

SEX EDUCATION AND THE HORRIBLE EXAMPLE STORIES

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A number of stories, or rumors, which have been widely circulated as evidence against sex education classes in our public schools, have also appeared in print as the controversy over sex education rages on. When the issue popped up in the columns of "Dear Abby," for example, several people wrote in about scandalous goings-on which they had "heard about," events which, it turned out, were being talked about all over the country, wherever debates over sex education have occurred. The appearance of a number of these rumors in print in popular sources calls to our attention a number of issues which should be arousing the interest of folklorists. Should rumor ever be considered a genre of folklore? What is the relation between legend and rumor? (Is the difference one of structure, for example, or of function, or of length of time the items have circulated in oral tradition?) What is the relationship of fact to rumor and legend? Is there a similarity in the dissemination patterns of rumor and legend? (Can we learn anything about legends by studying the course of contemporary rumors which may actually be tracked down and documented?) To what extent are rumors conscious attempts to manipulate public opinion?

Dear Abby's response to the rumors circulated to expose the evils of sex education has been to challenge their factuality, thus exposing them as rumors. One reader writes, for example (Sept. 8, 1969):

DEAR ABBY: How can an intelligent woman like you be for sex education in the schools?

Why, I heard that one teacher got so carried away while conducting a sex education lecture that she completely DISROBED in front of the class!

In another school, the teacher herded the whole class into a dark closet and told them to "feel" each other!

I could tell you much more, but you wouldn't believe it.

HORRIFIED IN MELROSE, FLA.

Abby answers, "I have heard all these wild tales (and more) but have been unable to locate the teachers who supposedly did the above, the schools in which these incidents were supposed to have occurred, or any of the children who were actually present."

An article in Family Circle (a magazine sold at the checkout counter in many supermarkets) (Barbara Yuncker, "Sex Education: Should It Be Taught in School?" January, 1970, pp. 46ff) maintains that such rumors have their basis in twisted or misconstrued facts. Regarding the rumor about "that teacher in Michigan who stripped to the buff to demonstrate female anatomy to her coed sex-education class," the author purports to reveal the real incident which gave rise to the rumor.

The facts are that it was an all-girl class, the subject wasn't sex per se, and the teacher didn't strip. What she did do was to change into different costumes (behind a

screen) to illustrate how clothing alters the image a person projects.

Equally stretched from bits of truth or made up whole are tales of the teachers who turned out the lights and had mixed classes play "feelies," or who showed pornographic films to eight-year olds.

Of course it was not the purpose of the Family Circle article to theorize concerning the relationship between fact and folklore (if such rumors are indeed folklore), but it would be interesting to know what evidence the author has to indicate that these "facts" are truly the source of the widely circulated rumor. Could this indeed be the beginning of the nude teacher rumor, or is this an example of the non-folklorist making naive assumptions about the nature of oral traditions?

A Look magazine article (Ernest Dunbar, "Sex in School: The Birds, the Bees and the Birchers," September 9, 1969, pp. 15ff) discusses the role which a number of right wing organizations have played in opposing the institution of sex education programs and in spreading anti-sex education propaganda. The article begins with a run down of the most prevalent horrible example rumor motifs which are circulating in an attempt to discredit sex-education.

In some other city (usually quite distant), a teacher, you are told, put some very young children in a dark room and encouraged them to experiment sexually with each other. Or a child came home in a state of shock because of a brutally frank discussion of sex in his class that day. Or kindergarteners clomped to the dinner table babbling about the genital organs they'd fashioned from clay in school.

The article goes on to imply that right wing propaganda lies behind the dissemination of these rumors.

Explore further, and you will be told that these sex experiments are all part of an international Communist conspiracy to subvert America by corrupting the minds of our young. Once the youth are depraved, so the argument follows, America is on her way out. The mass media, Parent-Teacher Associations, even the American Medical Association are said to be part of this plot. But the chief conspirators are headquartered in New York City at something called SIECUS, the Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. SIECUS, the accusers say, is the chief culprit in the drive to bring immorality into the classroom, and the teacher is its agent.

Right wing propaganda actually does appear to be the source of many of the motifs which recur in the horrible example rumors. Or perhaps we might better say that printed right wing propaganda provides an ideological framework which lends support and a kind of consistency to the rumors. The John Birch Society (often working through local committees) and the Rev. Billy Hargis's Christian Crusade have been two leaders of the opposition to sex education; both have been active in circulating printed anti-sex education propaganda. The idea that sex education is all part of a Communist plot to destroy American youth by promoting

"universal sexual promiscuity -- and perversion" was put forth in the John Birch Society's January, 1969, Bulletin. The Communist plot theme in rumor form appears in the following Dear Abby letter (Sept. 14, 1969) which, interestingly enough, localizes the Communist agent as a teacher of the sixth grade daughter of friends, from whom the letter writer got his facts, thus making the rumor sound much more authentic.

DEAR ABBY: Recently you answered in your column that it was better for children to learn the facts of life from an "informed, responsible educator" than in the home where the parents equated sex with sin, etc. In other words, you were pushing sex education in the school.

That sounds all right, but how do we know that the school teachers are "informed and responsible?" Some friends of mine said they are sure their sixth grade daughter is being taught by a COMMUNIST teacher who is trying to break down the morals of our youth by telling them there is nothing wrong with "sex." I heard, too that one 12-year-old boy had his head so filled with sex at school he went home and tried to "practice" on his little sister.

It has been proved that sex education has been the ruination of the Scandinavian countries. Do we want that to happen here?

ALSO CONCERNED

The preceding letter also contains another motif originating in right wing propaganda -- citing the (supposedly "socialistic"?) Scandinavian nations as examples of sexually perverted countries. Anaheim, California, likewise has a bad reputation in anti-sex education literature as a result of its pioneering efforts with a course called Family Living and Sex Education, offered since 1965. Thus we possibly have the source of the rumor which appeared in a September 8, 1969, Dear Abby letter:

DEAR ABBY: I think you are all wrong to say that sex education in school is okay. During school years children should concentrate on reading, writing, and arithmetic. And in their spare time they should think about dolls, flying kites, and baseball.

I heard that a school in southern California tried sex education 10 years ago and they had to stop it because over half the girls in the senior class dropped out because they were pregnant.

AGAINST SEX EDUCATION

It would appear, then, that the rumors which have been circulating to illustrate the awful consequences of instituting sex education classes have had their impetus in right wing and fundamentalist literature which seeks to discredit existing programs and to alarm the public about such programs. I would like to suggest that a more extensive investigation of orally-circulated rumors might be useful to our understanding of the dissemination of oral information (whether this information should be called "tradition" remains to be seen) in the United States today. Of course the sex education rumors may be a unique case; assuming that an organized propaganda campaign can be proven to be behind this rumor does not mean that such organization is the root of similar rumor (legend?) cycles. However, it has been suggested that the Beatles organization was behind the "Paul McCartney is dead" rumor

("McCartney's Lyke-Wake," FOLKLORE FORUM, II, (1969), 167-168) in an attempt to sell records. There is also some evidence of possible extremist political motivation behind the "J.F.K. is alive" rumor. One of the earliest mass media notices given that rumor was by right-wing Chicago radio announcer Howard Miller. Miller got his information from a listener who sent him a copy of an apparently widely circulated anonymous mimeographed letter (falsely attributed to Truman Capote) alleging that Kennedy lived (F. de C. and E. L. O., "JFK Is Alive: A Modern Legend," FOLKLORE FORUM, II, 2, (1969), 54-55). Although it is perhaps unwise to speculate on the origin of such a letter without having seen it, its mimeoed format and anonymous dissemination perhaps indicate that it was intended as political "hate mail" of some strange sort.

The sex education stories may, then, fit into a "pattern," as yet very vaguely conceived, in which oral accounts have been stimulated via organizational efforts. Perhaps some FORUM readers who are more conversant with right-wing publications and information channels can shed more light on this situation.

STAY IN SCHOOL AND GET A BETTER JOB !!!!!!!