

Symposium proposal

Title:

Moral dimensions of sex education

Convenor:

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Moral dimensions of sex education

The moral status of homosexual acts is a central topic of recent articles by Michael Hand (2007) and by Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker (2004). The reason why they address this topic is rather different, however. Hand focuses on whether homosexuality should be a subject of *directive* or *nondirective* moral teaching. Directive moral teaching, or teaching a moral issue as settled or resolved, roughly means that the teacher promotes a particular answer to a moral question, with the intention that students come to share the teacher's moral view about the matter at hand. Nondirective moral teaching, or teaching a moral question as a controversial issue, roughly means that the teacher makes a deliberate attempt not to steer students towards a particular answer but rather tries to expound rival moral views as impartially as possible. Hand argues that homosexuality should be a subject of directive moral teaching: the view that homosexual acts are morally legitimate or unproblematic should be actively promoted.

However, the question raised by Steutel and Spiecker is whether or not promoting a particular moral view of homosexuality should be part of *compulsory* education. The claim that a particular form of education should be made compulsory roughly means that the state has the right to introduce coercive laws or regulations in order to make sure that this form of education will be provided by all (state) schools. Steutel and Spiecker argue that the state has the right to coerce schools to provide liberal sex education, which involves the teaching of respect for other persons' right of sexual self-determination. As they see it, the view that homosexual contacts are morally permissible should be part not only of directive but also of mandatory teaching.

With reference to these articles (and also to Hand, 2008; Steutel and De Ruyter, 2009) three clusters of topics will be addressed. First, the conceptual distinctions between directive and nondirective teaching and between compulsory and non-compulsory education will be elaborated and discussed. Second, criteria will be introduced and discussed both for distinguishing moral issues that should be taught directly from those that should be taught nondirectly (criteria of controversiality) and for determining which moral issues should be included in compulsory education and which ones should qualify as non-compulsory (criteria of compulsoriness). Third, the question will be discussed as to how these different classes (directive/nondirective, compulsory/non-compulsory) are related. Are they overlapping classes or do some of them exclude one another? And is it possible that applying a particular criterion of controversiality and some criterion of compulsoriness will result in incompatible

classifications? All these topics will be illustrated with examples from the moral dimensions of sex education.

The symposium will start with three brief introductions. First, Michael Hand will distinguish three criteria of controversiality: the *behavioural* criterion (an issue is controversial when people disagree about it), the *epistemic* criterion (an issue is controversial when contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason), and the *political* criterion (an issue is controversial when no view on it is entailed by the public values of the liberal democratic state). He will defend the epistemic criterion and explain why he takes Steutel and Spiecker (2004) to be advocates of the political criterion. Second, Jan Steutel and Doret de Ruyter will explain the conceptual distinction between compulsory and non-compulsory education and introduce and defend a particular criterion of compulsoriness, namely the Rawlsian version of the principle of public justification. They will argue, against Hand, that this principle does *not* imply the political criterion of controversiality. They will show that the state has the right to make some forms of directive moral teaching compulsory that should be classified as nondirective on the basis of the epistemic criterion of controversiality. Third, Michael Merry will argue, contra De Ruyter and Steutel, that Rawls' public justification argument does not sufficiently attend to valid conflicts of interests between 'reasonable' persons, thus threatening the state's legitimacy, but also calling into question its supposed neutrality on matters of reasonable disagreement. He will suggest that public justification simpliciter fails as a basis for 'compulsion'. And, except for matters which bear directly on safety and health, he will question whether it is the place of schools to directly teach sex education at all given the fundamentally controversial character of (liberal) sexual ethics.

After these introductions, the floor will be open for questions and discussion.

References

- Hand, M. (2007) Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue? *Theory and Research in Education*, 5(1), 69-86.
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- Steutel, J.W. and De Ruyter, D.J. (2009) Compulsory sex education: teaching about the right and the good. Paper presented at the annual PESGB conference (Oxford, April 3-5).
- Steutel, J. and Spiecker, B. (2004) Sex education, state policy and the principle of mutual consent. *Sex Education*, 4(1), 49-62.