Difficulty and Diversity: The Context and Practice of Sex Education

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Type of Article: Qualitative Research Study

Intended Audience: Policy makers and school personnel.

Purpose: To provide a better understanding of the delivery of sex education and an appreciation of the context in which sex education teachers work.

Theoretical Perspective: The authors make no theoretical perspective clear. They seem to assume the following theory: sex education solves the problems of teenage pregnancy and STDs among youth.

Methods: In general: Qualitative research.
Specifically: 1) In-depth interviews of 58 teachers from 25 schools in East Scotland.
   a) Assistant Head Teachers (AHT), Personal and Social Education Teachers (PSE), and at least one other associated staff member interviewed at each site.
   b) Teachers’ student ranged in age from 13 to 16.
   c) Topics covered included:
      i) content and delivery of sex education
      ii) the organization of Guidance and PSE within the school
      iii) school ethos
      iv) personal values
      v) perceived effectiveness of sex education
      vi) relationships within the guidance team
   2) Detailed field-notes based on site visits and classroom observations.
   3) Data from interviews cross referenced with observations as well as interviews and discussions with students and groups of students.
   4) Data analyzed with NUDIST, research software.
Findings/Conclusions:

1) Broad priorities of the senior management team shaped the amount of time devoted to sex education, the selection of teachers to provide it, and which students the teachers actually taught.

2) Most schools assigned curriculum development to one teacher whose motivations, views, values, and experiences were crucial in determining the nature of the curriculum.

3) Cohesiveness of the team delivering sex education varied considerably between schools and depended upon both the PSE coordinator and the degree of standardization of the curriculum.

4) Personal characteristics of the classroom teachers made a key impact on instructional delivery, especially where the guidance team was weak.

In order to improve sex education, teachers need the following support:

1) A standardized curriculum,
2) Their schools to take sex education seriously,
3) Staff development and training,
4) Support in dealing with social and cultural issues that surrounding matters relating to sexuality.