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R. J. Vanden Branden
Drake University

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The Need for Sex Education*

R. J. VANDEN BRANDEN
*Chairman, Science Education
Drake University*

There is no shortage of information and misinformation about sex education; however, it is difficult to determine which information is based upon more than personal bias and experience.

Educators profess to educate children in those aspects of behavioral change which are based upon the needs of the students. The assumption is that if a need exists that is not otherwise being met, the schools must satisfy that need. Is sex education such a need?



Vanden Branden

Science educators become involved in the sex education controversy as soon as the schools begin teaching sex education. Rightly or wrongly, many newspaper and journal articles select the science teacher as the teacher of sex education. Do young people agree?

In seminars and class discussion, students raised the issue that most, if not all, of the published and reported opinions are the opinions of the "older generation." Why not ask the young adult generation?

This report is based upon a series of questions asked of young women, college students, between the ages of 19 and 23. All of the students questioned have expressed an interest in teaching as a profession.

Three categorical questions are answered by the series of questions directed to the students: Is there a need for the schools to teach sex education? When should it be taught and by whom? What should be taught in the sex education program?

Questions related to the source of sex information were used to identify the existence of need. The students were asked to identify the sources of information about specific aspects usually associated with sex education and the approximate age at which they received this information.

The data from this study are in accord with other studies on the topics of origin of babies and menstruation. When compared with studies for males, there are marked differences. Girl companions are not the major source of information for any of the topics. Printed matter, as the initial source of information, ranks much higher in the results of this study with college women (of age 18-23) than in any of the reports searched related to young males or fe-

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Table 1
Initial Source of Sex Information
(210 college women)

<i>Initial Source</i>	<i>Origin of Babies</i>	<i>Ejaculation</i>	<i>Menstruation</i>	<i>Masturbation</i>	<i>Intercourse</i>	<i>Prostitution</i>	<i>V.D.</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Girls	20	23	17	19	31	29	12
Boys	2	9	0	9	7	7	1
Mother	55	15	57	11	24	16	12
Father	6	5	1	1	6	3	2
Teacher	4	9	9	12	6	5	30
Experience	0	6	4	6	7	4	2
Printed matter	10	30	11	40	18	36	40
Other	1	2	2	1	1	0	1

Table 2

<i>Grades</i>	<i>Age at Initial Information</i>	<i>Origin of Babies</i>	<i>Ejaculation</i>	<i>Menstruation</i>	<i>Masturbation</i>	<i>Intercourse</i>	<i>Prostitution</i>	<i>V.D.</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
	Below 8	24	0	3	1	2	0	0
3	8	12	2	3	1	2	0	0
4	9	10	1	10	2	6	1	0
5	10	23	4	27	6	16	3	0
6	11	12	10	26	10	17	9	4
7	12	9	15	13	19	22	26	15
8	13	6	19	8	16	13	25	23
9	14	2	12	6	16	11	15	22
10	15	0	10	3	8	4	11	16
11	16	0	9	0	10	5	6	13
12	17	0	8	0	5	2	3	5
	18	0	6	0	4	1	1	1
	over 18	0	1	0	2	0	0	1

males of the "older generation." i.e., studies reported prior to 1953. There may be justification for the claim by some young people that "this" generation is different. The need for education in the schools might be implied from the results only on the basis that there is quite a diversity of initial sources of sex information reported.

It is evident from Table 2 that most topics of sex information were received by the majority of the students before age 14. If we interpret the table in terms of starting age for each grade, we can identify the approximate grades at which the various topics should be taught in the schools if there is a need for such instruction in the schools. Using this method of interpretation of the table, a majority of the women received information on the topics at the following grades: origin of babies—5th; menstruation—6th; intercourse—7th; ejac-

ulation, masturbation, and prostitution—8th; and venereal disease—9th. If these results were projected to a large population, the need for educators to review the grade at which such topics might be taught is imperative.

In response to a direct question, Should topics of sex education (such as the above) be taught in the schools? Seven women (3%) answered *no*. Of these, four stated that mother should be the only instructor, three stated that mother and father should instruct the children with one woman selecting doctor as an added resource. Two hundred and three women (97%) answered *yes* to the question.

SEX EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLS: WHEN AND BY WHOM?

In response to the question, when should such topics (above) begin to be taught in the schools?, the opinions were as follows: 34 per cent—before fourth grade; 23 per cent—fourth grade; 14 per cent—fifth grade; 12 per cent—sixth grade. Only 17 per cent felt that sex information should not be given to children by the schools prior to junior high school.

When asked the question, who should teach such topics?, the following responses were recorded: 152 women (73%) prefer a specially-trained sex education teacher; 22 per cent stated that the elementary classroom teachers should teach the topics included in the questionnaire; 9 per cent preferred the gym or health teacher; and only two women preferred the science teachers. Even of those who felt that sex education should not begin until 7th, 8th, or 9th grade, fourteen women (66%) stated that a specially-trained teacher was preferred over the science teachers or the gym or health teacher.

The women were then asked what should be included in the academic background of the teacher of sex education. Most of the women stated more than one response, but 201 (95%) would require at least one course in content and methods of sex education. All (100%) felt that some special course was needed. One hundred twenty-four women (56%) would require a course in "marriage and the family"; and more than 33 per cent would require a number of courses or a major in biology. Fifteen per cent would require a psychology course or courses specifically related to growth and development and emotional aspects. Four women suggested a major in sex education and one suggested a degree in sex education. If we relate the responses to this item to the item related to "who should teach such topics?", forty women felt that the elementary classroom teacher should teach sex education and only eight felt that at least one course in content and methods of sex education was not necessary. It would seem that the intent would be for the classroom teacher to have some background in what and how to teach about sex education even though she were not considered a "special" teacher.

WHAT SHOULD BE TAUGHT?

If sex education began in grades K-6, the majority (52%) of the women stated that it should be limited to the topics of: 1. origin of babies, 2. anatomy and function of the reproductive system, and 3. menstruation and other bodily

changes; 12 per cent would limit instruction to: 1. origin of babies; and 21 per cent would limit instruction to 1. and 2. above.

The sex education topics selected to be included after elementary school are as follows: 1. origin of babies, plus anatomy and function of the reproductive system, plus menstruation—14 per cent; 1. plus ejaculation, masturbation, intercourse, prostitution, and V.D.—79 per cent; sexual morality—53 per cent; marriage and family responsibility—46 per cent.

Apparently, the women reported in the study consider the biological topics as part, but only a part, of the sex education program.

In response to questions related to program organization, the women prefer flexible classes (separate for some topics—mixed for others)—62 per cent, but 32 per cent selected mixed (boys and girls) classes for all topics.

The program of sex education most favored by the young women (58%) would include a short period each week or a short unit (one week or longer) each semester from beginning grade *through high school*.

A more flexible program which would include a weekly period or a short unit each semester from beginning grade until desired topics had been completed and summarized dependent upon the progress of the particular groups of students involved was favored by 18 per cent of the women. Only 14 per cent favored a short period each week or a short unit each semester from beginning grade *through ninth grade*. Ten per cent favored a full course of one year only in grades seven (5%) or nine (5%).

SUMMARY

A small sample (210) of college women, aged 18-23, were questioned to provide answers to three categorical questions posed within the framework of a questionnaire.

There is a need for the schools to provide sex education. The diversity of initial sources of information about selected "sex" topics and the ages at which such information is received gives some evidence to substantiate the stated opinions (97%) of the women that such topics of sex education should be taught in the schools.

Eighty-three per cent of the women would have sex education begin in elementary school; 34 per cent want it to begin in the primary grades (before grade four). Regardless of when sex education should begin in the schools, 73 per cent of the women prefer that the teacher be a specially-trained teacher of sex education. Twenty-two per cent felt that the elementary classroom teacher should teach the topics appropriate to the elementary grades but almost all of these women felt that at least one course in the content and methods of sex education should be included in their professional background. This course should be required of all teachers, specially trained or not, according to 201 women (95%). Other courses which should be included in the teacher's background are: marriage and the family—56 per cent, and a special psychology course (or courses)—15 per cent. Thirty-three per cent of the women would require a major in biology or at least four courses in biology.

Sex education in the elementary schools should include: 1. origin of babies (100%); 2. the preceding plus anatomy and function of the reproduction system (73%); 3. the preceding plus menstruation plus other bodily changes (52%); and 4. the preceding plus other topics of sex education (15%).

In the secondary schools, 79 per cent of the women would include all topics not completed in the elementary schools (above), and sexual morality (53%) and marriage and family responsibility (46%) as part of the sex education program.

Flexible classes (separate for some topics—mixed for others) were preferred by 62 per cent of the women.

A majority of the young women (58%) favored a weekly period or a short unit each semester from beginning grade *through high school*. If the percentage which selected (18%) a more flexible program of a weekly period or short unit each semester from beginning grade until all desired topics had been covered were added, the total percentage which expressly stated or implied that sex education should continue through or into high school was 76 per cent.

Implications

The implications projected from the study may be applied to elementary and secondary teachers and to college professors responsible for teacher "training." If the results of this study are indicative of opinions of a larger population of prospective teachers, the science teachers are no longer looked upon as the logical teachers of sex education. Most of the biological topics would be covered in elementary grades by specially-trained teachers or by classroom teachers with at least one course in content and methods of sex education.

In junior high school, specially-trained teachers of sex education were preferred over health-gym teachers and science teachers. This was due to the expressed preference for a continuing program of sex education through junior and senior high school. Who should teach it in high school?

The implications for curriculum planners and administrators involves many problems unless teachers and course time are identified. The teachers would possess a background in the biology of reproduction, courses related to sexual morality, and marriage and family responsibilities, and courses in the content and methods of sex education.

The implications for college personnel would project an immediate need for the introduction of at least one course in content and methods of sex education for elementary and secondary teachers and prospective teachers.

More studies of this and more sophisticated nature are needed. A basis for decision about sex education programs in the schools is needed. Science educators should lead the studies to promote better articulation and communication about the topics of sex education if for no better reason than that they possess the tools and the present "older" generation seems to consider the general subject within the realm of science.