UTAH'S SEX EDUCATION CONTROVERSY: IS IT RELEVANT TODAY?

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Utah’s policy of abstinence only sex education is a contentious issue. Some worry that, if not taught in school, young people will not obtain accurate information on sex, contraceptives, and sexually transmitted diseases. Others fear that teaching safe sex will encourage adolescent sexual activity breaking norms of society. Currently, Utah sex education excludes discussion of contraceptive use, homosexuality, and sex outside of marriage. However, with today’s culture of communication and information accessibility providing information on all matters including sexual health, is policy concerning sex education even a relevant concern?

Through qualitative, open-ended interviews, this project looks at how young people in Utah learn about sexual health, from whom they learn, and how accurate and complete the information they gain is. The forty interview participants were Utah High School graduates, ages 18 to 27, equally representing both sexes. Interview responses were noted by hand, and answers were coded for quantitative analysis reflecting the overall perspective of participants. The majority of participants felt their formal sex education had been largely unhelpful, with courses focusing mostly on anatomy, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI’s), and abstinence and fidelity. Outside of classes, participants reported getting the most information from parents, friends, and the Internet. Parents were recalled as mostly discussing health information, condom/contraception use, and maturation; friends talked about health information, relationships, and sex; and most participants mentioned looking up health information and terms on-line. All participants reported gaining the majority of their information from outside sources, but varied in what information they got from which sources, the breadth and depth of information, and their ease of finding accurate information.

This project has greater implications concerning what is taught in Utah sex education classes. Sex education classes could be utilized to foster positive discourse surrounding sexual health, to encourage student questions, and to teach students research methods and provide them with resources for answering future questions. The information from this study may help educators to structure sex education courses in such a way as to fill students’ gaps in knowledge and engage students in discussions that are appropriate and relevant for today’s changing society.