethical law for health educators in the field of sex education.

Examining certain beliefs is admittedly dangerous to the beliefs; not examining them is disastrous to the soul. Can we fully examine the common problem of when is an abortion therapeutic and when is it criminal? Can we examine the problem in a latitudinarian manner? Examining a belief is not the same as talking heatedly about it. The person doing the examining as well as the sex education program must be an individual selected more for his personal attributes than on his scholarship. His personal attributes must be of a refulgent nature so as to be an example opposing reticence and biased opinion. Of course, no one person can generate beliefs or values. Only an institution such as the family can transmit them. If the family neglects its duty the work must be an effort of the school as a subsidiary agency to the family. The school is not out of its province in teaching sex education. After all, sex education implies values. Intellectual competence in determining values is the first duty of a school and the framework of the formal school's program of ethical education.

Thus far, parental and school sex education has been mostly in the realm of misinformation or underinformation. The medical profession is keenly aware of this. Dr. James Rosen, for example, in his book review appearing in *Medical Opinion and Review*² urges the

² James Alan Rosen, M.D. "Challenge of Pubescence." *Medical Opinion and Review* 3(1):105; January 1967.

medical profession to care and to take a more active role in reversing the horrifying statistics of teen-aged unmarried mothers, their illegitimate children, and their abortions.

Effective and helpful sex education must be offered to teen-agers to prevent them from supplying their own distortions. From basic psychology we know that distortions can become conditioned. When a chain of thoughts becomes firm, its connections are very difficult to break. As Beveridge has said, regarding science in general, although his words apply here, "If an adolescent frequently pursues an unprofitable line of thought, the harder it is for him to adopt a profitable line of thought instead."³ And of course the thinking of Freud enters into this line of thought as well. He believed that great damage could be done in early childhood as a result of bad teaching and inexperienced handling in sexual matters.

The school can and should set forth a policy which reinforces the good already begun outside the school. It should use the knowledge of the entire school system to guide its pupils in ethical choices and judgments in an effort to transform the naturally egocentric child into a mature adult. A philosophy which will break the Puritan Gordian knot of inhibition and guilt is needed now by administrators. Youth today can be privileged by confronting prob-

lems we have grown gray seeking to solve or ignore.

In summary, our philosophy should be based on these items:

1. Awareness of the new morality as well as the ancient rules of conduct and responsibility set forth in the Old Testament and the view that the older proven codes are still the strongest and cannot be attenuated no matter what the standards of the day may be.

2. The social and psychological implications as well as the anatomical and physiological implications of sex must be included in the sex education program. The approach should be positive and not negative, emphasizing the normal and not the abnormal aspects.

3. The concept of self-determination should be instilled in the individual so that he will be able to accept responsibility for his own welfare. To do this, we as educators must understand three factors which influence our thinking and the thinking of those who listen to us: the linguistic, aesthetic and ethical.

4. Objective examination of current problems and how their solutions correlate with proven attitudes and values.

5. Personnel for teaching sex education should be selected on the basis of personal attributes as well as scholarship. Only then can there be a puissant guarantee of success, a lowering of the barriers of inhibitions on questions regarding sex, and an opening for intellectual curiosity and understanding.

³ W. I. B. Beveridge. *The Art of Scientific Investigation*. New York: Norton Press, 1950. p. 64.

Copyright © 1968 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.