

FORUM FACTSHEET 10

Developing partnerships in sex education: a multi-cultural approach

Guidance on sex education from the Department for Education highlights the fact that sex education needs to be based on a partnership between schools and parents. *Circular 5/94* states that in the development or review of their sex education policy, governors 'may wish to take due account of representations or advice they may receive from health authorities and from others, in particular religious groups and ethnic minority communities'. It further notes that 'particular attention should be paid to the needs of parents from some religious groups and ethnic minority communities who may not be comfortable in dealing with the subject publicly'.

The following factsheet draws on the findings of a number of sexual health initiatives working with parents and pupils from minority ethnic communities in the area of school sex education. It also draws on research carried out by the Sex Education Forum and others; offers practical suggestions which have had positive outcomes for others and provides details of useful resources. Many of the suggestions provided would be relevant for consultation with parents regarding other issues such as drug education policies, bullying policies and other pastoral support of pupils.

The importance of active consultation

Despite government exhortations to do so, there are still many schools who have not openly consulted with parents in the area of sex education. This may be because of competing demands on time and resources, or it may be because their earlier attempts have been unsuccessful. However, the evidence from schools and practitioners around England and Wales is that such consultation is vital and, if planned carefully, is overwhelmingly positive for schools, parents and pupils. There are many examples where schools have been surprised and reassured by the interest and support that parents from minority ethnic communities have shown for their work in PSE and sex education.

However, research has shown that there is often a mismatch between what parents and schools understand by consultation. In a recent survey carried out by the Health Education Authority¹ all the schools reported that they had consulted with parents over sex education, but only 23 per cent of parents felt this to have been the case.

Caution on the part of teachers about parents, and of parents about teachers, has resulted in inaction for many schools. Many see sex education as a potentially controversial area. This may be partly as a result of media attention and partly due to the reality of open enrolment, which may have made schools nervous about parental opinion in this and other areas. Parents too can be nervous about schools, and barriers of language and culture can complicate communication. These factors can contribute to a stalemate between home and school, where instead of talking, both sides make assumptions about the other.

Parental support for sex education

Research over the last ten years has found parental support for school sex education consistently overwhelming. The latest research in 1994, found that 94 per cent supported school sex education. And parents from Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities also expressed higher levels of support than might be expected (49 per cent, 78 per cent, and 75 per cent respectively). Despite this support it is clear that many schools lack confidence in communicating with parents about the aims and content of sex education. These anxieties are often heightened where the parents concerned are from religious and minority ethnic communities. Research^{2,3,4} has shown that these anxieties have hindered the development of sex education policies (a statutory requirement since 1987) and open consultation with parents.

Parents as sex educators

The need for more effective consultation with parents is evident. Research with families⁵ has shown that children cannot always rely on their parents to talk with them about puberty or sex. Asian children are less likely to have spoken with their parents about sex than their white peers and African-Caribbean children report even lower levels of communication. The WRAP research team found widespread reliance on schools as source of sex education amongst young women from minority ethnic communities.⁶ As this research shows, many parents feel ill-equipped to educate their children about issues on which they themselves received little formal education. They appreciate the role schools can play in supporting them in the education of their children.

Positive outcomes of consultation

Active consultation with parents has been found to have very positive effects. It can help

clarify and dispel preconceptions about parental attitudes to sex education. It can facilitate communication between schools and parents and establish a foundation of communication that the school can build on in the future. Consultation with parents also has a positive impact on the confidence of staff. It can increase their understanding of and ability to respond to cultural and religious diversity.

The following principles and examples have been drawn and developed from the shared findings of practical experience in different parts of England and Wales. This work with schools in consulting with parents from minority ethnic communities includes: work undertaken by the Sex Education Forum for the Sex Education Alliance in North and West London; a project offering health education training to schools in Worcester; the 'Black and Ethnic Communities Sexual Health Programme' undertaken in North West Lancashire; and a project undertaken in Cambridgeshire and Huntingdon, on sex education and religious and cultural issues.

Principles for successful partnership with parents

Establish effective communication with parents

Staff in many schools have very little contact with parents. This can impact upon staff confidence in their ability to respond to religious and cultural diversity in sex education. Open routes of communication between schools and the parent body makes it less likely that either party will fall back on stereotypes.

One secondary school, which carried out a consultation exercise with parents, found that the opposition of pupil and parental interests

predicted by many of the staff did not in fact exist. A staff training session provided as part of the consultation process helped staff to understand ways in which the home cultures of pupils had been stereotyped and helped them to identify ways in which to value diversity in practice in the classroom.

Schools have found that identifying a named link person for parents to contact has had positive effects on communication between parents and the school. For many parents, their main source of information about the school will be via their own children. Establishing a named contact point for parents creates an easy route of access for parents and will help dispell parental fears that they may be regarded as a troublemaker if they contact the school.

It is clear from initiatives in this area that successful consultation with parents regarding sex education is helped if the school already has established routes of communication in existence. These may for example take the form of active home and school link workers. Many schools send a regular newsletter to parents which includes information on when sex education will be taught.

If however, these links are not in place, then alternative routes will need to be built over time. Obvious candidates for help in this area are school Section 11 post holders who can act as home and school liaison workers and bilingual support teachers. These staff may also have the added benefit of working for local community-based organisations such as youth groups.

A practical example of this support in one school involves a home link worker from a local community group who runs a regular lunchtime drop-in session for pupils and liaises directly with parents.

Consultations with parents over sex education may identify a range of other parental concerns about the school. These issues may be of greater concern to the parents contacted than sex education. The consultation process will be easier if parents have been consulted before on other aspects of school policy and life.

A commitment by the school to communicate with parents and carers in their first language

The willingness of a school to communicate with parents in their first language and to translate relevant documents is crucial in expressing a positive ethos of the school to parents. This means:

- ensuring that key documents and materials (such as the sex education policy and occasional newsletters) are translated;
- that trained interpreters are provided at meetings – rather than relying on children to take on this role;

- that cultural norms are recognised and respected, for example the provision of single sex discussions of sexuality and relationships at parents' evenings.

Although this may present a problem for schools in terms of resources, it is worth the investment.

One secondary school convened a meeting with Turkish-speaking parents of Year 9 pupils. The meeting was held at lunchtime and parents were invited to attend to discuss any concerns they had about their children's education. The invitation from the Deputy Head was translated into Turkish. The Turkish home-school link worker and the bilingual support teacher who were known to many of the parents were both present. One acted as an interpreter, the other welcomed parents on arrival.

School ethos

The key to respectful and effective consultation with parents lies of course in the general ethos of a school and its openness to parents, the community and sources of outside support. The school ethos also has consequences for the school's commitment to and confidence in talking with pupils about ethnicity, faith and diversity.

A positive school ethos is created where questions of ethnicity and religion are addressed explicitly as part of the curriculum as well as being management issues concerning policy making and consultation. A positive outlook on equal opportunities and cultural diversity will increase parents' trust regarding the school's ability in treating issues of cultural diversity in relation to sex education.

General good practice in representing and valuing cultural diversity will have a positive impact in terms of parents' perceptions of the school and the degree to which they feel the school is open to them.

Examples of this seen in schools include:

- welcome signs displayed at the school entrance in all relevant community languages;
- communication home being translated into community languages;
- home-school link workers working with parents on matters concerning communication with the school about pupil behaviour and performance; and interpreters being made available for parents at meetings.

Be prepared to respond to criticism

A confident school is able to hear criticism and to respond to it constructively. Genuine consultation with parents requires a school to take risks and it is unlikely that a school would have this confidence in a crisis situation or in a period of rapid change.

Active commitment of senior management

Effective partnership with parents requires a school to be willing to hear the views of parents and carers and to be prepared to respond to their views constructively. As consultation with parents about sex education may raise other issues, it is vital that contact with the parent body is actively supported by the Head Teacher and the Senior Management Team. Initiatives with parents have shown that without this support other staff do not have the authority or confidence to respond to the needs and concerns expressed by parents.

Working in partnership with outside agencies

There are a number of organisations that can support schools in the consultation process, for instance community-based agencies specialising in work with minority ethnic communities, health promotion and voluntary projects. An outside agency can provide impetus and support, and can also offer teachers a real insight into cultural and religious issues.

Factors which have been found to facilitate partnership between schools and outside agencies include:

- the school is actively involved in leading the partnership and in owning the consultation process;
- all partners are clear about their roles;
- the school is centrally involved in parental consultation.

One example of partnership with community groups was undertaken by an agency which carried out valuable preliminary work in the locality of the school with adults in their workplace. This was part of an existing community-based sexual health project. Some of the adults were parents of pupils at the school involved.

A health promotion authority was invited to support a local school with the review of its sex education policy. The health promotion team supported the school (which served a high proportion of Muslim pupils) in consulting with parents. They produced a leaflet for parents as part of this process. The consultation brought together parents, staff, former pupils, and community and faith leaders. A workshop was facilitated by South Asian workers.

Initial meetings with key parents can also provide a valuable link into the community. For example, one school held a meeting with a parent governor and her daughter who was in the sixth form of the school. From this meeting a local Muslim women's organisation was identified and contacted. This group was considered to have an opinion forming role within the community and contained a number of parents of pupils at the school.

A commitment to training

Research has shown a widespread need for staff support and training in classroom strategies for teaching sex education in a multi-cultural context. The consultation process with parents and their children can be an effective way of identifying staff training needs. Key to the response of the school to parental views is a commitment to meet these training needs.

Principles to inform consultation with minority ethnic parents

- a real ethos of acceptance and support;
- a thought-out confidence about what the school is doing so it can defend and explain its practice;
- a willingness to actively consult and inform;
- a policy and initiative owned by schools (visible management support is essential);
- a willingness to involve different agencies which can make schools feel less vulnerable, help develop a confident platform and utilise alternative networks.

Pupil consultation

One of the key motivations for undertaking consultation with parents must be to ensure the entitlement of pupils to sex education. **Pupils are what schools and parents have in common and therefore provide the bridge in any consultation between home and school.** Recognition by schools and parents that they share a concern with the best interests of the child is a strong foundation for partnership and trust. Staff commitment to support pupils experiencing a clash between home and school culture can also be informed by greater contact with parents.

Pupils can be actively involved in the consultation process either in person or through examples of their work. The needs of pupils can be identified in many ways. For example, one school carried out a series of needs analysis sessions using interactive methods and drama, with pupils from Year 8 and the sixth form. The local health promotion officer facilitated a final session focussing on pupil attitudes towards parental opinions of sex education. The session took the form of a chat show, billed as the 'alternative Oprah.' Participants, both staff and pupils were given roles to play. Exercises such as these enable pupils' views to be incorporated.

Some pupils may experience a conflict of values between home and school. Improved contact with parents and the broader community can help clarify misconceptions and enhance the quality of education and support provided by the school to pupils.

Consultation with pupils and parents in one school identified the potential for a number of initiatives that could help strengthen home-school links, these included, mother and daughter sessions and the provision of information for parents to support sex education in the home.

One initiative found that the involvement of parents in consultation over sex education was supported by most pupils. However, some pupils did express concern as to how the school would approach their parents. Pupils were aware that they had become adept at managing the differences between home and school culture. They weren't sure that their parents or teachers would be able to do so as well. Schools need to be sensitive to the situation of such pupils and to acknowledge their experiences within the ethos of the school by demonstrating explicit respect for pupils' home cultures. In the context of secondary schools it would be appropriate for schools to consult with pupils as to how to develop relationships with parents.

It has proved helpful to integrate sex education into existing support available to schools in the area of home-school support, equal opportunities, bilingual support and governor training.

Strategies for consulting and initiating consultation with minority ethnic parents

- begin at a community level;
- work at the school's pace;
- ensure that governors, especially governors from minority ethnic communities, get sex education training;
- review sex education policy and include a stipulation that there is consultation with parents and the community;
- employ small-group work in consultations, rather than fielding questions from the floor;
- make available first language communication – co-facilitate with voluntary or statutory bodies to support minority ethnic and cultural work with parent groups;
- consult with key faith organisations;
- be open and honest – carefully explain your agenda – listen actively to parents and others;
- involve young people separately and feed their needs and concerns back.

Preparing for consultation with parents

Staff involved in a consultation process with parents will need to have an opportunity to reflect critically on the school's existing practice and the extent to which diversity is really acknowledged and valued within the school.

Issues such as confidentiality need to be clarified before any formal consultation takes place with parents to ensure that the entitlement of pupils to education and support is not adversely affected. It can be helpful to consult pupils with regard to the viability and parameters of consultation with parents. A code of confidentiality regarding pupils' disclosure will need to be agreed in advance of consultations with them.

Conclusions

It is clear that schools wishing to involve parents from minority ethnic communities in consultations over sex education need to take special steps in their approaches. These might include identifying and making contact with existing community-based groupings, the provision of single gender meetings, writing letters in community languages, translating documents and ensuring that trained interpreters are present at meetings.

In all the projects described parents were both pleased and reassured to be invited to participate in consultations and that steps had been taken to facilitate their involvement. Many were uncertain of the exact nature and aims of sex education, yet most were pleased that the school was taking this responsibility. Parents were however concerned about the values framework within which sex education was taught. All parents expressed the concern that the values of their community were respected and acknowledged in any sex education that took place.

Parents consulted in these projects were aware that their children were growing up in a culture with a range of values, traditions and lifestyles and expressed some concern about the ability of their children to resolve the dilemmas of living in a multi-faith and multi-cultural society. Parents were concerned that schools should support them in this endeavour without undermining their respect for the culture of their parents. Active consultation with parents strengthens the ability of schools to do this.

References

1. NFER (1995) *Parents, schools and sex education: a compelling case for partnership.* Health Education Authority
2. Health Education Authority (1993) *Sex Education Alliance Audit*
3. National Foundation For Educational Research (1993) *A Survey of Health Education in Schools.* Health Education Authority
4. Thomson, R. and Scott, L. (1992) *An Enquiry Into Sex Education.* Sex Education Forum
5. Brannen, J and Storey, P (1996) *Child Health in Social Context.* Health Education Authority.
6. Holland, J [Women Risk & AIDS Project] (1993) *Sexuality and Ethnicity: Variations in young women's sexual knowledge and practice.* Tufnell Press.

Further reading and resources

Sex Education Forum (1994) **Forum Factsheet 1: Religion, ethnicity and sex education – issues for teachers.** Provides a brief introduction to some of the issues raised in the Forum's successful publication, *Religion, Ethnicity and Sex Education: Exploring the issues*. It looks at some of the processes required for schools to ensure equality of opportunities in sex education within a multicultural society. It provides suggestions for teaching resources, recommended reading and useful organisations.

Thomson, R. (ed) (1993) **Religion, Ethnicity and Sex Education: Exploring the issues.** National Children's Bureau. This pack for teachers explores the issues raised by teaching sex education in a multi-faith and multicultural society. It provides seven religious perspectives on sex, sexuality, and sex education: Anglican; Hindu; Islamic; Jewish; Methodist; Roman Catholic; and Sikh as well as a secular and personal perspective. By presenting a range of different religious beliefs this pack aims to inform those working with young people and their families to encourage them to enter into a dialogue with the communities served by their school. The pack also includes a discussion of equal opportunities, and workshop activities that explore some of the issues raised by the pack. Available from: Book Sales, National Children's Bureau. Tel: 0171 843 6028/29. Price £10.50 (Members of the National Children's Bureau and the Sex Education Forum) £15.50 (non-members) plus £3.00 p&p.

Lenderyou, G. and Porter, M (1994) **Sex Education, Values and Morality.** Health Education Authority. Report based on the process and outcomes of a multi-faith workshop. Offers guidelines to schools on developing sensitive and educationally sound sex education programmes that respect beliefs and values. From the Family Planning Association. £6.99 Tel: 0171 837 5432.

Robin, A, Singh, G and Thompson, H (1996) **Rishtae aur Zimmevarian – Relationships and Responsibilities.** North West Lancashire Health Promotion Unit. This report and training manual is the result of a sexual health programme targeting black and minority ethnic communities in North West Lancashire. The report includes information about the initial research, how the programme was set up and implemented and the activities which have been generated from the work. The training pack provides specialist resources which have been created specifically for

working either with trainers or community groups of all ages. Available from North West Lancashire Health Promotion Unit. Tel: 01772 711796.

D'Oyen, F, M (1996) **The Miracle of Life: A guide on Islamic family life and sex education for young people.** Islamic Foundation. A guide on sex education and traditional family values for young Muslims. Presents scientific information in the light of broadly accepted Islamic teachings on a variety of topics including pregnancy, childbirth, personal hygiene, evolution and genetics. Available from the Islamic Foundation, The Markfield Conference Centre, Ratby Lane, Markfield, Leicester, LE67 9RN. Tel: 01530 244944. Price £5.95 (plus 90p p&p)

Dix, D (1996) **Sex Education for Parents: A resource pack for professionals to support parents in their role as sex educators.** Family Planning Association and Health Promotion Wales. A pack for professionals running workshops for parents. Includes information and activities to help build parents' confidence in talking about sexual matters with their children. Price: £15.00. From the Family Planning Association. Tel: 0171 837 5432.

Naz Project (1996) **Dictionary of Terms for Use in HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health Resources.** Naz Project. A series of nine dictionaries of HIV/AIDS and sexual health terms to assist health workers in the production of linguistically appropriate resources. They are available in Arabic, Bengali, Farsi, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil, Turkish and Urdu. Price £5.00. Available from the Naz Project. Tel: 0181 563 0205.

White, S (1995) **Confidentiality in Schools: A training manual.** Brook Advisory Centres. Provides helpful background material on the issue of confidentiality and its implications for those working with – or coming into contact with – children or young people in schools. It also provides guidance and ideas for working with different groups including parents, governors and teachers plus workshop activities for addressing issues of confidentiality. From Brook Advisory Centres. Price: £10.00. Tel: 0171 833 8488.

Kapasi, R and Hyare, I, S (1996) **Reaching People: Guidelines for the development and evaluation of sexual health materials in a multiracial society.** Aquarius. Is aimed at those involved in developing new sexual health education and promotion materials and in evalu-

ating existing materials. It provides a framework by which to assess how issues of ethnicity and culture pertinent to sexual health education and training materials have been incorporated into specific materials. It also offers a good practice framework for professionals seeking to develop and use multiracial materials, and materials in languages other than English. Price £10.55 (incl. p&p) from Aquarius E.T.C., 6th Floor, The White House, 111 New St, Birmingham B2 4EU.

Parker-Jenkins, M (1995) **Children of Islam: A teacher's guide to meeting the needs of Muslim pupils.** Trentham Books. Provides a brief historical overview of Muslim communities in Britain; an introduction to Islam and the Islamic concept of knowledge; and the duties of Muslim parents and children. Intended for everyday use by teachers it provides practical suggestions to inform practice. Price: £12.99. Available through bookshops.

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