

Public Opinion on Sex Education as Seen in Newspaper Reports: The Background of the Institutionalisation of Sex Education in England

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This paper clarifies the public opinion underlying the institutionalisation of school sex education in England. For this purpose, newspaper articles are examined to highlight both the structure of public opinion on sex education and its influence on policy making.

The paper analyses one hundred and sixty six newspaper articles which were written on and around sex education for quality papers, Sunday papers, tabloids, regional papers, and papers of professional or specific areas from 1980 to 1993.

The findings are as follows.

1. The institutionalisation of sex education was the shifting focus of sex education from social movement stress to that of social policy.
2. This shift was accompanied by the change of the main leading staff from left wing to central Conservative government.
3. No significant opposition was made by the left wing against this shift. Rather, they supported the forming of comprehensive school sex education system.
4. There could still be seen, however, different understandings between the left wing and the Government. For example, the Government was stressing traditional family values, and the left wing was considering more about the realistic treatment, for example, for single parent families.
5. Most of society, including 96% parents, approved of school sex education, which means that public opinion was largely pro-sex education.
6. The contributors to this opinion did not consist of only positive supporters but also of large numbers of parents who were reluctant to talk to their children about sex.

7. In parallel with this general acceptance of school sex education, the strong opposition was raised by the Moral Right such as Christian fundamentalist groups, who actually constitute a very small minority of people in society.

8. These small groups, however, played significant roles in the process of directing school sex education system by acting as forceful pressure groups on government policy making.

These can be summarised as follows.

The institutionalisation of school sex education was the combination of two different concepts of sex education. This started and proceeded in the 80s and 90s under the Conservative government as a social policy to face the consequences of the so called permissive society, succeeding the social movement interests, which had been developed during the Labour period to support sexual and gender minorities. In spite of this pro-sex education trend in society, significant influence was exerted on the government by small but vocal Moral Right pressure groups whose anti-sex education campaign, however, failed to attract widespread public support.

The content of the paper is as follows :

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