

Sex Education and the De-Polarization of Public Values

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Sex education is among the most frequently and hotly contested aspects of school curriculum. Lay people with few convictions about education policy often express strident support for, or opposition to, specific forms of sex education. The titles of major scholarly books on the topic feature confrontational, even military, metaphors, such as “battles,” “debates,” and “war.”¹ Campaigns to change sex education—whether from right to left, or vice versa—are described as “revolutions.”² There is scarcely ever a change to sex education policy that doesn’t send droves of parents marching into the streets, writing op-eds, and calling their elected representatives.

The degree of public contention over sex education as compared to other aspects of formal schooling is unsurprising insofar as the mention of “sex” automatically sounds an assortment of cultural alarms. Yet the extent of concern is grossly misaligned with the actual weight of sex education in formal curricula. Sex education in the United States accounts for a meager average of 5.4 hours of instructional time per year in middle school, and 6.2 hours of instructional time per year in high school.³ In light of its miniscule role in the curriculum, as well as research suggesting that young people learn far more about sex outside of the classroom than in it, we may wonder why the public has seized upon this minor subject area as a repository for so much educational activism. Moreover, given the current intensity of political movements for racial and economic justice, not to mention existential threats to democracy itself, perhaps it is time to give sex education a rest.

Despite all the other aspects of education with monumental stakes, however, sex education remains central to the public interest

and deserving of philosophical attention. For one thing, we have hardly arrived at a public consensus about the meaning of sex and the state's interest in regulating it, as the reconfiguration of the Supreme Court and the precarious future of marriage equality and reproductive rights in this country suggests. And while the place of sex on the formal curriculum may be limited, young people are "learning" sex through unfettered access to digital pornography and mainstream cultural memes, such as the record-breaking music video "WAP." Such phenomena illustrate the gaping discrepancies between the sexual discourse that is deemed admissible in schools and what passes for sex education when we leave young people to their own devices (literally).

Moreover, the controversies over sex education in schools can be read as a proxy for the broader political tumult in which we find ourselves. Sex education is Exhibit A in the phenomenon of political polarization and growing ideological consistency, whereby an individual's position on one hot-button topic serves as a reliable bellwether for her views on myriad others.⁴ Since the 1997 introduction of the so-called A-H guidelines, sex education in the United States has been dominated by Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Education (AOUME).⁵ Any program that exceeds the federal guidelines is de facto dubbed Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE). Although these terms, AOUME and CSE, are neither exhaustive nor particularly accurate, the dichotomy they represent can be mapped onto other allegiances that track conservative and liberal politics respectively. If we could find ways of speaking productively with our adversaries on the topic of sex education, we might just break through communication barriers that dog a range of other political disputes. For this reason alone it is worth trying to get a clearer grasp on the normative terrain covered by the public contestation of sex education and how it becomes distorted through partisan confrontation.

In this paper I offer a brief values analysis of the persistent stand-off over sex education in the context of vicious polarization. The expectation is not that such analysis will dissolve genuine disagreement. However, I hope to illuminate how some disagreement has been inflated or misapprehended, with detrimental consequences for young people. Furthermore, however genuinely a position may be held, it is not necessarily defensible within the public discourse of a diverse democracy, nor is it automatically applicable to matters of education policy. A philosophical analysis of the sex education discourse can help to clarify the actual fault lines of public disagreement and suggest what should and should not be controversial about how we teach young people about their sexuality.⁶

ORDERS OF VALUES

Disputes about sex education are clearly values disputes, but we rarely consider the nature of the values behind various positions and their supposed incommensurability. The culture-wars approach to sex education generates more heat than light, dividing people into religious, homophobic prudes (on the right) and morally relative sexual libertines (on the left). This polarization inflates the actual degree of disagreement over individual components of sex education, as well as the common aims undergirding them.

The values behind sex education can be articulated in more accurate, and less partisan, terms. Consider three general values associated with sex education: health promotion, individual flourishing, and ethical relationships. In different ways, sex education has always been justified and designed with some combination of these values in mind. First, in the post-war period, sex education began to be installed in American schools out of a concern for public health or, as it was known then, “social hygiene.”⁷ While the meaning of “public health” has evolved over the decades and adjusted to epidemic scares such as HIV in the 1980s, it

remains an uncontroversial value whose importance cuts across attitudes to specific educational policies. But we could in principle approach sex education with little to no attention to epidemiology.

A second common value is “individual flourishing,” which may call to mind modern aretaic conceptions of the good life and classical liberal defenses of autonomy. But even conservative attitudes toward sex education—such as the promotion of abstinence until marriage—are premised on a commitment to some notion of flourishing. If we did not care about the quality of a young person’s lifelong relationship to sexuality, we would not become so animated about what a preparation for that relationship requires. For some advocates of AOUME, a person’s sexual flourishing extends not only to their sexual behaviours and sentiments in marriage, but also to their treatment in the afterlife. Though others may balk at this conception and assert that it ought to have no bearing on public policy, the fact remains that the two sides are debating what *constitutes* individual flourishing, not *whether* individual flourishing is a guiding value, and one to which sexuality contributes. In a non-Western society, this value may be more controversial or entirely oblique.

Third, everyone who takes a public stance on sex education expresses some commitment to the value of ethical sexual relationships. Sex education curricula almost uniformly emphasize norms such as honesty and respect for others; they are intended to help young children identify and respond to abuse and to deter sexual assault; and more progressive curricula now emphasize the negotiation of consent in sexual interactions. Whatever else they disagree about, sex education foes tend to agree that sex should be voluntary and consensual.

These guiding values, however, can result in different, even incompatible, attitudes toward curriculum. Those who advocate for, and those who oppose, LGBTQ+ inclusion in the curriculum are likely to

appeal to the value of individual flourishing when pressed to account for their views. So too will those who vehemently disagree on whether pleasure is an important value in sex education.⁸ The values of public health and ethical relationships can be invoked in defence of both religious and secular paradigms for sex education, by both sex-positive and sex-negative educators, and by those who value teaching critical thinking and those who are suspicious of it.

In short, the debates about sex education tend to dwell at the level of intermediary values. When we aggregate up to more abstract levels, we can often discern an overarching value over which there is negligible controversy, such as promoting public health and the well-being of all children. This observation may be trivial insofar as the disagreements at lower levels of value are still potent enough to dominate public discourse. But we may do well to begin by acknowledging that we're not all fighting different battles. The acrimonious tenor of political exchange today allows CSE—and AOUME—proponents alike to insinuate that their adversaries literally don't care about children, about ethics, or about sexual health. A more panoramic appreciation of values at different levels may be a productive step toward de-vilifying adversaries and getting to the thrust of real disagreements.

SHARED AIMS

Not only are the higher-order values behind sex education in many cases shared, but so too are many of the concrete aims. By “aims,” I mean the measurable outcomes that we hope to achieve through these experiments in curriculum. While it may seem as though various camps have incommensurable goals, it is taken for granted that we do not want adolescents to become pregnant or contract sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Despite fluctuations in the public priority placed on these topics, sex education has always been deployed to achieve these

ends. Today, everyone from Planned Parenthood and the Guttmacher Institute to Focus on the Family and the Heritage Foundation measures sex education on the metrics of pregnancy and STIs. Progressives and conservatives even agree, to a surprising extent, that abstinence is the ideal for youth and that sexual activity should be delayed and minimized as much as possible. The organizations that eschew “abstinence only”—like Planned Parenthood—still cleave to a clear message of “abstinence first.” In most supposed CSE curricula, contraception and safer sex are introduced as damage control for the inevitable failure of abstinence. While respect for sexual diversity is enjoying more recognition in recently updated curricula, almost no one can be found who publicly disputes the ideal of a sexually healthy young person as “the abstinent heterosexual.”⁹

This degree of convergence between avowed political enemies reflects the distinction between means and ends. AOUME teaches abstinence as an end very conspicuously, but comprehensive sex education is another means toward the same. This suggests that what opponents are often disagreeing about is *how* we ought to go about accomplishing widely endorsed goals. This might be akin to observing that different political parties all endorse the aim of having a strong economy, but disagree about whether they should strive for it by reducing taxes or investing in infrastructure.

The means in question here are choices about educational policy and pedagogical practice. We might think of this as a technocratic question. Indeed, we now have substantial evidence about the correlation between different educational means and the sexual health outcomes to which they are ostensibly oriented. Counterintuitive though it may seem, if the goal is to keep young people abstinent for longer, preaching abstinence as the exclusive form of “sex education” is a disastrous strategy. After years of aggressive AOUME in the United States, 77% of people have had sex

by age 20 and 97% of Americans have had sex before marriage.¹⁰ CSE is as effective as, and sometimes more effective than, AOUME at delaying the onset of sexual activity and reducing the number of sexual partners; it is also more effective than AOUME at preventing the transmission of STIs, encouraging infected adolescents to seek treatment, and reducing unplanned pregnancy.¹¹

These data have pushed advocates into defending CSE by doubling down on the evidence. Unsurprisingly, those who object to CSE on principle are unlikely to be persuaded by having more evidence waved around. What is at stake is the very role of evidence itself. It is true that scientific facts, confirmed by decades of disinterested research, should not be up for public debate. However, there are legitimate debates to be had about the limits of facts for pursuing the public good.

MEANS VERSUS ENDS

The strategy of defending CSE through evidence depends on the assumption that rational people would support whatever means have been demonstrated to promote their shared aims. To the extent that both opponents and proponents of sex education agree about some of the ends, you might expect that they could agree on whatever means are most efficient at bringing them about. To fail to do so looks like a classic case of denial: “to unconsciously mistake the emotional value of denying something for actually having good reasons to deny it.”¹² Certainly all of us are guilty of such specious reasoning to some extent.¹³ There is a more sophisticated explanation available, however. At a certain point, some means may no longer be justifiable, whatever they accomplish; the familiar critiques of utilitarianism apply. A charitable interpretation of some people’s attitudes toward the failures of AOUME would say that while they accept the evidence, they think the ends don’t justify the means.

The “means” of detailed sex education are enough to make any-

one squeamish. Often, a gym teacher, whose portfolio usually involves sports drills and square-dancing, is tasked with sitting down embarrassed adolescents and running through some of the most intimate and stigmatized aspects of humanity in a few designated lessons—all without being judgmental, exclusionary, or inadvertently titillating. Indeed, many politically progressive parents welcome CSE in the schools precisely because they feel unequipped to have these discussions with their own children.

But for some parents, the discomfort with frank education about sexuality goes far beyond embarrassment or limited expertise. The method itself already designates human sexuality as public, secular object of study, on par with math and languages. For conservative, especially religious, parents, the process of treating sexuality as a topic for school-based instruction is unacceptable from a moral perspective, whatever the outcomes. Mere exposure to detailed information about sex, even if empirically accurate, can already be corruptive of the worldview they wish to impart to their children. This may have to do with the sanctity of sexuality, the beauty of marriage, or other metaphysical commitments. The means of preventing teen sex and unwanted health outcomes therefore has to meet some moral, as well as (or instead of) empirical, bar. Evidence is only part of the picture.

The purpose of AOUME, then, is not only to achieve some of the health outcomes that everyone can agree on (which the evidence shows it doesn't), but perhaps to reinforce the bonds of cultural belonging and a faith-based worldview that gives meaning to many people's lives (which it may well do). Remember that the broad values of "health" and "individual flourishing" can lend themselves to multiple purposes. This thinking likely explains why the same religious conservatives who oppose sex education are also likely to oppose abortion and parenthood out of wedlock. Logically, and empirically, reducing teenage pregnancy and

abortion requires CSE and easy access to contraception; and reducing childbirth out of wedlock requires access to safe abortion. But for those who believe that these things are sinful in themselves, it is preferable to counsel adolescents to remain abstinent than to express approval for the more successful, but (on their view) fundamentally immoral, strategies.

Even if one is sympathetic to the possibility that AOUME remains a viable means to perpetuate certain values, Western societies are trending toward a degree of diversity that makes limiting children's exposure to secular or sexually explicit materials increasingly unrealistic. As much as religious parents may wish for their children to encounter ideas about sex exclusively through the lens of faith, the crushing realities of globalization, cell phones, and pop culture will beat them to the punch every time. Of course, this is just more evidence and practical reasoning in the face of commitments that are better described as deontological. Progressives in the realm of sex education have become associated with clinical, even amoral, subservience to evidence, and hence instrumental reasoning, while conservatives may be thought to enjoy a monopoly on values education. Once again, however, our picture of the disagreement tends to be oversimplified. All of us employ practical reasoning and categorical imperatives at different times. Some conservatives endorse means of sex education that are strikingly similar to those of CSE; and some liberals would oppose the means of AOUME even if they were correlated to more desirable outcomes.

As an example of the former, the parenting series *Talking about Sex and Puberty* published by Focus on the Family may astonish some CSE advocates with its no-nonsense, talking-beats-silence advice. The guidelines recommend using correct names for body parts, avoiding confusing euphemisms ("making love") or myths ("storks"), and answering children's questions directly.¹⁴ Masturbation is also dealt with more

matter-of-factly than one might expect: the site acknowledges that boys will almost inevitably masturbate and says that a moral injunction against it will only cause them to feel shame.¹⁵

While many advocates of CSE could object to the framing of these issues by Focus on the Family—which are directed at parents, whom they take to be “proper” sex educators, rather than schoolteachers—they will also recognize in this advice many echoes of what is considered best practice by professional sex educators. But the places where discrepancies persist are also informative. For instance, Focus on the Family, like most of its cousin organizations, defines sex exclusively in conventional heterosexual terms, dwelling on “boy-girl relationships” and the miracle of childbirth. And within the parameters of these opposite-sex, marriage-oriented interactions, girls and boys play different roles: girls are gatekeepers and chastity defenders, while boys are desirers and pursuers. This “complementarian” view of the sexes and its associated expression in traditional marriage is a non-starter for many advocates of CSE.¹⁶

In fact, even if these AOUME-typical messages were highly effective at, say, preventing unwanted pregnancy and disease, many liberals would oppose them just as vehemently. Liberals, just like conservatives, have some moral ground rules. The ends do not automatically justify any means. For example, some studies show that virginity pledges—a species of abstinence promotion in which young people (especially girls) pledge to remain virgins until marriage—are correlated with later sexual debut and fewer partners.¹⁷ Even if these ends are to be celebrated, critics have argued that the practice of virginity pledging itself perpetuates harmful and regressive gender stereotypes, sexist attitudes about desire and control, discourses of sexual shame and guilt, naively optimistic views about the safety and pleasure of sex within marriage, fear of women’s sexuality, and highly heteronormative understandings of what constitutes “sex,”

fulfilment, or love.¹⁸ Much as some pro-chastity parents worry about the psychological harm that may come to children from being taught that pre-marital sex is a viable option, other adults are equally vexed about the damage inflicted when desired behaviours are promoted through regressive cultural paradigms.

One danger, then, in refuting AOUME advocates with means-ends rationality is that the same logic may be used against advocates of CSE depending on which ends are in play. We need not mechanically implement whatever means have evidentiary support for certain ends. This is different from saying that facts or evidence are dispensable. Some facts about adolescent sexuality and the impacts of various educational interventions should not be controversial in public deliberations. Indeed, it is a serious stain on organizations to methodically deny or obfuscate scientific evidence in the service of an ideological narrative.¹⁹ Yet, once we look at all the studies on sex education programs and their impacts, there is a further argument to be made about the value of particular combinations of means and ends.

THE DANGERS OF IDEOLOGICAL FRAMING

To summarize so far, the controversies over sex education are not always what they appear to be. There is significant agreement at the level of higher-order values and the broad aims of sex education, which becomes eclipsed by more granular value disagreements and approaches to implementation. These disagreements are genuine and require careful ethical analysis. Nonetheless, the public discussion of sex education inaccurately portrays AOUME and CSE as distant poles with no common ground between them. Worse, it emboldens people to use partisan or ideological affiliation as a brute proxy for judgments about specific educational policies.

For example, a study conducted in 2014 found that 87% of Ontario

parents agreed or strongly agreed that sex education should be taught in schools, and rated each of thirteen sexual health education topics, from methods of contraception to media literacy, as “important” or “very important.”²⁰ However, a new Conservative premier’s hasty repeal of the comprehensive curriculum appeared to confuse these same parents about their values and beliefs. A survey found that over half (51%) of parents supported the abrupt policy shift, *even though their views on the necessity and age-appropriateness of items in the curriculum hadn’t changed.*²¹ For example, 84% of them still supported teaching about sexually transmitted disease, oral and anal sex, and the risks of “sexting” in Grade 7, all of which had just been struck from the curriculum.²²

The ideological framing of education policy inflames our cognitive biases. In fact, the level of support for CSE in Ontario is comparable to that found across the United States. Notwithstanding the strength of conservative religious values among Americans, studies find that about nine out of ten voters believe that information about contraception and STIs should be taught in schools, and they oppose exclusive federal funding for AOUME.²³ CSE is much less controversial than people think it is, probably because conservative approaches to sex education have had a stranglehold at the federal level for thirty years. The political dance floor has accordingly moved to the right: after many frustrated efforts to make inroads against the A-H guidelines, there are some battles that progressives long ago stopped picking.

The gerrymandering of public opinion about sex education is worryingly undemocratic. So, while I have been arguing that the controversy over sex education is often inflated—for instance, when we look at the shared preference for “abstinence first”—the degree of convergence among adversaries may also be strategic or artificial. Educators and researchers have spent decades calling for (and in some cases implementing)

types of sex education that far exceed mainstream CSE, such as porn literacy and queer inclusion in safer sex, but these are construed as fringe positions by jittery public officials. This state of affairs should motivate us to clarify, not just what people *actually* believe and value, but what range of possibilities and types of evidence properly belong to a public discussion of sex education. Indeed, given that our policy judgments at times fail to track our stated values and vice versa, it is clear we don't know as much as we think we know. Most adults take for granted that grown-ups know about sex and that the question of sex education is one of appropriately induct children into this knowledge. On the contrary, sex education is equally a problem of adult education and, more poignantly, democratic education.²⁴

CONCLUSION

In times of political crisis, it may be reassuring to discover that we are not as divided as we appear to be. An ethical analysis of the controversy over sex education shows that when we factor up to higher-level aims and values, there is a real opportunity for conflict to dissipate. At the same time, some important points of disconnect between camps may be hidden or misunderstood. We disagree about the relationship between means and ends, and we disagree about the priority of certain ends over others. These discrepancies are especially informative in light of the surprising (and mostly hidden) degree of unanimity about the pointlessness of AOUME. We must transcend stale AOUME versus CSE representations of sex education to have meaningful discussions about sexual values, evidence, and educational priorities.

Philosophers have been much less verbose than our academic peers on the topic of sex education.²⁵ In the last few decades, sex education has blossomed into a rich field of scholarship, involving both empirical and theoretical interventions. Most of this literature, however, hails from

disciplines such as sociology or gender studies, and involves critiquing even so-called “progressive” curriculum, much less than adjudicating the norms of political reasoning and mediating value pluralism. Philosophical analysis can complement these efforts by parsing the disagreement about values that regularly becomes reified into black-and-white poles and stymies actual curricular advancements. The goal here is not to eliminate disagreement. Instead, the challenge for peaceful modern societies is to ensure responsible public discourse and democratic decision-making in the face of irreducible pluralism. Philosophers of education can contribute to public democratic life by refusing to let “public knowledge” about sex education rest on ethical confusion and ideologically conditioned judgments.

1 Janice Irvine, *Talk About Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Kristin Luker, *When Sex Goes to School: Warring Views on Sex--and Sex Education—Since the Sixties* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007); Nancy Kendall, *The Sex Education Debates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

2 Nicholas Hune-Brown, “The Sex Ed Revolution: A Portrait of the Powerful Political Bloc that’s Waging War on Queen’s Park,” *Toronto Life* (2015), <http://torontolife.com/city/ontario-sex-ed-revolution/>; M.B. Warnke, “These Women Are Leading the Sex Ed Revolution Online,” *Girlboss* (2018), <https://www.girlboss.com/life/online-sex-education>.

3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “School Health Policies and Practices Study: Health Education Fact Sheet” (2014), http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/shpps/pdf/2014factsheets/health_education_shpps2014.pdf

4 Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public” (2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/section-1-growing-ideological-consistency/>

5 Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States, “A History of Federal Funding for AOUM” (2018), <https://siecus.org/wp-content/up->

[loads/2018/08/A-History-of-AOUM-Funding-Final-Draft.pdf](#)

6 For earlier exercises such as this, see Michael Halstead and Michael Reiss, *Values in Sex Education: From Principles to Practice* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2003); David Archard, “Sex Education,” *Impact* 7 (Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 2000); Josh Corngold, “Moral Pluralism and Sex Education,” *Educational Theory* 63, no. 5 (2013): 461-482.

7 Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government’s Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

8 Sharon Lamb, Kara Lustig, and Kelly Graling, “The Use and Misuse of Pleasure in Sex Education Curricula,” *Sex Education* 13, no. 3 (2013): 305-318.

9 Cris Mayo, *Disputing the Subject of Sex: Sexuality and Public School Controversies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

10 Lawrence Finer, “Trends in Premarital Sex in the United States, 1954-2003,” *Public Health Reports* 122, no. 1 (2007): 73-78.

11 Douglas Kirby, “The Impact of Abstinence and Comprehensive Sex and STD/HIV Education Programs on Adolescent Sexual Behavior,” *Sexuality Research & Social Policy* 5, no. 3 (2008): 18-27.

12 Adrian Bardon, *The Truth About Denial: Bias and Self-Deception in Science, Politics, and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 30.

13 Another possibility is that the denial of evidence relevant to one’s position on sex education is purely cynical: our reasoning is intact but we dig in our heels to save face.

14 Focus on the Family, *Talking about Sex and Puberty* (2011), <https://www.focuson-thefamily.com/parenting/sexuality/talking-about-sex/talking-about-sex-and-puberty>

15 Focus on the Family, *Talking about Sex*.

16 Kendall, *Debates*, 151-178, 162-3, and 209-223.

17 Peter Bearman and Hannah Brückner, “Promising the Future: Virginity Pledges and First Intercourse,” *American Journal of Sociology* 106, no. 4 (2001): 852-912.

18 Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

19 Likewise, lying about facts within the content of sex education itself, such as the effectiveness of condoms, should never be condoned, irrespective of the further values it is thought to promote.

20 Alex McKay, Sandra Byers, Susan Voyer, Terry Humphreys, and Chris Markham,

“Ontario Parents’ Opinions and Attitudes towards Sexual Health Education in the Schools,” *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 23, no. 3 (2014): 159-66.

21 Nick Westoll, “Ontario Parents Divided Over Repeal of Sex-Ed Curriculum, Yet Majority Approve of Content: Ipsos Poll,” *Global News* (2018), <https://globalnews.ca/news/4424744/ontario-sex-ed-curriculum-ipsos-poll/>.

22 Westoll, “Ontario Parents.”

23 Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States, “On Our Side: Public Support for Sex Education” (2018), <https://siecus.org/resources/public-support-sex-education/>

24 I lack the space to elaborate on this contention here, but I expand on it in a forthcoming book co-authored with Lisa Andersen (*Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education*, University of Chicago Press).

25 There is much valuable philosophical scholarship on sex education that I have not cited here, including all of the articles in a special issue of *Educational Theory* dedicated to the topic in 2013. I make this generalization in contrast to the much more voluminous work on sex education hailing from the social sciences, including the multiple journals devoted to it.