

Sex, sexuality, and religion in the classroom

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Last summer, Alberta passed legislation allowing parents to remove their children from class when the lesson concerns sex, sexuality (including sexual orientation), or religion. Under Section 9 of Bill 44, children whose parents have removed them from class are not responsible on tests or assignments for the material they have missed. The bill will come into effect in the Fall of 2010.

Bill 44 directly contradicts the principle that every child is to have the opportunity to acquire as good an education as every other child. It is this principle that underlies Canada’s commitment, backed by law, to compulsory education to age sixteen. After all, no one can enjoy equality of opportunity in life if he or she has been denied equality of opportunity in education, and equality of opportunity in life is a bedrock value of liberal society.

You would be forgiven for thinking that those Albertans opposed to Bill 44—and there are many, from teachers’ unions to boards of education to civil liberties organizations—would make much of the fact that allowing parents to pull their children from the classroom is tantamount to allowing parents to leave their children uneducated. You would be forgiven for making this obvious assumption, but, strangely, few opponents of the bill put the principle of equal opportunity for education at the centre of their criticisms.

The teachers’ unions made the sound point that Bill 44 puts their members at risk of being disciplined or sued. One or another of the guarded topics will now and again happen to come up in the ordinary run of the day, and teachers certainly should be able without fear to seize teachable moments.

But the most popular criticism of opposition groups was that teaching about sex, sexuality, and religion is important in fostering among school children the values of tolerance and respect for others. Children, opponents of the bill asserted, need to be present in class for the sake of their becoming good citizens and for the sake of society becoming more inclusive.

In making this argument, opponents of the bill conceded exactly what the groups behind the bill had been charging, that the schools were not educating the children, but were rather indoctrinating them into certain attitudes and values.

What opponents of Bill 44 should have said, of course, is that sex, sexuality, and religion are topics like all the others. They are subjects, that is, for study and discussion like all the others.

Opponents should have affirmed that teachers are there to impart to their pupils facts and theories about the matter under study, whether that matter is the solar system, Hinduism, or human sexual response. And they are also there to make their pupils aware of the significance of those facts and theories for life today. Sex, sexuality, and religion are on the curriculum because of their intrinsic interest and the importance of the normative issues they raise. And that makes them no different as topics of learning than the water cycle or the history of Quebec.

Suppose that the topic is sexual preference. The teacher might draw her pupils' attention to the fact that some people are attracted sexually to those of their own sex, while other people aren't. She would canvass a range of theories offered to explain the facts, asking which theories are well supported by evidence and which not. She might then ask what attitudes we should have toward what we believe are the facts. Same-sex marriage as a socially recognized institution, for instance: what can be said in its favour, what can be said against it?

There will be nothing in this teacher's approach that should cause anyone any fear that their children are being indoctrinated into any set of attitudes or any particular values. Or at least that's what opponents of Bill 44 should have made clear to the people of Alberta.

That they didn't, that they instead sought to convince people of the goodness of the attitudes and values the curriculum is meant to instil, is sad evidence that the teachers in Alberta, their bosses, and many of their supporters have lost their way.