Population Education: The Search for a Definition

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With increasing urgency the need for more effective population education asserts itself. Yet underlying all discussions of the topic is the concern for a comprehensive and acceptable definition of the term.

THE importance of identifying and defining the field of population education became especially evident during and after the World Population Conference in Bucharest in August 1974. Its Plan of Action stressed the role of education, and emphasized the importance of developing population education programs. Prior to this, in 1972, the Report of the President's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future called for the enactment of the Population Education Act.

The content of population education overlaps with many other disciplines such as environmental education, health education, and family life education. However in the past few years, population education has been recognized both internationally and nationally to have a distinct place as an area of concern in the school curriculum.

Responding to the need for identifying the content of population education, Sloan Wayland (1968), the pioneer in the field, said it should include several areas: population dynamics, human reproduction, health, quality of life, and social and economic development. Wayland states that population education should be the educational response to influence fertility patterns. He states "Population education has been presented here as the school's counterpart of family planning programs for adults in the reproductive ages." This clearly implies the need for an educational response to a perceived population problem.

Viederman (1972), in his report to the President's Commission, defined population education as "The process by which the student investigates and explores the nature and meaning of population processes, population characteristics, the causes of population change, and consequences of these processes, characteristics, and changes for himself, his family, his society, and the world."

In 1974, Viederman suggested a modified definition:

> Population education may be defined as an educational process which assists persons (a) to learn the probable causes and consequences of population phenomena for themselves and their communities (including the

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world); (b) to define for themselves and their communities the nature of the problems associated with population processes and characteristics; and (c) to assess the possible effective means by which society as a whole and he as an individual can respond to the influence of these processes in order to enhance the quality of life now and in the future.

In his 1974 definition Viederman perceives population processes and characteristics as a problem. Also his inclusion of the statement, "to enhance quality of life" implies there is a desired quality of life that has to be developed through population education. This introduces a value bias into population education which Viederman himself in 1973 claimed should be an inquiry-oriented discipline. Viederman (1973) stated "Positions should not be preached. Rather opportunities for evaluating competing theories and for exploring values and their consequences must be provided and encouraged."

What Options Are Open?

The UNESCO Asian Regional Office in Bangkok defines population education as "an educational programme which provides for a study of the population situation in the family, community, nation, and the world, with the purpose of developing in students rational and responsible attitudes and behavior towards that situation." This definition introduces a value bias, in that it states a rational and responsible attitude and behavior has to be developed. This implies that population education should develop attitude and behavior toward a specifically identified goal. In a personal interview the Director of the Population Education Project in Sri Lanka (a country in the Asian region), expressed concern about this clause in the Asian Regional UNESCO definition of population education. He said that Sri Lanka does not fully subscribe to the UNESCO definition because it implies an understanding of the desirable goals in population education.

The Population Reference Bureau of the United States has defined population education as "[seeking] to bring about a realization of the individual, family, social, and environmental effects of the explosive increase in human populations, the rapid shifts in the increase and distribution of the people, the implications of changing age and other demographic patterns, and the conceivable options that may be open to mankind to cope with the consequent problems. While it is not confined exclusively to a particular age group, it is focused primarily on students who will become the principal child bearers within one or two decades." Value bias in considering population as a problem is very clear in this definition. It emphasizes the need to prepare students to live in a world where population increase and changing age are serious problems. There is also a movement to make population education primarily influence fertility behavior in young people.

The Small Family Norm

India is concerned about developing the small family norm and population education is perceived as one approach to achieve this goal. The National Seminar on Population Education held in August 1969 in Bombay established the following guidelines for population education:

1. The objective of population education should be to enable students to understand that family size is controllable, that population limitation can facilitate the development of higher quality of life in the nation, and that a small family size can contribute materially to the quality of living in the family.

2. Students at all levels have a right to information about the effect of changing of family size and national population on individual, family, and the nation, so that this body of knowledge is utilized to control family size and national population, with beneficial effects on the economic development of the nation and welfare of individual families.

Indian population educators perceive population as a serious national problem, and see population education as a method of developing the small family norm. However it does not seem very clear as to how this could be done. Dr. Parakh, Director of the Population Education Cell at the National Council for Educational Research and Train-

ing in New Delhi, in a personal interview in August 1974, rejected the idea that population education should be indoctrination, but emphasized that population education in India seeks to develop the small family norm.

Burlson (1969) says: "Population education involves education for population awareness, education for family living, reproductive education, and underlying basic values." Burlson identifies three major areas of concern: population dynamics, family living, reproductive education, and an analysis of underlying values in each of these areas. He also suggests that population education should be included in the broader framework of environmental education. This definition has value in identifying specific areas of concern and emphasizing value analysis.

Lane and Wileman (1974) define population education as "the study of human population and how it affects and is affected by several aspects of life: physical, social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological." This definition, while broad enough to include all possible aspects of population education, does not identify specific areas of concern in the curriculum.

The Population Environmental Education Project at the University of Delaware has developed an environmental approach to teaching population education. Population is included in an environmental framework in a conceptual scheme which states: "Man is a part of the natural system and is ultimately subject to the limits of the system."

Massialas (1972) has made an important contribution to the inquiry approach to teaching population education. He states: "Education in contrast to indoctrination is a process of testing and exploring alternatives. Whether or not we may be convinced that our planet is overpopulated, as teachers we have a basic commitment to an objective examination of claims and counter claims." The series called Springboards developed by Massialas *et al.* and the book by Nelson (1972) are valuable approaches to teaching population concepts by the inquiry approach.

Several definitions to population education have been suggested, and often the definition reflects the concerns of a nation or the individual interests and needs of the researcher or organization. It seems clear that no single definition can be adopted when the goals of population education differ in each setting. However researchers and educators must carefully examine the several approaches to population education that have been suggested in the context of the specific goals of the country or society.

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