Sex Education in Schools Today

What is Happening in the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education

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Extreme intervention by the Tokyo Board of Education in sex education

Today, an extreme intervention is taking place regarding sex education. This has appeared in its most excessive form in the attack on sex education at school N for the disabled children. The Tokyo Board of Education, claiming that “there is a deviant form of sex education,” has already attempted to restrict sex education by exerting pressure on the school principal, based on a research on school reports to guardians, and the usage of curriculum and material for sex education. On December of 2002, the Board of Education ordered the surveillance of educational content in a notification titled “Instruction of Sex Education in Schools.”

In the Tokyo metropolitan assembly meeting of June of 2003, some assembly members raised a question about sex education at the N school. The Tokyo Board of Education Superintendent, Mr. Yokoyama, answered that the Board would “send a report and conduct an investigation in order to find and instruct on the situation.” Moreover, in an assembly meeting in July, the same assembly members raised further issues with N school’s practice report which states “sex education in the primary school level to nurture emotions for a basis of the future” and “sex education in the school to be conducted with comfort as the foundation towards safety.” Immediately after that meeting, the Tokyo assembly members, members from other district/city assemblies, and the Tokyo Board of Education suddenly entered the N school with certain press agencies with the pretense of permitting a news interview. The Board of Education confiscated the material used for sex education and loaned them to some of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly members, which exhibited it in an assembly conference room in a prejudiced manner.

Subsequently, the situation drastically worsened. The Tokyo Board of Education conducted a survey of all the staff at N school, which extended to the educational content, class organization, and work regulations. The effects of this survey spread to the entire prefecture. By September 11, as punishment for “inappropriate” education of the metropolitan schools for the blind/ deaf/ disabled, 65 teachers, the principal, 37 assistant principals, and 14 members of the Ministry of Education were penalized. The penalty blatantly reflects a political intention. It is an unfair and forceful interference into educational content.

A correct and concrete sex education is a necessity

At the N school for the disabled children, they teach the names of body parts in a song, in order to instruct the disabled children to respect their own life and body. The song included the names of genitals. It also became a problem that topics such as intercourse were taught visually with the usage of dolls and panels.
However, visual and clear instructions are necessary for children to value their bodies and to positively become aware of their sexuality. Mentally challenged children are especially in danger of sexual assault/abuse, and clear and concrete teaching on sex education is thus essential. Imparting scientific sex information, such as secondary sex characteristics including menstruation and ejaculation, pregnancy and the giving of birth, protection to prevent unwanted pregnancies and abortion, is urgently needed in today’s society of commercialized sex. The problem lies in the sexuality of the metropolitan assembly members and the Board of Education who criticize these efforts as “extreme sex education,” “lacking common sense,” and “resembling an adult shop.”

This summer, the Board of Education gathered management and teaching staff at schools for the disabled children to conduct an emergency sex education workshop. The Board of Education emphasized there that educators must teach within the range of the Ministry’s teaching guideline concerning children’s developmental stages. Do they realize that more than half of the children in the third grade already know the word “sex” as a sexual practice? “Do not wake up the sleeping child” is often heard as a quote in Japan, but children are not asleep. Children gather information on sex and sexuality through television, magazines, friends, and adults. They secretly pass on the knowledge, often in pieces and inaccurately. Such talk is unscientific, and moreover, dangerously reflects commercialized information on sex. This condition does not contribute to positive self-esteem of one’s body, and children cannot learn self-determination and responsibility regarding sex.

In order for a child to become aware that “one’s body is one’s own” and that “the protagonist of one’s body is oneself,” it is important to provide systemic and scientific information sensitive to the child’s situation, interest, and environment. It is also crucial to provide correct knowledge on sex and sexuality that supersedes the uncriticized distribution of commercialized sex information. However, the Board of Education’s notion of children’s developmental stages assumes that there is no information on sex around children and that children are not interested in sex.

This assumption of the Board of Education is what creates incorrect ideas of sexuality – boys to think that “women always want to be led to sexual intercourse” or “men’s sexual desires cannot be controlled,” and girls to think that they “can not predict when they are most likely to become pregnant” or “women cannot say no to men’s demands.” Sex education begins by examining the environment for sex information that the children live in. We must consider what message will secure the children’s self-determination on sex. Sex education is a human rights education.

Why sex education bashing is occurring

The Metropolitan Board of Education strictly instructs sex education to “stay within the range of the Ministry’s teaching guideline” and it also heavily criticizes that there are often “deviations from the guideline.” Yet, the Board allows for other subject areas to “utilize the teaching guideline in a progressive way.” I believe that the reasons for specifically targeting sex education are closely connected to the current movement of appalling reform on the Fundamental Law of Education. The Board of Education’s stance reflects the political motivations of rightwing, cultural traditionalists who: do not want children to have self-determination regarding sex, do not want people to deny the patriarchal system, do not want women to have the right to decide “to give birth or not to give birth,” do not
want women to realize their reproductive health rights, and do not want people to become critical of the gender-based division of labor.

A structure has been appearing throughout the country in which members of the Board of Education interfere with sex education by taking advantage of certain scandalized guardians and media, and of assembly members who have raised this issue in assembly meetings. The Board of Education is subjugated to such forces that criticize gender-free education. The concept that sex education is human rights education has finally begun to take hold due to our movement. Training for children to protect themselves from sexual violence is still in its initial stages. I am painfully aware that we must advance sex education without fearing an unjust and political domination and control.

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1 The teaching guideline was made by the Ministry of Education to standardize public education. There is criticism that the teaching guideline is a tool for the government to manipulate the education.

2 The government of Japan is trying to reform the Fundamental Law of Education. There is a criticism that the new reform is focusing on patriotic and nationalistic-oriented education, which resembles pre-war education in Japan.