

Well That's the Way We've Always Done It: Preaching Abstinence in Schools

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Introduction

Children often develop and mature in direct response to the stories they hear growing up. Hindman and Yan (2015) stated many school districts and many political groups vote in favor of abstinence-only sexual education within public schools. Schools have taught this biblical masterplot of waiting to have sex until marriage to students across the nation. However, when students do engage in sexual actions at young ages the school system neglects student's best interest and leaves students uneducated regarding STIs, at risk of misinterpretation of sex in the media, and uneducated regarding safe sex (Bute & Jensen, 2011). In this paper, I will discuss the influences of the abstinence-only masterplot in comparison to the way sex is taught in school and how this conflicts with the current media portrayal of sex. I will convey the consequences of this narrative incoherence of abstinence-only sex education and media portrayal of sexual activity in reference to scholarship as well as a current sex education curriculum from Austin Independent School District (AISD). I will also briefly address, through scholarship, the various outcomes for adults of abstinence-only sex education taught during adolescence to emphasize the need for coherence when discussing sexual education in adolescence.

Abstinence-Only Masterplot

Abbott (2008) defined masterplot as "stories that we tell over and over in myriad forms...that connect vitally with our deepest values, wishes, and fears" (p. 46). The abstinence-only masterplot surfaces from biblical teachings. In these biblical stories, characters learn the importance of waiting to have sex until marriage and saving themselves for only one person. This narrative has trickled down in history and has reinforced the heteronormative discourse as

well. Due to the nature of the abstinence-only argument specifically focusing on heterosexual relationships, I will not discuss homosexual relationships in this paper as a limitation.

Jenson (2008) described how the practice of strategic ambiguity when discussing sex in public locations allows a conversation about sex to surface without revealing any educational or helpful information. For students to experience a conscious effort from the school system to minimize the amount of knowledge spread regarding sex creates a detrimental learning environment for students. Foster (2012) noted student's increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases when students go uneducated regarding sexual behaviors. Risks of disease remain present in students' lives. However, many individuals believe abstinence-only education still should remain the prominent avenue of teaching regarding sex (Hindman & Yan, 2015).

The abstinence-only masterplot has circulated in history for many years (Jensen, 2008). Since the 19th century, society has preached social purity, threatened social images with the consequences of having premarital sex, and associated sex with disease and danger. Historically, Jensen (2008) commented, societies practiced silence when discussing sexual activity, the law as well as citizens aided in enforcing the silence to "protect children from obscenity" (p. 403). This masterplot has transitioned from religious teachings and historical practices into school curriculum and school districts have not moved to shift curriculum away from abstinence-only teaching. Manning (2017) supported this research by noting the tendency for children who were taught abstinence-only practices to still engage in sexual activity prior to marriage. Manning (2017) stated the children taught abstinence simply participated in sexual activity later in adolescence compared to children not educated about sex from an abstinence-only approach.

Scholars (Manning, 2017; Suleiman, Lin, & Constantine, 2016) have also discussed the influence of parents on children's sexual education knowledge. Many families who teach sex

education at home also tend to gravitate toward an abstinence-only method of teaching. Families who practice Judaic Christianity also teach children from the point of view of practicing purity and attempt social control over their children (Manning, 2017). Teaching children purity can delay when children engage in sex, however, in defiance of the abstinence-only masterplot, those adolescents, on average, still engage in sex before marriage. Parents have the opportunity to teach their children about sex, yet even with this chance to inform children, parents face the obstacle of understanding sexual health themselves (Suleiman, et al., 2016). Suleiman et al. (2016) also described how parents have the potential to not fully understand sex education materials intended for aid in teaching children about sex and sexual activity. If schools do not fulfill their obligation to provide students an adequate sexual education course and parents struggle to understand at home sex education materials, children have few opportunities to learn from a trusted adult in a space where they can openly inquire and receive a well-rounded education.

Media Influence

In addition to the heavy impact of schools on children and their sexual knowledge, the media also greatly influences children and adolescents' perception of sexual behaviors. The media tends to glorify sex and often adolescents turn to media to teach them about sex when other resources fail to provide adequate information (Pinkleton, Austin, Chen, Cohen, 2012). The media, without a doubt, glorifies sexual activity of almost every kind. The majority of movies and television shows portray sexual footage, and "only 13% of...programming portray[s] risks and responsibilities associated with sexual behavior" (Pinkleton et al., 2012, p. 461). This unsurprising statistic does not raise alarm when considering television as a source of entertainment. However, when considering television as a resource for adolescents to learn

sexual behaviors, activities, and social norms, the percentage of programs that omit responsible and safe sex discussions cause more harm than good. In regard to informing youth who rely on media for sexual education Pinkleton et al. (2012) discussed the low level of media literacy among youth who engage in sexual activities. Without sufficient media literacy, between abstinence-only teachings in school and promotion of all sexual behaviors in the media as good, youth have no opportunity to learn how to have sex responsibly or how to avoid risks.

Scholars (Jensen, 2008; Pinkleton, et al. 2012) have argued that media has a heavy influence on viewer's sexual actions and behaviors. The media focuses on pleasure, fun, and displays a carefree reflection on sexual behaviors and actions. Exposure to this display of sex and showing adolescents consequence-free situations can prevent those children from seeking out adults to ask questions or voice concerns because those children view what they see in the media as truth (Manning, 2017). Manning (2017) also stated that people will identify and align with media that reflects individual values. Therefore, if the media portrays promiscuous irresponsible sex which bears no consequences, adolescents, with prematurely developed brains and ideals of indestructability, will identify with a nonconsequential lifestyle and can fall, vulnerably, to the practices perceived on television.

According to Manning (2017) and Suleiman, et al. (2016) the media influence could encourage sex before marriage whether or not parents have taught children to practice abstinence. However, the detriment arises when children do engage in sexual behaviors after having only received abstinence education and these adolescents do not know how to engage in sexual activities safely and responsibly. Pinkleton et al. (2012) discussed the importance of media literacy in order for adolescents to appropriately understand mediated messages regarding sex, but if schools only teach abstinence (Bute & Jensen, 2011), parents teach abstinence

(Manning, 2017), and the media teaches irresponsible sex (Pinkleton et al., 2012) students have a strong disadvantage when attempting to learn appropriate information regarding safe sex, responsible sex, and children have no platform to inquire about sex.

Narrative Incoherence and Reflections on Adulthood

Irresponsible sex in the media (Pinkleton et al., 2012), primarily abstinence-only sex in schools (Bute & Jensen, 2011), and abstinence teachings at home (Manning, 2017) create a gap in potential knowledge for adolescents. Children lack exposure to any real, educational information regarding sex and this deprivation of knowledge results in a narrative contestation. Adolescents and children in school receive no concrete information in regard to how they should act if they choose to participate in sexual activity before marriage. However, Wiley (2012) has provided concrete evidence that students from at least 13 years old to high school are having sex.

Historically, Jensen (2008) discussed the ways society framed sex as dangerous and sinful. However, as time progressed, and television began to glorify sexual activities (Pinkleton et al., 2012) discussions regarding sex became taboo and public spaces addressed sex with strategic ambiguity (Jensen, 2008). In result of addressing sex ambiguously or with silence, a large disconnect appears for adolescents. Schools and parents, as well as media, provide youths with two drastically different narratives regarding how they should or should not behave sexually. Resultantly, adolescents questioning sex, in any way, have no single plot to live out. The two roads presented to them diverge drastically and educational systems fail to provide students with any concrete knowledge regarding either path.

Bute and Jensen (2011) consider “human beings...natural storytellers” (p. 214). Stories, especially masterplots, provide people with a predetermined script and narratization to live out. However, the abstinence-only masterplot, which has not evolved regarding the values or

reasoning behind its historical origins, directly contrasts with what children see on television. This inconsistency of narratives to live out, and plots to follow, results in confused and uneducated students. Society asks adolescents to perform two radically different stories, yet education systems fail to emphasize the positives and negatives of each situation (Hindman & Yan, 2015). This knowledge gap, caused by abstinence-only education, leads adolescents to turn to television and internet for information regarding sex and the disintegrated, potentially confusing, information found between mediums has a low likelihood of providing accurate or reliable knowledge (Hindman & Yan, 2011; Pinkleton et al., 2012; Suleiman et al., 2016).

When adolescents move on to adulthood, many face uncertainty and regret in regard to their adolescent sex lives (Bute & Jensen, 2011). However, people could avoid negative evaluations when reflecting on the lived narratization of their sex lives if the school system could universally inform students of the risks, benefits, and appropriate practices revolving around sexual behaviors and actions. Bute and Jensen (2011) stated schools attempt to offer students education regarding sexual behavior so they are equipped to make well-informed decisions when faced with sexual behavior choices. However, with the majority of schools focusing on abstinence-only education in contrast with media encouraging unhealthy sex, the drastically diverse narratives adolescents have the choice to follow creates an incoherence in decision making and students do not have a single masterplot which they can follow.

Conclusion

Many scholars (Bute & Jensen, 2011; Jensen, 2008; Manning, 2017; Pinkleton et al., 2012) have discussed the influence society has on youth in regard to sexual behaviors. Scholars (Jensen, 2008; Foster, 2021; Hindman & Yan, 2015) have also argued abstinence-only education does not benefit students. In addition, Manning (2017) described how children will engage in

premarital sex even if parents and schools pass down the abstinence masterplot to children. When parents do choose to teach their children purity and encourage abstinence, this often simply delays when the child engages in premarital sex but does not prevent premarital sex. If children will practice sexual behaviors regardless of being taught abstinence, schools should take the responsibility of giving children the opportunity to learn about safe sex, consequences of unhealthy sex, and accurate information on the various ways to use protection and prevent STIs in order to combat the incoherent messages children receive currently.

Many schools, especially conservative schools, still teach abstinence-only sex (Hindman & Yan, 2015). However, some school districts, such as AISD, have begun to incorporate other material into the curriculum. Wiley (2012) described the ideal sex education curriculum as that which “covers abstinence as [the] first and best choice for youth, in addition to healthy relationships, boundary setting, anatomy, sexually transmitted infections, condoms, contraception, and unintended pregnancy” (p. 30). Although Wiley (2012) depicted school districts, such as AISD, as gradually gravitating toward administering a more coherent narrative, one which matches what students see in the media, the focus remains rooted in the masterplot: abstinence.

There remains a disconnect between the masterplot of abstinence and the media portrayal of sex in the lives of adolescents. This incoherence results in adults facing uncertainty and regret when reflecting on their sex lives (Bute & Jensen, 2011). In order to avoid this narrative contestation presented to adolescents and provide them with one coherent plot to follow in their sex lives, the connotation of sex and sex education must shift from abstinence-only to a well-rounded, inclusive, coherent curriculum which addresses everything from safe sex and

preventing STIs to consensual sex to media literacy in order for students to obtain appropriate education to make well informed decisions in their lives when partaking in sexual behaviors.

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