

LIES THE STORK TOLD ME:
THE CASE FOR CURRICULUM REFORM
IN AMERICAN SEX EDUCATION

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Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders made the off-the-cuff suggestion at an AIDS conference in 1994 that masturbation ought to be brought into the curriculum of sex education. To her surprise, many people found her remarks incendiary and inappropriate, and her tenure as a progressive-minded surgeon general was brought to a premature dénouement. The mainstream political spectrum deemed her unthinkably radical and unfit to hold such a high position—President Bill Clinton soon thereafter requested her resignation (Lindley). For most Americans, masturbation was simply not an activity worthy of public mention or pedagogical interest. The reaction Elders incited made it clear that what she had spoken of was subversive to be kept out of public schools and children’s minds.

The controversy revealed a deep split in the American debate about what exactly should be taught in sexual education courses. Despite being a taboo subject, the fact of the matter is that masturbation in the United States, as Alfred Kinsey reported in his two revolutionary sex studies in 1947 and 1953, is about as common as watching television or eating dinner (“Facts Sheet”). He found that 92 percent of males and 62 percent of females masturbate, with unmarried females frequently describing this supposedly elicited activity as their most important sexual outlet. If the behavior Elders spoke of was in fact already in practice by most young adults, why was there such an outcry over presenting it as a subject to an audience which in all likelihood was already familiar with it?

The Elders incident is significant because she herself did not advocate masturbation or demonstrations of masturbation, but simply a policy of bringing it under the auspices of sex education. The outcry against her was the result of fundamental differences between Elder and her political opponents in both the aims and processes of sexual education. First, while her critics believe that sexual education is an opportunity to instill valuable morals, such as abstinence, Elders believes that sexual education is purely a public health matter and should not inculcate but teach only what is necessary to protect students from the behaviors they choose to practice.

Second, for her critics, teaching a subject to students is equivalent to

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advocating its practice—the dissemination of information is not a neutral presentation. As a result, educators have an obligation to present sex in the way that they believe it ought to be practiced. For Elders, on the other hand, teaching choice does not inherently advocate or legitimize a practice; sexual education occurs largely outside the classroom, and educators must therefore present options that students must be allowed to freely choose as sexuality of any form becomes an issue in their lives.

The Current Debate Surrounding Sex Education

A debate indicative of this split between principle and pragmatism has occurred in the United States over the course of the last year, not about just masturbation, but more broadly about the federal funding of abstinence-only programs in schools. Abstinence-only is an approach to education in which educational institutions are required teach abstinence until marriage: no discussions of contraception, abortion, or pregnancy tests are permitted. Debate about this issue has also taken place in Washington. President George W. Bush made support of the program one of his primary campaign platforms in education policy (Connelly). His administration has proposed increasing the funding to abstinence-only programs from \$33 million to \$135 million (Vulliamy).

The current national debate taking place in both the academic literature and in the Beltway about the approach to sex education involves two distinct camps: proponents of abstinence-only programs and proponents of the American Civil Liberty Union's "comprehensive education" program ("ACLU" par. 3). Advocates of the abstinence-only approach support a curriculum in which schools teach children and young adults that the only successful way to remain healthy is by maintaining chastity until marriage; such an approach is touted by its advocates to be effective in reducing rates of teen pregnancy and stemming the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in schools (Connelly). Opponents of this curriculum call it "government-sponsored censorship" and argue that it is linked to a religious ideology; accordingly, they argue that teaching it in public schools would undermine the separation of church and state. On a purely practical level, opponents also argue that such abstinence only education is unrealistic since young adults will have sexual intercourse regardless of the formal education they receive, given the fact that a reported two-thirds of High School students will graduate sexually active (Vulliamy). Moreover, these opponents insist that denying young people information about sexual health is "playing roulette" with their safety. Teens who choose to remain sexually active will not receive important information about what do in the event of pregnancy or the contraction of an STD ("ACLU").

Despite these claims of objectivity, in reality both sets of claims are very much driven by a particular political ideology. Abstinence-only education invests itself in a set of religious ideals that value marriage, traditional family arrangements, and chastity. Advocates of the comprehensive curriculum are connected to a more value-neutral mindset that teens have an inherent right to make unimpeded decisions about their sexual activity. The comprehensive approach favors the free dissemination of information about abortion, contraception, and different sexualities.

While its critics may be right, in that such an approach might unintentionally be perceived as advocating some of these practices and behaviors, the availability of information about sex and sexuality offers what is a far more realistic approach to caring for the well being of young people. In keeping with that key observation and the principle of individual choice, this article proposes a normative agenda for sex education that presents information about all forms of sexuality and about different methods of contraception (abstinence among them) within a historical framework that will allow students to better understand the context in which they will make their lifestyle choices. Sex education, it is presumed, should not advocate any particular activities but should instead present a breadth of options in order to inform an ultimately free individual choice. While the dissemination of information is not neutral, offering such a choice is a far superior alternative for the promotion of the general public health as well as the welfare of teenagers as both citizens and healthy individuals.

Sex Education in Context: A Brief History of the American Curriculum

Sex education does not only take place in the classroom: it occurs in all facets of life. Family, place of worship, entertainment, advertising, and media all constantly educate about sex and sexuality, ultimately engendering a unique set of prescriptions. This bombardment produces a discourse on gender, sexuality, familial roles, and sexual intercourse that can eventually lead to the internalization of such information. But formalized sex education (defined as sex education that takes place in the venue of schools, conferring a level of authority and legitimacy. As according to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemonic inculcation, schools are places students often view as irrefutable houses of expertise and socially correct knowledge. Sex educators ought to be cognizant of the "real world" outside the classroom, the world from which many students learn about things sex education often ignores. Its purpose should be holistic and not taxonomic, and should work to debunk much of the oft-oversimplified understanding of sex and sexuality offered by society as a whole. As authoritative mouthpieces for American social values, schools should produce a comprehensive curriculum while

aware of cultural representations of sex and sexuality. Sex education should not perpetuate these constructs of sex and sexuality, but should elucidate all issues surrounding them, including sexual orientation and gender.

In her book *Creative Approach to Sex Education and Counseling*, Patricia Schiller outlines a brief history of American cultural ideas about sex and sexuality in relationship to its pedagogical implementation, which she argues have largely failed to prevent practices and behaviors deemed undesirable. Moral and legal codes intertwined within American society, she asserts, dominate what is and has been taught and schools (Schiller 20-21). The origins of such legal codes and sexual ethics lies with Puritan law codes, influenced by their strictly Calvinist interpretation of Biblical moral principles (23). These religious interpretations taught sex as negative even within the confines of marriage and precluded sex education outside the religious framework.

The beginning of World War I brought with it a sweeping re-evaluation of sex and sexuality, and a more overt discussion emerged. Men who traveled to Europe to fight were deprived of the one “acceptable” form of sex (that is, with their wife in the confines of marriage). As men needed to satisfy their sexual urges, prostitution became a “much-sought-after” pleasure (40). Because of this increase in sexual partners, fighting men were often afflicted with sexually transmitted diseases. The military felt compelled to begin incorporating information about these diseases, deviating from the abstinence-only thinking taught at home. It began teaching men about how to deal with infections, but also started moving bases out of cities as a means to curtail sexual activity (22). This dissemination-of-information approach represented a break in formal sex education.

After the war, the roaring twenties brought about more sexual liberation, and some churches even produced literature that separated sexual intercourse from sin, asserting that sex could be a “positive and stimulating force for good” (still only in the context of marriage) (25). The 1920s brought the concept of homosexuality to the forefront, but dealt with it primarily as a “perversity and a vice,” leading to calls for schools to end “indoor athletics” because it resembled Greeks and Roman “perverse” behaviors involving contact with other men while “wearing scanty clothing or no clothing while bathing” (Kirsch 334-335). Regardless of the immediate impact, admitting that homosexuality existed was still a notable breakthrough in the history of sex education, since as a subject it was almost completely ignored previously in a school setting.

The late 1940s and early 1950s brought about a watershed series of studies frankly and candidly documenting American sexual behaviors, the Kinsey Reports, comprised of two studies, one dealing with male sexual behavior and the other with female. The studies’ findings on masturbation, homo-

sexuality, orgasms, and pre-marital sexual intercourse were extremely controversial (Breasted 20). Based on his findings, he produced a “sexuality scale,” one that explained orientation as a point on a range rather than as a binary (“Facts Sheet”). Individuals, Kinsey contends, were not simply either heterosexual or homosexual, but located somewhere in between. The report on men was substantially more surprising than the one on females: it found that that 95 percent of males engaged in pre-marital sex, 70 percent of males had sex with prostitutes, and 37 percent of men engaged in at least one homosexual experience (Reisman 4). American sex educators could simply not ignore this startling findings. Schools began to discuss more varied facets of sexuality, and educators began to enter words like “homosexuality” and “masturbation” into their pedagogical vocabularies.

Education about sex, whether in school, home, or place of worship, seemed highly affected by new information and changing social mores. In 1964 the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States was formed to “develop, collect, and disseminate information, promote comprehensive education about sexuality, and advocate the right of individuals to make responsible sexual choices” (“Facts Sheet”). This organization developed a curriculum for sex education advocating a more candid and less moralistic or religious approach to sex education. The coalition of clergy, doctors, educators, and other professionals who formed SIECUS wanted to incorporate more than just the “textbook definitions of the biology of conception and reproduction” into sex education, which was to be differentiated from simple reproductive education (Hill 2). SIECUS also called the moralistic version of sex education “deficient,” seeking to make it more independent from the Ethics courses in which it was usually taught (Hill 6-7).

With this burgeoning field of sex education getting more attention and evaluation than ever before, many new questions arose. Is sex an appropriate thing to teach in schools? Shouldn't the parents teach it? What exactly are schools going to teach? The SIECUS group viewed sexuality as an undeniable trait of humans that needed to be discussed. To them, sex education was more complicated than the birds-and-the-bees routine produced by “head in the sand” apprehension of previous generations.

Why Different Approaches Are Advocated

While the SIECUS projected effectively ended debate about sex education's place in secondary schools (now federally mandated, it was there to stay), it also provided a clear dividing line between the two opposing approaches to sex education. One advocated progressive exploration and discussion of sex and sexuality, the other an abstinence-only policy that avoided promoting other forms of contraceptive and specifically rebuked non-hetero-

sexual activity. This dichotomy has been with us ever since, and was abundantly clear when Jocelyn Elders made her remarks about masturbation. The two viewpoints are still battling in Washington today as Congress decides whether or not to support President Bush's proposed funding increase for abstinence-only programs.

While both advocates and opponents of abstinence-only seek the same basic goal of teen health, differences in principle are still evident in how each group defines "health." Conservative advocates of abstinence define health simply as preventing of sexually transmitted diseases, decreasing unwanted pregnancies, lowering the divorce rate, and increasing the institution of marriage (McIlaney). On the other hand, liberal advocates' definition of health includes some of the same goals (such as prevention of STD's and decreasing unwanted pregnancies), but further include an understanding of sexuality and the freedom to choose the means to maintain healthiness. Unlike conservatives, they argue that sex itself is not a problem and not something that schools needs to be control; only presented responsibly so as to ensure that students make educated decisions to minimize the health risks (Hill 6).

Behind abstinence-advocacy groups often resides a Christian religious affiliation, one that they are not afraid of admitting (though some fail to mention Christianity, marriage, homosexuality, or monogamy explicitly in any of their literature) (McIlaney). The progressive Elders, who at nearly seventy is still advocating for the same changes she was nine years ago, asserts that formalized sex education should be a routine part of learning, starting in kindergarten and continuing until graduation (Pardini).

Such a lingering religious and ethical cleavage goes to show that sex education is never just about public health. No matter what is taught and regardless of who teaches it, there is an investment in the type of society that results from a particular approach to sex education. Depending on whether it is critical of how repressively or explicitly that culture deals with sex and sexuality, educators will always have to teach sex education within the framework of their own ideal society. Advocates of both camps are looking to produce some specific set of sexual mores in their students, whether it be an acceptance of a broader scope of sexual practices or an increase in the institution of heterosexual marriage.

Aside from moral reasons, there are also explicitly political calculations involved for policymakers when deciding which approach to champion. For example, it is important to look at exactly why the Bush administration is seeking to increase funding for abstinence-only approaches (Connelly). Though ideologically aligned with the moral message that is coupled with the abstinence-only approach, it is important not to discount the political advantage to be gained from the program. First, accomplishing this relatively low-priority measure will help to appease his Christian Right con-

stituents, who have criticized President Bush on other policies such as his stance on stem cell research to immigration (Vulliamy). Second, the program is very much in alignment with the Bush administration's results-based approach to education. The success of some of the abstinence-only plans already in place across the United States is often quite surprisingly. Ten "very promising" evaluations of the program are circulating in the educational field, citing findings that many of the students involved in these programs (about a third) have taken "virginity pledges" which in turn has lessened the overall percentage of STD's and unwanted pregnancies in the schools studied (Connelly). And even some proponents of comprehensive sex education have lauded the results the programs have produced—Douglass Kirby, of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy cited that there is "strong evidence" that "some" abstinence only programs have worked in producing the health results desired by both sides (Connelly).

Thus it is important to not fall into the analytical trap of simply seeing advocates and opponents of particular sex education approaches as only being motivated by a particular religious or moral ideology. There are also very political and practical goals to be achieved from finding the approach to sex education—in this case, abstinence-only— that empirical evidence shows to be the most effective in improving public health.

The Fallibility of Abstinence-Only Programs

Removing principle from the debate over sexual education, however, is not necessarily a laudable achievement. Such an overtly political approach that emphasizes success often accompanies a failure to recognize the unrealistic, anachronistic, and repressive approach to educating about sex represented by abstinence-only. Simply gauging the public health success of abstinence-only education ignores the moralizing social forces that went into shaping the program. The key distinction between the approaches remains to be the classical liberal principle of choice: abstinence-only programs promote only one way to maintain good health, whereas comprehensive programs offer a variety of options to do so. Some watchdog groups have even called into question the constitutionality of abstinence-only programs in schools, since it "promotes a single, religious-based point of view about sex and sexuality" ("What's our Stand...").

The psychological ramifications of abstinence-only sex education—a facet of the health it is trying to promote—are egregiously harmful. Students who fall outside of this policy (as the title suggests, the only way to do things) are typically estranged and often struggle with identity and feelings of acceptance (Harrison 54). Children who are already sexually active or have been sexually abused have a difficult time understanding where exactly they fall in

such a program, as resources available to them are not made known. In a 1991 study of homosexual male students in an all-boys school where such abstinence-only programs were being taught, all said that discussion of homosexuality was “invisible” in the education (54). Such negligence to incorporate all facets of sexuality in abstinence-only sex education is “a form of discrimination” (“What’s Our Stand...”). Abstinence-only sex education not only excludes homosexuality from its teaching, but generally presents an antiquated view of male/female relationships, often subtly advocating a masculine, reproductive view of sex in which the male is defined as the dominant player, the female as the passive one (Hill 25, Harrison 52). Such programs also typically present marriage, and not simply monogamy, as the pre-requisite for safe sex. Given that marriage, in all but a few states, must legally be between a male and female, abstinence-only education therefore prescribes only heterosexual as an acceptable form of sexuality.

Sex, with or without the institution of marriage, is a part of the human experience; to educate about sex is really to educate about human relations (Harrison 78). To legitimize sex only through marriage is to create a fractured view of reality and define human sexuality as a very specific set of legal behaviors.

A Prescription for Sex Education

Who should teach a sex education curriculum that includes providing choices in context? As sex and sexuality are part of a very complicated range of social interactions, it should be taught by not just schools, but everybody in a young person’s life, from their parents to role models in the media in order to be celebrated and understood without dangerous oversimplifications. At what age should students be taught? Elders advocates sex education infused into every year of school from kindergarten through graduation. In order to be able to combat stereotypes and misunderstandings of sexuality, sex education ought to be geared towards illuminating existing behaviors that digress from social norms and not simply describing the biological processes of reproduction. And finally, what ought to be taught? Everything and anything, from birth control (including abstinence) to masturbation, heterosexuality to homosexuality; information about preventing diseases and performing abortion; a history of religious interpretations and cultural representations; most importantly, a history of the sex education itself.

Aside from its moral and pedagogical failings, the dogmatism of abstinence-only education deprives sexually active students of critical information about how to stay healthy. Such a policy allows educators to “play roulette with children’s health.” To truly meet the health needs of students studying sex and sexuality, a candid understanding of sex as a part of human nature

and will occur no matter what constraint is used must be realized. Sex education mediated through the filter of a single approach leads to vast misunderstanding and destruction of the health of the students who are being taught.

While President Bush's stance on abstinence-only is indeed more "medical than moral," the approach he advocates remains a narrow-minded and fundamentally flawed one (Vulliamy). From an ethical standpoint, sex education should not preach right and wrong ways to be healthy; such an approach is contradictory to the freedoms in this country that we celebrate. The point is not to simply block sex from occurring with pedagogical restraints in order to keep students healthy, but to understand its occurrence and present the means and methods of a multitude of lifestyles safe from anguish and disease. Sex education can be informative and health-promoting without coercing or advocating one irrefutably correct set of beliefs or understandings. The dissemination of information is oftentimes incendiary, but exposing students to a range of issues does not have to be prescriptive—it can simply be informative.

Conclusion

Joycelyn Elders hit a nerve when she even muttered the word masturbation, and even more so when she advocated its being brought into the realm of sex education. But what Elders wanted—a frank discussion of sex and sexuality—was too far outside the norm of political understanding of the subject for American public discourse. Elders was not talking about advocating or showing students how to masturbate, she was simply asserting that pretending it does not exist is counter to both the goal of promoting freedom and improving public health. Those two aims, Elders believed, were not contradictory: sex education can do both. With the Bush administration on the brink of making abstinence the primary approach taught in schools, we must seriously reevaluate the goals of sex education and craft policy accordingly. Sex education must be a presentation of options and complexities, exploring the spectrums of sexuality while cognizant of all the potential consequences.

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