

Sexuality Education in Public Education

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2020

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Comprehensive sex education has been a staple in the curriculum for public schools. However, sexuality has been defined within these often linearly structured programs. Although many of them generally do not bluntly define sexuality, the “focus is usually on teen pregnancy prevention through a hetero-normative lens. Even when STIs are discussed, heterosexuality is assumed.” (Karrari, 2013, p. 12). Sexuality within educational curriculum needs to become more inclusive to promote an equitable environment for all learners.

Constructing a binary focus within sex education through implied gender roles and sexuality does not support the diverse needs of LGBTQ learners within our institutions. Without representation within these programs, these learners often feel ostracized when presented with the material in a way that only represents the topics through a heterosexual lens. Often this is achieved in ways such as depicting “abstinence until heterosexual marriage as the only moral choice for young people.” (Bridges, 2015, p. 3) and focusing “on heterosexual youth, ignoring the needs of LGBTQ youth.” (Bridges, 2015, p. 3).

The past few decades have seen huge steps toward equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. Yet LGBTQ youth still face discrimination and harassment. Among LGBTQ students, 82 percent have experienced harassment due to their sexual orientation, and 38 percent have experienced physical harassment (Bridges, 2015, p. 2)

Sexuality education programs have been historically stifled in public school systems in part due to religious opposition. “For most organized religions, matters of sexuality and family

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formation are paramount concerns, as they represent fundamental human behaviors that religions attempt to shape and control.” (Gunasekara, 2017, p. 7). This religious opposition comes in the form of school board policies related to curriculum and parent/community input regarding the programs themselves that assist in driving these policies. In a case of this outlined by Catherine Lugg with a religions group known as the Religious Right, opponents of a sexuality education program that focused on tolerance and teaching children to appreciate others

raised the alarm that new regulations promoted sexuality. The original 575 outcome statements did not mention sexual orientation, yet the tolerance outcome was quickly construed by members of the Religious Right to mean not only teaching children about homosexuality but also advocating they become homosexual themselves. (Lugg, 2012, p. 9)

Responses such as this only help to enforce the continued heteronormativity of sexuality educational programs within our public schools, which continue to disregard and demean the needs of LGBTQ youth. “Heteronormativity is a form of privilege similar to the ableism, patriarchy, and White supremacy that dominates American social culture. As such, heteronormativity is dependent upon oppression and structural violence.” (Kocsis, 2017, p. 20).

Educators and proponents of sexuality education can help to advocate for meaningful changes that are equitable for LGBTQ students in our institutions. One of these proposed programs is structured around care of the self. This framework involves re-framing sexual education as “the study of sexuality as it is produced in a culture – how it gets talked about, in what terms, according to what fears and problems, how it is related to class, race, gender, sexual

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orientation, and ability differences, and thus how it is implicated in a cultural politics.” (Carlson, 2011, p. 14). This structure of curriculum is based around queer theory, as it seeks to “to denaturalize and decenter social norms surrounding human sexual identity.

Another approach is through Rights-Based Sexuality Education. “Essential to this approach is the acknowledgement that social and cultural expectations engrain in children and adolescents expectations about gender and sexuality, as well as families, communities, and institutions dictating their appropriate role in society.” (Kocsis, 2017, p. 133). This curricular approach directly challenges societal and cultural biases which create inequitable environments for LGBTQ students through exclusive practices and aims to create a more inclusive program for incorporating sexuality education within public schools. This structure of curriculum is based around critical pedagogy which “asserts that inequalities related to asymmetrical power relations are central to an analysis of education policies, practices, and curriculum.” (Kocsis, 2017, p. 38).

Sexuality within educational curriculum needs to become more inclusive to promote an equitable environment for all learners. Although LGBTQ advocates have seen many positive reforms, educational programs which are conducive for these learners are still falling short on what they need. Educators may not be able to change the narrative happening in individual households, but they can ensure that educational institutions are supporting the needs of diverse learners through changes to curriculum.

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