

## **Education for Sexual Health**

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The issue of “sex education in schools” has once again become part of public discourse in the wake of the actions of a representative of the group Advocates for Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (AYSRHR), and his call for the implementation of the National Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) policy. The debate about whether sex education should be included in the school curriculum is now a moot point, in light of the statement by the Ministry of Education affirming its commitment to HFLE, and the assurance by the Minister that sex education will be included in all secondary schools from the start of the new academic year, as part of a revised HFLE curriculum.

Some background to this commitment to life skills-based HFLE may be useful. Research coming out of the region in the last decade has highlighted the serious threats (social, psychological, and physical) that impact on the health and well-being of children and youth. This has resulted in a growing acceptance by the education and health sectors of the need to strengthen the role of the school in educating the whole child, with a focus on reshaping values and promoting positive behaviours. It is against this backdrop that the CARICOM Standing Committee of Ministers of Education passed a resolution in 1994 to support a comprehensive approach to HFLE. In 1996, the Standing Committees of both Ministers of Education and Health reaffirmed their commitment to HFLE as a priority for achieving national development goals, and agreed to the formulation or review of national policies on HFLE. One objective of this review was to ensure that HFLE was included as part of the core curriculum of general education at all levels. In Trinidad and Tobago, a national committee representing a cross-section of interests was established to formulate the draft policy. This document was circulated and published, and two national consultations were held, one in Tobago in December 1999, and the other in Trinidad in January 2000. A summary report was submitted to the Ministry of Education for further action. This formed the genesis of the Trinidad and Tobago HFLE policy document.

Human Sexuality/Sexual Health is one of the five themes of the life skills-based HFLE programme. While knowledge of reproduction, and hormonal and physical changes are integral to the HFLE sexual health curriculum, the emphasis is on abstinence. Research from other countries indicates, however, that young people are often disappointed by education that teaches only about the physical and medical aspects of sex. They are more concerned about social issues, about relationships, about body image and self-confidence, about their feelings and their emotions. They therefore need to be taught how to manage intense and unpredictable emotions, how to cope with sexual feelings, how to form healthy relationships with members of both sexes, how to recognise or avoid situations that are potentially harmful, how to make good decisions, how to be assertive, how to refuse, and how to clarify their own values. Sexuality is a complex and confusing aspect of life. The way that young persons resolve needs, desires, values, and social expectations in this area has the potential to lead either to maximal adult sexual adjustment and life satisfaction, or to considerable conflict, pain, and poor life satisfaction. Sexual health

education, therefore, is about providing young people with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will empower them to make the right choices about their sexual health.

There is need for revisiting the September deadline for introduction of the sexual health curriculum if the necessary support systems and structures are not in place. First of all, is the curriculum ready? If it is, is it developmentally appropriate for the various levels, and is the focus on life skills acquisition rather than on knowledge dissemination? How will such a curriculum be delivered? Will it be delivered as a separate subject or infused into existing curricula? Have principals, teachers, and parents been sensitised? It is necessary for parents to be part of such an enterprise. They must understand the goals of such a programme if they are to accept it. Are training workshops being planned for teachers and, if so, which teachers? This is an important question for several reasons. Firstly, there are some teachers who are not comfortable with their own sexuality and are reluctant to teach sexual health issues. Secondly, life skills programmes are best taught through participatory methodologies and assessed in non-traditional ways. Teachers must be competent in the use of such methodologies and in alternative forms of assessment. Thirdly, there will be issues relating to confidentiality, and disclosures that require the intervention of experts. Teachers must know how to treat with these issues, and where to get help. What kinds of monitoring procedures will be put in place to evaluate programme outcomes? These are just some of the prerequisites for successful implementation of the programme.

There are those who feel strongly that this is the domain of parents. While we acknowledge that parents have an important role to play in passing on personal, moral, religious, and cultural values, the 1998 “Regional Report of [the] Needs Assessment Study”, of the CARICOM HFLE Project (produced by the School of Education, UWI, Cave Hill), has revealed that young persons themselves are asking for help in this area. Many claim that they are unable to speak to their parents on sexual matters, and many parents also state that they lack the knowledge of how to do so in an appropriate way. If young persons are denied the opportunity to be educated about sexual health through educationally sound and evidence-based programmes, then they will turn to their peers and other unreliable sources. Sex is a topic that is discussed in the corridors, washrooms, playgrounds, and classrooms of our schools. When a young schoolboy on national television can announce, in response to a question about the purpose of visiting the National Library, that it is not about learning, “...it is about girls, girls...” then we need to take our heads out of the sand and do a reality check.

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