Transcending Traditional Approaches to Sexuality Education: A Case Study in Communicating, Constructing, and Defining Sex-Positive Sexuality Education

Jessica A. Nodulman

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Abstract
Guided by a social-ecological approach to health, this study explored a new approach to sex education--sex-positive sexuality education (SPSE). A collective case study was completed on three organizations that utilize a sex-positive approach to sexuality education--Good Vibrations, Scarleteen.com, and The National Sexuality Resource Center's Summer Institute. Good Vibrations is an adult sex toy retailer, Scarleteen.com is an adolescent sexual health website, and the Summer Institute is an academic institute for scholars and practitioners of sexuality studies. Using qualitative methods of observations, interviews, and textual analysis, this study explains how sex-positive sexuality education is constructed, communicated, and defined. Despite studying three disparate organizations in regards to their context and audience, all three organizations enacted sex-positive sexuality education in similar ways. A three-tiered definition was constructed to understand this approach. The first tier consists of a three-element model, Enactment of Sex-Positive Sexuality Education. This model explains the three elements--core values, physical environment, and communication strategies--that were seen across the dataset as necessary for enacting sex-positive sexuality education. The second tier is composed of relational pairs. These relational pairs--inclusivity and normalization, pleasure and health and safety, accessibility and a critical approach, open environment and agency, and clarity and comfort--highlight how within a sex-positive approach to sexuality education, similarities and differences work in tandem. Finally, these pairs inform the third level, a dynamic that sets sex-positive sexuality education apart from other approaches to sex education. The model of SPSE is unique from other approaches to sex education--abstinence-only and comprehensive--because those approaches stay muddled in tensions over appropriate values, contexts, content, and communication strategies. SPSE however, embraces the natural tensions inherent in sexuality education. This dynamic co-existence of multiple concepts forms a holistic approach to sexuality education. Thus, SPSE transcends approaches that enforce an either/or or wrong/right dichotomy and instead brings together divergent perspectives in an all-inclusive approach to sexuality education. This study contributes to academic scholarship and public health initiatives because it offers a definition of sex-positive sexuality education and concrete examples of this approach in practice. Also, it benefits sexual health communication scholarship because it suggests the centrality of communication to what SPSE is and how it functions. Finally, this study provides research on a new approach to teaching sex education that may be able to help improve our nation's sexual health.

Language
Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Sex-positive CSE can play a crucial role in acknowledging a greater diversity of sexual practices, and in challenging heteronormativity. In doing so, it offers meaningful content to adolescents and young people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and provides examples of sexual practices with decreased risks to health or of unintended pregnancy, and which offer equal pleasure potential for all partners involved.