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Sex Education and Young Women's Sexual Empowerment

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Sex Education and Young Women's Sexual Empowerment
By Devon Paolini and Katie Standish

In an effort to connect two areas of feminist thought in a new way, the question is posed: how does sex education impact young women's sexual empowerment? There is little material combining both the area of sex education and of women's sexual empowerment; thus our research is the first to combine these areas in a qualitative study. This research is especially important in Ontario's current social climate, where there is great concern over a new sex education curriculum and the presence of rape culture and sexual violence on university and college campuses. We engaged in one focus group, three individual interviews, and two qualitative surveys. The semi-structured interviews used a feminist methodology to attempt a conversational flow for the comfort of the participants, the depth of the responses, mutuality, reciprocity, and to disrupt the researcher-participant power dynamic. The interviews, surveys, and analysis explored the ways that sex education impacts the sexual empowerment of our participants, including creation of discourse and internalization of messages. The study will place value in women's experiences, normalize negative feelings of participants, and critically analyze constructed frameworks impressed upon participants. This is done by employing Dorothy Smith's theory "relations of ruling," which will acknowledge intersectional identities and experiences. We utilized the inherent orientation of social action and change in feminist study in the analysis of the interview findings. We found that sex education was a source of negative messages about women, sex, and sexuality that led to the sexual disempowerment of young women. Furthermore, participants constructed their definitions and journeys of sexual empowerment in opposition to the external influences of their adolescent years. Thus, in order to help young women with their sexual empowerment, sex education must be a source for positive messages about women, sex, and sexuality.