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Appreciating how life begins

ONCE again, we seem to be seized by the issue of whether sex education for children and the young in our country is necessary and, if so, how should it be carried out.

It is unfortunate that in some people's minds the term "sex education" conjures up images of encouraging free sex among those given this information.

However, we need to only see the regular reports of young-age "unwanted" pregnancies and often the dire consequences suffered by infants born as a result; and the growing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and HIV-AIDS to realise that our young people need better information, guidance, counselling and advice on matters relating to sexuality.

When inquiring young minds want to know the answer to the burning question, "Where did I come from?", it can be all too easy for a flustered parent, adult or teacher to offer either vague, in some cases startling or, worse, wrong information.

For children, especially at a young age, the focus cannot be on the reproductive act but on how the baby kitten/human grows inside the mother and emerges. The details will eventually need to be augmented, of course, but what's provided must always be matter-of-fact, informative, reassuring and discreet.

And, that's where carefully prepared, pre-tested, sensitivity- and age-oriented, simple, illustrative and descriptive books and other materials can be both handy and helpful to gradually guide the child along the path of understanding and appreciating how life begins, the natural cycle behind the birth of a duckling, kitten and baby and related facts of life.

To allay the undue and misplaced concern and resentment

towards the concept of sex education, the terminology in use in many such initiatives in countries of our region and elsewhere is "Population", "Family Welfare", or "Family Life" Education.

I have had the privilege of being associated for almost three decades with the management and implementation of various programmes on population, family welfare and family life education in several countries of the Asia Pacific region.

With international collaboration of various United Nations (UN) agencies, these activities were carefully planned, organised and implemented through several government departments, employers' and workers' organisations, as well as NGO's, women's, youth and community groups and religious bodies.

A major programme in each case was one on "population education in schools".

Among the countries involved were Bangladesh, Hong Kong, South Korea, India, Indonesia, Nepal, several Pacific island nations, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The age-specific components of such programmes, in an appropriate form suited to each target group included human sexuality, reproduction, reproductive health, and family planning together with issues such as family size, adolescent needs, parental role, peer pressure, decision making, health and nutrition, education, basic necessities, work, budgeting, and societal and national concerns.

In the in-school programme, right from primary level onwards, these elements were progressively reflected in the curriculum, among others in subjects such as language, mathematics, sciences, moral studies, civics, geography and economics.

Teachers were provided with appropriate orientation and training to teach the various topics as a part of the specific subjects.

Relevant material was either obtained or developed and constant adaptation of content and approaches, based on situational needs, was an essential part of these efforts.

The experience in all cases was positive and clearly discernible in both enhancing understanding and attitudes as well as in practice and trends.

As a result, these programmes have since been integrated into the policies and ongoing programmes of the various national and local level agencies and organisations to reinforce their impact in the context of individual, family and community welfare and national development.

Clearly there is a need to advocate and plan for school-based efforts to address family life and welfare and population issues.

Since these issues are so crucial for the life of all individuals, schools – with the support of the appropriate ministries – should make every effort to address these topics in a culturally relevant matter.

At the same time, appropriate information for parents, policy makers and community leaders is also needed alongside an important and effective role by the media.

Children and young people are our greatest asset today, the leaders of tomorrow, and the parents of the future. Much can be done today to enable them to succeed and help prepare them for future roles for the good of the nation and its people.

RUEBEN DUDLEY,
Former United Nations/ILO
Regional Adviser on Population,
Employment & Development.