

Spring 2015

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Recommended Citation

Nelson, Seraphina (2015) "Youth, Sexuality, and the Cost of Archaic Modes of Thinking," *ESSAI*: Vol. 13, Article 29.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol13/iss1/29>

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Youth, Sexuality, and the Cost of Archaic Modes of Thinking

by Seraphina Nelson

(English 1102)

The inhabitants of the United States of America have quite mastered the art of contradiction. News anchors blame violence in the media for acts of violence while all they cover on their stations are different violent crimes. Obesity and health problems are highly feared and complained about, yet fast food joints continue to thrive. Again with the media, shows and advertisements aimed towards adolescents are extremely hyper-sexualized, yet in the “real world” teenage sexuality is taboo and corrupt. Contradiction at its finest. We tell young girls not to engage in sexual activity until later in life, yet we let them be spoon-fed sexuality everywhere they turn, thanks to the media (Laidlaw 44). Sexuality is everywhere we as humans turn, from the media and peers to our natural instincts, it is unavoidable to face.

If this is the case, then why are high school health educators highly stressing abstinence? You can tell teens, “Don’t smoke weed. Don’t drink. Don’t have sex.” Will they really listen? Has the illegality of drugs stopped people from using them? The answer is no. Laws can always be made, and opinions can always be stressed, but when it comes down to it, people (especially teenagers) will do what they want to do.

Having this known as basic knowledge, American youth needs to be taught safe sex, and not abstinence. No matter how strongly health educators and parents believe in abstinence, it is simply an absent minded and inconsiderate way of avoiding to formally teach students what they need to know (Wiley 165). If safe sex is taught to American adolescence and abstinence is not the main concern encouraged, more teenagers will use condoms therefore highly decreasing the number of teenage pregnancies and STDs, while also ridding of the shame, guilt, and fear that teenage girls suffer from over sexuality.

In 2013, statistics from The National Campaign for America were updated on teenage pregnancies. They calculated that the number of births by teenage girls ages 15-19 in 2013 were at the whopping number of 273,105 births, making that come out to 27 births for every 1,000 girls in the U.S. (The National Campaign). In a basic sexual education class, fear is the number one strategy that health educators use. Scary pictures of genitals infected with STDs are strewn across a large screen for all of the students to see the close-up details. In my personal sexual education class in high school, along with the scary STD slideshows, we were shown a graphic video of a woman giving labor, primarily shown in hopes to “scare” the females of never wanting to become pregnant (or have sex). It’s safe to say that teenage pregnancies have become more so of a “girl’s issue” than it is a boy’s problem. Although the male is the one impregnating the female (and not using a condom), it is considered a problem of the female, since it is her body and her fault for “letting it happen”.

Yes, parents of teenage boys stress to their sons not to get girls pregnant, but it is quite obvious that they do not have to face nearly as much of the disapproval, torment, and shame as the female must deal with. As mentioned in C.J. Pascoe’s book: *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, Pascoe observes that teachers and parents try to control the hyper-sexual minds of teenage boys (which is quite impossible) all while trying to prevent teenage girls from becoming pregnant (Pascoe 26). By parents and educators trying to de-sexualize teenage boys’ minds while preventing girls from becoming pregnant, they are actually creating sexual tension by forming a *difference* in the two genders, when really, sex is sex. Both male and females partake in sexual activity, and both are responsible for the outcomes and safety of doing so.

A proper example of the media “teaching” the consequences of teenage pregnancy is a television show called “*16 & Pregnant*” which was followed up with another show called “*Teen Mom*”. A recent study on the exposure to the television shows found that 83.7% of their research participants had seen “*16 & Pregnant*” at least once and 80% of participants have seen “*Teen Mom*” at least once. The creators of these shows aimed to show teens the negatives of becoming pregnant in high school, but fails to do so by glamorizing the girls of the show, making them somewhat of celebrities (Wright, Randall, Arroyo 51). Many [older] people who have seen and heard of this show believe that it is glamorizing teen pregnancy by making these girls into celebrities. Although the creators may not have had that direct intention, they should have guessed it was bound to happen by airing the show on MTV, home of “*Jersey Shore*”, which is a perfect example of placing fame upon people who by all means do not need/deserve it. By putting shows like “*16 & Pregnant*” and “*Teen Mom*” on MTV for teens to watch and fan-girl over, it is in no way properly educating the American youth on proper safe sex, and instead shoving fear down their throats and into their molding minds.

This is why teaching American youth safe sex is such a necessary tool in reducing teenage pregnancies. When parents and educators stress to students that sex is a big deal and **MUST** be done with someone you love, they are covering only the ethical/moral views of sex and completely disregarding the logical information that needs to be provided (Wiley 164/166). When educators start teaching students about safe sex (i.e. providing and teaching how to properly use condoms) then they can cover the scary side effects that can very easily occur if measures of safe sex are not used. A proper and formal way of educating students on safe sex to prevent pregnancy would be first off, to teach both male and female students of **ALL** forms of birth control (pill, condoms, shot, IUD). It is also important for health educators to educate the students of what can happen if birth control is not used during intercourse (pregnancy, STDs) but to do so in a way that is not emphasizing fear as their main teaching method. Lastly they should state common views on choosing sexual partners (always better with someone you really care about, **NO MEANS NO** [rape education for teenage boys]).

A proper and highly considerable aspect that should be included in high school sex education is rape/sexual assault prevention. Rape has always been considered a “woman’s issue”. On any website or any research in general when you search for “women’s issues” rape is always a key point that comes up. It is astounding that this has always been a concern for women, women are always told to be careful, watch out, watch how you dress, don’t drink too much, when really the problem at hand is most of the time a man’s issue. Men are the ones committing rape and sexual assault, so why are women taught to fear it and prevent it by all means? Young men **NEED** to be taught the psychological, physical, and overall traumatizing effects that rape and sexual assault can have on a female (or other males, for that matter). Many schools will occasionally have guest speakers and assemblies where dating violence and sexual assault are discussed, but that should not be the only time they are educated on it. I believe for it to make an actual difference it would have to be incorporated into the sex ed., program, and discussed in a logical and representative way.

Speaking again of the contradiction of America and teaching youth about sex education comes the issue of abortion. Parents and teachers do not want their high school students to become pregnant, plain and simple. While high schools continue to teach abstinence-only and abstinence-plus programs (mostly being in southern states where abstinence is mostly taught) is it just a coincidence that the southern states of America have the highest rate of teen pregnancies (The National Campaign)? Or is it because right wing conservatives who believe abortion is murder mostly occupy the southern states? These statistics are something to widely consider for health educators still teaching abstinence.

Speaking of the southern states not properly teaching students sexual education, a recent STD outbreak in a Texas High School has occurred, and (hint, hint) they teach abstinence-only to their students (Grenoble 1). 1 in 15 of the roughly 300 students at Crane Independent School District have contracted chlamydia, and it is clearly not just a coincidence that the school they attend happens to

overlook teaching safe sex (Grenoble 1). This is not an issue of the students, but the ENVIRONMENT of which they are being taught in. Superintendent Jim Ramage of the Crane Independent School District defended their teaching of abstinence only programs by stating "...if kids are not having any sexual activity, they can't get this disease. That's not a bad program [abstinence-only]." He is obviously not the smartest tool in the shed, since the school that is currently teaching abstinence-only programs has an incredible outbreak of STDs, especially compared to schools that do not teach abstinence-only (Grenoble 1). His argument lays insignificant and does not acknowledge the fact that evidently even if teens are taught NOT to have sex they are going to regardless, considering the Chlamydia outbreak at the school.

Another major outcome of teaching safe sex over abstinence would be the increase in condom use in American adolescents, preventing and decreasing the rising number of STD cases that teens are contracting from each other. Condoms usage hit its peak at 60% in the 1990s, during the AIDS crisis which pumped fear and worry into the minds of educators, parents, and even students (Steinmetz 1) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Nowadays, that fear isn't as major since American adolescents know there are cures for most STDs and the overlying fear of AIDS and HIV isn't shoved in their faces nearly as much as it was in the 90's (Steinmetz 2).

This incredible rise in STDs could very well be due to the fact that out of the 90% of schools who teach abstinence and sexually transmitted diseases, less than 60% of them teach their students about proper forms of contraceptives (Steinmetz 1). When health educators are withholding possible life saving health information from students, it is a truly dishonorable problem (Wiley 167). Many health educators and parents feel that if they provide their students with access to condoms that they would be promoting sex and therefore increasing sexual activity in students (Steinmetz 2) (Hyde 3442). My complaint and question to those who believe that would simply be- would you rather have sexually active students not using protection or sexually active students USING protection?

Like I had mentioned before, regardless of what they are told and taught, high school students will have sex even if they are being taught abstinence. As much as they may not want to, health educators and parents really need to accept this concept, because when they do not, they are being selfish and putting their students in danger of contracting an STD.

In a very recent (2015) study for ©The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, Garcia-Retamero and Edward T. Cokely researched the "Simple but Powerful Health Messages for Increasing Condom Use in Young Adults". In this very thorough and sought-out study, they had two groups of young adults which of whom both had educational interventions on STDs, except one group's intervention had positive framing and visuals, where the other group had negative framing and mostly numerical statistics. Their studies showed that:

When condoms were described as 95% effective in preventing AIDS (the positive-framed message), young adults reported stronger intentions to use them than when they were described as having a 5% failure rate (the negative-framed message). (Retamero, Cokely 31)

This study examined by Retamero and Cokely really makes a point about the huge difference that positive and negative (teachings, sanctions) can have on a person, especially a young adult. It's a simple concept to understand that negative teaching produces negative outcomes, when a health educator says that condoms only work [X] percent of the time, obviously then they would think they might as well not even use a condom. For health educators to believe that fear will prevent teens from having sex and therefore they don't need to teach much about condoms is incredibly selfish, unprofessional, and unethical.

If sex education for adolescents is taught properly, (which would be thoroughly educating

both male and female students on all forms of birth control and contraceptives, letting them know the outcomes that can occur if those forms of safe sex are not used, and lastly to express to students common views and morals), there would be a major psychological outcome for (mainly) the female students. I emphasize the female students because, let's be honest, it would be a very rare occasion to hear a boy being "slut-shamed" or being looked down upon for being "sexual" even in the very slightest. Being a female, it is not that unlikely that at one point in their life have they been called a slut for either dressing a certain way, engaging in sexual encounters, or talking a certain way (Valenti 14). Women and girls are particularly singled out when it comes to shame for any type of sexual representivity or action.

As there are so many examples to provide, I will start with the most important and apparent issue of inequality that girls and women face when it comes to sexuality: contradiction and confusion. Everywhere a [teenage] girl looks, whether it be magazines, TV, instagram, billboards, movies, malls- they can always find hyper-sexualized images of women (i.e. large breasts, thin waists, "perfect faces", and of course, imposing the desire/experience of sex). This interests me greatly, and also disturbs me. In the media and every day advertisements, women are ALWAYS represented as sex objects, yet teenage girls are constantly negatively sanctioned ("slut-shamed") for in any way possible representing a sexual image or having been known for having sex.

Girls can feel shame and guilt when it comes to sexual activity from the way they are taught sex ed. in school. In abstinence-only programs, students (particularly female) are explained that their virginity is a "gift" and it must be saved until marriage (Borawski 425). Female students in these abstinence-only programs are also taught that if sex is had before marriage and abstinence is not concerned, that a great deal of emotional, psychological, physical, and economic consequences will be probable for their case (Borawski 425).

In the instances where abstinence-only programs are still highly encouraged, there is a good chance that many of those female students could be or have been taken to a Purity Ball by their fathers. Purity Balls are extravagant little father-daughter events where the daughter promises to her father to keep her virginity until marriage (Valenti 15). This is enhancing the notion of shame and guilt towards these girls because as if saying they had to wait until marriage wasn't enough, now they will be breaking a promise...to their fathers, which is reinforcing the aspect of making girls feel bad and "dirty" for having sexual relations.

To make Purity Balls even worse, there isn't actually a male equivalent to them, meaning that parents don't care if their sons are still pure and virgins? Instead of going to a Purity Ball the boys do Integrity Balls, that of which they do indeed promise to abstain from sex, but only for the mere purpose of not taking the abstinence away from another man's "future wife" (Valenti 15). The Integrity Balls for boys have no intention to keep them abstinent to maintain "pure" and virgins, only to reinforce that females stay virgins, *assuming* that they will one day be married...to a man.

The health educators in America who are in charge of teaching teens sex education are going about it completely the wrong way. To make a drastic change the media must stop hyper-sexualizing women, parents need to get a firm grip on reality when it comes to sex and their teenagers, and schools need to teach safe sex and abandon the idea of abstinence. If schools teach safe sex and make contraceptives easily available to students, there will be a significant decrease in teenage pregnancies, STDs, and slut-shaming.

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