“SEX RESPECT”: ABSTINENCE EDUCATION AND OTHER DEPLOYMENTS FOR SEXUAL “FREEDOM”

Liz Jackson
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Those who view the right to a religiously neutral, empirically based public education as fundamental have been able to do little more than watch in terror as abstinence-only sex education, which excludes information on either safe sex or birth control, has come to prevail in United States (US) schools. Among causes for concern are abstinence programs’ endorsements of inaccurate, incomplete, partial information with little to no regard for the realities of life, particularly of teenage life today, as known through medical or social science. Continuing efforts to evaluate this trend seem crucial for the wellbeing of American youth and society. Here I explore a subtle strategy of abstinence-only sex education: its (positive) promotion of particular conceptions of human sexuality and sexual pleasure. Rather than simply forbid sexual behavior or deny sexual fulfillment, abstinence educators deploy particular conceptions of them while encouraging children and teens to abstain for the time being. While the slogan “Just Say No!” seems to capture abstinence educators’ main message, the call to abstain also encourages an ideal of sexual fulfillment which comes, of course, at the cost of immediate satisfaction.

This is not an exceptional observation today; in a recent examination of abstinence education, Cris Mayo similarly argued that such discourse “neither ends the preoccupation with bodies nor with desire.” Yet if pronouncements regarding sexual fulfillment can be made to promote abstinence in line with certain Christian, cultural, and political beliefs, this suggests that critics of abstinence-only education who would promote alternate conceptions of sexual liberation might similarly deploy partial or biased information about sexual activity.

Here I will briefly discuss the historical context giving rise to present day pushes toward abstinence education before examining the main contents of the exemplar of federally funded abstinence education programs, Coleen Kelly Mast’s “Sex Respect: The Option of True Sexual Freedom.” I evaluate similarities and differences in approach among Mast and her challengers, particularly examining Judith Levine’s Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex. While I concur with critics that the information typically provided American children by abstinence educators is incomplete and biased, I also find some noteworthy contradictions within such counter discourses. These contradictions seem to echo Michel Foucault’s concern with what he calls the “repressive hypothesis,” that we repress if we do not promote or deploy a particular conception of human sexuality and sexual fulfillment.
I am critical here toward the critics of an unhealthful, unscientific status quo in US education not merely to be provocative, but because their works seem to lack an appreciation for Foucault’s observation that “we must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power.” A comprehensive analysis of the relationships among scientific, religious, and critical discourses on sex and sexuality is beyond this essay’s scope. Yet I think it remains reasonably clear that as long as sex education is “sexuality” or “sexualities” education, remarking on the relationships among identities, meanings, and bodily acts, it detracts from more conclusive, more consequential knowledge linking sexual behavior to public and personal health. Thus, I argue that the dissemination of what Foucaultians might call “transsubjective” truth regarding sexual activity is fundamental to any sex education increasing the health and happiness of our society, but that such practice is hindered by the more polemical positions developed by abstinence-only educators and many of their critics.4

“Sex Respect”

“Sex Respect” might be best viewed as the educational response to the most recent political and legislative successes of those interested in controlling or forbidding young people from engaging in sexual activities.7 Because the consequences of commonplace “teenage sexual activity and out-of-wedlock childbearing are many and serious for teens, their families, their communities, and society,” the Abstinence Education Law of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act sanctioned the federal government funding only those educational programs “that teach an unambiguous abstinence message to youth,” wherein “providing instruction in or promoting the use of birth control would be inconsistent.”8 In tying federal funding to the prohibition of safe sex education, this law influenced school decision making regarding sex education; while many states already had similar laws, “for comprehensive sex education, it was the beginning of the end.”9 Every state has formally accepted this regulation, even while teenage sexual activity remains fairly widespread and normative. House staffers wrote at the time, “that both the practices and standards of many communities across the country clash with the standard required by law is precisely the point” (TP, 103). Political and cultural discourses on public welfare clearly permeated the environment. As President Bill Clinton stated in 1996, “we want to talk about teen pregnancy, because…it is a very significant economic and social problem in the United States.”8

Clinton’s economic rationale seems to echo that which lay behind the development of a proletariat sexuality in the eighteenth century, as seen by Foucault:

…in order for the proletariat to be granted a body and a sexuality; economic emergencies had to arise…there had to be established a whole technology of control which make it possible to keep that body and sexuality, finally conceded to them, under surveillance
(schooling, the politics of housing, public hygiene, institutions of relief and insurance, the general medicalization of the population...).

Yet with regard to its apparently repressive function, Foucault writes, “let us not picture the bourgeoisie symbolically castrating itself the better to refuse others the right to have a sex and make use of it as they please. This class must be seen rather as being occupied, from the mid-eighteenth century on, with creating its own sexuality and forming a specific body based on it” for “the indefinite extension of strength, vigor, health, and life.” It was the liberals calling for greater popular enlightenment who feared the apparent barriers to freedom and prosperity that could develop out of rampant sexuality. For example, Immanuel Kant wrote in On Education that

Nothing weakens the mind as well as the body so much as the kind of lust which is directed towards themselves….But this also must not be concealed from youth. We must place it before him in all its horribleness, telling him that…his bodily strength will be weakened by this vice more than by anything else…that his intellect will be very much weakened, and so on.\footnote{11}

Explicit in the most recent federal legislation is the perspective that in our society youth sexual abstinence helps enable social functioning and productivity. Implicit is the view of public schools as technologies for applying such official knowledge; educators are now expected to encode the legal perspective into commonsensical discourses connecting individual sexual abstinence to personal social, psychological, and health benefits. Legislators thus fund programs by Mast and others who attempt to simply communicate how the political is personal and the significance of human sexuality for the young member of society. Interestingly, Mast’s “Sex Respect” bears a striking resemblance to Kant’s writing two hundred years ago in emphasizing sexual fulfillment rather than mere gratification.

By contrasting fulfillment with gratification, Mast marks it as rarer and more valuable than the latter. Mast reasons that sexual fulfillment (unlike gratification) is not just physical; it can only be achieved holistically. Thus for Mast, sexuality is “not just our sexual organs and what we do or don’t do with them. It’s all the traits and values—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—that make a person male or female.” It is even implicated, as the first page of the text explains, in how we express ourselves verbally and emotionally. Mast seems to equate sexual development with gender socialization, noting how we learn to be individual girls and boys upon birth and men and women during adolescence (which Mast calls the “toddlerhood of sexuality”). The progressive parallel development of the human also along mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual paths is necessary in Mast’s conception of sexual fulfillment.
As socialization is key to fulfilling desire, pseudo-humanist arguments ground Mast’s call to wait for sexual “maturity”; “psychology has proven that man [sic] is much more than an animal; he is also a mental and spiritual being [because of] his ability to sublimate. Sublimation…is our ability to channel our sexual energy to a higher level of productivity than the lower animal is able to do.”\(^{14}\) We can use our sexual energy, unlike “cats, dogs, or rabbits,” to excel in studies, work, or sport. Mast thus writes at length in the beginning chapters of her text to emphasize the difference between animal instincts and the human capacity for responsible decision making:

Like animals, humans have needs….But we also have drives, or desires, which we can choose to act upon or to not act upon. Since not all drives are needs, we can channel them in a healthy way because they do not mean a difference between life and death….Often our mistake is in confusing needs (which we must satisfy) and drives (which we would like to satisfy).

One drive we obviously share with animals is the drive for sex, the mating instinct. However, animals have no choice but to mate when they are in heat (fertile). Their sexuality is centered around their reproductive organs. Human behavior is controlled in the mind—a mind that can think, evaluate, and decide. We humans can think and decide whether or not we will act on our sexual drive. We don’t have to follow our impulses. We can look at the consequences, think about the future, and use our minds to decide how we should act.\(^{15}\)

Just in case students remain uncertain regarding human exceptionality, they can be quizzed on “what determines which mate an animal chooses,” which reminds them of how humans can be self-possessed in ways that other animals cannot be.

Interestingly the significance of sexuality, above and beyond sex, in human communities also grounds the arguments of comprehensive sex education advocate Levine. She argues that sociobiology “which compares humans with other beasts” is of “limited utility when explaining children’s sexual development,” because “human touch acquires meaning in culture” \(TP, 179\). Similarly, Levine argues for a more integrated approach to understanding human sexuality, because “if we want children to…balance spontaneity and caution, freedom and responsibility, these are capacities and values that apply to all realms of their private and public lives, with sexuality no greater or lesser a realm” \(TP, 224\). Levine also argues ultimately for our integrating “real sexual maturity into our lives” rather than regarding sex as “the center of the universe.”\(^{16}\)

Of course Mast provides, in a less than humanist fashion, the end result ideally arising out of this appreciation for humanity. To “express its sexual
self” the “inner being” must be in a committed, lifelong, adult (heterosexual) relationship. Only by doing so can we apparently experience a pleasure unlike that available to any (other) creatures. This ideal result stemming from “our” conception of human sexuality thus ignores or discounts numerous voices, viewpoints, and scientific and theoretical findings to accord with the 1996 Abstinence Education Law. Excluded from “Sex Respect,” for instance, are popular notions of sexual fulfillment as not determined by or dependent upon marital status, marriage as a sexist or heteronormative institution, gender binaries and gender socialization as problematic, heteronormativity as harmful, and premarital (and “nonmarital”) sexual activity as not inherently destructive. It does not seem particularly educational to promote as truth such a contentious perspective. Without providing additional information regarding other prevalent perspectives on human sexuality, educators exclusively endorsing programs like Mast’s are accurately viewed as biased. Levine thus critiques “Sex Respect,” as Bonnie Trudell and Mariamne Whatley have, for being dogmatic and indoctrinating.

However, as Foucault wrote regarding the nineteenth century history of sexuality,

deployments of power and knowledge, of truth and pleasures, so unlike those of repression, are not necessarily secondary and derivative...repression is not in any case fundamental and overriding. We need to take these mechanisms seriously, therefore, and reverse the direction of our analysis: rather than assuming a generally acknowledged repression, and an ignorance measured against what we are supposed to know, we must begin with these positive mechanisms, insofar as they produce knowledge, multiply discourse, induce pleasure, and generate power. 17

For all of its lacking, “Sex Respect” does contain positive messages about sex, sexuality, and fulfillment. Chief among these is that we can use sexuality to better ourselves and improve our lives. Mast’s appeal to the positive and creative effects of sublimation and integration make clear her position on the positive utility of sexual energy accompanied by intentionality. Thus while Levine bemoans that “the idea that sex is a normative—and, heaven forbid, positive—part of adolescent life is unutterable in America’s public forum,” the idea is certainly expressed in those schools using Mast’s guides (TP, 93). Of course, Mast feels that our sexualities should be rather tightly harnessed so that we can be “free to make choices about our lives that might not be open to us if we’re preoccupied with sexual activity.”18 Yet I wonder who would actually disagree with this. Negative social and health consequences are a possible result of sexual activity. As federal regulations remind us, energy spent in and due in part to sexual activity is energy that could be spent in other ways.
Our sexualities can be useful to us if we act rationally or systematically in relation to them. Mast thus appeals also to the capacity for rationality, for the betterment of the individual and society, as would any advocate for any form of sex education. Toward this aim, she encourages students to take a critical stance toward messages they receive, particularly from the media and peers. She points out how media can deceive and exploit youth: advertisers are “constantly trying to turn us on, to use us to sell their projects! This is unfair!” Yet as her student text is also dotted with controversial news quotations of individuals, such as religious fundamentalists discussing so-called findings regarding sexuality and youth, her more liberal statement once again seems disingenuous.

Similarly, Mast’s positive emphasis on sexual communication and dialogue seems at times underhanded. Dialogue serves in the guide to transmit important information obtained through experience or expertise from one person to another, and it is further emphasized in the teacher’s guide’s suggesting ways to engage students. Yet exploration of some quite relevant topics, such as birth control and homosexuality, are prohibited from federally funded sexual education, as they remain socially contested and unprivileged. While such need not be a mark against a given issue, Mast does maintain neutrality or silence, stating in her sole reference to homosexuality that it is simply “unnatural.”

Overall, a paradox emerges in the text. Few would disagree with Mast’s encouraging one to think for his or herself, critically using various information sources, before making decisions about sexual activity. As no one is “free” in the sense of being able to construct one’s worldview independently of others in society, we must develop and revise our beliefs through collaborative processes; we therefore need to communicate about issues of sex and sexuality to gain a better sense of our options. Such practice is hindered, however, by Mast effectively shutting down some conversations, such as those about homosexuality, and treating her understanding of sexual fulfillment as the obvious end to any rational inquiry on the subject.

Yet might a more general form of this predicament be inherent of any sex education? After all, education is required of young people by adults; in essence, young people are forced to hear and manifestly retain certain perspectives and are not in public schools today “free” in any meaningful sense of the word. Thus, a critical reception of institutionalized messages can be encouraged in the classroom, but what counts as critical is ultimately determined by the beliefs of society in general and by teachers in particular. The educational implications of this state will be made clearer in the next section.
There are many problems with “Sex Respect.” As we have seen here, sexual diversity is not highlighted in the materials. Trudell and Whatley also observe cultural biases in “Sex Respect,” including certain gender, class, and racial stereotypes. Due to its sexist tone, Mayo notes “Sex Respect” being removed from at least one school district. Because of these problems as well as abstinence education’s apparent ineffectiveness (young people still engage in a variety of sexual activities), Levine argues that it must be replaced because “comprehensive, nonabstinence sex education works” (TP, 102).

Yet we must be cautious before stating that anything “works.” The relationship between educational discourse and personal beliefs, attitudes, and behavior is unclear. As Trudell and Whatley point out, “it has never been proven conclusively that sexuality education has any significant effect on behavior.” Nor is it plausible in our current legislative environment that we could gain accurate demographic information regarding how much and what types of sex young people are having. As Levine writes, even attempting to collect such information would “in the eyes of many influential Congress members…border on sexual abuse” (TP, 134-135). Finally, the study Levine cites emphasizes that there is no “silver bullet” for improving US adolescent health and instead lists as priorities cultural values such as secularism, research, positive perceptions of youth, and national health care provision, as well as access to accurate information about sex in schools. It is American culture, or its official (political) discourse, that hinders effective sex education.

Of course, Levine recognizes as much in her text, warning us that neither teens nor adults are obtaining enough sexual pleasure in our society, as evidenced by Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders being asked to resign for “killing the moral fabric of America,” by suggesting that classroom teachers discuss masturbation (TP, 185). Levine feels that humans are entitled to pleasure and the fulfillment of desire, and she does not accept sex education programs leaving students “expert in the workings of the vas deferens, yet ignorant of the clitoris” (TP, 139). Levine argues that it harms students to preclude their developing knowledge for the attainment of sexual pleasure, and thus wants to change our cultural conceptions of sexual desire and fulfillment through sex education.

Levine justifies her case by pointing out that teens, particularly girls, are having bad sex. As noted above, we do not have in this country statistical data on minors’ desires and pleasures. Nonetheless, without an education specifically for fulfilling desire, Levine presumes with the use of anecdotal evidence that teen sex is fast and (therefore, apparently) unfulfilling and regrettable for girls. Interestingly, that sexual activity does not fulfill young people also justifies Mast’s call for sexual abstinence in “Sex Respect.”
Because of this situation, Levine recommends that girls learn that desire resides in the body, since otherwise they might become paralyzed and prevented from sound decision making because of the surprise of arousal. Further, she would advise that “love doesn’t always make sex good,” a message curiously echoing the teacher’s guide to “Sex Respect” (TP, 160–167). Likewise Levine, like Mast, would have boys recognize that “not-knowing isn’t unmanly. It can unlock the clues to desire” through prompting questions (TP, 174). Of course, Levine and Mast are at odds with one another regarding a crucial issue. Mast feels that it is a disservice “to teach teens a sexual decision making process which they are not experientially capable of handling,” whereas Levine views it as our duty to explicitly promote masturbation and other positive sexual activities in sex education.

Yet while the scarcity of comprehensive sex educators seems to complement Levine’s argument that we need to further accept and embrace youth sexuality in our culture, it also challenges the capacity to implement her proposals. In the face of widespread child sexual hysteria, sex educators must be cautious even when following legal and employment codes. Levine’s discussion of one mother who regrets her lack of knowledge regarding sexual fulfillment illustrates another challenge we face in educating for some capacity not universally realized by adults in our society:

Twenty-five years after her first sexual experience, Terry still finds it difficult to sort out love and sex. In fact, she said, she and Sally had been planning the “girls’ dinner” for two years, but they kept putting it off. “And really,” said Terry, “the reason was that I was waiting to have something intelligent that would be worthy of a mother telling a daughter—and I felt stupid.” Like many women, Terry struggles between the pull of romance and a solid sense of herself as a sexual agent. When I asked about desire, she admitted, “I don’t know if I know when or what or who I desire, really, even now.” (TP, 167)

If adults’ conceptions and capacities related to sexuality vary to the point where some concerned individuals remain utterly perplexed, then what exactly signifies sexual knowledge?

Other comments of Levine’s seem to negate the need for comprehensive sex education. Appreciating the joys of masturbation is an entitlement to be taught or at least promoted, according to Levine. Yet she also acknowledges the prevalence of masturbation among children who have received no guidance. Indeed, Levine recognizes clues that children nonetheless experience this pleasure even if “someone has told them to hide it and shut up about it,” in their developing “their own names for the practice,” like “pressing” (for girls) and “pulling” (for boys) (TP, 186). Levine suggests a limit to sex education as well
when she recommends that we respect children’s personal “knowledge” about their pleasurable feelings rather than “rush to civilize.”

It seems that sex education is not needed at all when Levine (paradoxically) recommends naïve experiments with “outercourse,” because enjoying “being clueless about the right way to go about it” can preclude one developing “the sexual misery that afflicts so many American adults” (TP, 195). Levine’s point is further muddled by her describing one male friend noting “outercourse” as the “hottest sex of his life,” and then quoting another who equates “awkward teen sex” with “other ‘ghastly’ trials of adolescence, including ‘playing football, having zits, and eating my mother’s cooking’” (TP, 194–195). Does nostalgia for ignorance signify it as good or bad? Many “worldly” adults appear to enjoy football and their mothers’ cooking. These remarks make Levine’s stance regarding the merit of sexual knowledge less than obvious. Does “knowledge” make sex better or not? If some seem to benefit from sexual naivety while others do not, might knowledge of sexual pleasure or fulfillment be subjective and personal rather than objectively applicable?

Further, Levine includes one chapter on the beneficent sexual instruction available to young people on the internet and in popular and classical literature, in which she claims that “a rich imagination is the soul of good sex” (TP, 153). Treating the imagination as essential to sexual pleasure seems to negate the necessity as well as the potential of an official discourse on sexuality. Perhaps we do not loathe and repress sex in our society as much as we keep it where it belongs: in the imagination and out of statistics. As we have seen here, policy prescriptions and official discourse need not correlate with actual norms of practice. It is one thing to state that we need to encourage young people to seek out appropriate, empowering sexual pleasure, and here Mast is in agreement with Levine. Yet it is another to equate this with comprehensive sex or sexuality education in a society where, according to Levine, children are “pressing” and “pulling” themselves no matter what we say, while their adult would-be guides struggle not to define themselves “in terms of a man’s love” (TP, 186; 167).

**Conclusion**

Mast and Levine both seek to defend human sexual freedom from deceptive forces. They fear how media messages about sex can harm those lacking certain knowledge and virtues, particularly if they engage in improper forms of sex that might lead to regret. Because of this, Mast recommends that school aged people abstain from intercourse and sublimate their sexual energy, while Levine seems to promote a more liberal attitude encouraging masturbation, “outercourse,” and intercourse. Yet both arguments are what Foucault calls deployments of sexuality, reflective of the writer’s desire to
articulate a quality of experience that can nonetheless only be subjectively known:

By creating the imaginary element that is “sex,” the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles: the desire for sex—the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted “sex” itself as something desirable. And it is this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power; it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected—the dark shimmer of sex.26

Understanding sexuality as a cultural, contextually knowable conception can preclude our echoing Mast’s and Levine’s question: when will our sex(es) be liberated? As Foucault wrote, “the irony of this deployment is in having us believe that our ‘liberation’ is in the balance”; the positing of so called objective knowledge on sexual pleasure or fulfillment can not liberate any but (perhaps) the one emphasizing thusly their personal, subjective experience.27

To put forward either account of sexual knowledge as conclusive when neither is even particularly coherent would hardly be educational. Yet Foucault also cautions against our being for “nonconsensuality,” even if “one must not be for consensuality.”28 There are forms of truth, Foucault writes, whose subject may properly be regarded as neutral and “indifferent to time, space, and circumstances.”29 While politics can be viewed as “essentially domination and repression,” he has also emphasized that it need not be.30 There can be transsubjective truth in a Foucaultian account even if it has a place and time; indeed, there must be for knowledge to hold social value.

Given the uniqueness of each person’s experience of sexual pleasure, I remain less than certain what we should teach, how much we should teach, who should teach it, and how, when it comes to sexual fulfillment or liberation. Instances where the repressive function of official discourse is undercut by the pleasure people receive in transgressing it make arguing against it no easier task. Yet in our situation, it seems to me that any truly liberating sex education, which provides knowledge that can inform personal decision making, should have less to do with properly appreciating alternative conceptions of sexuality than with the more widely recognizable potential effects of sex acts on one’s health and general state. While such “truth” would certainly have a historical, political context, it still seems more useful to our nation’s youth than more particular perspectives on the key(s) to fulfilling their sexual desires.
Notes


2. Mayo, Disputing the Subject, 141.


5. See Levine, The Perils; Pillow, Unfit Subjects; or Mayo, Disputing the Subject.


7. Levine, The Perils, 97, 101. This work will be cited as TP in the text for all subsequent references.

8. Bill Clinton, quoted in Pillow, Unfit Subjects, 46.


15. Mast, Sex Respect, 28.


17. Foucault, History of Sexuality, 73.