

Developing sex education in a comprehensive school

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This article describes how the sex education component of a secondary school's Social Education programme was transformed by staff reorganisation and the active support of an Advisory Teacher. 'A group of teachers who were initially cautious (and in some cases very nervous) about doing discussion work on sex education, were now planning how they might further develop this work in coming years!'

The Dudley Project was a three-year pilot project undertaken by the Social Morality Council in conjunction with Dudley Metropolitan Borough. Much of the initial funding for the project came from industry. Dudley was chosen for this work because schools were already involved in Social Education, and a working party had produced an outline scheme of work. The description which follows represents only a small element within the Dudley Project.

The school in question had undertaken sex education as part of the Social Education programme for some years, although, because of staffing difficulties, it has always been in half-year groups. It formerly consisted of a lecture, or a film, under the direction of the deputy Head. However, the new academic year offered a new situation. A Head of Social Studies had been appointed, and a change of deployment of staff within the Design for Living course meant that within each half-year group one teacher could work with 20–25 pupils. These two groups met on the same afternoon, before and after break. Eight members of staff were involved.

A key meeting

Two months before the start of the new programme, I met the deputy Head and the Head of Social Studies, who in turn asked the rest of the proposed teaching team if they would be prepared to take part in the discussion groups. Many expressed serious concern about this involvement for various reasons including limited factual knowledge, personal moral viewpoint on some topics, embarrassment, and so on. As a result, I was invited to a general staff meeting, and the fact that this was held in school time emphasised the value put on this work by the school.

At the meeting, I was able to draw on my experience of the fears of other teachers in similar situations, and these exactly mirrored the fears of the new group. There was open and frank discussion. A Year Head was very concerned that he might be in a personal dilemma over his strong religious beliefs and what he might have to teach about 'morality'. Another teacher was concerned about personal questions. However, having seen the work outline, everyone agreed to participate, and my offer to join in the team-teaching was felt to be very helpful.

One item causing considerable discussion was whether contraceptives should be available in the classroom as visual aids. There seemed to be no fundamental reason why they should not be, and the Head agreed to this. Six contraceptive display kits were purchased.

Of the 250 pupils in the 4th year, all but a small number who were members of the Jehovah's Witness or Sikh faiths returned their parental consent forms.

Session One – introductory lecture

As in previous years, this took the form of a lecture by the deputy Head, and included the film *Then One Year*. This helped the staff by laying a good foundation for future work, and made them feel more relaxed with the subject-matter. There was no group discussion during this session.

Session Two – 'Loving and Caring'

Several days before this session the teachers were given a selection of background reading material, most of which was fact-sheets produced by the FPA. It included information on the law in relation to sex, as well as facts about birth control and the attitudes of different religious groups to contraception.

The actual session was based on the *Loving and Caring* trigger film. The first three parts were shown, and there was a brief discussion in pairs. Then, after 35 minutes, the pupils went to classrooms with the different teachers, who had selected material from the programme outline previously circulated. When the staff met to share their experience before repeating the session with the second half-year group, all expressed pleasant surprise at how well the work had gone; all of them felt more at ease, although the pupils had not been too forthcoming. However, this was not surprising, since the attitude of the pupils depended critically upon the maturity of the pupils; the boys, particularly, were rarely likely to contribute to these types of discussion. All the teachers felt that a hurdle had been overcome in undertaking the first small-group discussion work.

Session Three – use of contraceptives

For this session, I gave each half-year group an introductory talk in the lecture theatre, and used the contraceptive display kit. The staff had suggested that if one of the kits was first used in the lecture, it would prepare the way for their use in the classroom discussion. There was an excellent response by the pupils, with little obvious embarrassment. A film was shown after the talk, and there was then time for 20 minutes of small-group discussion, using the contraceptive display kits and support literature from the Health Education Office. The fact that the teachers found there was insufficient time for discussion suggested that their natural fears and concern had largely been unfounded, and since the use of the kits had produced no unnecessary difficulty or embarrassment, it was felt that the lecture itself could have been dispensed with, leaving more time for small-group work.

It is significant that other members of staff showed interest in the materials when they were being sorted and checked in the staff-room. No one expressed opposition to what was being done, although some were glad that they were not doing the teaching themselves! Some asked very specific factual questions, and one teacher involved in the course said that he had learned some new facts by reading the literature when preparing for the class.

Session Four – Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Before the session, while the supporting literature was being assembled, some other interested teachers started reading the material themselves, and seemed to be broadening their own knowledge of the subject! Some of the team asked what they should do if homosexuality or other sensitive issues arose; I suggested that they should either answer the questions in the group, or explain that they felt the question would be of general interest in the Session Six forum, and should be written down for answering then.

It was planned to have a brief introduction and two films in the lecture theatre, which would allow 15-20 minutes for small-group work. It had previously been felt that a worksheet might be drawn up, but since the teachers felt that the pupils had been too rushed over supporting leaflets in previous sessions, more time should be allowed for reading. Each pupil had a set of leaflets.

At the end of the afternoon, some discussion took place amongst the staff with respect to how successful the programme had been so far. It was decided to give the pupils a simple evaluation form to complete in Session Five.

Session Five — 'Parents' Talk'; evaluation; question collection

First of all, I explained the nature and function of the evaluation questionnaire, and then introduced the film *Parents' Talk*. Follow-up work then went on in the small groups, using selections from a previously-agreed range of activities — written work, discussion, and role-play. The role-play tried by a probationer and myself went well, and this activity formed a stimulus for further discussion. About 35 minutes were spent in these activities, and during the last quarter of an hour the pupils were asked to complete the evaluation questionnaire and to write down an anonymous question for use the following week.

At break, the staff felt that the class-work had generally gone well, and no one mentioned lack of material as a problem. Several teachers agreed to deal with questions at the final forum, and it was also planned to feed back the results of the evaluation during the same session.

Session Six — the questions

A wide range of questions were submitted and sorted out into various topic areas. The Deputy Head, the head of R.E., and a community tutor, as well as myself, formed the panel. A large number of questions dealt with abortion and the use of various contraceptives. Many pupils wished to know details of the law in relation to abortion and to the provision of contraceptives to those under 16.

Apart from biological and factual questions, there was a significant amount of time spent in answering questions from various moral standpoints.

Staff feedback, and summary

Two weeks after the sessions finished, I met all the staff to discuss the course and the pupils' evaluation. The teachers now clearly felt far more confident about tackling sex education in small groups, and the six-week experiment had been an invaluable learning experience.

Several teachers considered that my own role had been helpful in developing the programme. Several reasons for the value of an Advisory Teacher were given:

1. I was able to allay many of the fears and concerns before the scheme started.
2. I was available, on a week-to-week basis, to answer individual questions regarding classroom practice or factual knowledge.
3. I was also able to join in team-teaching, which had been invaluable.
4. The personal concern of some of the teachers about the use of certain approaches in class (e.g., the use of contraceptive samples) was alleviated by knowing that the final responsibility for this type of innovative activity lay with me.

To sum up, a group of teachers who were initially cautious (and in some cases very nervous) about doing discussion work on sex education, were now planning how they might further develop this work in coming years!

Note

Details of the wide range of activities involved in the Dudley Project can be found in an extensive range of literature which is available from Peter Brownjohn, Advisory Teacher for Social Education, Dudley Teachers' Centre, Laburnum Road, Kingswinford, Dudley, West Midlands, (Tel. Kingswinford 288864), or from David Ingram, Development Officer, The Social and Moral Education Centre, 21 University Road, Leicester (Tel. 0533 551122).