

**A CRITIQUE OF THE ABSTINENCE-ONLY APPROACH:
A Consideration of Adolescent Decisional Development
and Democratic Sexual Citizenship**

by

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The present thesis poses a focused challenge to the abstinence-only approach in adolescent sex education. The first chapter clarifies the term *abstinence-only* and provides context to the debate surrounding the abstinence-only approach. The second chapter addresses at length the role of information provision in the development of knowledge and decisional skills in adolescents. Abstinence-only education is indefensible because of its refusal to provide a significant measure of sexual health information to adolescents, even though these individuals are, by and large, capable of understanding and reflecting upon such information. Furthermore, exposure to accurate, relevant, and comprehensive information is crucial to the strengthening of adolescents' emergent decisional capacities. Thus the provision of information lends itself greatly to adolescents' maturation as reliable decision-makers. In the third chapter, I maintain that the abstinence-only approach fails to recognize the value of providing students with an appropriate discursive venue in which they may meaningfully discuss their own perspectives while also developing a sense of the views and needs of other *sexual citizens*. The pro-discourse stance I take in this chapter responds to the charges of discourse opponents and demonstrates that these measures of censorship both passively waste opportunities for students to become well-informed, enabled, and empowered sexual agents *and* may actively damage and deprive the well-being and flourishing of particular groups.

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1.0 THE ABSTINENCE-ONLY EDUCATION DEBATE: CONTEXT AND CLARIFICATIONS

In the summer of 2001, the office of former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher produced a call to action to “Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior.”¹ In this document, Satcher and his team highlight the state of public health matters with regard to sexual health and development and suggest changes that must be undertaken in order to address these problems and improve programs that will further protect and enhance the health of the population. Many of the points made in this document are well-aligned with my conception of an ideal sex and sexuality education framework.²

Within the desiderata of a positive sex education program, a preliminary goal for students is to develop a basic understanding of: sexual anatomy and physiological development, the processes of conception and pregnancy, the symptoms and spread of sexually-transmitted infections, and the use and potential effectiveness of contraceptive and prophylactic devices and techniques. The content and scope of a sex education program must be adjusted to be

¹ Office of the Surgeon General of the United States of America, David Satcher, *The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior*, Proceedings of the July 2000 Surgeon General’s Conference, Warrenton, Virginia. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, Jul 9, 2001). Note in particular pages 1-7.

² The adjective “sex” in the term *sex education* has long served to indicate the content of such education. However, recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of noting that *sexuality* is distinct in that it incorporates notions of such things as identities and psychosocial relationships, and not merely sexual acts. For the sake of this paper, I mobilize the term *sex education* generally to incorporate *sex* and *sexuality* and will at times bring attention to *sexuality education* when its particular distinctions are germane to the discussion (as with the third chapter of this thesis).

appropriately aligned with the particular intellectual, emotional, and social maturity of the students enrolled. Building upon this foundation of medically accurate and reliable *information*, the next objective is that the students' skills in approaching and negotiating potential sexual encounters are enhanced.

Marjorie Coeyman writes that “few topics in US public education ignite more emotion—or bridge more divergent viewpoints—than sex [education].”³ While sex remains a sensitive and highly private matter for most members of society, and therefore can incite passionate reactions, the cultural backdrop muddles the issue by aggressively and pervasively showcasing sex and sexual messages throughout media such as advertisement and popular entertainment. As a result, adolescents are emplaced in a culture that drives their curiosity and attention to sex, yet society is also imbued with a tradition of perceiving sex negatively (as dangerous and naughty) and as a strictly adult activity. This tension makes it difficult to know what to say to adolescents about sex in terms of education, as well as where and when to educate them about sexual matters; that is, though sex education may be viewed as a necessary and desirable program, issuing proper content and methodology therein is a thorny issue. While there is plenty of disagreement among these standards of disclosure, perhaps the most volatile and passionate question has recently become *if* anything may be said at all. That is, the debate that has most recently been at the forefront is whether or not sex education programs should employ comprehensive methods or ones that conform to the abstinence-only approach.

³ Marjorie Coeyman, “Schools Stumble over Sex Education,” *Christian Science Monitor* 95:165 (2003): 13-15.

In recent years, abstinence-only education in the United States has been met with substantial (and increasing) support from government funding and policy-making resources;⁴ yet, this sex education approach has also encountered a considerable measure of criticism. This thesis will pose an additional focused challenge to abstinence-only education. I argue that, in comparison with more comprehensive sex and sexuality education programs, abstinence-only education is a particularly poor curricular choice that does not adequately serve, educate, and protect adolescents and young adults. I contend that abstinence-only education is a fundamentally impoverished response to the developmental needs and interests of adolescents in terms of their individual decision-making abilities. In a corollary argument against abstinence-only education, I maintain that it fails to recognize the value of providing students with an appropriate discursive venue in which they may meaningfully discuss their own values while also developing a sense of the views and needs of other *sexual citizens*. The few favorable aspects of the abstinence-only approach do not outweigh the drawbacks and, furthermore, they do not measure well against a more comprehensive program that may afford students an even richer and more complete set of benefits.

As I will argue at length in the second chapter, the elements of knowledge and skill enhancement identified in Satcher's report are necessary factors that lend themselves to the development of the *decision-making capacity* of adolescents and young adults. The provision of information is a crucial factor in enabling students to become empowered and reliable decision-makers. In contemplating the information, piecing it all together, and having opportunities to

⁴ The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) reports that in the fiscal year of 2006, the federal sex education initiative received government funding on the order of \$176 million combined; the AGI also projects that funding will further increase to over \$200 million by 2008. The three programs that constitute this initiative are all dedicated to restrictive abstinence-only education. According to federal law, a public institution receiving funding from any of these federal programs must discuss abstinence as the only reliable form of defense against undesired pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections. Alan Guttmacher Institute. "Facts on Sex Education in the United States: 1/2007," http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_sexEd2007.html.

obtain a clearer picture of the concepts of sexuality, I contend that students will have a richer and firmer sense of their personal worth and responsibilities. Senses of personal value and self-esteem can be fostered in and through a myriad of settings ranging from more formal educational environments to domestic and community venues.

An underlying requisite to meeting any of the goals within a beneficial sex education program is for educators (whether they are teachers, mentors, or guardians) to be adequately trained to have knowledge and communication skills related to the information that is being shared. Moreover, educators must have a sense of the needs, desires, and maturity of the group they are teaching. Understanding these elements involves being aware of the cultural context in which their students find themselves.

In addition to meeting the program's goals of informing students about sex and sexual decision-making, students should develop competence in interpersonal communication and listening skills that are encouraged and fostered through well-facilitated *discursive* venues that allow students to make inquiries, express themselves, develop communication skills, and experience the diverse views of others. In the third chapter, I will further explore these themes. Students should develop an awareness of the emotional and psychological factors that may be effected in themselves (and that they may effect in others) though sexual behavior. Students must be provided with guidance on how to identify sexual pressure, harassment, and violence as well as where to find resources that will help them effectively address these issues. While the focus is most often on the emotional and psychological harms that can result from sexual activities, I contend that the benefits and *positive* aspects of sex should also be discussed. Furthermore, I shall argue that adolescents should have an opportunity to explore sexuality in terms of *democratic citizenship*. Developing democratic sexual citizenship means that students

should be guided in the enhancement of their sense of their own sexual identity, interests, and autonomy as they concomitantly develop respect for the identities, interests, and autonomy of other *sexual citizens*.

Before proceeding to these arguments, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the “abstinence-only approach” and elucidate how it differs from a comprehensive approach. This first chapter, therefore, describes and compares these approaches. In so doing, it reveals how the abstinence-only approach is poorly aligned with public health standards and priorities, as well as the sexual needs of adolescents.

1.1 DEFINING AND DEBATING SEX EDUCATION

The various approaches to sex education collectively present a puzzle of definitions and distinctions; yet, when taught, incarnations of sex education may typically be characterized in terms of two camps: comprehensive or abstinence-only. Basically, comprehensive programs present students with information about sexual physiology, pregnancy, sexually-transmitted infections, and various “safer-sex” methods that are effective means of preventing many undesired consequences of sexual activity.⁵ Within a comprehensive program, abstinence is likely to be presented *and encouraged* as a valuable and preferred option for adolescents. While a comprehensive program’s content, scope, and context may vary, its essential characteristic is

⁵ *Safer-sex methods* generally indicate those measures individuals may take to prevent the spread of sexually-transmitted infections from one partner to another during sexual contact. Common devices used to this end are condoms and dental/rubber dam. The term safer-sex may also involve contraceptive measures such as hormonal medication, diaphragms, coitus interruptus, and condoms. Though at one point these techniques were referred to as “safe-sex,” this term was deemed unsatisfactory by some who felt that it set forth the inaccurate and unrealistic proposition that there is such a thing as safe sex with no risk, so the term evolved to safer-sex. All of the above efforts may also be characterized as “using protection.” When I refer to either safer-sex or protection I have in mind measures to prevent either undesired pregnancy or sexually-transmitted infections.

that it provides information about a variety of topics related to sex while also allowing opportunities for inquiries and discussions to better understand the lessons. On the other hand, an abstinence-*only* program, by definition, does not offer a considerable amount of information, and thereby also precludes reasonable discussion, regarding contraception and most methods of preventing the spread and reception of sexually-transmitted infections.

Though some abstinence-only programs utterly prohibit discussions of any safer-sex method besides abstinence, it is important to observe that some do permit discussion of contraception and prophylaxis, but only regarding the extent to which these safer-sex methods fail. I agree with Landry, Kaeser, and Richards that although this method may seem comprehensive due to the mere mention of extra-abstinent issues, it nonetheless presents abstinence as the *only* positive and reasonable option for adolescents. This renders any discussion of the procurement and proper use of devices such as condoms and birth control pills superfluous; thus, this method remains, effectively, abstinence-only.⁶ Moreover, discussions of particular sex acts should, at relevant points, include guidance about the proper use of safer-sex devices and techniques that help to protect people from the risks that are encountered when engaged in such sexual contact. A lack of guidance about protective measures renders discussions about forms of sexual contact incomplete and, moreover, *irresponsible* in light of the related presence of sexually-transmitted infections. So, without a companion discussion of safer-sex methods, it is unlikely that a program would also include more than the mere mention of forms of sexual contact. In this respect, such supposedly comprehensive programs for all intents and purposes qualify as abstinence-only and can only be considered comprehensive in a poor and

⁶ David Landry, Lisa Kaeser, and Cory L. Richards, "Abstinence Promotion and the Provision of Information about Contraception in Public School District Sexuality Education Policies," *Family Planning Perspectives* 31:6 (1999): 282.

very narrow sense of the word. That said, for the purposes of this thesis, the term *abstinence-only* refers to educational programs which (a) prohibit the provision of most information pertaining to sex and sexuality, (b) censor discussion regarding such topics, and (c) promote abstinence as the only reasonable and positive strategy of protection for *unmarried* people, including adolescents.⁷ My critique is focused on the method of teaching adolescents abstinence exclusively (*-only*) and in ignorance of other relevant and beneficial aspects of sex and sexual health.

An underlying challenge in any sex education program is identifying what counts as *sexual activity*. In Section 510 of the 1996 United States Social Security Act (the defining guidelines for federally-funded abstinence-only education) refers to abstinence as the avoidance of “sexual activity.”⁸ Many have criticized the vagueness of what “sexual activity” might entail (e.g., only vaginal intercourse, any genital contact, heavy kissing, massaging, watching sexy music videos, reading the Marquis de Sade) and the resultant confusion that arises about just what one is supposed to *abstain from* under abstinence-only programs. While this definitional ambiguity is a challenge for comprehensive programs that include the concept of abstinence as one element of instruction, it poses a significant problem to abstinence-only programs in which the core of instruction is *hinged* on the avoidance of “sexual activity,” vaguely defined. Students in a comprehensive program may be able to consider a range of sexual activities and then shape their own definitions of the limits of sexual activity while still having some knowledge of

⁷ I recognize that there are circumstances in which an adolescent (so defined as a minor between the ages of about 12 to 17) might be legally married in some states, by and large these programs are geared toward adolescents because the expectation is that it is quite unlikely that they are married by the age of 17. On a separate note, as I will discuss in the third chapter, abstinence-only education materials tend to use *unmarried* as opposed to *single*. The term *unmarried* is problematic and I resist its use; however, in indicating the characteristics of the abstinence-only approach, this term describes the program in its “own words.”

⁸ Social Security Administration, “Social Security Act: Title V: Maternal and Child Health Services Block Grant. Separate Program for Abstinence Education, SEC. 510.” [42 U.S.C. 710] 2005.

relevant protective measures on which they may rely. For instance, an adolescent boy may consider himself abstinent/not having “sex” even if he engages in oral stimulation, but has heard from resources (*e.g.*, a comprehensive sex education program, a television advertisement) that a barrier method should be appropriately and properly used during such contact.⁹ As I will illustrate in the next section, this paucity of discussion regarding common sex acts (and the safer-sex measures that should appropriately accompany their mention) is particularly problematic for adolescents. Methods of abstinence-only education provide inadequate and unrealistic instruction with virtually no real guidance to adolescents who are either sexually naïve or subject to multiple mixed and inaccurate messages regarding sex from various media and ill-informed peers.

1.2 PROBLEMS AND DRAWBACKS OF ABSTINENCE-ONLY EDUCATION

Typically, abstinence-only education makes no effort to help the student sort through the definitional ambiguity of *sexually-active* (in terms of which acts count as “having sex” and which do not); moreover, if no discussion of safer sex methods is permitted, then it is irresponsible to explain the sex acts themselves as doing so may send the message that protection is an afterthought or not deserving of emphasis. Abstinence-only education’s characteristic avoidance of information provision and discussion regarding these issues may have particularly negative effects on adolescents enrolled in such a program. This is because they are not able to shape courses of action as reliably and safely as they might if they (a) had a sense of their own

⁹ That is, oral-genital stimulation, not merely kissing.

sexual limits based on their considerations of the range of “sex” acts that exists, and (b) had knowledge about methods of protection that pertain to certain forms of sexual contact. Even if a student of abstinence-only education decides that she will abstain from sexual activity, there are several ways in which such a program may nonetheless fail to equip her with what she needs in order to protect her health and well-being. Consider the following likely scenario involving a young woman who was educated through an abstinence-only program.

Perhaps while on a date she believes that she will be pressured into having “sex” and intends to refuse. Yet she is not presented with a proposition of intercourse (her generic conception of “sex”), but of oral stimulation. She now faces four problems. First, the adolescent may have heard of “going down,” but is not sure she knows what oral stimulation *entails* and, thus, may not be certain if she would consider it sex. Is it more like kissing (something she does want to do with her date) or does it lean more toward vaginal intercourse (something she was prepared to refuse)? Her knowledge of oral stimulation is not just a matter of her or her partner’s technique, of course, but is material to her recognizing that what is being presented to her is a *sexual* decision. Understanding this novel situation, indeed being able to categorize it as a sexual decision, is critical in her decision-making process because she, having not been prepared for this likely contemporary scenario, may be unsure of how she feels about oral stimulation, what she believes is in her best interest, or what her sex education would recommend. Even if she does recognize that she is making a sexual decision, and so may refer to her sex education, she faces additional problems as a result of being educated through an abstinence-only program.

Let us consider what might happen if she intends to refuse oral stimulation. Though she could, “just say no,” it is reasonable to think that her partner may be persistent and may put her refusal skills to the test. She has anticipated that her refusal strategies would be focused around

the prevention of undesired pregnancy and HIV infection.¹⁰ Though, it cannot be taken for granted that every adolescent knows that oral stimulation cannot result in conception, let us assume that this young woman does realize that pregnancy is no longer in her refusal toolkit. She has heard of other sexually-transmitted infections besides HIV, but is not sure how those might be transmitted in an act she knows little about and, furthermore, she is uncomfortable with the idea that her partner would feel “accused” of having a disease. To be sure, there are reasons besides undesired pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections that may compel her to decline engaging in a sexual activity with her date, but she has only been prompted to consider these sorts of negative consequences. Without them in play, she now faces the second problem in this scenario: a gulf in her refusal resources.

At this point, it is reasonable to think that she may consent, or at least discontinue her refusal. Her abstinence-only education has briefly mentioned barrier devices in terms of their failure rates and, in any case, the program did not include instruction on how to procure them and properly use them. The third problem encountered by this adolescent is that she does not feel compelled to use protection because her abstinence-only education program has portrayed safer sex methods as ineffective and untrustworthy; it has also not schooled her in how to use protection methods. Moreover, because she was going to “just say no” anyway, she has not given much thought to where to obtain any barrier devices. So, the act proceeds without a barrier method of protection and perhaps one or both partners will need to deal with a sexually-transmitted infection as a result. If it is the adolescent girl who experiences the sexually-transmitted infection and if she happens to notice it (her abstinence-only class did not discuss the

¹⁰ Regardless of whether a U.S. public school is mandated on the state level to provide abstinence-only or comprehensive programming, it is well-established that virtually all schools will provide some HIV/AIDS awareness program, whether it is incorporated into the sex education program or treated as a separate component.

symptoms of many sexually-transmitted diseases because infection presumes that sex has occurred and such thinking runs contrary to the approach of the program, which presumes that sex does not occur), her education did not inform her of what medical resources are available to her. Moreover, this young woman is inhibited from seeking help because, in addition to confused anxiety, she feels a sense of shame regarding her present circumstances. Her anxiety would likely be even more increased if her date happened to also be a woman and, being uncomfortable with her sexuality (indeed with discussing it), the young woman might be reluctant to discuss the event with her parents or a care-provider.

At each of the four junctures discussed above, the abstinence-only education experienced by the adolescent becomes problematic as opposed to helpful. The first issue pertains to its failure to help adolescents develop a sense of personal sexual limits—considering *from* what one is abstaining. The adolescent in the preceding scenario was taken by surprise and, in the moment, did not have adequate time to consider where oral stimulation fell in terms of her personal limits. Nevertheless, it may be argued that because she could still have said no despite, and perhaps on account of, this confusion, abstinence-only education ought to be sufficient for her needs. Though her abstinence-only education did support her by leading her up to the point of “just saying no,” after that, class was dismissed without resolving issues that prove important for this young woman. She experiences pressure and finds that “just saying no” is not so simple. As bright as she may be, this is a situation for which she has not been adequately prepared. If she continues to say no, then it may be said that, at worst, her abstinence-only education does not provide her with much help, but at least it is not a significant detriment to her. Yet, it is reasonable to think that either her weak refusal skills (weak because they are not informed a sense of her personal limits) or natural curiosity may lead the young woman to agree to the sex

act. Once she does select this course of action, her abstinence-only education does become a detriment because it did not prepare her to recognize that she must use a method of protection, has not educate her about how to use this method properly, and did not provide her with information she needs to know if an unexpected negative consequence should occur—even if she had taken reasonable measures to prevent it. In contrast, a comprehensive program *could* have helped her to recognize and understand the situation at hand, strengthened her decision-making skills, and ensured that, for whatever course of action she took, she was provided with information to defend and enhance her health and well-being.

I should note that, although abstinence-only education is a poor curricular choice, the strategy of abstinence itself is certainly not a futile goal and deserves to be emplaced prominently in any sex education program. Adolescents should be encouraged to abstain from sexual acts that present the risk of undesired pregnancy or contracting a sexually-transmitted infection until they feel they are prepared to protect against or deal with the possible consequences. Moreover, they must be encouraged to understand that this preparedness, which occurs in stages of emotional, social, and intellectual maturity, will likely not occur until they become adults. They should be encouraged to abstain from sexual activities not only because such acts pose risks to their health and well-being, but also because abstinence helps them to enjoy relationships that are uncomplicated by the complex decisions involved in negotiating a sex life. These messages should be communicated in effective terms that are understandable and credible to adolescents.

It should be made clear that those who are critical of abstinence-only education and instead support comprehensive sex and sexuality education—myself certainly included—are not against the teaching and encouragement of abstinence as a beneficial option; rather, it is the

abstinence-only educational approach that is problematic and ethically untenable. The unrealistic and uninformative approach of abstinence-only sex education may undermine its credibility and thus render the delivery of the abstinence message less effective. Moreover, the student, should she chose to be sexually active, is actually worse off as a result of the rigid, uninformative, and censoring methods employed by the abstinence-only program. To this effect, the abstinence-only debate has produced many valuable points and objections in scholarly and journalistic literature.

1.3 CONSULTING THE LITERATURE ON THE ABSTINENCE-ONLY APPROACH: CONSIDERING THE SEXUAL NEEDS OF ADOLESCENTS

Review of relevant literature suggests that the abstinence-only approach is largely unrealistic in the context of modern culture and teenage behavior.¹¹ Ira L. Reiss, for example, finds teaching abstinence-only to be an inappropriate (perhaps anachronistic) response to the needs of adolescents and young adults whose daily lives are inundated with messages about sex and sexual behavior. A recent study by Darroch, Landry, and Singh found that teachers were largely dissatisfied with the content of sex education, in many cases mandatory abstinence-only-based, as a response to the reality of their students' sexual behaviors and attitudes.¹² Moreover, as the above scenario illustrates, it is reasonable to think that adolescents are likely to encounter sexual

¹¹ Ira L. Reiss and Harriet M. Reiss, "Teenage Sex," in *Solving America's Sexual Crisis* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997). See also: Judy Mann, "Wanted: A Realistic Attitude Toward Teen Sex," *Washington Post* (Jan 27, 1999): C.14.

¹² Jacqueline E. Darroch, David J. Landry, and Susheela Singh, "Changing Emphasis in Sexuality Education in U.S. Public Secondary Schools, 1988-1999," *Family Planning Perspectives* 32:5 (Sep/Oct 2000): 206, 211. For an additional article on the imbalance between educational response and potential risk, see: Susan N. Wilson, "Sexuality Education," *Family Planning Perspectives* 32:5 (Sep/Oct 2000): 252-254.

decisions before they become adults. As Cynthia Dailard argues, adolescence is a time “marked by physiological and psychological maturation[, the] formation and testing of romantic attachments[, and] the physical expression of sexual feelings are a natural and developmentally appropriate part of this process.”¹³ Rather than addressing these matters, the abstinence-only method refuses to discuss most of the issues related to sexuality. Though proponents of abstinence-only education may argue that it is a preferred method because it presents students with simpler and less confusing material than may be found in a comprehensive program, in precluding a vast majority of relevant sexual information, the abstinence-only program is not prepared for the significantly likely outcome that adolescents *will* become sexually active to some extent whether as adolescents or as adults. In either case, the program fails to anticipate that adolescents will, at some point, need instruction on practices that will enhance their sexual, and thus overall, well-being. That is, at whatever point adolescents decide to become sexually active—even in marriage when sex is by this approach deemed “appropriate”—instruction in youth that has provided little to no positive information regarding safer-sex puts the sexually-active at a disadvantage in protecting themselves against undesired pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections.¹⁴ Dailard and others have also argued that there is a disconnect between this approach and public opinion about what sex education should include and discuss.¹⁵

¹³ Cynthia Dailard, “Legislating Against Arousal,” *Guttmacher Policy Review* 9:3 (2006): 13.

¹⁴ I will argue for this point at length in the following chapter which is on the needs and training of adolescent decision-making. For additional instances of a similar critique, see also: Heather D. Boonstra, “The Case for a New Approach to Sex Education Mounts,” *Guttmacher Policy Review* 10:2 (2007): 2-7; Jane E. Brody, “Abstinence-only?,” *New York Times* (Jun 1, 2004): F.7; and Samuel G. Freedman, “Muzzling Sex Education on Anything but Abstinence,” *New York Times* (Jul 19, 2006): B.7.

¹⁵ Cynthia Dailard, “Sex Education,” *Guttmacher Report on Public Policy* (2001): 9. See also: Heather Boonstra, “Comprehensive Approach Needed to Combat Sexually Transmitted Infections Among Youths,” *Guttmacher Report on Public Policy* (2004): 3-4; Elizabeth Bernstein, “Sex-Ed Class Becomes Latest School Battleground,” *Wall Street Journal* (Mar 30, 2006): D.1.

The exclusive teaching of abstinence (or, the omission of a majority of other information related to sexual health and well-being) has also prompted arguments from those who find that this method creates an environment of undue mystery, shame, and fear about sex. John Santelli has argued that an atmosphere of misunderstanding and shame makes it very difficult to obtain a clear and accurate picture of whether abstinence-only education has a positive, negative, or any effect on adolescent and young adult sexual health.¹⁶ He suggests that self-reports of sexual activities may be skewed if participants—sexual minorities in particular—have come to believe that their sexual activities are inherently non-legitimate, inappropriate, wrong, or forbidden. That is, self-reports from these populations may be inaccurate as a result of confusion as to whether or not their behaviors are recognized as legitimate.¹⁷ This concern does not just refer, for example, to whether a student considers oral stimulation in general as sex, but whether a bisexual student feels as though anything she does with her same-sex partners is recognized as sex by the mainstream and is thus reportable. Perhaps she only reports the activities she engages in with men and not women. Also, some sexually-active students may not report any activity at all if they are under the impression that their behavior is “wrong,” and thus the data may be biased because these survey participants are unwilling to report their supposed wrongdoings. Without an accurate picture of the state of adolescent and adult sexual behavior, it is very difficult to shape appropriate responses to protect the health and well-being of these populations.

Implicit in many of these challenges are suggestions about what sex educators must take into account in order to adequately address the needs of students. The debate has motivated

¹⁶ John Santelli, Laura Duberstein Lindberg, Lawrence B. Finer, and Susheela Singh, “Explaining Recent Declines in Adolescent Pregnancy in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97:1 (2007): 154-155. See also: John S. Santelli, “Abstinence-only Education,” *Social Research* 73:3 (2006): 835-858.

¹⁷ As I will argue, abstinence-only education can become a place where ideologies, like heteronormativity, take the stage unchallenged and result in the devaluing and marginalization of some sexual minorities.

some to call for a more in-depth and accurate understanding of the role of *positive* motivations and *pleasure* in an adolescent's decision to engage in sexual behavior. As Mary A. Ott and her colleagues have argued, the benefits of sex have been undermined by the risks and are often under-represented in programs such as abstinence-only; more effective sex education programs should frame both positive and negative motivations for engaging in sexual activity.¹⁸ While Heather Boonstra argues that it is crucial to provide youth with more control and empowerment as they are the one who determine the course of future prevention of undesired pregnancy and the spread of sexually-transmitted infections, Laura Duberstein Lindberg and her colleagues add that efforts to bolster adolescent decisional empowerment must be supplemented with increased efforts to enhance adolescents' access to medically relevant, accurate, and comprehensive sexual health information.¹⁹

The second chapter will address at length the role of such information in the development of knowledge and decisional skills in adolescents. I mount an argument against the indefensibility of abstinence-only education in terms of its fundamental refusal to provide a significant measure of sexual health information to adolescents, even though these individuals are, by and large, capable of understanding and reflecting upon such information. Furthermore, exposure to accurate, relevant, and comprehensive information is crucial to the strengthening of adolescents' emergent decisional capacities; thus the provision of information lends itself greatly to adolescents' maturation as reliable decision-makers.

¹⁸ Mary A. Ott, "Greater Expectations," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 38:2 (2006): 88.

¹⁹ Heather D. Boonstra, "Young People Need Help in Preventing Pregnancy and HIV," *Guttmacher Policy Review* 10:3 (Sum 2007): 4-7. See also: Laura Duberstein Lindberg, John S. Santelli, and Susheela Singh, "Changes in Formal Sex Education: 1995-2002," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 38:4 (2006): 182-189.

2.0 A CRITIQUE OF THE ABSTINENCE-ONLY APPROACH PERTAINING TO ADOLESCENT DECISION-MAKING

The adolescent personifies the ever-evolving nature of life. Indeed, the term has etymological roots in the Latin verb *adolescere* which means “to nourish or grow” and suggests a sense of burgeoning and emerging. Quintessentially on the verge of childhood and adulthood, the teenager lingers on the frontier of maturity.²⁰ To be sure, early childhood is a dynamic period, but the meaning of age differences are not as distinctive year-by-year as in adolescence. Adulthood is also not as variegated as adolescence. Adolescence can be a memorable and exciting time; it is also a phase in which young people experience an increasing sense of responsibility and independence in the face of unfamiliar circumstances and prospects. These cascading pressures and demands launch adolescents into a strange, new world. In this place, the many privileges and alluring opportunities presented to adolescents help to introduce them to adulthood, yet they also make teenagers susceptible to suffering the negative consequences that may result from inadequate planning or poor decision-making. This rightly invites the timely intervention, guidance, and protection of those who seek to promote the best interests of adolescents. Yet there are times when the best of intentions do not best serve the needs of

²⁰ Glynnis Chantrell, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* (New York: Oxford University Press, s.v. “Adolescence”).

adolescents. Sex education is one context in which ostensibly well-intended efforts fail to meet adolescents' needs.

The present chapter will address the contentious issue of adolescent decision-making capacity and how it may be handled through various methods of sex education. I will discuss the relationship among cultural, legal, and scientific conceptions of adolescence and will present findings and claims pertaining to adolescent decision-making capabilities. The first section will maintain that adolescents have decisional capabilities that ought to be respected and nurtured; through this discussion, I will demonstrate that the abstinence-only approach ignores the existing and emergent decisional abilities of adolescents and is therefore an impoverished response to the developmental needs of the adolescents with respect to their decision-making capacities. In the second section, I will contend that abstinence-only education, in withholding information, is not in the best interests of adolescents.²¹ In particular, I will highlight the particular challenges the abstinence-only approach presents to women. In the final section, I will discuss how abstinence-only education is problematic because it skews the educational responsibility of providing well-facilitated, accurate, and appropriate information away from schools and toward parents and students.

²¹ By definition, the abstinence-only program withholds a substantial amount of information regarding sex, sexuality, and sexual health.

2.1 DETERMINING THE STATE AND NEEDS OF ADOLESCENT WITH RESPECT TO THEIR DECISION-MAKING CAPACITY

In an attempt to better serve the needs of adolescents, society recognizes that adolescents compose a unique group and has thus identified the behaviors and needs of teenagers appropriately in terms of their distinct developmental circumstances. One example of this is the subject of *adolescent decision-making*: although teenagers are presumed immature and are still considered children in the legal sense, they possess a certain potential that reaches beyond childhood capacities, but has not quite reached adult standards. Moreover, the subject of adolescent decision-making must take into account matters that may figure prominently in the world of the adolescent such as employment, individualism, politics, substance use, identity development, and sexuality—the subject of the present paper. Before we consider adolescent decision-making in the context of sexuality, it is important to have an understanding of the concept of adolescence in terms of its cultural and functional meanings in our society and how these perceptions influence our policies.

2.1.1 Cultural, Legal, and Scientific Conceptions of Adolescent Decisional Capacity

Socially, adolescence is understood as a transition period from childhood to adulthood. This developmental phase is loosely bound by rather ambiguous age delineations. In the common legal sense, adolescence encompasses a range of 14 through 18 years of age. Psychological literature similarly defines adolescence in a range from puberty to adulthood, which is approximately 13 to 18 years of age, though it may be extended further. Medical standards offer a more generous range and, depending on the circumstances, may consider a person an

adolescent from as young as 12 to as old as 21. Each of these disciplines applies different criteria in delineating the stage of adolescence. That is, whereas the law and psychology categorize adolescents as such due to, among other things, their intellectual capacity, medicine derives its standards from a biological- and physiological-development standpoint. Though a social definition of adolescence does relate to the relative age of the person, it is also imbued with cultural norms and perceptions. As I have noted, adolescence signifies a time of fluid, rapid change. This period of maturation also represents increased independence as adolescents graduate beyond juvenility and become members of an adult community in which they may enjoy self-determination and obtain access to the full range of privileges assured to them by law.

As a society, we frame the period of adolescence through a variety of rituals occurring around events such as birthdays (*e.g.*, “Sweet Sixteen”) and graduations (*e.g.*, to junior high then to high school); each event constitutes a sort of countdown to approaching adulthood and brings with it increasing responsibilities and challenges. Moreover, popular teenage discourse often expresses a sense of urgency with regard to attaining what it means to “be older” (*e.g.*, driving, graduating, living independently, entering mature relationships, and the like). In short, adolescence is a transition period that is highly visible and generally receives a great amount of attention in U.S. culture.

Adolescent years are not only accompanied by social rituals, but are also laden with cultural assumptions about the identity, intentions, and nature of teenagers. Notions of puberty figure prominently into these assumptions. Ostensibly, adolescents experience rapid and sometime surprising changes in their bodies. In response to changes in hormone release, adolescent bodies grow and increasingly develop adult features. These chemical and subsequent physical changes are also believed to affect the teenager’s emotional reactions, which are also

linked to increasingly stressful and intimidating social situations. Generally, teenagers are believed to be a mix of variegated qualities, some cooperative and some contradictory. Adolescents are commonly believed to be impulsive, naïve, easily influenced, rebellious to authority, and foolhardy; yet, they are also recognized for their high degrees of loyalty and dedicated friendship, ambitious striving for individuality, sensitivity to their surroundings, curiosity, and impressive rapid intellectual and social maturation (over the course of a period of a few years). These assumptions not only operate in our cultural conceptions of adolescence, but have also found their way into our thinking about policies and standards regarding adolescent decision-making capacity.

The legal system of the United States has traditionally recognized the unique temporal space occupied by adolescents, though the period is not altogether clearly marked. A vivid example of this distinction in law is the juvenile justice system which employs judicial approaches that are informed and guided by the belief that adolescents are cognitively distinct from younger children with regard to *maturity*, yet are not rightly held to adult standards.²² The qualification of maturity is not based on a stable, fully-observable characteristic, but is often determined with the individual's particular circumstances in mind. That is, there is no definitional stability with regard to the intellectual and decisional capacity of adolescents, with the exception of the generally accepted legal classification of adolescents as those between the ages of 14 and 18. While there has been a move to ground and bolster these determinations with scientific research, legal approaches to adolescent decision-making have historically lacked such empirical support; rather, judicial bodies relied on "conventional wisdom" to inform their discretion.

²² Elicia N. Eddington and Michelle Hecht, "The Legal Foundations of Adolescents' Education," in *Sexuality Education*, ed. Roger J. R. Levesque (New York: NOVA Science Publishers, 2003), 1-2.

The legal policies that resulted from this reliance have been largely incoherent. By some arguments, these poorly-supported approaches are guided by misunderstandings and may unconstitutionally deny adolescents certain rights that respect their decisional capacity.²³ Evidence of the dubiousness and ambiguity of this approach may be found in how the legal system has had difficulty producing congruent policies with regard to adolescent decisional capacity. Legal scholar Rhonda Gay Hartman cites numerous examples of this “incohesive” phenomenon: a 15 year old who may decide on a course of treatment regarding a sexually-transmitted infection may not be considered competent to make a medical treatment decision regarding a complication of this infection. Another striking example of the inconsistent nature of policies approaches to adolescent health decision-making is that an adolescent with a child may not have decisional autonomy with regard to medical procedures for herself, but may still be entrusted with the right and responsibility to make similar treatment decisions on behalf of her infant.²⁴ In citing these examples, Hartman exemplifies a scholarly outcry to consider how poorly these policies may be aligned with reality, and indeed as they are not, to reexamine seemingly established views of adolescent decisional capacity to consider how to revise legal policies to better serve and respect the abilities and developmental circumstances of adolescents. As Hartman notes, the “void” in scientific knowledge has resulted in the “corollary void in policy-making attention” and thereby compels us to reconsider the seemingly “well-settled issue” of adolescent decision-making ability.²⁵

²³ Kathleen M. Sullivan provides a compelling analysis of this claim: Kathleen M. Sullivan, “Unconstitutional Conditions,” *Harvard Law Review* 102:7 (1989): 1413-1506. Rhonda Hartman also makes reference to this discussion in her article on adolescent decisional autonomy: Rhonda Gay Hartman, “Adolescent Autonomy,” *Hastings Law Journal* 51 (Aug 2000): 1268.

²⁴ Hartman (*ibid*), “Adolescent Autonomy,” 1267.

²⁵ Rhonda Gay Hartman, “Coming of Age,” *American Journal of Law & Medicine* 28:4 (2002): 410.

An important step toward a better understanding of adolescent decision-making may be a conceptual shift away from perceiving of adolescent decisional capacity in terms of its shortcomings and instead embracing a more positive conception that seeks to maximize and enhance emergent strengths and abilities in judgment. To this end, we must look to the scientific literature that clearly depicts what is currently known about adolescents' decision-making capacity.

Adolescents' judgment and decisional capabilities are grounded in certain cognitive capabilities. So, before we consider how decision-making works and what is required for its successful development, we must understand what mechanisms must first be in place. Yet it is difficult to get a clear picture from the literature as to which collection of cognitive features is necessary to make rational decisions. That is, the mental competence of adolescents is not clear because the physiological and intellectual capabilities needed for this competence have not been sufficiently defined. Indeed, this lack of scientific knowledge about adolescent intellectual development is problematic because it can therefore only inform policy-making to a limited extent.

Be that as it may, the psychological literature has revealed a set of general skills that are essential to rational decision-making. Beyth-Marom, Fischhoff, Jacobs Quadrel and Furby have produced a general normative model that includes the following cognitive conditions: the ability to think abstractly, the ability to "list relevant action alternatives and subsequent consequences," the possession of a basic understanding of probability and risk negotiation, the establishment of the "relative importance (value or utility) of each consequence," and the "ability to integrate these values and probabilities to identify the most attractive courses of action [following] a

defensible decision rule.”²⁶ The authors note that one who follows these steps may be considered a *rational* decision-maker, yet there are degrees to which one behaves as an *effective* or *optimal* decision-maker.²⁷

While there may be doubts that teenagers reliably make the most favorable decisions (relative to more mature persons), this should not obscure the evidence that teenagers have an emerging ability to make rational and beneficial decisions.²⁸ As I have mentioned, society recognizes these developing cognitive features not only in recognizing a distinct period of adolescence, but also in holding some minors accountable to adult standards when they commit crimes. Older minors also experience increased independence with respect to certain privileges. Driver licenses are an excellent example of how our society trusts adolescents as young as 15 with the responsibility of making concrete rational decisions (in accordance with the conditions outlined in the aforementioned model). While teenagers in the U.S. are generally granted the privilege of operating a motor vehicle at the age of 16, some states (*e.g.*, Pennsylvania) demonstrate an appreciation for the gradation that exists in adolescent abilities and thus have implemented graduated driving programs that emphasize the value of experience and training that will lead up to optimal driving ability. Some common driving restrictions for adolescents include limited nighttime driving and the presence of a mature adult in the same vehicle.

Such a commonsense policy reflects what the scientific literature suggests about the state and development of adolescent decision-making in several ways. First, a graduated driver

²⁶ Ruth Beyth-Marom, Baruch Fishhoff, Marilyn Jacobs Quadrel, and Lisa Furby, “Teaching Decision-making to Adolescent,” in *Teaching Decision Making to Adolescents*, eds. Jonathan Baron and Rex V. Brown (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1991), 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁸ Susan B. Dickey and Janet Deatrck, “Autonomy and Decision Making for Health Promotion in Adolescence,” *Pediatric Nursing* 26:5 (Sep 2000): 462. Findings that support this claim may also be found in the following sources: Janet Deatrck, D.B. Angst, and M. Madden, “Promoting Self-care with Adolescents,” *Pediatric Nursing* 1:2 (1994): 11-20; Lois A. Weithorn and Susan B. Campbell, “The Competency of Children and Adolescents to Make Informed Treatment Decisions,” *Child Development* 53 (1982): 1589-1598.

license encourages the young driver to become a better motor vehicle operator in collaboration with an educator of sorts. In addition to the increasing intellectual ability of adolescents is the reality that they are inexperienced and perhaps not quite as sure of themselves as good decision-makers. Cynthia Berg contends that efforts to enhance adolescent decisional capacity must be facilitated by caring and beneficial collaborators (*e.g.*, parents, educators, peers, care providers) who should assure the adolescent that they may be relied upon should the adolescent need information, guidance, constructive criticism, and support.²⁹ Laura L. Finkin has also found that the quality of involvement from “consultants” in adolescent decision-making can certainly have an influence on its development and, given favorable circumstances, may also improve decisional experiences and outcomes.³⁰ Finkin also notes that while adolescents seek out consultants from various resources such as their peers, family, educators, and the media, they are not well-equipped to judge the legitimacy and credibility of the advice and information they receive. Keeping in mind that consultants are not merely “passive sounding boards” but sometimes actively influence the course of a teenager’s decision, those who are concerned for the well-being of adolescents have a responsibility to ensure that the adolescent is able to collaborate with useful consultants who will not ultimately erode the quality of her decisional processing, impede the development of this capacity, or cause her harm.³¹

Second, implicit in the graduated driver license system is the notion that its requirements are temporary and that adolescents will at some point be allowed to drive without supervision.

That is, this system acknowledges the need for teenagers, as they approach an eventual state of

²⁹ Cynthia A. Berg, “Lessons from a Life-span Perspective to Adolescent Decision-making,” in *The Development of Judgment and Decision Making in Children and Adolescents*, eds. Janis E. Jacobs and Paul A. Klaczynski (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2005), 245.

³⁰ Laura L. Finkin, “The Role of Consultants in Adolescents’ Decision Making,” in *The Development of Judgment and Decision Making in Children and Adolescents*, eds. Janis E. Jacobs and Paul A. Klaczynski (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2005), 257.

³¹ In the final section of this chapter, I will return to the issue of adolescent vulnerability and discuss more fully.

decisional autonomy, to collaborate with responsible parties. In her commentary on the principal components of adolescent decision-making, Berg articulates the importance of balancing self-determination and collaborative support. She argues that opportunities for adolescent independence and self-determination are crucial in training for adulthood where individuals are given the right and responsibility of decisional autonomy.³² Respecting the independent decision-making of adolescents increases their confidence and self-esteem and facilitates the strengthening of their welfare-enhancing “*internal* motivational resources.”³³ Such internalized motivations are a valuable resource because they may have dramatic, compelling, and beneficial effects on adolescents’ decisions with regard to their sexual health and well-being.

Finally, in constructing and emphasizing the view that the contribution and mentorship of others is an important aspect of decisional development, some scientific research suggests that decision-making is an *emergent*, rather than automatic, skill. While classical, Piagetian-based developmental psychology frames juvenile decisional capabilities in terms of eventual or stage-based developments, some post-Piagetian theorists have argued that decision-making ability does not develop well if left on its own without explicit and attentive training.³⁴ That is, in the contemporary scientific literature, researchers considering decisional-training curricula suggest that it is more appropriate to view decision-making as needing active training, guidance, and experience, as opposed to simply needing a certain amount of time to eventually develop on its own. For instance, theorists who follow a “fuzzy-trace” conceptual model argue that people, as

³² Berg (*ibid*), “Life-span Perspective,” 244, 246.

³³ Johnmarshall Reeve, “Teacher as Facilitators,” *Elementary School Journal* 106:3 (Jan 2006): 226, 229.

³⁴ Support for this claim may be found in the following sources: Ruth Beyth-Marom et al. (*ibid*), “Teaching Decision-making”; Edward W. Cassidy and Dana G. Kurfman, “Decision Making as Purpose and Process,” in *Developing Decision Making Skills*, ed. Dana G. Kurfman, (Arlington, Virginia: National Council for the Social Sciences, 1977), 1-26; B. Fletcher and George Wooddell, “Education for a Changing World,” *Journal of Thought* 16:3 (1981): 21-32; and H. Simon, “Problem Solving and Education,” in *Problem Solving and Education*, eds. D. Tuma and R. Reif (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1980).

they mature, shift away from attempts at precise analytical thinking and rely more on intuitions.³⁵ Such theories suggest that maturing adults do not tend to hinge their decisions on verbatim processing of new incoming information; instead they tend to negotiate decisions intuitively based on previously-acquired impressions. In other words, the decision-making abilities of adults, presumably mature decision-makers, rely greatly on previously-developed habits and beliefs formed *throughout* childhood and adolescence. This suggests that focus should be placed on imparting knowledge and training decision-making during these formative stages, as opposed to merely assuming that decision-making abilities will eventually form and mature once adulthood is reached, independent of any training and guidance provided during adolescence.

The “fuzzy-trace” theory is not an indication that information-processing, risk negotiation, and personal values do not still drive the decision-making process; rather, this view advises educators to be mindful about the timing of the introduction of information. Put differently, it is wise to allow adolescents the opportunity to gather information early. Doing so enables them to formulate intuitions that are well-founded before they become more mature, for in maturity they are less likely to think analytically about many choices and are more likely to base these decisions on pre-existing memories or intuitions.³⁶ If such impressions are distorted or poorly-founded, then the decision-maker, while possibly still meeting criteria of being a rational agent, may not be as effective a decision-maker as she could be. This theory of decision-making is important to consider because it refocuses the discussion of adolescent

³⁵ Valerie F. Reyna, Mary B. Adam, Kristin M. Poirier, Craig W. LeCroy, and Charles J. Brainerd, “Risky Decision Making in Childhood and Adolescence,” in *The Development of Judgment and Decision Making in Children and Adolescents*, eds. Janis E. Jacobs and Paul A. Klaczynski (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2005), 80-81.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

decision-making autonomy *away* from attempting to identify a definitive point when the capability automatically becomes present (as if *de novo*) and *toward* respecting this capacity as emergent and dependent on appropriate training and support. In other words, even if we cannot determine that, or the precise point at which, adolescents are able to orchestrate all of the skills and information necessary to make the most favorable decisions, their emergent capabilities invite sustenance and enrichment throughout the formative years of adolescence.

Thus far, I have sought to articulate the various concepts pertaining to the decisional abilities and needs of adolescents. In the following section, I will consider how the abstinence-only method addresses adolescent decision-making and whether this program aligns well with what is presently known and encouraged with respect to the enhancement of adolescent decisional capacity.

2.2 ABSTINENCE-ONLY: AN INDEFENSIBLE AND UNCONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSE TO ADOLESCENT DECISIONAL CAPACITY

To be considered *fully decisionally capable* is to be deemed as one who is able to sufficiently employ the basic cognitive processes of judgment such as being able to comprehend new information, envision a variety of consequences to various actions, and weigh the risks of a set of actions and outcomes.³⁷ The scope of an individual's experience (in terms of maturity and wisdom) must also be considered when determining how fully an individual's decisional capability is developed. If one is considered *decisionally incapable*, it means that one is

³⁷ As noted in the present paper, Beyth-Maron et al. provide a useful general normative model of basic decisional processes.

deficient in such abilities. We can also imagine a median state in which one is *approaching decisional capability* and has a basic, but not fully developed, set of decisional abilities. It should be noted that while such an individual may possess the components needed to meaningfully contemplate the decisions at hand, this determination of decisional capacity does not necessarily imply that he is a reliable decision-maker and is prepared to implement some decisions on his own accord. Indeed, this outline of determining decisional capabilities reflects how society generally regards children (incapable), adults (capable), and adolescents (of maturing capability). The question we must ask of adolescents is not whether they are capable or incapable, but whether they are *more* capable than incapable and whether their movement toward increased capability can be facilitated (or impeded) by educational practices. In summary, there are three general positions through which one may view adolescents' decisional capacities: (1) decisionally incapable by virtue of lacking basic cognitive abilities, (2) having basic cognitive abilities, but lacking maturity in terms of some aspect of process or experience, and (3) reliably decisionally capable in terms of adequate cognitive and social developments.

One reason a determination of these capabilities is germane to a discussion of whether or not an adolescent is a good candidate for comprehensive sex education is that the comprehensive approach compels her to exercise such processes of judgment. A comprehensive sex education program may, for example, present new information about contraceptive measures that could bring about certain outcomes and may encourage students to predict the consequences and risks of being both sexually active (in various degrees) and sexually abstinent. While they are not actually making concrete decisions about whether to engage in a sexual act, the students are prompted to learn how to implement their decisional skills in combination with the information they are learning. An emergently decisionally capable student could therefore engage with and

possibly benefit from such an approach. However, an approach which compels little to no contemplation of new information and complex risk evaluation may be more appropriate for students who lack these reasoning skills; the abstinence-only method constitutes such an approach because it neither presents an array of information nor invites an extensive discussion of outcomes other than abstinence.³⁸ Abstinence-only education is therefore perhaps appropriate for, and arguably would be appropriate *only* for, those who lack such emergent processes of judgment and cognitive abilities.

Proponents of abstinence-only curricula attempt to justify this approach based on several reasons. With regard to adolescent decisional capacity, they doubt that adolescents are capable of processing information regarding sexual activity because they are not *adequately* developed cognitively or socially. Put differently, proponents may argue that adolescents are not a competent audience for a comprehensive program because they are decisionally incapable (due to inadequately developed cognitive abilities) or because their inadequate life experience renders them as not sufficiently capable. Accordingly, the abstinence-only method is deemed more fitting because this approach: (a) recognizes that teenagers are likely faced with various influences and opportunities to engage in sexual behavior, and (b) provides them with a presumably appropriate measure of guidance (*i.e.*, the promotion of only abstinence) toward positive and protected outcomes. Extending this basic supposition, some proponents further claim that it is not only futile to provide adolescents with a comprehensive sex education, but

³⁸ Therefore, abstinence-only methods are perhaps appropriate for those who lack such cognitive abilities and skills of judgment; however, abstinence-only education is not appropriate for those who do have such emergent abilities and skills.

also harmful if they are misguided by the information presented or are somehow enthused to become “promiscuous and attempt premature sexual activities.”³⁹

While I acknowledge that this line of argument purports to have the best interests of adolescents in mind, I question its prudence and defensibility. Just as the Supreme Court historically employed “conventional wisdom” as an appropriate standard for determining adolescent decisional capacities and has been challenged to justify its reasoning with more substantive, pragmatic, and unbiased evidence, we might also challenge the thinking of those who argue that adolescents are decisionally impaired to receive comprehensive sex education.⁴⁰ A first step in refining our conception of adolescents is to recognize that, in addition to individual differences, within this broad group there are subsets of younger and older adolescents who are distinct from one another in their intellectual capabilities. Therefore, conclusions about the decisional capabilities of 14 year olds may not be appropriately applied to 16 year olds.

The scientific literature is largely undecided on precisely which components are required for optimal decision-making and also lacks consensus on how to determine when a person passes into a fully mature state of judgment capability. Nevertheless, the literature does present a general idea of what cognitive skills must be in place; some adolescents demonstrate that they have and exercise these skills to a certain extent. Though not perfectly formed, such abilities are clearly possessed by some adolescents (particularly older adolescents of 16 and 17 years of age). Moreover, research illustrates the faculty of judgment as one that can respond positively to proper training and encouragement with age, or may stagnate—or even deteriorate—without

³⁹ Joseph Collison, “Sex Education Programs Promote Teen Promiscuity,” in *Teenage Sexuality*, ed. Tamara L. Roleff (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2001), 154. See also: Joe S. McIlhaney Jr., “Abstinence-only Programs Reduce Teen Sexual Activity,” in *Teenage Sexuality: opposing viewpoints*, ed. Tamara L. Roleff (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2001), 135-136.

⁴⁰ Hartman (*ibid*), “Coming of Age,” 411.

nourishment.⁴¹ This reframes the intermediate standard of decisional capacity (*i.e.*, having basic cognitive abilities, but lacking maturity in terms of some aspect of process or experience) as one in which adolescent intellectual immaturity does not render this population as unqualified to receive decisional training, but as inviting such development.

Ultimately, there is more empirical support than opposition to the suggestion that adolescents, by and large, have basic cognitive capacities for rational decision-making, and especially in the case of older adolescents, these faculties invite training and improvement. In other words, an abstinence-only approach, which does not attempt to enlarge the decision-making process (aside from endorsing a particular agenda for abstinence) follows a minority view in the scientific opinion of adolescent decision-making. The research does not support the claim that adolescents lack the cognitive abilities required for potentially good decision-making and therefore the research also does not support the contention that adolescents lack the basic components to make development of such cognitive abilities possible. Ultimately, the scientific consensus substantially weakens the contention that an abstinence-only approach is appropriate because adolescents lack decisional competence.⁴² Yet doubts about older minors' decisional capacity are a prevalent feature of the abstinence-only campaign. As I previously suggested,

⁴¹ Examples of such research are found in *Teaching Decision Making to Adolescents*, eds. Jonathan Baron and Rex V. Brown (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1991). In particular see: Daniel D. Wheeler, "Metaphors for Effective Thinking"; Maurice J. Elisa et al., "Teaching the Foundations of Social Decision Making and Problem Solving in the Elementary School"; and Marilyn Jager Adams and E. Feehrer, "Thinking and Decision Making".

⁴² Though I speak of *competence* in general terms, I recognize and agree with Allen E. Buchanan and Don W. Brock's view that determinations of decisional competence are ultimately dependent on how the decision-maker understands and is able to negotiate a particular task within a given situation. Put differently, decisional competence, in precise terms, is not truly an over-arching characteristic, but is task-specific. That said, this paper seeks to demonstrate that adolescents (particularly those ages 14 through 17) have in place *basic* cognitive capacities necessary to process most information related to sex and sexual health; moreover, these capabilities are *emergent*, or *maturing*, and invite development. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, I refer to adolescents as basically competent candidates for an appropriate comprehensive sex education course; however, I realize that a technical determination of their decisional competence with regard to a range of actual sexual events would require a properly complex set of considerations specific to the individual, activity, and situation in question.

such doubt is partly informed by cultural assumptions which characterize teenagers as generally impulsive and preoccupied (*e.g.*, with social relationships at school, and keeping up with popular culture, music, and fashion). These qualities, which are sometimes true of people regardless of age, tend to describe personality traits, but do not necessarily speak to intellectual abilities. While impulsiveness characterizes some decision-making, adolescents are not themselves inescapably or exclusively impulsive.

Moreover, it is important to draw a distinction between the training of rational, decisional skills and the execution of concrete decisions. Provision of students with a set of skills that leads to good sexual decision-making *does not* necessarily lead to the manifestation of such thinking in concrete action, and I contend it is erroneous to conflate these two phenomena. One who is not fully competent to make real, immediate decisions about sex may *nonetheless* be an appropriate student of decision-making training in this regard.

2.2.1 In Defense of the Development of Adolescent Decision-making Capacities in the Context of Sex Education

An underlying suggestion in my argument is that adolescents have sufficient existing decisional abilities to make them suitable candidates for a program that provides both an appropriate measure of information about sexual health and sexuality and also the opportunity to engage in discussions about such matters. I contend that the abstinence-only approach, by nature of its policy of withholding a considerable amount of information while also censoring discussion, is an unreflective response in ignorance of the existing abilities of adolescents. Furthermore, it is

an impoverished response to adolescents' need for *development* of their decision-making processes.⁴³

While the abstinence-only approach does rely on adolescent decisional ability to a very limited extent by promoting one decision—abstinence-*only*—it does not provide a stage for the contemplation of other decisions (*e.g.*, the decision to choose among a set of behaviors, to learn more, to engage in discussion, to challenge the curricula). By not informing adolescents and engaging them in discussion, this approach does not offer fertile ground to develop their deliberative faculties. Abstinence-only education is not truly geared toward the development of decision-making *abilities*; rather, this approach strives for students to adopt a singular decision—to utterly abstain from sexual activities. The strategy of abstinence provided by the abstinence-only approach does not require or encourage the student to arrive at the decision to abstain through deliberation.⁴⁴ It is important to note that a comprehensive approach could also emphasize and encourage an abstinence strategy, though the crucial difference is that the comprehensive approach provides grounding that will allow the student to arrive at this decision through deliberation, and, it is hoped, subsequent convincing reasoning. If the abstinence-only slogan basically reads “just don’t do it,” the comprehensive message may more persuasively read “*you have convincing, personalized reasons to not do it.*” I would thereby classify the abstinence-only program as an inherently outcome-focused approach that lacks a related focus on process. Alternatively, a more comprehensive program could potentially focus on achieving positive outcomes while *also* incorporating a decision-making process-oriented element.

⁴³ As I will discuss at length in the third section, rather than providing students with the opportunity to enrich and cultivate their decisional abilities through inquiry and conversation, this approach stifles and immobilizes such development.

⁴⁴ It bears repeating that a problematic genetic flaw of the abstinence-only approach is that while it encourages abstinence from sexual activity, it is characteristically unable to provide any companion discussion that might clarify what constitutes *abstinence* and *sexual activity* and thus improve the possibility that adolescents will consistently comply with an abstinence strategy.

The paucity of judgment development borne by the abstinence-only approach is a great concern because it lacks a vision for equipping adolescents to become effective decision-makers.

As Edward W. Cassidy and Dana G. Kurfman contend:

Decision making as an educational goal derives its justification from two values which underlie our American social-political system. One of these is belief in popular rule, and the other is respect for the individual. From the democratic value of popular rule comes support for developing skill in making decisions about public issues. From the value of individual dignity comes support for making sound decisions about personal problems.⁴⁵

The development of decision-making abilities is a vital aspect of respecting the budding self-determination of adolescents, which leads to the further development of adult autonomy. As I mentioned earlier, research suggests that development of decisional capabilities depends not only on age, but also on adequate training. Decision-making ability is emergent, but does not solely drive itself. It will flourish only if it is attended to through exercise and training. While an adolescent may have the basic cognitive components in place, the quality and maturity of her decision-making capacity will enlarge only if given the opportunity. As Beyth-Marom et al. note, there is an important distinction to be drawn between deciding rationally and doing so effectively and optimally.⁴⁶ If a student is denied an opportunity to cultivate her decisional sense while she is an adolescent, then even as a cognitively mature and experienced adult she may not be as well-off as other decision-makers who have had opportunities to cultivate this skill and enhance their competence in prudent judgment.

Implicit in this suggestion is the idea that children and adolescents are in a better position to acquire new skills and knowledge than mature, adult persons. Part of the justification for this claim has to do with the widely-held scientific notion that intellectual skills which are most formative in childhood become less adept with age; timing is everything. A classic observation

⁴⁵ Cassidy and Kurfman (*ibid*), "Purpose and Process," 3.

⁴⁶ Beyth-Marom et al. (*ibid*), "Teaching Decision-making," 22.

that attests to this claim is the ease with which children rapidly acquire a second language (sometimes many simultaneously) as their adult counterparts struggle to do the same, often with ultimately less refined pronunciation and proficiency. Not only are children's cognitive faculties particularly flexible, they also possess relatively fresh social perspectives as a result of less exposure to the world than older persons may have. These intellectual factors position children and adolescents to be highly receptive audiences with respect to decisional training.⁴⁷ In addition to this, their concurrent enrollment in a school system provides them with an opportunity to experience a facilitated and carefully-constructed program.⁴⁸

These factors explain why decision-making skills must be trained in the first place and why it is optimal to do so during adolescence. While these claims might be met with substantial agreement, a more controversial question lingers: why must decisional training occur in the particular context of *sex and sexuality* and be accorded its own sex education curriculum? In response, I would contend that it is sometimes important to teach concepts that relate to particularly complex (or otherwise difficult to speak of) matters *in context* so that they may be dealt with in a straightforward and concrete manner and thus may be better grasped by students. Of course, it is not practical or obligatory that every context deserves its own curriculum; however, sex is a significant aspect of human life and health. Moreover, it is a highly visible and prevalent part of social existence; adolescents are inundated with sexual messages from sources like the internet, television, music, magazines, and the advertising industry. Many of these messages about sex and sexuality are contradictory and confusing. Society has recognized that

⁴⁷ While this developmental flexibility makes adolescents ideal as students, it must be acknowledged that they are also a vulnerable population in this sense (hence the protective measures society takes in law, education and other venues). Thus, I would urge society to be attentive and guarded against discriminatory, imbalanced, or otherwise unjust teaching methods and resources that encumber reasonable and considerate thinking.

⁴⁸ In the next section, I will examine why sexual education (and the decisional components therein) ought to be the responsibility of schools. I shall also address others issues related to the provision of information in sex education.

sex and sexuality education is desirable not only to promote the general health of people, but also to help young people make sense of the given sexual culture and its corresponding social climate and the multiple sexual messages they constantly encounter.

2.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION PROVISION IN ADOLESCENT DECISION-MAKING DEVELOPMENT

In the preceding section, I explained why a process-based comprehensive sex education program that seeks to develop adolescents' decisional abilities is preferable to an abstinence-only approach. Once we parse out the developmental needs of adolescents with emergent decisional capacities, we will locate the provision of information as a critical element of the decision-making element of sex education. One of the most striking aspects of the abstinence-only approach is its omission of information regarding sex, sexuality, and sexual health. Information is material to decision-making development, but there are other dimensions to explore with regard to the provision of information. In what follows, I will discuss how the omission of information, which is a fundamental feature of abstinence-only education, is problematic for the decisional development of students and poses particular challenges for women. Moreover, this approach tends to shift the responsibility of providing information away from schools and to parents and students who are thereby unjustly burdened.

2.3.1 The Role of Information Provision in the Development of Decisional Capacities and Defense of Adolescents' Best Interests

It may not be in a student's best interest to allow her to make every last decision regarding her education; sometimes children object to studying arithmetic and vocabulary words because they would rather do other things. Yet mathematics, composition, and reading/listening comprehension skills are mandatory elements of education in the U.S. and many other countries because they prepare children and adolescents to understand and successfully function in modern society and also participate in democracy. Thus, a justifiable decision is made on behalf of the student that she will be required to learn (at least the basic aspects of) arithmetic, reading, writing, and so forth. However, abstinence-only education, as opposed to disclosing information that may be material to the future well-being of students, constitutes a barrier to students' access to such information. So, an individual may be required to study reading, but it is arguably in her best interest to do so; moreover, this society considers it neglectful and unjust to actively prevent her from learning about that which is material to her success and well-being in life. In that same institution, she may be conversely deprived of the opportunity to choose to learn about contraceptives and placed in an abstinence-only class that does not provide her with information or instruction on contraception and prophylaxis; the question is whether this decision to *not* provide her with sex education justifiably leaves her better off, or if this is an instance (like mathematics) in which exposure to information is in her best interest and she is entitled to, and indeed there is an imperative to provide her with, an opportunity for such education.

I believe that abstinence-only programs suffer from what Mary Mahowald refers to as a

sort of “nearsightedness.”⁴⁹ The number of individuals who will encounter this national sex education program is enormous. Similarly, the variations among their personalities, experiences, cultural perspectives, maturity, and so forth are just as vast. Nonetheless, the abstinence-only program adopts a one-size-fits-all policy that ignores the diversity of sexual culture and instead makes a number of broad and unwarranted assumptions about the character and abilities of adolescents. That is, in the face of a perceived “sexual epidemic” of teen pregnancies leading to abortion and the spread of disease, conservative groups may respond with a strategy that attempts to reinforce traditional paternalistic values.⁵⁰ Though it may be true that some individuals do not make responsible sexual judgments, it seems imprudent to attempt to fix the problem by assuming that all adolescent individuals must have decisions made for them regarding sexual awareness and health education. That is, the irresponsible judgments made by few do not necessarily characterize and predict the attitudes and decisional capabilities of the whole. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that the cause of irresponsible judgments is adolescents’ decisional incompetence or underdeveloped decisional capacities while it is very possible that a lack of information is to blame. Indeed (as I have argued at length in the sections above) information processing is crucial to the development of positive and welfare-enhancing decision-making and it is thus inappropriate to compromise decision-making development during adolescents—a critical stage in intellectual maturation—by preventing exposure to and instruction about relevant information. The abstinence-only approach decides, on behalf of the student, that she will not be presented with information about contraceptives and, in doing so effectively deprives her of opportunities for welfare-enhancing education without a just and

⁴⁹ Mary Mahowald, “On Treatment of Myopia,” in *Feminism & Bioethics*, ed. Susan M. Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 96.

⁵⁰ Linda Singer, *Erotic Welfare* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 84.

compelling reason. She may have adequate decision-making skills, and the information is, though complex, not overwhelming if presented effectively. Furthermore, the program greatly hinders or, at worst, deprives women of the ability to make informed decisions about their sexual health later on, thus doing more harm than good to their well-being.

2.3.2 Abstinence-only and the Policy of Withholding Information: A Particularly Problematic Issue for Women's Decisional Autonomy

Women's bodies are the primary sites for contraceptive measures, so much of the information that pertains to contraception (with the exception of male condoms and vasectomy) is particular to females. This is not to say that the information is somehow off-limits or otherwise inaccessible to men; rather, the distribution of information is simply unbalanced. That which is being withheld from men is effectively far less in content and complexity than that which is being withheld from women. While the abstinence-only approach may be said to leave both men and women in the dark, turning the light on is a much more difficult task for women given what that entails. The result is a kind of indirect disadvantaging and subordination.⁵¹

This is not to say that women are not resourceful or capable enough to learn about contraception and other methods of safer sex on their own. Provided there are reliable alternate resources available to her, it is reasonable to think that a woman could, if she so chose, refer to or study information otherwise. However, disadvantaged groups, such as those who live in poverty or are uneducated by average standards, are arguably at the highest risk for undesired sexual consequences. These groups consist mostly of women who may either lack *access* to key

⁵¹ Dorothy Roberts, "The Future of Reproductive Choice for Poor Women and Women of Color," in *The Politics of Women's Bodies*, ed. Rose Weitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 283.

information resources or the knowledge of how to effectively utilize them. Coupled with this is the fact that adolescents and young adults are the primary recipients of formal sex education. Such a group is largely inexperienced and, as I have argued, it is questionable whether or not they should be responsible for filtering out inaccurate information without careful facilitation and advising. The topics of sex, contraceptives, and sexually-transmitted diseases are complex and intimidating and thus should be approached with more reliable and relevant detail, contextualization, and guidance than the internet or a textbook can provide.⁵²

Although the abstinence-only program is able to effect the originating decision that an individual will not be taught about contraceptives, it is not able to offer support to her later on when she must make the additional concrete decision to engage in, or forgo, sexual relations. The message that is given to her by the abstinence-centered approach is that the program supports her compliance, but should she choose otherwise, she will be on her own. The woman, left uninformed and intimidated by the aggressive rigidity of the program, is now placed in a situation in which she is not, in fact, offered health protection in the form of accurate information and resources. To have acted in one's best interest means that the result of the decision will place one in a better state of well-being and security than the alternative. Abstinence is one way that a woman may avoid an unwanted pregnancy, which is to say that the success of this approach may indeed lead to this state of well-being. However, the approach is problematic in that the effectiveness of the message is invested primarily in women.⁵³ The perception that women are responsible for being the gatekeepers of sex (whether as enforcers of abstinence or responsible for taking safer-sex measures) stems from two interrelated ideological notions. First,

⁵² Laura Landro, "Net Benefits," *Wall Street Journal* (Dec 8, 2003): R.09.

⁵³ Such claims and analyses are provided in: Lisa S. Parker, "Public Health's Image of Women," paper written at the University of Pittsburgh.

men are characterized—and often caricatured—as having a very strong eagerness to be sexually satisfied, whereas women are viewed as not being as interested in sex and thus better able to control their urges as well as the impulses of male partners; these characterizations are undergirded and perpetuated by the ideology that, while men possess strong sexual agency, women lack sexual agency and are primarily objects of men’s pleasure but are disembodied from pleasure themselves. In the third chapter, I will further argue that this sexual dichotomy is fallacious and unjust, and moreover, that the abstinence-only approach is not effectively equipped to address and challenge how these ideologies are potentially damaging to women’s sexual health, well-being, and agency. For the present, I maintain that, in an atmosphere of male patriarchal dominance and hostility toward women’s supposed resistance to sex, women are generally not in a strong or advantageous position to carry out alone the responsibility to enforce abstinence. Women are doubly disadvantaged in not only bearing the responsibility of enforcing abstinence but, should the abstinence strategy be overturned, women ostensibly are also responsible for seeing to it that protection, condoms in particular, are used. Though condom use should not be only women’s responsibility, this important (and popular) method of preventing pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections among adolescents and adults should be used appropriately and properly. Therefore, instruction should be provided to students in order to better facilitate proper use of condoms and, moreover, during instruction it should be emphasized that *both* men and women have a responsibility to be knowledgeable about condoms (and other methods of protection) *and* enforce safer-sex measures.

The abstinence-only initiative problematically disregards a woman’s decisional agency when the opportunity comes for her to choose whether or not to be informed about contraceptives. Yet, paradoxically, the abstinence-only approach, like many public health

programs, *relies* on women to exercise control and autonomy in negotiating (in this case, ceasing) sexual encounters.⁵⁴ That is, women are perceived as bearing the responsibility of policing and making firm decisions about sexual relations, even though the abstinence-only program has already established the trend that sexual decisions are being made without the exercise of her decisional abilities. The woman is expected to reject advances and maintain traditional patriarchal values of sexual humility and chastity, while also indirectly preserving the abstinence of her partner. Even before the sexual encounter, a sort of heterosexual institution exists in which male dominance is considered normal and natural, while feminine compromise and flexibility places women at a disadvantage in this power context.⁵⁵ The abstinence-only program reinforces this notion and contributes to the unrealistic burden being placed upon women in the current climate.

One may respond to this point by arguing that, if women are generally perceived as disadvantaged in their sexual relations, it would perhaps be *better* for them to not have to negotiate safer sex practices and to simply bypass the entire situation through a commitment to abstinence-only. This line of reasoning is flawed because while a woman certainly has the right to abstain from sex, she should do so because she desires to wait, not because she is not in control or, not having been educated, is afraid that she does not understand sex well enough to engage in it and feels unprotected.⁵⁶ The sexual subordination of women is not an inevitable fact of nature; rather, it is a social problem that could be effectively addressed through a comprehensive and accurate sexuality education program. As Holland and her colleagues have

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Scott, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson, "Sex, Gender and Power," *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 12:3 (1990): 342.

⁵⁶ Lisa S. Parker has shared with me the important insight that the line of reasoning discussed above (pertaining to women's maintenance and enforcement of abstinence) suffers the additional flaw of assuming that women are successful in abstaining from sex and are not often pressured or raped.

argued, empowered sexuality in women comes through a sense of intellectual and experiential control, in addition to an understanding of one's own sexuality—this includes information on contraception for women. The abstinence-only approach cannot provide this, though a conscientious comprehensive sexuality program that also regards the merits of abstinence is a promising notion.

2.3.3 The Distortion of Educational Responsibility

As Eddington and Hecht note, the Supreme Court has historically elevated the “parental right to control students” education over the students’ own right; yet the Court has begun to recognize the first amendment as affirming “students’ rights to increased access to educational materials.”⁵⁷ While the state has established the fundamental right of parents to direct their child’s education, it has also asserted its own control over the scope, content, and presentation of students’ education.⁵⁸ Cases such as *Wisconsin v. Yoder* and the legal philosophy of *parens patriae* underscore the challenges of achieving balance between state and parental interests to ensure that students’ entitled educational needs are satisfied.⁵⁹ Sometimes interests overlap, such as parents’ and states’ shared interests in ensuring an appropriate education for youth. With the Court’s recognition of the rights of students, tensions may arise. That is, students’ educational rights are fundamentally constructed in terms of their access to information whereas parental and state’s rights are concentrated on how to shape the scope of education. While

⁵⁷ Eddington and Hecht (*ibid*), “Legal Foundations,”7.

⁵⁸ *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923). 262 U.S. 39. See also: *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925). 268 U.S. 510.

⁵⁹ Regarding *Yoder*, see: *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972). 406 U.S. 205. Regarding *parens patriae*, Rhonda Hartman has defined this legal concept as the “the philosophy that government should be proactive in protecting the welfare of minors” and the “power of the government to promote the health and well-being of citizens.” Rhonda Gay Hartman (*ibid*), “Coming of Age,” 411. Rhonda Gay Hartman, “AIDS and Adolescents,” *Journal of Health Care Law & Policy* 7:2 (2004): 299.

parents and the state may disagree as to which materials and instructional methods should be employed in schools, students' rights to access resources may be in tension with the interests of both parents and the state, both of which also have an obligation to guard students from education that may be harmful or otherwise impede their development as "responsible [and] intelligent citizens."⁶⁰

To be sure, there can never be a perfect balance among these three parties. When control is granted to one party over another, this shift invariably encroaches upon the second party's freedom to exercise its will. Moreover, this second party and any other parties involved suffer a decreased ability to intervene in the actions of the first party and, thereby, their ability to mitigate potentially harmful actions is likewise lessened. The point is that rights and interests sometimes overlap and create tension with one another. The contentious nature of sex education can further augment the difficulty of agreeably aligning various views with one another. With regard to matters of sex and sexuality, parents have a right to raise their children in an environment that reflects their values, but their approach may not seem to complement the state's interest in keeping society well-informed, reasonably autonomous, and healthy. Even though the efforts of parents and the state may be well-intended, care must be taken that their measures do not obscure the rights and interests of students. As Hazel Glenn Beh and Milton Diamond argue, "the highly charged nature of the fight between parents and the state concerning sexual [matters] makes it easy to neglect the distinct and significant rights of the minor in procreative and self-actualizing decisions."⁶¹

⁶⁰ Eddington and Hecht (*ibid*), "Legal Foundations," 20. Also, the issue of adolescents' vulnerability, in terms of their sexual naiveté and their related inexperience in evaluating the credibility of resources providing information on sex and sexuality, will be discussed further toward the end of this section.

⁶¹ Hazel Glenn Beh and Milton Diamond, "The Failure of Abstinence-only Education," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 15:1 (2006): 50.

When the scope of students' education is enlarged or restricted, management institutions such as public schools become more or less responsible for providing certain services. In the context of the present discussion, a school-based abstinence-only program limits the scope of education and thereby alleviates schools of the responsibility to provide informative content and opportunities for discussion. As I have argued, sex education has a relevant place in the lives of adolescents, especially given that our current cultural climate is inundated with sexual messages and pressures. Such education is a pertinent and vital aspect of the health-related, social, and decisional development of students. Schools are appropriate places in which to implement a meaningful part of this education because they occupy a substantial portion of a students' time and, in particular, do so during the formative years of social and physical development when sexual issues also begin to increasingly absorb students' attention. Apart from matters of timing, scholastic institutions have funding, material resources, and informed guidelines that help to provide an environment that is both favorable to cultivating adolescents' development and conducive to learning.⁶² In maintaining that sex education is a valid need of students and, furthermore, in contending that schools are in a highly advantageous position to meet these needs, I am suggesting that students have the right to an appropriate sex education program and that schools have a substantial responsibility to fulfill adolescents' developmental and educational needs in this respect.

A school acting in accordance with an abstinence-only policy is prohibited to provide the information and opportunities necessary for adolescents' intellectual and social development.

⁶² I recognize that many public schools throughout the U.S. struggle to meet educational goals under constraints such as limited funding and staffing. However, the time and resources I speak of are those which are already allocated to sex education and/or some form of HIV/AIDS education. As I have mentioned, government funding for abstinence-only programs has increased to nearly \$200 million. Ideally, such funding would continue to grow in support of sexual health-related programs and, furthermore, would be distributed fairly among schools. While on the path to this objective, it is important to focus on how existing resources can be put to use wisely and efficiently.

While schools should not be the sole source of education in sexual matters, it is highly problematic to shift such a substantial portion of responsibility onto the shoulders of parents and guardians. Though they ought to have an influential role in shaping the values and knowledge of their children, parents generally lack the collective advantageous resources, including expertise and time, available to schools. A single, working parent may have great difficulty finding the time to engage her child in meaningful discussion. Parents, though presumably experienced in sex to some degree, cannot *themselves* be expected to have had a formal and effective sex education. There is a great amount of information to be learned about sexual matters—contraception, for its complexity and evolving nature, may be a course unto itself—and the deleterious impact of abstinence-only education burdening young women with the responsibility of unguided self-instruction reigns true here for parents, as well. Access to resources, knowledge of how to utilize those resources, and discretion regarding the credibility and relevance of the information at hand all require experience and training. In addition to this constraint of material knowledge, parents may not be knowledgeable about effective methodology in the delivery of sex education. Furthermore, though parents may be capable of providing their children with relevant, accurate, and well-rounded information in a comfortable and safe environment, one drawback of an exclusive parent-child interaction is that such a setting is unable to provide adolescents with a discursive venue in which they may communicate with individuals from diverse backgrounds and sexual identities (whether the diversity lies in broad differences between identities like homosexuality and heterosexuality, or in nuances within particular identities). As I will argue at length in the third chapter, the opportunity to actively engage a range of sexual views helps to not only better inform adolescents about the realities of sexual

culture, but is also a critical element in shaping the notion of sexual citizenship as entailing individual autonomy and mutual respect.

I am not suggesting that parents are utterly incapable of educating children appropriately about sexual matters. My objective in raising these concerns is to highlight the difficulties they may well face in their attempts to become effective sex educators. The task can certainly be accomplished with care and attention, but it seems more sensible and effective for parents to be a *partner* and not the sole proprietor of the sex education experience. Regardless of the degree of intellectual comfort the parent has with the material, “the talk,” as it is evinced by the many self-help resources available to parents, can also be an uncomfortable event for a nervous parent; as a result, the discussion may be awkward, incomplete, ineffective, delayed for too long, or—at worst—avoided altogether.⁶³

Ultimately, placing responsibility for sex education onto the adolescent is the most dramatic negative consequence of this shifting of educational responsibility. The difficulties I have outlined with respect to parents as educators are radically amplified when adolescents are unfairly burdened to take on the role of self-educator. Naturally curious students may be compelled to seek answers elsewhere if their efforts to obtain information are discouraged or simply rejected by schools or parents. As the scientific literature on adolescent decisional development suggests, teenagers do attempt to engage with new information and decisions independently, though they are also highly reliant on external sources. Such sources may not only provide misleading or inaccurate information, they may also not have the best interests of the student in mind. Inexperienced peers can be undependable and issue messages and pressures

⁶³ Cristine Russell, “‘The Talk’ with Kids Should Occur Early, Often,” *Washington Post* (Apr 6, 1999): Z.10. For additional comments on the issue of parent-child conversations about sex and sexuality, see also: Josie A. Weiss, “Let’s Talk about It,” *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners* 19 (2007): 450-458.

that are contradictory to the best interests of their fellow adolescents. Moreover, children and teenagers may be especially vulnerable when they look to resources like the internet or the media, where parties who wish to deceive, exploit, or otherwise harm adolescents may reside. Adolescents are by and large vulnerable because they are likely to be sexually naïve and lack some frame of reference or experience upon which to evaluate the credibility of some of the information they receive. Depending on their maturity, curious adolescents', axiomatically lacking life experience, may be drawn to and rely upon resources that promise them guidance and friendship. The unfortunate reality is that such resources may house pernicious parties who seek out teenagers who seem to lack sexual understanding and have a weak, or no, support system. Moreover, some individuals with malicious intentions may also count on adolescents' reluctance to report inappropriate solicitations because adolescents would then have to admit to doing something (*e.g.*, asking about oral sex in a chat room) they perceive is wrong "in the first place." In failing to educate students accurately and realistically on matters of sex and sexuality *and* in creating an environment in which sexual inquiries are discouraged or prohibited, abstinence-only education may actually render many adolescents *more vulnerable* than they might otherwise be if they had an opportunity to engage with comprehensive information in open discourse with reliable and trustworthy educators at home and in school.

3.0 SEX, SEXUALITY, AND DEMOCRATIC SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP IN EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE

The present chapter will consider the power, influence, and importance of conversational intercourse in the context of sex education. I will discuss the formative and performative potential of discourse within the context of sex and sexuality education and will also outline the *anti-discourse* position and its main objections to allowing information-sharing and group discussion to occur in sex education programs. This position grows largely from the concern that open talk about sexual matters effectively incites dangerous reactions, *i.e.*, from the belief that the impact of such speech is too great in the sexual context and therefore it must be stifled, lest it mislead and harm adolescents and children.

In general, there are two stances that proponents of the anti-discourse position may take regarding formal school-based sex and sexuality education. The first stance broadly opposes the implementation of any sex education course whatsoever to children and adolescents. Both the prevalence of some form of government-supported school-based sex education and studies demonstrating public support for sex education suggest that this position is a minority view that has not been influential in shaping the course of sex education in the U.S.⁶⁴ The second stance,

⁶⁴ Cynthia Dailard, "Sex Education," *Guttmacher Report on Public Policy* (2001): 9. See also: Heather Boonstra, "Comprehensive Approach Needed to Combat Sexually Transmitted Infections Among Youths," *Guttmacher Report on Public Policy* (2004): 3-4.; Elizabeth Bernstein, "Sex-Ed Class Becomes Latest School Battleground," *Wall Street Journal* (Mar 30, 2006): D.1.

on which this chapter is focused, does not necessarily oppose the existence of sex education in schools, but does seek to curtail the content and scope of sex education curricula ostensibly to prevent sexual activity from being incited through discourse.⁶⁵ Curricula in accordance with such a position would likely provide only a minimum amount of basic information that is largely detached from imaginative assumptions that sex is “imminent” or “has occurred.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, it is expected that such curricula would resist candid discussions about sex and sexuality as the anti-discourse position stems from the belief that such discourse incites sexual activity; instead, curricula emerging from an anti-discourse position would insist that all conversations stress the avoidance of sexual activity. Ultimately, the anti-discourse position would amount to a program that is effectively an implementation of the abstinence-only approach; to refer to anti-discursive sex education is to refer to abstinence-only education and vice versa.⁶⁷

Furthermore, it is important to focus on abstinence-only education in relation to the anti-discourse position because the problematic attitudes and assumptions that are often central to the anti-discourse position are perpetuated through abstinence-only education. In addition to my concern that this misdirected response denies adolescents reasonable opportunities to learn new information, there is another ethically troubling issue at hand. Silence is not necessarily safe—

⁶⁵ References to the *anti-discourse* position hereafter indicate this second stance and not the first which resists any and all school-based sex education.

⁶⁶ Curricular topics that would entail “imaginative assumptions” may include information regarding how to choose contraception that best suits your preferences and needs (which assumes that sex is imminent), as well as information about pregnancy options (which puts students in a position where they may have to imagine that they had sex, *i.e.*, that sex occurred). Rather, information would likely be limited to sexual anatomy and physiology, and pregnancy in de-personalized, biological terms of conception and the development of human fetuses.

⁶⁷ Abstinence-only education may be supported in part by those who believe that adolescents do not adequately have the intellectual and decisional abilities required for comprehensive education. These supporters take an *anti-information* stance (which is considered in the second chapter), but may not necessarily subscribe to the *anti-discourse* position. However, since information precedes discussion, any anti-information position is one that is consequently *anti-discursive*. So, the effectively synonymous relationship between anti-discourse sex education and abstinence-only education holds. In some cases I will refer to abstinence-only education as *anti-discursive* abstinence-only education in order to highlight the anti-discursive nature of such programs.

indeed it can speak volumes. Censorship may breed ignorance and forgetfulness; the dismissal or omission of some topics may have a lasting, chilling effect on the silenced and may undermine the rightful free expression of those individuals impugned under this system. The pro-discourse stance that I take in my argument responds to the charges of discourse opponents and demonstrates that these measures of censorship both passively waste opportunities for students to become well-informed, enabled, and empowered sexual agents *and* may actively damage and deprive the well-being and flourishing of particular groups.

I argue that anti-discursive practices prevent the beneficial learning of democratic skills and responsibilities in terms of the sexual life; moreover, anti-discursive practices can be mechanisms of proliferating ignorance and misunderstandings about the needs, interests, challenges, and identities of certain sexually-disadvantaged groups. In analyzing the anti-discourse position, one is able to discern the embedded misunderstandings and conceptions that are central to the unjust subjugation, or obviation of the equal status, of some sexual citizens.

This chapter considers two consequences of anti-discursive, *i.e.*, abstinence-only, sex education programs. First, anti-discursive sex education diminishes attention to pleasure and desire because of the supposedly inciting effects of these notions and thus denies women in particular an opportunity to improve an undeveloped sense of sexual agency and embodiment. The underdevelopment of the notions of pleasure and desire contribute to women's disadvantaged sexual status. Second, anti-discursive sex education, because it approaches discourse about sex and sexuality as dangerous and appropriately omitted from sex education, consequently prohibits discussions about sexual identities. A lack of attention to the needs and interests of sexual minorities proliferates ignorance about these groups and also has a devaluing and shaming effect on these individuals. Put differently, the anti-discourse position is shaped

around the factors that render women and sexual minorities as subordinated sexual groups and aids in the further proliferation of these factors.

The solution, then, lies in a contrary strategy of increased, open discourse in which the expressions of adolescents' ideas, positions, and inquiries regarding sex and sexuality are reasonably uninhibited and in which they are encouraged to communicate and consider the ideas of their peers. At a time when the abundance of sexual speech is at an all-time high, the current state of sex education—dominated by abstinence-only education—has gone in the opposite direction and is relatively silent on matters of sex. In light of the prevalence of mixed and confusing sexual messages in the culture of the U.S., it is an impractical move in the wrong direction to downsize or eliminate students' opportunities to engage in well-facilitated and open discourse regarding the realities of sex and sexuality. I contend that such open discourse not only affirms a student's sense that her or his views and needs are legitimate and valued, but also provides such students with an opportunity to learn that the views and needs of others also deserve the same kind of respect. Autonomy and mutual respect are core elements of democratic citizenship. As John Dewey argues, a young person's sense of democratic citizenship (entailing individual dignity, collective respect, and civic responsibility) is first explored and then nurtured in the educational setting. The privileges and protections afforded to citizens of a democracy extend to all facets of life, including sex and sexuality. Sex education is a place that provides a venue for exploring sex, sexuality, and sexual relationships, as well as private and political sexual decision-making—all of which comprise sexual citizenship. Thus, discourse within sex education that is structured by democratic principles can facilitate improved circumstances for people for whom autonomy and mutual respect are lacking. The particularly disadvantaged

sexual groups I will discuss are women, sexual minorities, and those suffering from sexually-transmitted diseases.

A defining feature of the abstinence-only approach is the dearth of substantial discourse between students and their instructors, as well as with their peers. In the preceding chapter, I consider at length the necessary relationship between receiving accurate information and the development of decisional skills in adolescents. I contend that any manifestation of the abstinence-only approach is flawed because it discourages—or even disallows—the sharing of a large portion of relevant information and, in doing so, stands as an impediment to the enhancement of decision-making skills in adolescents.

While some proponents of the abstinence-only approach may resist the notion of information-sharing on grounds that it is futile because adolescents still lack the cognitive capacity to properly *understand* the information at hand, the far more prevalent argument is that, though they may understand their lessons, adolescents are unable to properly manage information of a sexual nature *in practice*. Put differently, in this particular case, silence results not from the notion that words are fruitless, but from the suspicion that they may be *too effective* in influencing students and must be suppressed. Though abstinence-only proponents may not necessarily oppose all discourse about sex, that which they do permit (urging abstinence, *only*) is rigidly narrow and precludes a vast amount of other relevant speech. To illustrate this point, consider that in 1998, when the abstinence-only curriculum was predominant, and comprehensive programs were submerged to a stark minority, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) published an informational handbook entitled *Filling the Gaps: hard to teach topics in sexuality*. As Judith Levine notes, this text, which discussed “safer sex, condoms, sexual orientation, diversity, pregnancy options, sexual

behavior[, and] sex and society,” demonstrated that “the ‘gaps,’ in short, were everything but sexual plumbing and disease.”⁶⁸

I grant that persons in the formative stage of adolescence are subject to certain vulnerabilities that warrant a sense of caution regarding the scope, content, and setting of sex education; yet I also maintain that a sweeping omission of information is an untenable response to this vulnerability. Anti-discursive sex education not only forces a wedge between students and the informational tools that would make them better enabled decision-makers, it also assumes that the consequences of discourse are inevitably harmful and thereby loses sight of the potential benefits that may be reaped from open, well-facilitated discussion. The impediment of individual decision-making development is one ethically troubling aspect of abstinence-only programs; another distinct issue is that anti-discursive sex education also dissipates opportunities for students to develop skills in communicating and understanding others within the sex education context. The preceding chapter focuses on the student as an individual learner and set forth the ideal result that this student would develop into a reliable decision-maker who is well informed about that which will maintain her sexual health and well-being. The scope of the present chapter is broadened to consider the individual among others in a community of students and as a member of the larger democratic society. This macro-level focus acknowledges that one’s personal sexual decision-making is not always solitary, but involves the participation of others.⁶⁹ So, it is important to examine the effect that the anti-discourse position may have upon these intersubjective relationships and the development of views grounding future political decisions. Sexual discourse can be a means of connecting adolescents with the realities of the

⁶⁸ Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁶⁹ A further insight from Lisa S. Parker is that this macro-level focus also recognizes that sexual issues have implications for decisions about resource allocation, civil rights, and other political decisions faced in a democracy.

diverse sexual culture that exists in the world. Thus, this paper encourages two transformations. The first changes our view of the sex education student from one who is individual in his cognitive needs to one who is enmeshed in complex social relationship and responsibilities. To suit this adjustment in perspective, a second transformation must occur: the classroom cannot be conceived of as purely composed of lecture, but must also encompass multi-directional discussion.

3.1 DEMOCRATIC SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP

I propose that it is useful to frame an analysis of sexuality in terms of democratic citizenship—more precisely, *democratic sexual citizenship*. By mobilizing the concept of democratic sexual citizenship, I seek to draw connections among the following ideas. The notions and responsibilities engendered within a democratic concept of citizenship are widely known (*e.g.*, civil rights such as free speech, equal treatment under the law, fair representation, freedom from discrimination) and the structures that identify and preserve the rights and interests of members of the citizenry are established and are accessible for examination. The philosophy of democratic citizenship not only encompasses the value of individual autonomy (as the previous chapter sustains), but also captures the notion that *others* comprise the citizenry and provides guiding insights into how a diverse range of citizens may co-exist peacefully and respectfully. While sexuality can be understood as an aspect of individual identity and personal relationships, sexual matters also bear on the cultural, public, and political realms within a society. Sexuality, like citizenship, has reaches in both individualism and community and is thus a category in

which the public/private *dichotomy* can be deconstructed and refashioned such that the concomitance between the private life and public life become apparent.

If sexuality is understood not merely as individualistic, but also as having political implications within a democratic setting, then it is important to consider whether sexuality is afforded the same respect and protections as other aspects of human life, such as religion. Put differently, is *sexual citizenship*—citizenship viewed in terms of sexuality—recognized and respected in accordance with democratic ideals? Are *sexual citizens*—citizens viewed in terms of their sexual identity—respected and afforded democratic rights and protections? If not, then one reason may be that people have a poor understanding (or do not believe) that democratic citizenship (which affords people various civil rights) *bears on* sexuality as it bears on other aspects of human life.⁷⁰ One way to facilitate a better understanding of sexuality and its relationship to democratic citizenship is for individuals of diverse sexual identities (some privileged, others disadvantaged) to come together to engage with a central tool of democracy: open and fair discourse. Discourse is central to democratic citizenship because it is a key means for individuals to reflect on their own ideas and position, while also having exposure to the ideas and positions of others. In other words, discourse not only lends itself to development of responsible and respectful micro-level sexual decision-making (individuals considering sexual acts), but it also helps to facilitate fair and just macro-level sexual decision-making (society making sexually-related political decisions) with both levels requiring a developed sense of individual value and the importance of according equal respect to others.

Discourse must have a space in which it may be encouraged and allowed to flourish if citizens are to have a fair chance to develop such insights; moreover, the cooperative practices

⁷⁰ Also, as Lisa S. Parker has noted, people might not recognize how sexual identity, affiliation, and expression bear on *other* aspects of socio-political participation, expression, and affiliation.

that make discourse effective do not arise from automatic skills but must be learned and developed.⁷¹ In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey argues that schools do not just provide students with information, but also must be considered places in which the skills, practices, and principles of democratic citizenship may be learned. Following Dewey's lead and the notion that discourse is central to such learning, the present essay underscores the challenges faced by various groups of people whose sexual citizenship is undermined and proposes that the quality of discourse in sex education is a key factor in making the challenges of these groups visible, improving their situations, and mitigating future discrimination and misunderstanding. To be sure, there is no universally accepted and understood interpretation of *good* citizenship (or good sexual citizenship, for that matter); be that as it may, I believe that it is still possible to productively derive a reasonable framework of good citizenship in the context of sex education.

It is important to consider the types of issues of democratic deliberation for which discourse-supporting comprehensive sex and sexuality education would prove beneficial. A clear parallel exists between the anti-discursive approach and the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that prevents the employment of openly-homosexual people in any branch of the U.S. military.⁷² This policy reflects society's discomfort with publicly discussing sexuality. Students enrolled in discourse-supporting comprehensive sex education have an opportunity to develop communication and listening skills in open sexual discourse while learning about the sexual challenges, needs, and interests of various groups. Discussions about women and sexual minorities in particular could be structured so that stronger connections are made between the circumstances of these individuals and their status as citizens with democratic rights, protections, and responsibilities. By means of such discourse, students would have the opportunity to

⁷¹ From here on, references to *citizenship* or *sexual citizenship* will refer to the *democratic* sense.

⁷² *United States Code*, Title 10, Section 654.

develop richer and more accurate perceptions of sexual culture and would be provided with some informational resources conducive to developing positive attitudes regarding the acceptability and relevance of open sexual discourse. Adolescents—as *future macro- and micro-level democratic deliberators*—are essential to reversing and reforming undemocratic practices that have pernicious effects on women and sexual minorities. As future leaders of society, students of discursive sex education are better equipped to evaluate, and resist, various anti-discourse sentiments, such as the prominent “don’t ask, don’t tell” military policy.

Discursive sex education may also, for example, facilitate more equitable and respectful deliberation and policy-making with regard to same-sex partnerships. In addition to paying attention to the popular issues of same-sex marriage and child adoption, attention must also be paid to healthcare and tax policies that negatively and unfairly affect same-sex partners who should be treated as equal with heterosexual partners. Realizing the legitimacy of minority sexualities is a first step in having a positive and reasonable understanding of the legitimacy of same-sex unions. Moreover, students of discursive sex education are in a good position to contemplate why the privileges of citizenship should apply consistently and equally to same-sex and heterosexual civil unions as well as to discuss and evaluate the possible reasons for why same-sex couples in the U.S. often face unjust unequal treatment. While same-sex unions are permitted and recognized in some states in the U.S., the overall picture is certainly inconsistent. Citizens in same-sex unions should be treated equally with heterosexual couples with regard to issues such as tax policies, healthcare decisions, and health insurance. A woman should not be discriminated against with regard to tax deductions or credits because her partner is also a woman. She should also be eligible to receive funeral pay-outs and inheritance should her female partner die. In any state of the U.S., the standards and responsibilities of surrogate

medical decision-making should apply to a man and his ill partner regardless of whether the partner is a woman or a man. A democratic citizen with a minority sexual identity is a democratic citizen nonetheless and deserves the same rights, protections, and privileges granted to all other citizens. We should defend against sex education approaches that have a negative effect on the future democratic deliberations of adolescents. Advocacy is one important way of changing standards, policies, and practices that are inequitable and unjust for certain sexual groups. Another avenue is discursive-supporting sex and sexuality education, which can shape young people's present and future deliberations to be well-aligned with democratic principles of respect, equity, and justice.

3.2 THE ANTI-DISCOURSE POSITION

The scope, content, and influence of information shared within sex education have been hotly debated in the U.S. for decades, indeed since the very inception of the first sex education programs in the nineteenth century. A familiar vestige of the late 1960s and 1970s is the call for increased open dialogue regarding sexual attitudes, behaviors, and orientations, as well as the corollary need to reexamine and frankly address issues of pregnancy, contraception, and the prevention of sexually-transmitted infections. While more comprehensive programming did result from such movements, the 1980s can be identified as the turning point towards discursively-limited programs. Although the identification and threat of HIV/AIDS has resulted in an aggressive push toward increased public and private dialogue about sexual behaviors and their consequences, the panic that accompanied this epidemic clouded several avenues of response, including sex education. Rather than responding to this wake-up call with an increased

seriousness and aggressiveness in protecting the sexual health of people by empowering them with resources and information, the U.S. has taken a contrary route by adopting anti-discursive abstinence-only education as a nationally-endorsed approach. The tragic legacy of the HIV epidemic is that it has not only produced a multitude of victims in those who have contracted and live with the virus, but also has fueled the deprecation of homosexuals and villanized sex itself as inescapably wrought with “lethal” danger. With such sentiments in the atmosphere in the 1980s and 1990s, it became increasingly difficult to defend a sex education program that was perceived as promoting sex—even if such a program adamantly declared that protection and maturity were essential aspects of sexual safety and that abstinence is a highly valuable option to be seriously considered. The antiquated Victorian fear of inciting sexual behavior was thus recharged, yet this time around it was not *chastity*, but *disease*, *HIV*, and *death* that were the watchwords. This is one way in which the anti-discourse approach began (and continues) to dismantle support for comprehensive models.

A second maneuver is discussed by Janice M. Irvine in her work on the strategies and effectiveness of the rhetoric produced by the anti-discourse position in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s.⁷³ Irvine notes that since the 1980s, many theorists including scholars of linguistics, law, feminism, gender, politics, and other disciplines have discussed the performative consequences of speech acts and debated whether or not speech may, in being uttered, manifest discrimination and do violence. This theoretically and practically invaluable insight has helped to shape policies that protect people from sexual and racial harassment and verbal neglect. However, the insight’s import is double-edged. By reinforcing that the boundary between words and deeds is not obvious, and that some words have material consequences similar to those of actions, this

⁷³ Janice M. Irvine, *Talk about Sex* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

theory of the impact of speech also helped to legitimize the anxiety that talking about sex will encourage sexual interest and activity. The performative account of speech seemingly proposed the rash connection that, if sex talk *is* sex—that it is “tantamount to ‘doing it’”—then one who speaks about sex to a minor is effectively endangering a minor emotionally and psychologically.⁷⁴

Anti-discourse supporters now have at their disposal a climate in which words perceived as harmful are scrutinized as having enough force to be considered (and *punished*) as a form of violence. An additional instrument of this position is the guarantee that people react passionately to allegations of child sexual abuse, an anathema attracting considerable public disdain and panic. Levine rightly maintains that it is critical to view practices of discursive strategies within their cultural and sociohistorical context; she argues that such notions of abuse and molestation “could only emerge as a culturally powerful rhetoric of fear in a broader context of [a] massive cultural shift in attitudes” regarding the vulnerability of children and amid an apparent widespread epidemic of their sexual abuse.⁷⁵

The idea that sex talk constitutes sex is extremely fuzzy and elastic. It is doubtful that many would be convinced or willing to concede that an adult woman who talks about her sexual history with a gynecologist is actually having sexual relations with that person. However, when a child or adolescent is involved in a conversation about sex, the inflammatory suggestion of child molestation can be enough to render the child or adolescent an inappropriate interlocutor and can overshadow a well-intended educational effort. There are two reasons that people may be hesitant to voice objections to the claim that talking about sex with children is a form of child sexual abuse. The first is that they may view the vulnerability (naiveté, foolhardiness) of

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

children as good reason to play it safe and disallow sexual speech in their presence; though this rationale may entail depriving minors of some information they might need, the fear of enacting sexual abuse, and so harming the child, may trump this concern. Second, people may fear the possibility that they may *themselves* be labeled as perverts and child molesters because they are willing to talk to children about sex. Issues of what is being said, what is the intended result of the discourse, whether malicious intent is present in the conversation, whether the environment is appropriate and well-supervised, and whether the conversation is appropriate to the maturity of the audience are all crucial questions that can help to determine whether a particular instance of discourse is harmful, beneficial, appropriate, or inappropriate. Unfortunately, reaching a point when one can evaluate and defend sexual discourse may mean first making oneself vulnerable to scandal and hasty charges of perversion. The imprecise nature of what counts as abusive sex talk and who might perform it is “beset with seemingly random [and amorphous] danger.”⁷⁶ Thus, anti-discourse rhetoric instills a sense of paranoia in both those who fear being accused of perversion and those who fear potential predators.

Though in the mainstream the literal accusations of sexual abuse have seemed to decrease, Irvine reminds us that it is difficult to forget a time when books such as *Raping Our Children: The Sex Education Scandal* and *Child Abuse in the Classroom* were published while the anti-discourse movement was on the rise in the U.S.⁷⁷ Even if it cannot be said that contemporary pro-abstinence-only literature overtly accuses comprehensive-education supporters of being sexual predators, accusations that sex education “morally molests” or otherwise mentally harms children remains very much in effect and invokes a visceral reaction to the very

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷⁷ Gloria Lentz, *Raping Our Children* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1972); and Phyllis Schlafly, *Child Abuse in the Classroom* (Pere Marquette Press, 1984).

idea of child sexual abuse.⁷⁸ Moreover, these metaphorical accusations of abuse can be employed to indicate that sexual discourse assaults students' morals (*e.g.*, by proposing that "alternative" sexualities are legitimate and acceptable) and sexual attitudes (*e.g.*, by endorsing masturbation and other self-exploration as normal, healthy, and beneficial practices). So, as Irvine notes, the addition of the vocabularies of "seduction" and "abuse" to those of "stimulus" and "promiscuity" carried out their own "unsettling effects in the already unsettled space of the sex education culture wars."⁷⁹ The anti-discourse approach has two related effects in abstinence-only sex education. First, anti-discursive sex education's intense focus on the negative consequences of sex enlarges a sense of danger, fear, and shame associated with sex. Second, in being preoccupied with avoiding sexual discourse on grounds that it may incite such danger-laden sexual activities, the anti-discursive sex education shrinks or fully eliminates any discussion of the positive aspects of sex, such as pleasure.

According to the anti-discourse position, talking about sex and sexuality may construct the sexual identities of students. The typical inference is that sex education manipulates the "natural" progression of adolescents' sexualities and disrupts it in such a way that they either become confused or lured into "alternative" lifestyles. This line of reasoning is that just as talk about sex incites sexual behavior, talk about sexuality incites transformations of sexual identities. This allegation is typically one-sided and implies that talk about (or the mere mention of) sexual identities such as homosexuality will seduce students toward directions in identity development or expression which they were not otherwise heading. For instance, in her analysis, Irvine quotes

⁷⁸For instance, see: Contender Ministries, "SIECUS is Morally Molesting Your School-Age Children," <http://www.contenderministries.org/articles/worldevents/siecus.php>. As of 2/2008, this link is among the top five returned results when a basic Google search for "SIECUS" (the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States) is performed.

⁷⁹ Irvine (*ibid*), *Talk about Sex*, 132.

journalist Jim Townsend as saying that there are “more homosexuals made in [a] sex education classroom than would have ever been here today if *they* hadn’t told them... and a lot of them became homosexuals as a direct result of being *taught* that in the classroom.”⁸⁰ This quotation exemplifies two important points.

First, sex education programs are sometimes labeled as “recruiting grounds” by homosexuals and other sexual deviants (note the use of “they”). Meanwhile, no attention is paid to the effect of heteronormative discourse either in sex education classes or elsewhere in the curriculum. Presumed to be normal and natural, heterosexuality is not treated as something to which students could be recruited or turned; it just is. It is the path on which they will find themselves if no one causes them to deviate. The anti-discourse position does not recognize or acknowledge that silence is able to communicate notions about identities and thus accomplishes its own work in influencing people’s expression or repression of their identity. If the concern is that sex education in the classroom shapes sexual identity, then we must consider the possibility that compulsory heterosexuality (*i.e.*, the view that heterosexuality is the expected norm) can also be imposed or reinforced by the refusal to discuss other sexual identities. Silence, as much as words, can be a compelling means of pressuring and communicating what is acceptable and what is unmentionable.

Second, the quotation reflects assumptions that an individual’s sexual identity and behavior can be altered quickly and easily by external influences that “teach” students to change their minds. It may be true that behavior is subject to personal decision-making and that both behavior and outward personality-work are shaped by environmental pressures. Nevertheless,

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 133. My emphasis added.

although the concepts of desire and identity are by no means settled theoretically, identity is a highly complex attribute that is arguably not purely subject to choice.

In the following sections, I will respond to these two assumptions underlying the anti-discourse approach: (1) sexual discourse is dangerously enticing and should be avoided and (2) sexual discourse shapes sexual identities away from accepted models.

3.3 DANGER AND SHAME AS TOOLS FOR EXPANDING FEAR AND DIMINISHING PLEASURE

There are two major implications of anti-discursive (abstinence-only) education's overemphasis of the dangers of sex and its subsequent refusal to allow substantive sexual discourse. First, anti-discursive education diminishes the discursive space available to talk about desire and about the pleasure or any of the other positive benefits of sex; I argue that a lack of discourse about pleasure and desire proliferates the sexual disembodiment of women and their disadvantaged sexual status. Second, anti-discursive education's overemphasis of danger and exclusion of discourse about sexual identities creates a climate of fear and shame that is continually problematic for the already sexually-active, those who experience sexually-transmitted infections, and, in particular, sexual minorities.⁸¹ I contend that the aspects of exclusion and

⁸¹ I recognize that some may view the term *sexual minority* as problematic because the term unto itself already renders this group as seemingly apart or marginalized from the mainstream. However, I use this term because it is one way of signifying this group in terms of its relation to the dominant groups in society. Furthermore, I recognize that it is not entirely appropriate to lump all minority identities into one group; each identity has its particular challenges, but for the sake of practicality and purposes of the current paper, the first task is to discuss how these minorities, *in simply not identifying with heterosexuality*, face discrimination which is exacerbated by anti-discursive abstinence-only education.

ignorance, which are at the heart of the challenges faced by these groups, are reflected in and give ground to the anti-discourse approach.

It is important to consider the social and communication skills that adolescents would—or would *not*—learn from programs formed by anti-discursive approaches. It is also important to think about whether an anti-discursive educational endeavor would—or would *not*—address the sexual challenges suffered by certain groups and if, in fact, this program lends itself to the proliferation of sexual inequality and disrespect toward sexual minorities. I argue that anti-discursive programs do reinforce the disadvantaged status of certain sexual groups, including women and sexual minorities. In contrast, a pro-discourse approach would help to rectify, clarify, and protect the interests of all sexual citizens.

3.3.1 Diminishing Pleasure, Constraining Desire, Disempowering Women

The rhetoric of danger and abuse outlined above illustrates one significant feature of anti-discursive sex education: substantive discussions about pleasure are de-emphasized or entirely omitted. Indeed, it would be contrary to the mission of anti-discursive sex education to make room for discussion of desire and pleasure. The primary goal of anti-discursive sex education is to set forth the precondition for being appropriately sexually active (*e.g.*, marriage), but the attainable goals within sex itself (*e.g.*, personal pleasure and protection) are precisely what are left out. Embedded within anti-discourse sex education methods is the notion that inclusion of anything enticing about sex would inevitably result in the failure of program, *i.e.*, for adolescents to choose anything beyond abstinence from sex.

This is an evolutionary offshoot from the belief that sexy talk is seductive. Although abstinence-only education is likely to cite bonding and “felt expressions of love” as reasons that

sex is valuable and special, notice that these feelings of pleasure are shared (presumably in the partnership of marriage, which is presumably heterosexual). These pleasures are not personal or individual. Learning dependency or association of pleasure with another decentralizes the sense of pleasure in one's own body and, as such, preserves the abstinence-only approach's mission of making sex something that occurs in a narrow range of acceptability. Abstinence-only education exalts sex as the fruits of a particular kind of union and promises that any other condition for its practice is dangerous and shameful. Discussions of pleasure in the personal sense, a pleasure one person takes in a particular range of acts, can in some ways remove the partner from the picture or at least shifts this other person from the center of one's pleasure. For instance, the normal, healthy, and beneficial activity of masturbation has no place in anti-discursive abstinence-only education. If masturbation is discussed with adolescents, then it will surely be enticing for its ease (the necessary conditions of masturbation are few) and for its promise of independent pleasure. The ostensible worry is that adolescents will become captivated by masturbation, which may then become a gateway to other, more risky sexual activities. Masturbation is hardly a new practice that must be taught to some adolescents and young adults at all, but the un-mentionability of this practice is part of a long history of cultural discouragement and may cause many to feel hesitancy or shame about having an intimate understanding of their bodies through personal pleasure. The notion of independent pleasure disrupts the dominant model of heterosexual marriage. It may help some individuals imagine being able to have pleasure that is not dependent on the proper construction of the union, but on the personal feelings of each participant.

On some level, the omission or de-emphasis of pleasure in anti-discursive sex education renders sexual acts as less about the phenomenology involved and more about how proper sex

satisfies certain conditions. This shift in focus is accomplished without questioning the standards that give rise to those conditions and the problems that result. Pleasure might be largely omitted from discussions of sexuality because a sense of pleasure is just assumed to go along with sex. While it is easy to pass off discourse about sexual pleasure as being superfluous or redundant, this assumption has certain negative implications for women. Entertainment media has perhaps mislead us into thinking that women have undergone a great sexual revolution in recent decades and their openness to talk about sex is indicative of this. Though women have made strides in the positive reclamation of their sexuality, the task is far from complete. Though pleasurable sensations may be immediate during the sex act, compelling evidence suggests that women, in particular adolescent girls, continue to experience confusion, shame, fear, and disembodiment with regard to sexual pleasure.

The sexual experiences of individuals must be analyzed in the context of the dominant ideologies of sex, gender and pleasure. Even in modern times, when people supposedly experience increased sexual freedom and expression and when exposure to sex is at its height, women's placement in sexual ideology reveals that the range of freedom is not uniform between men and women. A woman who admits to a sexual appetite, whether or not she acts on these desires, is perceived as wanton, improper, and "unladylike," which is to say sexual desire is not considered a proper expression of femininity while it is considered a perfectly natural, even requisite, expression of masculinity. This common understanding of the divergence of men and women's sexual appetites and roles is characterized as a "double standard," which is embraced by women as much as men.⁸² Men who engage in sex acts with various partners are perceived as

⁸² Susan Moore and Doreen Rosenthal, *Sexuality in Adolescence* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 141-142. See also: Caitlin Welles, "Breaking the Silence Surrounding Female Adolescent Sexual Desire," *Women & Therapy*, 28:2 (2005): 35.

acting on natural, biological drives and are commended for *fulfilling* a given role, yet women who behave similarly are disparaged and criticized as *neglecting* propriety. This double standard stems in part from the perception that women are objects of sexual desire and pleasure, but are not themselves sexually driven, which is to say they are not viewed as sexual agents or subjects unto themselves. It is telling that while there are a multitude of reproachful names to refer to a woman who “sleeps around” (*e.g.*, slut, loose, whore, and slag—many of which have equivalents in other languages), men are often exalted for copious sexual activities or patterned as sexual idols (*e.g.*, stud, the *man*, Casanova, and Don Juan) with few, if any, disparaging titles. As Mariamne Whatley observes, in this construction, women are not viewed as agents of their pleasure, but as accomplishments and objects to be possessed for male pleasure; women are detached from their desires and needs and are valued inasmuch as they help men “measure up in the eyes of other men. [If a woman’s] value declines, she can be discarded and new property acquired.”⁸³ This notion of property is an important facet of patriarchal dominance in which a woman answers to male sexuality or is a manipulated parcel of it, but is without her own agency and determination.⁸⁴

Ultimately, a woman’s outward displays of sexual desire not only make her vulnerable to a bad reputation, but also construct her sexuality as dangerously inviting trouble in the form of sexual harassment and rape. A woman who bares her sexuality is said to be “begging for it,” where “it” vaguely constitutes whatever response men, including sex offenders, choose to offer. To varying extents, women in the U.S. and abroad continue to be held *responsible* for sexual

⁸³ Mariamne H. Whatley, “Raging Hormones and Powerful Cars,” *Journal of Education* 170:3 (1998): 113-114.

⁸⁴ *E.g.*, Michelle Fine, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females,” *Harvard Educational Review* 58:1 (1998): 29-53; and M. David, “Sex Education and Social Policy,” in *Gender, Class and Education*, eds. Steven Walker and Len Barton, London: Falmer Press, 1983), 141-159.

assault, if not in legal terms then socially.⁸⁵ Though there have been both advocacy and civil evolution of the laws that protect the rights of the accuser/victim of sexual assault, a woman's sexual history, physical presentation, and mental condition at the time of the attack are typically brought into question and scrutinized for proof of her responsibility in luring danger upon herself (*e.g.*, her seductive clothing, being in the wrong part of town, intoxication) or in misleading the accused (*e.g.*, her willingness to kiss, touch, and remove clothes but not have sex). This persistence of holding women responsible for being the victims of sexual assault is one way in which the consequential weight of sex rests on women, *i.e.*, women's sexuality is constructed as an excuse for men's violation of social norms. It is important to consider how open sexual discourse, in revealing the unjust and unwarranted assumptions that construct women's sexual "culpability," can be a venue in which to question, challenge, and facilitate the reversal of women's sexual inequality. Discursive-supporting sex education may help to reform judicial policies and social norms such that assumptions regarding women's guilt in sexual assaults are preventing from being a part of the legal process.

Even if a woman engages in consensual vaginal intercourse, her desire is seen as risky under the always-looming threat of undesired pregnancy. Though presumably both men and women should wish to avoid unintended pregnancy, much of the burden to avoid arousal is shouldered by women who are not only held responsible for inciting men's desire, but also bear the responsibility of negative consequences, such as undesired pregnancy.⁸⁶ If a woman delivers a child, it is seen as her primary responsibility to raise the child into adulthood, whether her partner is present or not; even though she is often entitled to some form of financial support, a

⁸⁵ Bonnie Trudell and Mariamne H. Whatley, "Sex Equity Principles for Evaluating Sexuality Education Materials," in *Sex Equity and Sexuality in Education*, ed. Susan Shurberg Klein (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 310.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

woman is for the most part expected to contribute her time, energy, and daily attention to the child. Though contraceptives exist, it is not always easy for a women to understand how to obtain them, how to use them correctly, and how to get help paying for contraception if there is a cost. She is by and large held accountable for maintaining contraception. This accountability further amplifies her risks and raises the stakes of her sexual desire. Her desire is constricted, for if she acts on it as willingly as she would like, it seems inevitable that she would “get *herself* in trouble” or, from the male perspective, that some man would get “*her* (read: not himself) in trouble.” Either way, sexual arousal spells trouble for women.

It is important to note that the ideology cannot be explained by simply blaming men as deliberately and consciously seeking opportunities to oppress women. Such an accusation is misguided because it overlooks two important issues. First, women—as much as men—uphold and proliferate women-subordinating sexual ideologies. Second, men—as much as women—can resist women’s sexual inequality. Moreover, it is unproductive to consider the behaviors and presumed beliefs of men and women without also considering and analyzing the overarching ideological institutions that inscribe certain standards and notions in society. As Holland and her colleagues contend, ways of dealing with pleasure personally and relationally occur in the “context of an institutionalised heterosexuality which defines male dominance as normal, defines sexual intercourse in terms of men’s satisfaction and turns sexual encounters into potential power struggles.”⁸⁷

Deborah Tolman’s *Dilemmas of Desire*, an extensive and rich study of the narratives of adolescent women, brings to light how the suppression of desire manifests itself problematically for women. Women are aware of the social constructs that define and evaluate their sexuality

⁸⁷ Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Scott, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson, “Sex, Gender and Power,” *Sociology of Health & Illness* 12:3 (1990): 342.

and sexual behaviors, and yet are caught in the “double bind” of not knowing how to appropriately react to their own desire and to external pressures.⁸⁸ Ultimately, women sense that their value rests in the pleasure they provide men and understand that, in the calculus of power relations, their worth decreases if they are considered as abnormally aggressive or as not neatly belonging to just one or a very few partners. Yet in an attempt to satisfy even just one man, a woman still risks being labeled a whore for “going all the way.” All the while, the focus is not on her desire, but on the consequences of whether she acts in accordance with propriety. If there is not a focus on her sexuality, and if she herself does not have an opportunity to explore her own wishes, then her decisions are not mediated by her own knowledge, but by her beliefs regarding how she must conform.⁸⁹ As it often does in adolescents, confusion gives rise to fear—the fear of making the wrong decision, the fear of appearing weak or incapable, and the fear of disappointing friends and loved ones. As I have mentioned, the sense that one’s desire is mysterious, untrustworthy, and volatile is enhanced for women who are trapped in the double bind: to refuse to submit to another’s desire risks rejection, while to submit risks the damage of one’s reputation and respectability. In fact, women are triply damned if it is believed that even existing as sexy or voicing desire is a “weakness” as women then become targets of violence because such states or desires automatically undermine the “credibility of [a woman’s] refusal” of sex.⁹⁰

Ultimately, the lack of clarity, self-exploration, and reflection leads many women to become detached or disembodied from their sexuality during adolescence. If sexuality and desire are mysteries or seem dangerous, one seems better off to leave them alone. Moreover, if

⁸⁸ Deborah Tolman, *Dilemmas of Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 63.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95, 79.

one's sense of desire or pleasure is not raised as a legitimate consideration, one may not even realize that it is unexplored, and the exclusion of one's pleasure from sexual engagement begins to seem natural. Tolman discusses the narratives of several young women who describe sexual encounters that they remember as "painful," unwanted, "forced" or heavily pressured, "boring," and dissatisfying.⁹¹ The common denominator of these accounts is that the girls did not feel a strong desire to have sex and did not enjoy it with their partners, but did have sex and *continued* to do so after these encounters because they thought it was what they were supposed to do. Frequently, the adolescent girls who were forced to have sex were not outraged (or even sure) that they had been raped because they could not recall how engaged they were or what they felt at the time. The girls who did not feel as though they were forced, but were bored, never shared their dissatisfaction with their partners; they perceived male orgasm as the ultimate goal that brings an end to a sexual act. It is not expected that first or early sex will produce narratives of a virtuoso sexual performance or the greatest possible pleasure. It is not that these women did not feel a sense of enjoyment in some cases; yet their relative lack of interest demonstrates detachment. It also reflects their embrace of the notion that a woman is obligated to provide pleasure whether or not she herself is aroused and willing. Faking an orgasm is additional demonstration of the complex calculus in which the erasure of women's pleasure is itself erased by the illusion of pleasure. Furthermore, many accounts construct sexual encounters as starting with male arousal, having a considerable focus on penetration, and ending with male orgasm.⁹² All the while, a woman's role in this heterosexual encounter is to mediate arousal, penetration, and ejaculation.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 106, 172.

⁹² Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson, "Power and Desire," *Feminist Review* 46 (Spr 1994): 31.

It would seem that de-emphasizing pleasure in the sex education setting benefits neither gender, but it is particularly detrimental to women. Sexual pleasure for neither gender is, in fact, confined to genitals and orgasm, and it is unfair to claim that men already and always know about their desires. Still, in heteronormative contexts, men's pleasure is given primacy, and it must be acknowledged that this primacy places women in a subordinate position. We have seen that for women, this often results in confusion and trepidation regarding how they are to present themselves and behave sexually, though all the while they remain out of touch with the intuitions and feelings that should be integrated with their decision-making.⁹³

In having a better (though admittedly never perfect) sense of what they desire and do not desire, women can become more empowered as sexual agents and can resist being cast merely as passive objects of pleasure. Though power relations are never completely equal, *empowerment* does not necessarily entail having power over another (for control then becomes dependent on that particular person), but means having better knowledge of one's self in terms of being less inhibited by limits, hesitations, and uncertainties.⁹⁴ In having an *embodied* sense of desire and personal sexual pleasure, *i.e.*, in having their "material bodies realized" and made visible in the world, women take a crucial step toward empowerment.⁹⁵ Simply put, this is a strategy of bolstering confidence and investing in the positive, desirable consequences that can result from developing a firm sense of personal efficacy in sexual decision-making.⁹⁶ Beyond the effect on personal decision-making, an understanding of the importance of making women's pleasure visible and bolstering their agency may inspire more women and men to recognize and resist the

⁹³ Tolman (*ibid*), *Dilemmas of Desire*, 188. If adolescent girls are not "out of touch with" or ignorant of their feelings, then they are aware of feelings and have self-knowledge that is not integrated with their education or that, at worst, is at odds with what they are taught.

⁹⁴ Holland et al. (*ibid*), "Pressured Pleasures," 258-259.

⁹⁵ Holland et al. (*ibid*), "Power and Desire," 33.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Pearson, "Personal Efficacy, Self-Efficacy in Sexual Negotiation, and Contraceptive Risk among Adolescents," *Sex Roles* 54 (2006): 622.

prevalence of subordinating notions of regarding women primarily as objects of pleasure. A final accomplishment of increased discourse about pleasure would be the shared realization that men and women have more in common than in difference with regard to their human instincts and senses of desire.⁹⁷ Ideologies of gender that establish men as excusably sexually voracious and women as having only a responsive sexuality frame *neither* men *nor* women in terms of their potential to apply efficacious self-control; rather, a lack of self-control is emphasized.⁹⁸ A focus on personal sexual pleasure—accessible to and desired by both women and men—may prompt members of both sexes toward conscious acknowledgement of and resistance to such limiting gender ideologies.

Reversing the trend of the ignorance or misunderstanding of desire may be facilitated through means such as open and conscientious discourse in sex education. The setting and the time are appropriate for adolescent women to consider their desires, question the social constructions that influence their behaviors, and find ways of expressing themselves sexually and non-sexually; thus, discourse-supportive sex education is well-aligned with a continually developing sense of desire and standards of pleasure. Stereotypes are shielded when left unmarked and unexplored, but can be dismantled when they are challenged. Well-structured discourse not only encourages reflection on the part of the individual, woman or man, but also challenges socially-constructed notions, such as male sexual uncontrollability and the sexual objectification of women. At this formative stage, the time is ripe for both genders to begin appreciating their sense of pleasure and the value of recognizing the challenges that others face with regard to desire and sexual expression. It is overly-simplified and disrespectful to claim

⁹⁷ Trudell and Whatley (*ibid*), “Sex Equity,” 307.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 307.

that merely discussing pleasures and desire with students is enough to incite mass behavioral changes in the adolescent population.

Nevertheless, if the opportunity to consider sex and sexual pleasure is accompanied with effective guidance regarding protection and with a clear message that it is beneficial to abstain from sex until one feels confident in one's ability to negotiate a sex life, acknowledgment of the benefits and pleasure of sex can have several positive effects. Many of the adolescent girls in Tolman's study express confusion about what they have felt during their sexual encounters; in being confused about their mental and bodily willingness to respond to the sexual advances of their partners, the girls often consented or merely posed no resistance. In hindsight, perhaps they would not have been as willing to engage in sex since their pleasure was not an important focus of the sexual event. Being in touch with one's sexual desires and sense of genuine arousal is an important part of sorting out when one is truly willing to engage in sex and when one is not interested (*i.e.*, would likely want to refuse). Also, viewing contraceptives and prophylactics not merely as means of reducing the negative consequences of sex, but also in terms of how they may reduce anxiety (of negative consequences) and thus *enhance the possibility of enjoyment and pleasure during sex* may facilitate positive decision-making and improve use of these techniques. Being in touch with one's embodied sexuality can increase one's sense of personal value, agency, and empowerment. However, if pleasure and desire are unacknowledged, diminished, or rendered suspect in educational sexual discourse, then they remain shrouded in mystery or shame. Leaving desire and pleasure, which are primary motivations for sex, unexplored is unrealistic and undermines the credibility of the sex education program. Moreover, adolescent women will not receive the support and guidance that would help them to develop a sense of personal, welfare-enhancing, and non-male-oriented standards for engaging in

or refusing sex. Similarly, male students will not have an opportunity to explore how and why women are sexually objectified and disembodied from pleasure. Thereby, the disadvantaged sexual status of women is reinforced and perpetuated by anti-discursive sex education because no discursive measures are taken to facilitate the reversal their subordination.

3.3.2 Silencing, Shaming, and Suppressing Sexual Minorities

I maintain that silence can be a means of communicating ideas, though not always as clearly and effectively as spoken words. Interpretation does much of the work in making sense of silence, which relies on the use and abuse of tools such as ambiguity and vagueness. Silence can create an air of mystery, suggesting that something is either not known or, if known, is unspeakable. Silence can also stand as a refusal to accept or acknowledge a proposition or idea. Finally, silence can evince a lack of interest in or ignorance of a subject. Ultimately, the anti-discourse approach is very focused on the negative nature of sex by explicitly emphasizing its risks. Yet anti-discursive sex education provides little or no information about how to mitigate those risks or how to enhance pleasure and confidence in negotiating sexual encounters. Rather than balancing the dangerous consequences of sex and the things that make sex highly desirable and beneficial to human life, anti-discursive abstinence-only education often rashly casts sex as a stark, all-or-nothing choice: abstinence is the only means of protection and, should a individual who is not married choose otherwise, then he is on his own, as nothing—not knowledge, interpersonal skills, or a condom—stands between him and all the dangers of sexual activity. Of course, sex involves risks, but anti-discursive sex education cannot or will not say what they are, how to avoid them, who presents them, who does not, what alternatives exist to reduce risks, and whether or not the risk is the same for everything and everybody at anytime. Thus, anti-

discursive sex education creates an atmosphere of fear and paranoia that creates unhealthy perceptions of sex; the always-looming threat of victimization is a tool that keeps not only women in fear of their sexuality, but everyone else, as well.

Sex educators Bonnie Trudell and Mariamne H. Whatley analyze sex equity principles and means of improving sexuality education programs through the reduction of gender-bias and sexuality discrimination. Notable among the forms of bias they list in their evaluation frameworks are: invisibility (not acknowledging a sexual group), stereotyping (operating under assumptions about a group or describing a group in stereotypical terms), imbalance/selectivity (focusing on only certain topics for discussion while omitting or underemphasizing others), and fragmentation/isolation (marginalizing sexual groups in texts or in discussions).⁹⁹ The authors stress, as I do, that the presence of these elements in any sex education program creates an unwelcome and untenable environment that is detached from the reality of diversity and the principle of equality. The exclusion and subordination of people can occur without the use of a single statement made against them; *indirect* or *passive* methods which create unwelcome or threatening conditions can be just as effective in silencing people and marginalizing their interests.

Cris Mayo's thoughtful analysis of abstinence-only programs and its construction of the ideal adolescent as an abstinent heterosexual nicely lends itself to my contention that varying allowances of speech and silence can capitalize on a climate of fear and shame in order to perpetuate and re-inscribe these elements into an educational context. All abstinence-only programs clearly discourage any sexual activity, yet some go out of their way to underscore the unacceptability of specific activities. Though students are instructed to avoid anal sex in

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 305.

specific, the details of this particular sexual act are not discussed (in accordance with the anti-discursive abstinence-only approach) and particular reasons for risk (e.g. facilitated HIV introduction via rectal tearing) are either completely unidentified or are discussed to a very vague, abstract, or minimal extent.¹⁰⁰ Saying little of risk-mitigation and not being clear that the danger is seated not in the act *unto itself*, but in the risk of disease, creates a sense of the inevitability of harm, which does not bode well for encouraging the use of protection if attempted.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the parallel assumption created is that there is something frightful, dangerous, and even immoral, about anal sex—coincidentally (or perhaps not coincidentally), a hallmark of male homosexual intercourse. There is no way to tell for certain how this rhetorical strategy is received, but the implication that anal sex is “always wrong” is quite clear, and its associations with homosexuality are hard to miss. The subtle smuggling in of insinuations and stereotypes can be an influential and effective rhetorical tool of manipulation.

Mayo highlights two particularly problematic terms that have implied definitions, though they are often not defined clearly or thoroughly within the texts she examines. “Sex/sexual intercourse” and “sexual relationships” seem to be neatly, unquestionably demarcated in terms of heterosexuality.¹⁰² Within abstinence-only texts, such as those in Mayo’s analysis, one will find that sex, in any limited description permitted, is presumed to be (a) centered around the penis (which de-legitimizes the intimacy of lesbians) and (b) some form of penetration (thereby precluding other expressions of intimacy that do not involve penetration). It goes without saying that this model also makes no room for masturbation.

¹⁰⁰ Cris Mayo, *Disputing the Subject of Sex* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2004), 74.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 69, 74. See also: Trudell and Whatley (*ibid.*), “Sex Equity,” 307.

It might be said that, in obviating discussions of sexual identities other than heterosexuality, abstinence-only education is not intentionally seeking to discriminate, but is simply poorly-constructed or attempting to simplify its message toward a target “majority” audience of heterosexual adolescents. This is a weak excuse for its heteronormative bias. Although the anti-discourse approach would advocate that the most minimal amount of information be offered and, in the interest of economy, that it be related and directed to what is presumably the largest group of students (heterosexuals), such targeting is flawed because it assumes that only heterosexual matters are relevant to heterosexual students. Rather, the citizenship skills and virtues of a student (regardless of her sexual identity) would be better developed in an educational setting that allowed her an opportunity to explore the interests, needs, and relationships of others who comprise the diverse sexual citizenry, and not just her own. As Trudell and Whatley state, a sexuality education program must be sensitive and conscientious to diversity and attempt to avoid the erasure or marginalization of some groups. The denial of the presence of sexual minorities in the audience, as well as the relevance of diverse sexual issues, has an impact on all.

A commonly-criticized flaw of the abstinence-only program is that it already distances itself from two critical target-groups: the already sexually-active and those among that group who have experienced a sexually-transmitted infection. If an anti-discursive sex education programs exaggerates the element of risk and fear in sex, then those who are already sexually-active are stigmatized for antecedently deviating from abstinence. The already sexually-active have certain difficulty identifying with the strategy of abstinence that is central to abstinence-only education. Moreover, the stigmatization they experience may also make it difficult for them to perceive their sex educators as being concerned about them as much as with those students

who have not already engaged in sexual activity. Thus, the already sexually-active may be less inclined to form positive perceptions about the overall sex education program as credible and relevant. Indeed, it is these very students who need particular attention in being educated on how to make good sexual decisions that protect their health and well-being. Future abstinence (abstinence “from now on”) could certainly be encouraged as an excellent strategy for already sexually-active adolescents; however, their possible immediate sexual health needs, and the safer-sex measures that can protect the health of these students, should not be overlooked. Anti-discursive sex education does not suggest what one should consider if and when sex occurs, because to do so imagines that the educational audience is sexually-active. Anti-discursive sex education finds this sort of thinking too tempting. The perceived exclusion felt by the already sexually-active may instill a sense of hopelessness in them—that it is already “too late” for them to fit into the program’s assumption that being respected and healthy is seated in abstinence.

The potential shame of the sexually-active is amplified for those who have experienced a sexually-transmitted infection. Efforts should be made to reach out to these individuals to help them understand that a disease does not make them outcasts undeserving of respect, and moreover, that their encounter with a sexually-transmitted infection should give them increased motivation to use appropriate safer-sex measures correctly should they decide to engage in sexual activities in the future. Instead, anti-discursive sex education stigmatizes students who have experienced an infection by focusing on such people as vectors of disease who should be avoided. That is, those who have experienced an infection become walking examples of the dangers of sex, in the view of anti-discursive sex education, and are thus regarded as “second-class [sexual] citizens”; they become “the enemy” as opposed to young persons who need guidance and respect, for whom we should still have optimism regarding their future sexual

decision-making.¹⁰³ It is crucial to recognize that the *devaluing* or belittling of anyone’s sexuality—whether of women, sexual minorities, the already-sexually active, those who have experienced a sexually-transmitted infection, or anyone else—can have considerable negative effects on his or her perception of self-worth. A decreased sense of self-worth certainly does not provide one with much encouragement or incentive to protect oneself, whether by *abstinence or* through the use of other reliable means.

Silence can suggest that some things are taboo or irrelevant. A lack of discourse about sexual activity and safer-sex methods does a great disservice to the already sexually-active and those who have experienced a sexually-transmitted infection. Moreover, a lack of discourse about sexualities other than heterosexuality—indeed, the lack of attention to heterosexuality as a sexual identity—marginalizes many students and does not realistically reflect the nature of the diverse sexual community that exists in the world. It impugns sexual minorities as being outside the realm of relevant curricula and spurs hesitance to discuss their interests and needs alongside everyone else’s. As Dolores Grayson notes, homophobia keeps “boys and girls ‘in their place’ better than any written rule” against homosexuality. Adolescents police themselves and each other to resist viewing homosexuality or any other minority sexuality as positive; homophobia also reaches into institutions (such as youth education and leadership programs) and plays a similarly influential role.¹⁰⁴ That is, anti-discursive sex education has little discursive space to address minority sexualities and, if such sexualities are discussed, they are often disparaged or discouraged. Take, for instance, Mayo’s aforementioned analysis regarding how some abstinence-only programs particularly emphasize the avoidance of anal sex and construct the *act*

¹⁰³ Trudell and Whatley (*ibid*), “Sex Equity,” 314.

¹⁰⁴ Dolores A. Grayson, “Emerging Equity Issues Related to Homosexuality in Education,” in *Sex Equity and Sexuality in Education*, ed. Susan Shurberg Klein (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 175.

itself (presumably linked with male homosexuality) as representing dangerous and immoral sexual decision-making.

Whatley's framework for increasing sex equity in sex and sexuality education maintains the importance of eliminating *direct* and *indirect* means of exclusion and shaming. Together with Trudell, she contends that a fair program must take measures to eliminate

heterosexual assumptions... including de-emphasis on dating and marriage as outcomes for students, presentation of intercourse as only one of many acceptable forms of sexual expression, and recognition of homosexuality as a viable form of sexual expression for many.¹⁰⁵

The authors, echoing Mayo, understand that the assumed definitions of terms such as *sex*, *sexual intercourse*, *relationships*, and *marriage* are largely problematic and potentially confusing for adolescents who are developing perceptions about sexual identity (whether their reflections on sexual identity are personal or in other-regarding). By adolescence, some may already have a strong sense of their sexual identity, while others may have little or no developed sense other than an assumed heterosexuality. In my experience in being an adolescent and later working with adolescents, I have found that they are quite sensitive to criticism and so, in this formative stage of personality-work, many are careful to take note of even subtle suggestions of what people think of other people in terms of their behavior, personality, and identity; this is how adolescents (and adults) navigate the social terrain and align themselves with—or learn repulsion of—certain identities, including those of a sexual nature.

Though the homosexual community has made notable strides in “weakening the twin supports of the closet” in defeating many criminalization policies against homosexuality and in making the identity more visible in the public through leadership and positive advocacy, there is

¹⁰⁵ Trudell and Whatley (*ibid*), “Sex Equity,” 305, 307. I believe the authors would be willing to include other minority sexualities and not just homosexuality.

still considerable mystery, resistance, and stigma attached to this community.¹⁰⁶ Some people avoid discussing homosexuality not because they think it is wrong, immoral, or dangerous, but because they are not confident that they understand homosexuality and how to appropriately address it; this sentiment is, in part, a consequence of a lack of open discourse about (and with) sexual minorities. Many perceptions of sexual minorities are distorted and blurred through imprecise or unfavorable media such as popular entertainment in which, for example, homosexuality seems rarely to be taken seriously, but is viewed as an anomalous trait that fuels a character's funniness or curiousness. Misconceptions become settled when left unchallenged. As I have mentioned, although there is nothing necessarily homosexual about anal sex, the misconception that it represents male homosexual intercourse can be manipulated against the community indirectly when the *dangers* of anal sex are conflated with homosexuality. Also, the traditional connection of heterosexuality with marriage/civil union is being aggressively challenged in the U.S. and in many other places. The exclusion of an opportunity to discuss such fallacious equations demonstrates either ignorance on the part of anti-discourse sex education programs, or an agenda to render adolescents ignorant of such false assumptions and associated issues.

It is also important to note, as Steven Seidman does, that sexual minorities who have spoken out against the lack of attention and rights granted to them have been countered with accusations that they are after "special" rights. Seidman argues that the large "assimilationist" movement in the U.S. desires the equality and equity that is housed within principles of democratic citizenship and demand that the U.S. "live up to its promise of equal treatment for all

¹⁰⁶ Steven Seidman, "From Outsider to Citizen," in *Regulating Sex*, eds. Elizabeth Bernstein and Laurie Schaffner (New York: Routledge, 2005), 231.

of its citizens... [so that they all may] be a part of what is considered a basically good nation.”¹⁰⁷ The rights of sexual minorities, in these terms, are really just any citizen’s rights. As Seidman notes, assimilationists seek to reform, not revolutionize, current practices of the U.S., and, although they seek equal status for sexual minorities, some assimilationists do not actively voice objections and challenges to heterosexual dominance.¹⁰⁸ I maintain that equity in sex education discourse must not entail mere negative tolerance (*i.e.*, “if you do not have something nice to say, do not say anything at all”), but must include *balanced representation* in fair terms and contexts.¹⁰⁹ Given the inequality presently experienced by sexual minorities and women, sex education should pay explicit attention to such groups in order to counteract trends of ignorance and misunderstanding.

Regarding the notion of “fair terms,” Trudell and Whatley take care to note that it is unacceptable to marginalize information about sexual minorities or to contextualize them such that their segregation is distinct from the whole.¹¹⁰ Just as gender scholars have been critical of the use of terms like *lady doctor* (which assumes that the term *doctor* is always masculine unless the distinction of femininity is added), we must continue to defend against the use of terms such as *unmarried woman*, *non-heterosexual*, *gay marriage*, *gay sex*, and *lesbian mother*, all of which refer to dominant, expected standards to which sexual minorities are simply ancillary. Sex equity principles also defend against special sections of sex education curricula that cordon off “gay issues” where the word *gay* becomes a blanket term for everything that is not categorized as heterosexual. That is, although drawing a distinction between being “straight” and “gay” may help introduce some students to the notion that many diverse sexualities exist and have a

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

¹¹⁰ Trudell and Whatley (*ibid.*), “Sex Equity,” 305-306.

legitimate place in sexual culture and society, it is inappropriate to erase the distinctions that exist among sexual minorities. Often, identities like bi-sexuality and trans-sexuality are either overlooked or given less attention than male homosexuality. Open sexual discourse not only prepares adolescents to make fair and democratic deliberations, in general, about people who do not identify with heterosexuality, discourse also helps to draw students' attention to issues that have special implications for some sexual minorities (*e.g.*, domestic violence within lesbian couples is viewed as trivial and thus abusive partners rarely face appropriate punishment, the medical expenses of individuals seeking trans-sexual surgery are often viewed as non-legitimate and thus insurance coverage for such costs is extremely limited).

It is a mistake to grant that an anti-discourse program is acting equitably if it merely occasionally denotes or makes brief mention of sexual minorities. The real circumstances of many young people of varying sexual identities demand that proper discursive space be granted to them. Proper discourse is the fair and civil exchange of ideas, agreements, and dissensions. The simple presentation of information in a lecture-type setting is a modest step in a better direction for sex education in general, but the *process* of sharing and discussing ideas about sex and sexuality is a crucial element to instilling substantive understanding of sexual matters and is a key factor in the development of democratic sexual citizenship. Simply talking about the sexual challenges faced by women and sexual minorities is at least more than what an abstinence-only program typically allows; however, students must also have an opportunity to “*examine the ways in which prejudice manifests itself in our society... and understand the parallels between homophobia and other types of prejudice.*”¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Grayson (*ibid*), “Equity Issues,” 177-178. Emphasis in the original.

I should also note that discourse in the context of sex education cannot be used as a forum for ferreting out who does what, with whom, and when. Sexual education discourse should not be anyone's compulsory "coming out" event. Though adolescents should not feel ashamed about their sexual curiosity or their sense of their sexuality, a first step in establishing enriched sexual discourse is ensuring the physical and psychological safety of students. Ideally, students should be provided a physical and discursive space in which they may voluntarily engage in discussion with their peers and a compassionate facilitator. In reality, the world still presents threats of violence to sexual minorities, and such constraints on discourse must not be overlooked, even as they must also be viewed as a compelling reason to pursue positive social change through sex education. All students should be encouraged to believe that they will benefit from engaging in sexual discourse in a well-facilitated and respectful environment where they may find ways to express their thoughts and confusions. The scope of sexual discourse does not simply pertain to "local" activities and personalities, it also pertains to a greater understanding of the larger implications of respect and equality in terms of sexuality and public (political) decision-making.

3.4 CITIZENSHIP LESSONS

The previous sections address the notion that sexual discourse is dangerous to adolescents and should be avoided. The fears and prejudices that are rooted within these notions manifest themselves in the curricula of anti-discourse abstinence-only programs and give rise to ignorance and exclusion which further proliferate the sexual subordination of women and sexual minorities. The fear of inciting curiosity about pleasure through discourse leads to the omission of any

exploration of pleasure and desire; this may have a detrimental effect on a young woman in the class because she misses out on a valuable opportunity to recognize and explore her likely already-defective sense of sexual embodiment and, consequently, develop a sense of empowered agency. Instead, negative gender ideologies remain unquestioned and intact within her mind, as well as in the minds of many other women and men. Anti-discursive sex education also omits valuable discussions about the diversity of sexualities as well as the interests of sexual minorities and the challenges they face in a heteronormative culture. Not only might this exclusion foster a sense of unimportance and shame within a young homosexual adolescent, but also the tide of ignorance abstinence-only education fails to mitigate may follow him and other sexual minorities as they progress into adulthood. Ultimately, the factors that create difficulties for the groups discussed above are not merely individual problems, but ones that are created collectively by groups. Fortunately, this etiology of the difficulties suggests that groups of individuals who recognize the value of the ideas and positions of one another in relation to their own personal interests can help to dismantle the social constructions that otherwise perpetuate the difficulties.

One contention found within the anti-discourse position is that sexual discourse shapes sexual identities away from accepted models. For some this could mean that talking about sex undesirably encourages adolescents to become promiscuous; while sex education may shape the sexual behavior of adolescents, it alone does not inspire them to become sexually-active and, if they do, it does not compel them to become sexually irresponsible (indeed, with proper sex education, the result may be the opposite). For others, this contention might imply that discourse about sexualities will create more homosexuals; again, although sex education might help adolescents to develop a better sense of their sexuality, it does not manufacture identities for them. Anti-discursive sex education is deeply flawed and problematic because it fails to address

the problematic perceptions that exist with regard to sex and sexuality—women are sexy but are not sexual agents, homosexuality is just a marginal peculiarity, and adolescents cannot be trusted with their own sexuality. Abstinence-only programs make virtually no effort to acknowledge these issues and to seize the valuable opportunity that adolescent sex education affords to enact positive change.

I am not arguing that sexual discourse does not affect identities and shape attitudes. Indeed, I hope that it *is true* that discourse about sexuality may be able to positively enhance adolescents' sense of sexual identity while developing their attitudes of respect and tolerance. That is, sexual discourse is not a frightening and destructive force, but one that may do significantly beneficial work in *facilitating* sexual citizenship-building. The concept of democratic citizenship entails that an individual's interests, needs, and right to freedom of expression be valued and defended while civil liberties and protections are in mutual concession with other citizens. Thus, democratic citizenship is a promising framework in which to consider issues regarding sex and sexuality because the challenges facing women and sexual minorities stem from an inchoate sense that people must be treated as respected equals even in the context of sexuality. If the concept of democratic sexual citizenship contains the fundamental aspects needed to help reverse trends of discrimination and disrespect and if the vehicle of citizenship-building is discourse, then the task (or, responsibility) at hand is to instill this notion duly in young people through timely educational discourse.

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey contends that “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience,” and the processes of thinking and reflecting about oneself in relation to others “is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which

[have kept people] from perceiving the full import of their activity.”¹¹² I read Dewey as arguing that democracy, an inspiring idea, only takes flight when citizens are willing to engage in the process of reciprocal conversation and thereby transcend the “barriers” that sometimes blind people to their genuine connectivity and impact on one another. Discourse is central to citizenship-building because it is the vehicle by which people are able to have access to knowledge of the ideas and positions of others and develop the capacity of recognizing and respecting those experiences.¹¹³ He further argues that a lack of the “free and equitable intercourse” emerging from a varied range of positions and ideas arrests the “diversity of [intellectual] stimulation,” which, in turn, fails to exercise and “challenge thought.”¹¹⁴ Underprivileged or minority groups must have as much opportunity for expression as those who are at an advantage if they are ever going to be able to bridge mutual understanding and respect for one another. Discourse can be a place that shapes more unified and civil populations; or, if one-sided or absent altogether, it can be a venue which “educates some into masters [and] others into slaves.”¹¹⁵ The only lesson that might be learned by those who are denied proper discursive space, in what should be a democracy, is that their voices are devalued and considered ineffectual and risky. While this chilling effect may be resisted by some, it has considerable consequences on the development of a properly-formed democracy and the trust citizens have in democratic ideals. Democratic discourse is not only a place to find similarities and gather others’ perspectives, but also an opportunity for one to challenge what is unjust. Democratic discourse also inspires others to resist prejudice and oppression; such discourse is powerful

¹¹² John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 87.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

because it is also a space for learning how to organizing resistance, build unity, and implement change.

By and large, people cannot fully appreciate the substance of democracy until they are able to associate with it directly; as with many other mental and behavioral faculties, humans become better at understanding and *doing* democracy with guidance, support, and practice over time. For this reason, schools are an advantageous place to implement democratic education and build positive notions of citizenship in various aspects including the sexual life. Schools not only contain the material resources necessary to carry out educational endeavors, with conscientious effort, they can also provide a well-facilitated and safe venue for discursive exchange. The most important advantage of the public-school educational setting is that it is already a gathering place for young people. Abstinence-only approaches squander these opportunities to enhance students in their sense of sexual agency and citizenship. While discourse may be a lifelong process, adolescence is an indispensable time to provide instruction on civil living and its goals. This is also a good time to begin allowing students entrance into the practices of democratic citizenship. Providing students with a comprehensive sex education program that provides them with appropriate, adequate, and relevant information as well as a venue in which they may engage in democratic discourse on sexuality (and the multiplicity of perspectives, identities, inquiries, attitudes, and challenges therein) is a valuable and beneficial investment in the construction of a stronger, healthier, happier, and more equitable nation of responsible and respectful citizens.

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