

The quality and importance of sexuality education

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The quality of sexuality education received varies from person to person, high school to high school. Some schools may have developed a comprehensive curriculum regarding the topic, while others may have omitted it entirely. Personally, I have been fortunate enough to receive sexuality education at the high school I attended, although the programme there was not without its flaws. When it comes to sexuality education, there are two sides we can consider - the "official" culture of schooling, and then the "unofficial". When it comes to breaking down the sexuality education that I received while at high school, both "official" and "unofficial" sexuality education played a part in forming what I know about the topic.

"Official" sexuality education would involve the curriculum taught to us students by teachers during class. This would mean the two compulsory years of health/sexuality education in years nine and ten, as well as the year of health that I took voluntarily in my last year of high school. Although this official system did teach me some things, it was interesting to note that I had learnt much of what was taught and more through the "unofficial" system already - the "unofficial" system being through my peers, and teacher-student interactions in the past. In my experience, the "official" culture of schooling offered a much more anatomical and reproductive based approach to sexuality education. Heavy emphasis in particular was placed on the reproductive aspect of our bodies - mostly regarding pregnancies, or the avoidance of them through contraception and abortions. Despite the topic of sexuality education involving many more aspects than simply the reproductive capabilities of our bodies, my school decided to put reproduction and sexually transmitted infections in the spotlight and shunt

other topics such as relationships/emotions, sexual/gender orientations and pleasure aside. Looking back, perhaps this purely anatomical and reproductive focus was an attempt by the school to keep their curriculum as “clean” as possible – treating young people’s sexualities as a problem rather than something to be embraced. As sex and pleasure is still thought of as a taboo topic by many – especially when it comes to the sexuality of young people such as teenagers – perhaps this omission was a result of official bodies trying to accommodate for families that did not believe it had a place in the formal curriculum.

The avoidance of pleasure as a topic of discussion is obvious now that I look back at the sexuality education I had received. Diagrams lacked the labels for organs like the clitoris that were known more for pleasure-based functions, and erect penises were never seen in material presented to the class. The discussion of pleasure and orgasms was lightly skimmed over as simply a possibility or merely in the context of reproduction, rather than a healthy part of our sexualities that is simply another normal part of us. This balancing act between knowledge deemed necessary for sexuality education and what was considered socially acceptable to be taught in a formal environment reflected the kind of sexuality education curriculum we ultimately ended up receiving. Perhaps the nature of the class also played a role into formalising the omission of such topics from the curriculum. From memory, there were instances where my classmates were immature, and even the mention of genitalia would spur some individuals to start making inappropriate comments and jokes. Perhaps the school viewed this kind of behaviour as unacceptable and thus kept away from further provoking such

students with topics such as pleasure. It may also have potentially been a way to reduce teacher discomfort as well, as some students may also harass/press teachers to divulge information (potentially more than they may be comfortable with) regarding their own experiences and preferences when it comes to this topic. This interaction of student immaturity and teacher discomfort could potentially have further reaffirmed the school's decision to leave out the topic of pleasure, and instead decide that students could learn this kind of thing on their own.

However, an issue with this way of thinking is that despite it indeed being possible for students to "figure it out" on their own, it increases the likelihood for students to engage in unsafe practices due to their lack of knowledge surrounding that area of sexuality education. The narrow scope and lack of detail of the sexuality education curriculum in my school, combined with the fact that the teacher was a physical education teacher rather than a dedicated health teacher gave students the impression (whether they consciously realised it or not) that sexuality education was a subject less important than all other "proper" subjects. It told us that we did not need to know much, just that teenagers having sex is a bad thing, and made little to no effort to validate other aspects and emotions that could be included under the umbrella of sexuality education. Normalisation of the topic would make the process of incorporating education and discussion around topics such as pleasure/orgasms more acceptable in the school environment.

However, this is much easier said than done, and would require a shift of thinking on the societal level in order for this to occur. Perhaps we may see <https://assignbuster.com/the-quality-and-importance-of-sexuality-education/>

the integration of such thinking into our society in the future, but as it stands right now this appears to be unlikely for the near future. Heteronormativity was another aspect prevalent throughout the sexuality education I had received. When discussing sexual activities and STI prevention, the focus was always with regards to heterosexual intercourse, and more specifically heterosexual copulation. Any other type of sex (for pleasure, or non-heterosexual) was simply glossed over or omitted entirely. As noted by Dioro (1985, p. 239), the term "sex" is often reduced to simply the act of heterosexual copulation, which strips sexuality of its multifaced meaning and scope of practice. This generalisation of the term marginalises those who do not fit within the heterosexual norm, and reinforces the dominant discourse of institutionalised heteronormativity that pervaded every aspect of the sexuality education I had received. With regards to protection, my class was only taught about condoms. Despite condoms being a viable tool for heterosexual and gay intercourse, no information was given regarding lesbian intercourse.

In my experience, some teenagers also made remarks or acted inappropriately when the teacher mentioned homosexuality (other sexualities outside of heterosexual and homosexual were not mentioned at my school). However, the teacher made no attempt to correct these students, nor did they say anything in defence. Although we may not have realized it at the time, this student-teacher interaction could have further emphasized the thought that anyone who did not identify as heterosexual were not worthy of defending, or somehow less than heterosexuals. This in turn, further normalizes heterosexuality and establishes any deviation from

heterosexuality as a negative thing. In a study investigating topics students wanted to be included in sexuality education programmes, it was found that out of a total 31 issues, homophobia and sexual diversity ranked 21st and 24th respectively. “ Such findings reflect and are an effect of dominant discourses of sexuality where homosexuality is marginalized in favour of the constituted ‘ norm’ of heterosexuality.” (Allen, 2007, p. 170)

As someone who does not identify as heterosexual, I do not find that the sexuality education I received via the school curriculum had sufficiently answered my questions nor given me the appropriate knowledge to express who I am safely and confidently. In fact, the heteronormalising of these topics, in conjunction with homophobia exhibited by students and the teachers’ indifference has negatively impacted how I view myself. Although I doubt it was anybody’s intention to do so, the ignorance stemming from institutionalized heteronormativity has indirectly taught me as an individual that heterosexual orientations are dominant and take precedence before all other orientations. It may be that the school was simply catering to the perceived majority (with the assumption that most students would identify as heterosexual), but there is still a significant number of people who do not identify this way. Omission of recognition and discussions inclusive of all orientations (or at least some other than heterosexual) further gives students the impression that heterosexual is the default and any deviation is considered abnormal as it is not included in the formal curriculum.

This lack of representation can negatively impact non-heterosexual individuals, in particular those who may not know much regarding sexual/romantic orientations but have recognised that they do not fit with <https://assignbuster.com/the-quality-and-importance-of-sexuality-education/>

the socially accepted norm. Validation leads to self-understanding and acceptance, but omission only breeds doubts and insecurities. The knowledge gained and that I came to understand from my experience of sexuality education at high school was shaped by many factors. These factors included the societal normalisation of heterosexuality as the default, the missing discourse of pleasure and desire within the “official” culture of schooling, as well as what I came to learn through my peers and teacher-peer interactions in the “unofficial” culture of schooling. Although I have learnt many things regarding sexuality throughout this process, I ultimately believe that the sexuality education programme offered by my high school still had its flaws; despite what may have been the school’s best intentions.