

No such thing as value-neutral: Value-attentive Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as the preferred approach to American sex education

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Since the 1970s and 80s, an ongoing cultural war of traditional/conservative versus progressive/liberal values has risen to a fever pitch in the United States. A key site where many of these battles have been waged, but have yet to be resolved, can be seen in changing values around sexuality, gender, and reproduction. Perhaps secondary only to the issue of abortion, sex education has become a central nexus of the battle for progressive or traditional values around American sexuality because it is so concerned with the cultural values imbued in future generations. The preeminent traditionalist approach, Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage (AOUM), endorses abstinence from sex as the expected standard for all school-aged children (Santelli et al., 2017), while Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), the progressive-favored curricula, may include discussion of birth control, STI prevention, sexual orientation, or other topics accounting for a range of sexual expression (Dent & Maloney, 2017). CSE is ultimately preferable to the AOUM approach because CSE is more likely to change health behaviors; CSE is preferred by parents; and CSE is more likely to advance gender and LGBT equality. However, current CSE efforts are weakened by their purported value-neutrality, and need to give students the ability to articulate a range of values around sexuality to account for both traditionalist and progressive individual sexual ethics.

Sex education approaches cannot be examined without first simply examining their effect on health outcomes. The federal US guidelines for abstinence-only programs define a program eligible for funding as one that “has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity” (Santelli et al., 2017, p. 274). A large body of evidence has shown that such programs are “not effective in delaying initiation

of sexual intercourse or changing other sexual risk behaviors” (2017, p. 273), which are basic public health goals of all sex education programs. State-level abstinence mandates have been found to have no effect on teen pregnancy or abortion rates (Carr & Packham, 2016). Far from just being ineffective at reducing undesirable public health outcomes, a recent evaluation in the *American Journal of Public Health* has found that abstinence-only federal funding actually increased adolescent birth rates in the most conservative states (Fox et al., 2019). Although there may be minor differences from study to study, there is clear consensus that AOUM programs, specifically those that meet the US funding requirements, do not change teens’ sexual health behaviors in any lasting way at best (Santelli et al., 2017; Carr and Packham, 2016), and may actually exacerbate undesired outcomes at worst (Fox et al, 2019). Because CSE programs vary so much in scope and content, it is more difficult to find consensus in the literature that they definitively change or improve health outcomes, but it is important to note that states with more progressive sex education policy (Guttmacher Institute, 2019) tend to have lower teen pregnancy rates (Guttmacher Institute, 2017), and the reverse is true for the most conservative states.

A significant argument for AOUM programs, and particularly the federal guidelines that allow states to opt in or out of AOUM marriage programs, is that universally implementing CSE programs would force conservative parents to have their children in programs that condone values they disagree with. The values communicated by each type of curricula are discussed in more detail below, but it remains that characteristics of CSE, rather than AOUM, are overwhelmingly endorsed by conservative and liberal parents alike (Kantor & Levitz, 2017; Dent & Maloney, 2017). In a study of political views and sex education, 90.1% of Republicans and 96.1% of Democrats thought sex education was “very” or “somewhat important” in middle school, with even higher percentages for high school (Kantor & Levitz, 2017, p. 4). Even in

evaluation of specific sexual health topics, which included puberty, healthy relationships, abstinence, birth control, STDs, and sexual orientation, a majority of both Democrats and Republicans supported all of these topics being taught—Republicans even supported sexual orientation in middle schools at 64.7%, the lowest given percentage of approval for any topic (2017, p. 6). In a different qualitative study of Evangelical Christians' support for abstinence-based sex education, the researchers discovered a group of parents who rejected what they believed to be sex-negative messages espoused in these programs and believed themselves to be part of a “silent majority” in their demographic (Dent & Maloney, 2017). Although there are certainly parents who virulently oppose any non-abstinent curricula, these studies give voice to parents who have a more moderate viewpoint; at the very least, a strong majority of both conservative and liberal parents support teaching abstinence alongside other sex educational topics (Kantor & Levitz, 2017).

CSE is more effective than AOUM curricula at favorably changing teen health outcomes and qualities of CSE are favored by parents, but AOUM curricula is also more likely to perpetuate homophobia and misogyny. A qualitative study interviewing Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual (LGB) college students identified concurrent themes of LGB exclusion and abstinence in their at-home and in-school sex education experiences (Estes, 2017). Because there is taboo and discomfort around sex among parents of LGB children (2017), sex education that supplies this information compassionately is especially important. AOUM curricula by their very nature exclude queer youth: the act of abstaining-from is penis-in-vagina intercourse, and until 2014 when same-sex marriage was legalized nationwide, marriage was not a possibility for many LGB youth. In addition to AOUM harming LGB students, CSE has been found to actually decrease incidents of homophobic and transphobic bullying (Baams, Dubas, & van Aken, 2017),

indicating this curriculum may contribute to diminishing cultural homophobia. Another major criticism of AOUM curricula is that they stigmatize sexual pleasure and entrench children in traditional gender roles, both of which harm female students and specifically contribute to rape culture. Michelle Fine's formative essay on this exclusion of pleasure argues that "silencing a discourse of desire buttresses the icon of woman-as-victim" (Fine 56). The way AOUM reinforces women as responsible for sexual control can also be seen directly in its proponents' discursive arguments: Ed Ainsworth, a prominent AOUM advocate, criticizes teaching safe sex by asking, "will a condom protect your heart? As a female, will a condom protect your reputation?" (Smith, 2011). Although interrupting gender and sexuality norms are undoubtedly bastions of more liberal sexual values to begin with, these outcomes cannot be excluded from consideration when weighing curricular approaches because homophobia and a rape culture rooted in misogyny have immediate real-world impacts on queer and female students.

Although AOUM curricula are less likely to positively change teen behavior, reinforce homophobia and sexism, and are less favored by even conservative parents, there are important arguments for AOUM that must be considered. Some parents feel that CSE approaches "promot[e] promiscuity" (Belz, 2017), especially those supported by recognizably partisan organizations such as Planned Parenthood. For these parents, CSE essentially gives children too much information, too soon; as one parent quips about her sixth grader, "It's like, are you going to send my kid home with lubrication?" (Belz, 2017). For parents with more conservative values, and especially those who live in homogeneously conservative communities, CSE feels simultaneously "values-laden" (Belz, 2017) and bereft of any moral clarity around proper sexual behavior (Smith, 2011). A major advantage of AOUM is that it allows for consistent articulation of values around sexuality that help students feel connected to their communities when both

students and their social environment are conservative; this may be one reason that in an review of specific programs that have been proven to reduce sexual risk-taking behaviors, there was a mix of programs that centered abstinence and those that included a more comprehensive range of topics (Goesling, et al., 2013). Because the values of sex positivity associated with CSE are by definition more radical than the conservative values that AOUM espouses, CSE programs often position themselves as value-neutral and steeped in discourses of biomedical accuracy; however, a positivist, biomedical approach connotes a moralizing lens (Pigg & Adams, 2005) just as a religiously framed, abstinence-centered one does. Although CSE has more significant advantages than AOUM in most important areas of consideration, in order for CSE to be truly comprehensive, such approaches should give spaces for all students—including conservative ones—to develop and articulate their own personal values around sexuality.

CSE curricula is preferable to AOUM approach because CSE is more likely to positively change risk behavior, is favored by the majority of liberal and conservative parents, and is less likely to perpetuate harmful stereotypes about female and queer sexualities. However, the value-neutrality of CSE is ultimately false; in order to win over a harshly divided sexual culture, CSE must instead be *value-attentive*, trusting all students to interrogate and clarify their own personal sexual ethics. An important limitation to both approaches is that even though CSE challenges some gendered and homophobic norms, both curricula do little to challenge stigmatizing notions of teens of color as sexually deviant. In order to center all students in curricula, including queer student and teens of color as well as religiously conservative students, CSE approaches that allow for articulation of a range of personal values ultimately offer the most promise to a bitterly divided cultural landscape that needs a realist approach to actual teen behavior.

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