

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Undergraduate Theses, Professional Papers, and Capstone Artifacts

2021

An Evaluation of Sex Education in Missoula County Schools from Students Perspectives

Sara Lindsay Bigelow

University of Montana, sb133531@umconnect.umt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/utpp>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Bigelow, Sara Lindsay, "An Evaluation of Sex Education in Missoula County Schools from Students Perspectives" (2021). *Undergraduate Theses, Professional Papers, and Capstone Artifacts*. 312.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/utpp/312>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Theses, Professional Papers, and Capstone Artifacts by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Introduction:

Background

For the purposes of evaluating current sex education in Missoula County High Schools from previous students' perspectives, the below literature review assesses current epidemiological data, details why student perspectives are important to sex education, and provides an overview of understanding of student's attitudes regarding sex education. Sex education is defined as the teaching about human sexuality, including intimate relationships, human sexual anatomy, sexual reproduction, sexually transmitted infections, sexual activity, sexual orientation, gender identity, abstinence, contraception, and reproductive rights and responsibilities (Breuner, 2016).

Definitions relevant to this literature review:

Attitudes is defined as a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person's behavior.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus or HIV is a virus that attacks cells that help the immune system function.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases or STD's are an infection that is transmitted through sexual contact caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites.

Erotic's is defined as arousing or satisfying sexual desire.

In the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Youth Risk behavior survey evaluating years 2007-2017, many factors related to sexual behavior were evaluated. Among all high school students, the percentage of students who have ever had sex fluctuated between 39.5% and 47.8%. Of those, the majority of high school students were currently sexually active. Of students that were currently sexually active, 53.8% to 61.5% of students used a condom during their last

sexual intercourse. This data shows that almost half of high school students are currently sexually active, but that the majority of those students are not using safe sex practices that prevent sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies, such as using a condom. In the Montana Office of Public Instructions Youth Risk Behavior Summary of 2019, the topics of "sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection" was evaluated. It found that 56.2% of students have ever had sex, and on whether or not a condom was used during the last time they had intercourse, 25% responded "yes" and 18.7% responded "no" (Center for Disease Control, 2018).

In an analysis of Montana state health education laws, the CDC completed a report in December 2017. The report showed that for the topics of sexual health education, HIV prevention and STD prevention, no laws or regulations exist with regards to requirements in educating on these topics. In addition, an evaluation on the presence of evidence-based components such as curriculum delivery by trained instructors or medically accurate curriculum and more, there was no evidence of any common evidence-based components in Montana sex education. The report also showed the percent of secondary schools that tried to increase students' knowledge in certain topics as 75% in human sexuality, 86% in HIV prevention and 84% in STD prevention. Even in the absence of evidence-based components of sex education, it is clear that teachers have made an effort to increase student knowledge of the above stated topics (Center for Disease Control, 2018).

In a study completed by Alexander Libby that directly asked students on their perceptions of their own sexuality education, many shortfalls of sex education were discovered. While students received information about anatomy and reproduction and protective methods, other topics were left unaddressed, such as issues of discomfort, stigma, the significance of the

quality of sex to relationships and more. In addition, the stigma surrounding sex education and sex at a young age (under 18) impacts the quality of the education students are receiving: "a negative deterrence focus reinforces sexuality as a scary and embarrassing subject that is compressed into a time frame too narrow for students to 'get used to it'" (Libby, 2007).

A similar study was done, also at the University of Montana, that evaluated sex education in Montana schools in relation to the needs of sexual and gender minority youth in 2017. The research questions aimed to gain insight on the perspectives of sexual and gender minority youth, as well as the knowledge and rates of sadness. This was a cross-sectional designed study and a questionnaire was developed by having faculty and key informants help with creation, pilot test and focus group with the created questions to revise, and then implemented online. The discussion included finding a need for consistent sex education as a result of more descriptive guidelines and expansion of sex education topics. Mentioned earlier, there are no guidelines or regulations for sex education in Montana, which likely lead to this study showing an inconsistency of topics. This study aims to look more specifically at Missoula County High Schools and show what topics the participants were taught and what needs expansion (Redinger, 2017).

A study done in New Zealand in 2005 evaluated the gap between what students are taught in sex education and what they do in practice. This study suggested that a way of making sex education more effective is to allow students take a lead role in the evaluation and creation of sex education content, design, and delivery. This study also found that "without a discourse of erotic's, it is not surprising that knowledge derived from this secondary source held less appeal and status for young people in the study." The inclusion of erotic's in sex education is seen to be the answer to closing the gap between the education and students' personal experiences by

increasing student interest in the education with using erotics. This brings up an interesting point about how to increase student attention to sex education, and this study aims to see what the participants perspectives are on the contributors to making sex education more effective. Including certain topics, such as erotic's, in sex education is one way of increasing student attention, as this could be a topic perceived as interesting. Student attention is essential to the effectiveness of sex education, and with some sex education topics being perceived as irrelevant, boring, or repetitive, including topics that peak student interest will also peak student attention (Allen, 2005)

The study to be completed does aim to evaluate the Missoula County Schools sex education through the perspectives of the graduated students, and to gain insight into the effectiveness of the sex education programs they completed. The above studies have shown that there is a lack of regulation of sex education in Montana, that sex education in high schools is relevant due to almost half of high school students have been or are sexually active, the lack of elaboration of some sex education past anatomy of reproductive systems and the impact of student attention on overall sex education effectiveness. To increase the knowledge base specific to Missoula County schools, students will be asked about their sex education, their perspectives, the teaching methods used and what they think should be used and the existence of stigma surrounding sex education in Missoula.

Methods:

Research Design and Setting

This research study aimed to gain insight about former high school students' perceptions of the sex education they received at Missoula County High Schools as well as their perceptions

on how sex education can be improved. The method for obtaining this data was personal interviews with former Missoula High School students who graduated between 2016-2018 that were conducted via Zoom. Personal interviews were chosen as the data collection method because it was seen as the most accurate way of learning about the perceptions of participants on what they learned and experiences in high school sex education courses. Participants were recruited through personal conversations via email or phone, were identified as over the age of 18 and were known to have graduated from a Missoula County High School within the last 5 years, or 2015 or after. The format of the interview was semi-structured with pre-planned interview questions which were all asked, as well as unplanned questions that were asked for clarifying information by the interviewer. Interviews were scheduled to be one hour or less, though often did not last the full hour. All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator.

Analysis of the data produced by the interviews was performed in a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) system called Dedoose. Interview transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose and coding was performed on the interview transcript iteratively, with at least three readings. Codes were then grouped into categories and categories were grouped into themes. The entirety of the research was done by the principal investigator, with the guidance of a faculty supervisor. The principal investigator is studying public and community health and taught HIV 101 as a volunteer through Open Aid alliance. Through this volunteer experience, she saw the epidemiological data in Missoula and Montana that suggested a lack of effective sex education in Missoula. The principal investigator, through this research of evaluating student perspectives of their sex education, expected to see gaps between the current education and what

participants believe should be included in sex education. This is also due to the principal investigators personal experience of a lack of effective sex education.

Participants and Procedures

The study looked at five current University of Montana students that attended high school in Missoula and have graduated within the last 4 years. One graduated in 2016, three in 2017 and one in 2019. One student graduated from Big Sky High School, two from Sentinel High School and two from Hellgate High School. The study included one person that identified as male and four people that identified as female.

The guiding interview questions that the students were asked included:

1. Demographics - tell me a little bit about yourself
 - a. Where did you grow up?
 - b. Where did you go to high school before going to UM?
2. Sex education experience
 - a. Where did you initially learn about sex?
 - i. Did your parents talk about sex education with you when you were growing up or was this something that you only learned about in school?
 - b. Do you have a memory of the first time you were introduced to sex education in school?
 - i. Who taught it?
 - ii. What do you remember learning?

- iii. How was it taught? (teaching methods)
- iv. What did it feel like? Awkward, informative, scary etc.?
- c. What years in high school were you given sex education? (go year by year)
 - i. Who taught it?
 - 1. How did you feel about that person?
 - ii. What do you remember learning?
 - iii. How was it taught? (teaching methods)
 - iv. What did you and your friends think about it? Did you talk about it outside of class?
 - v. Did you talk about it with your parents/other family members?
- 3. How did you feel receiving sex education?
 - a. Can you give an example of something that was talked about that made you feel ___?
- 4. In your opinion, was your sex education:
 - a. Helpful for staying safe?
 - b. Helpful for understanding what sex was?
 - c. Helpful for being abstinent?
 - d. Why or why not? Examples?
- 5. Perspectives of sex education

- a. Do you think it is important to include sex education in high schools?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - ii. If yes:
 1. What content is important to include? Why this content?
 2. When should sex education first be introduced? Why this age?
 3. Who should be responsible for teaching sex education? Why this person?
 4. What teaching methods should be employed? Why?
 - iii. If no:
 1. Is there an alternative source that sex education should be offered through?
6. Change in Perspective over time
 - a. Now that you are in college, have your feelings about sex/sex education changed?
 - i. Importance of sex education
 - ii. Necessity of sex education
7. In Missoula County, do you think there is a stigma surrounding sex education?
 - a. Define stigma if needed.
8. To reflect on this interview, how did talking about your sex education and your perspectives make you feel?

9. As a reminder, I am doing this research to find out the perspectives of former high school students' perspectives of their sex education. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Results:

Preliminary Results

Based on the five qualitative interviews, some themes showed in terms of topics learned in the participants past sex education and what they hope to be included in future sex education courses. Participants had all recalled learning about anatomy, and other topics that were mentioned in more than one interview include consent, sexually transmitted diseases, reproduction, abstinence and healthy relationships. A student mentioned that while birth control options were mentioned, they remember learning that “the only way to prevent pregnancy was to not have sex” teaching them that the only viable birth control was abstinence. When asked if the participants thought whether or not sex education was important to include in high school education, all five participants responded that it is important. Topics that were mentioned as important to include in sex education include what the students previously learned, and in addition, sexual orientation, decision making, birth control options, pleasure and communication. Of the five participants, only one mentioned talking about and learning about sex education with their family members. When asked if there is a stigma surrounding sex education in Missoula, there were various answers. Two participants said there is not a stigma, and the three others said yes for different reasons; because sex education lacks information, because “there is always that group of kids whose parents didn’t want them to learn about [sex education]” and because sex

education is uncomfortable and people do not take it seriously. When asked about what teaching methods were employed in their sex education, students responded mostly with PowerPoints and lectures with few videos. When asked what teaching methods they would like to see employed, students answered with more activities, more guest speakers (that know more about certain topics), discussions, visual cues and overall mixed teaching methods in order to increase student engagement. One student mentioned that “outreach to community members [as guest speakers] would be ideal to students” as it brings new perspectives and information to the classroom.

Discussion:

Principal findings

This study that was aimed to learn more about sex education in Missoula County schools, and while it did just that, it created more specific questions to answer before practical action can be taken. As described later in the limitations, the researcher had no access to the sex education content or lessons that were actually taught to the participants, but access to that could have given insight into how effective that content was by comparing the actual content to what the students can recall. Given that participants were being asked about their sex education two to eight years after received that education, what the participants can recall keys to the effectiveness of that sex education in teaching student’s information that they will remember long-term.

Another point that surfaced throughout the interviews was the importance of a variety of teaching methods within sex education, though this also holds true in primary and secondary school education. Participants mentioned that sex education was boring when it only presented

through lectures and reading textbooks, but engagement was better during activities or videos or other visual cues.

When participants were asked about the change of personal necessity and personal importance of sex education from when high school to current times, all five participants said either that it stayed the same or is more important now. In further discussion, relevance of content was recognized as a factor of this personal importance. Two students discussed how the personal relevance of sex education has become increasingly important since their high school sex education, and that they believe sex education would be more effective if students could see the relevance of sex education when they receive it.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include limitations that were a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, researcher positionality and the number of people interviewed. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the interviews to be moved online. Because of this, the researcher was not able to take into consideration that non-verbal aspects of participants when interviewing them. Positionality is a limitation because the researcher is in an outside position by not experiencing the sex education that the students in Missoula County did. Positionality also causes the researcher to make unique inferences based on the data. Additionally, the amount of people interviewed was five and more people interviewed could cause for more connections between interviews or new information to be brought to attention.

Conclusions

Though this study gave greater insight into former Missoula County High School students experience and perspective with their sex education, the study also sparked more

questions. Comparing student memory of what they learned in their sex education with their actual sex education content would give more insight into how effective that sex education is. Additionally, a larger study with a similar objective would be useful for more information. Studies evaluating the effectiveness of different teaching methods for sex education would also be useful in Missoula County Schools so that sex education can be personalized to their learning needs. As a result of irrelevance coming up in this study, an additional study of how perceived irrelevance of sex education effects student engagement would be useful in creating programs that students perceive as relevant.

References:

Allen, L. (2005). *'Say everything': Exploring young people's suggestions for improving sexuality education*. *Sex Education*, 5:4, 389-404. DOI: [10.1080/14681810500278493](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810500278493)

Center for Disease Control. (2018, June 20). *Analysis of state health education laws 2017*.

Retrieved from

https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/policy/pdf/summary_report_factsheets/Montana.pdf

Center for Disease Control. (2018). *Youth risk behavior study 2007-2017*. Retrieved from

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/trendsreport.pdf>

Libby, A. (2007). *"They should make it more normal": Young people's critical standpoints and the social organization of sexuality education*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. Ann Arbor, MI.

Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/304818459?pq-origsite=primo>

Redinger, E. A. (2017). *Sex education in montana schools: An assessment of the needs of sexual and gender minority youth*. Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers.

Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/10922>