

Sex education to grade seven students in Papua New Guinea, yes or no?

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To answer this question, I would like to give you some personal opinions, experiences, criticism and encouragement, based on what I have experienced in giving many sex education lessons to grade seven students in many high schools, and also courses to third-year students at the Teachers Colleges at Kaindi, Vunakanau and Kabaleo in order to prepare them to give sex education to grade seven students when asked to do so.

Firstly, to parents who answer this question with no or say that it is against our customs, I would like to ask:

- Would you like your daughter to be the one running into our clinic, upset and scared and thinking that she is bleeding to death, because nobody took the time to prepare her for her first menstruation?
 - Would you not be upset if your daughter thinks that she can only get pregnant when she has sex with someone more than ten times?
 - Is it acceptable to you that your sons and daughters are confused and feel guilty because they have experienced the feelings and emotions that come with masturbation or that your son has the same confusion when he experiences a wet dream?
 - Is it acceptable to you if your son has the opinion that he can do with girls what he wants, because nobody has discussed a code of sexual behaviour with him and made it clear that he has responsibilities and has to have respect for others in this matter?
 - Why is it that we allow teachers to talk about reproduction of plants and animals in detail and do not allow them to talk about human reproduction and other facts of life?
- Why is it that teachers have no problem in explaining the working of the eye, the ear, or the nervous or blood circulation systems but need a lot of encouragement before they feel confident to explain to students the human reproductive system?
 - Is it because we ourselves were not prepared in time for the facts of life by our parents or here in Papua New Guinea by our aunties or uncles?

I personally was certainly not prepared by my parents or anybody else. I picked up my knowledge by bits and pieces from the street, which certainly did not take away my ignorance, fears, confusion and guilt feelings completely.

Centuries of inhibitions, taboos and false moralism have formed a barrier between the generations, which prevents the elders from freely sharing their knowledge with the youngsters about these all-important facts of life. These difficulties have their roots in the refusal to accept sexuality for its rich and positive value, yes, as a present of God, in the full expression of human personality.

From the above you know my answer to the question, 'sex education, yes or no?' If we look at Papua New Guinean culture and customs then we see that in many parts of the country initiation rites existed for both boys and girls; sex education was not the task of the parents, since most of the time they were not involved at all in these rites: it was the task of the aunties and uncles of the children. We might say that those instructions were not always anatomically correct or morally right but some codes of behaviour towards the other sex, the village leaders, the elderly and the community were clearly given and sometimes hammered in painfully.

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Except as tourist attractions those rites in most places do not exist any more. In their place are, for some young people, television, videos, radio and songs, booklets and friends of the same age group. For sure, not always sources of balanced information, you will agree. If you say we do not talk about these matters in public, please ask a group of boys or girls and they will tell you that they, as we did when we were young, talk a lot about these matters.

Researchers have proven that failure from parents or teachers to answer questions about sexual matters honestly can negatively influence their trust relationship. I believe that it will take time before parents have gained enough courage and know how to talk honestly about the excitements and problems of puberty with their children here in Papua New Guinea. But do we have the time to wait in this rapidly changing society and in the light of teenage pregnancies, STDs and now HIV/AIDS? In Uganda I was allowed to follow a human reproduction lesson in grade five in a community school. Uganda had similar customs and taboos concerning sex as we have here in PNG. Now sex education is compulsory there from grade five on in all schools; it is the first lesson in the AIDS awareness kit for schools in Uganda.

I personally believe that we should offer some responsible answers to sexual and puberty questions at the end of grade six, but we are not allowed yet until sex education is in the curriculum for the community schools. Some parents believe that we should put it on the P and C agenda and get the parents' permission to teach it after they themselves have heard the lesson. Until that changes let us focus on all grade seven classes, where it is already requested in the curriculum that these topics be covered by the guidance teacher.

The reactions I have received from young people and their parents, over all the years that I have been giving sex education in high schools, have been reactions of thanks, of encouragement and of support. I do not believe any more that parents do not wish their children to be informed about the facts of life and growing up. Who then is against sex education?

I think that we the health educators have failed in influencing the decision-makers in

this country, both at government and church levels. Many of them still hide behind reasons such as it is against our religion, culture or tradition to talk about these sensitive issues.

It is conveniently overlooked by them that knowledge by itself does not determine people's behaviour. I think it is high time that those decision-makers be reminded that:

- a) Nobody has ever become pregnant or become infected with an STD or HIV because of knowledge.
- b) Preventing people from gaining knowledge and the means of being able to make better decisions about their sex lives is a contravention of and interference with their basic human rights.
- c) There is no evidence to show that sexual knowledge per se leads to sexual experimentation but there is a lot of evidence that ignorance in this field leads to problems such as abuse by peers, low self-esteem, vulnerability to STDs, pregnancy, abortion and suicide.
- d) Young people need to grow up and gain in self-confidence; it is not surprising if they become confused by the mixed messages they receive when they are told to do one thing while they see parents and the pillars of their societies do the opposite.
- e) What kind of religion is it that endorses withholding knowledge so that people can be told, "We told you so" when those same people who have been kept in ignorance make bad decisions?

The challenge for us today is how to convince decision-makers about the urgent need to provide everyone with factual nonjudgemental information about sexuality, STDs and AIDS, and the need for discipline, self-respect and respect for others.

Doesn't your child deserve to know more than you did when you were an adolescent?

What do we teach, and how, in those lessons for grade seven students? The lessons I use follow the method used in Ugandan schools and consist of four blocks or parts and an introduction.

Introduction

Talk about sexuality as a gift of God, as there are so many other gifts of God. Sexuality is not dirty or bad or dangerous. If used correctly sexual expression is a means of joy and helps a young person to mature into a well-balanced adult with respect for his or her body and that of others.

Part One: Being born

With a set of slides or the video tape, 'The First Days of Life', I explain, in simple words, conception, the embryo stage, the development of the fetus, being born, being looked after by parents, brothers and sisters, etc.

Part Two

Explain all internal and external puberty changes in boys and girls. Use the teachers' guide for human reproduction.

Part Three

With the help of the same guide explain sexual intercourse and the different stages of pregnancy.

Part Four

Teach responsible sexual behaviour, self-discipline, and respect for one's own and somebody else's body. Use the stories from the teachers' guide and your church guidelines for responsible sexual behaviour.

It is clear that teaching the physical aspects of sexuality only is not enough. What is really important is to bring out, and explain fully, the link existing between sex and love. If sex implies satisfaction and joy, then love is the attitude that should go hand in hand with it; love is sharing, which means concern as well as love for the other.

That is why it is important that the sex education lessons are followed up by guidance and religious education lessons to guide the adolescents in discovering themselves and making proper use of their qualities and urges. It should help them to see sex as an integral part of human life, a natural and normal urge, and a positive force necessary for a balanced emotional development in interpersonal relationships.

I hope that the above will convince you that we have the duty to help out in this field of education. At the same time we must do everything possible to convince the parents that they are the first and most important sex educators. We should help them with the means and skills as well as encouraging them to educate their children about love and sex.

Some practical advice when you give sex education lessons

- a) Try to avoid a mixed group. In a mixed group both girls and boys, but especially girls, will feel ashamed or embarrassed and they will not ask questions freely.
- b) Bring the topic out as positively as possible.
- c) Discuss the topic in Pidgin, Motu or 'tok ples'. That needs practice and preparation.
- d) Ask for help and input from another teacher or parent.
- e) Make sure that your lessons are followed up by guidance or religious education lessons.

There are several ways and methods. If you want to use the Ugandan Education Department one, you need the following materials:

- BBC video tape on sex education, edited version.
- Teachers' guide to human reproduction (Uganda). These are the two most necessary ones.

If it is not possible to show the video, then use:

- Life Magazine educational lift-out 'Life before Birth'
- The five human reproduction posters (black and white, Uganda)
- Set of slides about the first days of life (or the video tape with the same title).

All of these items are available from the National Family Life Office, PO Box 592, Goroka, EHP 441, Phone 7321356.