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What Your Teacher Did Not Tell You About Abstinence

A Critical Analysis of the Arguments in Favor of the
Teaching of Abstinence-Only Sexual Education in Public
Schools

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Abstract

Although Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs have proven ineffective in reducing teenage pregnancy rates and the spread of STDs, thirteen states in the U.S still stress abstinence in their sexual education curricula. This in turn has created a big debate over what sexual education in public schools should contain. This paper intends to determine whether the arguments proposed by three advocacy groups for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage can justify the teaching of the programs in public schools. The advocacy groups have been chosen because of their frequent participation in the debate, and because they bring the controversial issue of religion in sexual education into it. By using Ludvig Beckman's methodology of a critical analysis of ideas it has been possible to test the logical validity, empirical strength, and normative plausibility of the three chosen arguments. The results of the analysis show that most of the arguments are logically valid; however, many of them lack empirical support, and cannot be considered normatively plausible. Therefore, the three arguments should not be taken into account in the formation of new and effective sexual education policies.

Key words: Sexual education, Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs, Critical analysis of ideas, Advocacy Groups, The United States

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1 Introduction

The debate over what should and should not be taught in public schools has a long history in the United States (U.S). The fact that there are almost no national requirements or guidelines on a number of the subjects leaves it up to the states themselves to decide (Berkman et. Al. 2008: 920). This has led to plenty of discussions, arguments, and even court cases taking place when the public, school boards, and the state government cannot decide on a common policy on which public school education should be built upon.

Most divided are the Americans when it comes to teaching subjects such as biology, earth science, and sexual education. This is because these subjects can be taught very differently depending on what worldview and values the teacher has. One of the first cases to be settled in court was the famous “Monkey Trial” (ibid) in 1925 where John T. Scopes was arrested for breaking Tennessee law after teaching evolution in his science class. The court, however, ruled in Scopes’ favor when declaring the Tennessee law unconstitutional for only allowing schools to teach “[...] the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible [...]” (ibid). Since then the courts have generally ruled in favor of teaching evolution, but the battle continues in classrooms around the country. The two sides of the debate are still as divided as ever where one side declares teaching creationism unconstitutional and a violation of the student’s right to learn objective, research-based science. At the same time, the other side argues that “you simply cannot compel belief, and when you do, you sacrifice liberty on the altar of science” (theweek 2011).

Another issue, that has received more attention lately, is the subject of sexual education. The U.S has one of the highest teenage pregnancy and birth rates in the industrialized world. This is a problem that the federal government has tried to control for a very long time, and has since 1982 supported sex education programs that advocate abstinence as a solution to it (Howell 2007). However, the abstinence programs have proven ineffective in reducing teenage pregnancy rates and research has found that they “[...] tend to promote abstinence behavior through emotion, such as romantic notions of marriage, moralizing, fear of STDs, and by spreading scientifically incorrect information” (Stranger-Hall & Hall 2011: 9). This has of course, sparked the debate on whether the programs are simply an excuse to teach conservative values instead of scientific facts.

The debate is widespread and takes many different forms but the core of the problem is whether teachers should have the liberty to teach their own beliefs or if objective science should always prevail. As a consequence, the kind of education the students get is highly dependent on the teacher they get. Steven Newton, programs and policy director at the National Center for Science Education, expresses it like this: “It’s almost a random experience; it’s kind of the luck of the draw” (Welsh 2011).

1.1 Intent and Research Question

If Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs have proven ineffective in reducing teenage pregnancy rates and the curricula are full of subjective values and scientifically incorrect information, then how can the teaching of it be justified? Should public schools be able to teach subjective values as facts even though they are not? The opponents of the programs would argue that they can never be justified because they are not based on science. Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs are merely an expression of some Christian, conservative values that should not be forced upon young students. By forcing these programs onto students, it only makes them less able to make well-informed decisions (SIECUS 1 2012). Nevertheless, advocates for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage argue that the programs have helped in reducing teenage pregnancy rates. They claim that the programs promote the highest health standards, and argue that the message of risk avoidance is far superior to that of risk reduction (Elliot 2005).

Independent of the personal opinions regarding Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage, the programs continue to be taught around the nation. In fact, thirteen states in the U.S stress abstinence in their sex education curricula (ibid). Therefore, the intent of this paper is to investigate whether the advocates' arguments are tenable enough to justify teaching the programs in public schools. Drawing from this introduction and intent the following research question has been formulated:

Can the arguments proposed by advocacy groups for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs be considered valid in justifying the teaching of these programs in public schools?

1.2 Limitations

As explained earlier in the problem area, the subject of sexual education is a major topic of debate in the U.S and therefore fulfills the requirement of external relevance. Most of the research that has been conducted on Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs has been concerned with whether they have reduced teenage pregnancy rates and the spread of sexually transmitted infections and diseases (Stranger-Hall & Hall 2011; Siecus 1 2012; Santelli et. al. 2005). All these reports have concluded that stressing abstinence in sexual education does not lower rates of teenage pregnancy.

It might not be self-evident how the topic of this paper relates to political science. However, sexual education is closely linked to several other policy-areas. For example, it relates to public health problems, the development of public education, and the role of religion in public settings. Furthermore, there are many different views on what sexual education should contain. This makes it interesting

for a political scientist to investigate which ideas and suggestions should be taken seriously in the formation of public policy.

Since this is a well-researched area, my ambition is not to add another report showing the same phenomenon. Rather, my research will build on these findings by contributing something new to the ongoing discussion. Currently the debate about sexual education is highly polarized and both sides of the issue spend much time ridiculing one another. Therefore, my ambition is to have the discussion on the proponents' own terms. By critically analyzing the grounds for supporting Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs, I hope to find whether they can be considered valid and reasonable. My findings will hopefully help to move the discussion forward, and out of the deadlock it is in today.

Another limitation I set is that my paper only takes public schools into consideration. This is because public schools are funded with tax money and should therefore be separated from any particular belief system (First Amendment to the United States Constitution 1791). Also, students that cannot afford private schools do not have a choice when it comes to choosing their education. Children are merely forced to go to the closest school in their school district. Private schools, however, are freer to teach what they want because they are voluntary, meaning, you do not have to attend any of them if you do not want to.

Furthermore, there are many different forms of abstinence-only curricula, but this paper deals with the justifications of programs that *stress* abstinence. Those programs are often “designed to promote the conservative social idea that sexual behavior is only morally appropriate in the context of a heterosexual marriage” (SIECUS 1 2012). Most people agree that abstinence should be presented as an option among others, but it is when abstinence is presented as the only option that it becomes problematic (Stranger-Hall & Hall 2011: 6). More information about the different levels of abstinence is presented in the following chapter.

2 Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage-Programs

There are many different types of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs (hereafter referred to as abstinence-only) as well as varying levels of emphasis on abstinence. The programs can be categorized into three different levels, which differ according to the degree of emphasis placed on abstinence. Level one is abstinence covered, level two is abstinence promoted, and level three is abstinence stressed (Stranger-Hall & Hall 2011: 2). However, all abstinence-only programs that are funded by the federal government have to adhere to a certain eight-point definition of abstinence education. The federal government defines the term abstinence education as an educational program which:

- has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity
- teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school age children
- teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems
- teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity
- teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects
- teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society
- teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances
- teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity (U.S. Social Security Act, §510(b)(2) 2010)

These eight points can be seen as the common core of the different abstinence-only programs that are funded by the federal government and taught in public schools. However, it is up to the states to decide for themselves how these eight points should be taught and which aspects should be emphasized. Most states do not require the teaching of sexual education but if public schools want to teach sexual education, they must comply with state legislation and policy. For example, if a public school in Alabama wants to teach sexual education it must emphasize that abstinence is the only completely safe method against unwanted pregnancies and STDs (SIECUS 5 2012). The curriculum taught must also be age-

appropriate, with teachers stressing that “[...] homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public [...]” (ibid). Similar laws and policies can be found in, for example, Texas, South Carolina, and Utah (SIECUS 2 2012).

Previously, abstinence-only programs have received much financial support from the federal government. However, a different approach to abstinence-only programs was begun in March 2009 when President Obama signed a \$410 billion dollar spending bill into law in his attempt to battle earmarks (Kane & Wilson 2009). The legislation included a \$14.2 million dollar cut to Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE), which was the first ever cut to abstinence-only programs (SIECUS 2009). The federal government is now focusing on the development of comprehensive sexual education, and the budget for fiscal year 2013 shows continued support for these programs (SIECUS 4 2012).

Nevertheless, one of the funding vehicles that remains for abstinence programs, is called The Title V Welfare Reform Act (SIECUS 1 2012). The funding that states receive from Title V goes toward abstinence curricula and material. These curricula and material are usually produced by private companies or organizations. One popular program that many states use is called *Choosing the Best*, but it is just one of many being used in the U.S (SIECUS 3 2012).

3 Theory

There are many different groups in the U.S that advocate for abstinence-only programs. Aside from ordinary citizens, such as parents and students, there are various organizations that lobby for extended funding of the programs. This chapter focuses on the arguments put forward by those organizations. A description of the advocacy groups for abstinence-only is provided, and the chapter concludes with an explanation of the three chosen arguments. The arguments have been chosen because of their frequent reoccurrence in the debate. Moreover, these arguments constitute the fundamental difference between abstinence-only programs and comprehensive sex education programs, which place them at the core of the entire debate.

3.1 Abstinence- Only Advocacy Groups

Two different kinds of abstinence-only advocacy groups can be identified in the debate. To simplify somewhat, it can be said that one group base their arguments on secular beliefs, while the other group base some of their arguments on religious beliefs. The religious advocacy groups use all the same arguments as the more secular groups do, but they also add the importance of religion and morals in sexual education. For this reason, the analysis focuses on the religious advocacy groups, since they bring the very controversial issue of religion in public schools into the discussion.

There are various religious advocacy groups but some names are more frequently represented in the ongoing debate. These include: *Concerned Women for America (CWA)*; *The Family Research Council (FRC)*; *Focus on the Family*. Regarding the religious values, it is of importance to note that there are many different values within various religions, and that there can be many conflicting values within a single church or religion. While these organizations base some of their arguments for abstinence-only programs in their religious values, there are also many religious people that might not support the programs. However, all aforementioned organizations share a Christian faith (a minor exception when it comes to the FRC which promotes the Judeo-Christian worldview) in which biblical principles should guide the formation of public policy (CWA 1 2012; Focus on the Family 1 2012; FRC 1 2012).

The three organizations have taken on the mission to promote their religious values in public policy and are very keen on their right to do so (ibid). Focus on the Family says that their priority is to “engage the culture for biblical values” (Focus on the Family 2 2012). They go on to say that parents should be the

primary sex educators of their children, and if parents do not agree with what is taught in school, or if it is against their faith, they should either try to change the curriculum or pull their children out of class (Focus on the family 3 2012). The FRC argues that “[c]itizens, churches, private organizations, and public officials have every right to proclaim their faith in public settings and to bring their religiously-informed moral values to bear in election campaigns and public policy decisions “ (FRC 1 2012). Furthermore, the CWA claims that President Obama is America's most biblically-hostile president due to a number of his policy decisions including the cutting of funds for abstinence-only programs (CWA 2 2012).

3.1.1 Argument 1: Abstaining From Sexual Activity is the Only 100 Percent Effective Method When it Comes to Preventing Pregnancies and STDs

The most frequent argument for abstinence-only programs is the fact that abstaining from sexual activity is the only 100 percent effective method when it comes to preventing pregnancy and STDs (Focus on the Family 4 2012; Elliot 2005; FRC 2 2012). According to all these organizations, premature sexual activity, outside of marriage, can have vast negative physical, mental, and emotional consequences (Focus on the Family 5 2012). Since all public school education should aim to communicate the highest health standards, and since abstinence is the only fool-proof method that protects youths from these negative health consequences, then naturally, abstinence-only programs should be taught in public schools (ibid). If the objective for sexual education is to reduce teenage pregnancy rates and the spread of STDs and HIV then what should be taught is “[t]he only truly “safe” option [which] is abstinence until marriage and faithfulness thereafter” (Elliot 2005).

The logic follows:

- (1) Thesis: To reduce teenage pregnancy rates, the spread of STDs, and other negative health consequences, we should only teach abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula in public schools
- (2) Argument: Abstaining from sexual activity is the only 100 percent effective method when it comes to preventing pregnancies and STDs
- (3) Premise: If we teach youths to abstain from sexual activity they will abstain from sexual activity and therefore not be in danger of becoming pregnant or contracting a STD

3.1.2 Argument 2: The Message of Abstinence-Only is Consistent with the Health Message of Other High Risk Behaviors, Such as: Drug Use, Cigarette Use, Gun Use, and Drunk Driving

The purpose of abstinence-only programs is to exclusively promote abstinence. Consequently, the teachers cannot talk about contraceptive use or sex, outside of

marriage, in a positive way. This follows from the idea that information about sex, contraception, and HIV can encourage early sexual activity among young people. The idea is that teaching abstinence, but at the same time talking positively about contraception, will send a mixed message. CWA expresses it like this in an information sheet: “We don’t tell children not to do drugs and then give them clean syringes in case they do” (Elliot 2005). Furthermore, Focus on the Family argues that “[r]isk-reduction is simply not acceptable teaching in health education. Students are taught to *avoid* the activity all together so they can avoid the risks associated with the behavior” (Focus on the Family 6 2012). Similarly, FRC states that “[a]bstinence education mutually reinforces the risk avoidance message given to youth regarding drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and violence” (FRC 2 2012). The idea is to spread the message that teenagers should “just say no” to sexual activities, and that abstinence-only programs should equip them with strategies to do so.

The logic follows:

- (1) Thesis: To reduce teenage pregnancy rates, the spread of STDs, and other negative health consequences, we should only teach abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula in public schools
- (2) Argument: The message of abstinence-only is consistent with the health message of other high risk behaviors, such as: drug use, cigarette use, gun use, and drunk driving
- (3) Premise 1: Sex is a high risk behavior
- (4) Premise 2: We should send a consistent message to youths about how to handle high risk behaviors
- (5) Premise 3: Teaching youths to just say no works with other high risk behaviors, such as drug and cigarette use; therefore, it should also work with sex.

3.1.3 Argument 3: Religion and Morals Play an Important Role in Helping Teens to Delay Premarital Sex

One of the main critiques the three organizations have for comprehensive sex education, is that the programs largely ignore teaching values, and that abstinence-only programs are the only curricula that provide an opportunity to discuss value based sexual activity (CWA 3 2012). They argue that the lack of values in sex education has led to a diminished respect for human life and sexuality in general, which in the end has become harmful to the teens of America (ibid). The FRC points to a report issued in 2004 by the National Center for Health Statistics which showed that teens’ main reason for not having had sex yet was that it was against their religion or morals (FRC 3 2012). Particularly girls who pray, attend church, and believe religion is important, were less likely to have premarital sex than were the less religious teens (ibid). Moreover, Focus on the Family argues that only abstinence-only programs are in line with the idea that “[r]eligious beliefs and heritage surrounding sexuality should be honored” (Focus on the Family 4 2012). They go on to argue that the reason why so many academic institutions are critical of abstinence-only curricula is because the institutions are mostly liberal and “would ban any hint of Christian morals”

(Focus on the Family 6 2012). The point the three organizations are making is that teenagers need moral guidance when it comes to sexual activity. In this case, Christian values and morals provide teens with an objective to abstain from sex which reduces the risk of them becoming pregnant or contracting a STD.

The logic follows:

- (1) Thesis: To reduce teenage pregnancy rates, the spread of STDs, and other negative health consequences, we should only teach abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula in public schools
- (2) Argument: Religion and morals play an important role in helping teens to delay premarital sex
- (3) Premise 1: Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs are the only ones that teach religion and morals
- (4) Premise 2: We should teach religion and morals if it helps teens to abstain from sexual activity

4 Methods and Material

The method used to answer the question posed in this paper is a critical analysis of ideas. I have chosen this method because my ambition is to explain whether the reasons given in support of abstinence-only programs can be justified (Beckman 2005: 55). The notion that it is an important task to verify the strength of a political message goes a long way back and has to do with the need to explain which ideas and arguments can be considered reasonable for a certain position (ibid). This chapter provides an extensive description of the different methodological considerations and choices made in order to answer the research question posed in this paper. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the pros and cons of my chosen empirical material.

4.1 Model for Analysis: A Critical Analysis of Ideas

It is possible to analyze ideas and concepts in many different ways. Some common types of analysis have the ambition to systematically structure and describe ideas by interpreting and specifying them in a coherent way (Beckman 2005: 55). However, the critical analysis of ideas takes it one step further and aims to test the strength of the specific arguments. The arguments can then be criticized for being vague, logically inconsistent, irrelevant, or simply false claims about reality (Vedung 1974: 2). Moreover, Vedung distinguishes between two different types of critical analysis, which are; *Contextual analysis of ideas* (innehållslig idéanalys) and *Functional analysis of ideas* (funktionell idéanalys) (ibid). The functional version aims to determine the origins and the circulation of certain ideas to establish how they connect to our societal structures. This type of method is not used in this paper since it does not relate to the research question.

The type of method used in this paper is the one that Vedung calls contextual analysis with the aim of testing the strength of specific arguments. It is also the method Beckman refers to as the critical analysis of ideas; therefore, this will be the term used from now on (Beckman 2005: 55).

To fulfill the criterion of intersubjectivity, and to be able to make a scientific critical analysis, there are some requirements that the critic needs to meet. Vedung argues that a well-written critical analysis of ideas requires several elements. These elements include:

- The use of well-defined words and concepts to avoid ambiguity and misperceptions
- References to specific arguments need to be neutral
- Parts of arguments cannot be left out if it leads to a false representation
- Implications cannot be drawn from the arguments without stating on what grounds
- The ambition should always be to form a true perception of reality

(Vedung 1974: 3)

Similarly, Beckman argues that the critic needs to comply with the same criteria that he or she applies to the arguments that are being analyzed. This means that the arguments need to be logically valid, supported empirically, and normatively plausible (Beckman 2005: 27). These guidelines are followed as far as possible at all times by the provision of clear evidence and support for the drawn conclusions, and by the use of well-defined words and concepts.

As previously mentioned, a critical analysis of ideas is used to answer the research question of this paper. The specific method is based on Ludvig Beckman's criteria for how to execute a scientific critical analysis of ideas, presented in his book *Grundbok I Idéanalys: Det kritiska studiet av politiska texter och idéer* (2005). Evert Vedung's principles for the same method are also considered throughout the analysis. To structure the paper in a constructive way the analysis is organized around the three arguments presented in the previous chapter (3.2.1-3.2.3). In turn, these three arguments are equally organized around Beckman's three criteria; logical validity, empirical strength, and normative plausibility (Beckman 2005: 57).

The reason why I have chosen to work with Beckman's method is because he uses clear criteria to determine what constitutes an acceptable argument. Furthermore, much of his methodology builds on Herbert Tingsten's and Evert Vedung's writings in the field, and they are both considered experts on the subject. With this in mind, Beckman also offers a way to analyze the plausibility of normative positions. While both Tingsten and Vedung have argued that the job of a political scientist is to never criticize values, Beckman holds that it is possible, and even necessary, to do so (Beckman 2005: 68-70).

There might be objections to the fact that I have chosen a critical analysis of ideas instead of a classical argumentation analysis. After reading and considering the writings of argumentation analyst Arne Naess (1986) I find Beckman's method better suited to the ambition of this paper. While Naess' pro aut contra scheme is incredibly comprehensive, it also aims to determine the strongest arguments for and against a certain issue (Naess 1986:84). This paper is not concerned with the contra arguments, rather, the subject of interest are the ideas expressed on only one side of the issue. Therefore, because of the ambition of this paper, and considering the limited time and space, I find Beckman's critical analysis of ideas a more suitable methodological option.

4.1.1 Logical Validity

The ambition for testing the logical validity of a certain way of reasoning is to find out whether it can be upheld in a logical way. If we claim that an argument is invalid it means that we are critical of the logical properties of the argument (Beckman 2005: 58). This does not automatically mean that the argument is empirically false, because the argument can be logically invalid but at the same time have strong empirical support. Consequently, when we test for logical validity we are not concerned with whether a statement is true or not, but rather whether it makes sense in a logical way (ibid). For an argument to be logically

valid it must fulfill two different criteria, namely, it has to be non-contradictory and it must have valid conclusions (ibid). That an argument is free from contradictions is one of the most basic requirements in science. However, to charge someone with contradicting her/himself requires a certain extent of argumentation. This means that we cannot claim that someone is contradicting herself without arguing why this is so.

Moreover, there are two different kinds of contradictions. Because of difficulties in finding the corresponding English terms, the Swedish ones are presented for the purpose of clarity. The first kind is called *Konträr*, and it is when two statements cannot be true at the same time, however, they can both be false (Beckman 2005: 59). For example, the two statements that John Stuart Mill was a utilitarian and that John Stuart Mill was a moral absolutist, is a contradiction since they can both be false but only one of them can be true (ibid). The other kind of contradiction is called *kontradiktorisk*. This kind of contradiction occurs when out of two statements, one has to be true and the other one has to be false. For example, stating that “Lisa is a girl” and “Lisa is not a girl” is a clearly contradictory statement since one of them has to be true and the other one has to be false (ibid).

To determine the validity of conclusions we have to look at the relation between the premises and the conclusions (ibid). A number of premises can be consistent with each other without automatically making a conclusive argument. What is being said might not be contradictory, but it is not enough to determine if the drawn conclusions actually follow. With that said, it is also possible that false premises can lead to a logically valid conclusion. Beckman uses this example in his book:

Premise 1: All Swedes are men

Premise 2: It is obligatory for all men to do military service

Conclusion: It is obligatory for all Swedes to do military service

(2005: 61).

Another way of determining the logical validity of a conclusion is to search for irrelevant premises, since irrelevant premises can lead to invalid conclusions (Beckman 2005: 62). Referencing a certain authority or pointing to a certain character trait is irrelevant when it comes to validating an argument (ibid).

4.1.2 Empirical Strength

Determining the empirical strength of a political argument is to examine whether its claims about reality have any empirical support (Beckman 2005: 65). Beckman argues that this can be done by posing three different questions to the argument:

1. Is evidence for the claims provided?
2. Is the provided evidence tenable?
3. Is it possible to verify the claims?

(2005: 65).

To begin, the critic needs to find out if any evidence is presented to support the

claims being made. Failing to provide any evidence for one's claims can be devastating for the argument, as the critic only has to clarify the lack of unambiguous evidence to undermine the whole position (ibid). The second step is to examine whether the evidence provided can be considered tenable or not. It can be an enormous assignment to verify whether the evidence is true or false, or whether it truly represents reality (Beckman 2005: 66). Vedung argues that the critic should not have to carry out entirely new research in order to determine whether something is true or not. Rather, the task is limited to making an informed estimation of what previous research has concluded (Vedung 1974: 5). This is a position Beckman agrees with, and he argues that the critic has to make an effort to understand what previous findings prove when it comes to the subject of analysis (Beckman 2005: 66).

The third task is to establish whether it is possible to verify the veracity of a claim (Beckman 2005: 67). Claims about reality that cannot be scientifically verified are called metaphysical claims. For example, the claims that God created humans, or that time exists are claims that cannot be scientifically verified (ibid). Although these kinds of claims can never be proven true or false, it is still useful to point out the occurrence of metaphysical claims since that can tell us something about their relationship to science. The more metaphysical claims that occur in an argument, the less scientific it is (ibid).

4.1.3 Normative Plausibility

Although the possibility of criticizing values has been questioned, Beckman holds that it is (Beckman 2005: 71). Beckman argues that values can be criticized for being more or less plausible, given that the basis for criticism is provided (ibid). There are two main strategies when it comes to determining where the criticism should stem from. The first strategy is called internal criticism and the other external criticism (ibid).

Internal criticism emanates from the values and principles that the advocates themselves claim to promote. The one performing the analysis, or criticism, then adopts those ideals and uses them as his or her point of departure. For example, if someone argues for the right to teach Christian values in public schools because the value of religious liberty should be honored, then it is possible to analyze whether this position leads to the honoring of religious liberty in public schools.

One way of criticizing values in arguments is by pointing out any signs of incoherence (Beckman 2005: 71). This means that the normative claims being made cannot be traced back to a coherent set of values. Signs of incoherence can be a consequence of a deeper inconsistency in the values promoted. Another strategy for internal criticism is to point out implications of the position which are in conflict with the promoted values (Beckman 2005: 72). Albert Hirschman called it "the perversity theory" (ibid). This means that if the policy would be implemented, then it would undermine instead of enhance the values that the advocates claim to hold. So, if we use the aforementioned example of religious

liberty in public schools then it would mean that the teaching of Christian values would instead undermine religious liberty rather than honoring it.

External criticism stems from values other than the ones promoted by supporters. Consequently, the question is no longer if the supporters are embodying their own principles (Beckman 2005: 74). Rather, the ambition is to find out whether their position is compatible with other normative positions (ibid). This way, it is possible to highlight any conflicts between different values.

In this paper the strategy of internal criticism is used to analyze the normative plausibility of the advocates' arguments. Since the analysis builds on their own values they will need to listen to the criticism, which would not be the case if it would be based on any other values (Beckman 2005: 77).

4.2 Material

The empirical material used in this paper is derived from the various organizations taking part in the sex education debate. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) provides extensive information about sexual education programs, state profiles, and policy updates (both within the federal government as well as at the state-level) (SIECUS 6 2012). The council also provides arguments for and against abstinence-only and comprehensive sexual education, referencing peer reviewed reports, and offering examples from many different sex education curricula (ibid). Everything one needs to know about sex education has been gathered on the Council's website, which makes it an invaluable source. Nevertheless, SIECUS is against abstinence-only education and the information is therefore colored by its agenda to stop the teaching of it. Thus, the information must be interpreted with this in mind. Not all of the material is biased, though, as there is references to sources where one can find further information. For example, all the state profiles contain references to the actual legislation and policy documents (SIECUS 5 2012).

The websites of Concerned Women for America (CWA), Focus on the Family, and the Family Research Council (FRC) provide the material for arguments supporting abstinence-only education. The material consists of information about the organizations, research about the effects of abstinence-only education, arguments for the programs, information on how to take action, and much more.

All the empirical material used for this paper comes from different websites. While some people could argue that this might constitute a problem, I hold that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. The websites of all these organizations are their official representation. It is their chance to communicate their message to a large amount of people at the same time. Therefore, it is important for the website to contain correct and appropriate information. Another benefit of having all the material online is that it is available for everyone. Readers of this paper will be able to check the quotes and information immediately, to judge for themselves if my interpretations are reasonable.

5 Analysis

This chapter gives an account of the analyzed material, as well as the results of the critical analysis of ideas. Each argument is analyzed with the help of Beckman's three criteria, and they are analyzed in turn starting with the first argument, then the second, and lastly, the third argument (see order in Section 3.1.1-3.1.3). This means that argument one is analyzed with criterion one, two, and three before the analysis of the next argument is presented.

5.1 Argument 1

Abstaining from sexual activity is the only 100 percent effective method when it comes to preventing pregnancies and STDs (Section 3.1.1).

5.1.1 Logical Validity

The first argument holds that abstinence-only should be taught in schools because abstaining from sexual activity is the only 100 percent effective method when it comes to preventing pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections and diseases. This argument, and conclusion, is built on the premise that teenagers will abstain from sexual activity if we teach them to do so. When it comes to testing the logical validity of this way of reasoning we are concerned with how the components relate to one another.

This whole way of reasoning is built on the belief that premature sexual activity is both physically and mentally harmful, and in the worst case scenario it can lead to death (Focus on the Family 5 2012). When this is the foundation for one's reasoning it is not surprising that the conclusion holds that teenagers should be taught abstinence-only. If we know that the risk of all these dangers can be completely removed by teaching abstinence-only, then it would be strange not to do so. There are no logical contradictions between the premises and it is pretty clear that the premise, argument, and conclusion show no inconsistencies. Rather, a contradiction in this case would be if any of the components were changed to instead discard the teaching of abstinence-only. For example, if we changed the thesis to: "to reduce teenage pregnancy rates, the spread of STDs, and other negative health consequences, we should *NOT* teach abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula in public schools", but keeping everything else the same. Then it would constitute an inconsistency and the reasoning would not be logically valid.

5.1.2 Empirical Strength

If we turn our attention towards the criterion for empirical strength then it becomes more problematic. The premise holds that teenagers will abstain from sexual activity if we teach them to do so, however, this is not an uncontested position. To begin, it is important to look at what evidence is provided in support of this claim. The three advocacy groups present reports and research on their website which suggest that abstinence-only education is providing the wanted results. For example, CWA references to a memo published by The Heritage Foundation. The memo concludes that a study, published in the peer reviewed journal *Adolescent & Family Health*, celebrate the effectiveness of abstinence education in reducing teenagers' high-risk behaviors (Pardue 2005). According to this study, teens that had taken part in an abstinence program, called Best Friends program, were “six-and-a-half times more likely to remain sexually abstinent” (ibid: 1).

Focus on the Family also presents different reports showing the same phenomenon, especially one report that states that “[t]heory-based abstinence-only interventions may have an important role in preventing adolescent sexual involvement” (Focus on the Family 8 2012). The FRC points to a study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research Inc. on behalf of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which focuses on four individual abstinence programs which received funding under Title V. While this study states that “the sexual behavior of young people who went through the programs did not differ significantly from that of their peers in the same community who did not participate” (FRC 4 2012), The FRC holds that this by no means proves that abstinence education is ineffective (ibid). Instead, they call for more research and claim that “[a]t a recent government sponsored abstinence education conference, no fewer than two dozen different true abstinence programs were shown to have resulted in significant positive changes in students' attitudes, behavior, or both” (ibid). Unfortunately, the names of the conference or the programs were not mentioned.

While these advocacy groups do provide evidence for their claims it is still debatable whether this evidence is tenable or not. It is rather difficult to find peer reviewed reports which show the effectiveness of abstinence-only. Nevertheless, one study published in the *American Journal of Health Behavior* showed that “abstinence programs can achieve significant reductions in teen sexual initiation” (Weed et. al. 2008: 71). But it also stated that “[a]ll of the above trends point to the need for more and better research to evaluate the effectiveness of abstinence programs” (ibid: 62). Far easier is it to find research showing the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only programs.

The studies mentioned in previous chapters (i.e Section 1.2) have shown that there is no proof that abstinence-only education is effective. Rather, there appears to be a positive correlation between stressing abstinence-only in state policy and higher teenage pregnancy rates. In 2001, a comprehensive study conducted by the Committee on HIV Prevention Strategies in the United States concluded that “[t]he Committee believes that investing hundreds of millions of dollars of federal and state funds over five years in abstinence-only programs with no evidence of effectiveness constitutes poor fiscal and public health policy” (Committee on HIV prevention... et. Al. 2001: 119). This of course was before the Obama

Administration cut much of the funding for the programs.

The core of the debate is the fact that research has found little to no effect of abstinence-only programs when it comes to reducing teenage pregnancies and the spread of STDs. The difference is that advocates for abstinence-only blame the lack of properly executed evaluations of the programs, while the opponents understand this as a failure of abstinence education. The effectiveness of these programs should be something that can be scientifically determined, and after several years of research the results still show little to no effect. It might be the case that more research is needed, and when it is done it will prove that abstinence-only is effective. However, for now, the claim that if we teach teens to abstain from sex then they will do so, lacks unambiguous empirical support and cannot be considered empirically tenable.

5.1.3 Normative Plausibility

The last criterion that the reasoning must fulfill is that of normative plausibility. When analyzing the first argument it is not obvious what the underlying values are. The advocates claim that the argument is solely built on health concerns, which in turn means that the value promoted is that we should strive to be as healthy as possible. While this is a value that many people would agree should underpin all public school education, it is also possible to find that a more latent norm is actually being promoted.

All three advocate groups argue that the safest way to avoid unwanted pregnancies and STDs is to remain abstinent *until marriage* and faithful thereafter. This way of reasoning promotes the institution of marriage which in itself is not a controversial norm to promote. Nevertheless, the implications of this value become problematic because the conception of marriage that these groups promote is limited to heterosexuals (CWA 1 2012; Focus on the Family 2 2012; FRC 2 2012). They all speak of homosexuality as something that is unnatural and should never be encouraged (FRC 2 2012; CWA 4 2012; Focus on the Family 7 2012). Moreover, most of the states that promote abstinence-only in their legislation and policies have not yet legalized same sex marriage, which eliminates that option for many young people in those states. This excludes one group of teenagers from the teaching of sexual education, since all they are taught is that if they do not plan to marry someone of the opposite sex, they are never allowed to have sex. Also being taught that one's sexual orientation is not considered natural may cause strong feelings of shame, low self-confidence, and risk of clinical depression. All the same negative mental consequences which the advocate groups claim that abstinence until marriage will eliminate.

Research has also suggested that teenagers that have participated in abstinence-only programs are at a greater risk of becoming pregnant or contracting a STD once they start having sex, because they were never taught how to use contraceptives (SIECUS 1 2012). Consequently, teaching abstinence-only might not lead to the highest health standard, which the advocates claim is their main concern. For these reasons the values underlying this way of arguing cannot be considered normatively plausible.

5.2 Argument 2

The message of abstinence-only is consistent with the health message of other high risk behaviors, such as: drug use, cigarette use, gun use, and drunk driving (Section 3.1.2).

5.2.1 Logical Validity

The premises supporting this argument are clear and not contradictory; they can all be true at the same time. However, premise three (teaching youths to just say ‘no’ works with other high risk behaviors, such as drug and cigarette use; therefore, it should also work with sex) could be considered irrelevant. If we accept premise 2 (we should send a consistent message to youths about how to handle high risk behaviors) then it would not matter if it works or not. If risk avoidance is the curricula for all other health education and we should send a consistent message to youths about it, then that is all we need to know. The premises are however not contradictory and they make a conclusive argument, therefore, they can be considered logically valid.

5.2.2 Empirical Strength

The second criterion is to determine whether the claims have any empirical support, and if this support can be considered tenable or not. Therefore, we have to investigate if any evidence is given to conclude that sex is a high risk behavior, if there are reasons as to why we should not send different messages about how to handle different high risk behaviors, and if teaching youths to just say no actually works with other high risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use.

It is true that sex can put you at risk of attracting a STD or becoming pregnant, and that these risks can be both physically and mentally harmful to teens. This is something that all three advocacy groups argue. CWA also points to a survey saying that “[s]exually active girls are three times more likely to be depressed and three times more likely to commit suicide than girls who are abstinent” (Elliot 2005). The FRC uses a study from WebMD to show that “[s]exually active females are 5 times more likely to be victimized by dating violence than girls who are abstinent” (FRC 2 2012). Moreover, there is not much controversy around the claim that sex includes risks. Even the opponents of abstinence-only argue that it can be risky to engage in sexual activities without protection, they are just more focused on risk reduction rather than risk avoidance. Therefore, it is justified to call sex a high risk behavior.

The claim that we should send a consistent message about how to handle high risk behaviors is slightly more problematic. The advocacy groups fail to provide any evidence for this position. Rather, they argue, without justification, that risk-reduction is unacceptable teaching in health education (Focus on the Family 6 2012). CWA argues in a similar way when claiming that in no other health

education curricula would we teach youths how to engage safely in high risk behaviors (Elliot 2005). Due to the lack of unambiguous evidence to support this claim, the only justification the advocacy groups have is the fact that every other health educator is teaching the same method. The advocates are pointing fingers rather than giving reasons for their position.

There is no evidence to believe that every high risk behavior should be treated the same, especially when there seem to be few reasons to believe that the method is actually working with sex. For example, the advocates are not very convincing when it comes to proving that drunk driving and sexual activity are equivalent. While it is true that, in the worst case scenario, both behaviors could lead to death, it is also true that sexual activity is the basis of human existence and drunk driving is not. Sex becomes acceptable, and even encouraged, after a certain point while few people would argue that drunk driving is okay as long as you are married or mature enough. For this claim to be considered empirically tenable it would need more support proving that sex is equivalent to every other high risk behavior and should therefore be treated the same.

The last claim, that the ‘just say no’-message works with reducing other high risk behaviors, also lacks evidence. Whilst the evidence may exist, the three advocacy groups subject to this analysis fail to provide it. It seems to be taken for granted, that because the method has widespread use, it must be working. But even though “[w]e don’t tell children not to do drugs and then give them clean syringes in case they do” (Elliot 2005), as CWA argues, the U.S has had the highest level of illicit drug-use in the world for quite some time now (Warner 2008). This suggests that the message of ‘just saying no’ might not have worked as intended. However, if it is true or not is irrelevant at this point since the advocates fail to provide any evidence at all for this claim.

5.2.3 Normative Plausibility

When it comes to the criterion of normative plausibility, the same conclusions drawn in the previous argument can be applied to this one. The advocacy groups claim that this argument too, emanates from the value of health, but also the promotion of heterosexual marriage. Therefore, because of the same reasons mentioned in Section 5.1.3, the values underlying this argument cannot be considered plausible.

5.3 Argument 3

Religion and morals play an important role in helping teens to delay premarital sex (Section 3.1.3).

5.3.1 Logical Validity

The third argument highlights the role of values in sexual education, and the three advocacy groups argue that it is important to teach the rights and wrongs of sexual activity (CWA 3 2012; Focus on the Family 4 2012). They claim that religion and morals help teenagers abstain from sex longer because the underlying values teach them that it would be morally wrong to engage in sex outside of marriage. Therefore, the way they are arguing, religion and morals become the means to achieving a given ends.

Although the premises are not contradictory, they are flawed because they are too vague to be conclusive. In attempting not to argue explicitly for Christian values, they speak more generally about it by referring to religion as a whole. The problem, however, is that religion and morals are overly vague concepts when they are not properly defined. So they can literally mean anything, which makes it very hard to determine if the argument is conclusive or not.

5.3.2 Empirical Strength

The claim that religion and morals play an important role in helping teens to delay premarital sex is very vague and not fully supported empirically. The three advocacy groups offer empirical evidence suggesting that girls especially, who pray and attend church, are less likely to have premarital sex, and there do not seem to be any claims to the contrary in the debate (i.e FRC 3 2012). Therefore, the argument can be considered partly justified. But at the same time the argument seems to suggest that if teenagers just had *any* morals or religious values, they would be better prepared to abstain from sex. This of course is problematic. According to the Christian morality of these three advocacy groups, teaching teenagers contraceptive use and speaking positively about homosexuality is deemed immoral. But what the advocates do not seem to recognize is that people that support comprehensive sex education do not lack morals or values, they just have different morals and values.

Furthermore, we can teach teens as much religion and morality as we want but they actually have to share those beliefs for them to be helpful. Teaching a young, homosexual, atheist that sex is only morally just in the context of a heterosexual marriage because it is what God wants, will probably not motivate him or her to be safer when it comes to sex. While Christian moral codes might provide an incentive to delay premarital sex for the people who share those beliefs, there is no evidence suggesting that *those kinds* of religion and morals play an important role in helping teens with other beliefs to delay premarital sex.

5.3.3 Normative Plausibility

As previously mentioned, the advocates argue that religion and morals should be taught in public schools as a means to higher health standards. As with the previous two arguments the advocates are officially arguing for higher health

standards, but in essence, what they are doing, is trying to justify teaching their own beliefs. It is problematic to accuse the advocacy groups for meaning something other than what they say publicly, however, there are good reasons to believe that this is the case. According to CWA their whole mission is to “bring Biblical principles into all levels of public policy” (CWA 1 2012). The mission statement of the FRC states that “FRC shapes public debate and formulates public policy that values human life and upholds the institutions of marriage and the family. Believing that God is the author of life, liberty, and the family [...]” (FRC 5 2012). And finally, Focus on the Family says that “Abstinence education provides one tool to defend God's design for marriage and sexual intimacy in the face of teenage sexual activity. As previously stated, abstinence-until-marriage education supports Christian orthodoxy but is *not* taught in a Christian context in the public school system” (Focus on the Family 7, 2012). Therefore, I argue that there are good reasons to believe that the real mission, the unofficial underlying value, is to promote and protect their personal Christian beliefs.

The premise that we should teach religion and morals if it helps teen delay premarital sex is a normative claim, but the vagueness of this argument is a result of the undefined concepts of religion and morals. ‘Religion’ and ‘morals’ are overly vague when not properly defined, so the conclusion of this argument is that we could teach the students anything so long as it helps them delay premarital sex.

To argue, as Focus on the Family does, that we should teach Christian values but just not call it Christian, makes it problematic for the critic. Which normative position is it that should be determined plausible? Is it the value of promoting Christian values in public policy, or is it that we should teach anything as long as it helps the students delay the initiation of sexual activity? Both normative positions are questionable. The first normative claim emanates from the right to one’s own beliefs, the right to religious liberty. However, the implications of this claim are that you can end up violating someone else's religious liberty. If we started teaching Christian morals and values in public schools, we would violate the rights of the people that do not share the Christian worldview. Consequently, the implication of this normative position is that its implementation would undermine the value that it seeks to promote.

6 Conclusion and Discussion

After applying Beckman's three criteria on the three arguments, it is possible to see that the arguments are flawed in many ways. While most of the arguments are logically valid, many of them lack empirical evidence to support the claims made. Furthermore, the advocates constantly claim that the arguments stem from the value of health which has proven to be problematic. Because there is no unambiguous evidence supporting the claim that abstinence-only programs make teenagers abstain from sex, it makes it invalid to argue that abstinence-only leads to the expected health benefits. If there was proof that abstinence-only works, then this conclusion would look very differently. However, for now, it seems like the other values and norms being taught in abstinence-only classes cause more harm than good, which in turn undermines the value the advocates claim to hold. Therefore, the arguments cannot be considered normatively plausible either.

The problem is that the advocacy groups all claim that the programs are working. But after thoroughly analyzing the material I still cannot find proof of this. Besides, the advocacy groups themselves have said many times that more research needs to be done. So until they can provide a coherent report stating the scientific facts of the benefits of abstinence-only programs, the claim cannot be considered valid.

The question that arises is why the advocates are still so prone to keep teaching abstinence-only in public schools? They argue that the healthiest option for teenagers would be to abstain from sex until marriage, but, as previously mentioned, abstinence-only education does not lead to more teenagers abstaining from sex. So if abstinence-only was only a means to the goal of making teenagers healthier, then they should recognize that it has not worked and consider a different method. Obviously there is something more to it, and this is where the third argument of religion and morals comes in.

The advocates have realized that it is impossible to argue that only Christian morals should be taught in public schools. They know that courts take the First Amendment seriously and the favoring of a certain belief system in public schools is refuted. Consequently, they have learned to argue in a more general way when it comes to the issue of values, and which values should be taught. Instead of saying that people favoring comprehensive sex education teach the wrong morals and values, they argue that they have no morals or values. That makes it possible for them to claim that abstinence-only is the only sexual education program that offers moral guidance and values surrounding sex, even if they are Christian morals. This argument is not only absurd but it is also too vague to be logically coherent, since religion and morals can really mean anything if not properly defined.

Since much of the debate around sex education has been in a deadlock, and both sides spend much time ridiculing one another, this analysis has been an attempt to take the advocacy groups seriously. But after reaching the conclusion that the arguments are not enough to justify the teaching of abstinence-only in public schools, the question is still what we do now? Comprehensive sex education is getting more support from the public, and especially from the current federal administration. But the proponents of abstinence-only still consider comprehensive sex education immoral, and thirteen states still stress abstinence in their legislation and policies.

The advocacy groups are entitled to their beliefs, and religious liberty grants them the right to act out these beliefs. But what they do not have the right to do is force those beliefs onto others, especially not in public schools. I dare argue that the advocates' time and effort would probably be better spent if they started organizing abstinence-only programs in their churches or societies instead of trying to have public schools adopt them.

Sexual education is an important issue in all societies, especially since it is so closely linked to other policy-areas. It goes hand in hand with public health issues, the development of public education, and the question of religion in public settings. It is important to get it right because it could be the key to a healthy, intelligent, well-educated next generation. Public schools should be a place that allows young students to flourish, prepares them for adulthood, and where no one is left behind. To exclude someone for being homosexual is as bad as excluding someone for being Christian.

Trying different solutions to a problem is a positive thing, but it is even better to know when to move on. We are far from finished with the development of sexual education programs. This paper points out inconsistencies in the arguments proposed by the advocacy groups. Further research needs to be conducted in order to establish how future policies are implemented. These new policies must be based on arguments that are logically valid, empirically strong, and normatively plausible. This paper provides evidence that the arguments proposed by abstinence-only advocates fail to meet these criteria, and as such should be largely ignored in the consideration of new and effective sexual education policies.

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