

Sex Education: History, Controversy, and Deliberation
How we can learn from the past and deliberate the future

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Table of Contents:

Introduction.....3
Chapter I: History of Sex Education.....6
Chapter II: Current Debate.....20
Chapter III: Tension, Ignorance, and Apathy.....26
Chapter IV: Mutual Understanding.....32
Conclusion.....36

Introduction

Sex education curriculum has greatly evolved in the United States over the past 150 years. It has advocates and opponents at varying levels of intensity. The current debate between these sides has been tearing apart communities and schools throughout the United States. The tension can be defined in many ways, but through the research presented in this paper, I will argue that at the core of this tension is a disagreement at the foundational level and a misunderstanding of potential commonalities.

Sex education in the United States is a relevant topic because it is highly controversial with varying moral stigmas and values. It has a rich, evolving history that affects how we teach it today. In addition, almost every child has some sort of sex education class or portion of a class in their lifetime. Related controversial topics are increasing in tension, such as abortion and homosexuality, causing sex education to continue to be a hot button issue across the United States.

As we will see, sex education is a broad term for various programs and curriculum in and outside of schools today. To be clear, I will start with some definitions. First, according to MacMillan Dictionary (www.macmillandictionary.com), sex education is “information about sex and sexual relationships that adults teach to young people, especially in school.” There are numerous variations of sex education and we will not discuss each one in this paper, but instead categorize them into two commonly identified types: comprehensive sex education and abstinence-only sex education. Comprehensive sex education includes programs where young people are taught about the basics of how sex works, how babies are conceived, what the risks of sexual activity can be, how to practice “safer sex”, how to discuss sex with your parents

and/or your partner, and many times where to get protection (ie: condoms, birth control, Plan B, etc.). They may also include discussions about the possibility of abortion, homosexuality as an “alternate lifestyle”, and even demonstrations on how to properly use a condom. Abstinence-only education includes the basics of how sex works and how babies are made, but teaches young people to not have sex at all until they are married, hence, abstinence-only. They do not include safer sex or where to get protection if one chooses to have pre-marital sex. This type of education may also include students taking a virginity or purity pledge, vowing to stay virgins until marriage.

These two different types of education bring us to defining the two sides of the sex education debate. In her book, *When Sex Goes to School*, Kristin Luker (2006) describes in detail the discussions she has had with real community members about their values, morals, and views on sex education. She distinguishes two groups of people: the sexual liberals and the sexual conservatives. These two groups are not necessarily also defined by their religious or political affiliation. Sexual liberals are those who generally believe that the more information young people receive, the more educated, and thus better, their decisions will be. Sexual conservatives are those who generally believe that giving young people too much information or information that contradicts itself (telling kids not to have sex, but also giving them options if they decide to anyway) will confuse young people, leading them to make poor decisions. We will discuss these two groups in further detail in the section about the current debate.

We will see how history has shaped sex education as it is currently and look at the various periods of agreement and disagreement. There have been so many opinions and changes that current sex education in the United States is more like a patchwork of

contradicting ideas than a clear picture of how or what to teach. At times, both sides have accused the other side of being absolutely wrong and depicted the opposition as everything from scandalous and evil to narrow-minded and discriminatory. I will argue that in order to make progress to rectify this tension, both sides must embrace the commonalities they do have, recognize the similarities in their ultimate desires, and put aside some of their differences. I will specifically focus on deliberative democracy as a potential method for communities to focus on their common goals to better teach their young people such a controversial subject. This method is designed to allow citizens to participate in policy making in their communities, but not like in debates or town hall meetings where tempers fly and accusations are made. Deliberative democracy fosters discussion, fact-finding, and collaboration among participants. This process of decision making is discussed more fully in the chapter final chapter, “Mutual Understanding”.

CHAPTER I: History of Sex Education

Unlike subjects like math and English, sex education is more about values and choices than formulas or theorems. Before sex education was a public issue, it was not generally discussed at all, and only sparingly at home or through churches. The first public sex education guide we find is from the late 17th century, when, in 1684, Aristotle's Masterpiece was first published in English, which is a detailed manual of sexual parts, sex, and pregnancy (Moran, 2001, p. 702; Aristotle's Masterpiece, 1684). In 1837, Reverend John Todds' moralistic Student's Manual was published, in which he encouraged young men to overcome the "secret vice" of masturbation because, as he concluded, ejaculation decreased energy and productivity (Moran, 2001, p. 702; Cornblatt, 2009). Sylvester Graham traveled the East Coast in the 1880's warning audiences that "self-pollution" (masturbation) was responsible for "everything from warts and constipation to insanity and death" (Cornblatt, 2009).

Other early forms of sex education encouraged or required students to take a pledge of abstinence until marriage, much like many sex education programs do today. In the 1880's and 1890's, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), a group of women who were concerned about destruction caused by alcohol and other social problems (wctu.org, n.d.), called for students to take a vague pledge of premarital sexual abstinence as part of its White Cross Movement for personal purity (Moran, 2001, p. 702). The WCTU lives by and defines temperance as "moderation in all things healthful; total abstinence from all things harmful" (wctu.org, n.d.)

These early sex educators were primarily focused on moral sexual behavior. The purpose of their programs was to educate and protect young people from harm. Some

programs included claims about the dangers of masturbation or premarital sex, and were addressed to help people choose to be more moral or pure.

Progressive Era: Social Hygiene Movement

In 1913, the Social Hygiene Movement began. About a dozen prominent citizens in the New York area met and founded the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), which was the first group to advocate sex education (Luker, 2006). They thought that the only way to answer the problems of prostitution, venereal diseases, and men's exploitation of women was to educate Americans about the proper use of sexuality (Moran, 2001, p. 702). They argued that "sex education was essential to dispel the ignorance about sex, disease, and immorality that made prostitution and other misbehavior possible" (Moran, 2001, p. 702). Their central document was *Social Diseases and Marriage* by Dr. Prince A. Morrow, a New York dermatologist, published in 1904 (Moran, 2001, p. 702).

This group was prominent and determined. Its members included professors, lawyers, physicians, and a woman minister who helped found both the Women's Peace Party and the NAACP. They had great financial support from upstanding citizens like John D. Rockefeller, Jr., heir to the Standard Oil fortune; Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co.; Mrs. E. H. Harriman, the wife of the railroad entrepreneur; Edward S. Harkness, also of Standard Oil; and Henry C. Frick, formerly of Carnegie Steel, who each gave individual contributions of \$1,000-\$5,000 to the new organization, the equivalent of \$15,000-\$75,000 today (Moran, 2001, p. 702; Luker, 2006). Other groups such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Men's

Hebrew Association desired cooperation between their organization and the new Social Hygienists to support sex education.

Having such prominent figures invest so much time and money into sex education at that time undoubtedly demonstrates the desire for a more organized, comprehensive program to educate young people on the risks and meaning of sexual encounters, as well as their sexual health. At that time, progressives used “hygiene” as encompassing health in all its dimensions: social, mental, spiritual, and physical. The word “social” was special as well, as it was a euphemism for sex, but also because the proper use of sexuality was intimately related to all the pieces of “hygiene” (Luker, 2006).

The Social Hygienists were not the only organization pushing for more organized sex education in that time period. The National Education Association called for teacher training programs in sexuality education in 1912 (Pardini, n.d.). This is the first time we see the public school systems taking a direct interest in the sex education our young people were being taught.

Throughout the 1910s sex educators switched their audience from adults in public lectures to students in public schools in order to teach young people a mix of medical and moral lessons about “anatomy, proper thoughts, and Protestant, middle class morality” (Moran, 2001, p. 702). Thus far churches and political groups both agreed that some sort of sex education was necessary to prevent arising problems, specifically syphilis and other venereal diseases. This harmony would see its end as two groups began charting different courses.

The Sexual Revolution

The beginning of the 20th century opened the door to what many refer to as the first and only real sexual revolution (Luker, 2006). As previously noted, prior to the 1900's, sex and sex education were generally not discussed in homes or in schools. When it was, there was usually a negative tone used, and the discussion was associated with words like "dirty" and "immoral" (Luker, 2006). This time period in America introduced the short skirts of the flapper, increased immigration, rising divorce rates, coeducation, and more women began smoking and drinking, which made apparent that a new age had come about (Luker, 2006).

There were two things going on at the same time. Many people, including editorialists and the Social Hygienists, were seeing a disconnect between sex and procreation (Luker, 2006). This was thought to be a threat to marriage. Previously, the purpose of marriage was to be fruitful and multiply (in other words, have lots of children), and if that was no longer the purpose, what would keep marriages together? Next, the rising rates of venereal disease among soldiers during World War I were cause for concern. There was a general agreement that young people needed education about these and other risks of sexual activity. Sex education in universities and public schools expanded significantly. Funding from the newly passed Chamberlain Kahn Act (1918) allocated money to educate soldiers about venereal diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhea.

Much of the early sex education information was presented to soldiers in films, such as *Fit to Fight*, *The End of the Road*, and *Damaged Goods*. In *Damaged Goods*, a man has sex with a prostitute the night before his wedding, gets syphilis, passes the

disease on to his newborn baby, and then commits suicide (Pernick, 1993). The films received positive reviews, and were later edited for high school classrooms, partly due to a 1919 report from the U.S. Department of Labor's Children's Bureau suggested that soldiers would have been better off if they had received sex instruction in school (Cornblatt, 2009; Moran, 2001, p. 702). The Social Hygienists helped teach soldiers about sexual hygiene. Their instructors used a machine called the stereomotorgraph to show soldiers microscopic slides of syphilis and gonorrhea organisms, as well as symptoms of the diseases on the body of an actual soldier (Cornblatt, 2009).

Another push for soldiers was a new single standard of sex equality. They were shown filmstrips and given lectures that men and women were to be equals in marriage. Some pamphlets given at this time were even promoting the importance of mutual orgasm in marriage. This was in the very beginning of the 20th century. As absurd as it seems to educate a soldier about the importance of a mutual orgasm in the face of war, this teaching was seen as an important tool to prevent the rapid spread of venereal disease, possibly to encourage more meaningful sexual encounters and discourage numerous sexual partners.

By 1920, at least 25% of public high schools offered some form of sex education through biology and social studies classes, poster exhibits, or lectures by physicians. They also used film to enhance sex education. The American Social Hygiene Association produced *The Gift of Life*, which explicitly warned students about the “solitary vice.” It was said that “Masturbation may seriously hinder a boy’s progress towards vigorous manhood. It is a selfish, childish, stupid habit” (Moran, 2001, p. 702; Cornblatt, 2009, para. 6). This sex education was still focused on abstinence until

marriage, although it was not explicitly required. At this time, sex education drew most of its funding and energy from public health officials in individual cities and states rather than federal allocations (Moran, 2001, p. 702). Sex education was actually quite popular at this time, probably at least partly due to the pro-marriage mantra of the programs offered (Luker, 2006, p. 59).

The Expansion of Sex Education

During the next few decades, sex education grew in popularity and drew more training and materials for sex education in schools. The field of sex education also expanded. Sex education became a broader subject of family life education, and new professions, organizations, and ideologies emerged. Sociologists, marriage counselors, therapists, home economists, physical education specialists, social workers, nurses, mental hygienists, and family life specialists all took responsibility for the teaching of family life education and many produced materials to use as well (Luker, 2006, p. 60). In the 1930s, the US Office of Education began to publish materials and train teachers (Cornblatt, 2009). In 1940, the U.S. Public Health Service strongly advocated sex education in schools, labeling it an “urgent need” (Pardini, n.d.).

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, courses in human sexuality began to appear on college campuses (Cornblatt, 2009). In 1953, the American School Health Association launched a nationwide program in family life education, and in 1955 the American Medication Association and the National Education Association published five pamphlets that were regularly referred to as “the sex education series” for schools (Pardini, n.d.).

Meanwhile, the American Social Hygiene Association gave credit to family life education as a remedy for

divorce, masturbation, lack of self control in sexual and financial life, sexual maladjustment, delinquency, crime, and marriages of ‘differing races, religions and nationalities,’ in addition to building character, preparing young men (and women) for service in the military, and helped young people present a good image of Americans abroad. (Luker, 2006, p. 61)

In other words, the American Social Hygiene Association gave family life education credit to be able to fix all social problems of the times. Educators drew from broad cultural agreements that sex outside of marriage was wrong and sinful, as well as quite risky. This is why family life education was generally accepted as a benefit to our young people. This type of education taught the same values that most people held to be true.

First wave of Organized Opposition (1960s-1980s)

The 1960s were a time when many believe the world changed forever. They brought revolutions and movements in many social realms. The second feminist movement grew; the Civil Rights movement included Martin Luther King Jr’s *I Have a Dream* speech; hatred and fear led to the assassinations of former President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X; the first man walked on the moon; Elvis Presley shocked audiences with his hip shaking performances; the Vietnam War brought men overseas and protesters to the streets; LSD became a widely used psychedelic drug; and “free love” became prevalent.

Sex education was encouraged by some during this time of recreational drug use and casual sex in hopes of protecting young people from venereal disease and unwanted pregnancy. Mary Steichen Calderone, a physician who had been the medical director at Planned Parenthood from 1958 until 1964, overturned the American Medical Association policy against physicians disseminating information on birth control (National Library of Medicine). Calderone went on to found SIECUS (Sex Information Education Council of the United States) in 1964, in part to challenge the authority of the American Social Hygiene Association, which then dominated sex-education curriculum development (Cornblatt, 2009). She believed that sex education needed to be more than about pregnancy and what many liberals disdainfully call “just the plumbing” education.

About the same time, the organized opposition to sex education gained strength, despite the fact that most sex educators were generally conservative. We can see a sharp divide in viewpoints as those in favor of sex education continued to develop programs and educate teachers, while those in opposition attacked those programs and made egregious allegations against them. Opponents publicly attacked the allegedly radical comprehensive sex education programs favored by SIECUS and its leader Mary Calderone (Irvine, 2002). Sex education was marked by public animosity from that point forward, even though the AIDS crisis and teenage pregnancy concerns caused more schools to institute some form of instruction (Moran, 2001, p. 702).

During the second sexual revolution in the 1960s and into the 1970s, sex education began to respond to the separation of sex and marriage. Groups like the Christian Crusade and the John Birch Society began to passionately attack sex education in the local public schools. They attacked SIECUS and sex education overall for

promoting promiscuity and moral depravity, describing it as “smut” and “raw sex,” and termed the effort to teach about sexuality “a filthy Communist plot” (Irvine, 2002).

Phyllis Schlafly, leader of the far-right Eagle Forum, which continues to strongly support conservative and traditional values, argued that sex education resulted in an increase in sexual activity among teens (Pardini, n.d.). They charged sex education as serving merely to

make sexual promiscuousness fashionable, marriage a temporary convenience, divorce commonplace, chastity a joke, and fidelity a symbol of backwardness.

[They] encourage premarital sexual experiments and relations, the unlimited use of contraceptives, and a widespread resort to abortion...[They] convert the sexual act from its natural reproductive function to solely a source of pleasure, without corresponding responsibility. (John Birch Society Newsletter, 1964, p. 5)

Whether or not this was actually happening, it is clear to see how these conservative and fundamental religious groups could gain support by making such daunting claims about the curriculum. Sex education was becoming political.

In the widely distributed 1968 pamphlet entitled "Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?" Gordon Drake and James Hargis framed sex education as communist indoctrination: "[If] the new morality is affirmed, our children will become easy targets for Marxism and other amoral, nihilistic philosophies—as well as VD!" (Cornblatt, 2009, para. 9). Rumors spread that sex instructors were encouraging students to be homosexuals or even stripping and having sex in front of their classes. "Religious conservatives began using sex education to their political advantage," says Janice M. Irvine, author of *Talk About Sex: The Battles Over Sex Education in the United States*

(2002). "They had this really scary rhetoric." She notes that opponents to sex education used anti-communist rhetoric, among other things, and "drew on languages and images of danger and shame available in the broader sexual culture and made them specific to debates over sex education" (Irvine, 2002, p. 49).

Irvine refers to this outcry as "sex panic" in her article *Emotional Scripts of Sex Panics* (2006). She explains how emotional scripts, defined as rhetoric strategically developed to produce intense emotional responses, lead to heated emotions, leading to panic (Irvine, 2006). In the above examples, groups like Christian Crusade and the John Birch Society, along with people like Gordon Drake, all are passionately emotional about sex education, and have become extreme. It is no wonder that parents began protesting sex education programs in school districts across the country.

Both sides gained a good deal of support. Sexual conservatives gained support of groups like Focus on the Family, founded by Dr. James Dobson in 1977; Concerned Women for America, founded by Beverly LaHaye, wife of conservative Protestant activist and best-selling author Tim LaHaye, in 1979; and the backing of many conservative evangelical churches. Sexual liberals have groups like Planned Parenthood, SIECUS, and the National Education Association on their side, in addition to school administrators and teachers, who are generally in favor of more information for young people as opposed to less (Luker, 2006, p. 227).

One commonly liberal church, the United Church of Christ, recommended at this time that local churches, associations, and conferences initiate study and dialog to the meaning of human sexuality in the theological context (EC, 1973). They wanted to

understand and teach the best programs for their young members to do exactly what everyone else wanted to do: prevent venereal disease and unwanted pregnancy.

As conservative religious groups and community members protested sex education, the United States Office of Education gave New York University a grant to develop graduate programs for training sex education teachers (Cornblatt, 2009). The United States government was pushing education to “fix” the social and health problems associated with sex, even as the opposition protested and was strengthening. Sex education continued to be pushed into the political realm. Senator Edward Kennedy sponsored legislation in 1978 to expand comprehensive sex education and contraceptive services in an attempt to decrease teenage pregnancy rates. Then, in 1981, Republican Senators Orrin Hatch and Jeremiah Denton sponsored the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), designed to redirect federal money from comprehensive sex education to pro-family organizations. It is at this time that the term “abstinence education” is introduced (Luker, 2006, p. 222).

This is the beginning of an ongoing divide in politics. Before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, not many sexual or gender issues came up in the state or federal legislation debates. Those that did generally received more support from liberal Republicans than from Democrats. Democrats at this time were still essentially immigrants and workers, and had close ties with the Catholic Church, so they sided with traditional family values and gender roles (Luker, 2006). Republicans were more supportive than their Democratic counterparts of divorce reform and attempts to overturn the 1873 Comstock Act, which made contraception illegal. They were part of the

affluent well-educated, and called for a certain amount of gender and sexual equality due to their financial and economic status (Luker, 2006).

In the 1970s, however, conservative Catholics and Evangelical Protestants began to move into the Republican Party. This was partly due to the decision of *Roe v. Wade* to legalize abortion in 1973. Being pro-life became almost a requirement in order to run as a Republican, as being pro-choice became a requirement to run as a Democrat (Luker, 2006, pp. 225 & 236).

Still, during the 1970s and 1980s, activists on both sides agreed that sex education was the best response to the dual problems of teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. When the gender revolution began challenging traditional family roles and values, opponents of liberal issues such as abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, pornography, and sex education began organizing and growing into a regular social movement. Its members repeatedly referred to it as the “traditional values” or “social issues” coalition, or, more regularly, the pro-family movement (Luker, 2006, p. 221). This led to more individuals and organizations to be mobilized, such as Phyllis Schlafly’s Stop ERA, which became the Eagle Forum, and Connaught Marshner of the Free Congress Foundation, in addition to the conservative Christian groups mentioned earlier.

The AFLA money was used for organizations where conservative, traditional values were strong, and many times brought more people together just because of their values. They had a place to meet. Sexuality issues brought out more people on both sides of the issue, and have even been compared to the binding that anti-communism once played in conservative constituencies (Petchesky, 1983).

When the AIDS and HIV pandemic began in the 1980s, proponents of sex education found their position strengthened (Cornblatt, 2009). By 1983, sex education was being taught within the context of more comprehensive family life education programs or human growth and development courses—emphasizing reproduction, self-esteem, responsibility, decision making, contraception, family finances, and parenting skills (Pardini, n.d.). In 1986 the US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop issued a report calling for comprehensive AIDS and sexuality education in public schools, beginning as early as the third grade. “There is now no doubt that we need sex education in schools and that it [should] include information on heterosexual and homosexual relationships,” Koop wrote in his report. “The need is critical and the price of neglect is high. The lives of our young people depend on our fulfilling our responsibility” (C. Everett Koop, n.d.).

This forced the Religious Right to rethink opposition strategies. They could no longer focus on banning sex education due to the social acceptance of the need to prevent HIV and AIDS. They could, however, push for fear-based, abstinence-only sex education (Pardini, n.d.).

By the mid-1990s, every state had passed mandates for AIDS education (sometimes tied to general sex education and sometimes not). But as some form of sex education became inevitable in the era of HIV and AIDS, sexual conservatives launched a movement to rebrand sex education as "abstinence education." Religious conservatives helped add provisions for abstinence education to the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, and the Federal government directed tens of millions of dollars to abstinence-education programs for the first time (Cornblatt, 2009).

There continued to be differing views on what should be taught. At the 1994 United Nations conference on AIDS, then Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders was asked about promoting masturbation to prevent young people from engaging in riskier sexual behavior. "I think that it is something that's part of human sexuality and it's part of something that perhaps should be taught," Elders replied. The negative reaction to her response forced her to eventually resign (Irvine, 2002, p. 1; Cornblatt, 2009, para. 10).

Chapter II: Current Debate

Currently, the sex education debate is divided into two opposing sides: sexual conservatives, who advocate abstinence-only sex education programs, and sexual liberals, who advocate comprehensive sex education programs. Kristin Luker spent two decades interviewing and engaging in dialogue about sex education in several communities across America and from those discussions distinguished these two groups, from which she wrote her book, *When Sex Goes to School* (2006). She sees these sides as having four main arguments.

The first is the difference in the value and place of information. Sexual liberals believe that giving kids more information will lead them to make better decisions. If a young person knows all there is to know about sex, the risks associated with it, and the precautions they can take to protect themselves better, then they can use that information to formulate their own values and make wise decisions. Comprehensive sex education programs are centered around a “scientific rationality arising from Enlightenment ideals about truth, justice, and individual rights” (Kendall, 2013, p. 226). Kendall and Luker both agree that this school of thought focuses on information sharing.

Sexual conservatives believe that giving kids more information will confuse them, such as telling them that abstinence is the best way to prevent pregnancy and STIs, but also telling them how to get contraceptives if they choose to still engage in sexual activity. They feel that giving kids a simple, clear message is the best method.

The second argument is on how men and women are to conform themselves. Liberals believe men and women should have equal responsibilities and that women should be able to express their sexuality as men are able. Abstinence-only programs are

based more on a biblical foundation (Kendall, 2013, p. 227). Conservatives believe men should lead the household and women should keep their place primarily as homemakers; not that women should not have outside occupations, but they see traditional gender roles as being beneficial for healthy family life.

The third argument is over the role of sexuality in human life. Liberals believe sex is for expressing love and affection in any committed relationship, while conservatives restrict sex only to express the love and bond in a legal marriage between a man and a woman. Comprehensive programs are more sex positive, teaching students that sex is a natural expression of love, whereas abstinence-only programs are more fear based, teaching students all of the terrible things that could happen if they engage in premarital sex (Kendall, 2013, p. 225). Sexual liberals, therefore, also advocate teaching young people about homosexuality as an alternate lifestyle. Sexual conservatives do not agree with teaching about homosexuality because most of them believe it is wrong and also have concerns that teaching homosexuality will cause kids to want to try homosexual acts (again, the belief that more information can be dangerous).

The final argument is whether the world is a place of firm lines and boundaries or of interconnections and informed decisions. Liberals again believe that more information leads to better decisions and that there is no black and white with these decisions. Conservatives believe only one clear message should be given because there is a definite distinction between right and wrong.

Clearly, sexual liberals and sexual conservatives have many disagreements about some fundamental issues when debating sex education. They have both had much influence on current programs across the United States. Although polls consistently

show that a large majority of the public believe sex education should be expanded beyond abstinence only measures, the number of teachers teaching abstinence-only education rose from 2% in 1988 to 23% in 1999 (Irvine, 2006, p. 193). Only 10% of schools have comprehensive education, while 34% promote abstinence as the preferred option but allow for discussion of contraception. Abstinence-only education is considered “anti-controversy” since restrictions on what can be taught in the classroom have led to fewer conflicts during the school year. For example, leaving out subjects like masturbation allow schools to not have to deal with the controversies it brings up in communities.

Nancy Kendall discusses the additional problem of some schools losing financial and political support if they were using abstinence-only education (she uses the term AOUME programs) (Kendall, 2013, p. 30). She says of her experience in Florida, “Many public school actors with whom I spoke were unsure that AOUME programs could meet their students’ needs, but they were fearful of AOUME activism, which they felt could significantly weaken their institutions financially and politically” (Kendall, 2013, p. 30). She discusses the federal and state money that go into AOUME programs- “CSE [comprehensive sex education] providers reported feeling under attack by a well-funded and well-organized legal and media effort to discredit and legally inhibit their work” (Kendall, 2013, p. 35).

Surgeon General David Satcher spoke out in favor of comprehensive sex education, and New Jersey is one state that has mandated Family Life Education and helped overcome restrictive legislation in 1993 and 2001 that would have not allowed instruction of contraception and safer sex in schools. Additionally, after studies done

evaluating prominent abstinence-only sex education, there was no solid evidence that it delayed sexual initiation among young people (Irvine, 2006, p. 194).

The Christian Right, generally associated with sexual conservatives but not always the other way around, has advanced sex education in Christian settings, discussing it in terms of committed marriage and God-centered lives. This has brought praise from Christians who agree with sexual liberals that it is important to discuss sex and not hide from it, but also a backlash from sexual liberals, who criticize their conservative views, such as encouraging wives to submit to their husbands and their narrow focus of who should be having sex with whom. Frank Fisher discusses how religious groups adding their voices to controversial issues and how they view their lack of acceptance in debates. He says religious groups allege “that liberalism rests on the authority of a secular scientific rationality that discounts the concerns of religious citizens, unfairly restricting or silencing their voices in political debate” (Fisher, 2009, p. 79). The Christian Right does not necessarily want to shove their opinions down the opposition, but rather simply desire to be heard by them.

Kendall adds another dynamic to the discussion. She believes that the national sex education debate is about more than just sex. She says in her book,

The morals and values most readily apparent in national sex education debates relate to teen sex, religion in schools, and sexual orientation. These debates shape the ‘hot topics’ identified by teachers and adults: homosexuality, abortion, and contraception. But the critical issues at play in sex education practices are bigger and run deeper, right to the core of power, social relations, and the enactment of democracy at this time in US history.” (Kendall, 2013, p. 224)

She gives insight into the power dynamics of sex education in schools, from the financial to the political, as mentioned earlier. She believes Florida's abstinence-only "It's Great to Wait" program links abstinence before marriage not with public health or as a moral issue, but as a discourse to strengthen the nuclear family (Kendall, 2013, p. 45). Waiting to engage in sexual relations until marriage pushes the idea of a need for marriage and that marriage is the beginning of a family rather than potentially having children out of wedlock. This ties into other issues, as research has shown that situations like cohabitation without marriage can contribute to higher levels of family violence as well as depression in women and negative child outcomes (Graefe, 1999, p. 206). Pushing for traditional, married, nuclear families could also be in response to the increase in cohabiting couples in conjunction with the decrease or delaying of marriage in the United States.

There are a plethora of organizations working to advance either comprehensive or abstinence-only sex education, whether it is their primary mission or a small part of what they do. Just last year several groups worked together to release the first ever national standard for sex education in schools. The "National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, K-12," published in the *Journal of School Health*, provides guidance on the minimum essentials that are age-appropriate for students in grades kindergarten up to grade 12. It sides with comprehensive sex education advocates. The primary organizations that developed the standards were the American Association for Health Education, the American School Health Association, the National Education Association Health Information Network, the Society of State Leaders of Health and Physical education, and the Future of Sex Education (FoSE) initiative, which is a

partnership between Advocates for Youth, Answer, and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. (Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, 2013).

In recent political news, the Community-Based Abstinence Education grant program and the Adolescent Family Life Act, two of the largest federal programs funding abstinence education, were eliminated by President Obama in 2010, but shortly thereafter House Republicans put abstinence education legislation into the Affordable Care Act, President Obama's healthcare reform law. This legislation would grant up to \$50 million per year to abstinence-only education programs (Koebler, 2011). However, the Affordable Care Act also provides \$75 million per year for five years to the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP), which is a state grant program to fund comprehensive approach to sex education (National Partnership for Women and Families).

There are some similarities in worldviews between the two conflicting sides. They both generally agree that teen sex is a problem and both have concerns about the negative role of the media on adolescents (Kendall, 2013, p. 225). However, the beliefs about how to fix these problems vary greatly, as noted previously.

With numerous organizations on either side of this debate, there will no doubt be continual tension in schools and in politics when it comes to what kind of sex education our students receive. The issue may be more controversial now than it has ever been, especially when school funding is thrown in the mix.

Chapter III: Tension, Ignorance, and Apathy

History is peppered with differences in values and moral disagreements. Civil rights, women's rights, abortion, contraception, and religion are just a few that immediately come to mind. Frank Fisher writes about the expectation of moral disagreement in politics:

Even when citizens are motivated to find fair terms of social cooperation, disagreement will still emerge from the fact that different people hold different and sometimes incompatible norms and values. Moreover, citizens have incomplete understandings of many problematic issues, as well as differing interpretations of the meanings and consequences of actions. (Fisher, 2009, p. 80)

People's values and beliefs can be quite different. These differences start with the different values we are taught as kids by our parents and educators, and expand through our personal experiences. Our values can change with new information every day. Each of us has unique lenses through which we view the world, and that is very apparent when discussing something so saturated in values as sex education. The tension caused by these differences in values and morals in such a public debate deeply impacts those directly involved in addition to the communities they are in.

In communities where sex education is a hot debate, many citizens are not just concerned about *what* their children are being taught but also *who* is teaching it. Many people worry when the government begins legislating what values are deemed acceptable, and it only gets worse when they are choosing the values that will be taught to our children. There are currently many other equally divisive topics being debated and

voted on across the country such as gay marriage, abortion, and right-to-die laws. Sex education is not alone in its controversy. Sex education is unique, however, because it specifically dictates what values are deemed acceptable to *teach* to children. Parents understandably have a difficult time giving such a personal matter to schools or legislators.

Regular citizens are also skeptical of professionals, especially when their children are involved, although this was not always the case. Berube (1996) says that in the past, professionals were considered “competent, dependable, accountable, trustworthy, honest and loyal,” but has changed recently, and are now seen as “arrogant, exclusive, self-serving, money-grubbing, careerists—and they purchase their status by discrediting everybody else as ‘amateurs’” (as cited by Fischer, 2007, p. 21). If the general public believes this about the professionals making decisions about their children, including lawmakers, elected officials, and school administrators, it makes sense that they would be apprehensive about their choices that relate to morals and values.

An example of why citizens would be skeptical of professionals in divisive issues is the Plan B case. Susan F. Wood, former Assistant Commissioner for Women’s Health and Director of the Office of Women’s Health at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, resigned in 2005 after the agency continued to delay nonprescription sale of the emergency contraceptive Plan B against the recommendation of its own science advisory committee. Liberals argued that the agency’s decision was not about science, but rather about politics. Although Plan B was deemed to be a safe and effective drug to prevent pregnancy when taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex, the agency gave in to conservative concerns that it was just a different form of abortion and lobbied against its

passing. Eventually, in 2006, the drug was approved for nonprescription sale to adults, but the damage of the agency relying on social pressures rather than scientific research had already been done (Brown, 2009, p. 1-2.) Frank Davidoff, another committee member, resigned a few days after Susan Wood resigned, and added an additional dynamic to the issue. He explains that the proposed benefits were “as much social, behavioral, and ethical as they were clinical” and that “at the most fundamental level the Plan B controversy was about the ‘commingling of sex with politics and morality’” (Brown, 2009, p. 258). Davidoff understood the problem with combining politics with the highly controversial morals and values of sex. This only confirms that when it comes to sex, many people would prefer that politicians and politics not get involved.

In addition to skepticism and cynicism regarding professionals, there is currently a decline in public engagement. People do not trust professionals, but they are also not engaging in making a change or difference in their communities. Colin Crouch calls this “post-democracy”. He describes this as a time “when boredom, frustration, and disillusion have settled in...; when powerful minority interests have become far more active than the mass of ordinary people in making the political system work for them; where political elites have learned to manage and manipulate popular demands; where people have to be persuaded to vote by top-down publicity campaigns” (as cited by Fisher, 2009, p. 49). This only exacerbates the already skeptic views citizens have about political professionals making decisions for their communities.

You do not have to look far to find statistics indicating an apathetic public. Low voter turnout rates have shown lack of interest in public affairs. Although almost everybody is for participation in theory, many are quite skeptical of its value in practice

(Fisher, 2009, p. 50). Increased levels of voter apathy and citizen distrust have led people to not take as much participation in the democratic process. Only about 5-10% of citizens fully participate in governmental activities, 15-25% follow politics attentively, 30-40% don't follow politics but can be interested at particular times, and the rest have no interest and are almost never involved in the political process (Fisher, pp. 51-52). For example, the 2012 presidential election turned out only 57.5% of the eligible voting population (Bipartisan Policy Center).

Frank Fisher even notes in his book, *Democracy and Expertise*, that “American citizens are said to have little desire to participate in matters of public policy” (2007, p. 55). Some people may be interested but do not understand the facts of an issue, so they seem ignorant. Looking to the public for help in answering public problems seems like an unproductive, inefficient, and arduous plan. Fisher says many people “question the wisdom of broad public engagement. Why, they ask, should we consult people who either have little knowledge of the issues or backward view on views (on issues such as the death penalty, sex education, or gun control, for example)?” (2007, p. 53).

Of course, there are also limitations on mass opinion. James Fishkin further discusses these limitations:

First, it is difficult to effectively motivate citizens in mass society to become informed...Second, the public has fewer “opinions” deserving of the name than are routinely reported in polls...A third limitation is that even when people discuss politics or policy they do so mostly with people like themselves—those from similar backgrounds, social locations, and outlooks...A fourth limitation of

public opinion as we routinely find it in mass society is vulnerability to manipulation. (Fishkin, 2009, pp. 2-3)

These limitations, coupled with an assumption that citizens simply do not care, are a dangerous duo, allowing us to buy into the idea that engaging the public to make informed policy decisions is useless.

Not getting involved in the political process can be due to a number of reasons, but ultimately the problem will still be there if no one takes a stand. Some argue that public citizens are either too ignorant or apathetic to include them in important decision making. These arguments are far from the truth.

To the contrary, it is not because of incompetence or ignorance that citizens do not participate. Fishkin (2009) argues that the public does have views on current events, but “some of them are very much ‘top of the head,’ vague impressions of sound bites and headlines, highly malleable and open to the techniques of impression management perfected by the persuasion industry” (p. 2). Just because the public seems to not care about current events or even understand them, does not mean that they are unwilling or unable to discuss and formulate solutions to some of the most divisive issues we are currently debating. They just need a deeper explanation and understanding than what the media is willing to delve into.

Through activities such as deliberative democracy, discussed in the next chapter in more detail, where the public is presented with clear, factual information, it has become apparent that citizens are in fact able to make well-reasoned arguments and deliberate effectively with others. Some countries, such as Brazil, India, and Bolivia, have even passed national legislation mandating popular participation in local

governance, including planning and budgeting, and deliberative democracy has moved into some European countries as well (Fisher, 2009, p. 75). Perhaps this is the next step for the sex education debates.

CHAPTER IV: Mutual Understanding

In order to rectify the tension in the sex education debate, we must come to some mutual understandings and deliberate with clear, factual information. We must understand that we may never agree completely. It is not likely that either side will drop all of their own arguments and side entirely with the opposing side, nor will both sides likely come to an absolute common agreement in the middle. History tells us that controversial issues stay controversial for a long time, but that does not mean we should give up. We can come to mutual understandings, which will help the deliberation.

Many sexual liberals and sexual conservatives hold inaccurate perceptions of the other side. Sexual Liberals view Sexual Conservatives as prude, old-fashioned, and too religious, while Sexual Conservatives view Sexual Liberals as out of control sexual fanatics and think they want to teach sex to kindergarteners. Neither have accurate perceptions of the other, which causes their discussions to go nowhere.

In one community where sex education was up for debate, a group of people against the proposed curriculum showed the citizens pornographic images before a town hall meeting, claiming that the images were in the proposed curriculum. This was not true, but it did get the community fired up and they showed up to the debate in huge numbers, outraged and unwilling to hear the other side. Another community meeting about sex education reached its peak in the debate when one desperate woman challenged the assembly to “stand if you would die for your kids,” insinuating that to be for comprehensive sex education was to be against nurturing and protecting your children.

These perceptions caused the debates to be skewed from the start. Tempers rise, insults fly, and the arguments people make do not really relate to the actual issue. They

use the straw man fallacy, misrepresenting the argument of the other side in such a way that the opposition appears obviously fake or ridiculous. The slippery slope is also used when one side makes an argument that what the opposition proposes will inevitably lead to more terrible things down the road, even though it may not be true. Conservatives have argued, for example, that *teaching* kids about homosexuality will cause them to want to “try” homosexuality, for which there is no evidence.

Deliberative Democracy

In order to have effective deliberation and prevent these and other types of debate failures, communities need clear, factual information given to them. One method of propagating accurate information and focused discussion is deliberative democracy and variations of it, giving alternatives to traditional debates or public forums.

Deliberative democracy is very different than a debate where there are two sides fighting against each other. The purpose of deliberative democracy is to learn more and understand the complete issue and proposed solutions or to come up with their own solutions. The participants are not trying to “win” or tear down one side. Deliberation is “a commonplace word, used most often to describe the process used by juries, councils, legislatures, and other bodies that make decisions after a period of reasoned discussion” (Gastil & Levin, p. 6). Simone Chambers wrote of deliberation as “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (Chambers, 2003, p. 309).

Deliberative democracy, more specifically, is based on “citizen participation, moral reason, and a return to the public interest” (Fisher, 2009, p. 77). When citizens come up with decisions together in a deliberative process, as Mark E. Warren explains, they can “produce better decisions than those resulting from alternative means of conducting politics: coercion, traditional deference, or markets. The decisions resulting from deliberation are likely more legitimate, more reasonable, more informed, more effective, and more politically viable” (as cited in Fisher, 2009, p. 78). Amy Gutmann (2005) echoes the claim that deliberative democracy gives legitimacy to decisions, saying that “by deliberating with their fellow citizens, decision-makers can arrive at better, more adequately justified decisions and, in the process, express mutual respect among free and equal citizens” (p. 23). These decisions would be based on discussion, listening, and working together to come up with solutions to decide how to educate our kids about sex. Rather than fighting in town hall and school board meetings, citizens would have to listen to one another and work together.

Those deliberating must reason beyond their own self-interests and think about the common good and how they are able to justify their arguments to those who disagree with them. The purpose is to “promote tolerant, mutually respectful decision-making”, hopefully resulting in “better understandings and eventual agreement” (Fisher, 2009, p. 80). Gastil and Levin share that “advocates of deliberation presume that it is worthwhile for diverse groups of citizens—not just experts and professional politicians—to discuss public issues” (2005, p. 3).

There are a variety of examples of deliberative democracy, such as citizen juries, public meetings, deliberative polling, televoting, focus groups, consensus conferences,

national issue conventions, study circles, workshops, planning cells, citizens' assemblies, and public budgeting, to name a few. I will go into further detail about the types of deliberative democracy I believe could be most helpful in the sex education debate.

Citizen Jury

In the citizen jury, participants get an issue to deliberate, hear expert discussions, have an opportunity to question experts, and then discuss amongst themselves, usually for three days, and are expected to formulate an answer to the problem they have been tasked with (Fisher, 2009, p. 91). There is a moderator, but the discussion and agenda is set by the participants. This concept began in Northern Europe and the United States, but has spread around the world. A sophisticated version of this has been developed in Germany, where participants are exempt from their regular work, similar to jury duty in the United States, and spend several days discussing various policy options (2009, p. 92).

There are some criticisms, as to be expected. The discussions are closed to outsiders, the issues generally concern "narrowly defined local problems", and the moderator can sometimes help write the final report (Fisher, 2009, pp. 92-3). The reasons this method could be helpful to bring some cohesion and understanding in the sex education debate are that it allows participants the resources to hear from experts and ask questions of them, the participants are in the process for a number of days so even if the discussion gets heated, they have time to regain their calm and come back together to continue deliberations, and this method allows for minority reporting, so all opinions can still have an impact on the final report.

Consensus Conferences

Another example Fisher discusses is consensus conferences. He explains the Danish Consensus Conference in detail, which is similar to the citizen jury but a bit more refined. They are usually longer than citizen juries, about five days. The participants are not given a specific charge to answer—only the topic to be discussed. They must come up with the questions they want answered. Consensus conferences are more open to the public, inviting the public to make statements or ask questions during parts of the conference, in order to “inform and stimulate broad public debate on the given topic” (2009, p. 93) and is credited with building “understanding and trust among citizens and experts as well” (p. 94). This would be an excellent process to deliberate sex education because it allows the participants to hear the public opinion and expert information. Past examples of issues they used consensus conferences for include energy policy, air pollution, sustainable agriculture, food irradiation, risky chemicals in the environment, the future of private transport, gene therapy, and the cloning of animals (2009, p. 93).

A few downsides to this kind of deliberation are that the conferences meet for several months on weekends and the candidates volunteer. The time commitment could be challenging and would have an impact on who is able to participate, and the people who volunteer could be citizens who already have a high interest or stake in the issue being discussed, so their motives may not be to simply find the best policies and answers.

Deliberative Polling

Rather than doing random polls to determine the most popular option for an issue or the most popular candidate for a position, deliberative polling is a bit more focused.

Generally, a random group of citizens are selected to ask questions, discuss options, and *then* give their opinion on a specific matter. This type of polling allows for all options or candidates to have a legitimate chance at the poll, rather than the usual win of the most well-known, or popular, option or candidate. Many times a candidate or option with the most money behind them will win a poll or primary election simply due to name recognition, even though that person or option may not be the best choice.

For example, George Papandreaou, the national party leader of the left-center party PASOK of Greece, employed Deliberative Polling to decide the party's candidate for mayor of a city outside of Athens in 2006. A scientific sample of 160 randomly chosen citizens gathered to ask the six finalists questions about relevant issues. After ten hours of deliberation and two secret ballots cast, the least well known candidate, Panos Alexandris, held the majority. (Fishkin, 2009, p. 9). Instead of holding a primary election where the most well known candidate would likely have won, the person who was best suited for the position became the chosen candidate.

These methods of deliberative democracy could help communities that have heated debates going on in their schools about what kids should be learning in their sex education curriculum, primarily because it requires participants to hear all sides of the debate and actually discuss the merits of those sides instead of merely attacking the other side. These participants would be able to hear experts discuss research findings and studies being conducted to help in their decisions. Most importantly, the participants, and potentially the public as a whole, would feel that they are being listened to and that they have a voice. It is important to add, as Fishkin (1991) does, that “participants must

be willing to consider the arguments offered on their merits. They listen and participate with an openness to the reasons given on one side or another” (p. 37).

Importance of Education

Education is one part of deliberative democracy that is critical to this debate. Educating the public on what is actually in the sex education curriculum options is a key piece that would help our communities. When citizens come into debates already heated because of misinformation, the discussion will not be productive. Educating parents on *how* to discuss morals and answer questions with their children could empower many parents. Many parents may not feel competent to teach their kids about sex, so they are fearful and uncomfortable when sex education is included in their children’s curriculum. Helping them understand how to answer questions that will be prompted in school could be what some parents need in order to be comfortable with the chosen curriculum.

Research

Finally, more research is needed to determine what kinds of sex education are needed, effective, and appropriate at different ages. The current research is sparse and contradicting, so more research could perhaps help in these discussions as well. Long term research would be needed to determine what kinds of sex education are most effective when looking at statistics like unplanned pregnancy, contraction of STDs, age of first sexual encounter, and number of sexual partners.

CONCLUSION

History has shown that sex education has been controversial for a long time. It is saturated in values and those who are passionate about it extend past just the parents to include community members, religious groups, social groups, politicians, teachers and those in the medical field. It impacts a huge majority of people.

The sex education controversy will not work itself out without our help. Current debate shows it is more controversial than ever, and both sides hold inaccurate perceptions of the opposing side. I believe that the best way to begin real discussions is to create an environment where both sides are encouraged to listen to each other rather than fight with each other. In deliberative democracy, participants do just that. They hear public opinion, expert advice, and discuss—not fight—with each other to come up with the best solution.

Sex education may not look the same state to state or even school district to school district, and maybe that is okay. After researching this issue and looking objectively at both sides of this debate, I have come to respect both sides' concerns and desires. I believe that with understanding and listening, other people will also be able to respect and sympathize with the opposite side, and maybe even change their own minds.

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