

# The Cold War and the Sexual Chill

## Freezing Girls Out of Sex Education

by *Christabelle Sethna*

*L'auteure examine l'évolution de l'éducation sexuelle d'après-guerre dans des écoles d'Ontario en mettant en relief son impact sur la vie et les rôles des jeunes femmes de cette région.*

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Many Ontario educators saw in advent of the Second World War the potential to

advance the whole child-centred approaches to schooling inspired by John Dewey's writings on education for democracy. Yet such American-styled progressive ideas, which had made a popular resurgence in the curricular reforms initiated by the Ontario Department of Education in the 1930s, were steadily jettisoned over the course of the war. Contrary to the claims of critics, by 1950 educational progressivism had been overtaken by educational formalism. Canadian historians are united in claiming that the shift to a pedagogy based on the three R's spelled the end of progressivists' dream of student-teacher cooperation, activity-oriented projects, and multidisciplinary themes (Stamp; Tomkins; Sutherland).

These same historians have failed to perceive, however, that sex education in schools was one of the more concrete casualties of the traditionalists' march toward formalism in teaching the learning after 1945. Whereas sex education was touted during wartime as vital to victory, in the atmosphere of the Cold War quest for national security, it came to be portrayed as a curricular frill incompatible with pedagogical and sexual conservatism. The chill cast on delivering school-based sex instruction to

students would be borne by secondary school girls in particular.

The wartime enthusiasm of many Ontario educators for school-based sex instruction occurred in concert with a joint rise in venereal disease and juvenile delinquency. Over the course of the war, the female juvenile delinquent came to be seen as synonymous with the amateur prostitute who infected soldiers and civilians thereby compromising allied war aims at home and abroad. As rates of venereal infection skyrocketed in the military and civilian populations at the same time that mothers employed in war industries were repeatedly blamed for their daughters' sexual licentiousness, a tremendous groundswell of support arose for school-based sex instruction. Although educational officials acknowledged that sex education in schools was a controversial matter, they generally agreed that it could become a key component of the school's role in preserving democracy for Canadians. Faced with the twin perils of venereal disease and juvenile delinquency and fired by wartime patriotism, educators relied upon the Deweyist belief in educating the whole child to justify their support for school-based sex instruction (Sethna 1998).

Some school boards in the province either introduced or flirted with introducing some form of social hygiene education to students in high schools. But it was not until 1944, when the panic regarding the spread of venereal disease in teens of both sexes led the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation to endorse unanimously compulsory venereal disease testing for all high school students, that the provincial Department of Education took action ("Teachers Urge All Students be V.D. Tested"). In an attempt to quell the hysteria, the Department of Education, in league with the Ontario De-

partment of Health, revised its curriculum guidelines in 1944 to include the study of venereal disease. The Department of Education slated the topic for Grades 10 and 12 to give students who did not continue their education after Grade 10 the opportunity to acquire some knowledge of the contagion (Ontario Department of Education 1944). No doubt because knowledge of the contagion could also provide students with information about premarital sexual intercourse, the Department of Education ringed the subject with careful stipulations. Venereal disease was to be studied alongside other communicable diseases. Individual public schools could choose whether or not to include the subject in the curriculum. Parental permission was required. And girls and boys were to be instructed separately (Brown).

Toward the end of the war, the discovery of penicillin's effectiveness against syphilis and gonorrhoea engendered even more consternation over the possibility that a medical cure would give way to a jump in juvenile delinquency and, therefore, to greater increases in venereal disease

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in teens. But due in part to the military campaign to distribute condoms and prophylactic kits to men in the armed forces, the end of the war did not bring about the predicted rise in venereal infection. Rates of syphilis and gonorrhoea in Ontario actually fell after 1945. Yet demands for the introduction of some form of sex instruction into secondary and elemen-

tary schools increased (Lichstein).

As the menace of venereal disease ebbed, only to be replaced by the threat of sex delinquency—broadly defined as any form of criminal and non-criminal non-marital sexual activity—Ontario educators began to clamour for the introduction of family life education into schools. Family life education had originally been popularized in the late 1920s as a possible vehicle for sex education in schools. Unlike social hygienists, who had traditionally concentrated their energies on fighting prostitution and venereal disease, family life education theorists focused their attention on channeling children's sexual energies toward eventual marriage and parenthood. Because its goal was to produce stable nuclear families modelled after white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon heterosexual norms, family life education was initially considered a boon to national security (Gleason). For as the dread of Soviet expansionism abroad was accompanied by the threat of Communist subversion at home, the containment of sexual energies within stable nuclear families was perceived as the key to the containment of Communist ideologies (May).

Trustees at the Toronto Board of Education had considered introducing social hygiene teaching into schools during the war. But now galvanized by the prospect of sex delinquency, the Board struck a Teachers' Committee to develop a curriculum on family life education for Grade 7 and 8. The Committee sought to combat sex delinquency by nurturing sexually chaste, heterosexual relationships amongst boys and girls. Such relationships had far-reaching implications. In the contemporaneous psychological discourse they were considered crucial to weaning boys and girls from the adolescent stage of homosexual attraction. So central was this weaning process to "normal" psychological maturity as expressed in sexual chastity, marriage, and child-rearing that girls and boys who engaged in sexual relations prior to marriage were stigmatized as psycho-

logically abnormal (Adams, M.). Homosexuality was further constructed as a political and criminal danger to the state. Gays and lesbians in the Canadian civil service were targeted as national security risks because they were considered easy targets of Communist blackmailers. And male homosexuals, under a new legal and psychiatric rubric designed to identify criminal sexual psychopaths, were designated as violent child molesters and murderers (Kinsman; D'Emilio).

The Teachers' Committee held that sex delinquency could be nipped in the bud if students in coeducational classes were given accurate facts on sexual physiology provided in films, charts, and question and answer sessions in addition to sound moral values about sex. Thus, the Teachers' Committee produced a Family Life Education curriculum which couched information on menstruation, seminal emissions, sexual intercourse, conception, gestation, and childbirth within a framework promoting the importance of opposite-sex attraction, sexual chastity, marriage, and parenthood. Parental opposition was feared. But *teachers* objected to the curriculum because they believed it was long on sexual physiology and short on sexual morality. They argued that the imbalance would give students the smarts to avoid the consequences, such as an unwanted pregnancy, of sex delinquency. Family life education was now seen as contributing to the very national insecurity it was meant to eliminate. Due to the protests of a number of teachers and trustees, nearly all of the physiological information in the curriculum was excised in 1949 and even the modified curriculum was quickly shelved (Sethna 1995; Adams, M.).

The Department of Education soon followed suit. In 1950, the same year in which the staunch educational conservative William Dunlop was appointed Minister of Education, the Department eliminated the study of venereal disease from the newly revised secondary school health education curriculum guidelines. Al-

though never mandatory, the study of venereal disease had offered students in Grades 10 and 12 an avenue for dealing legitimately with a considerable amount of sexual physiology at the classroom level. The foreclosure of this opportunity dealt girls a particularly harsh blow. The gap left by the elimination of the study of venereal disease was papered over by the stress the 1950 health education curriculum guidelines placed on rating, dating, and mating. The boys' health education section also dealt with the importance of good grooming, participating in coeducational activities and of maintaining sexually chaste relationships with friends of both sexes. But unlike boys, girls were given a surfeit of information on achieving an acceptable level of physical attractiveness and a high standard of personal popularity as a prelude to marriage and motherhood (Ontario Department of Education 1950).

In effect, the postwar health education curriculum guidelines had merely expanded upon the wartime trend toward investing high school health education for girls, more so than health education for boys, with information on developing the skills required to take on the role of dates, wives, and mothers. The same wartime health education curricula guidelines which had allowed the study of venereal disease had also placed greater emphasis on providing girls rather than boys with a curriculum geared toward the necessity of "being attractive," "entertaining" the opposite sex, and "love" (Ontario Department of Education 1944, 34). Yet, whereas these wartime curriculum guidelines were limited mainly to girls in Grade 11, postwar guidelines stressed the importance of white, middle-class notions of gender-role conformity and compulsory heterosexuality for girls in Grades 9 through 12.

The Department of Education justified the disparity between the health education curricula for high school boys and girls by citing recent American studies. These apparently confirmed that personality and appearance were of greatest interest to girls

from Grades 7 to 10 (Ontario Department of Education 1950). But a more appropriate explanation for this disparity—as well as for girls' possible interest—centred about the role heterosexual courtship had come to play in the primarily white, middle-class, North American teenage culture which developed after 1945. Prior to the early 1940s, courtship amongst white middle-class boys and girls became a keenly competitive system which equated success with the number of different individuals one dated. After 1945, in keeping with the Cold War quest for national security, girls and boys began dating one individual exclusively and began doing so at younger ages (Bailey). Not all couples "going steady" stayed together. But because many "steadies" did tie the knot—a practice which led to a considerable drop in age of first marriage during the '50s—parents often actively discouraged interethnic teen romances (Torgov).

Marriage and fatherhood for boys were considered indicators of normal psycho-social adjustment in the '50s. Nevertheless, boys were not expected to restrict their options for personal and professional fulfillment to the role of husband and father. By contrast, girls were under special pressure to be attractive and popular enough to win and keep a "steady" because they were expected to seek their happiness in marriage and motherhood. Irrespective of their career aspirations, it was as wives and mothers that women ensnared in the feminine mystique of the age were accorded "the full stamp of cultural approval" (Seeley, Sim, and Loosley 106). Not surprisingly then, the 1950 health education curriculum guidelines furnished girls in the younger grades with information on enhancing and improving their posture, developing poise, and understanding the interests of the opposite sex. The older girls were treated to units on getting along with boys and looking forward to marriage. The entire Grade 12 section for girls was devoted to child study.

Not every high school girl was

capable, of course, of negotiating smoothly the transition from gawky adolescent to alluring date to happy wife and devoted mother. Few girls, particularly those of colour and those from the working classes, would have been able to emulate the blond-haired, blue-eyed, high-breasted, white, middle-class glamour epitomized by Hollywood starlets such as Doris Day (Breines). And even fewer girls would have succeeded at making the transition the curriculum guidelines appeared to promise with the paltry amount of information on sexual physiology it actually delivered. This contradiction placed girls in a serious biological and sexual double bind.

Since 1900, a higher standard of living, particularly amongst the middle classes, has led to an "ovulatory revolution" (Brumberg 6). By mid-century girls began menstruating earlier than ever before, some at the age of eleven. As most girls now reached menarche between eleven and fourteen years of age, educational guidebooks for teachers routinely recommended teaching girls about menstruation in their pre-adolescent years. Girls were intensely curious about menstruation, peppering teachers with questions such as "Can you go swimming while menstruating?" "Is tampon any good?" "Is it possible when you are menstruating to have intercourse and not to have a baby?" But whereas the ill-fated Family Life Education curriculum developed by the Teachers' Committee at the Toronto Board of Education had recommended the coeducational study of menstruation in Grade 7, the Department's health education curriculum guidelines restricted the topic to girls alone in Grade 9. This unfortunate decision not only perpetuated the traditional embarrassment over discussing menstruation in mixed company. It also introduced girls to the study of their menstrual periods after the majority would have reached the age of menarche (Sethna 1995).

The fact that girls were menstruating and "going steady" at younger ages put them at a major reproductive risk. Because girls matured physically

any where from one to three years earlier than boys did, girls were expected, even encouraged, to date older boys (Schacter, Jenkins, and Bauer). But regardless of the age—and power—differential between the steadies, girls were routinely assigned the task of sexual gatekeeping because they were considered sexually passive. Even though it was generally acknowledged that some aggressive boys nicknamed "wolves" tried to take sexual advantage of their dates, a girl was expected to consent only to sexual activities which preserved her virginity. Based upon a double standard, the taboo against premarital sex was enforced by the fear of unwanted pregnancy and the concomitant threat of social ostracism. So strong was this taboo that women who violated it with "steadies" they would later marry remained racked with guilt. And men who did not think that premarital sex was morally wrong still said they wanted to marry virgins (May).

The possibility that a girl could be coerced into or could desire sexual intercourse was considered negligible if she were disciplined enough to establish and maintain a strict code of conduct. Girls were not to park in automobiles, accept gifts, let their dates' hands wander, drink alcohol or kiss too many boys goodnight. A girl would permit prolonged necking and petting only if she were dating her prospective husband. Boys' duty extended only to helping a girl stick to her code of conduct. The implications were obvious. The girl who could not or would not keep her date from going all the way was held to account and labelled a psychologically maladjusted sex delinquent (Adams, C.). Because of the strong proscriptions against the loss of female virginity, it was understandable that high school girls and boys associated love with girls who didn't have sex and sex with girls who did in ways which paralleled the rigid racial divisions of the 1950s: love was the "something pink up there" while sex was the "something black down there that went with it" (McCracken 93).

Although the dearth of sexual

knowledge provided by the Department of Education could not have helped dispel the notion that sex was a "dirty thing" (McCracken) boys fared somewhat better than did girls in the postwar health education curriculum guidelines. Grade 12 boys had the chance to view a fairly detailed animated film, "Human Growth," which had been recommended by the Teachers' Committee for the Grade 8 level. The vast majority of Grade 12 boys would have undergone already the physiological changes with which the film dealt. But the film would not only have given boys information on male secondary sex characteristics, nocturnal emissions, fertilization, gestation, and birth but also a knowledge about puberty in girls. Notably, "Human Growth" was not included in the girls' Health section, perpetuating the lack of accessible information on male and female physiology for girls well into the 1960s (Sethna 1995).

Given the shutdown on sex education in schools, curious girls turned to sympathetic teachers who took it upon themselves to provide girl pupils with information about reproduction and even contraception (Seeley, Sim, and Loosley; Prentice). But these sporadic and usually surreptitious attempts at sex education continued to be frowned upon by the Department. Dunlop, the arch defender of the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic, did not sway from his belief that sex education was a curricular frill. Even after his retirement in 1959, sex education received little or no support from provincial government officials. S.D. Rendall, the Department's Superintendent of Secondary Education, issued a memo in 1960 which stated that no subject in physical and health education include sex education and which urged teachers to exercise caution around any topic "which may be construed erroneously as sex education" (Canadian Education Association 6).

Ontario was not unique. A survey on sex education conducted in 1964 of Canadian public and separate schools in Grade 1 through 13 re-

vealed that although the majority of school boards were willing to take on the job of sex instruction, sex education programs across the country were spotty or non-existent (Canadian Education Association 4-5). Not one provincial department of education and not one of the boards of education surveyed reported having a separate sex education course on the curriculum. Various topics related to sex instruction were, however, included in regular subjects such as health education, science, social studies, home economics, family living, and guidance. The various topics related to sex instruction ranged from considerations in choosing a mate to understanding where babies come from to the roles and responsibilities of parents. The topic most often presented to girls in Grades 7 through 13 was familiar: dating manners. Yet some overall progress was apparent. In the survey the subject of pubertal changes in girls was dealt with as often as the topic of dating manners (Canadian Education Association).

In the mid-1960s, supporters of a newly invigorated progressivism demanded that far more progress was going to be required. Progressives repeatedly cited the continued inadequacy of timely and accessible information on sexual physiology for students during a period of sexual ferment as a key reason for increases in the rates of single pregnancy and venereal disease amongst teens (Guest). Yet despite the successive appointments of progressive-minded Ministers of Education John Robarts and William Davis, the Department accomplished little of concrete value on sex instruction until the late 1960s.

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## AIDA FARRAG GRAFF

### Mirage

Cleopatra's serpent set her free.  
But you my dear, ensnared me  
In the coils of your glistening smiles.  
I never sensed the venom,  
Never tasted the bitterness of your honeyed words—  
Pearls of wit and wisdom!  
Never shuddered from your tight embrace,  
Believing it was the breathlessness of love.  
Never saw through the mirror of your soul,  
Thinking you were  
What you appeared to be.

And now abandoned and alone,  
I writhe, seeing roads not taken.

*Aida Farrag Graff's poetry appears earlier in this issue.*

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