

Quality schooling has little impact on teenage sexual activity

February 8 2008

A report published in the online open access journal, *BMC Public Health*, shows that socio-economic situation and the local high school catchment area have a more powerful influence on reported sexual experience among 15 and 16 year olds than classroom discipline or the quality of relationships within schools.

This is the first study to attempt to look beyond the formal sex education curriculum and assess whether the way in which schools are run, in terms of their organisation and social relationships, can affect levels of sexual activity amongst pupils. A team of researchers from Glasgow and Edinburgh analysed data on nearly 5000 pupils from 24 different Scottish Schools. They found that overall 42% of girls and 33% of boys reported experience of sexual intercourse, but the rates between schools ranged widely, from 23% to 61%.

“Schools have the potential to influence their pupils’ behaviour through the school’s social organisation and culture, as well as through the formal curriculum,” said study lead author Dr Marion Henderson from the Medical Research Council Social and Public Health Sciences Unit in Glasgow. “The idea of Health Promoting Schools – whereby schools move beyond their formal health education curricula to examine how their policies and practices throughout the school affect the health and well-being of pupils – is now encouraged by government.”

However, the study found that how well a school is run appeared to have little influence at all on sexual behaviour. Once the researchers had

accounted for all the known predictors of sexual activity (parental monitoring, individual socio-economic factors, the age of pupils, their levels of personal spending money or the proportion of their friends perceived to be having sex) – the variance between schools dropped sharply. The characteristics of a school, including relationships between teachers and pupils, appearance, discipline and the school's layout, showed only a very weak impact on the rates of sexual experience.

The results revealed that school level socio-economic factors remain very influential even after individual pupils' socio-economic status is taken into account. Dr Henderson explained: “School-level socio-economic factors, such as levels of deprivation, do have a big influence. This suggests that an individual who is deprived but attending a school with an affluent catchment area may be discouraged from sexual activity, whilst an affluent individual attending a school with a deprived catchment area may be encouraged towards earlier sexual intercourse.”

Source: BioMed Central

Citation: Quality schooling has little impact on teenage sexual activity (2008, February 8)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2008-02-quality-schooling-impact-teenage-sexual.html>

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