

The Expectations of Sex Education Curriculums from the Adult Population

Melanie D. Prater and Christi Hu, PhD

Faculty Mentor: Christi Hu, PhD
Science, Psychological Science

Abstract

Previous research has found that the majority of sexual education programs taught in the school system are abstinence-based. This project continues the line of research investigating the relationship between types of sexual education and sexual activity in college. While research has shown that teenagers' sexual education did not cover, or covered only briefly, important topics and focused on abstinence, very little research has been done from the perspective of adults. This study asked adults, what type of sexual education programs they received and what they thought was currently being taught in sexual education programs; it also asked them to rank the importance of several topics. Information on religion, politics, and location were also gathered. The level of importance on several topics, including LGBTQ issues and abstinence, were related to religiousness and political stance. While there were differing opinions in several areas, there was still a large portion of adults who focused on abstinence as an important topic.

Background

Previous research in this laboratory has found that the majority of sexual education programs taught in the school system are abstinence-based (Prater, 2019), which supports other findings in the literature. In a study conducted by Gardner and colleagues (2015), the findings showed that only 1/3 of the schools in the US reported being an abstinence-only-based sexual education program. However, every student involved in the study reported that their sexual education program was abstinence-only and highly valued virginity even when the school reported otherwise (Gardner, 2015). In another study, only 5-10% of students reported that they were enrolled in a comprehensive sexual education program (Constantine, Jerman, Petra, Huang, & Alice, 2007).

Gardner also found that students' sexual education program did not cover, or covered only briefly, topics that they thought were important. These students stated that their ideal sexual education program would include a neutral orientation to sexuality that assumes that young people will be sexually active, full and specific information on contraception and safe sex options, and information on accessing sexual health services (Gardner, 2015).

However, it is not just the students who believe that there is much lacking in their sexual education. Parents also believe that certain topics are lacking in sexual education programs. Parents have reported that they wanted the topics of puberty, healthy relationships, abstinence, sexually transmitted

diseases, and birth control taught in their child's sexual education program (Kantor & Levitz, 2017). In a study done in California, 89% of parents were in support of comprehensive-based programs, while 11% of parents were in support of abstinence-only-based programs (Constantine, Jerman, Petra, Huang, & Alice, 2007).

No conclusions have been drawn pertaining to what influences parents' perception of sexual education programs. A study conducted on the different views of sexual education between Democrats and Republicans showed no significant difference between the expectations of Democratic and Republican parents (Kantor & Levitz, 2017). There is also a lack of research in more conservative areas of the country. This project aimed to fill some of these gaps by asking adults specific questions about their expectations of sexual education programs, along with demographic, religious, and political affiliation questions.

Method

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through social media by the sharing of the survey and a request for joining the study. At the end of the survey, we also asked if they would share the survey on their social media page, using snowball sampling. Participants were eliminated if they were 1) under 18 years of age or older or 2) currently enrolled in college courses. This

ensures that we were gathering data from adults not in any type of school system.

Materials

Participants completed an online survey with 35 questions in total.

Participants' own sexual education program. The survey included the choice of 5 different sexual education programs, with instructions to select the one option that best describes the program that they experienced in high school. Definitions of the programs were obtained from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (summarized in Connecticut State Department of Education's Overview of Sexual Health Education; CSDoE, 2020).

Current sexual education programs in community. The participants were asked to indicate which topics they believed were offered in the current sex education programs at local schools, based on a list of topics provided to them. They were then asked to rank the importance of each topic individually. The participants were also asked if they believed that a sex education program should be co-ed and who they believed should teach a sex education course.

Demographic questions. The survey included questions regarding age, race, and level of education. The participants were asked which state they lived in and to rate their religious and political views.

Data Collection

Data was collected using social media. The survey was shared on a social media platform, and at the end of the survey, the participants were asked to share the survey on their accounts in order to spread access to the survey. The project was approved by LaGrange College's IRB.

Results

145 adults participated in this study. 4 participants were removed from the study due to nonsensical answers. Therefore, our sample was 141 (114 females, 26 males, 1 nonbinary). The participants ages ranged from 18 to 79 years. The participants were white (123), African American or black (7), Asian (2), Indian (1), multiracial (4), and 4 failed to respond.

The majority of all participants (66.79%) thought that an outside source should be brought in to teach sexual education programs (See Figure 1).

Participants who identified as very religious found the topic of abstinence more important in sexual education programs compared to non-religious participants ($\chi^2=59.43$, $p<0.00$). Participants who identified as non-religious found the topic of LGBTQ issues more important in sexual education programs compared to very religious participants ($\chi^2=59.43$, $p<0.00$). Participants who identified as politically conservative found the topics of abstinence ($\chi^2=70.34$, $p<0.00$) and morality ($\chi^2=46.82$, $p<0.00$) more important in sexual education

Figure 1.

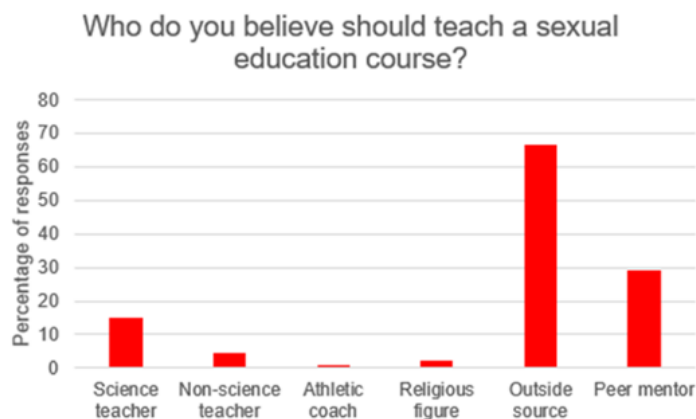
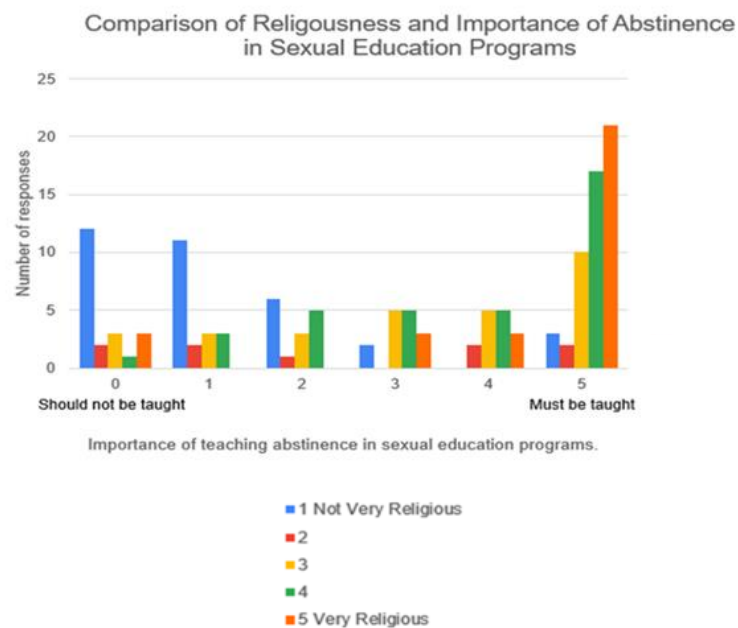


Figure 2.



programs compared to liberal-leaning participants. Participants who identified as politically liberal found the topic of LGBTQ issues more important in sexual education programs compared to conservative-leaning participants ($\chi^2=59.33$, $p<0.00$). Participants who ranked the topic of LGBTQ issues as more important also ranked topics of abstinence as less important ($\chi^2=45.36$, $p<0.00$). However, even in groups of participants that encouraged the inclusion of LGBTQ topics, there is still a large number of adults who rank abstinence as important. The participants who ranked LGBTQ issues as very important (n=56), 17 also ranked abstinence as very important (See Figure 2).

Levels of education did not predict the participants' rank of importance in LGBTQ issues ($\chi^2=11.35$, $p=0.33$); however, a quantitative trend shows that participants of higher education showed a large amount of support to the inclusion of LGBTQ topics.

Participants who identified as very religious also thought that sexual education programs should not be coed, while participants who identified as non-religious thought that they should be coed. ($\chi^2=13.31$, $p = 0.01$)

Discussion

The support of the topics of abstinence, LGBTQ issues, and morality are correlated with religious and political stance. This could support that the opinions of sex education are influenced by political and religious agendas.

The majority of the adults sampled supported an outside source being the teacher of sex education programs. Seeing as the majority of current sex educators are not outside sources, this is valuable information moving forward in the understanding and improvement of sex education programs.

There was surprising support of abstinence topics, even in the non-religious and liberal-leaning participants. This highlights the adult view that teenagers should not be having sex and that sexual education programs should teach this lesson. However, previous research shows that over half of college students are sexually active, regardless of the type of sexual education program (Prater, 2019). We need to move away from this focus and start educating students in ways to live a sexually healthy life.

The limitation to this study is the lack of diversity in the sample. The overwhelming majority of the sample were white women from the South. We would have a better understanding of the population if our sample was more

diverse. Future studies should collect data from the groups that are lacking, which would show a better understanding of the current situation of the mind set about sex education.

References

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