

Sex Ed
for
Caring Schools

CREATING AN ETHICS-BASED
CURRICULUM

SHARON LAMB

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INTRODUCTION

Sex Ed with Character, Citizenship, and Caring

Who actually teaches sex ed today in the classroom? Health teachers? Yes. In more liberal school districts health teachers can warn students against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy and provide valuable health information. Gym teachers? Yes. But do we ever ask ourselves why gym teachers are given this role? Is sex a sport? Do principals believe they know the body better than other teachers? Do we automatically turn to them as a source of information for all things physical? Or are they simply the teachers who have some spare time available in order to fill a niche or advisory period in the schedule? What about other teachers in the school, those who attend training courses to learn how to teach Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) curricula only to return to school fully armed with slogans and horror stories about regrettable sex? They teach sex ed, too. And what about trained personnel from outside of the school from organizations like Planned Parenthood, or from rape awareness or peer education programs, who are invited to hold one, two, or maybe three classes on valuable information such as contraception use? They too teach sex ed.

But the best answer to the question of who will teach sex ed is, *you*, the reader. Teachers in training to teach a variety of content courses—history, English, social studies, and other topics—can teach sex ed in middle schools and high schools because sex ed needs to be about more than health. And the teaching of sex ed is part of a larger critical pedagogy project that asks students to learn to critique education and the oppressive aspects of institutions that affect the way they live. *Sex Ed for Caring Schools* presents the background and framework of a curriculum that goes beyond the typical health curriculum students receive today. It advocates for a curriculum that helps students develop awareness and understand the complexity of what it means to be a sexual person in today's world. As part of a critical pedagogy movement that connects education to social justice enterprises, this book and the corresponding online curriculum encourage students to see themselves as sexual citizens and to talk, write,

and think about the moral issues underlying so much of sex. Those of you who have engaged in critical pedagogy in your classes today or who are inspired by the teachings of Freire and his successors, who discuss how postmodern, feminist, anti-racist, and queer theories impact education today, are in a unique position to advocate for a comprehensive and morality-based sex ed course. Even if a school lacks adequate time to present the full course, this book, with its emphasis on ethical issues involved in sex for youths, is relevant to you, given your unique opportunity to educate, provoke discussion, and nudge students to be ethically minded thinkers and actors in the sexual world they live in. Those of you training to be middle school or high school teachers of English, social studies, and other subjects can take initiative and volunteer to teach such a course or incorporate moral discussions into your classes.

Even though sex education in the United States today takes place in a post-Pill and post-*Roe v. Wade* era; even though it is being taught to students, the majority of whom will be having some kind of sex in high school; even though students today see pornography fairly regularly, watch TV shows in which there are frank and humorous discussions about sex, and can go on several websites to get information about the most typical to the most unusual sexual practices, sex education now is, for many students, an irrelevant course—for some even damaging. At its best, today's school-based sex ed provides students with health information and a space to discuss and weigh options regarding personal decisions. This kind of sex ed has been called Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and stands in contrast to Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) sex education.

The word “comprehensive” used to mean something more comprehensive than it does today, and the vestiges of curricula that are a part of that movement for an all-encompassing sex ed class can be seen online in courses such as the King County *Family Life and Sexual Health (FLASH)* curriculum, which is a school-based comprehensive curriculum in Seattle; in the massive curriculum by Advocates for Youth, parts of which can and are incorporated into school-based and community-based programs; and in the *Our Whole Lives (OWL)* curriculum, which is associated with the Unitarian Universalist Church and predominantly taught in church. These curricula are excellent, despite their shared tendency to address students in too simple a manner, directing material to the least accomplished students rather than to the average or smartest. Though comprehensive, they, like most CSE programs, use simple social-skills training exercises, role plays, and workbook-type assignments in a manner similar to the more limited school-based comprehensive curricula being practiced today. Still, these curricula, unlike their successors of the

“comprehensive” variety, contain moral messages about not harming others, exercising one’s rights, and respecting fellow students who may have different views.

When I began to look closely at the curricula in use today, from the pregnancy and HIV/AIDS prevention curricula to the AOUM curricula, I started to think about how we could and should do more with ethics. As a member of the Association for Moral Education (AME) and its current president, I’ve been interested in the development of morality for some time. In my early years, training to do Kohlberg coding of moral interviews and working with Carol Gilligan on her early moral interviews for her paradigm-changing book, *In a Different Voice*, I learned to think of morality as not something that was passed down from adults to children—what the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget called *heteronomous* morality (1948)—but as something that students develop in relation to one another, in relationships that are more or less equal. I also learned to understand moral development as different in different contexts and even dependent on the power and position one has in society—for example, girls having been brought up in a context that emphasized concern for the other and that prioritized injunctions such as “do no harm” over “preserve rights.” This training taught me to question the Western emphasis on rights and justice, or at least to consider alternative moralities as ideologies potentially meaningful for youths.

As a feminist, I have been concerned for a long time about issues such as sexual harassment, sexual abuse and victimization, girls’ empowerment, and coercive, narrow gender roles. I’ve also studied media and marketing influences on girls’ and boys’ conceptions of themselves and what it means to be a girl and a boy. From a postmodern perspective I have analyzed and deconstructed discourse around gender, abuse, violence, sexuality, and empowerment, ultimately extending this work to the discourses dominating sex ed curricula. This feminist perspective is tied to the perspective I bring from the field of moral education in that I desire for girls and boys to be freed from rigid gender roles and to be empowered to critically examine marketing and media stereotypes that restrict their growth and ultimately limit their potential.

As a child psychologist who treats children and adolescents in a therapy office, researches them as a scholar, and cares about their growth, I also care about sex ed in its current and inadequate state. I understand that sexual development starts at birth and that children play sexual games and have sexual experiences with one another as they gradually develop a more adult understanding of sexuality. I want deeply for them to have these experiences without shame, without being accused of sex offending, and to have the opportunity to work out their thoughts and feelings

about sex in a space that permits a range of affects and questions. I also want them to know from an early age about what hurts, what respecting others entails, and that sex is as much about relationships as it is about what protects, works, or feels good.

This book, then, and the online curriculum accompanying it emerge ultimately from my own diverse educational background: moral education, feminist education, and child psychology.

Liberals today, I have noticed, do not use the “v” word much! By the “v” word I mean “values,” not “vagina,” a word, incidentally, liberal sex educators have very few qualms using. Values have come to be associated with conservative and Christian fundamentalist groups in the United States who want to preserve values in American families and who claim that liberals are value-less. Because of this, and because in philosophy, values and ethics are not necessarily synonymous, I use the word “ethics” in this book. I want to bring ethics back into the liberal discourse around sex education. I see the point of conservatives, who claim that sex education as it is proposed by liberals is problematic because it is value-less. I see their point that by not teaching values we are in effect telling youths that whatever they think is right—or what their parents tell them is right—must be right. And I see them struggling in their curricula to not only impart values, but to create conversations in which students discuss values with one another. I also see their point that religion should be a part of sex ed discussions and removing religion from the picture is disrespectful to the parents who want a certain kind of education for their children.

In designing this curriculum I gave weight to these concerns and started to imagine a curriculum that could not only talk about family values but talk about ethical principles. I thought about how the human motive to care for another person and character traits such as generosity, empathy, and compassion were important traits to explore with regard to sexual behavior. I also began to entertain the possibility of introducing religion into the classroom. According to my younger son, the best course he has taken was a world religion course, offered in 9th grade at a private school in Vermont and taught by a newly graduated philosophy major from Middlebury College. Now in college, he is still interested in the religions he took interest in during that course, deepening his knowledge of them. To bring religion into the classroom is not the same as teaching someone to practice a religion other than his or her own; rather, it is teaching him or her to understand difference, to hear about how sexuality is conceptualized in religions other than one’s own, and even to understand the diversity in practice in one’s own religion.

I am not the first nor will I be the last to say that sex ed ought to be moral ed. Many have had similar concerns coming from the right, left,

and center. When I began to research the history of sex education in the United States, I was taken aback by some of the older texts. More than 100 years ago, people also interested in ethics had an interest in the sexual lives of adolescents and wrote about it. I was embarrassed to read that I shared a concern that Eugenicists wrote about back in the early 20th century, a concern that we needed to offset the education our youths were getting from the world around them; that popular culture can be damaging. Evangeline Young wrote in her introduction to March's *Towards Racial Health* (Young, 1919) that parents had failed to take notice of the

low tone which has pervaded the literature, drama, films, and music of the past decade, and have failed to sense the social dangers accompanying the introduction of pagan forms of dancing. The business interests which sell various forms of amusement to young people know exactly how to use this material to their own best advantage. The resulting sexual ideals and habits of boys and girls in many instances are disastrous. (p. xii)

Never would I have thought I would have anything in common with someone concerned with racial "health," but I had to face the fact that this concern of Young was exactly the concern that worried Lyn Mikel Brown, Mark Tappan, and me when we wrote *Packaging Girlhood* (2007) and *Packaging Boyhood* (2009). We were worried that marketers and media today portray a version of what it means to be a sexual human being that is problematic for boys and girls and based on stereotypes. We were also concerned about the crassness in the media surrounding sex and primarily worried that, during a time of AOUM ascendancy, this was the only message available to boys and girls.

As I read on, I discovered there were others like me in history who worried not only about the representation of sex in the media but about the representation of sex in schools in a way that showed little consideration of ethics and relationships. Indeed, the more familiar I became with the history of sex education in the United States, the more I could see that I was taking contradictory sides in several arguments that have existed for over a century.

When I write, as I will later in this book, that I want ethics to return to sex education in high schools, I am one in a long line who have made that cry, from early social hygienists with whom I would have deep disagreements, to the liberals in the 1960s who wanted ethics as part of Family Life Sex Education (FLSE).

When I write that a predominantly health-focused curriculum is problematic, I have the support of several others before me who argued that sex education based on fear of disease is not enough.

When I write about the need for inclusion and gender equity, I recognize that many before me have made similar demands, even if the conceptualization of gender equity has changed significantly over time. I was surprised to find in a 1914 text the warning that girls and boys can have equally strong urges and that it is a myth that the male sex drive is overpowering. Was this a surprisingly just treatment of sexuality and gender? Or was this part of a longstanding view that sees women as lustful creatures able to tempt men from the right path, a view that was later rejected in favor of one that held women as pure and devoid of sexual appetite?

When I write about the need for student-centered learning and democratic education, I am writing in solidarity with the teachers in California in the 1970s who opened the classroom up to students to run, believing that handing over the reins to students increased responsibility and helped them to “own” their education, to use a modern phrase. This understanding is consistent with Lawrence Kohlberg’s thinking about the democratic classroom experience in the “Just Schools” approach (Kohlberg, Lieberman, Higgins, & Power, 1982).

Finally, I’d like to explain why I chose to use the phrase “sex ed” instead of “sexuality education” (or “sexualities education,” as it is called in Great Britain). Social constructionism, postmodernism, discourse theory, feminism, and queer theory have all brought our attention to the use and meaning of words such as “sex” and “gender” and “sexuality,” as well as the playful use of demeaning words such as “queer” and “slut” in a way that reclaims them and embraces acts and identities that were formerly condemned. Because I am reverting to an older phrase, I want to acknowledge the reasons good people such as those at the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) organized the change of wording from sex ed to sexuality education. The first is that “sex” has come to refer to what one does sexually with another person, whereas “sexuality” refers to the whole realm of events, identities, and practices having to do with sex. The second is that “sex” has come to refer to biological sex rather than gender and so use of the word “sex” evokes a feeling of biology and destiny rather than an understanding that we are talking about a social construction. Still, I am going to retain the use of “sex ed” and “sex education” for this book because the transformation of this language no longer seems necessary for a progressive agenda, because it is shorter and catchier (!), and because the kind of curriculum I am advocating is wide-ranging at the same time as it is focused on the construction of sexualities. By calling such a curriculum “sex ed,” I believe I am reclaiming the meaning of it.