

Introduction

THE CENTURY OF SCHOOL, AND THE CENTURY OF SEX

In 1900, the Swedish schoolteacher and author Ellen Key published a best-selling book with an auspicious title: *The Century of the Child*. Translated into several languages, Key's book, and its title, would become rallying cries for reform-minded critics, scholars, and educators around the world. Children were the hope of the future, Key wrote, but everywhere they were enchained by adults' rigid rules and stern rebukes. Here she took special aim at the West's signature child-rearing institution, the public school, which prescribed irrelevant "doses of knowledge" and pretended to measure the same with terrifying tests and examinations. But children learned best on their own and with their own parents, who had surrendered too much influence and authority to schools. Whereas gymnastics and art were formerly taught at home, for example, children increasingly learned them in the classroom. In the twentieth century, Key hoped, children would be "emancipated" from the sterile curricula and harsh pedagogy of the school. And parents would regain rightful control over the child, who could best develop "individuality"—including conscience, judgment, and free will—at home.¹

In many ways, however, the world was moving in the opposite direction. The ensuing century witnessed a dramatic explosion of state-run schools, which became ubiquitous across the West and—eventually—around the globe. Between 1950 and 1970, the percentage of children who attended primary school rose from 58 to 83 percent; by 1985, 90 percent of the world's children had spent at least some part of their lives at school. Secondary schools increased at an even faster rate, roughly tripling in number and size over the same span.² Official policies and curricula proclaimed that these institutions

would cultivate the freedom and agency of each individual, much as Ellen Key had wished. In practice, though, they frequently diverged from her ideal. In the developed world, child-centered classrooms were often distributed by social class: wealthier children received personalized attention and instruction, while poorer ones were more likely to experience the lockstep lessons and dry drills that Key detested. So did the vast majority of students in the so-called Third World, where skyrocketing class sizes and dwindling resources made “individuated instruction” impossible. How could a teacher with fifty or a hundred students—and without much formal preparation herself—do anything *other* than force-feed selected facts, which the children would dutifully regurgitate on their end-of-year exams? The twentieth century would not be the Century of the Child, at least not in the manner that Ellen Key had hoped. It was, instead, the Century of the School.

It was also the Century of Sex, which Key more presciently forecasted. “People have commenced already to experiment with unions outside marriage,” she wrote. “The whole problem is being made the subject of debate.” An avowed enemy of Christianity, particularly in its denigration of bodily pleasures, Key looked forward to the day when more and more individuals could determine their own sexual destinies. And so they did. Especially in the second half of the century—and especially in the West—human beings would attain a level of sexual freedom beyond anything Ellen Key could envision. A new model of companionate marriage promised sexual pleasure for men and women alike, aided by birth control technologies that separated lovemaking from reproduction; homosexuals gained increased visibility and rights, including—most recently—the right to get married; and formerly tabooed sexual themes became commonplace in literature and mass media, as censorship laws and regulations fell away. Many of these trends occurred earlier—and more forcefully—in the developed than in the developing world, where older traditions and restrictions held sway. Nor was it clear that the “liberalization” of sexual mores was always liberating; for women, especially, the heightened public discourse around sex could feel more like a new set of expectations than a new license for freedom. Surely,

though, a greater number of people experienced a greater degree of sexual autonomy than ever before.³

But how would they learn to exercise that freedom? The modern answer was sex education, where the Century of the School met the Century of Sex. Starting in Europe and the United States, and then spreading around the globe, nation-states looked to their burgeoning educational systems to describe, explain, and especially control sex. But the marriage between school and sex proved to be both stormy and delicate, spawning heated controversy outside of the schools and surprisingly little instruction inside of them. Part of the reason lay in deep popular unease and disagreement about childhood sexuality; whereas advocates saw sex education as a check upon youth sexual activity, critics worried that it would corrupt otherwise innocent minds. Another factor was the organizational structure of the schools, which were never the bloodlessly efficient behemoths that Ellen Key imagined; even in highly oppressive and totalitarian societies, nervous principals or shy teachers could evade national sex education directives if they wished. Most of all, many people around the world continued to insist that the family—not the classroom—was the proper locus of sexual instruction. Even Ellen Key, an early tribune of sexual liberation, balked at the first attempts to teach about sex in schools. “I objected at that time to this plan, showing that the school was not the place for such knowledge,” she wrote in 1900. “It should be slowly and carefully communicated by the mother herself.”⁴ Across the globe, just as Key feared, the state-sponsored school would come to dominate nearly every aspect of children’s lives. But it rarely—and then only gingerly—touched on sex, which proved too divisive and unstable for schools to accommodate. In the Century of the School, and the Century of Sex, the school struggled to master sex. And, for the most part, the school failed.

To be sure, sex education varied across space and time. In the early twentieth century, when strong taboos on public sexual discussion remained in place, sex education mostly assumed the form of plant and animal analogies; by studying roses or rabbits, the argument went, children could learn about human reproduction without prematurely igniting their interest in practicing the sexual act. After

World War II, as the United States assumed new power and prominence on the global stage, Americans refashioned sex education as “family life education”; emphasizing gender roles and proper child rearing, it made sexual continence a key to world peace as well as to national survival. In Europe, meanwhile, Swedes took the lead in promoting new curricula aimed at liberating individuals to discover and develop their own sexual selves, much as Ellen Key had wanted (but via her *bête noire*, the state-sponsored school). International aid and educational associations took up that ideal in the 1960s and 1970s, which in turn triggered a right-wing reaction in the United States, Great Britain, and other parts of the West. These conservatives would join hands with like-minded critics in the developing world in the 1980s and 1990s, when the HIV/AIDS crisis lent a renewed global urgency to sex education. But the terms of the battle remained much the same, even as the battlefield changed. Around the world, liberal educators sought to empower individuals to assert their sexual “rights”—including the right to sexual pleasure—while conservatives emphasized abstinence outside marriage. One side stressed “the right of young human beings to have sexual feelings,” as a Dutch educator wrote in 2000, while the other urged the young “to say NO to sex.”⁵

Yet even countries that officially embraced “liberal” sexual philosophies often struggled to provide much real sexual *instruction* in their schools. Consider Ellen Key’s homeland of Sweden, the first nation to require sex education and a symbol of sexual freedom (or, depending on one’s perspective, sexual excess) around the world. In 1969, more than a decade after the subject became compulsory, one-third of Swedish students had still not encountered it in school. Moreover, half of Swedish teachers admitted that they avoided or ignored sex education in their classrooms. Many teachers confessed to being “embarrassed” by the subject, while others complained that they lacked sufficient education in it themselves; as late as 2006, more than 90 percent of teachers reported receiving “little or no preparation” for delivering sex education. But the limited instruction in Swedish schools dwarfed most other countries, where the subject resembled the small town of American cliché: blink twice and you might miss it. In Hong Kong, the average high school student re-

ceived two hours of sex education per year in 2001; students in France averaged exactly the same amount, belying their country's libertine image; in Chile, half of students received sex education no more than twice per year; and so on. In the United States, where local authorities mostly controlled education, the average school provided 6.5 hours per year of sex education in 1989; in the United Kingdom, which was similarly decentralized, half of local districts did not bother to record what—if anything—their schools were teaching about it. Significantly, however, even countries with highly nationalized education systems often ceded *sex* education to local officials and teachers. In most of the world, “every course other than sex education is centrally programmed,” a 1976 international survey concluded. “Only in the area of sex education is the initiative and responsibility left to individuals.”⁶

Indeed, only in the area of sex education would modern school systems fail so dramatically—and so universally—to impose themselves *upon* individuals. It was not for want of trying. By the 1970s, nearly every country in the Western world had instituted some form of sex education; most nations in the developing world would do the same during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, which made it impossible to ignore sex entirely in their schools. But from the dawn of the twentieth century into the present, and from one corner of the world to another, the reach of sex education radically exceeded its grasp. “The child growing up in the midst of civilization receives from its parents and teachers something of the accumulated experience of the world on all other subjects save upon that of sex,” the prominent American reformer Jane Addams complained in 1912. “On this one subject alone each generation learns little from its predecessors.” Similar jeremiads mark the reports and memoirs of sex education advocates from Addams's day into our own, when—as one African educator observed—children “learn complicated mathematics they will never use in their lifetimes” but “nothing about their sexual organs, which they will be using every day of their lives.” In the Century of the School, as Ellen Key feared, children's lives came to revolve around formal educational institutions. But in the Century of Sex, Key would be relieved to know, schools were never able to bring sex fully into their orbit. This book tries to explain why.⁷

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The first reason, unsurprisingly, was deep-rooted controversy and disquiet surrounding sex itself. Starting in the early twentieth century, adults around the world worried that youth sexual behavior was spinning out of control. But they disagreed sharply about how it should be brought back *into* control, and by whom. To its advocates, school-based sex education represented a “Prophylactic Coefficient against Sexuality,” as an Italian physician titled his 1914 plea for the subject; if young people were armed with proper information about sex, the argument went, they would resist its seductive perils. “The sex appetite is a powerful appetite,” a New Zealand advocate explained. “A powerful appetite needs control. It must be intelligent control. There cannot be intelligent control without knowledge.” The same theme marked imperial officials’ scattered attempts at school-based sex instruction in Africa and Asia, where a leading British educator worried that racy Western films and magazines were “inflicting a grave injury on the moral and ethical standards of the Eastern races.” The fears continued into the postcolonial period, as newly independent nations gradually established sex education programs to repel promiscuous winds from overseas. “The influence of western culture is increasingly pervading present-day society,” three Indian physicians warned in 1976, bemoaning “new sexual trends towards greater liberty and experimentation” and a corresponding rise of illegitimate births and illegal abortions in their country. School-based sex education would provide a “preventive measure” against these developments, they concluded, restoring the traditional continence of the subcontinent.⁸

From the very start, however, critics condemned sex education for fostering the same promiscuity it purported to control. For the half century before Sweden instituted nationwide sex education, parents blocked or limited the subject by arguing that it might “awaken the sleeping bear”—that is, encourage sexual activity. In Japan, opponents warned that sex education would “wake a sleeping child”; in Thailand, that it would “show nuts to the squirrel”; and in Vietnam, that it risked “showing the way to the deer.” Beneath these colorfully metaphoric objections lay fundamental disagreements not just about

sexuality but also about rationality, and—most of all—about whether the latter could reasonably affect the former. “Knowledge is the cry. Crude, undigested knowledge, without limit and without reserve,” wrote the American essayist Agnes Repplier in 1914, in a typical admonishment against sex education. “If knowledge alone could save us from sin, the salvation of the world would be easy work.” Six years later, a German critic noted that the most highly educated members of his society also exhibited the highest degree of “sexual indulgence” outside marriage. “Have we not been guilty of the Socratic fallacy that knowledge of the good is sufficient for the avoiding of evil?” he asked. “Reason, as such, does not suffice to check the sex impulse.” By the late twentieth century, when nearly every country had adopted some kind of sex-related instruction in schools, deep-rooted disputes about sex continued to hamper the subject almost everywhere it appeared. “There’s an old saying that ‘there are only two things for certain in this world; death and taxes,’” an American school board member wrote in 1986. “A third certainly might be added: disagreement about sex education.”⁹

Faced with these inevitable objections, educators often tried to disguise sex education with different names—or with no name at all. In the 1920s, Denmark taught about sex under labels such as Mothercraft, Baby Nursing, and Moral Education; Germany included sex in lessons on Marriage and Motherhood, Human Development, or Social Hygiene; and Norway changed the last term to “*slekts hygiene*,” borrowing the Norwegian term for “family.” “This change in nomenclature has been useful inasmuch as it does away with the reaction common in so many people, especially the less enlightened and the prudish, against the ‘vulgar’ and sensational feeling associated with the word sex,” a local physician explained. The word “family” also featured heavily in postwar formulations, starting in the United States; although “a rose by any other name” was nevertheless a rose, as one American advocate quipped, a course called Family Life Education drew far less public attention and controversy than “Sex Education” did. The international drive for family planning in the 1960s and 1970s birthed Population Education, while the HIV epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s led many countries to reframe sex education as AIDS Education. But even the term “AIDS” was too

controversial for some countries, which adopted more anodyne titles like Life Skills or Adolescence Education. “So far, no clear consensus exists regarding a universally acceptable term,” a 2007 global study of sex education noted. “In some settings, use of the terms ‘sex’ or ‘sexuality’ in the title of a programme is simply too explicit for the comfort of parents, teachers, or politicians. And yet, terms such as ‘family life education,’ ‘life skills education’ or ‘population education’ may provide an opportunity to ignore discussion of sex altogether.”¹⁰

So did efforts to “integrate” sex into regular school subjects, as educators repeatedly discovered. According to a 1975 survey of seventeen European countries, only two taught sex education as a “separate” subject in the curriculum; the rest folded it into biology, civics, social studies, or religious instruction. Like the different names that educators devised for sex instruction, “integrating” the subject into others was a strategy to minimize public controversy; if sex education received “special and dramatic emphasis” in the school timetable, one American warned, it would be more likely to draw special—and derogatory—attention. In practice, however, curricular integration often allowed schools to neglect or ignore the topic. Countries that purportedly integrated it into the major subjects rarely included questions about sex in their national examinations of these subjects, so there was little incentive for schools or students to take sexual knowledge seriously. Most of all, spreading sex education across the curriculum also defused responsibility for it. Only ten of eighty Swedish schools in a 2001 survey had designated a staff member to oversee sex education, which still lacked any official space in the national timetable of subjects. “I wish the Government would have the balls to make it statutory and say, ‘Right, this has to be timetabled’ or get rid of it completely,” a British educator grouched in 2007. “It just doesn’t work, this half-way house.”¹¹

In the doorway of the house stood classroom teachers, the “foot soldiers on the sex education firing line,” as an American visitor to Sweden wrote in 1971. Yet even in that famously “sex-positive” country, many of these instructors found themselves trapped between *competing* lines of fire. “If you want your children to have sex education, I think this is very good. But other parents don’t. What should I do?” one Swedish teacher asked the following year. “They

come to me and say: why did you tell them—I don't want that—I told you you mustn't do it." Around the world, teachers had to tread a delicate path; more tightrope walkers than foot soldiers, they sought most of all to avoid controversy—and to keep their jobs. "In an ideal world parents would give their children sex education but it falls back on the poor old teachers who are caught between a rock and a hard place," one sympathetic English observer wrote in 2000. "Be fair and totally objective and the moralisers attack them, push a traditionalist 'family and marriage' line and the progressives pan them." Nor were teachers helped by the large amount of discretion that most school systems granted them on sex education; to the contrary, that very "freedom" exposed them to even more potential discord. "In the absence of clarity," an Irish educator explained, "teachers ... adopted a conservative approach and said, 'Well, I'm not sticking my neck out here in case, you know, I say something wrong.'"¹²

The dangers were greatest of all in the developing world, where sex education threatened to erode teachers' tenuous authority inside of classrooms as well as outside of them. As school attendance escalated in the second half of the century, young nations were often forced to hire teachers with little more schooling or preparation than the students in their charge. Some of these students were almost as old the teachers, which added another obvious challenge. Finally, these same years witnessed the mass arrival of female students into schools around the world. So classrooms were also transformed into "amorous" spaces that spawned "early sexual contacts" outside of parental control, as one observer in Ghana wrote in 1976. Some of these new relationships were between students; others paired students and teachers, who sometimes traded sex for school fees, grades, or cash. In such a highly sexualized space, any mention of the subject risked putting teachers' already fragile control on even weaker ground. Male students hissed, giggled, or grunted through sex education lessons; girls stayed quiet or even stayed at home, to avoid embarrassment; and teachers often received intrusive questions about their own sexuality, especially if they were female. To be sure, teachers around the world—and across the twentieth century—faced awkward insinuations whenever they broached the subject; women

instructors, especially, were seen as young hussies who were too interested in sex or as “old maids” who were not interested (or experienced) *enough*. But the problem was particularly acute for teachers in the Third World, who had to govern crowded classrooms even as they negotiated the perilous terrain of sex in a rapidly globalizing world.¹³

Indeed, the set of circumstances that scholars have called “globalization”—the compression of the world, and the intensification of our consciousness of it—have mostly served to curtail rather than to expand school-based sexual instruction. From its origins in Europe and the Americas into the present, sex education has remained a strongly international movement. For example, China’s first modern sex educator drew heavily on the work of British sexologist Havelock Ellis; in India, meanwhile, a popular American sex education textbook was translated into Marathi and illustrated with local drawings and photographs. But a Norwegian teacher who used the same textbook in his classroom in the early 1950s was fired for spreading “immoral” ideas from the United States; in France, likewise, Catholic critics condemned sex education as an unwelcome American import. Over the next half century, Scandinavia would come to replace the United States as the acknowledged world leader in the subject. No matter where it was taught, however, opponents continued to blast sex education as a “foreign” or alien intrusion upon local or national values. The more the world globalized, in short, the more that sex education came under attack.¹⁴

Nowhere was that more true than inside the United States, where western Europe—and, especially, Sweden—became a symbol of sex education gone awry. Around AD 1000, one American educator quipped, Scandinavian Leif Erikson discovered America; roughly a thousand years later, Americans “on the prowl for ammunition to use against sex education” discovered Sweden. “Most high school Swedes regard premarital sexual relations as natural and acceptable,” a conservative minister told a California school board in 1969. “It is your responsibility to recommend a course of action.... Will it be the plan of God or the failure of Sweden?” Hyperbole aside, the minister’s remark spoke to real and important differences between educational approaches in the United States and Sweden; one em-

phasized the perils of sex and the need for restraint, while the other prized individual discretion and pleasure. But such contrasts were often lost in the developing world and in post-Communist Eastern Europe, where sex education critics denounced the subject with a single, all-encompassing adjective—“Western.” In India, the secular left and religious right both blasted sex education as a “Western attack” upon “Indian cultural values”; Chinese critics dismissed it as “just another effort to mimic the Westerners”; and in Russia, opponents charged that a “world sexological-industrial complex” was foisting the subject on the rest of the globe. Some critics said that “Western pharmaceutical companies” and intelligence services were secretly promoting sex education among unwitting Russians; even more darkly, others suggested that a worldwide “Jewish conspiracy” lurked behind it.¹⁵

Yet these diverse and nationalistic critics united across national borders, posing a new and thoroughly globalized check upon the growth and development of sex education around the globe. After spearheading the movement for sex education in the first half of the twentieth century, the United States would also galvanize the more recent international campaign to remove or restrict it. The key shift occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the American “New Right” helped organize protests against the subject in several Western countries. “It’s up to us to set the standard that we want for our youngsters,” a New Zealand activist wrote in 1973, quoting several American and British conservatives. “Do you like the idea of New Zealand being the Sweden of the South Seas?” The effort did not become thoroughly global until the 1980s and 1990s, spurred not just by the spread of HIV/AIDS but also by the enormous transnational migration of human beings. By 2005, 190 million people had moved from one country to another; together they made up 3 percent of the world’s population, more than double their proportion three decades earlier. Even a formerly monochrome society like Sweden counted one million immigrants among its nine million people; in Holland, meanwhile, newcomers were so numerous that its largest city, Amsterdam, was expected to become majority-immigrant by 2015. Most of these migrants came from Muslim or Hindu societies in South Asia, the Middle East, or North Africa; not surprisingly,

they often objected to the more liberal messages taught about sex in European schools.¹⁶

By the end of the twentieth century, indeed, the battle over sex education had spawned new armies that cut across races, religions, ethnicities, and—most of all—across nations. In many places, opponents of sex education shared more with conservatives in another part of their country—or in another part of the world—than they did with the people who ran their own schools. One Lebanese journalist described the entire sex education dispute as an example of “Ideological Globalization,” pitting traditional and orthodox communities around the world against liberal-minded citizens and educators. In Western Europe, especially, sex education spawned new alliances—or “strange bedfellows,” as skeptical journalists quipped—between “the most reactionary believers of different faiths,” as a conservative American noted approvingly. “In the case of fundamental norms, we find more common grounds between Islam and Christianity,” a British Muslim leader added, in an attack on sex education, “but many Westerners are so distant from their religious roots that it often requires a Muslim to point out the meeting points between these two faiths.” As nativist sentiment soared across the continent, sparking electoral gains for right-wing political parties, sex education also provided a rare spot of consensus between Muslim immigrants and conservative whites. On most matters—including civil liberties, foreign policy, and immigration itself—these groups stood in stark opposition. But they joined hands on sex education, creating multi-racial coalitions to stalemate or roll back the subject.¹⁷

To sex educators, across the twentieth century and around the world, the key to improving sexual behavior was spreading knowledge about it; like any other social issue or dilemma, the problem of sex would be solved by more information, discussion, and understanding. “The world has probably never known any such universal consensus as the present belief in education,” wrote G. Stanley Hall, perhaps America’s best-known psychologist, in 1911. But when it came to sex, Hall added, “it would almost seem as if civilized man was afraid of knowledge, laid a heavy ban upon instruction and deliberately chose darkness rather than life.” That same year, but an ocean away, France’s most famous sociologist took a very different

tack on sex education. Debating a physician who demanded that schools teach the “facts of life” about sex, which religion had made into something frightening and “mysterious,” Émile Durkheim rejected the idea that sex could be anything *other* than religious—or mysterious. Even the “crudest and most primitive religions” regarded sex as a “grave, solemn, and deeply religious act,” Durkheim observed. Such ideas were not simply “superstitions” or “deceptions,” he cautioned; they instead reflected social reality, “some sentiment which men of all times have truly felt.” To Durkheim, sex could never be reduced to a matter of health, science, or even knowledge. This book is about the possibility that he was right.¹⁸