

The school house and the home

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In 1935, philosopher and social critic Bertrand Russell debated journalist and author G.K. Chesterton on the matter of “Who should bring up our children?” Broadcast over the BBC, Russell said parents by nature are unfit to raise their children, with Chesterton countering that parents are naturally positioned to bring up children who, of course, don’t raise themselves.¹

The debate terms may have changed somewhat, yet eighty years later the tension between the school house and parents is still simmering.

For as much as the recent debate around the Ontario sexuality education curriculum has been about the age appropriateness of certain topics, the debate has exposed an underlying tension about the role of the school in matters that are personal to many and seem peripheral to the education system to some.

For many parents, this curriculum is a wake-up call to the fact that there is a lot being covered at school that steps into what previously would have been exclusively parental territory. Teachers are being asked today to do a lot more than teach subjects. They are moral educators, disciplinarians, the social conscience, and relationship arbitrators. It is, if the current controversy tells us anything, too much, both for teachers and for parents.

Even the “uncontroversial” (read non sexual) components of the new curriculum broach this tension.

The school as parent

Consider the less controversial aspect of the curriculum that addresses competition and score keeping among fourth graders. A teacher prompt states, “Some people like keeping score in activities. In class we usually don’t. Why not?”² Some parents will value the focus

¹ G. K. Chesterton, G.K. and Russell, B. (1989). *Who Should Bring up Our Children? A Chesterton-Russell Debate*. *The Chesterton Review* XV 4: 441-451.

² Ontario Ministry of Education (2015). *The Ontario curriculum grades 1 -8 – Health and physical education*. p. 132. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health.html>

on skill development and building self-esteem, while others will be quick to criticize an atmosphere that prevents children from learning from both winning and losing.

A teacher prompt for grade three is more direct, “Why is play fighting not a good idea?”³ It’s a fine rule at school that some parents may hold to at home, but in other homes children bond with a parent while play wrestling and keep score while doing it.

Other matters in the curriculum are more substantive. A significant thrust of the curriculum for the older grades is a focus on the development of a child’s self-concept – how they see themselves and understand who they are.⁴ The curriculum directs educators to take an active role in guiding this process. Undoubtedly many influences shape how children understand themselves, as the curriculum acknowledges. Over time many parental responsibilities have been shared with the school or deferred altogether. Yet other parents will question the leading role of the school in directing their children through this process.

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Acknowledging a diverse group of parents

When it comes to sensitive subjects like human sexuality, the tension over responsibility between the school house and home can boil over. Parents have been vocal about their concerns regarding the age appropriateness of various areas including gender identity addressed in third grade, masturbation in sixth grade and oral and anal sex in grades seven and eight.

Those concerned are not merely religiously motivated and “out to lunch” as one journalist suggested. A February 28th Forum Research poll suggests that the age at which sexuality education begins may be a problem for voters.⁵ It also suggests that 44 percent of parents disapproved of the new curriculum.⁶

A *Globe and Mail* article interviewed three parents with apprehensions about the curriculum and found that their reasons for concern were as varied as the children they parent. One mother told the *Globe* that she likes the curriculum but that for her daughter who has an

³ Ministry of Education (2015). The Ontario curriculum, p. 124.

⁴ Ministry of Education (2015). The Ontario curriculum, p. 236.

⁵ Forum Research Inc. (2015, Feb. 28). One half approve of sex ed curriculum; one third do not [Press release]. p.2. Retrieved from [http://poll.forumresearch.com/data/ON%20Sex%20Ed%20News%20Release%20\(2015%2002%2028\)%20Forum%20Research.pdf](http://poll.forumresearch.com/data/ON%20Sex%20Ed%20News%20Release%20(2015%2002%2028)%20Forum%20Research.pdf)

⁶ Forum Research Inc. (2015, Feb. 28). One half approve, p. 1.

auditory processing disorder and presents younger than her age, "it's just too much, too soon."⁷

The *National Post* published an article examining the influence of ethnic-cultural values and globalization on the instruction of sexual education around the world. In the view of the author professor Jonathan Zimmerman of New York University, "Schools are central for deliberating the values we wish to transmit to our young. But on the subject of sex, we disagree too fundamentally to arrive at anything like a consensus about what adolescents should learn, know and become."⁸

Sexuality education has been in schools for decades and the debate is not about the presence of sexual health lessons in the classroom. The debate is about the timing, nature and content of the curriculum and the role parents should have in contributing to the discussion and the final document.

Attachment comes first

While the Ministry of Education sets the curriculum agenda, it will be the classroom teacher that will be responsible for delivering the curriculum to a diverse body of students. For as healthy a learning environment as teachers can create, the system is not set up for long-term attachments and relationships where important issues such as self-concept are chiefly formed.

A Toronto District School Board survey found that 46 percent of grade nine to twelve students reported that, "they haven't met any adults in their school who they feel comfortable asking for advice, help or personal support."⁹ Is this the atmosphere where core questions about self are best answered?



Research suggests that home environment is critically important to child development and correlated to the later decision making about things like sexual behaviour. Parents can support their children in communicating accurate information but also in striving to create a warm and supportive atmosphere where there is open communication, clear guidelines and appropriate supervision.¹⁰

⁷ Cuneo Keenan, R. (2015, Mar. 6). Hesitant parents explain their unease with revamped sex ed curriculum. *Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/parenting/hesitant-parents-explain-their-unease-with-revamped-sex-ed-curriculum/article23312617/>

⁸ Zimmerman, J. (2015, Mar. 9). The more the world has become interconnected, the more sex ed has come under attack. *National Post*. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/2015/03/09/jonathan-zimmerman-the-more-the-world-has-become-interconnected-the-more-sex-ed-has-come-under-attack/>

⁹ Hammer, K. (2013, Feb. 12). Teenagers are anxious, and parents help them with homework; survey. *Globe and Mail*.

¹⁰ DeVore, E.R., Ginsburg, K.R. (2005, August). The protective effects of good parenting on adolescents. *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*, 17(4).

Chesterton argued, "Parents are imperfect: fathers are imperfect; mothers are imperfect. Are we asked to believe doctors are perfect, schoolmasters are perfect, inspectors of nursery schools are perfect?"¹¹ There is a role for school based sexuality education –and it should be done well - but the school house cannot replicate the home, where parents are the primary sexuality educators. When the topic of how to teach children about sexuality is brought up in any public environment, there are bound to be clashes—which is precisely what is happening in Ontario right now.

Peter Jon Mitchell is the author of [Making sex education work: Tips for Ontario and other provinces revising their curricula - and tips for parents](#)

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¹¹ G.K. Chesterton as quoted in G. K. Chesterton, G.K. and Russell, B. (1989). *Who Should Bring up Our Children? A Chesterton-Russell Debate. The Chesterton Review* XV 4: 441-451