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15. Sex Education in the School

By international comparison, general sex education and the sex education given in schools in Finland is matter-of-fact and open in character. These qualities are evident in many ways including the prevailing culture of public debate. The work of school nurses has strong traditions in Finland, with respect to both individual counselling and health education. On the whole, the general public appears to approve of openness in sex education. An illustration of this acceptance is the favourable reception of the initiative by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to send all young people turning 15 an information package and a sample condom to their home address.

General sex education and the sex education given in schools are characterised by regional equality and uniform objectives for both the instruction given and the activity of school health care. According to the objectives the young, regardless of where they live or go to school, or of the family's ideological background or social environment, shall have an equal opportunity of receiving instruction on sexual-related topics. Currently, the inclusion of sex education issues in the curriculum of an individual school does not lead to much public discussion in Finland.

Opportunities Awarded by the Curriculum

Early years of the comprehensive school

Issues related to human sexuality and interpersonal relationships have, despite the description above, been dealt with in different ways in schools at different times. Especially during the 1970s, but even toward the end of the 1980s, certain groups viewed the current sex education very negatively. This opposition also extended to textbooks, which were the source of many questions in the Parliament as late as the 1980s. Similarly, the values and attitudes of teachers produced obstacles hindering sex education.

The second report of the Curriculum Committee for the Comprehensive School from 1970 created good opportunities for sex education. The contents of this report were not primarily envisaged as core curricula according to the present view, but they were considered as normative enough to warrant an almost literal observance. This would have been entirely possible, because the reports mostly contained very detailed descriptions of the topics to be dealt with in each subject for each grade. The implementation of the comprehensive school curriculum proceeded gradually throughout the country, starting from the north and ending in the capital region in the autumn of 1977.

The Report's Section II contains an excellent description of how sex education should be constructed. The most comprehensive description of sex education is contained in the family education section of the subject Civic Skills.

A balanced development of the personality also includes a natural attitude to sexual life. One of the conditions for this is that the individual is sufficiently well informed of the facts related to sexuality. ... Even at the pre-school age ... it is important that issues of family education are dealt with at all stages according to the pupil's age and conceptual powers. At the primary stage, according to the teacher's discretion, differences between boys and girls, the birth of a child and a child's dependence on its mother, father and home should be discussed. ... At the secondary stage, family education should be integrated with the instruction in other subjects – primarily Natural History [Biology]. Thus Civic Skills could concentrate on issues related to mother- and fatherhood and the psychological and ethical aspects of marriage. ... It is important to remember that school is the only social institution to reach all members of every age group. With the exception of certain special cases, sexual issues are most naturally discussed in groups consisting of both boys and girls.

A matter-of-fact sex education not only offers the opportunity of decreasing the numbers of abortions, children born out of wedlock or cases of venereal disease, but also creates better conditions for a happy family life. With regard to the individual, the task of sex education is to help the young to understand their sexuality as a constructive force that is to be accepted and respected as an integral part of their development.

The content description for fifth grade Natural History (Biology) was stated as the following: *at a suitable stage, the human body and its vital functions are examined and this instruction contains basic information on the changes occurring at puberty and on human reproductive biology.* The ninth grade topics included a brief mention of *reproduction, development of the foetus, growth and hormonal activity.* The instruction must bear in mind the contents allotted to Civic Skills.

In Home Economics, the section on *child care and family education* included the following topics, among others: *conception, main developmental stages of the fetus, physiology of pregnancy, growing to be a mother and a father, preparing the family for the birth of the child, childbirth and new-born babies.* A reference is made here to Natural History.

Instruction reform in the comprehensive school

The National Board of General Education approved the first official core curricula in 1985. The general objectives of these contain the heading *all-round development of the pupil's personality*, but the following text mainly concentrates on a description of the development of the pupil's overall personality and her or his opportunities for developing and learning.

The objectives for each subject were described in a general manner in the core curricula. The contents again were listed by topic for each grade or for two successive grades together. Municipalities were able to modify the core curricula to some extent to accommodate local circumstances.

Topics connected with interpersonal relationships and sexuality can be found under different subjects as follows:

Objectives for Civic Skills mention that *instruction shall deal with human growth and development, the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, a healthy lifestyle. ...* The content mentioned for the third and fourth grades include *personal growth and development* and for the fifth and sixth grades *puberty, differences and similarities between people, interpersonal relationships, ... responsibilities and duties ... and learning about and observing vital functions, problems related to puberty ...*

One of the objectives of Biology instruction is to *provide instruction particularly in the structure of the human body and vital functions*. Objectives related to attitudes include a mention of *awakening the pupils to a responsibility for their own health ...* The content for the fifth grade includes a heading containing the topics *puberty – adult, what happens in my body and the birth of a child*. During the ninth grade, the topics are revisited for the objective is that *pupils are taught about the structure and vital functions of human beings, reproductive physiology ... and an appreciation of health*. The content contains the heading *reproduction and interpersonal relationships, heredity and evolution*.

In Religion, the objectives include *to guide the young to identify moral problems in their life, their family and immediate community and in the whole of humankind, and to look for solutions to them on the basis of a Christian concept of humankind*. In Ethics again, the topic is approached through the objective *to help the pupil to attain the capability for positive interpersonal relationships*. The family education within Home Economics mentions interpersonal relationships, but areas related to sex education are not mentioned explicitly here. Neither does the health and traffic education contained in Physical Education include any topics related to interpersonal relationships and sexuality.

Opportunity for school-specific curricula

In 1991, the National Board of General Education and the National Board of Vocational Education were merged to form the National Board of Education. In terms of the development of society, this was a period characterised by an increasing decentralisation and by the organisation of activities as networks. This change resulted in the delegation of more decision-making powers to schools, and school professionals also interacted more with their community and with professionals from other schools. The flexibility afforded

by the national allocation of instruction time and the core curricula, as well as the principle of allocating resources specifically for each school, enabled a significant variation in curricula.

In 1994 the National Board of Education approved new Core Curricula for the comprehensive school. The 1994 reform brought a significant change in the steering practices. During the former period, a centralised steering committee specified core curricula and provided objectives and contents of instruction in great detail for each grade. After the reform core curricula no longer defined detailed contents of instruction for each grade, but instead gave only general objectives of instruction for each subject and topic area. Thus, currently core curricula issued by the National Board of Education define on a national level the objectives and core contents of instruction. These objectives are interpreted and applied when the curriculum of each school is being drafted. The share of steering through information and evaluation is also receiving increasing weight in the monitoring of how well the objectives of individual schools are being met.

The provision of education is the responsibility of the municipality. The basic principle of the reform process was to increase schools' opportunities of developing distinctive curricula that are based on their individual strengths while at the same time conforming to the national objectives of the core curricula issued by the National Board of Education. The aim was to increase the commitment of schools to work toward the objectives and to recognise the teachers' role as experts in their own work.

The Council of State's decision concerning the allocation of instruction time for each subject determines the obligatory number of hours to be given to obligatory and elective subjects. The schools draft their curricula within the constraints of this allocation and on the basis of national objectives. Thus, schools can define the contents of instruction to support the various objectives in many different ways. The increase in autonomy, range of elective subjects and co-operation with stakeholder groups in curriculum work presents a big challenge for teachers and administrators, and schools have taken it up in many different ways. Thus, in the implementation of sex education, the curriculum reform may provide a great deal of variation across municipality with respect to the content of school curricula, modes of the instruction, and offerings to students.

Objectives describing sex education contained in the Core Curricula

In the objectives of the current core curricula there is a description of all subjects to be taught, and also a listing of various themes from which the schools may select one or several; the design of new entities is also permitted. The list contains the entities *family education* and *health education*. Both are described briefly.

The task of family education is to support the growth and development of the child and young person towards adulthood and to create the basis for a successful family

life. ... In the Lower Secondary school, issues related to living as a couple, family life, and parenthood are examined from the angles of a young person's growth into independence and of setting up a family... The contents of family education include ... the human physical, psychological and social development, ... interpersonal skills and relationships, sexuality, interaction with the opposite sex and forms of sharing one's life with another...

The task of health education in the school is to support the healthy growth and development as well as the health-promoting behaviour of the pupil. The objectives of health education describe the three broad tasks of health education: provision of enlightenment, raising of awareness and support of mental health. The description does not explicitly mention content areas related to sexuality and interpersonal relationships, or other areas.

Environmental and Natural Studies for grades 1 to 6 contain the headings *the pupil's living environment and interpersonal relationships and structure and vital functions of human beings and differences between people, the human life cycle.*

In grades 7 to 9, interpersonal relationships and sexuality are mentioned under several subjects. One of the topics of Ethics is *interpersonal relationships and moral growth*, which also allows an examination of sexuality.

One of the objectives of Biology instruction is that *the pupil learns to know her-/himself and understands the differences between people through learning about human beings as biological entities, learns to accept her/his development at all stages of life from birth to death.* The topic is revisited in contents examining human beings, which also contain the word 'sexuality'. Moreover it is mentioned that *sexuality and interpersonal relationships are a natural part of a person's life and that they are examined from the angle of the pupil's life situation and set of values.* The text also refers to co-operation between subjects by stating that *in planning the instruction, health and family education curricula of all subjects need to be considered.*

Under Physical Education instruction for grades 7 to 9 it is stressed that *the young are to be guided towards an acceptance of themselves and a constructive emotional behaviour.*

Materials supporting the drafting of curricula

When the core curricula were published in 1994, background materials and preparative training were arranged to support curriculum work for each subject and central thematic entities. The background material for health education, "Schools and the Enigma of Health", contains two articles to support the instruction in sex education.

One of the articles, “Sex Education is Necessary, But Who Shall Teach It?” examines the educational task of the school and states that sex education is best taught by the teacher or school nurse who is willing to do it. Whether nurse or teacher, the task is both to provide information and to educate. The background material also gives an example of how the more detailed objectives for an individual school could be drafted, and the objectives of sex education given here are that the young person

- 1) understands sexual development at different ages,
- 2) accepts her-/himself and others,
- 3) is capable of building interpersonal relationships, of acts based on caring and respect for others, and of acting with responsibility,
- 4) is given information on reproductive biology and sexual behaviour,
- 5) is conscious of the rights and obligations of an adult,
- 6) strives to understand variation in sexual life and its difficulties and
- 7) strives to grow into a good parent.

In addition to this description of objectives, the article contains a thematic breakdown of sex education to support the drafting of the contents of instruction (Lähdesmäki, 1994).

The second article supports the objectives of sex education by providing background material and deals with sex education from the point of view of juvenile gynaecology. The article stresses that the instruction should acquaint the young with the broad scope and different manifestations of sexuality instead of concentrating narrowly on sexual intercourse. Human growth should be linked to something more profound, i.e., the right to describe the values, manifestations and variations of sexuality from a multiplicity of viewpoints (Cacciatore, 1994).

On development projects and instruction materials

In addition to the curriculum reform, the legislation related to the official approval of instruction materials was amended. Textbooks and instruction materials are no longer approved by the National Board of Education, as was the case with its predecessor, the National Board of General Education. The producers of textbooks and instruction materials must ensure that their products conform to the objectives of instruction, and the responsibility of selecting high-quality textbooks and other material rests with the school and the group or individual arranging the instruction.

Consequently, attention to local circumstances is one of the characteristics of school development work in Finland, and this is also seen in development projects concerning sex education. A large number of projects have been set up to support sex education, and in this context materials have also been developed by the health care system, family planning clinics, universities and various NGOs. Primarily, schools or municipalities

decide independently on the materials they will use and the development projects in which they will participate.

With respect to health education, during recent years the priorities have been the prevention of substance abuse, the promotion of safe learning environments, healthy self-esteem and social skills, and the prevention of social exclusion. In 1999 the National Board of Education produced the instruction kit "Stages of Sexuality" for use in all forms of the comprehensive school. The book and the associated set of overheads deal with the development of a child's sexuality and her/his growing independence, starting out from the emotions of the child and the young person. Children themselves can assess which stage they have reached and how many stages must yet be gone through before they are mature enough for a sexual relationship. Sex education proceeds in a systematic manner from one grade to the next. The aim is that during the pupil's entire school career, sex education would form an entity examining the themes topical and relevant for each development stage, while not forgetting the individual viewpoint.

The development projects undertaken by individual schools characteristically start out from narrow, discrete topics (such as prevention of substance abuse or sex education), but fairly soon these topics tend to be linked to a broader entity of life management and health promotion, which is then developed holistically. An example of this is the controlled substances project involving 18 comprehensive schools in the city of Espoo. During the project the schools have very quickly begun to develop a broader, more holistic curriculum for life management or health promotion, as well as various methodological, pupil-centred options for implementing the instruction. This is necessary, in order to avoid the artificiality of developing isolated content areas within health education outside the context of health promotion or growth and development. Similarly, issues related to sex education, interpersonal and interactive skills, family education or prevention of diseases become a part of a broader health education curriculum. The project mentioned has created extensive curricular themes that also include topics related to sex education.

The WHO project European Network of Health-Promoting Schools has been active in Finland for several years, and currently involves about 40 schools. In recent years the project's activity has included the elaboration of health promotion and health education curricula for schools, of which the objectives of interpersonal relationships and sex education form a natural part. Special health promotion weeks also broadly deal with various aspects of health and with themes related to sex education.

The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) has in recent years also co-operated with schools, particularly in developing projects for schools jointly with school health care, family counselling clinics and family planning clinics.

The strengths of all these development projects include not only the development of content, but also the development of instruction methods, emphasising the active role of pupils and pupil-centred activities.

Currently, as various organisations approach schools with a wide variety of materials and projects, the proper selection of partners has increasingly become a subject to be included when developing sex education programs. The risks lie not so much in co-operation with authorities as in accepting an approach adopted by a special interest group. Insufficient expertise or a set of materials focusing on isolated topics can, if offered and accepted by the school, also affect sex education negatively. Therefore, the expertise of professionals in school health care, family counselling clinics or NGOs such as the Family Federation of Finland is often of paramount importance when schools assess the material available.

The role of school health care in the school's instruction in sex education

The traditions of school health care in Finland are strong and promote equality, regardless of location. In addition to counselling given to individual pupils, school nurses have participated in lessons dealing with sexual issues. Formerly, the school nurses worked predominantly with issues related to the prevention of teenage pregnancies and prevention of diseases. Nowadays the instruction and counselling also emphasise issues related to life management and parenthood. The fact that an ever younger and ever increasing number of children are starting to use all types of controlled substances has increased the risk of HIV infections. Thus links between sexual behaviour and disease have lately also come to be included as topics in programs designed for the prevention of substance abuse by the young.

The work of school nurses has long traditions and is highly appreciated. Thus, a matter of national concern is that the job description of school nurses has changed due to the economic recession and the growth of the elderly population. The effect of this has been to cut down the time available for school nursing; at the same time, the contribution of school nurses to instruction or individual counselling for the young has decreased.

Discussion

Given the national steering, guidance, and support for curriculum work, sex education could have been successfully implemented for 30 years by now. The core curricula have created a solid basis, but there are still deficiencies in practical work at schools. Surveys reveal that the results continue to be uneven and there is variation among schools.

The National Board of Education has not carried out surveys or studies on the implementation of sex education after the 1994 curriculum reform. Studies carried out before 1995 apply to instruction based on the former core curricula. Thus, at the moment it is very difficult to obtain reliable information, upon which to generalise, on the implementation of sex education in schools. Curricular variation creates difficulties

for determining nationally valid indicators, because content related to sex education can be taught under a great number of subjects or general themes. Questionnaires directed to the teachers of a small number of subjects will not lead to reliable school-specific data; instead, a survey of the entire curriculum is needed. Thus, researchers must pay sufficient attention to the changes due to the curriculum reform and understand that these changes also make it difficult to use earlier studies as comparison data.

Currently, the National Board of Education is conducting a sample-based analysis of comprehensive school curricula, which in most cases apply to one school only. The process has revealed that very often the curricula are extremely concise. As such, they do not necessarily give a true picture of the reality in schools. Even though the topics of sex education to be taught are to some extent mentioned in headings, the actual text does not allow very detailed conclusions to be drawn about the actual instruction situations and their contents, let alone about the teaching approaches. It may be assumed that sex education is being developed in schools, even when the written curricula do not contain descriptions of activities that include sexual topics. Thus, systematic data are not available on projects carried out with networks of partners, or about thematic weeks and days of health education, containing topics linked to sex education or interpersonal and interactive skills.

Core curricula for vocational education were modified after the publication of the general core curricula in 1994. The legislation on school health care is shortly to be reviewed and specified. In the coming years the National Board of Education will also review the core curricula for the comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools. This will then permit the further development of the objectives for the subjects and the inclusion of various general themes in curricula. Thus an opportunity for reviewing the objectives of instruction in sex education will occur in the future. To support this, the National Board of Education is also producing learning material.

In the new system of steering schools through information, one aspect worth emphasising is the quality of learning materials adopted by schools. Electronic and printed media shape the ideas that the young have about sexuality and about issues linked to it. With the Internet, the young have increased access to a wide variety of information sources related to sexuality, whether at home or at school. The positive side of this development is that high quality and balanced material is available everywhere. On the other hand, it is difficult to screen out materials harmful for children and adolescents, because access is difficult to monitor. Isolated cases of access to sexual materials by children and adolescents need not give cause for concern. Nevertheless, vulnerable groups among the young are those who have an interest in sexual material promoting violence and contempt of human dignity. Access to such material has become easier with the advancement of networks, and therefore media education, an analysis of its viewpoint, purpose, and its consequences, will increasingly need to become an inherent part of good sex education.

The primary support for the positive and healthy growth and development of sexuality continues to be given in the home. Education in the home is complemented and supported by education provided by the school. The importance of the school's role in implementing a matter-of-fact and selective sex education and in providing quality learning materials will, however, increase in the future. This trend is also strengthened by the requirements stated by parents.

It is very difficult to assess all the factors and their importance in the significant improvement of young people's information level regarding sexuality from the beginning of the 1970s up to at least the mid-1990s. This increase in knowledge has resulted from some combination of influences. These include the general development of an open discussion culture related to sexual issues; the mass information campaigns conducted by the social and health care sectors; the work of school health care experts; and the development of curricula, contents and methods of sex education in schools. Various non-governmental organisations working for sexual equality or health promotion have been able to make their voices heard in public debate and in networks of co-operation, and thus, also promote sexual information and knowledge.

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