

Spring 2017

# The Student Experience of Sexual Education in Maine Public Schools

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## Recommended Citation

Nevins, Grace and Johnston, Michael, "The Student Experience of Sexual Education in Maine Public Schools" (2017). *Thinking Matters*. 70.

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## Abstract

The modern sexual climate of the United States often contradicts the moral values taught to young people in sexual education classes in the public school system. Studies have shown that the traditional “abstinence only” method, which was made popular during the 1990’s, was ineffective in the prevention of young pregnancy and the reduction in sexually transmitted diseases (Schwarz, 2007). Teenagers are increasingly exposed to more sexualized content through a variety of media; however, this often contradicts the messages they receive in schools, particularly the “abstinence only” educational model.

## Introduction

In 2012, the state of Maine developed new and more comprehensive sexual education expectations for high schools, encouraging schools to teach several different methods of contraception. However, little research has been done on the impact and meaning of this curriculum change. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of adolescents, aged 15-19 years old, enrolled in the Maine public school system. The findings of this study will contribute to the knowledge base and inform curriculum development that addresses the needs and experiences of teens who are grappling with choices around sexual activity.

## Questions/Objectives

- What was the experience within the classroom and with the teacher?
- What was the experience in the greater school community?
- What was the level of comfort and knowledge with the subject?
- From where did the student gain the most information on the subject: school, family, peers, partners, media, etc.?

## Methods

### Social Constructionism Theoretical Framework

How sexuality is continuously constructed and reconstructed through social processes and practices, which shape our understanding of our bodies, sexual behaviors and sexual identities (Seidman, 2003).

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to personally interview participants, identified through snowball sampling. Each interview was conducted in person and lasted under an hour. Data analysis consisted of careful evaluations of each individual interview leading to the identification of meaning statements and common themes.

### What was missing

“They leave stuff out, I mean it’s a big issue about like sex, there’s more to it. It’s more than just having sex, there’s emotions and how you feel about”

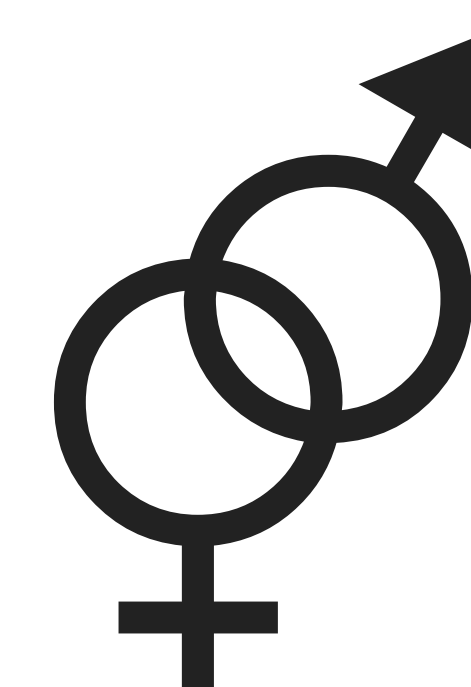
### CONSENT

### Negative Classroom Atmosphere

“Didn’t really get the chance to learn much because everyone was being immature”

### Classroom Atmosphere: Fear of asking Questions

“They would assume something was wrong but you really just don’t know the answer and want to because it’s important”



### Where I learned Instead

“If I had questions I looked things up myself, I didn’t need other people to make it weird”



### School Atmosphere

“It was not a thing to be talked about inside the building for around teachers”

## Results

Through phenomenological data analysis four major themes arose:

- 1) What was missing
  - Students expressed a lack of diverse information concerning sexual health options available to them, as well as information taught with and about the opposite sex.
- 2) Negative classroom atmosphere
  - Classrooms were reported to be uncomfortable, to include disruptive peers, and to be taught by unapproachable teachers, resulting in students feeling awkward.
- 3) Where students gained their information Instead
  - Most sexual education was found to be done at home, with a healthcare provider, or through the student’s internet research, as opposed to in the school. Students explained they were seeking safety and anonymity by doing so.
- 4) The larger school atmosphere
  - Students expressed a lack of resources in the greater school community, including available adults to answer questions, resulting from a larger a culture of shame around sexual health and behavior.

## Discussion

Our analysis found that some content areas, including human development and STD’s, were being covered within the current public school curriculum, as set out by the National Conference of State Legislators (2016). However, school curriculum and atmosphere seem to have not improved in the areas of communication, conflict resolution, and individual responsibility since Title 22 was revised, contradicting the original goal of the legislative change (2015.) Family planning seems to have been introduced in some cases, but failed to meet student needs and expectations.

We found there was not only a lack of communication about sexual health, but students felt discouraged about their learning experience and wished for a more open and informative experience, also in line with previous findings (Chabot, Shoveller, Johnson, & Prkachin, 2010). Additionally, several students also expressed a feeling that within their school community at large, asking questions or seeking resources was discouraged and shameful.

Previous research found that students who saw their school-based sexual education as lacking looked towards their peers (Wong, Chan, Boi-Douku, & McWatt, 2012). However, our student population was found to exclusively seek out resources such as the internet and their families when looking to fill the void caused by uninformative and incomplete sexual education. These students found their peers to be awkward and unreliable sources of information.

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### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the IRB for giving us the opportunity to conduct this research study, as well as Professor Gerstenblatt for guiding us through the process. We are grateful to the University and all we continue to gain while here.