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## A FAMILY LIFE AND SEX EDUCATION NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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### Abstract

A change in counselling focus from psychotherapy to psychoeducation has left many counsellors illprepared to develop and evaluate programs designed to meet the specific needs of their clients. This article illustrates how these tasks may be facilitated by the use of needs assessment technology. Needs are defined as measurable discrepancies between ideal situations and actual situations. Those needs for which the school has been assigned significant responsibility are designated as curricular needs. The article reports on the findings of a family life and sex education needs assessment conducted in the Calgary public school system. The implications of the findings of this study are discussed but the reader is cautioned not to over-generalize to other settings.

### Résumé

En counselling, une bifurcation de la psychothérapie à la psychoéducation a laissé plusieurs conseillers mal préparés pour élaborer et évaluer des programmes destinés à satisfaire les besoins spécifiques de leur clientèle. Cet article illustre comment l'accomplissement de ces nouvelles tâches peut être facilité en recourant à la technologie de la mesure des besoins. Les besoins sont définis comme des écarts mesurables entre les situations idéales et actuelles. Les besoins curriculaires sont ceux pour lesquels l'école est investie d'une responsabilité réelle. Dans cet article, on trouve des données quant à la mesure des besoins d'éducation familiale et sexuelle. L'étude s'est faite dans le cadre du système scolaire public de Calgary. Les auteurs discutent les résultats de leur recherche et font une mise en garde quant à une généralisation trop hâtive à d'autres environnements.

Until recently, professional counselling in North America has been viewed as indistinguishable from psychotherapy. Quite logically, therefore, the training of counsellors was founded on the theories and methods of

psychotherapy. A clear and decisive shift in counselling emphasis from remediation to development and prevention, however, has produced a parallel shift in the focus of counsellor education from psychotherapy to psychoeducation. Accordingly, a "new generation" of professional counsellors now identify themselves as psychoeducators.

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Psychoeducation or "developmental

education" is based on the assumption that information or guidance provided in anticipation of the developmental problems that people "normally" encounter will enable them to cope more effectively with expectable but stressful events in their lives. Programs in family life and sex education provide good examples of the psychoeducational approach. Their over-all purpose is to help individuals accomplish age-related "developmental tasks". More specifically, they strive to promote normal development by providing the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for personally effective and socially responsible living in all life stages.

Counsellors who completed their training programs several years ago understandably may feel inadequate for their new role as psychoeducators. Indeed, those who have had no specific training in the planning, development, or evaluation of psychoeducational programs can expect to encounter a number of difficulties in these areas. This article deals with two program planning tasks which are likely to prove most troublesome:

1. the allocation or distribution of responsibility for various aspects of psychoeducation, and
2. the selection of relevant, useful, and appropriate "content" for psychoeducational packaging.

The approach to these planning tasks which we recommend is the "needs assessment".

In planning a needs assessment, we begin with the assumption that schools cannot and should not attempt to teach all there is to know. Limited school resources, cultural pluralism, and the electronically informed society demand that responsibility for the education of youth be shared with the whole community. In Alberta, the Junior-Senior High School Handbook (Note 1) officially declares that:

While the school makes a very important contribution to education, it is only one of the agencies involved in the education of youth. The home, the church, the media and community organizations are very significant influences on children. It is useful, therefore, to delimit the role of schooling in education (p. 3).

But, how should this delimitation of the

role of schooling in education be achieved? Surely, slicing the educational pie cannot be the exclusive privilege of professional educators. Students, parents, community groups, and social policy makers also must be involved. Indeed, the participation of all "stakeholder groups" becomes essential when the schools' curriculum begins to encroach upon areas of responsibility that traditionally have been the province of other institutions.

During periods of social transition, boundaries of responsibility become fuzzy and poorly defined. No school program better illustrates the conflicts and controversy that can emerge from these shifting responsibilities than does a family life and sex education program. To minimize this conflict and controversy in order to provide a consistent and supportive environment for our students, we must possess information that would enable us to differentiate and coordinate the respective roles of the home, school, church, and community. A properly conducted needs assessment can provide that information.

This article describes a needs assessment study designed to collect information regarding three major concerns of family life and sex education curriculum planners:

1. What content relevant to family living and sexual behavior do parents and students consider to be important?
2. Given that several topics in this area may be viewed as important, which topics merit priority?
3. Which of the high priority topics do parents and students regard as suitable for inclusion in a family life and sex education program offered by the school?

Before deciding to implement a family life and sex education program, we believe that a needs assessment should always be conducted. At minimum, parent and student involvement should be solicited in the identification of needs, selection of content, planning of learning activities, and evaluation of outcomes. It is generally wise to include other stakeholder groups as represented by the church and media as well.

There are two situations in which the school does not operate in the interests and desires of its community:

1. when it fails to achieve those goals which have been assigned to it, or

### *Family Life and Sex Education*

2. when it deploys its efforts toward the achievement of goals for which it has not been assigned responsibility.

Responsible schools (i.e., those willing and able to respond to the interests and desires of their communities) monitor their performance relative to both these conditions. In doing so, the needs assessment has become a popular tool for soliciting community input.

The most common definition of an educational need is that presented by Kaufman (1972), who proposes that needs be assessed in terms of measureable discrepancies between "what ought to be" and "what is". The first task in an educational needs assessment, therefore, is to identify "what ought to be" by polling various stakeholder groups within the community to determine what they consider to be important. The next step is to take some inventory or measurement of the present level of performance or "what is". A discrepancy between these two results defines a need.

Many educational needs assessments fail to recognize that schools cannot be held accountable for all "educational goals" and much less for everything that "ought to be". Hence, we find it useful to distinguish between the total spectrum of educational needs and the much smaller subset of needs which clearly fall within the school's domain. We shall refer to this subset of educational needs for which the school has been assigned primary and distinctive responsibility as "curricular needs". For example, parents and students may clearly acknowledge the importance of factual information about sex, but the presentation of this information will not be considered a curricular need unless it also is perceived as appropriate for inclusion in the schools' curriculum.

The assessment of curricular needs is largely a matter of performing the following tasks:

1. Identify "what ought to be" by polling various stakeholder groups to determine what they consider to be important.
2. Identify "what is" by taking some measure on present level of performance.
3. Determine the nature and amount of discrepancy between the desired goals and their present level of achievement (i.e., the educational needs).
4. Determine how various stakeholders within the community attribute responsibility for meeting these educational needs.

5. Identify curricular needs.
6. Establish action priorities.

These steps are schematically represented in the flow chart diagram presented in Figure 1. They are also illustrated in the following report on a family life and sex education needs assessment conducted at the senior high school level in Calgary, Alberta.

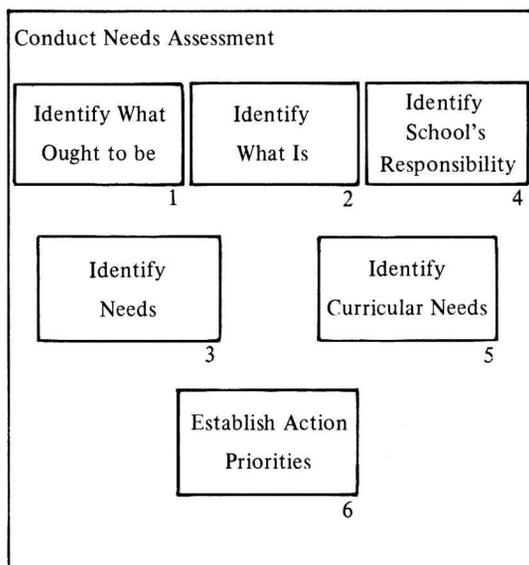


Figure 1.  
A systems model of the needs assessment process.

### *METHOD*

#### *Instrumentation*

Standardized instruments for conducting a family life and sex education needs assessment are not generally available. Moreover, carefully developed instruments tailored to the local scene often prove most useful. A self-administered questionnaire for collecting perceptual data relevant to family life and sex education therefore was designed specifically for this study (see Woods, 1981). This questionnaire consists of 36 items, three from each of 12 broad goal areas identified in the developmental and family life education literature. For each of these items, three separate questions were asked:

1. How important is this knowledge, attitude, or behavior?
2. To what degree does the student now possess this knowledge, attitude, or behavior?
3. To what degree is the school responsible for helping the student to acquire this knowledge, attitude, or behavior?

Subjects were asked to respond to these questions on a five-point Likertype scale, ranging from zero to four.

Due to the length and time required to respond to the complete instrument, the 36 items of the questionnaire were divided into three parallel forms, each containing one item from each of the 12 goal areas identified in the literature.

### Sampling

Division of the questionnaire into three parallel forms necessitated matrix sampling. In other words, each subject was asked to respond only to one form, i.e., to one third of the items. Information about all 36 items, nevertheless, was obtained by randomly assigning one of the three forms to each subject of the sample. At this point we caution the reader to note that this matrix sampling procedure reduces the effective sample to one third of its apparent size.

Names and addresses of all grade 10 and grade 12 students attending two representative high schools in Calgary were obtained. From this list a stratified random sample of 400 students and 400 parents was selected. Packages containing a questionnaire, a postage paid return envelope, and a letter to the parent and/

or student providing instructions and explaining the purpose of the study were mailed to each subject selected by the sampling procedure. Ten days after the initial mailing a follow-up post card was sent to each subject reminding him/her to complete and return the questionnaire.

A total of 161 student questionnaires were completed and returned representing a return rate of 40.3 percent. Girls accounted for 56.8% and boys 42.6% of the student respondents. A total of 106 parent questionnaires were completed and returned, representing a return rate of 26.5%. Mothers completed 66%, fathers 10.5%, and both parents conjointly 22.6% of the parent returns. Responses rates to the three forms of the questionnaire were not significantly different from expectation.

### RESULTS

The results of this study are presented in Table 1. The 36 items, expressed in behavioral terms, are arranged in order of perceived level of school responsibility. In other words, parents and students regard the school as having greatest responsibility for the first item listed, second greatest responsibility for the second item listed, and so on to least responsibility for the last item listed.

Table 1

Questionnaire Items with Coefficients of School Responsibility, Educational Need, Curricular Need, and Action Priority

Item	Schools' Responsibility	Educational Need	Curricular Need	Action Priority
1. Finds accurate information about the training requirements of careers he/she is interested in pursuing.	3.18	.70	2.23	1
2. Is aware of the chances of finding a job in the occupation of his/her choice.	2.69	.38	1.02	3
3. Is aware of the reasons for having most of the laws and rules we must live by.	2.65	.30	.80	4
4. Knows how venereal diseases can be prevented, their symptoms, consequences, and cure.	2.64	.79	2.09	2
5. Does things to keep in good physical condition.	2.38	.33	.79	10
6. Is aware of the lifestyle he/she can expect given the wages of his/her chosen occupation.	2.37	.44	1.04	6
7. Is aware of things that should be considered when making decisions about the use of birth control.	2.22	.63	1.40	5
8. Usually works well with age-mates	2.21	--	--	--

*Family Life and Sex Education*

Item	Schools' Responsibility	Educational Need	Curricular Need	Action Priority
9. Accepts consequences of decisions made without having to go to parents to fix things up.	2.12	.15	--	--
10. Thinks about the advantages and disadvantages of alternatives to marriage.	2.12	--	--	--
11. Is familiar with the dictionary terms related to sexual topics.	2.11	--	--	--
12. Is aware of the effect that other people have on his/her behavior.	2.06	.06	--	--
13. Is aware of his/her own values regarding sexual involvement.	1.97	.18	--	--
14. Is able to identify the expectations placed on him/her by others and to decide whether and how to respond to these.	1.94	.19	--	--
15. Is able to evaluate his/her own efforts without having to obtain approval of parents.	1.82	--	--	--
16. Organizes time in such a way that he/she can do those things which should be done as well as those things which are enjoyed.	1.80	.46	.83	9
17. Can identify what is most important to himself/herself when torn between one thing and another.	1.78	.47	.84	8
18. Is able to prepare well-balanced nutritional meals for himself/herself.	1.77	.37	.65	13
19. Is comfortable expressing his/her feelings to others.	1.77	.42	.74	11
20. Can negotiate a fair deal for himself/herself when others expect too much.	1.72	.20	--	--
21. Is willing to do things not enjoyed if it will help someone else	1.70	.20	--	--
22. Is able to deal with conflicts between himself/herself and others in an effective manner.	1.67	.43	.72	12
23. Can list reasons why many people act differently to members of the opposite sex than to people of their own.	1.63	--	--	--
24. Shows respect for the feelings of other family members.	1.60	.57	.91	7
25. Thinks about those duties he/she would willing to accept in marriage and those his/her spouse would have to assume.	1.60	.40	.64	14
26. Gains the respect of others for his/her opinions and ideas.	1.53	--	--	--
27. Is able to perform minor household repairs.	1.48	--	--	--
28. Is usually able to choose how he/she will react to his/her emotions.	1.43	.21	--	--
29. Is able to make the best of his/her appearance	1.34	--	--	--

Item	Schools' Responsibility	Educational Need	Curricular Need	Action Priority
30. Is satisfied with the number of friends he/she has.	1.31	--	--	--
31. Can accept persons who have sexual relations with members of their own sex.	1.31	.38	.50	Model
32. Is willing to spend time helping other members of his/her family.	1.29	.17	--	--
33. Is open and honest with parents.	1.27	.41	.52	Model
34. Considers what may be gained or lost by marrying someone who has similar background, values, and personal goals.	1.02	.34	--	--
35. Spends much free time away from home.	.98	.06	--	--
36. Is satisfied with his/her rate of physical growth.	.94	.24	--	--

A coefficient of school responsibility is also presented. This coefficient consists of the average of the mean rating of parents and the mean rating of students to the question "To what degree is the school responsible for helping the student to acquire this knowledge, attitude, or behavior?" The reader should bear in mind that ratings were made on a five-point scale ranging from zero to four. The average of mean ratings for parents and students provides a pooled rating which weights the opinions of parents and students equally despite their differential rate of response.

Educational need is operationally defined as the difference between a subject's rating on the question "How important is this knowledge, attitude, or behavior?" and his/her rating on the question "To what degree does the student now possess this knowledge, attitude, or behavior?" As ratings on both questions were made on a five-point scale, differences in ratings theoretically range from minus four to plus four. Negative ratings arise when the knowledge, attitude, or behavior is rated lower on the importance scale than on the existence scale.

The coefficients of educational need presented in Table 1 are the average of the mean result for parents and the mean result for students. Negative coefficients have been omitted from the table since they have little relevance for curriculum planning.

The curricular needs presented in Table 1 are simply the arithmetical product of educational need and its corresponding coefficient of school responsibility. Curricular needs of less than .50 are considered operationally insignificant and are therefore arbitrarily omitted from the table.

The reader will observe horizontal lines dividing the table into three sections. The first such line occurs after the fourth item. The first four items have coefficients of school responsibility greater than 2.5 and are therefore considered to be items for which the school has primary and distinctive responsibility. The second dividing line occurs after the 26th item. The items between the first and second dividing lines have coefficients of school responsibility between 1.5 and 2.5 and are therefore considered to be items for which the school has moderate but significant responsibility. The remaining items have coefficients of school responsibility less than 1.5 and are considered to be items for which the school has minimal or insignificant responsibility.

Of the 36 items constituting the questionnaire, only 16 yield an index of curricular need of .5 or more. Action priorities were established simply by ranking the items "within the three divisions of the table" according to the magnitude of curricular need. Action priorities are not provided for items for which the school has minimal and insignificant responsibility. Since two items (31 and 33) in this section of the table, nevertheless, have indices of curricular need of .5, we recommend simply that school personnel model the appropriate knowledge, attitude, or behavior without formally including specific content in the curriculum.

The careful reader will observe from Table 1 that much can be learned by noting those items which "do not" generate a curricular need as well as those which do. The psychoeducator would be wise to devote his/her time and effort to the identified action priorities and to avoid wasteful diversion into irrelevant areas. Psychoeducation will flourish

## *Family Life and Sex Education*

and gain prestige within the community to the degree that we deliver with competence that which is expected of us. There is no room in psychoeducation for would-be social reformer or self-appointed do-gooders to ride their hobby horses. This, they must do "on their own time" and not at public expense.

### *DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS*

The 14 action priorities identified in this needs assessment may be grouped, although somewhat arbitrarily, into the four broad categories listed below. For the convenience of the reader, the items which fall within each category and the action priority which attaches to each item are also restated.

#### I. Vocational and Educational Guidance

- a. Finds accurate information about the training requirements of the careers he/she is interested in pursuing. (1)
- b. Is aware of the chances of finding a job in the occupation of his/her choice. (3)
- c. Is aware of the life style he/she can expect given the wages of his/her chosen occupation. (6)

#### II. Sex and Health Education

- a. Knows how venereal diseases can be prevented, their symptoms, consequences, and cure. (2)
- b. Is aware of things which should be considered when making decisions about the use of birth control. (5)
- c. Does things to keep in good physical condition. (10)
- d. Is able to prepare well-balanced nutritional meals for himself/herself. (13)

#### III. Responsible Citizenship and Interpersonal Skill

- a. Aware of the reasons for having most of the laws and rules we must live by. (4)
- b. Shows respect for the feelings of others. (7)
- c. Is comfortable in expressing his/her feelings to others. (11)
- d. Is able to deal with conflicts between himself/herself and others in an effective manner. (12)
- e. Thinks about those duties he/she would be willing to accept in marriage and those his/her spouse would have to assume. (14)

#### IV. Self-Management

- a. Can identify what is important to himself/herself when torn between one thing and another. (8)
- b. Organizes time in such a way that he/she can do those things which should be done as well as those things which are enjoyed. (9)

A careful perusal of the above list of action priorities clearly indicates that the students of Calgary Public High Schools and their parents regard vocational and educational guidance to be the most pressing psycho-educational need.

Sex and health education closely follow. We were surprised by this fact. However, the careful reader will note that "family life education" is not to be found among the action priorities. Our respondents apparently want factual information about sex, health, and safety presented in the school curriculum. Presumably, what they do not want is a humanistic, permissive, and relativistic approach toward sexual behavior and family life. No doubt they wish to preserve the privacy of their personal values and the integrity of their families. We believe this position to be not only understandable but also quite defensible. Moreover, research in the communication patterns of adolescents clearly indicates that personal values, behaviors, and family matters are normally considered a private domain which may be discussed freely with trusted and significant others but not publicly (West, 1974). The relevant content of the sex and health education category can be integrated easily into existing school courses and programs. Indeed, both parents and students in our sample expressed a preference for such inclusion. Hence, no separate family life and sex education program is indicated.

Parents and students alike perceive a psychoeducational need in the area of responsible citizenship and human relations, but they see little need to focus on the self-centered topics which have been actively promoted by humanistic educators. Assertiveness training, for example, does not score as a curricular need (items 14 and 20). Neither is there a demand for the school to promote autonomy (items 9 and 15), self-awareness and values clarification (items 12 and 13), self-enhancement (items 29, 30, and 36), or class, sex, and racial attitudes (items 10, 22, and 34). Rather, more traditional topics related to responsible citizenship and interpersonal

conduct are sought. The list of action priorities in this category is surely worth pondering. Again, integration of these topics into existing courses and programs is the preferred mode of curriculum development expressed by parents and students alike.

Finally, there is a clear indication of a psychoeducational need in two "nontraditional" areas — personal decision-making and time-management. If and when school counsellors have time and resources to develop new areas of psychoeducation, they would do well to give their attention to these topics. Perhaps these topics could be integrated into the educational/vocational guidance program.

In general, we must conclude that parents of Calgary public high school students are not willing to transfer responsibility for raising their children to the schools. Neither do the students look toward the school for providing instruction in all areas. Of the 36 items surveyed, only four are rated by parents and students as the major and distinctive responsibility of the school.

Since community attitudes and expectations can and do change, it is important that curricular needs be reassessed periodically. Such periodic reassessment can help the school to remain responsive to the interests and desires of the community it serves. Moreover, there is no substitute for conducting a local needs assessment. Assessments made in Calgary cannot provide direction to counsellors who work in other communities. Hence, it is the process or methodology of needs assessment rather than the specific findings of this study which will be a greatest relevance to Canadian counsellors.

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