THE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

THE PROBLEM OF SEX EDUCATION.

W. A. COOK,

Fellow in Education, University of Wisconsin.

The Public Interest. One of the few things upon which educators are agreed is that children should be instructed in matters of sex. For several years past this question has been receiving increasing attention in educational and sociological publications, and its importance is being more and more stressed. This does not necessarily mean that vice and venereal disease are growing, for the contrary may be the case. But it does mean that through research the results of the social evil and its accompaniments have been traced out; that this information has been disseminated, and that a more sensitive public conscience than of old has been quickened to meet the long-standing demands of the situation. Laymen everywhere, and especially parents, will follow the struggle with this problem with as keen an interest as they will regard anything of an educational nature.

Disagreement As to Methods. But as soon as one has observed that there is agreement on the need of sex instruction, he must pause. For there is utter absence of accord when we come specifically to ask who shall give this instruction; where, when and how he shall give it; and finally what shall be given. To the writer it does not seem rash to predict that in four or five decades we may be offering what is needed, and doing it effectively, through more than one avenue, by various methods, at divers times and places. But just now Babel reigns. Some say the work must be done by the parents;

others declare that the agency must be free literature spread broadcast, or classes conducted by physicians or other specially-equipped persons; still others will place this new duty upon the regular teacher in the public school. Some would develop it out of nature study in the grades; others would approach it *via* the high school classes in biology, and a few would cut the Gordian knot off short at what they consider the appropriate time without "approaching" it at all.

No Scientific Data for Judgment. While we flounder in this uncertainty, amid nearly as many opinions as there are holders of opinion, it may be permissible for one who, as high school principal for several years had the seriousness of the sex situation called repeatedly to his attention, to offer his views. They are largely theoretical, in small measure empirical, which clearly classifies them with about everything we have on the subject. Actual experimental evidence on this point will accumulate very slowly, since the experimenter cannot complete his test in a month, check it by a "control" group and publish his "per cents." in a forthcoming periodical.

A Fundamental Requirement. Now, if the first requirement is that *sex shall be taught*, the range of possible teachers is lessened. Those who contend for the primacy of the home are holding to an ideal which all admire, but which is merely an ideal and utterly impractical in our generation, though it may not always be so. As society's demands multiply we are finding that there is scarcely anything that the home can be trusted satisfactorily to perform. One by one the various arts, intellectual and manual, have been rescued from domestic neglect or incapacity and transferred to the school. When we put the proposal to actual test, the home cannot be relied upon to teach sex. In some homes morals are loose or lacking, though this is comparatively infrequent. Millions of strictly moral parents refuse on flimsy pretexts to shoulder any responsibility, and many of the remainder are unable to teach sex any more than they can teach algebra. Free literature cannot meet the need; it finds the field already well filled with quack literature and advertisements within reach of boys especially. Occasional institutes or lectures do not reach the

masses. The school is the only organized agency that touches all the children, and only through it, by regular or special teachers, can we assure ourselves that *sex shall be taught*. No parent is thereby barred from co-operation in dealing with his child. All other suitable and reputable agencies may enter the field.

A Second Requirement. Educational history bears witness that much teaching has been a ridiculous waste—mere lessons, formally studied and perfunctorily recited. In this age the light of inquiry is being turned on every element of every new and traditional subject in the curriculum, and the question is always, "How does it affect the later life of the pupil?" When we look around we discover that hygienic instruction has failed to slump the tea or coffee market or "bust" the beer or tobacco trusts. It is therefore not enough that simple facts of sex shall be imparted, but *these facts must be given in a vital, dynamic way*. This emphasizes more than ever the need that the work shall be done by those who understand the nature and development of childhood and youth, and who know how to break through that reserve and sense of difference that unfortunately grows up between most children and their parents, culminating more or less unhealthily at adolescence.

An Unpedagogical Approach. Just what constitutes vital and effective method is not so simple to agree upon. But in the light of general pedagogy certain principles ought to stand out plainly. There is widely current an idea to the effect that the notion of sex difference and its place in nature can be gradually developed through many phases of nature study, such as the process of pollination in plants, the depositing of eggs and storing of food for the young by many insects, the nesting habits of birds, etc. Though no one has stated it precisely, doubtless it is expected to work from the oviparous to the viviparous idea, and finally up through the mammals to the constitution and purpose of the family as a human group. No one will object to the educative effect of such a training, but that it should be conceived as a pedagogical method of attacking the sex problem is beyond many.

No Need of An Approach. The technical purpose of a

method is presumably (1) to widen the scope of a child's interest by indissolubly connecting with some old interest something not hitherto of interest, and (2) to raise a problem in the child's mind. Now, neither of these two ends can be well achieved by the proposed method, because the problem of sex is in the normal child's mind before he reaches the fourth grade, and the only reason why we hear so little of it during his pubescent years is because it has been crowded into the background by other active interests and by the repeated rebuffs with which his attempts to investigate have been met. And then, why should we advocate a long and, to the child, a tortuous approach to this absorbing interest? We do not hear it argued that the hygiene of breathing involves a study of the function of spiracles in grasshoppers, or gills in fish. No one thinks the hygiene of eating may be better taught if preceded by a study of the organs of prehension and mastication far down in the animal scale. Such work is entirely educative, but quite superfluous with respect to the ultimate end.

Danger of the Slow Approach. But there is a positive danger in the indirect method of approach, because the teacher has not had the courage, from the child's standpoint, to attack the problem directly. If the boy, as is very likely, has already had information or misinformation of sex matters through the spoken or written word or the action of his older boy associates, he is exceedingly quick to note what he considers a stealthy, because gradual, introduction of a subject which he has been told to discuss "only with the fellows." Hence his suspicions are aroused and strengthened instead of being disarmed; now he is sure there is a "skeleton in the closet." But the term *introduction* is a misnomer if the child has already had his introduction, and such is almost inevitable before he reaches the age at which the school is able to generalize the idea of sex.

The Scientific Attitude Toward Sex. A yet more fundamental error inheres in this idea of generalizing sex through nature study or later in high school biology, i. e., an error of efficacy in sex instruction. All attempts to denude sex of all feeling, to disemotionalize it, are, in the writer's opinion,

doomed to failure. If scientific knowledge of the effect of narcotics cannot prevent numbers of our physicians from becoming "dope fiends," who will have the hardihood to claim that in a high school laboratory an adolescent can learn enough about sex to control his conduct thereafter? This is because emotion is more basic than mere information in determining ethical living. The latter leads to judgment, but the former impels to action; and the most casual observer can multiply illustrations of this principle to his satiety. Sex feelings are universally admitted to be instinctive, and, according to no less an authority than McDougall, have an unvarying, inseparable emotional correlate. It is possible that a considerable number of physicians after long experience are able to assume a *comparatively* unemotional attitude toward sex, but that children may be given a cold, scientific or intellectual regard for sex or anything else equally prominent in the evolution and survival of the race is chimerical. Nature does not leave such important matters to human reflection or judgment. Sterilization by education is impossible.

Emotions vs. Emotions. Like most contemporary writers on educational topics, the present writer finds his easiest task in telling how not to do it. Still, he would be false to his convictions if he closed without a few positive suggestions. The subject under discussion can be treated to advantage only by starting a back-fire against the impulse to sexual carelessness. The reproductive instinct is not so strong as instincts tending to self-preservation; the amorous emotion (in its unsocial manifestations) can be conquered by fear, disgust, self-respect and desire for the regard of others. If a skillful principal wants to decrease the use of cigarettes among his boys, he will not attack the practice necessarily through the physiology class, and certainly not from the physiological side alone. So in sex instruction we must seize on motives whenever and wherever we come upon them. No matter what the motive; if it is a motive, it can be made to count.

The Teacher of Sex. He who is called to the high work of instructing in this momentous subject should be no ordinary mortal. He must know his subject, and he must also know his pupils, the springs to their conduct, what attracts and what

repels. He must be able to command their confidence by his fairness and frankness and burning interest in what he is to impart. No apologist can for one moment succeed. Many a parent can do this excellently if he will. Most teachers ought to be able to do it, for their own sex at least, if they really possess those qualities which should make teachers the most useful of the world's men and women.

When Shall We Begin? That high school pupils are peculiarly ripe for this instruction is almost a truism, (1) because of the new dangers that are characteristic of their physiologic age, (2) because of their emotional susceptibility. If the State has a right to prescribe anything for every high school student, it should begin here. It is true that only one-fifth to one-twentieth of the children in different communities are graduating from the high school, but many others attend for a time, and the proportion is constantly increasing. If these can be reached at their peculiarly propitious age, there will soon be in every group of boys and girls almost anywhere one or more whose spirit shall have been stirred and whose ideals lifted up. And all such will become teachers of their less-favored fellows.

Still, there may be no impropriety, and possibly much wisdom, in carrying the gospel down into the grammar grades. The trouble comes in administration. Ideally, the writer believes there should be some differentiation on the basis of age between those under and those over 14. But then arises the difficulty of making the younger pupils feel that they are being dealt with frankly. Few of those below this limit are likely to profit by much instruction. At least, we shall all agree that there is some inferior age or grade limit to be set for sex instruction, though there probably should be no inferior limit set to the truthful, but guarded, answering of honest spontaneous questions from the children. The only way to establish our limit intelligently is to start in at the top of the school and work carefully down, surely not the reverse.

What Shall Be Taught? Sex instruction should not be stingy. Boys and girls have the same right to the vital facts here that they have to the vital facts in science, literature and history. Pubescents should be content with the names of vene-

real diseases, their visible effects and means of avoiding innocent infection. Such are the matters covered in the elementary school with reference to other contagious diseases. Adolescents in the grades should understand plainly how human life is transmitted, the culpable as well as the innocent methods of contracting venereal disease, the invisible and permanent results of the scourge and the effect of solitary vice. High school students before the end of their course would take the keenest sort of interest in the larger social aspects of these questions. A half-year course in "Social Problems" could advantageously be outlined, to be distributed in bi-weekly sessions over the entire four years, starting from the facts already imparted in the lower school and studying them in a more detailed way in relation to the physical and moral welfare of the individual. Next might come the evils of prostitution, the means adopted for their control and alleviation, the relation of licensed vice to municipal government and to other forms of crime, pandering and its detection and punishment. There should be a sociological (not a biological) study of the present status of the Lamarckian-Weismannian controversy and a careful consideration of devices for turning the principles of heredity to account in the treatment of criminals, lunatics, defectives, paupers and other delinquents and dependents. The end should be an appreciation of eugenics and its field. There is already available a vast amount of literature well adapted to the purposes of such a course, and well-chosen readings from this field should be in reach of all who are interested.

Coeducation or Segregation? The relation of the sexes in school is necessarily to be settled in connection with this teaching, and no doubt in different ways at different points along the route and according to the material presented. The regular force of teachers should be able to handle the instruction with less reserve or embarrassment, and they should get nearer to the pupils than special teachers. This can be easily managed along with sex segregation as far down in the system as departmental teaching goes. For children below the grammar grade segregation should hardly be necessary. The progress made in free and easy treatment of the subject will

determine largely how far coeducation can be carried. The further it can be followed with due delicacy the better will be the voice of those who approve coeducation as a general principle. If *none* of the topics suggested above can be treated by either men or women teachers before a mixed class of high school pupils, there has been a serious defect down the line somewhere.

An Objection from Abroad. Those who are alarmed at the possible effect of "Europeanizing" our educational treatment of the sex relation have overlooked the fundamental distinction between making the idea of sex too *common* and stimulating a *natural* attitude toward it as opposed to the present unnatural attitude. And even if it be admitted for the sake of argument that sex knowledge is imparted at a much earlier age abroad than it is here, and that it is made exceedingly common, it is a hasty sort of logic which paints existing or supposed conditions in foreign lands as a result of this knowledge. When we consider the greater density of population and stress of economic conditions abroad (factors which practically always are promotive of crime and vice), the historic inferiority of woman's position and vise-like grip of old national ideas, the dissimilarity and advantage of the New World are unmistakable. But, admitting also the validity of the conclusion that present conditions are wholly the outcome of different attitudes toward sex on the two continents, the argument of danger still fails; for the moment we consult comparative statistics of crimes against persons, sexual or otherwise, statistics of venereal disease, prostitution, divorce and intemperance, the conclusions come inevitably that somehow we have failed to realize our national advantages. The day is past when in a moral sense we may hold up the Old World as a "horrible example."