



Let's talk about sexual health education:

Youth perspectives on their learning experiences in Canada



The Research Question

Based on their sexual health education experiences, do youth in Canada feel informed and well-supported to develop and maintain their sexual health and to participate in healthy sexual and/or romantic relationships?

The Study

The study involved 12 focus group discussions with youth about their sexual health education experiences and preferences. There were a total of 66 focus group participants (ages 12-19, $M = 16.5$). Each discussion lasted approximately one-hour ($M = 62$ minutes) and focus group size was between three and nine participants. Focus groups met in schools and community organizations across Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec) in 2019. The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed for analytic purposes.

The Findings

A thematic analysis resulted in the identification of 10 themes. Four themes were about the context of youth educational and learning experiences. Six themes were about the content of sexual health education.



Theme 1 : Various Sources of Information

Youth accessed information and developed understandings about sexual health and relationships through several different sources. Many participants reported learning about sexual health and relationships by seeking out information over the internet. Other sources included peers, parents, and a variety of media (e.g. television, social media).

"We're self-educated."

Theme 2: Implicit Messages and Social Influences on Learning

Youth spoke about learning experiences that were often influenced not only by what information was shared, but also how that information was shared. This often affected their perceptions of what is deemed 'normal' with regards to sex, sexuality and relationships.

"I think that sometimes, the reason we're uncomfortable with certain topics is because it's taught to us that they are uncomfortable topics."

Theme 3: Creating Safer Environments for Learning

Focus group participants discussed how their learning experiences were influenced not only by what information was shared, but also by how that information was shared. This often affected their perceptions of what is deemed 'normal' with regards to sex, sexuality and relationships.

"Just a place where the person can come and they can be safe and not feel judged by anyone."

Theme 4: Sexual Health Education is Valuable

Participants voiced the value of having access to sexual health education. They saw sexual health education as important and essential due to the significant impacts that the lessons learned can have on both themselves and their peers.

"It's something that needs to be taught to everyone"



Theme 5: Comprehensive, Scientifically Accurate, and Factual

Youth spoke how they wanted to receive comprehensive and scientifically accurate sexual health information that is devoid of personal biases.

"I think [sexual health education] needs to be medically accurate. That's a very, very important thing about it."

Theme 6: Balanced Content and Options Provided

Youth identified the need for balanced information that highlights the positive aspects of sexuality and relationships as well as the prevention of possible negative outcomes. Focus group participants also spoke to the need for information that encourages informed decision making, as opposed to rigid instructions that dictate the decisions they should make.

"We don't want situations like [the teacher in the movie Mean Girls, who taught] ... 'Don't have sex, because you will get pregnant and die.' "

Theme 7: Inclusivity

Study participants spoke about the importance of receiving information that is inclusive of everyone. Inclusivity involves ensuring that no youth, irrespective of their gender identity or sexual orientation, was excluded in receiving information about different topics. Youth recognized that the gaps in their learning often related to the exclusion of specific populations, particularly for LGBTQ2S+ youth.

"Homosexuality, like every part of it should be addressed by the teacher."

Theme 8: Social and Emotional Aspects

Youth expressed wanting to discuss a broad range of topics that extend beyond reproduction and biology, which includes learning about the social and emotional aspects of sex and relationships.

"I think learning about healthy relationships deserves more focus than learning about where exactly in the testes is semen created."

Theme 9: Timely, Relatable, and Practical

Participants in the focus groups spoke about the need for timely and relatable sexual health information that is relevant and applicable to their lives. This included learning practical skills and receiving information at a developmentally appropriate time.

"[The teacher tells you], this is how your menstrual cycle works, but they don't tell you how to use a tampon"

Theme 10: Resources and Ongoing Opportunities to Learn

Youth voiced how they would like their sexual health education to occur through more classes over a longer period of time, and include more ongoing opportunities and access to local services and resources.

"I mean, I don't know how much information I can consume in one afternoon, but it's definitely not enough in my opinion"

Discussion & Implications

Findings from this study contribute to our current knowledge and understanding about effective delivery of comprehensive sexual health education in Canada, and provide evidence to help support strategies for improving learning experiences for youth across the country.



These findings highlight the importance of youth having access to ongoing learning opportunities and knowledge about various sexual and relationship health topics, while encompassing information about resources and services that meet their various needs. The findings also point to the significance of the context for educating youth, including the different sources of information, social influences, and the need for safer learning environments. Overall, findings demonstrate that youth have many valuable insights regarding their sexual health education experiences, which could serve as a roadmap for improving sexual health education curricula and implementation.



Reference (Full Article):

Laverty, E. K., Noble, S.M., Pucci, A., & MacLean, R. E. D. (2021). Let's talk about Sexual Health Education: Youth Perspectives on Their Learning Experiences in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 30(1), 26-38.