FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

"A recent trend in Canadian schools, Margaret Arcus reports, is the introduction of family life education courses into the curriculum," not for the first time but by the early 1980s (Arcus' article was published in 1983) in hundreds of schools across Canada.[1] Arcus suggests several reasons for this" trend," among them (1) "rapid social changes" placing "new demands upon individuals and families," (2) "new knowledge generated about human and family development and behaviour," and (3) "many individuals' concern for the quality of their own lives."[2] Proponents argue that schools have "a role to play in responding to these needs and concerns" while critics worry that "family life education may deal with sensitive and controversial material" that "should be left to families or churches," as including it in the curriculum may do "violence to important individual and family beliefs."[3]

In 1964, Arcus reminds, the Canadian Education Association surveyed all provincial departments of education and 55 urban school systems concerning the nature and extent of sex education in the schools, learning that no provincial department could "report curriculum provisions for the separate teaching of sex education, although most indicated that sex education topics were included in other subject areas."[4] Reasons cited "included a lack of demand for the subject, adequate coverage in other areas, or the school's unwillingness to accept responsibility for the subject."[5]

Another survey, conducted by The Vanier Institute of the Family during I968-69, found that "29% offered family life education in the curriculum with an additional 3 % offering it as an extracurricular course or informal subject," the "great majority" of which were offered "only recently."[6] Schools offering "composite courses (i.e., including family life education as part of another subject) tended to introduce the subject earlier than did schools offering it separately."[7]

Schools in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia included family life education in the curriculum (36%, 35%, and 30% respectively).[8] Arcus also discovered that the "larger the community, the larger the school enrollment; the more senior the grades in the school, the more likely schools were to offer this subject."[9] Of the courses offered, 83% were "composite" and included health, physical education, guidance, counseling, and home economics.[10] Topics considered in these courses were: sex education, dating or boy-girl relationships, and parent-child or inter-generational relationships.[11] Offered at all grade levels and to both boys and girls, they tended to be gendered segregated (e.g. boys and girls generally did not take family life courses together).[12] Most teachers had not been prepared to teach the family life courses they taught.[13] In addition to this problem, teachers faced lack of student interest, insufficient support from school authorities, the lack of qualified colleagues, few teaching aids, and/or other "curriculum limitations."[14]

In the more recent national survey of family life education in the schools, conducted by the Canadian Education Association, school superintendents, district family life coordinators, and family life teachers in all operating school districts in the 10 provinces reported that approximately 21 % of the school districts had a family life education program.[15] "It appeared" (as Arcus phrases it) that family life courses were often developed within the local school district, drawing on existing materials, requiring "a great deal of curriculum planning by local personnel."[16] Family life education was offered equally as a separate subject and as part of other courses (Health/Physical Education courses were most commonly used to provide family life education instruction), and, while provided at all levels, courses in family life tended to be offered more often at the secondary school level.[17] Ontario teachers indicated that, elementary schools, course emphasis was placed on family relationships and on different kinds of families, with "little" attention to sex education.[18] During Grades 6 through 8 "topics pertaining to the social and personal life of the young adolescent were emphasized: adolescence and peer groups; conception and birth; puberty; psychological maturation; and parent-child relations."[19] During Grades 9 through 13 the curriculum emphasized "conception and birth, venereal diseases, and interpersonal communication."[20]

British Columbia teachers indicated that they themselves were primarily responsible for initiating family life education, although students were also involved, as were local boards of education and the provincial Department of Education (the latter two primarily through resource allocation and course approval.)[21] The most popular topics (included in 90% of courses) in Grade 11/12 (embedded in home economics courses) were "male-female roles and preparation for parenting, followed closely by relationships with family, human reproduction, and child development."[22] The "least popular topic," Arcus reports, concerned family-community interaction.[23] Curricular priority was given to child development (28%), preparation for parenting (i3%), and human growth development (8%). and development; the least amount of time (less than 5 % each) was spent on marriage and divorce laws, premarital sex, and marriage problems,[24] indicating an interest (from students and their parents, from the teachers themselves, from Ministry officials?) in presenting a rather rosy picture of the issues these young people faced.

In the Grades 8-10 home economics courses, popular topics included "child development, relationships with siblings, human reproduction, and preparation for parenting, with marriage and divorce laws the least popular topic,"[25] once again showing preference for presenting optimistic scenarios of family life, too often the site of violence, abuse, and misery. "Priority topics" included "child development (15%), preparation for parenting (15%), and human growth and development (11%), while premarital sex and marriage enjoying "the lowest priority in these courses, with less than 5 % of class time spent on each topic."[26]

In sixty-five per cent of the home economics courses textbooks were "required"; two-thirds of these focused on child development and/or parenting; none

of the three guidance and social studies courses required texts.[27] There were problems reported, including the unavailability of appropriate textbooks or department budgets disallowing purchase of an adequate number of books.[28] When textbooks proved inadequate, teachers turned to other materials; many teachers indicated a preference for such materials, keeping course content "current," "flexible," and "related to student needs."[29]

Arcus found "few patterns," as "40 different references were used in the 20 home economics courses, with no reference listed more than twice."[30] Guest speakers were often part of the curriculum, averaging 6 speakers per course, and they included nurses (59%), doctors (31 %), and representatives from community social service agencies (20%).[31] Films were used in 88% of the family life education courses and units, including *Jamie, Phoebe, Four Families*, and the *Human Journey* series.[32] Also included in the curriculum were field trips, videotapes, slides, filmstrips, transparencies, and models.[33]

Arcus notes that "not all decisions concerning family life education were made by the teachers," as some "were required to teach family life education as a part of a department's offerings, while others were required not to teach it, or not to teach certain "touchy" subjects such as "sex," "working mothers," and "death."[34] Many "felt their instruction was limited due to course overload, and … a few evaluated their own offerings as 'half-hearted,' as they used mostly films and guest speakers."[35] She adds: "While respondents believed that family life education was important for all, teaching such subject matter was considered easier and more effective with a willing audience,"[36] surely something with which all teachers everywhere would agree.

"Two objectives appeared to guide both the courses and the units," Arcus reports, the first "to learn what is known about individual and family development topics, and the second " to become aware of one's own feelings and attitudes," both of which were included in many of the offerings, but, she adds: "there was some indication that self-awareness was the *only* objective in some family life education."[37] At this point Arcus adds what at least in the research assistant's report is one of few judgements:

> While this is an important objective, it may not qualify as education, in that such courses may become little more than "rap sessions." While rap sessions may be enjoyable, they may add little to students' understanding of themselves or others.[38]

I'm not so sure.

A second judgement soon follows: "Some disquieting thoughts are raised by the reported use of family life education resources," namely that teachers reported using whatever resources were "available," leaving Arcus wondering if "differences in the reported resources were the result of a selection procedure, or of an unawareness of available resources?"[39] She wonders how "family life educators learn about resources

in the field," and "what criteria do they use to select resources," and "perhaps more importantly, to what extent does the apparent availability of resources dictate course content?"[40] Arcus expresses concern over "the prevalence of popular press items among family life education resources," asserting that "while creative teachers may be able to use such items to advantage, reliance upon such resources has some potential for superficiality and for focus on currently 'popular' issues and topics,"[41] a statement implying that there are many teachers who are not creative, that the press is always or primarily superficial, and that timeliness is not a key curricular consideration.[42]

Arcus reviews "the nature of family life education in secondary schools in British Columbia."[43] Family life education is offered in approximately half of the province's schools; it is most likely to be offered as a unit within another course, primarily through home economics and guidance departments; considerable variation in content and its organization; many different resources and techniques were reported, with guest speakers and films the most heavily used resource, and class discussions the most successful technique.[44]

COMMENTARY

While the survey suffers from a meagre response rate of 26% of the departments contacted, the findings are nonetheless interesting: the haphazardness of offerings, the absence of any shared content or style of teaching, the topic's incorporation into other courses on an *ad hoc* basis. Curious and questionable that so-called "controversial" subjects — sex, divorce, death — were, if not avoided, treated cautiously. Despite these significant limitations, family life education addressed timely matters of personal importance, often providing students opportunities to explore and express their own experience.

REFERENCE

Arcus, Margaret. 1983. Characteristics of Family Life Education in British Columbia, *Canadian Journal of Education* 8 (4), 373-389.

ENDNOTES

[1] Arcus 1983, 374.

[2] Arcus 1983, 374.

[3] Arcus 1983, 374.

[4] Arcus 1983, 374.
[5] Arcus 1983, 374.
[6] Arcus 1983, 375.
[7] Arcus 1983, 375.
[8] Arcus 1983, 375.
[9] Arcus 1983, 375.
[10] Arcus 1983, 375.
[11] Arcus 1983, 375. To contemporary readers the absence of LGBTQ+ topics is conspicuous.
[12] Arcus 1983, 375.
[13] Arcus 1983, 375.
[14] Arcus 1983, 375.
[15] Arcus, 1983, 376.
[16] Arcus, 1983, 376.
[17] Arcus, 1983, 376.
[18] Arcus 1983, 376.
[19] Arcus 1983, 376.
[20] Arcus 1983, 376.
[21] Arcus 1983, 379.
[22] Arcus 1983, 380.
[23] Arcus 1983, 380. With no apparent to LBGTQ+ or Indigenous families, these could be considered the "least popular" at this time in British Columbia family education. Regarding the link between family life and community: was the atrophy of community (documented in so many sociological studies of the period) a factor?
[24] Arcus 1983, 380.
[25] Arcus 1983, 380.
[26] Arcus 1983, 380-381.
[27] Arcus 1983, 382.
[28] Arcus 1983, 382.
[29] Arcus 1983, 382.
[30] Arcus 1983, 382.
[31] Arcus 1983, 382.
[32] Arcus 1983, 382.
[33] Arcus 1983, 382.
[34] Arcus 1983, 385.
[35] Arcus 1983, 385.
[36] Arcus 1983, 385.
[37] Arcus 1983, 387.
[38] Arcus 1983, 387.
[39] Arcus 1983, 387.
[40] Arcus 1983, 387.

[41] Arcus 1983, 387.

[42] Concerning the creativity of teachers: given the complexity of that topic, it's not obvious how empirical data could be obtained to document the matter. As for timeliness: I can think of few more important curricular considerations, not in the service of intensifying presentism but in showing the profound pertinence of academic knowledge to lived experience (subjective, social, historical). As for the popular press one is obligated to choose carefully: while hardly above criticism, The New York Times is reliable enough for inclusion in the curriculum, as I show in the third edition of What Is Curriculum Theory? and elsewhere.

[43] Arcus 1983, 388-399.

[44] Arcus 1983, 388-399.