Developing sex education in a comprehensive school

Peter Brownjohn
Advisory Teacher for Social Education
Dudley Metropolitan Borough

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 were members of the Jehovah's Witness or Sikh faiths. They 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 meeting 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 preoccupied with 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 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. I now felt clearly 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 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).

Lifeskills in the secondary school
Thank you for printing my letter (Education and Health, September 1985) I have had many letters and requests since this was published. It is interesting to note that most people have experienced difficulty either with lack of material or with just not knowing to whom to turn for help in selecting suitable exercises for a PSE course.

I am pleased to hear that other schools are finding success in the field of PSE. I am aware that: PSE is going on in all schools in different ways. And I am sure that Geoffrey Thomas is right (Education and Health, November 1985) in saying that we do not need to be ‘experts’ to be involved in this area. However, there are certain criteria to be followed regardless of the way the course is run:

1. A co-ordinator of PSE.
2. A place on the school timetable.
4. Interesting and varied topics and methods of presentation.

I would suggest that Geoffrey Thomas and I are not ‘experts’, but are people who have developed expertise. Most issues in PSE could be tackled successfully by most teachers, but certain topics, such as choosing options in the 3rd year, sex education, and vocational information, are not easy topics for all tutors to handle.

I still firmly believe that, in spite of the fact that we are a department, we are not isolated; we cannot help but have influence and involvement across the curriculum, since without doubt one of the chief aims of Lifeskills, as of the school itself, is the self-empowerment of pupils.

Peter Wilson
Head of Careers Guidance and Lifeskills
Swanwick Hall School
Swanwick
Derby DE55 1AE

A co-operative venture in nutrition education
I was interested to read the three aspects of nutrition education which were reported in Education and Health, November 1985. I feel sure that your readers will want to hear of the work of a Secondary Science Curriculum Review working group, who have managed to combine two of the aspects reported with an interesting added dimension.

Briefly, they initiated a co-operative venture between Thorncliffe High School, Barrow in Furness, and the Schools Meals Service. They altered menus for pilot groups of 1st and 2nd year youngsters for a month, and monitored their responses to the experience. The added interesting feature is that they used peer-group tutoring to achieve much of the nutrition education. Copies of the report will be appearing shortly.

In view of the focus being taken in many parts of the country, I should be interested to discover how many of your readers would be prepared to attend a conference on school meals and nutrition - when teaching conditions allow?

Dina Bentley
Research and Development Officer
Secondary Science Curriculum Review
Manchester Polytechnic
9a Didsbury Park
Manchester M20 8RR

B61-434 9224

Does an Adviser stimulate health education?
With reference to the letter in Education and Health, September 1985, from David Turner ( Gravesend Grammar School for Boys), I should like to point out: that his statement about the absence of schools in Kent that have used the Health Related Behaviours Questionnaire is not now correct. Last September, we used the Questionnaire for an appraisal with the Sixth Form, and this term we plan to use it with the 1st and 3rd year groups.