

Promoting 'sex education' in a primary school

Brenda Reid

Senior Health Education Officer
Lewisham & North Southwark

The Education (No. 2) Act, 1986, lays down responsibilities for a school's governing body. This article describes how an ILEA primary school went about clarifying the education needs of its pupils with respect to sexual development and relationships. In particular, how could parents, teachers, and governors be objective and unbiased in meeting the needs of the pupils?

The need to establish a policy with respect to what is loosely referred to as 'sex education' led to a joint initiative involving parents, governors, and both teaching and non-teaching staff. This took the form of a seminar planned by the Head, the deputy Head (who also has responsibility for health education), and a Senior HEO.

The apparent overall success of this initiative prompted the writing of a detailed report, which is the basis for this article. The purpose of the report was to share the exercise with others, so that it may serve to complement or support other projects and work in this field.

The relevant parts of the Education Act may be quoted as follows:

Governors must consider whether sex education should form part of the Curriculum. (Sec. 18, clause 2)

Governors must make and keep up-to-date a written statement of their policy on the content and organisation of sex education. (Sec. 18, clause 2)

The governing body must... *furnish the Authority and the headteacher with an up-to-date copy of any statement [with regard to sex education].* (Sec. 18, clause 3)

Governors must consider the sex education policy for their school *in conjunction with the headteacher.* (Sec. 18, clause 3)

The governing body must have regard *to any representations... made to them... [with regard to sex education] by any persons concerned with the community served by the school.* (Sec. 18, clause 3)

The headteacher must *make any statement furnished to him... concerning sex education... available at all times to persons wishing to inspect it.* (Sec. 18, clause 4)

The governing body may *review their conclusions [concerning sex education] whenever they think fit.* (Sec. 18, clause 7)

The LEA... the governing body and the headteacher shall take such steps as are reasonably practical to secure that where sex education is given to any registered pupils at the school it is given in such a way as to encourage those pupils to have due regard to moral considerations and the value of family life. (Sec. 46)

The governors' meeting

The governors, feeling that they had little knowledge about how sex education might be approached with primary-age pupils, invited the Headteacher to provide some information. This led to the Head and the deputy Head explaining about:

1. The exact information the school expected to give the pupils about puberty and reproduction, and the age at which it was likely to be introduced.
2. The type of questions asked by pupils, and the style of response given by school staff.
3. The use of television programmes.
4. Presentation, and illustrations for various topics.

This information was welcomed, particularly by the teacher and parent governors. It was agreed that a meeting between parents, staff, and governors should take place, and the Head and deputy Head concluded that the school now needed:

1. To examine the present programme of personal development and health education, including sex education, in the school.
2. To identify any areas for future inclusion.
3. To plan the consultative meeting.

Staff discussion

Using the ILEA publication *Health Education - an aspect of the primary curriculum* (1985) as a guideline, the deputy Head set about identifying subject areas already included in the curriculum as health education and sex education, and those for possible inclusion in the future.

These subject areas were grouped on charts under three developmental stages, in line with these guidelines, and presented in a brief but clear format so that teaching staff could see how the various subject areas linked in the curriculum.

At a formal staff meeting, the charts were presented to get the views of the teaching staff, who were already familiar with the outcome of the last governors' meeting. Some anxieties about answering questions on controversial topics seemed to be dispelled, as they were now seen

in the context of understanding and valuing ourselves as well as others. It also helped the teachers to see that sex education was one part of a process of understanding which began with the youngest children.

A number of the teaching staff planned to attend the forthcoming seminar where the charts, having received their backing, would be presented. The Senior HEO had also, by this stage, agreed to be involved in planning the seminar.

Planning the seminar

The Head, deputy Head, and Senior HEO met twice before the seminar. At these planning meetings it was agreed that the seminar should provide a reassuring environment where everyone felt comfortable about discussing what at times might be sensitive issues. Therefore careful attention should be paid to both method and content.

Aims and objectives were identified as follows:

1. To help participants to develop a perspective on the content of sex education.
2. To explore the similarities and differences between governors', parents', and teachers' responses and responsibilities in particular situations and on particular issues.
3. To provide information on the school's sex education syllabus as it is now and might be in the future, and invite critical appraisal. This would include looking at the content, and explaining about the different teaching methods and cross-curricular 'fertilisation'.

Tasks for setting up and running the seminar were defined:

1. The Headteacher had overall responsibility for informing staff, parents, and governors; for asking the Chairman of Governors to chair proceedings; and to make the introductory comments about the reason for the meeting and the implications of the Education (No. 2) Act, 1986.
2. The deputy Headteacher had to finalise her work, ready for presenting, on the school's PSE syllabus.
3. The Senior HEO had responsibility for planning and organising the workshop.

Table 1. The school's three-stage health education programme, which was presented to the parents by the deputy Head.

Stage 1: up to 7 years	<i>Protecting our health</i>	<i>Promoting our health</i>
<i>Myself and others</i>	Hygiene	The fight against disease
How do we get on together at school?	Vaccination	How germs are spread
What do I know about my friends?	Medicine and pills	Mouth, tongue, teeth
Why are my friends my friends?	Skin care	Smoking and health
	Looking after my feet	Public health
	Smoke and me	Clothes and shoes - why we need them and how we care for them
	The Child Abuse phone lines	Finding out about medicines and drugs
	<i>Exercise and rest</i>	<i>Lifestyles and health</i>
<i>Protecting our health</i>	Who helps us and whom can we help?	Using our time
My responsibilities:	Our favourite ways of taking exercise	Leisure, relaxation, rest, and sleep
Dressing	Why do I need sleep and rest?	Work
Washing	When do I rest and sleep?	The effect of exercise on our bodies
Moving safely		Skeleton, brain, muscle
Looking after my teeth	<i>Food, enjoyment and rest</i>	<i>Food, enjoyment, and health</i>
	Eating habits	Food groups
<i>Understanding ourselves</i>	Choice of foods	Water
What do I look like?	Keeping food clean	Vitamin C and iron in food
What is my body like?	Preparing food to eat	Advertising and food
How did I begin?	Planning a meal	Food and the body
How are babies cared for?		A balanced diet
<i>Road safety</i>	<i>Safety</i>	Food needs when doing different things
What travels on roads?	Road safety	<i>Road safety</i>
What is moving?	Coming to school	Pedestrian and bicycles
What is near?	How do I get there?	Swimming and water safety
What is far?	Dangers on the way	Finding out about accidents
	Bad weather and darkness	First Aid and emergencies
	Keeping safe outside	<i>Understanding ourselves</i>
<i>Lifestyles and health</i>	Safety at home and in school	How we relate to others
Finding out what I do in a day	<i>Understanding ourselves</i>	Feelings and emotions
Things I like to do	Growth and growing	Finding out about my body
Things I don't like doing	What helps me to grow	The body's needs
	Myself as a changing person	Changes related to puberty
<i>Food, enjoyment, and health</i>		Sex education
What do we eat?	Stage 3: 9-11 years	Sexual intercourse [later]
What foods do we like?	<i>Myself and others</i>	Menstruation [earlier end of 3rd year juniors]
Trying new foods	Making up my mind	Birth of a baby
Choosing what to eat	How do I decide?	
	Groups I belong to	
	People who matter	
	Learning about others	
	Similarities and differences	
	Changing friendships	
	Interest in the other sex	
	Sex role	

Following the first planning meeting, letters were sent out from the Headteacher informing parents about the seminar and asking them to comment, on the returned slip, on any sex education issue they would like covered. It is worth noting that the 27 slips returned did not reflect attendance at the seminar.

The seminar

Out of a school roll of 200, 40 parents, eight governors, eight teaching staff

(including the Head and deputy Head) and two non-teaching staff attended the seminar. Following introductions by the Chairman of Governors, the Headteacher clarified the purpose of the evening with reference to the responsibilities of the governing body.

The workshops, organised by the Senior HEO, followed. There were six groups, each with at least one governor and one staff member. The responses to the tasks were displayed on the walls for

everyone to read during the coffee break. With hindsight, more time should have been allocated to discussion of the tasks immediately following the break.

The deputy Head then talked through the information and responded to questions, presenting the information given in Table 1. During the following open discussion, the following points or issues were raised:

1. What processes are used in the classroom?
2. How does sex education really fit into the curriculum? (The Headteacher reflected that the 'sex education' label was an unfortunate one.)
3. Moral issues — do these come out in discussions in the classroom?
4. It is important to listen to the different viewpoints of the pupils.
5. What about feelings and desires? It is important to provide a safe environment.
6. What about addressing the cultural aspects?
7. Homosexuality.
8. Moral views.
9. Request for consultation on HIV/AIDS.
10. It is important that parents know the content of primary sex education.

Some reflections

In planning the meeting, the aims and objectives of the seminar and the determination to have a practical learning session probably precluded time for adequate discussion. However, the workshop responses and the lively discussion at the end of the evening are evidence that a safe environment had been provided, where people could share their ideas and explore the various issues as planned.

Issues raised by parents who responded to the Headteacher's letter were addressed at various times during the evening.

Anecdotal feedback from parents was that they had been reassured that issues such as contraception and abortion would be dealt with sensitively on an individual basis, and not as planned course work. Teaching staff felt that they had benefited from the integrated group work.

The Headteacher and the deputy Head now knew that they had support when

planning initiatives to do with the school's sex education syllabus, particularly where emotive and sensitive topics and issues were involved. Also, the breadth of different subjects raised during the workshops meant that sex education could be visualised as part of the school's personal development and health education strategy, which, in turn, could be seen as an important part of the school's pastoral and curricular activity. The tasks facing the school governors when addressing their responsibilities in relation to the Education (No. 2) Act, 1986 will, one hopes, have at least been nurtured.

Conclusion

The ideas used for this seminar have already been adapted to meet the needs of other groups. The joint planning in this instance was very enjoyable, and proved a satisfying exercise for those concerned.

The opportunity was provided for parents, governors, and staff to begin to examine objectively, and it is hoped in an unbiased way, the educational needs of primary-age children in the context of sexual development and relationships.

The structured yet informal setting allowed for the exchange of ideas where tolerance and respect for each other could be seen and expressed, as prerequisites to the effective understanding and teaching of sex education. It may be that the picture of groups of parents, staff, and governors working on the task in hand with concentration and dedication is itself reassuring!

Perhaps this exercise in valuing each other can be seen as a good starting-point if sex education is to be firmly established as an integral part of a school's health and personal development strategy.

Contact Brenda Reid, Health Education, South Wing, Nurses' Home, Lewisham Hospital, Lewisham High Street, London SE13 6LH (01-690 4311, extn 6290).

The next issue of Education and Health will be about young people and SMOKING.
