



Sex Education

by Nathaniel Wright

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Sex education is a subject on which many schools, and most parents, remain silent. Rational and scientific programs to instruct young people in sexual matters are both recent and vulnerable. Religious and cultural taboos exert a powerful influence not only on sexual attitudes and behaviors, but even on the discourse of sexuality.

Despite valiant efforts on the part of educators and activists to implement effective programs to provide accurate information about sex and sexuality in public schools, those programs have been subject to attack and vilification. Indeed, their efforts have been countered by religious radicals and the Christian right, who have attempted, often successfully, to hijack the sex education movement as a means of disseminating their own repressive blend of intolerance and fear.

The scarcity of comprehensive sex education has severe consequences, especially for glbtq people. A large portion of the public money currently spent on sex education purchases curricula that ignore or denigrate glbtq people. Social conservatives and the religious right maintain that children must be protected from information about sex and sexuality, but among the consequences of ignorance and false information are intolerance and self-hatred.

History

In the United States, the movement for comprehensive sex education began to take shape in the 1960s, the era of civil rights, anti-war activism, and free love. From the mid twentieth century, organizations such as the National Education Association, the U.S. Public Health Service, and the American Medical Association called for sex education in public schools. Then, in 1964, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) was founded. Among its goals was to implement age-appropriate information on sex and sexuality (including homosexuality) in school curricula.

Mary Calderone, the first executive director of SIECUS, was a pivotal figure in the early sex education movement. Her personal views on sex education helped to shape early activism and policy. Her crusade was to break the taboos associated with talk about sex. On television she was quoted as saying, "It's a four-letter word, ending in K, and it means intercourse, and it's the most important form of intercourse there is--TALK."

Calderone's views on homosexuality, however, were less advanced, and helped to establish early on a certain divide between sex education activists and the gay rights movement. The decision by the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders did not occur until 1973, well after the first organized push for comprehensive sexuality education. Although she professed tolerance for gay people in society, Calderone made it clear that she did not personally endorse homosexuality as a lifestyle. She once said, "People are miserable if they're homosexuals."

Apart from major policy disagreements within the sex education movement itself, the culture as a whole

reacted fearfully to the idea of educating children about sex in schools. Numerous grass-roots groups of religious conservatives soon organized to oppose SIECUS and other progressive organizations when they tried to bring comprehensive sex education to communities around the country. Talk about sex in the public sphere triggered passionate emotions stemming from profound political, philosophical, and religious differences. Each local school district became a potential battleground in the struggle to provide children with information about sex and sexuality.

In 1981 the federal government began to take an active role in promoting religion-based sex education. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, signed by President Ronald Reagan, included a rider known as the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), sponsored by Republican Senators Orrin Hatch (Utah) and Jeremiah Denton (Alabama). AFLA set aside a small but significant amount of federal money to be used for the promotion of abstinence, as well as religious instruction in sexual matters within the public schools.

The law was criticized by the Supreme Court after a suit brought in 1987 by the American Civil Liberties Union, which alleged that AFLA violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment. The bill's architects were told to reformulate AFLA without the emphasis on religious teaching, but in the intervening years large amounts of money had already been siphoned off to help religious conservatives build and maintain organizations dedicated to silencing talk about comprehensive sexuality education.

A decade later conservatives racked up their second victory in the sex education funding war. The Welfare Reform Law, Section 501(b), Title V of the Social Security Act of 1996, signed by President Bill Clinton, enshrined in law the notion that "a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity." The bill also set aside \$50 million annually to promote abstinence-only sex education.

Finally, in 2000, a program was introduced with an even stricter definition of abstinence education. Called the Special Projects of Regional and National Significance--Community Based Abstinence Education (SPRANS-CBAE), the initiative doled out \$55 million in 2003 for programs that address each of the eight points in the federal definition of abstinence education. All told, the federal government now spends about \$120 million per year to teach American children that the only good way to avoid unwanted pregnancy, AIDS, and all the other unintended consequences of sexual activity, is abstinence.

One abstinence-only curriculum, called "Sex Respect," teaches that one of the best ways to avoid AIDS is to "avoid homosexual behavior." Virginitiy Pledges, another common technique used by several abstinence-only curricula, encourage students to promise not to have sex until they enter a "biblically based marriage." The one common theme of all the abstinence-only curricula is that they place ideology above information.

Moreover, recent studies show that while abstinence-only programs may delay the onset of sexual activity in some young people, they are not effective in preventing premarital sex and actually lead to a decrease in condom use and other contraception. Young people who make virginitiy pledges are statistically just as likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases as those who do not.

The United States government's attempt to pacify the demands of the religious right has had international consequences. George W. Bush's Administration has withdrawn from international treaties on population development, contraception, and HIV/AIDS prevention, and insisted that developing countries adopt abstinence-only sex education as a condition of receiving U.S. taxpayer assistance.

Despite (or perhaps because of) these policies, the U.S. has much higher rates of teenage pregnancy, abortion, unplanned pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases than other industrialized nations. A 2001 comparative study of the U.S., Canada, Sweden, France, and Great Britain found that the U.S. has the highest rates of adolescent childbearing, abortion, and STDs.

Countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and France provide their young people with accurate sexuality

information as a matter of rights. A study conducted in 1999 found that in these nations no attempt is made to stop adolescents from having sex. Instead, educators and policymakers respect adolescents' independence and privacy, and thereby encourage responsible choices. Not coincidentally, these countries have significantly lower rates of STDs and teen pregnancy than the U.S.

Sex Education and the GLBTQ Community

The discussion of homosexuality in comprehensive sexuality education plans has frequently polarized communities. In *Talk About Sex: The Battles Over Sex Education in the U.S.*, author Janice Irvine shows how the backlash against open, honest sex education is suffused with anti-gay bigotry and prejudice. "As a metaphor for the menace of sexual deviance, the issue of school discussion of homosexuality seemed to carry enormous cultural power for conservative Christian activists."

Gay people are consistently used as scapegoats in the Christian Right's opposition to comprehensive sexuality education. Irvine writes that "conversion anxiety" (fear that one's children will become gay), fueled by widespread acceptance of gay people as a reviled social category, motivates parents to "protect" their children from explicit talk about sexuality.

One curriculum drafted for New York public schools in the early 1990s came under fire for allegedly being "homosexual/lesbian propaganda," and for "teaching sodomy to first-graders." Despite widespread public support, objections to the curriculum's mention of homosexuality led to its rejection, even though the curriculum by no means made any overt endorsement of homosexuality.

Because of the fierce opposition of conservative Christians, basic discussion of sexual orientation in public schools across the country remains rare.

Unfortunately, the effects of this silence on the glbtq community are devastating. In schools, glbtq youth are almost universally harassed and discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientations or gender nonconformity. They are about twice as likely to be threatened physically, skip or drop out of school, and four times as likely to attempt suicide as their heterosexual schoolmates. Many school districts fail to provide protection from harassment; and abstinence-only curricula consistently ignore or openly denigrate glbtq youth.

Despite these dismal circumstances, glbtq people and their allies have had some success building support for comprehensive sexuality education in school and in helping alleviate the discrimination and harassment suffered by glbtq students. In 1990, when the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) was founded, there were only two gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in the entire nation's school system. Since then, that number has exploded to over 2500. While the existence of these organizations does not compensate for the absence of comprehensive sex education programs in school districts, they help support glbtq youth and protect them from harassment.

Indeed, tolerance for gay people and support for comprehensive sex education are both increasing. Surveys show that 79% of parents want their children to learn about sexual orientation in school. And 67% of parents believe children should be taught that gay people are just like other people. In the battle for comprehensive, inclusive sexuality education, the fight is difficult, primarily because of the organization and political clout of the New Right; but the struggle continues.

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