

ComAlt: Processes and Alternatives

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Research Project.

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5/26/17

Comprehensive Sex Education's Connections to Social Justice Work

Introduction.

This work focuses on exploring and discussing the ways in which comprehensive, inclusive sex education in various forms can be directly or indirectly related to social justice movements, and point out the ways that this seemingly unconnected topic touches many aspects of everyone's lives. When this idea was originally conceived, it was set and assumed to be in the style and form of a formal academic research paper. However, between timing, research logistics, and the current events of the campus, it's become a necessity and a challenge to create a piece of work that takes a more informal approach to discussion and exploration. This work is not created in a vacuum, and while it is not possible to note every possible outside social force that acts upon its content, style, and argument, to attempt to utterly ignore the context in which this work was written in would mean a loss of depth and meaning. Three major elements of context exist for this work.

In the most pressing logistical sense, the challenge of creating a work that perhaps blurs formal and informal writing and experiential more individual writing was born of necessity. For an in depth, truly research based paper there is not enough time to read through the PDFs and articles collected around the topic in a timely manner. In other words, a mistake of sorts, on the part of the author. However, the challenge that has come from problem solving for that mistake is influenced by other contextual factors that makes this work a more exciting prospect than dwelling on what no longer can

be created.

First, this piece is written for an Independent Study Contract that includes an element of experiential learning internship around coordination and leadership for identity spaces, and an element created to think deeply on how social justice and diversity can be written into fiction and why that's important. These influences are important because the challenge of this work is to create a starting point of thought for both further scholarly research, and for action in any form that the reader finds useful. This is not a work of fiction, nor is it exactly a work of exact academic scholarship. The challenge lies within finding that balance and creating something useful and thought provoking between traditional format barriers.

The third major contextual influence that created the idea of this challenge is the current campus climate, and the tension between scholarship and traditional education and social movements in general. Over the last several weeks, and especially over this last week the campus has been amongst very serious and very tense conversations around racism, anti-blackness, and institutional systems of oppression. They are conversations that have been happening for years, on this campus and in the world at large. Within those conversations are conversations about the ethics, effectiveness, accessibility, history, and founding ideals of traditional higher education and formal scholarship. Who gets to write about different peoples experiences? Who gets to learn about those experiences, and who do you learn from? What happens to anyone who doesn't have access to that education and writing and work, and what happens when anyone disagrees with the conclusions made in that formal scholarship frame?

For this piece, those questions cannot be answered, or in fact delved into very deeply. This piece is still written within a relatively traditional or relatively progressive (depending on what it's being compared to) higher education context, by a person with quite a bit of inherent privilege that likely hasn't been very effectively addressed. The challenge taken then is to change the form of this work even slightly to be less formal, more individual, more based on experience than on research, to

challenge the typical framework of academic writing. It's very unlikely that this is a new idea, but it will be the first time this author has consciously tried to work with this in mind, so there will likely be mistakes and there will definitely be problematic elements in this writing. It is to be part of the process of the author's learning, and not to be a burden of further teaching upon anyone but the author. At least that is the intent, and that is the general statement of bias and position.

Sex Education and Social Justice.

As it stands, the phrases sex education and social justice can cover an incredibly broad spectrum of meaning. Even within this paper, there will be times when additional clarification, or a different circumstance need be noted.

But a starting base discussion of what it those phrases mean to the author would never hurt.

This piece is working with an idea of comprehensive and inclusive sex education as not only a set of curriculum used in a traditional school, but also as a way to teach community. Comprehensive means learning about all biological systems, not just about the generalized set you were assigned at birth, as well as learning about contraception, sexually transmitted infections, pleasure, how to cultivate healthy relationships, and how to learn about your body and make mature and informed choices about what happens to your body, especially in regards to sexual health and sexuality, but also around aging and how other types of bodily health aspects can interact with sexual health and sexuality. Inclusive means it's accessible to people of all physical and mental abilities, and including what sexual health and sexuality can mean to people who don't fall within the societal 'norms'; inclusive also means that various kinds of sexual orientation, gender orientation, and relationship formation are discussed, as well as how different environmental factors, such as prejudices and systemic discrimination against certain identities, impact sexuality and sexual health. Of course, this idea of comprehensive and inclusive sex education seems to be more imagination and wish than reality currently, and in most situations comprehensive sex education can mean much less, in that it might simply acknowledges that

contraception exists and doesn't expect abstinence only education to be effective, and little other efforts to be comprehensive are actually taken.

In looking at the ideal comprehensive and inclusive sex education that includes space for as many sexual orientations and gender identities and biological variation as possible, with education around emotion, relationship, and sociopolitical context as well, it's easier to see sex education having impact on social justice work than it is to see current sex education having an impact.

Social justice in this work is considered pretty broadly. It aims to be able to include any movement or group working to bring further equity to groups of people based on identity and discrimination against that group. Some groups are less formal, like discussion groups or groups that come together around a particular project or cause for only a short time and various levels of organization, or it could be more formal, such as various nonprofits who are solely committed to advocating or fighting for equity in various ways. This idea of what social justice is is meant to incorporate both community demonstrations, some types of community contribution organizations, student groups, advocacy groups, shelters, and more. Some types of organizations that could be kept in mind are those that are working to decriminalize sex work, anyone who advocates for any aspect of equity for LGBTQIA folks, Trans folks, or queer and trans people of color, people working against mass incarceration, or anyone fighting in favor of inclusive feminism or for reproductive rights.

Of course there will be social justice movements that have little or nothing to do with sex education, but because of the foundation nature of sexual health and sexuality based identities, sex education touches or influences a lot.

Past and Current Influences.

In considering what past influences sex education has had on social movements, it's easier to think less of a structured sex education course or formal training, and more of the information that should be included in comprehensive sex education. Many social justice movements started as a

community or group of people learned more about the systems they lived within, and the body is another system to learn about. The information that should be included in comprehensive, inclusive sex education now and in the future has already had impact on social justice movements.

Early feminism developed some aspects from women's discussion groups and community meetings, discussing reproductive systems, abortion, contraception, periods, and other incredibly taboo topics. In understanding only a little more about women's bodies and orgasms, vibrators shifted from a medical device born out of the oppression of women to a symbol of freedom and women's control over their bodies. Learning more about human reproductive biology has created information that has given a long overdue voice to trans and nonbinary communities in their fights for equity and the right to determine what happens to their bodies and how.

Having more knowledge in the medical community about sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation can create a better space for anyone in the LGBTQIA community to seek care for medical needs. Learning more about HIV and AIDS helps keep already marginalized communities safer by slowly breaking stereotypes and prejudices.

All of these ways that information related to sex education has helped create a better society is the way that sex education interacts with social justice. Most of the information that was helped in these cases is still helpful, and still needs to be made visible to create more progress.

Potential Impacts in the Future.

Much of these impacts are being considered because some facet of them have already been present and having an impact. This is based on the things we're seeing currently, and what could happen if comprehensive, inclusive sex education and community acceptance became further normalized and further encouraged at every step of life.

Each of the impacts discussed here could be a seed for further more formal or experiential research, each of these topics could be expanded upon and should be expanded upon.

These topics are combinations of what should be taught, and how teaching that leads into increasing equity and bettering community and quality of life.

The benefits of teaching safer sex practices in a way that's not shameful or stigmatizing is not only decreasing the prevalence of STIs, but making it easier and more acceptable to handle STIs when they are present. If information is available to anyone, anyone will be able to find the information they need when they need it, and be less afraid to act. Whether that action is using a condom, getting tested, or having a conversation with a partner. If safer sex practices are taught with lenses to include teaching about pleasure, emotion, toys, and different ways to feel pleasure or have relationships, then it's easier understand why you like what you like, how to experiment with what you like, and how to do it safely. Reducing stigma around relationship styles, or sexual preferences that are not considered the 'norm' reduces the danger of discrimination and physical harm (both from outer factors and from unsafe practices) that face those communities.

To work toward LGBTQIA inclusive education also helps lessen stigma, discrimination, and misunderstanding, both for those in the LGBTQIA community, and those around them. It's really harmful to individuals to not have the tools to understand the way their identities have formed and could be expressed within themselves. To have greater education around the language that's being developed so quickly around identities, and around the biological implications, helps everyone. In recent history biology has been cited many times as reasons to disregard the language around identities that's been developed, but that's mainly because the biology being taught is simplistic, inaccurate or biased, and there's no acknowledgment of the vastness of what we don't understand yet about human biology. To acknowledge that there's a lot we don't understand, and to have education around the processes that have created out current biological knowledge would be incredibly helpful and affirming to many people. Including teaching around discrimination and how that affects health and sexual health as part of sex education because of the overlaps. Societal factors many times make it difficult to enact things that facilitate survival and healthy practices, and those societal factors are more prominent for

people who fall into or near certain identities. Increasing education around LGBTQIA societal issues, and then how those issues could be met and shifted will allow for better community understanding and support for LGBTQIA people, and allow for healthcare options to be more prevalent and effective. It creates more effective healthcare solutions because it would tackle education on both sides, medical providers would be more understanding and better educated around issues that affect health, and individuals will have a better understanding of how to navigate the unfair obstacles in their path, and what they should be able to demand when it comes to quality of care.

Having more comprehensive, more inclusive, and more prevalent sex education affects other health implications as well. Understanding accessibility when it comes to sex and sexual health and sexuality can have impact as well. Accessibility could mean mental or emotional ability to understand the information provided in sex education, or be able to learn in the format the education is being provided in. It could mean the physical ability to follow through on what's taught around safer sex, pleasure, or healthy relationships. It could mean outside ability to have access to safer sex supplies or information.

But in any meaning of accessibility, understanding the implications of providing more accessible education and resources helps provide autonomy in action and bodily autonomy to anyone at all affected by the question of accessibility.

Bodily autonomy, and the ability to make decisions about what happens to your body have been a hotly discussed topic for a very long time, especially now, and especially if you identify as a woman, or if you are in possession of a particular set of biological characteristics. This in itself is a social justice issue, and so teaching about it influences social justice work, and teaching anything that influences understanding of bodily autonomy, consent, or effective communication also contributes to social justice work.

Consent is an area that desperately needs more widespread information. Understanding consent in the context of sexuality and other contexts is incredibly important. Creating a culture where sexual

consent, consent around privacy or information, and any other area where consent is necessary helps combat any social justice issue that consent is a factor of. One major area of social justice work where consent is a large factor is the work to undo rape culture, and the cultural ideas that uphold it, such as slut shaming, victim blaming, and media formed beauty ideals that affect self image.

To teach these elements in sex education would have large direct and indirect influences on individual and community quality of life and ability to work on social justice issues. If more people had more complete and inclusive base understandings of these topics it would create an opening for far more mature interactions and relationships that could scale from individuals to entire communities and groups of people.

It's important to keep in mind then, not to relegate discussion of sex or bodily function to a place of unworthiness or grossness. It's just as important to think critically and openly about sex and body as it is to think about philosophy, art, politics, or any other 'higher thinking' subject. Additionally, it's pretty much a guarantee that sex and body have crossed over into each and every higher subject many times.

Form and Function: The Goals

Sex education is not just a curriculum that should be taught for a semester in an arbitrary age group. It is a community building experience. Talking about personal experiences and having an open space to share that experience is important to community health, because it's important to be able to continue learning and finding new information in an environment that won't stigmatize discussion of subjects that are pretty fundamental to our lives and the systems we live within. As long as no one is forced to speak about what they do not want to, and everyone is consenting to be part of that conversation and everyone is making sure that conversation is taking the form it needs to to make sure everyone is getting what they want or need out of that conversation, then there shouldn't be anything in the way of having more of these kinds of conversations.

Building that community aspect is incredibly important element, but no single element of education is a whole. There is still place for more formal or traditional or even classroom curriculum based education, as long as it is as comprehensive, inclusive, and accessible as possible. Part of creating that goal is making sure that the information is available to all, and that you can focus in particular on the things you are most interested in. The information must be available to anyone who wishes to know it, there must be an ability to go as far in depth as you can in each subject, and there must be different ways to learn the information and different formats that the information takes, to provide the best accessibility possible.

Conclusion.

This work has aimed to highlight the fundamental connections between sex education's potential impact and social justice movements' positive progress. Sex education is not simply a curriculum, or a day for raising awareness of a particular aspect, it is an opportunity for community development, growth, and shared learning. In addition, the normalization and destigmatization that will come from creating more comprehensive and inclusive sex education programs will create a space for still greater understanding of sex ed, but also for other social movements to create positive change.

There is the hope that this work can contribute to further studies and further research on various spectrum of formal and informal.

There is much study that could be done on the elements mentioned in this work, and there should be. This was not meant to be the only or the best work on any of the included or mentioned subjects. It is a collected expression of experiential learning over the last quarter and beyond.

This work is an invitation to be interested in a nuanced subject that is much bigger than this singular author and their attempt at keeping track of as many connections at once as possible.

Attached to this document is a bibliography of works that were to be used as sources in the original concept of this work as a formal research paper. They have not all been thoroughly vetted or

read through, and there are several subjects included in the collection, but they may provide some stepping stones for anyone who wishes to further this idea.

Potential Resources:

A starting point for references that could be used in future research.

Topics around comprehensive sex education, sex worker rights, HIV/AIDS prevention and affected communities, other various topics.

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