INTRODUCTION: THE ETHICS OF SEX EDUCATION

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Perhaps no other part of the school curriculum generates as much controversy and on such a consistent basis as sex education. Recent polling data from the United States, Canada, and Britain point to a broad consensus among citizens of those countries that schools should offer some form of sex education. But exactly what should be taught, when, and how are matters of intense and ongoing debate. There are a number of credible explanations for this contentious state of affairs. For one, policymakers, educators, parents, and other concerned citizens maintain different ideas about, and exhibit different levels of understanding of, human sexuality — an undeniably vast and complex subject. For another, they hold differing views on how participation in a variety of classroom activities (for example, lectures, group discussions, live skits, condom demonstrations, and so on) and exposure to a more or less expansive range of information are liable to impact children’s nascent sexual attitudes and behavior. Yet it is their adherence to fundamentally divergent conceptions of sexual morality, above all, that engenders impassioned debate in this area. As David Archard observes, “Sex education is disputatious because sex itself has a great significance in our lives yet we disagree profoundly about the values that should inform our sexual conduct.”

Against this backdrop of deep and ongoing disagreement, liberal polities adopt and periodically revise very different guidelines for school-based sex education. Across the United States, for instance, a veritable patchwork of state and local directives delineate how schools are to approach the subject of human sexuality. Some states mandate sex education (albeit frequently with exemptions for parents who wish to remove their children from instruction) while

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others do not. A number of states and localities direct schools to implement “abstinence-only” programs, which focus primarily or exclusively on convincing young people to abjure sexual activity before marriage. Others enjoin schools to administer “comprehensive” sex education, which generally emphasizes the benefits of abstinence while also providing medically accurate information about contraception, reproduction, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Some states and localities have responded affirmatively in recent years to appeals for the positive inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues in school curricula. Others have more or less strenuously resisted such appeals. What these and myriad other examples underscore is that, in the United States, policymakers and their constituents are deeply divided over the proper form, content, and curricular status of school-based sex education. Of course, while it offers some particularly dramatic illustrations of intranational policy variation in this area, the United States is not the only country in which sex education is the subject of recurring controversy. From Canada to Australia to Germany to Japan, debates rage on over what, when, and how children should be taught about sex and sexuality.

4. Whether this form of sex education actually merits the term “comprehensive” is a matter of some doubt. As the first essay in this symposium attests, the programs that pass for “comprehensive” today invariably gloss over or omit a range of issues, topics, and questions that must be addressed if children are to develop a broader understanding of human sexuality. See Sharon Lamb, “Just the Facts? The Separation of Sex Education from Moral Education,” in this issue.

5. The state of California, for instance, recently enacted the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act, which, among other stipulations, requires that instructional materials adopted for use in the schools recognize “the role and contributions of Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, European Americans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans, persons with disabilities, and members of other ethnic and cultural groups, to the total development of California and the United States.” See California Senate Bill 48 (“Pupil Instruction: Prohibition of Discriminatory Content”), July 14, 2011, http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/11-12/bill/sen/sb_0001-0050/sb_48_bill_20110714_chaptered.pdf.

6. In a handful of states, educators are expressly prohibited from discussing LGBT issues, except in a negative light. According to state law in Alabama, for instance, whenever sex education is provided in the public schools, it must emphasize “that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state.” And in Arizona, public schools are, by legislative fiat, barred from providing instruction that “promotes a homosexual life-style” or “portrays homosexuality as a positive alternative life-style.” To date, efforts by LGBT advocates to amend or repeal these laws have been unsuccessful. See The Code of Alabama 1975, Section 16-40A-2 (“Minimum contents to be included in sex education program or curriculum”), http://alisondb.legislature.state.al.us/acas/codeofalabama/1975/coatoc.htm; and Arizona Revised Statutes, Section 15–716 (“Instruction on acquired immune deficiency syndrome; department assistance”), http://www.azleg.state.az.us/FormatDocument.asp?inDoc=/ars/15/00716.htm&Title=15&DocType=ARS. See also Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), “‘No Promo Homo’ Laws,” http://www.glsen.org/learn/policy/issues/nopromohomo.

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Given that many of the issues surrounding it are value-laden, multifaceted, and (as noted) highly contentious, the topic of sex education begs for careful philosophical analysis. And it is in this spirit that we present the following symposium on “The Ethics of Sex Education.” As befits a theme of such complexity and importance, the contributors to this symposium address a range of problems, questions, and concerns from a variety of theoretical perspectives. If there is one thing they seem to agree on, it is that sex education should be a required part of the curriculum, and it should be broad in scope — with careful attention given to a wide spectrum of subject matter, including sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, relationships, human anatomy and reproduction, sexual behavior, sexual pleasure, disease and pregnancy prevention, media stereotypes, peer pressure, and more. Yet the authors whose work fills these pages take different positions on several key issues. What the primary aims of sex education should be, how these aims can best be realized, how educators should deal with moral disagreement in the classroom and with matters that are highly disputed in society — all of these questions, and more, are grist for debate in this symposium.

Early drafts of the essays included here were prepared in advance of the fourth annual Educational Theory Summer Institute, which took place in August 2012 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and subsequent revisions were completed in the spring of 2013. As might be expected, some important developments that are pertinent to sex education have occurred in the intervening months. Perhaps most significantly for the purposes of this symposium, the legal and political landscape surrounding same-sex marriage has shifted tectonically in the United States and Britain. On June 26, 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a pair of landmark five-to-four decisions, extending federal benefits to same-sex married couples and effectively nullifying a voter-approved ban on same-sex marriage in California.7 Three weeks later, a bill legalizing same-sex marriage in England and Wales, which was championed by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, passed through Parliament despite stiff opposition from Tory backbenchers. The events in the United States and Britain bear mentioning since several of the essays included here wrestle with the question of how schools should address same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage. Of course, this question continues to be philosophically and politically difficult: no answer to it follows straightforwardly from the recent legislative changes in the United States and Britain. Thus, the essays that make up this symposium are as relevant and timely now as when they were initially drafted. If anything, the conceptual, normative, and educational issues to which they draw attention have taken on renewed urgency of late.

7. Together, these decisions constitute an important victory for LGBT advocates. That said, the Court stopped short of affirming that there is a constitutional right to same-sex marriage, and laws prohibiting such marriages remain in effect throughout the country. The cases in question are United States v. Windsor, 570 U.S.__(2013) and Hollingsworth v. Perry 570 U.S.__(2013).
In closing, I would like to thank all of the participants in the Educational Theory Summer Institute, which proved to be a wonderfully collegial and stimulating venue for the exchange of ideas and criticism. I am especially grateful to my co-contributors to this symposium: Sharon Lamb, Paula McAvoy, Michael Hand, Dianne Gereluk, John E. Petrovic, and Cris Mayo. The work they produced has enriched my own thinking about sex education, and I’m certain it will have the same effect on subsequent readers. Nicholas Burbules, Chris Higgins, Maria Cynthia Anderson, and Walter Feinberg served as gracious hosts during the Summer Institute and provided insightful and invaluable feedback on early drafts of the essays. Lastly, special thanks also are due to Joyce Atkinson for her tireless editorial assistance in the preparation of this special issue of Educational Theory.