

Experiences of Youth in Learning About Healthy Intimate Relationships: An Institutional Ethnography

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Abstract : Adolescence is a vulnerable period for youth across the world. It is a period of new learning with opportunities to understand and develop perspectives on health and well-being. With youth beginning to engage in intimate relationships at an earlier age in the 21st century, concentrating on the learning opportunity they have in school is paramount. The nature of what has been deemed important to teach in schools has changed throughout history, and the focus has shifted from home/family skills to teaching youth how to be competitive in the job market. Amidst this emphasis, opportunities for them exist to learn about building healthy intimate relationships, one of the foundational elements of most people's lives. Using an Institutional Ethnography (IE), the lived experiences of youth in how they understand intimate relationships and how their learning experience is organized through the high school Health and Physical Education (H&PE) course is explored. An empirical inquiry into how the actual work of teachers and youth are socially organized by a biomedical, employment-related, and efficiency-based discourse is provided. Through thirty-two qualitative interviews with teachers and youth, a control of ruling relations such as institutional accountability circuits, performance reports, and timetabling over the experience of teachers and youth is found. One of the facets of the institutional accountability circuit is through the social organization of teaching and learning about healthy intimate relationships being framed through a biomedical discourse. In addition, the role of a hyper-focus on performance and evaluation is found as paramount in situating healthy intimacy discussions as inferior to neoliberally charged productivity measures such as employment skills. Lastly, due to the nature of institutional policies such as regulatory guidelines, teachers are largely influenced to avoid diving into discussions deemed risky or taboo by society, such as healthy intimacy in adolescence. The findings show how texts such as the H&PE curriculum, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) guidelines, Ministry of Education Performance Reports, and the timetable organize the day-to-day activities of teachers and students and reproduce different disjunctures for youth. This disjuncture includes some of their experiences being subordinated, difficulty relating to curriculum, and an experience of healthy living discussions being skimmed over across sites. The findings detail that the experience of youth in learning about healthy intimate relationships is not akin to the espoused vision outlined in policy documents such as the H&PE (2015) curriculum policy. These findings have implications for policymakers, activists, and school administration alike, which call for an investigation into who is in power when it comes to youth's learning needs, as a pivotal period where youth can be equipped with life-changing knowledge is largely underutilized. A restructuring of existing institutional practices that allow for the social and institutional flexibility required to broach the topic of healthy intimacy in a comprehensive manner is required.

Keywords : health policy, intimate relationships, youth, education, ruling relations, sexual education, violence prevention

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