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A Feminist Approach to Sex Education in the High School

By Peggy Brick

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At Dwight Morrow High School, sex education is an eight-week unit of a course called Introduction to Behavioral Science. Over the year, students cover such topics as human relations; the life cycle; learning; sleep, dreams, and the unconscious; mental health and mental illness — all of which contribute experiences and insights that enable students to understand dimensions of human sexuality.

Sex education is not mere "biology" as taught in high school science courses that ignore students' questions and the decisions they must make. Nor is sex an isolated entity as it is often studied in the context of health courses. Sex needs to be viewed as part of the totality of behavior: an element of human relationships that calls for meaningful communication; part of the life cycle in which development at each stage is related to earlier stages; a learned behavior which accounts for wide individual, socioeconomic, and cultural variations in expression. Sex needs to be understood as a behavior that is completely motivated and sometimes confusingly unconscious—a behavior each of us must come to terms with if we are to enjoy mental health. Within the context of a course such as Behavioral Science, students can see sex in the perspective of their total life experience.

The unit combines a foundation of knowledge and experience with students' questions and concerns. Some of these concerns are expressed openly, but others, possibly the most important ones, are dropped quietly into a Sex Question Box perched conspicuously on my desk throughout the eight weeks. The questions students ask reveal the intensity of adolescent concerns and clearly demonstrate the need for such a course. Persistent questions involve decision making. Frequently they ask, "What do you think about kids our age having sex?" "Should age be a factor in deciding whether or not to have intercourse with a partner if you have a good, mature, understanding relationship in which you can discuss sex and birth control?"

Another area of consuming interest is that of birth control and pregnancy: "Is it safe to have sex during a girl's period?" "How accurate are the home pregnancy tests?" "If you have an abortion, what problems can it cause later?" "Is it possible for a girl to become pregnant if the penis is not inserted?" Certain questions reveal their efforts to understand themselves and others: "How is it so easy for someone to get carried away while fondling even when there is no birth control available and they realize the consequences?" "Why do guys get turned on so easily?" And some are specifically about intercourse: "Is there any one position that is best for stimulation?" "Can the uterus be harmed due to deep thrusting?" Many reveal worries: "Does masturbation really reduce seminal fluid?" "What does it mean if a person can't have an orgasm?" "Is excessive masturbation harmful and could it cause lack of sexual interest in later years?" "Can women have gonorrhea without symptoms?" "I know many children have some sort of homosexual experience, but how can you tell when it's an early sign of complete homosexuality?"

These questions are only one indication of the high interest in this unit, which begins in May just as spring fever distracts students, and teachers are bemoaning poor attendance and lethargy. No such problems when you're teaching about sex! Classroom energy is high. Their comments show that students discuss topics intensely even outside the class, sometimes with parents.

This year, anonymous feedback from all the students after the first two weeks revealed that by then, many had recognized that they actually knew less about sex than they thought they did. One theme was repeated over and over: "A lot that people think teens know about sex, they really don't know and wouldn't even think to ask."

Students were intent on the immediate importance of sexuality in their own lives and its importance for the future: "This topic more than any other we studied will lead me to a greater understanding of life." They appreciated the chance to discuss sex in a comfortable atmosphere: "Many people may be unfamiliar or too closed to talk about sex, and this unit is opening them up."

Many were impressed with specific information they learned: "I found out that rapists do not have that much sexual drive"; or, "Seven out of ten parents want their children to have sex education in school." Almost everyone mentioned the Sex Question Box because, "If we have any questions, we can always drop them in the box and no one will know who wrote it." "Other people have the same thoughts I have; fears, too."

One student thought the course "bridged the gap between what is learned on the street and from friends, what is taught in biology, and what is learned from parents." Another said it was helpful in solving problems "no one else wants or cares to answer." "I see that if sex is dealt with openly, with time for questions . . . people will have an increased awareness of their bodies, feelings, and sexuality." As one student contended, "Studying sex in a clinical way is somewhat comforting because it makes people more willing and probably more able to control their own bodies and emotions."

We begin the unit with a Sex Knowledge Survey, seventy questions directed at common misconceptions about sex. Students have two days to find the correct answers from any source, including parents and teachers. Then, with even the
Facts About Sex

terms posted around the room — an effective technique for
coolest ones humbled, we discuss the answers fully. Next we
read and evaluate the controversial comic book, Ten Heavy
Facts About Sex (Gordon, 1973). We have a hilarious and, for
some, embarrassing time listing slang words under proper sex
terms posted around the room — an effective technique for
"desensitizing" these words and preparing students for
responsible discussion. We also embellish the bulletin board
some, embarrassing time listing slang words under proper sex
attitudes toward menstruation, childbirth, breast-feeding; sex
roles; customs of courting and marriage; and the role of the
family and religion in setting the norms that govern sexual
behavior. A discussion of Margaret Mead's work (1949,1963)
emphasizes the importance of early infant handling, and articles
by Messenger (1971) and Marshall (1971) provide dramatic
evidence of the variety of human sexual practices.

Students gain a sociological perspective by discussing
Kinsey's findings (Kinsey and others, 1948, 1953) and reading a
summary of Sorenson's Adolescent Sexuality in Contemporary
America (1973). They begin to focus on their own social envi­
ronment by making hypotheses comparing Sorenson's findings
with student behavior in our school.

Several research activities are designed to sharpen
students' awareness of the sexual milieu in which they function
and the sexual pressures imposed on them. Students write
detailed observations of the body language between a male-
female couple and do a 24-hour self-observation, listing their
own sexist and nonsexist behaviors. They also take an inventory,
"Attitudes Toward Women in American Society" (Spence and
Helmreich, 1977), which reveals differences in boys' and girls'
attitudes toward female equality. They may either write a book
report or conduct a research project in which, for instance, they
analyze sexism in elementary school textbooks; examine sex-role
stereotypes in advertisements and commercials; compare ar­
ticles on homosexuality written between 1920 and 1975; discuss
sexual imagery in popular songs; compare male and female
behavior and achievement in high school math classes; compare
attitudes of ninth- and eleventh-graders toward premarital sex,
birth control methods, and abortion.

Throughout the unit, I encourage students to evaluate their
own feelings, values, and behaviors in relation to their in­
creasing knowledge. Each year a "Sex Concerns List," a 45-item
checklist of concerns expressed by adolescents, reveals their
insecurities about establishing meaningful relationships. Girls
want to know "how you can say no to a boy without having him

lose interest." Boys wonder "how you can tell whether a girl
really loves you or is just leading you on."

Of course, role play is one of the students' favorite methods.
We act out a variety of problematic situations: facing peer
pressure to become sexually active; going into a drug store to
buy condoms; discussing sex with parents; dealing with sexual
activity of a younger sibling; confronting a partner with
possible pregnancy; relating to a sister who is living with a man.
But we also move into the future through a simulation that
encourages students to decide how their children, ideally, would,
learn about sexuality. Students divide into pairs and try to reach
family consensus on questions such as: Would you breast-feed
the new baby? How would you handle toilet training? What
would you do if you found your three-year-old masturbating
or your five-year-old "playing doctor" with the boy next door?
Would both parents have equal responsibility in rearing the
child? Much "parental pride" is evident as they share their
methods with the class.

During our discussion of changing sex norms in the United
States, the students develop a "New Code of Sexual Behavior."
In sex-segregated groups, then in small combined groups, and
finally as a whole class, they seek consensus on a code they
believe would lead to good sexual relationships in contemporary
American society. They typically feel that sex should always be a
choice — "People should not be pressured into having sex.
Honesty with a partner is important. When deciding whether to
have a relationship, consider how it would affect your feelings
about yourself: the next day, a month later, when the
relationship is over."

Students also write their own definition of love, although
student research shows that many more girls than boys believe
love is a critical part of a sexual relationship. Students of both
sexes are eager to share their definitions with the class, and we
use them for discussion.

I also encourage students to examine their beliefs through
values clarification exercises (Simon and others, 1977; Howe and
Howe, 1976). Values Voting tests their position on a bill before
the state legislature that would severely restrict abortions. Rank
Order stimulates thinking about important characteristics of
members of the opposite sex. Forced Choice has them consider
whether they would go out with a person who has a
"reputation." These exercises are always integrated into the
content of the unit, never used as a gimmick, and often help
students explore their attitudes toward positions taken by a
speaker, a film, or an article.

This past year I developed a survey of my students' at­
titudes and how they have changed as a result of completing the
sex education unit. The students who have taken the course feel
better about their sexuality and are confident about their new
knowledge, yet they are wise enough to realize that sexual
decisions are subject to complicated forces. They are not sure
they have gained complete control. Significantly, many still feel
reluctant to discuss sex with their parents, which reflects the fact
that communication between parents and teenagers is not
adequate for sex education to be left to parents.

Since sexuality is at the heart of adolescent consciousness,

1I have evolved this survey over the years, but many of the basic
ideas come from the Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test (Lief and Reed,
1972).

2Controversial because it advocates abortion, masturbation, and
accepting homosexuality; also because of its comic book format.

3The books students report on include, for instance, Walden Two
(Skinner, 1948); Sex: Telling It Straight (Johnson, 1979); Our Bodies,
Ourselves (Boston Women's Health Collective, 1976); and The Art of
Loving (Fromm, 1956).
one isolated course is only the start of a program that might help them achieve full integrity as sexual beings. As they experience their own developing sexuality, they are faced with confusing

4 The unit also includes a variety of speakers on sexual issues; films such as About Sex (available from Texture Films, New York City) and To Plan Your Family (available from the New Jersey State Museum Film Loan Service); films available from Guidance Associates, Pleasantville, New York; and articles representing a range of views, such as "I'd Rather Be Black Than Female." (Chisholm, 1970); "Homosexuals May Be Healthier Than Straights" (Freedman, 1975); and "Ties That Bind: The Price of Pursuing the Male Mystique" (Gordon, 1980).

5 The position of the American Medical Association (1972) is that parents are unable to assume the role of sex educators because of their embarrassment and "absymal ignorance of even elementary facts" (p. 151).

... adult behaviors and values and they are manipulated by the sexualization of virtually every advertisement they see. They are desperate for information and serious dialogue that will help them grow into sexually healthy persons. Without this opportunity, the strong ones will evolve their own codes, contemptuous of a society that simultaneously titillates and represses. Those who are less strong will remain confused. Many will slip into behavior that is harmful to themselves and others. What is it but our own sexual confusion that prevents us as educators from responding to this obvious need in today's youth?

Peggy Brick teaches Behavioral Science at Dwight Morrow High School in Englewood, New Jersey, and is a new member of the Advisory Board to the Women's Studies Quarterly.

REFERENCES

Lief, H. I., and Reed, D. M. Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test. Philadelphia: Center for the Study of Sex Education in Medicine, 1972.

NEWSBRIEFS: WOMEN'S HEALTH / SEXUALITY

The Society for Menstrual Cycle Research and the College of New Rochelle are sponsoring an interdisciplinary research conference on menarche, to be held June 12-13, 1981, at the College of New Rochelle. The aims of the conference are: (1) to bring together scientists and scholars from a variety of disciplines who have studied the onset of menstruation and to provide a forum for the presentation and discussion of their work; (2) to identify gaps in knowledge about menarche and to refine research direction and methodology; (3) to apprise those working with adolescents in health care and educational settings about new research and the role of menarche in young women's lives; (4) to publish and distribute the proceedings of the conference. Menarche will be considered from a sociocultural and a biological perspective. For further information, contact: Dr Sharon Golub, Conference Director, College of New Rochelle, New Rochelle, NY 10801.

Laura X of the National Clearinghouse on Marital Rape (NCOMR) is touring campuses speaking on her successful 1979 campaign to outlaw marital rape in California. Her topic includes the Rideout case and rape law in other states. NCOMR is supported entirely by tax-deductible contributions, memberships, speaking engagements, and publications including a newsletter and a guide to over 600 files of cases and articles. Write, sending self-addressed, stamped envelope, to NCOMR. Women's History Research Center, 2325 Oak St, Berkeley, CA 94708.