From the editors: We are delighted to begin editorship of the JSET book review section. We invite readers to recommend and send books for review, and to volunteer as reviewers. Our address is 717 Pemberton Street, Philadelphia, PA 19147; E-mail: <perpcorn@dca.net>

The following two reviews were solicited before our editorship. We decided to publish them together since both are excellent reviews of an excellent book.

Sexual Ideology and Schooling: Toward Democratic Sexual­ity Education. By Alexander McKay. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999. ix + 214 pages, bibliography and index. Paperback, $17.95. ISBN 0-7914-4524-0. (First published in London, ON, Canada, by The Althouse Press, 1998. ISBN 0-920354-43-2.) Quotes in the first review below are from the Canadian edition; in the second review, from the American edition.

Reviewed by Robert Selverstone, PhD, a psychologist and consultant in Westport, CT.

This is the book that I wish I had written. This is a book that I strongly urge you to read. Alexander McKay, Research Coordinator for the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN) and Associate Editor of The Canadian Journal of Human Sexual­ity, has penned a penetrating analysis of the critical inter­play among the philosophical, political, ethical, and pedagogical issues confronting all who deal with research, education, or therapy regarding sexuality. And, wide though that scope is, McKay further broadens it, asserting:

The battle over sexuality education is not simply a dispute over the most effective means to promote the sexual and reproductive health of youth, but rather it is, first and foremost, a clash over the shape and direction of society itself (p. 13).

I am reminded that when I first came onto the SIECUS Board of Directors, the late Dr. Mary Calderone sought hard to impress upon me that the opposition that right-wing authoritarian groups (led by the John Birch Society in the 1960s and 1970s) had been leveling at sex education was merely the opening salvo of what she saw as their attempt to construct a more absolutist theocratic society. At that time I was not convinced. I am now! Once again, Mary was on target!

There is never much question as to where McKay is heading, since he subtitles his book Toward Democratic Sexuality Education. Befitting his training in philosophical discourse, McKay escorts the reader through a virtual syllogism of argumentation that is notable for its clarity and directness. He discusses the nature of sexuality, sexuality education, society, sexual ideologies, “The Truth” versus different truths, and then explores how these might—indeed, how they must—interact in a liberal democracy. It is not exceptional to hold that a major task of the schools—in any society—is to teach young people how to function in that society. McKay contends that this role has particular significance when applied to sexuality education.

While Marshall McLuhan might have said, “the medium is the message,” McKay insists that the process determines the product. Just as the content and the process of education in an authoritarian/absolutist society must both reflect and support that society, so too must the content and the process of education in a pluralistic democratic society reflect and support democratic principles.

In McKay’s words:

As contrasted with totalitarian societies, moral issues and social policy are the subject of never ending debate in Western democracies. It is the clash of freely articulated ideas and perspectives in reasoned debate that provides the framework for the making of presumably enlightened social policy . . . [D]emocracy endows us with the right to moral autonomy but this autonomy is genuine only when we are free to digest diverse or opposing perspectives in reaching our own point of view. Providing this opportunity to deliberate between competing points of view pervades a democratic way of life (p. 111-112).

and:

Democratic societies are founded, in part, on the principle that moral pluralism is to be both tolerated and respected. This can clearly be seen in the fact that constitutional democracies invariably enshrine the right to freedom of belief as perhaps the most basic element of the cultural or national ethos . . . Democratic sexuality education is . . . deeply committed to promoting democratic values. It is committed to the affirmation of moral pluralism and freedom of belief (p. 9).

McKay identifies the sexual ideologies currently vying for dominance in sexuality education. He traces Restrictive sexual ideology to Augustinian Christian­ity and its view of sexuality as shameful. The princi-
amples of Restrictive sexual ideology arise from an external authority (God) and prescribe pre-set standards of sexual conduct. In this moral absolutism, specific sexual acts are the object of moral evaluation. The US Congress has institutionalized the Restrictive sexual ideology through its quarter-billion dollar funding of abstinence-until-marriage sexuality education. In McKay's Permissive or liberal sexual ideology, sexual behavior can be either harmful, neutral or beneficial, and its appropriateness can be judged by individuals based upon its context, on moral principles such as equality and justice, and on its ability to enhance or diminish pleasure, relationship, love, respect, dignity, etc. McKay says,

What is problematic about all of this to Restrictive sexual ideologues, many of whom hold fixed, theistically oriented, world views, is that it allows human beings themselves to decide what is morally right and morally wrong (p. 60).

Sexuality educators who are perplexed by right-wing opposition to sexuality education that emphasizes decision-making have failed to understand that in the predetermined, absolutist nature of Restrictive sexual ideology, individual decision-making and tolerance for differences are not encouraged. For the Restrictive ideologue, there is no room to determine for oneself what is morally right or wrong; it has been predetermined.

I suspect that most people will be able to identify themselves as landing in either the Restrictive or the Permissive ideological camp. However, I found myself smiling broadly as McKay spotlighted one particular person who appears to be trapped in a stunning contradiction between the two ideologies. Thomas Lickona is a leading proponent of the character education movement and of Lawrence Kohlberg's approach to value education. Both Dr. Kohlberg and Dr. Lickona support the use of moral dilemmas to encourage young people to think and reason their way to higher levels of moral development in virtually all controversial issues. Nonetheless—and McKay cites this as evidence that approaches to sexuality education are truly ideological—Dr. Lickona's commitment to his own restrictive sexual ideology so blinds him that he abandons his support of personal decision-making and reverts to the moral absolutism and indoctrination of a Restrictive sexual ideologue by insisting that premarital abstinence is the only ethical behavior for everyone.

Whatever the merits of Lickona's moral perspective on the issue of teenage sexuality, it is striking that he has chosen indoctrination as an educational approach for this issue but favors an approach where students use their own moral reasoning for other, non-sexual controversial issues (p. 74).

After examining both ideological approaches to sexuality education, McKay asserts that it would be anti-democratic for the schools to adopt either a Restrictive or a Permissive sexual ideology.

First, a democratic philosophy of sexuality education begins not with truth statements about the nature of human sexuality, but with a commitment to promote the values of democracy (p. 143).

Sexuality education that attempts to impose ideology as opposed to promoting critical thought is developmentally harmful in that it stunts the potential for social cognitive growth (p. 149).

For McKay, and I suspect for most of us, respect for moral pluralism is a fundamental tenet of democratic society. Second, it must also foster the democratic right of all people including young people, to deliberate between different points of view in arriving at their own convictions. Both of these tasks, I believe, logically lead us to a focus on the most fundamental of all democratic rights: Freedom of belief. A democratic philosophy of sexuality must respect and promote freedom of belief (p. 6).

McKay believes that sexuality education can accomplish this only by presenting both ideological positions. It is in this final section of his exposition that, I believe, McKay's fond hopes for a reasonable compromise break down. For while, by definition, Permissives and Liberals accept the right of others to choose behavior that they would not choose for themselves (otherwise there is no meaning to the concepts of freedom and choice), Restrictives fiercely oppose such a humanistic or pluralistic (dare one say, small 'd'), democratic stance. While proponents of Permissive ideologies, by definition, are committed to an examination of alternatives as essential to the choice/decision-making process, Restrictive ideologues must also, by definition, deny access to that very consideration of alternatives.

There can be no individual decision-making permitted—or examined—because of adherence to that very absolutism. But that is a contradiction that Restrictives themselves must confront since absolutism is by its nature anti-democratic. Those of us on the Liberal side of the spectrum need not simply to contemplate, but to continue to shout about this critical anti-democratic stance in the public domain. McKay (and Calderone) were correct; it is not just about sexuality education.

Finally, though I believe this is a terrific book, I wished to the author had included an examination of the psychological correlates of the Restrictive and Permissive ideologues. While Bob Altemeyer (1996) did a
good job of addressing some of this in The Authoritarian Specter, it would have been nice to see McKay pull it all together. But perhaps that’s another book.

Reference
Altemeyer, B. (1996). The authoritarian specter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sexual Ideology and Schooling: Toward Democratic Sexuality Education. By Alexander McKay. New York: State University of New York Press, 1999. ix + 214 pages, bibliography and index. $17.95, paper. ISBN 0-7914-4524-0.

Reviewed by John P. Elia, PhD. Dr Elia has taught in the Departments of Health Education and Psychology and the Human Sexuality Studies Program at San Francisco State University since 1987. Dr Elia is Associate Editor and Senior Book Review Editor of the Journal of Homosexuality.

Alexander McKay’s Sexual Ideology and Schooling: Toward Democratic Sexuality Education makes an important contribution to the scholarship on sexuality education. It begins by acquainting the reader with the intensity of the conflict about sexuality education. The author claims that this battle is so intense because sexuality is at the heart of the nature of society itself, and that sexuality education can either serve to perpetuate conventional social norms or challenge them. As McKay claims, “What we teach young people about human sexuality will at least partially influence the shape of society’s future social norms” (p. 7). Following an explanation of how sexuality education must be understood within a larger social context, the author turns to the ongoing ideological debate about sexuality in the Western world, viz., between the Restrictive and Permissive sexual ideologues. McKay explains that the Restrictive ideology, originating from early Christianity, maintains that sexuality should be restricted to the marital bedroom for the sole purpose of procreation. To the contrary, the Permissive sexual ideology portrays sexuality as a source of pleasure, self-fulfillment, and healthy psychological adjustment. Diagonally opposed to the Restrictive ideology, the Permissive ideology supplants “... [a]bsolutist, act-centered evaluations of sexual conduct with methods of moral evaluation that emphasize individual differences in desire and person-centered relational concerns such as mutual consent, pleasure, and respect” (p. 52). In this view, a wide variety of morally acceptable sexual behaviors and relationships are possible.

Following a general discussion of sexual ideologies, the author shows how Restrictive and Permissive sexual ideologies have dominated sexuality education, and therefore how critical deliberation—one of the key concepts of a democratic education—about the myriad aspects of human sexuality has been rare. Next, the author argues how social constructionist views of sexuality allow for multiple truths about sexuality, and as such are compatible with a democratic educational framework. Based primarily on concepts derived from political liberalism, the next chapter is devoted to a discussion of the foundational components of a democratic philosophy of sexuality education. It includes ideas about moral pluralism, freedom of belief, and democratic values in general. The next major idea presented is the importance of sexuality education’s role in encouraging students to engage in critical deliberation in terms of evaluating different ideas, points of view, and claims about human sexuality. The final chapter deals specifically with what McKay claims are the most controversial topics: sexual orientation, gender equality, and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. Here, the author demonstrates how these topics can be taught successfully by using a democratic approach. Finally, the book’s conclusion ties all of the major ideas together in a cogent and well-informed fashion.

This book’s many strengths far outweigh its few minor weaknesses. Its chief strength is that it is a well-reasoned book that successfully makes readers aware of how sexuality educators are often more committed to having their ideologies gain supremacy—as Restrictive or Permissive ideologues—than to offering a democratic sexuality education, in which students become fully engaged in critical deliberation as well as afforded freedom of belief. McKay observes that a democratically based educational enterprise not only accommodates all points of view, but also transcends sexual ideologies. Other splendid qualities of this book are that it acquaints readers with: the history of movements in American and Canadian sexuality education (e.g., education based on biological aspects of reproduction, STD prevention, abstinence-only sexuality education, etc.); the contents and characteristics of prevailing sexuality education programs for teens, such as Sex Respect and Teen-Aid; the limitations and wrongheadedness of teaching from particular sexual ideologies; and the characteristics and benefits of a democratic sexuality education. To add to the richness of this volume, McKay uses an interdisciplinary perspective to advance his chief argument that a democratic sexuality education is necessary to better serve students and, ultimately, society.

Turning to this book’s minor shortcomings, it could have benefited from a treatment of how it is possible for democratic sexuality education to transpire given