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(Ab)normality, Adolescence and the Politics of Need Interpretation in Three American Sex Education Programs

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(Ab)normality, adolescence and the politics of need interpretation in three
American sex education programs



Senior Project submitted to
the Division of Social Studies
at Bard College
by Analiese Rose Dorff

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- My brain, for not shutting down on me too badly
- All the beautiful friendships I have been a part of over the years- I am so lucky to know so many kind, creative, smart, passionate people who have made my life so much better.

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Chapter 1:

The Case of the Missing Clitoris: an introduction to the politics of need interpretation in American sex education

I first became interested in sex-educational needs while going over my interview with Justin, one of the educators I spoke with for this project, who is currently assisting the Williams Center, the organization he works for, in restructuring its decades-old curriculum. During our interview, Justin, a soft-spoken man who gave careful consideration to each question I asked him, told me about process of creating this new curriculum, which is largely preoccupied with interpreting what schools' sex-educational needs are. "We send out a survey to schools asking, 'What are the topics that you would like to have discussed?' So that's one, their voiced need.... Then, also, a big part of it is us trying to figure out what we feel as educators are things that maybe the schools didn't say that they think their kids are in need of but are those other things that we know they're not necessarily learning." This was a recurring theme with the interviews and the content I looked at: the invocation of need, and the recurring sentiment that educators had to 'figure out' what schools, students and parents needed outside of what they expressed.

Later that day, I had moved on to attempting to code the curricular content Justin generously provided me with: two booklets (a blue one for boys, a pink one for girls) explaining the mechanics of puberty, meant for 4th and 5th grade students. When I reached the section in the girls' booklet on reproductive anatomy, I could tell something was amiss, though I didn't know immediately what. After staring at the diagrams and re-reading the carefully worded descriptions of each part of the female reproductive system, it hit me: the clit was gone!

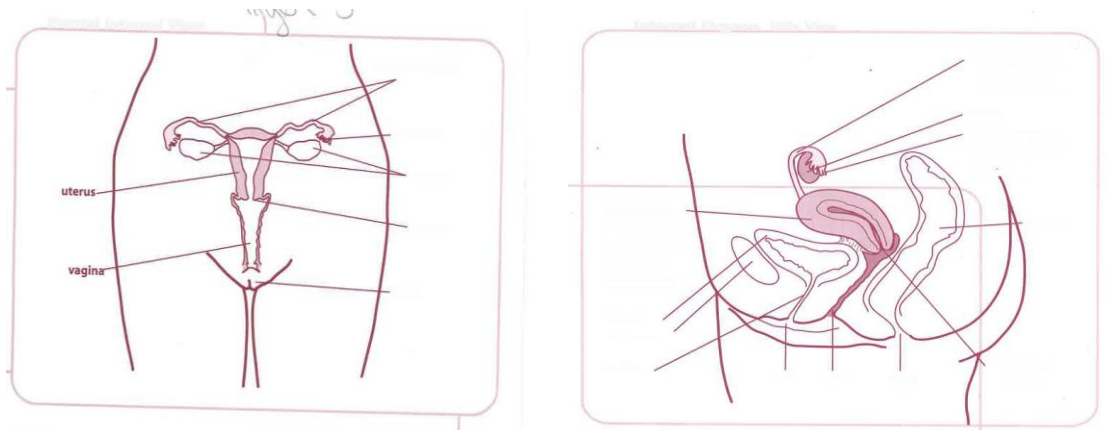


Figure 1: diagrams of the female reproductive system in Williams' puberty booklet for girls; sans clitoris

Much to my dismay, there was not one single mention about the clitoris in the entire pink booklet. This omission troubled me very much, although I could understand why that choice was made- it must be difficult explaining the clitoris, famous for its 8,000 nerve endings and for being the *only* human body part completely dedicated to sexual pleasure, to 10 and 11 year-old girls. And, I

supposed, they could justify not including it because it plays no role in baby-making. Still- it bothered me. In the boys' booklet they tackled erections and wet dreams, the penile products of arousal and pleasure, without pause. I thought back to my interview with Justin and hoped that he and the other educators at Williams could 'figure out' that this integral part of human sexuality deserved at least a mention.

I started to think more and more about needs and how sex education programs deem what is necessary to discuss with students, and what is not. Prior to doing this research, it never occurred to me to interrogate how institutions meet the needs of the communities they serve. With sex ed in particular, it seemed pretty self-evident: kids, as they get older, need to know about sex and puberty in order to keep themselves safe and have healthy relationships with others. Disputes emerged from outside of the need and stemmed from people's own hangups around sexuality.

In Nancy Fraser's *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Theory* (1989), she lays out a framework for understanding the politics of need in late-capitalist societies, a category of discourse which often goes uninterrogated. Fraser discusses how the interpretation of needs becomes more and more complicated as the need in question gets 'thicker,' which "[brings] into view the contextual and contested character of needs claims" (Fraser 1989, 163).

While Fraser's work deals primarily with gender and its relation to the welfare state,

her theorization of needs and their interpretations as a political product is a useful way to think about sex education, a much contested “thick need.” Needs that are thin appear simple and uncontentious, but ‘thicken’ and stir up political controversy when their causes and potential solutions are elucidated in the public sphere. While most people can agree that children are in need of sex education, this thin, or general need gets thicker as logistics are discussed: What, exactly do kids need to know about sex? Who determines what the needs are, and how these needs are addressed? How are needs prioritized? What subjects do not need addressing, and what is done with them? What don’t students need to know? What risks do they need to be protected from, and how do we protect them most effectively? What (if any) values about sex and relationships should be transmitted?

In this thesis I apply Fraser’s framework of needs interpretation to American sex-educational programming. I examine the discourses the organizations I studied invoke in interpreting the needs of their students (and their students’ families), and the strategies educators use to meet those needs as they are interpreted. Whether or not they accepted them as truth, the educators I interviewed engaged with essentialized understandings of human sexual development in the process of interpreting needs, and discussed these needs with me in ways that entrenched their authority as sexuality experts, while constructing parents as insufficient sources of this official knowledge and students as susceptible to misinformation and sexual harm. I argue that a needs-informed approach to sexuality education

necessarily omits and trivializes those topics that *aren't* 'needed,' which leads to inconsistent coverage of these topics and denies young people access to certain sites of sexual knowledge. As a result of the politics of sex-educational needs interpretation, human sexuality and adolescence are rendered two-dimensional and the potential of the sex education classroom as a liberatory space is significantly diminished. In the rest of this first chapter, I will outline the current realities and historical positioning of American sex education, review the literature on this topic, discuss my theoretical framing of this project, detail my methodological practices, and discuss my positionality and limitations within my research.

Laying the groundwork for a theory of sex-educational needs

The current realities of sex education in the US

In order to write about the social, cultural and historical nuances of sex ed instruction, it is first necessary to describe the current state of sex education in the U.S. Sex education curricula encompass a wide variety of topics related to human sexuality, including contraceptives and prophylactics, STIs (sexually transmitted infections), human anatomy and development, pregnancy, relationships and gender and sexual identity, among many others. Most commonly, adolescents receive formal sex education through school classes, after-school programs, and public health campaigns. Sex education is a required part of public schooling by twenty-four states as well as in Washington, D.C (Guttmacher Institute 2017). Twenty-six

states require sex education to be “age appropriate,” thirteen require that the information provided in sex ed and HIV education be medically accurate, eight require that programs must contain information that is “appropriate for a student’s cultural background and not be biased against any race, sex or ethnicity,” and two states forbid programs from promoting religion (2017). The amount of sex education a student receives and at what age they receive it can vary from several weeks to several hours, depending on their school district and state requirements. While the content of the many extant sex ed programs across the country differs greatly, the mission remains largely the same: to educate teens about what it means to engage in healthy, safe sexual behavior. Sex education programming in America is framed one of two ways: abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM), which, as one might imagine, only covers strategies to remain abstinent from sexual activity until marriage; and comprehensive education, which covers different methods of contraception in addition to discussing abstinence (but frequently stresses abstinence as the only ‘foolproof’ way of remaining safe from sexually transmitted infection).

Much of the research on sex education takes the form of quantitative studies, systematic reviews and meta-analyses that evaluate which type of programming is most successful at preventing STI outbreaks and pregnancy among teens, and which factors inform the outcomes of different sex education models. These studies often compare comprehensive programming to abstinence programming.

This body of work is so large, in fact, that it has even warranted a comprehensive review of the comprehensive reviews of sex education (Denford, Abraham, Campbell & Busse, 2017). The results of these myriad studies are conflicting and difficult to evaluate, since sex education is still quite controversial and many researchers have their own political biases. While this research is valuable and continual contributions are necessary in understanding what works and what doesn't in sex education, my project does not align with this body of work. Instead of attempting to determine whether or not curricula are successful in their missions, which is difficult to determine and highly based on extraneous social factors, I aim to explore qualitatively how cultural and historical discourses on gender, sexuality and adolescence play themselves out through instruction of sex education, and what the implications of this are.

There has been a good amount of research done on sex education in the realm of qualitative study, much of which I have pulled from in doing this research. Content analyses of state and federal policies, curricula and teaching material tell us much about the discursive work that sex education does to reproduce cultural values and norms. Much of this literature focuses on which topics are missing from the majority of sex ed classrooms in the U.S. (such as non-heterosexual orientations and discussions of sexual pleasure/masturbation) and the implications of their absence.

A common way of studying sex education in America, both through qualitative and quantitative methods, is to approach it through a comparative framework, looking at sex education by contrasting abstinence-only programming with comprehensive programming. This approach is informed by the truism that Americans are polarized in their views on sex: Kristin Luker's comparison of "sexual conservatives" versus "sexual liberals" in *When Sex Goes to School* (2006) is an example of this. Luker, who chose extreme examples from each category as her subjects, describes the highly polarizing differences in sexual liberals' and sexual conservatives' opinions on school sex education. Luker describes what is perceived to be at stake on each side of this culture war, but in electing to neglect the large "sexual middle," those who are not moved to fight either for or against, she is prevented from discussing potential similarities in Americans' views on sex education. By assessing populations and texts without using a comparative framework to understand sex education, I found that there were some surprising similarities between my three case studies and how they interpreted students' and their families' sex-educational needs.

Less commonly found is ethnographic and interview-based research, especially research that focuses on sex ed instructors. I was unable to locate many texts which studied the American sex education classroom in this way, and the ones I did find were from two or more decades ago. In that time, many things have changed which could possibly have had an influence on sex ed instruction at the

micro level: LGBTQ identities are understood in different ways and are being increasingly discussed in schools; the advent of the internet has led to easy access to sexual content, even for children and teens; race and class demographics have shifted; new laws and policies on school sex education have been implemented.

In addition to looking at work that focuses on sex education, I also consulted literature having to do with cultural constructions of childhood, adolescent sexuality, and what roles the institutions of the family and the school take on in regulating these. Through reading texts like these, I was able to fold new theories into my research and gain a better understanding of how sex education instruction is influenced by cultural conceptions of childhood, adolescence.

An overview of the literature on these subjects corroborates the idea that teaching sex education is not like teaching math, science or history. In the US, sex education instructors have to navigate cultural, political and ethical understandings of human sexuality as well as diverging opinions regarding how and what should be taught to adolescents. My research draws upon empirical and theoretical texts which explore conceptions of adolescent sexuality, historical analyses of the practices and politics of sex education in America, studies of sexuality and gender as they appear in schools and critical analyses of the content of sex education policies and curricula.. In the rest of this introductory chapter, I will lay out the history of sex ed in America, outline the theoretical framing of my project and discuss my methodology in gathering my data.

Historical overview of sex education

A historically and culturally grounded understanding of sex education is necessary to fully grasp the nuances of teaching sex ed to teenagers in the present day. I incorporated historical and discursive analyses of sex education in America into my research in order to obtain an understanding of the trajectory of the subject, as well as the evolution of the political and social climate around it. Notable histories of sex education are Jeffrey Moran's *Teaching Sex: the Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (2001), which charts the development of sex education and its relationship to adolescence throughout the 20th century; and Janice M. Irvine's *Talk About Sex* (2002) which is a discursive history of political battles over sex education in the US starting in the 1960s. Two periods are particularly important in the history of sex education: the early twentieth century, when sex ed was first implemented, and from 1960-onward, in which sex education became a political minefield in the culture wars occurring between extreme liberal and religious-conservative political factions.

Sex education first came into being in the United States, at the beginning of the twentieth century (Zimmerman 2015). This first iteration of sex education was implemented by progressive reformers (a term which encompasses a wide variety of actors, including doctors, suffragists, temperance advocates and public health officials) as an attempt to regulate sexual behavior seen as dangerous or immoral, and to instill a hygienic sexual ethos. Many of these reformers were associated with

the eugenics movement, and part of their mission was to eradicate “feeble-mindedness,” a quality associated with a lack of intelligence and a penchant for destructive and dangerous behavior (Trudell 1993, 11).¹ Progressives encouraged more open discussion of sexual activity out of concern for the proliferation of venereal disease, prostitution and other sexual vices (Moran 2000). Educational programming was implemented in the hopes of combating these social ills by teaching individuals to police themselves and their urges. At first, these reformers targeted at-risk adult populations with pamphlets and slideshows which urged men to stay out of brothels and detailed the gruesome ramifications of venereal diseases. However, tactics changed when the realization was made that adults were, in many cases, “already corrupted” by sexual vice (Moran 2000, 36). The desire to implement sex education was not only informed by the fear of disease, but by the concern for the population’s moral character and fear of corruption by amoral sexual practices. As a result, the focus was shifted from corrupted adults to the uncorrupted and malleable youth of America. It was quickly realized that best way to reach this youth population was through public schools. Initially, the type of sex education that proved to be the most effective was what was referred to as “emergency sex education” that dealt with disease prevention (Moran 2000, 113).

During the “intermediate area,” the period from 1920-60, sex education shifted

¹ Of course, it was not a coincidence that those considered to be ‘feeble-minded’ by eugenicists concerned with the racial purity of those of Western European descent were most frequently sex workers, people of color and members of the lower classes.

from being about the biology (and epidemiology) of sexuality to the psychological and sociological aspects of it (Huber & Firmin 2014, 32). “Family life education,” as it was called during the 1940s and 1950s, instructed students in relationship building,

character, household economics and, of course, marriage. Students were told that it was necessary to practice abstinence from sexual activity in order to cultivate a healthy marriage and provide for future children (Huber & Firmin 2014, 35-36).

While support for sex education varied greatly from school to school, sex education did not become a target of



Figure 2: Dr. Mary Calderone with a fan of SIECUS pamphlets, 1963.

national outrage until the latter half of the 20th century. Before the outrage, however, comprehensive sex education was by and large noncontroversial and even regarded as beneficial. Popular support for sex education in the US took off in the 1960s and 1970s, with the founding of SEICUS by Dr. Mary Calderone in 1964, as well as a cultural shift towards more sexually liberal values among young people

(Irvine 2002). During the 60s and 70s, the majority of Americans supported comprehensive sex education. Ideas about female empowerment and the liberatory qualities of sexual expression were gaining momentum. The notion that women had other options than to become wives and mothers became more prevalent, helped along by the invention of the contraceptive pill and the landmark court cases *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), which determined birth control a constitutional right (*The Birth* 2015) . This increased access to contraception, the increasing visibility of sexual vices like homosexuality, and the constitutionalization of abortion during this period was deeply disturbing to many Americans. Opposition to comprehensive sex education was primarily a result of the rise of the Christian right, a powerful political conglomerate which emerged in the 1970s out of a growing concern with the moral state of the country and the potential destruction of American family life. Concurrent with the rise of the Christian right, moral panic took hold across the country, fixated on the threat of (sexual) perversion and harm to innocent minors, typically portrayed as white children from nuclear suburban families (Lancaster 2011). Resistance to sex education heavily depended on the production of emotional responses to perceived societal threats. By disseminating what Irvine calls 'depravity narratives,' accounts of young children being exposed to perverse and immoral behavior in their sex education classes, the Christian Right gained widespread support in its opposition to sex education (54-58). In the end, they got what they wanted: in 1981 Ronald

Reagan passed the Adolescent Family Life Act, which provided funding only to abstinence-focused sex education programs (Huber & Firmin 2014). This act set a trend in federal funding, and the Clinton and (G.W.) Bush administrations both allocated funding only to abstinence programs. Advocates for comprehensive sex education during the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s still made many great strides in their mission: knowledge of contraceptives and prophylactics were worked into the HIV education programming brought on by the AIDS crisis, comprehensive sex education still received much funding as a result of a misunderstanding of the two different programs and a rebranding of comprehensive sex ed as “abstinence-plus” sex ed (Landry 1999). As a result of the Obama administration increasing funding for comprehensive programming and eliminating funding for abstinence-only programming, comprehensive programs receive more federal funding than abstinence-only programs, though funding of abstinence programs has increased (and probably will continue to increase) with the Trump administration (Donovan 2017).

The historical trajectory of sex education and the social conditions which it produces is continually informed by the extant realities produced by cultural hegemony. In the following section, I will continue my review of the literature related to sex education and discuss my framing of this project.

Theoretical framing: linking the discourses sex educators use to interpret need

Constructing adolescent sexuality

It is clear that, whether one is 'sexually liberal,' 'sexually conservative,' or part of the 'sexual middle,' America (as a state apparatus) is afraid of unchecked teenage sexuality, which is associated with great personal risk as well as the denigration of the family. My research also operates on the understanding that the sex education class is a space where hegemonic conceptions of race, class, gender and sexuality intersect to inform the ideals that all Americans should aspire to as sexual citizens.

The image of an adult frankly and explicitly discussing sexual matters with someone under the age of eighteen is one that most people are uncomfortable with, yet it is also considered a necessary preventative act in keeping teens from engaging in risky sexual behavior. Since childhood is seen as requiring protection from the potentially damaging effects of premature exposure to sex, the transition between childhood and adolescence, when an individual becomes a sexual being in the eyes of society, is rife with complications and contradictions. It is a common perception that teens experience powerful romantic and sexual urges as part of their development, yet it is also commonly accepted that they are not 'supposed' to act on them (though many, of course, do: data shows that in the U.S., the majority of teenagers ages 17-19 are sexually active, as are roughly 30% of 15-16 year olds (Finer & Philbin 2013). Various mechanisms are set up to thwart teenagers from engaging in sexual activity. This is because unregulated adolescent sexuality, for which American society has not created space, has the potential to do great harm to the (middle class, white, heterosexual) family, who constitute the ideal formation

of the American citizen. Those involved in sex education are tasked with navigating the precarity of initiating these former-children/not-quite-adults into sexually responsible practices.

People did not begin to conceptualize childhood as a time of innocence which warranted protection until the advent of modernization in Western nations. Philippe Ariès, tracing the historical trajectory of cultural understandings of childhood, writes that

the child under the age of puberty was believed to be unaware of or indifferent to sex. Thus gestures and allusions [to sexuality] had no meaning for him; they became purely gratuitous and lost their sexual significance... the idea did not yet exist that references to sexual matters, even when virtually devoid of dubious meanings, could soil childish innocence, either in fact or in the opinion people had of it: *nobody thought innocence existed* [emphasis mine] (1965, 106).

Ariès argues that the concept of childhood innocence, as opposed to childhood indifference to sex, was created by religious “moralists and pedagogues,” and gradually gained acceptance all over Europe (106). With this shift, children, who were previously conceived as ‘unaware of’ sex, started needing protection and safeguarding against harmful exposure to adult sexual matters. Thus, new sexual norms and values were created which further shielded children from exposure to lewd and perverse sexual expression. The primary guardians of childhood innocence, who were responsible for protecting children from both their own

burgeoning and unregulated sexualities² and external displays of lewdness, were parents. As society began to understand “sexuality and masturbation as fundamental to the problem of the incorrigible” (Foucault 2003, 61) around the beginning of the 18th century, expressions of childhood sexuality were increasingly pathologized and associated with physical deformity. The child masturbator became one of the “monsters” of the Victorian era, the product of an unholy union between overt sexuality, shameless self-pleasuring and supposedly innocent childhood. In his lectures on the genealogy of abnormality, Foucault describes how the nuclear family responsibility for child sexuality, and in exchange the state acquired control over the child’s body and mind through education- Foucault describes this as a “trap” because, as is apparent today, the state has also absorbed control over child sexuality (2003, 255-256).

Around the turn of the century, another shift in the conceptualization of childhood occurred. Economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer writes how children, once valuable as potential wage earners and domestic laborers, came to be understood as “economically worthless but emotionally priceless” (Zelizer 1994, 3). This shift, which was enacted through changing child labor laws and educational policies, stripped children of their earning potential and placed higher emotional value on their ability to have a childhood free of economic and familial obligation. This shift

² In *Abnormal*, Foucault describes the masturbating child as one of the “monsters” of the Victorian world, and highlights their association of childhood masturbation with the acquisition of physical deformity

mostly occurred among lower-income populations, who previously depended on their children to help contribute to the family income, while middle and upper class children during this time were already sentimentalized (Zelizer 1994, 6). This sentimentalization of children was more easily obtained by the middle class, and further reaffirmed the valuation of the white, heterosexual and middle class nuclear family, forever cemented into the American consciousness as the ultimate ideal of family life.

What happens when these worthless-yet-priceless children start to grow up? While previously there was no intermediary stage between childhood and adulthood, the category of adolescence emerged during the early twentieth century as a way to classify those beings who had “reached puberty but were too young to marry.” (Moran 2000, 1) One aspect of adolescence, an aspect which triggered considerable cultural anxiety, was an awakening of sexual desire. The formation of adolescence as a biological, psychological, and cultural stage in human development was first theorized by American psychologist G. Stanley Hall. Hall’s theorization of adolescence was influenced by a Victorian understanding of the sexual self, constructed as a dangerous impulse which was to be regulated in order to achieve true virtue (Moran 2000). From the get-go, adolescence, an American invention, was associated primarily with unregulated libidinal urges which posed a threat to society and the individual’s own well being. Adolescent sexuality required careful control if they were to grow into civilized and rational adults.

This new theory of adolescence also served to reinforce ideas of white supremacy. Hall's work was informed by anthropological studies which promoted the biological and cultural superiority of the white race and constructed other races as inferior and lagging behind on the path of human evolution. In this theory of recapitulation, humans live out the progression of this hierarchy as they age, stopping at whichever point of development the race they belong to is at (Moran 2000). Adolescents, with their burgeoning sexual appetites, "[recapitulated] the savage stage of the race's past" (Prescott 1998, 17). Adolescence was the period of time in which 'savage' sexual desires developed, and required civilization in order to reach the mental and physical capabilities only obtainable by whites. The overt racism of Hall's work on adolescence has fallen out of fashion over time, yet it is important to acknowledge this aspect of the theory and to consider the implications of it within more contemporary understandings of adolescent sexuality, as a period of development characterized by instability, abnormality and risk.

The category of adolescence, especially as Hall theorized it has had great staying power. Amy Schalet's study of adolescent sexuality in the U.S. and the Netherlands found that while parents in the Netherlands emphasized love relationships and incorporated their teens' sexual expressions into the realm of the family, American parents thought of teen sex as a "biologically driven, individually based activity which causes disruption to the teenager as well as the family"

(Schalet 2000, 88). In the latter context, teenagers are considered to be “not-yet-fully moral, not-yet-fully sensible beings who have not internalized sufficiently the moral standards imparted to them,” (2000, 88) echoing Hall’s assertion that adolescent sexuality required control and regulation if they were to become civilized and rational individuals. Because of their “raging hormones” (2000, 75) and low impulse control, these “fluid and fragile” teenagers are regarded as incapable of having the stable, long-term (implicitly heterosexual) romantic relationships which are considered healthy, mature and normal for adults. For this reason, teen sex is dangerous to the family and the home. The exile of teenage sexuality from the home and the family is further naturalized by its relation to a “deeply rooted belief that in a ‘real family’ only the husband and wife have sex” (2000, 89). These normative standards inform how and which information about sexuality is transmitted, both formally and informally, to teenagers.

Formal education, in addition to the family, is another institution through which culture gets reproduced. Schools select bits and pieces of information from a wide body of knowledge to impart to students. What is included and what is excluded, what is emphasized and what is trivialized, how this information is conveyed, depends largely on the values and priorities of the dominant culture. Educational theorist Michael Apple writes, “Since they preserve and distribute what is perceived to be ‘legitimate knowledge’—the knowledge that ‘we all must have,’ schools confer cultural legitimacy on the knowledge of specific groups. But this is

not all, for the ability of a group to make its knowledge into ‘knowledge for all’ is related to that group’s power in the larger political and economic arena” (Apple 1979, 63-64). ‘Legitimate knowledge,’ which Apple also refers to as “official knowledge” (1996), is positivistic knowledge, positioned as ‘rational’ and ‘logical.’

All three of the programs I studied called upon the legitimizing knowledge produced by scientific research to strengthen the claims they were making about the strength of their curricula and the accuracy of their information. While I will not make an attempt to unpack all the work that has been done in this area, it is worth noting here that the relative objectivity of science has been a subject of theoretical debate for many, many decades. Many writers have critiqued the idea that scientific discourse is absent of subjectivity and have warned against the dangers of blindly accepting science as truth. Donna Haraway notes that scientific discourses can “act as legitimating meta-languages that produce homologies between social and symbolic systems” (1991, 42), and that, through this process, science becomes closely aligned with common-sensical understandings of how things are. This conflation often leads to a ‘scientific,’ naturalized justification of essentialism, which can be difficult to extricate from how we conceive of identity. Emily Martin (2003) analyzed biology textbooks’ descriptions of fertilization to show the social constructions of masculinity and femininity embedded within them, which were adhered to even when those portrayals were proven to be erroneous. Scientific disciplines like phrenology and eugenics, once thought to be objective but

now generally considered problematic, have played significant roles in naturalizing socially constructed racist, classist and ableist social hierarchies. In making this point I am definitely not trying to discredit the usefulness of empirical data and the benefits of unbiased research; merely, I am problematizing the uncritical adoption of “scientific fact” as the basis for much of sex education, as these facts can be shaped to support potentially harmful constructions of normalcy and sexuality.

In addition to providing information backed up by objective science and data, another important need outlined by these programs- whether they agreed with it or not- was the need for sexuality educators to discuss the ramifications of “risky sexual behavior” and how to avoid them. Risk and adolescence have always gone hand-in-hand, especially in American conceptualizations of teenagerdom (Schalet 2000, Moran 2001,), and many public health studies have been enacted to understand and resolve teens’ propensity for engaging in risky behaviors. One of the key goals of the guidelines laid out by the National Sexuality Education Standards is for sexuality educators to emphasize to students their susceptibility to these risks when they engage in any sort of sexual behavior, and to encourage them to evaluate the risk potential of sexual activity: “It is widely understood that many young people do not perceive that they are susceptible to the risks of certain behaviors, including sexual activity. Learning activities should encourage students to assess the relative risks of various behaviors, without exaggeration, to highlight

their susceptibility to the potential negative outcomes of those behaviors” (NSES 2011, 10).

The tendency of these programs to focus on risk has historical precedence: In the wake of the AIDS epidemic, most sexuality education programs geared towards teens in the U.S. emphasize the inherent risk present in teen sex, particularly the dangers of STI contraction and becoming pregnant. This history has been written about by a number of scholars (García 2009, Patton 1996, Fields and Tolman 2006, Luker 1996), who have problematized these constructions of risk, highlighting the ramifications of the stigmatization placed upon teens who do engage in ‘risky’ sexual behaviors, the need for a contextualization of these ‘risks’ based on socioeconomic conditions, and the frequent intersections with racism, homophobia and classism found within risk-focused sex education.

Despite the findings of these scholars and their implications, which all suggest that framing sex as a risk does not benefit teens, curricula which emphasize the riskiness of teen sex is still the norm. It would be highly unusual for a school to have a sex education program which did not treat sexuality as a forbidden and unknowable entity, due to the always-palpable discomfort with teenage sexuality. Even sex education that is billed as “comprehensive” rarely covers *everything* there is to know about human sexuality. Certain topics and pedagogical approaches are routinely omitted from programs due to a desire to

discourage behavior constructed as risky or deviant and in order to remain age appropriate.

The content of sex education classes is informed by the work that schools and educators do to reproduce these deeply entrenched conceptions of family, gender and sex, and what constitutes legitimate knowledge sources, which pervade all sex education classrooms in some shape or form. Sex education classes say much about certain subjects and little about others. This prioritization of a specific mode of sexual being has negative ramifications from. These assumptions work to flatten and thin out the range of desires that young people, particularly young marginalized people, are entitled to envision. These, which fall under the category of “thick desire” (Fine & McClelland 2006, 300) include sexual freedom, protection from violence and meaningful engagement with society, all of which are at stake for teens as they learn what sexuality means in this cultural context. By prioritizing heterosexual, bourgeois ideals through sexuality education, those desires are put into jeopardy and contribute to the larger project of symbolic and structural violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) against marginalized communities. The space allocated to topics like pregnancy, sexual orientation, desire, pleasure and family planning, and how these topics are discussed, is informed by a shared understanding that the bourgeois, middle-class, nuclear family is a universal ideal and an achievable goal for all Americans. This ideal is undermined by many other,

non-normative modes of existence, which many sex education classes delegitimize, intentionally or not.

Many studies show the ramifications of these processes: Through the enforcement of heteronormativity and the lack of discussion of sexual orientation and issues specific to gender and sexual minority populations (aside from HIV education, in which gay men are often demonized), the needs of LGBTQIA students are neglected (Cianciotto & Cahill 2012). By constructing teenage pregnancy as a social problem among low-income youth of color and placing the onus only on teenage girls to prevent it, double sexual standards are upheld and 'risky' populations of teen girls are heterosexualized and only taught about pregnancy prevention, one aspect of many under the sexual health umbrella (Mann 2013, Garcia 2009). In both situations, inequality is reinforced in the attempt to get students to adhere to the prescribed ideal of middle-class family life.

It is also important to acknowledge the agency and active involvement of the individual doing the teaching, as well as that of the students. As Bonnie Trudell discusses in her ethnography of a sex ed classroom, individual sex education classrooms are informed by the students' and teachers' interest level, workload, course requirements, teaching style, socioeconomic context and many more variables (1993). This means that educators have a role in shaping how ideas are transmitted.

Methodology

At the core of my research on sex education is an understanding that certain naturalized ideas which uphold cultural hegemony are present in the way that sex education is taught and within its educational materials; as well as an understanding that sex education teachers (and students) are not passive conduits for these ideas, but, as Trudell points out, active participants in their transmission. These ideas include conceptions of adolescence, sexuality, family structures, relationships and gender dynamics.

I conducted in-depth research on three different sex education providers: the Williams Center for Health Education in suburban Chicago, Aspire Pregnancy Center in the Hudson Valley and Stronghearts in the Catskills.³ I spoke at length with high-level sex educators from each organization and also looked at their educational materials and the texts they used to build their curricula. I originally intended to have a larger sample from which to pull data, but encountered difficulties in recruiting, potentially due to the sensitivity of the content.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, and lasted roughly one hour (see Appendix for the list of questions). My questions attempted to gauge how the subject navigates discomfort in the classroom, how (or if at all) they discuss difficult issues like sexual orientation and pleasure, what their teaching method is, and their relationship to the surrounding community, among others.

³ In the interest of confidentiality, all the names of the people and organizations I studied have been changed.

These questions covered a wide range of topics in an attempt to understand as much about the subject and their specific circumstance as possible. After my interview data was collected, I transcribed the interviews and coded them, grouping together data that holds significance and seems to be thematic across my interviews.

In addition to conducting interviews, I also looked at the content my subjects use to teach their classes. This content included books, pamphlets, worksheets, media content and slideshows. By supplementing the data I gathered from interviewing sex education instructors with an analysis of the content used by these educators, I was able to more fully understand how sex-educational needs played out within the classroom. As with the interview data, I coded my content analyses and organize them into different thematic categories. I was able to create similar thematic categories for both the interviews and the content.

I also aimed to demarcate what is *not* discussed in the sex-educational content and in the interviews. As discussed in the literature review, certain topics, particularly topics that suggest a deviation from normative expressions of sexuality, receive little or no attention in sex education. Identifying and interrogating the limitations of how far-reaching sex education is tells us which aspects of sexuality society is uncomfortable with adolescents knowing about, and why that is.

Limitations & positionality of the researcher

I have many, many opinions about sex education. I have been interested in sex ed for a long time, perhaps since my first time experiencing it in the eighth grade. I wanted to write a thesis about sex ed because my interest in it is strong and because I believe that a person's sex ed experience (or the lack thereof), however fleeting or horrid it may be, is instrumental to the ways people understand sexuality, not to mention their sexual health and safety. While my interest level is a strength, it also meant I had to relinquish much of my personal opinions in order to conduct the most unbiased and objective research possible. Throughout this process I have and will continue to remain conscious of the impact my own subjectivity as a white, college educated female from a middle-class background has upon my interpretations of the literature I have relied on and the way I interpret data.

Due to my limited ability to travel and recruit from other places, my sample hailed from the Hudson Valley and the Chicagoland area, the two different geographic locations I call home. The Hudson Valley (NY) is more rural and less populated than DuPage County (IL), however they have comparable racial and economic demographics, with Dutchess County being slightly more diverse and having a slightly lower median income.

Since this selection process is not randomized, and since the sample size is so small, my findings within this population are not generalizable to a wider understanding of sex education instruction in America. However, these case studies

can say something about the way the politics of needs interpretation impact the day-to-day runnings of organizations like the ones I studied and provide insight into how sex education is taught to today's youth understood through a framework of needs interpretation, as theorized by Fraser.

One other important limitation of this study is that I was not able to incorporate the students' perspective into my analysis. This is due to the fact that I am not properly authorized to conduct research on individuals under 18. This limitation prevented me from obtaining the invaluable perspective of the students of sex education, the ones who are actively receiving (and possibly internalizing) what these organizations are teaching. I was unable to discuss how students understand the different aspects of sex education in this project, which would enhance my findings and help to specify which parts of sex education are most (and least) relevant, as well as how cultural understandings of adolescents and adolescent sexuality inform how teens see themselves. I also was unable to study the ways in which students resist class programming, which would demarcate which ideas are accepted and which are rejected.

Introducing the programs

Williams: sex ed for everyone

The Williams Institute for Health Education is one of the oldest organizations of its kind in the United States, and "the nation's first fully independent health

center,” according to its website. It is located in the western Chicago suburbs, and serves communities in central Illinois through Northern Wisconsin, including Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Williams has three programs, all of which use curricula created by the Center in the 1970s: the (sex-segregated) M/L puberty education program (named after the most popular baby boy and girl names the year the institute was founded), and the (coeducational) Beginning of Life and Teen Sexual Health programs. The Center’s programs typically occur over the span of two hours. Though the ages of these students are typically the ages these programs are taught to, there are occasional requests from schools- mostly schools in urban areas, according to Justin- for programs designed for older students to be taught to younger students. Instructors primarily teach the elementary and middle school programs. Williams uses the National Sexuality Education Standards (NSES) to inform their content and the way programs are taught, and is the only one of the three cases to do so. Of the three organizations I studied, Williams is the most bureaucratic and serves the largest number of schools and students.

I spoke with Justin, who has worked for Williams for seven years, about his experiences teaching sex education to such a wide array of communities, and what he regarded as the sex-educational needs of these communities. Justin has a background in public health education studies, and is a long term resident of the Chicago area. He is the only male educator at Williams, and is also the manager.

Williams' curricular programming has remained the same since the 1970s. In order to account for the great deal that has changed between then and now, educators are afforded a good degree of agency in the way they teach the programs, and space is made for them to customize their instruction: "Everyone's program- if you saw two people do [M] or two people do [L], you'd probably see differences, and that's because we try to give- within limits- the free range to teach how you teach." By allowing for teachers to deviate from the curriculum, they are able to inject their own sense of ownership over it, which allows them to educate in a more engaging way. Justin told me that, though he initially thought Williams' curriculum was boring and ineffective, he has since found that making the programs his own by throwing in jokes and stories has livened up his presentations. Though he had a rather serious, reserved demeanor, his face lit up when talking about how he jokes around with students and the many strange questions he gets asked.

Aspire: sex ed to combat a sex-crazed culture

The Aspire Pregnancy Center is a pro-life organization which provides childcare resources, counseling, STI/pregnancy testing and sex education to the surrounding communities. Though the organization is pro-life and does not condone abortion, they emphasize that they are a "judgment-free zone" (per the Center's website). This approach extends to their abstinence-focused sex education program, NO MIX. Kim, the head educator I spoke with, was very enthusiastic

during our interview. She kept telling me how much fun she was having talking about her job with me, and how much fun she has with her students, especially when things get uncomfortable: “I think it’s the best thing ever- I don’t feel awkward about talking about sex, I think that society’s too awkward about talking about it... I walk into a class and say ‘Hey good morning, we’re gonna talk about sex!’ and they’re like ‘what? that’s so weird’ and I’m like ‘Well, you could go back to algebra or English class if you want, or you could stay and hang out with me.’”

Kim told me that the main goal of the program is to simply provide information on the consequences of sex, which is primarily accomplished through sharing her own life experience: “We pride ourselves on not taking a manipulative, fear-based approach, which I think is a stigma of abstinence programs and that whole umbrella. We are trying to get away from that and present all the options: it’s your choice what you do with your body and your relationships, but let me tell you what I went through and you can make your own decision.” Unlike the other two programs, NO MIX’s approach to sex education places emphasis on self-worth, personal values and self-efficacy. In order to reinforce their claim that abstinence is the safest and healthiest option for young people, they emphasize to students that they, and only they have the power to make decisions about their lives.

Typically, APC teaches NO MIX to middle and high school students after they have learned about the anatomical and etiological aspects of human sexuality in their health classes, meaning that, aside from briefly going over sexually

transmitted infection, the focus is largely on the social and cultural ramifications of having sex “too early on” (any time before one is in a serious, committed relationship)- though, in keeping with the center’s ethos, “we don’t try to shame anyone for their choices.” Since the program does not focus as much topics that fall under the categories of reproductive anatomy and sexual health, APC teaches NO MIX to students of all ages with little modifications between age groups.

Stronghearts: whole sexuality education

Stronghearts is an independently-run organization based in Columbia County, New York, which teaches what founder Mica calls “whole-body sexuality education” to a wide range of ages. Strong Hearts primarily teaches two programs for young people: Bodies and Botany, for 7-11 year olds, and Realize, for high school students. Both of these programs meet once a week during the school year, meaning that students who take these classes spend much more time in sex education than both the national average⁴ and the other organizations I spoke with. Since Stronghearts is a privately-owned program which operates outside schools (though area schools are starting to request them to come in and teach), and since they teach year long classes, it is able to discuss sex in different, more comprehensive, less conventional ways than sex ed programming found in schools: The course designed for younger students focuses on learning about anatomy through learning about natural phenomena, like plants, and connecting students to

⁴ The average amount of time an American student spends in sex education class is 4.2 hours, according to Guttmacher (2017).

“their place in a larger natural world,” while the course designed for older students is led primarily by the students themselves, with occasional input from facilitators—both of which diverge from typical sex educational-programming.

The organization’s two programs are informed by Mica’s experiences working as a nurse in feminist health centers during the 1990s, as well as by the work of radical feminist sexuality educators like Annie Sprinkle, a former sex worker and adult film producer; and Rebecca Chalker, who is most famous for exploring the untapped potential for female sexual pleasure in her book, *The Clitoral Truth* (1997). In keeping with these influences, Stronghearts operates on the belief that sex is something which should be pleasurable and a positive force of energy in one’s life, and conceptualizes human sexuality as being connected to all other areas of existence.

Conclusion

To understand the politics of need interpretation as they relate to sex ed, it is first important to understand how identity is often taken for granted and remain uninterrogated, yet crucial to the politics of need interpretation:

... the identities and needs that [institutions] fashion for its recipients are *interpreted* identities and needs. Moreover, they are highly political interpretations and, as such, are in principle subject to dispute. Yet these needs and identities are not always recognized as interpretations. Too often they simply go without saying and are rendered immune from analysis and critique. Doubtless one reason for

this 'reification effect' is the depth at which gender meanings and norms are embedded in our general culture (Fraser 1989, 154).

As Fraser argues above, institutional interpretations of needs and identities often 'go without saying,' which strips them of their politics and constructedness, this maintains relations of power and reifies social hierarchies. In late-capitalist societies like America, needs which relate to issues of gender and sexuality are understood to be part of the domestic sphere (as opposed to the political or economic spheres) and are regulated primarily by the institution of the family—specifically “the modern restricted male-headed nuclear family” (Fraser 1989, 168). Domestic needs are rendered apolitical due to the efforts on behalf of these institutions to “... depoliticize certain matters by personalizing and/or familializing them; they cast these as private-domestic or personal/familial matters in contradistinction to public, political matters” (1989, 168). As soon as sex education became a fixture of schooling in America, it became politicized (Irvine 2001, Moran 2000). Politicized domestic needs, like sex education, break out of the apolitical, “personal” realm of the family. Due to the late-capitalist, patriarchal character of the American political sphere, Fraser argues that discourse around these politicized, or ‘runaway’ needs,

... is the other side of the increased permeability of domestic and official economic institutions, their growing inability fully to depoliticize certain matters. The politicized needs at issue in late capitalist societies, then, are "leaky" or "runaway" needs: they are

needs that have broken out of the discursive enclaves constructed in and around domestic and official economic institutions (1989, 169).

Domestic runaway needs, like sex education, operate upon hegemonic constructions of gender relations and roles as instituted within American family norms. In the process of interpreting these needs, these norms are often accepted or remain uncontested. In some cases, they *are* contested through the same sorts of needs talk, which still requires the detractors of these hegemonic norms to engage with them.

In outlining and interpreting the politics of sex-educational needs, it is important to keep in mind how adolescence is framed in American culture, and how this is informed by raced, gendered and classed relations of power, which often, as Fraser points out, 'go without saying.' American sex education classrooms are sanctioned spaces wherein young people and adults are allowed (and are indeed required) to freely and openly speak about topics that are separated between the two age groups. This does not mean that they are in a societal vacuum, however. Sex education will always be informed by cultural conceptions and understandings of adolescence, sexuality, gender, class and race. Education serves a dual purpose: to disseminate knowledge (which is derived from relations of power) and to reproduce culture. In the U.S., where the private sexual self is highly individualized and separate from all other areas of life, teens, who are not quite sexually mature

adults and no longer innocent children, are taught that any expression of sexuality on their part is dangerous and degenerative to family life.

These relations of power inform educators' understandings of what is needed in the sex education classroom, and how to provide these needs. Through this process, certain topics are understood as not necessary, and even harmful to adolescent development. Approaching sex education through a needs-interpretive stance, and all the uninterrogated interrelations of gender, power and knowledge that come with this stance, means that students receive incomplete information about human sexuality in their sex ed classes, and that the information provided to them is often informed by a specific set of politics and values.

Chapter 2

Interpreting the roles of sex-educational subjects: expert educators, ill-equipped parents & (ab)normal adolescents

This chapter outlines how these three programs interpret the sex-educational needs of their students, as adolescents, and their families; and the different strategies they employ to meet these needs, which are founded upon their understandings of adolescence as a period of instability, gender categories and gendered relations of power and the role of parents and the family in guiding unstable teens through adolescence. These interpretations are situated within educators' larger interpretations of their own positionality as sites of expert knowledge of sexuality, in contrast to the misinformation transmitted to students, which come from informal sources like ill-informed adults, media, the internet, pornography and schoolyard gossip- sources of knowledge generally not considered to be "official" (Apple 1993) or employ "paradigms of argumentation accepted as authoritative" (Fraser 1989, 165).

Within the context of sex education, the paradigms used to interpret needs stem from and frequently reify sources of what educational theorist Michael Apple (1979, 1993) has termed "legitimate" or "official" knowledge. Educators'

interpretations of students' and parents' needs are informed by this set of official knowledge around teenage sexuality. For this reason, the (uniquely American) conceptualization of adolescents as insecure beings ruled by hormones, susceptible to all types of sexual risk and a danger to the sanctity of the American middle class family, is a specter that these sex educators confronted while teaching their curricula, regardless of whether or not they agreed with that configuration.

I found that parents were interpreted by educators as uncomfortable with discussing their children's sexuality and lacking in critical knowledge, which complicated their position as role models, as well as their authority over what and how their children learn about sex. This understanding played a crucial role in determining the content and delivery of curricula, as well as effective, legitimate ways to address the need created by these gaps in parental knowledge. Students (who range in age from late elementary school to post-high school) in this schema were interpreted as intellectually malleable and curious about sexuality, yet lacking in the guidance and support necessary to make informed and empowering decisions. Educators' understandings of how gendered adolescent development interacted with their students' encounters with sexuality also informed their understandings of students' identity. Each program has different interpretations of and strategies for dealing with the needs associated with teenage vulnerability, parental ineptitude and the "really messed up culture surrounding sex," as Mica described it, which I will spend the rest of the chapter outlining.

Parents: role models in need of role models

Despite the marked difference in politics, pedagogical approach, curricular structure and constructions of need, these three programs all shared an understanding of themselves as sexuality specialists, with the information and strategies necessary for helping young people grow into their sexualities the right way, and empowering them to make the ‘right choices’ about sex.. Though these sex educators understood themselves as experts, they did not extend this designation to other adults. In interviews, each educator positioned other adults- specifically, parental figures and school faculty - as the primary role models of proper sexual decorum and ethics for students, but also as insecure and lacking in the knowledge needed to fulfill this role. In these educators’ eyes, parents and school teachers need just as much guidance as their young charges in learning how to talk to them about sex. The discomfort and ineptitude around talking about sex was understood by Justin, Kim and Mica as partially stemming from the “sexually repressive” culture around sexuality in the US, which makes it “awkward” for parents (and teachers) to talk about such matters with young people.⁵

Even though parents were thought of as uncomfortable with talking to their kids about sex, and thus ill-equipped to meet their children’s sex-educational needs, they were understood by educators as the loci of sexual morality, positioned

⁵ Foucault (1984) devotes much time to dissecting the “repressive hypothesis,” arguing that, instead of Western societies repressing discourse around sex outside of marriage, this talk about sex was rerouted into new discursive zones, like psychiatry and prostitution. This causes people to tend to regard sexuality discourse as possessing a liberatory, therapeutic quality.

as the main actors in their children's acquisition of sexual knowledge, despite their non-expert status. As a result, educators' direct and indirect interactions with parents, however fleeting, had a substantial impact on the content of these programs' curricula.

Williams: reassurance through 'just the facts'

Justin understood his influence over students' behavior as secondary, or even tertiary importance when compared to that of his students' parents, due to the fact that they remained "virtual strangers" as a result of constraints on time and the formalities of the classroom. Justin explained that, for various reasons but largely because of this understanding, Williams' approach is to stick to disseminating only fact-based, scientific information, and let the parents fill in the moral gaps: "... It's really getting back to the science, I can now look back and say that we were kinda actually throwing in morals- even if we didn't think we were, we were, but it's something [we're] now cognizant about, any time we're saying something or trying to change something, to try to keep it science, but parents are quietly saying moral, in a positive way." Even though Williams is tasked with teaching sex education, they must grapple with the reality that "the child's sexual body belongs, and will always belong, to the family space, and no one else will ever have any power over or claim on this body" (Foucault 2003, 257). Williams does not attempt to subvert this parental authority over their children's sexuality; rather, they interpret this to mean that parents, who they have constructed as uncomfortable with yet necessary for

proper child sexual development, need to be affirmed and empowered to impart moral lessons on sexuality to their children.

The Williams Center's website echoes this sentiment in their Parental Resources section: "Kids are bombarded with thousands of peer and media messages daily. They need social-emotional skills and scientific information they can trust to inform their decision making. Studies show that youth are more influenced by their families than any other source. You may not think they're listening, but they are." While Williams educators typically only interact with the many communities they serve for a brief period of time, they do what they can to fulfill what they see as these families' need for sexual health information, in order to equip them with the 'scientific information and social-emotional skills' necessary to be good role models and carry out healthy conversations with their children around sex.

Because role models are an important part of what young people need in order to learn about healthy sexual behavior, and because parents are understood as the 'most important' role models of all despite not knowing how to talk to their kids about sex, Williams devotes much time to educating parents as well as students. Williams has even created a sexuality program specifically for parents and adult community members, the goals of which are to "Describe why youth are vulnerable decision makers due to brain development; identify what youth are seeing in regards to sexuality, including current research, trends, and barriers to

healthy choices; develop skills on how to manage a healthy relationship and conversations around sexuality; create a conversation action plan on specific sexuality topics [and] identify resources for healthy conversations about sexuality.” These resources are designed to address the need to reinforce parents’ confidence and senses of authority over their children’s sexuality while allowing them to put their own spin on this information based on their values.

Both the videos and the programming itself emphasize the need for direct and factual conversations about sexuality between parents and their children, informed, like their programming for young people, by an understanding of the stages of social and cognitive development from early childhood to adolescence and what kids are able to comprehend at which points. These adult-centered programs and resources are designed to empower parents, as fully developed adults with autonomous sets of ethics around sexuality, to have healthy conversations with their ‘vulnerable,’ confused teenagers; and reassures parents of their authority and ownership over their children’s sexual value systems by telling them that they, as parents are encouraged to enforce their own “values about age appropriate sexual behavior.” Williams’ website also has video demonstrations teaching parents how to talk to their kids about several different sexuality-related topics: like puberty, sexual bullying and body image, choices and risks; even how to not talk to kids about these things. These videos tell parents that conversations should be non-judgmental and emphasize the consequences of choices and the

importance of taking precautions to be safe and healthy over exploration. One of these videos, which models how to talk to kids ages 12-14 about sexual choices and risks, shows a (white, middle class) family sitting around the dinner table discussing a television program about the teenage pregnancy epidemic in the United States.

The parents in this video encourage their children to not be shy about asking

questions and sharing their



opinions. The daughter shares that

her classmate's sister is a teen

mom, which sparks a discussion

about making choices and placing

judgment on others:

Figure 2: still from one of the Center's videos, titled "How to Have a Conversation about Sexual Behavior: Choices and Risks"

Sister: It's just really sad, because she seemed really really smart, but now she's got to try and take care of her baby and try to finish school.

Brother: She couldn't have been! That's why she got pregnant.

Father: Careful, buddy, that's a pretty big judgement to make about someone based on one questionable choice. It has nothing to do with being smart... you know, when I was in school, a lot of the smartest guys were the ones putting pressure on girls to have sex. That is not smart or respectful behavior.

Mother: Exactly. Have you ever been pressured about sex?

S: I don't know if I'm comfortable talking to you guys about this stuff...

D: sweetie, we hope that you know that you can come talk to us about anything.

M: Your dad and I believe that sex should be a safe, informed and respectful choice.

It is worth noting that, while Williams serves a racially, economically and sexually diverse set of communities, there is generally a lack of this sort of diversity in their educational materials. All the individuals depicted in these videos are white, middle class and treat these topics as only experienced in a heterosexual, cisgender context. The parents in this video, who appear to be married, fulfill very traditional roles: The father takes on a paternalistic persona, setting the boundaries for what constitutes 'smart or respectful [sexual] behavior,' while the mother plays a more supportive, touchy-feely role, backing the father up and making sure the kids feel comfortable. They operate as a single parental unit, a perfect representation of the middle-class ideal of the nuclear family. One has to wonder if this standard they set forward is actually attainable or even beneficial for all types of families.

This is representative of Williams' tendency to have relatively outdated educational materials for educators to work with, which are modified by educators to fit more contemporary, intersectional perspectives during their presentations of this material. When I asked him if there were ever any times when students question or contest the programming, Lance discussed how he attempts to acknowledge the diversity of his students' family lives and experiences and account for that. He also credited parents with becoming increasingly more progressive, and asking him to tackle previously controversial topics in classrooms, like same-

sex attraction and gender fluidity: “Parents rarely say it out loud but they’ll approach after [information sessions] and they’ll say ‘I didn’t want to make anybody in here upset, but do you ever bring up homosexuality?’, this or that, and a lot of the times it’s if not then ‘why, why aren’t you at least just bringing it up?’” The increasing progressiveness of parents has altered how certain topics are spoken about, and has even allowed for new subjects to be allocated space. What will happen, though, if the tides change and parental attitudes towards these topics become less favorable? Sex-educational needs and curricular content in this context depend highly upon parental attitudes towards subjects, which are in turn informed by cultural understanding of sexuality.

While Williams provides parents with tools to assist parents in asserting their own sets of sexual values, there is no specific statement of value coming from them, which reflects the assertion that they are not there to “tell anyone what to think, just provide necessary information.” Is merely providing information enough, and will parents know what to do with this information?

‘You’re worth something- students NEED to hear it:’ compensating for neglect at APC

At Williams, fact-based information was mobilized to fulfill parents’ and students’ needs, interpreted as stemming from teenage insecurity and hyper awareness of their own developing bodies, as well as parental ineptitude at discussing sexuality-related topics with their children. At APC, the primary need sought to be fulfilled was affirming students’ self-worth and empowering them to

make good decisions about sex, as opposed to providing accurate, science-based information about sex. Parents are regarded by Kim in a similar way to Justin and Mica, as not fulfilling a need their children have, though APC's approach is far less collaborative one than either Williams or Strong Hearts. Kim, whose NO MIX program exists in a motivational capacity as well as a sex-educational capacity, sees her students' parents, regardless of role model status, as guilty of not letting their children 'know that [their kids] matter.' This understanding is why she makes sure to include a message of personal worth in her programming, and why she uses her life story to help motivate students:

.... [in our evaluations], the biggest thing that teachers and students stress is feeling valuable, hearing that message that you are worth so much more than you think you're worth, they just- they don't hear it at home. And that's something, every time I've talked to whatever instructor it was, she's said, 'They don't hear it at home, they don't hear it at school enough, it reflects in their work and their behavior that they don't understand what their value is, as kids, as people, they don't have visions for their future, or, really, goals to be great and achieve greatness,' stuff like that. In addition to being a sexual education program, it has turned into a motivational program as well, and that's been really exciting and really encouraging. There's usually a few kids after class that come up and say, like, 'my dad's not around, it was nice to hear that there's somebody else who went through the same thing, and you're successful and you overcame all this stuff,' and- so that's really encouraging to hear, that they're not alone and for them to hear 'you're not alone'. It can be really isolating when you're 13, 17, and you're at home whatever's going on is going on- it's hard to get outside of that emotional thinking and say 'There's other people going through this, it's going to be okay, I'm worth more than what I'm being treated like right now.'

Kim has little exposure to parents and their direct input on what is taught in her classes is minimal - she told me during our interview that she has rarely interacted face-to-face with one of her students' parents, though occasionally she will speak with parents who make the request for Aspire to come into their children's schools. In spite of this limited interaction with parents, they still make a substantial impact on the way Kim teaches her curriculum. Her perception that parents are not addressing their children's needs, particularly their need for affirmation and motivation, has resulted in the program placing emphasis upon students' senses of personal value, and enforcing the message that one can preserve their self-worth

through practicing abstinence. In this understanding, engaging in sexual activity at too young an age outside the context of a committed relationship is something only a person who is unaware of how much they are worth would do.

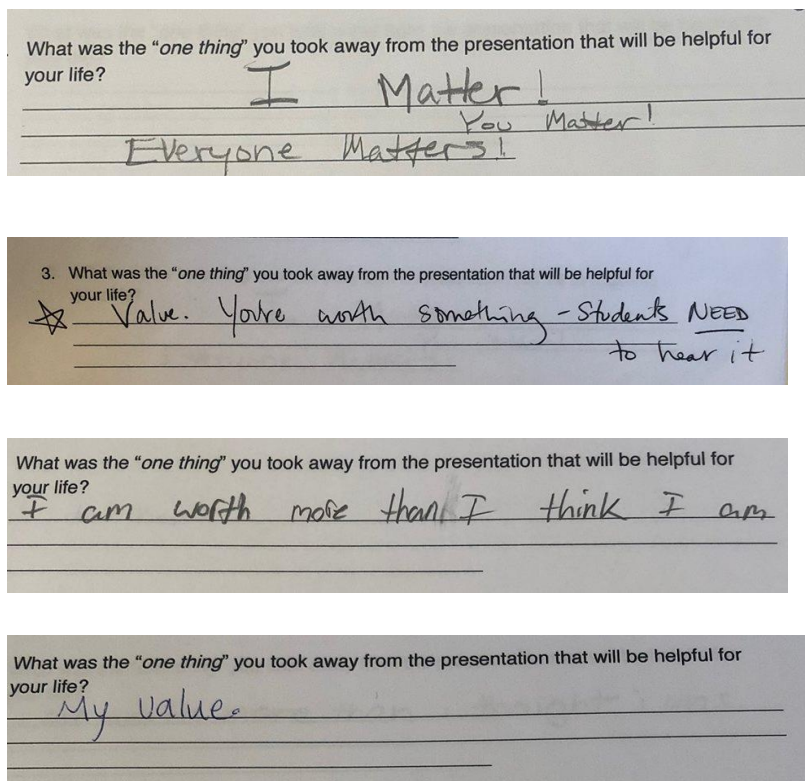


Fig. 2: a selection of teacher and student comments on Kim's latest NO MIX presentation.

It is not only parents who fail to tell their children how much they are worth, it is the culture. Kim told me that schools will often bring in both APC and another program run by the local pro-choice reproductive health center in order to provide information from “every side of the issue.” Kim characterizes the other organization’s programming as “very open to – ‘you can have sex anytime, anywhere, and that’s fine.’” When I asked her to explain what she meant, she told me that “they don’t really get into the emotional side effects, that it’s more than just a physical act– your heart is in it too. That’s where we come in and fill that piece of it.” NO MIX’s curriculum deals primarily with the emotional ramifications of engaging with this ‘open’ sexual culture, which Kim understands as a cheap and dangerous imitation of a type of intimacy and romance which can only be truly attained through a committed relationship between two adults:⁶

I think that as a culture we are very, very sexualized, and I don't think there's a lot of boundaries on that– it's just something expected of people who are talking, or dating, or hooking up, it's just something that's expected instead of something that's valued and special. I guess it just depends– there's obviously students who disagree, but they definitely think about and consider what I have to say, and the story I bring to the table as someone who's experienced a lot of heartache and a lot of struggles through promiscuous behavior and not knowing what I was worth, because if I knew what I was worth, I wouldn't have been so promiscuous and gotten myself into situations that were uncomfortable and difficult and hard to come back from. So I would

⁶ While she described marriage as “the ultimate commitment,” Kim also acknowledged that not everyone decides to get married and emphasized to me the importance of long-term commitment in deciding to have sex, as opposed to emphasizing the importance of marriage.

say- just like anything in life, it's your decision to do what you want. My job is to share what I went through, and if it can help one person then it's worth it to me- the one girl that comes up to me after class crying because she had no idea that other people went through what she went through, to me that's enough, but yeah, life's all about decisions.

Unlike Williams, APC treats values and morality as essential aspects of NO MIX's curriculum, since they believe the students they serve are not receiving the strong moral guidance and positive affirmation they need to make informed and healthy decisions about their sex lives, which means waiting until being in a committed relationship to have sex. In this precarious sexual economy, with its culture of "Netflix and Chill," NO MIX offers an alternate route to the values that our sex-crazed American society espouses, one that they perceive students to need very much.

Kim expressed to me that she felt like her program faced a lot of opposition as a result of a cultural fixation on sex, specifically the normalization of casual sex: "... what we stand for is not the overwhelming consensus of society, so we're going to face opposition and there's going to be people who don't agree with us." Kim never told me who she sees as the source of this opposition, or why their stance on teen sex is not the 'overwhelming consensus of society,' but it is clear that she regards her program as indispensable because it provides an antidote to this harmful 'overwhelming consensus.' While American culture may indeed, in some aspects, treat casual sex as an acceptable norm, this is not the case within the

official knowledge sources that inform Americans' understandings about what constitutes sexuality, and definitely not the case for teenagers and pre-teens (particularly non-white, non-middle class teens (Garcia 2009)), whose sexual lives are understood as incompatible with and dangerous for American schooling and family life (Schalet 2000, 2011; Letendre 2000). This is why, perhaps, APC does not need to feel like it has to reaffirm parental ownership over sexuality as Williams does: because it already aligns with this presiding, normative axiom that healthy family life and expressions of teenage sexuality cannot coexist peacefully.

Like the other programs, students are understood as lacking in something that their parents, schools and other sources of official and unofficial sexual knowledge have failed to provide. In this case, it is the knowledge that students are “worth it,” which would empower them to choose to stay and remain abstinent from sexual activity.

Stronghearts: (re)teaching whole sexuality to students and parents

Similar to APC, at Stronghearts, parents and the culture at large were also constructed as a barrier to their mission (which they also constructed as a necessary antidote to messed up cultural valuations of sexuality), but a different strategy was implemented to deal with it. Mica sees her program as very, very different from most other sex-ed programs because it is “whole sexuality education.” She defines ‘whole sexuality education’ as:

Rather than doing what's typical for sex ed, which is focusing on the "reproductive system" as a unit unto itself in the body, separate from the rest of the body, we see the reproductive system as one with the sexual system of the body, and the sexual system of the body being the body, so including all parts of the body ... We focus on the human body in relation to the world around us, so the human body is emergent from the natural world, and we lead classes where the natural world enters into our teaching and all of our conversations...

This understanding of sexuality is substantially different from what usually makes its way into classrooms. This is due to Mica's desire to break from how sexuality education has historically been implemented in schools, due to its tendency to rely on fear- and shame-based tactics to relay its messages.

Parents are "tricky," according to Mica, because, while they are young peoples' primary source of information on what ethically sound and healthy sexuality looks like, they are and are often in need of instruction on these topics themselves. Mica believes that this discomfort emerges largely out of parents' exposure to repressive and negative sexual culture during their own childhoods and adolescence:

Parents' experiences growing up... learning sex ed in school has been negative for the most part: what you don't do, what's not okay, what's risky behavior, what's dangerous, what's harmful, what diseases come from: all of that, schools and learning institutions have located in the sexual systems of the human body, and we come up against that all the time. We're constantly fighting that and figuring out creative ways to let parents and young adults who are already experiencing negativity know that we have a really different take on that and that we're very positive about sexuality as a human energy force and as a force of creativity and delight, and that sexuality is a positive and wonderful

force in the world and in our bodies- that negative training that our culture has offered and delivered to the families around us is a huge barrier for families to view us in a different way... We have parents involved in the younger classes and the reason for that is because parents have very poor sex ed, so we invite parents to come for the last part of every class, so parents can learn with their children and take the lessons home, but it's really so that they can start to have this education themselves, and get interested and excited about that, and that's really important because we recognize that the children's main teachers are their parents."

Negativity around sexuality is a pervasive harmful entity that the educators at Stronghearts need to 'constantly fight.' Mica's understanding of parental sexual knowledge hints at the fundamentalist sex education wars of the latter half of the 20th century (Irvine 2001, Moran 2000), wherein the Christian Right successfully implemented a smear campaign against comprehensive sex education through disseminating fear-mongering rumors about sex educators prematurely exposing their students to graphic displays of sexuality. Because of this understanding, she sees parents as needing re-education in order to be effective role models, and has integrated the parents and guardians of her students into her classes. Since Stronghearts runs year-long programs, parents develop a rapport with educators and are invited into the classroom at the end of every session- unless the students in the Teen Sexual Health Program decide they would rather not have them there.

Stronghearts is the only program of the three that affords students -at least, their older students- the agency to learn what they want to learn about sex. "The high school students lead, so they decide at the beginning of the year what they

wanna focus on and part of my work with them is to have them at the end of the year to be able to lead [the class].” Mica facilitates these lessons, but does not provide direct instruction. The only time personal choice and agency are not invoked for older teens is on the program’s website, where it advises parents to not give their children a choice in deciding whether or not to attend the program in the first place, though this advice comes from Mica’s students themselves:

I asked my daughter/son if they'd like to take this class, and she/he said “No!” What can I do next?

My high school students have the best answers to this question. They recommend doing this:

1. Don’t ask us if we want to take this class!
2. Tell us we have to go to 3 classes.
3. Expect us to be angry about this, especially if we’re used to being treated as adult decision-makers.
4. Expect us go to the first class and say we don’t want to go back.
5. Expect us to do the same after the second class. Maybe.
6. By the third class we’re fine, and are wanting to go back.

This advice seems just right.

This advice provided on the website to parents seems to follow from G. Stanley Hall’s (1904) theorizations of adolescence, that they are almost ready to be fully autonomous, but need guidance and molding from fully grown adults who know better. This idea still very much informs how educators and parents see themselves in relation to students, as tasked with the duty to shape half-formed teenage consciousness into something fully enlightened about the world and able to make

better decisions for themselves. Stronghearts seeks to accomplish this through providing an antidote to a harmful sexual culture which has deeply hurt so many. While the other two organizations both understood the damaging potential of exposure to 'confusing' (Justin), 'sex obsessed' (Kim) societal attitudes towards sexuality found present in all means of communication and interpretation, Mica is unique among the other educators I spoke with in that she understands this damage as directly stemming from patriarchy:

.... Patriarchy, and the patriarchal systems in which we live- yeah, boy, that includes everything. The school system that surrounds us, that teaches students and their families that this topic is a negative topic- that really places families' initial contact with us in a negative sphere, because- their experience growing up, parents' experiences growing up, and learning sex ed in school has been negative for the most part: what you don't do, what's not okay, what's risky behavior, what's dangerous, what's harmful, what diseases come from, all of that, schools and learning institutions have located in the sexual systems of the human body... many adults have been hurt sexually- I'm not talking about rape specifically, but that the culture is centrally harming. So once that starts to move away, and once parents hang out here enough and feel the delight and ease with which we approach the topic of sexuality, and once they learn that "you're fine! Your body's great and you're fine in your body." So that starts to relax, and then all the other stuff, the things that we tag on parents, like you're gonna be homophobic- that's not true. We're not just discovering that. Once parents learn that being sexual beings is ok, the rest of it starts to fall in line.

Parents here are able to immerse themselves in sex education on the ground, and become part of the process themselves. Once the work of re-education is done, Mica says, parents are a lot more willing to embrace Stronghearts' more

unorthodox, boundary-pushing methods and teachings. Unlike Williams, who only discusses those sex-ed topics considered non-necessary (masturbation, gender variance, same-sex attraction) when brought up by its students; and unlike APC, who never discusses these elements at all, Stronghearts actively incorporates discussions of sexual orientation, pleasure and all different types of sexual intercourse into their curriculum. Mica interprets both Stronghearts' students and parents as needing a positive, "whole," "real" sexuality (re)education in order to make it through a patriarchal and damaging American sexual climate.

Constructing students as 'normally abnormal' gendered subjects

Crucial to each organizations' understanding of adolescence and its associated sex-educational needs were their understandings of gender and (hetero)sexuality, and how these mapped onto young people's lives. All three organizations acknowledged that there existed a difference between girls and boys which impacted their reception of the programming. Additionally, all three organizations incorporated gender segregation into their curricula to some degree- Aspire provided their students with gendered formats of take-home materials, while Stronghearts and Williams both provided gender-separated programming, though their rationales for why they did so differed. How organizations constructed these gendered subjectivities intermingled with their interpretation of

students as highly influenceable, susceptible to risk and harm and in need of models of proper behavior.

Each organization constructed adolescence as a point in development where one undergoes dramatic changes and upheavals before reaching adulthood. Adolescence and puberty were thusly understood by educators as a frightening, yet exhilarating time in a young person's life. As a result, these programs saw it as their job to assist in making the physical and sexual aspects of adolescent development less scary and strange, and more wonderful. Though abnormality is understood as the norm during adolescence and puberty, this understanding only goes so far, and the process of delineating what was too abnormal was a significant factor in interpreting adolescent needs. Cindy Patton writes that this process was useful during the AIDS crisis in determining who was deserving of salvation through education, and who was to be excluded:

The basic logic for separating the young deviant from the 'normally abnormal' adolescent, and thereby determining who needs to know about safe sex, depend on the construction of normal adolescence as a passage from a precultural body (the innocent child), through a civilizing process (the adolescent with desires but without practices), to a sexually responsible adulthood (heterosexual, monogamous married, procreative, white). (1996, 43)

Patton's designation of who is allowed to receive protection from AIDS (those who abide by straight, white, middle-class standards) echoes the many theorizations of institutionalized heteronormativity, and what happens to those who try to exist

outside of this schema. The organizations' interpretations of student need were also informed by these criteria for legitimacy. Needs interpretations were largely underpinned by the heteronormativity present within educational discourse and the various processes through which heterosexuality and its lifestyle conventions (monogamy, nuclear families, paternalism) become institutionalized through mechanisms that naturalize and uncritically accept heterosexuality, along with

whiteness and middle-class resources, as the norm (Ingraham 1994, 204; Garcia 2009), while foreclosing the possibility to have a life outside of this "charmed circle" and pathologizing those who do attempt to exist outside of it



Figure 4: Gayle Rubin's diagram of the inner ("charmed") and outer circles of sexual behavior, found in *Thinking Sex* (202).

(Rubin 1984).

These organizations' conceptions of their students were informed as well by deeply entrenched American cultural constructions of adolescence and the needs associated with those constructions. It is worth noting here that adolescence and youth are not ahistorical, universal categories of development solely grounded in biology- rather, they and the challenges they face are constructed categories informed by sociocultural, political and historical context (Lesko 2012, Males 1996, Epstein 2007, Hasinoff 2015). American constructions of adolescence and puberty tend to emphasize the role of hormones in this stage of development, projecting a lack of control and propensity for risk onto these age groups as a result of their increased levels of estrogen, testosterone and progesterone (Schalet 2001, Letendre 2000, Hasinoff 2015), the hormones responsible for the development of secondary sex characteristics and the sex drive. Placing emphasis on the hormonal influences of adolescence leads to sex education that is heavily differentiated by gender. This extended to educators' understandings of the differences in how boys and girls behaved in the classroom. Institutionalized heteronormativity and its associated gender roles reinforce the divide between maleness and femaleness set up by these organizations' constructions of adolescence and what was considered 'normally abnormal' and what was considered deviant.

Williams: don't be nervous

At Williams, it isn't only the parents who need reassurance. Justin sees puberty and adolescence as "... one of the scariest, most physically weird times-



your body is growing, you're falling all over yourself, you don't know what's happening." It is the job of Justin, and other educators at Williams, to help students understand what is happening to their bodies, what these mysterious thoughts and feelings

Figure 5: illustration from Williams' puberty booklet for boys,

showing how everyone develops at different times.

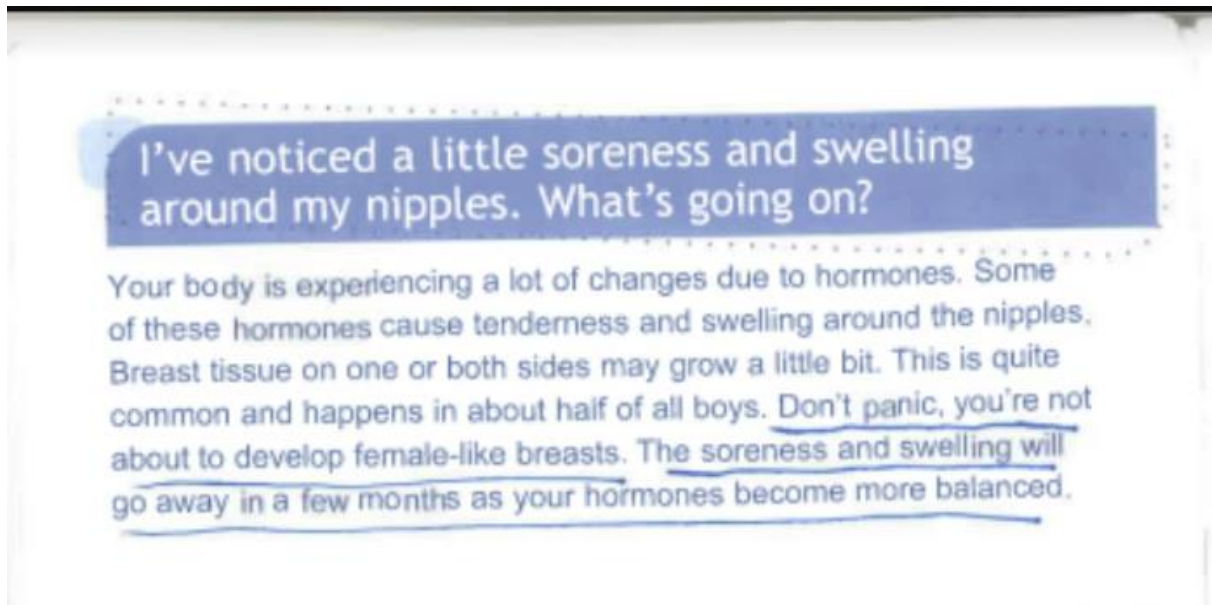
are all about. Williams interprets adolescents undergoing these changes as anxious, insecure and highly vulnerable to not only physical, but emotional damage. In their curricular material, they do much work to reassure students that, though strange things are happening to their bodies and emotions, their experiences are normal.

This treatment of (ab)normality is seen in Williams' puberty education programming. At Williams, puberty programming is a gender-segregated experience. Students are separated by gender into different instructional spaces and taught similar, though not quite identical, material- certain topics covered in the boys' class are not touched on in the girls' class, and vice versa. Puberty books provided to students take a stance of reassurance while frankly presenting the information, presuming that readers are anxious and scared about the changes they and their peers are going through. In both books, readers are told that they should expect to feel many different things about puberty, and that everyone has slight

variations in experiencing it: “[Puberty] is exciting, confusing and even a little strange! But when you understand what it’s all about, it won’t seem so confusing after all. In fact, puberty is a pretty amazing process! There’s plenty of time to get used to it all, so don’t be nervous.”

This reassurance is not only about assuaging preteens’ anxieties about puberty itself. It also reassures them that they will grow into their gender, and develop the physical characteristics associated with it. In both books, which are set up as an FAQ-style expository, there is a section that compares how female adolescent bodies with how male adolescent bodies develop. The books say that puberty is triggered by hormones: estrogen in girls and testosterone in boys. These books make it seem like only girls possess estrogen and boys possess testosterone, whereas all bodies produce both hormones, in addition to progesterone. The secondary sex characteristics that develop during puberty result from how much of each hormone the body receives: more testosterone leads to “male” secondary sex characteristics, like facial hair and the deepening of the voice, and more estrogen leads to “female” secondary sex characteristics, like breast growth. All hormones are a necessary presence in all bodies to regulate development. By only telling students that one hormone is present in women while another is present in men, the gap is furthered between maleness and femaleness.

Additionally, these puberty books construct androgyny as an abnormality. One of the topics the boys' book deals with is male breast growth, a common yet infrequently addressed component of puberty for boys:⁷



The possibility of growing 'female-like breasts' is a potential point of great concern for boys undergoing puberty, due to the freakishness associated with being in-between male and female. In the book's reassurance that this emasculating condition will not be permanent, the possibility that any non-female person can exist normally with 'female-like breasts' is not considered, though this is a relatively common and harmless phenomenon among adult males, and many people who do

⁷ These scans were taken after I had extensively marked the books up during the coding process—please excuse the underlining!

not necessarily identify as female do have breasts. As long as pubescent breast growth stops after puberty, it is normal. If it continues, it is a pathology.

Though much of the puberty education material reifies a binaristic divide between male and female, educators at Williams are also attempting to modify their language within the programming for older students to include gender non-conforming and LGBT students, more and more of whom are becoming part of Williams' audience:

... With the pregnancy portion- I've heard this from a few educators- the pregnancy program, if someone identifies as homosexual, bisexual or one of the two, they may tune out, because they feel like they aren't being spoken to at that time, so that's why with just language, we're trying to change, use more scientific language- instead of just 'boy, girl', saying 'someone with a male reproductive system' and we have images showing exactly what we're meaning by that but understanding that not everyone who says [they're] male looks like this; not everyone who says they're female looks like this, or has these organs.

Though students are taught that boys' and girls' bodies look and develop a certain way because of the presence of either estrogen or testosterone in the puberty programming, this narrative is subverted by educators' usage of gender-neutral language, which emerges out of a desire for inclusivity.

The booklets the girls receive are roughly ten pages longer than the ones the boys receive, due to the girls' booklet having an additional ten-page section describing the stages of the menstrual cycle, particularly focusing on menstruation. In this booklet, menstruation is defined for young girls as "your body getting ready

for the time in the future when you may decide to have a child.” Perhaps predictably, neither the intricacies of the menstrual cycle or female reproductive anatomy are discussed in the boys’ classes, since boys, who educators understand as lacking the parts necessary to have a period, do not need this information for their personal well-being.

The ways in which young people’s needs are interpreted informed by these constructed and essentialized gender divides have observable effects on students’ participation in sex education classes. While teaching older, gender-mixed classes, Justin has observed several differences between female students’ interest level and male students’ :

The biggest difference is that males are immature and females are a lot more mature. If you speak to any educator here, that’s the main thing. The maturity levels are at such different- and this is for 4th through 8th grade- they’re just all at different levels, also interest, and by interest I don’t necessarily mean ‘Yes, I want to sit here and learn about everything you have to say,’ ... but generally the female students are asking the more inquisitive questions... and that’s just because like, culturally, and that’s how it was I know in the past, it was more so ‘Girls, you don’t want to get pregnant, you don’t want to get an infection because if you have an infection who’s going to want to be with you?’ And then the male side, it’s been, ‘Yeah you do this but do your best to not get someone pregnant, and you don’t want to catch anything.’ So it’s the social perspective that I know still is on young people they’re feeling, girls, [they] can’t get pregnant and then the boys, the mentality is more so ‘if this happens it happens.’ The responsibility of pregnancy, oftentimes it’s single households, a single mother raising a child rather than a father raising a kid, so I think there’s a lot of social dynamics that play into this, but maturity is one

and interest is the other and girls are just more so scared of what's happening and boys are just- not interested in it.

Here, Justin identifies how gendered social inequalities filter into the sex education classroom and into young people's interpretations of their own needs. He describes a much- discussed double standard: boys are able to do what they want and are not held accountable for unplanned pregnancies or STIs, while girls are tasked with guarding their virtue and are very frequently shamed if they do not hold onto it. Young women in the U.S, who inhabit a late capitalist state wherein male-headed nuclear families are the norm (Fraser 1989), have much at stake if they fail to live up to the standards set for them. This is particularly the case with young women of color, who face additional, racialized constructions of their sexualities which limit their personal freedom.

Though Justin understood his students' behavior through the lens of these social conditions, Williams as an organization does little to address boys' lack of interest in and awareness of the gendered expectations impinged upon girls, or to diminish fear's role as the driving force behind girls' engagement with the programming.

APC:

NO MIX is the only program out of the three that does not acknowledge non-heterosexuality explicitly, though Kim believes that the lessons taught by NO MIX are applicable and relevant to any teenager, regardless of the way they identify:

Do you ever address or talk about LGBT students? Have you ever had a student who didn't identify as straight?

I haven't personally, that's not really- the program isn't really specific to whether you're straight or gay or lesbian or bi or whatever. Your worth doesn't change, it doesn't change the fact that it's a big decision. nothing about the program would change, I wouldn't change anything no matter what kind of sexual relationships you're having its a big decision with a lot of factors involved.

Despite Kim's belief in the universality of her program, the language of the NO MIX curriculum presumes the heterosexuality (or future heterosexuality) of its audience, in addition to promoting a traditionally gendered approach to courtship and relationships wherein the male partner is the provider and the female partner takes on a nurturing role. While Justin observed teenage boys' lack of interest in learning about the responsibilities of sex as they related to pregnancy and STI prevention, Kim found the opposite to be true in her conversations with students about responsibility. When I asked if she observed any differences between boys and girls in class, Kim responded:

Girls seem to connect very much with talking about self worth and what your value is and knowing when someone knows your value. talk about- it's not your responsibility to prove your worth and value to someone, whoever you choose to have sex with, or anyone in your life, it's their job to show they know your worth, before you make that decision.

The boys respond to talking about responsibility. I do this little demonstration where [picks up piece of paper] I have a piece of paper, a nice clean piece of paper, and I say 'this was my heart before it got messy, and there's no creases, and it's beautiful,' and then I talk about my first relationship and how it was very manipulative and how he only cared about getting what he wanted, and he was going to say

whatever it took to get me to compromise my goals and what I wanted. So [starts crumpling paper] he took my heart and didn't take care of it, laminate it, protect it, he took it, crushed it up, whatever. I'm very dramatic and animated and the kids think it's hilarious. So then [I ask] "boys, are you prepared to take someones nice clean heart and not let it get any wrinkles, or get any tears in it? Because this is what you're responsible for." So the boys really respond to that and, you know, sometimes you're not even responsible enough to finish your homework, so at 12 do you think you're responsible enough to take care of someone's heart, or support a family, or take care of a baby?... And the girls as well, thinking about how someone shows you they know what you're worth: They support your dreams, they don't ask you to compromise your goals, what you wanna be, if you wanna have kids or if you wanna have sex, they're not gonna pressure you to change what you want in life.

Potentially, the difference Because NO MIX does not teach about reproductive anatomy or human development like the other programs do, they do not delve too deeply into the biological aspect of these developments, unlike Williams. Instead, they focus more on interpersonal relationships and sexual values. Enforcing an ethos of male responsibility towards women as romantic partners, which speaks to the traditional gender roles of our heteropatriarchal society, is much more palatable than enforcing an ethos of male responsibility in the context of an unplanned pregnancy.

Stronghearts: all are welcome

Stronghearts was the only organization out of the three which actively worked to counteract a perceived gender divide within the sex education classroom, and the only one to include discussions of LGBTQ identities in their

curricula. One of their key tenets is inclusivity and ensuring that all feel welcome in the classroom: “All of the forms of sexual expression are welcomed here, and not just welcomed here but- students are surrounded by positive images of queerness and transness and non-gender binariness.” This is accomplished through continual dialogue about how to teach these topics, and being forgiving of mistakes:

Some things are challenging- like a couple years ago when the first out trans student was here in class, we had to figure out as a community how we were going to celebrate the learning that was going to happen over the course of the year, and we did that together, so - all kinds of stuff, from using the wrong pronouns and stuff like that- how could we be together, all of us, and go through this transformation of one of us, and how could we do that in a way that’s warm and friendly and safe for everybody, including making mistakes like getting gender pronouns wrong, and we’re really good at that.

Providing for mistakes and dialogue is a necessary component of Stronghearts’ approach to sex ed. By including input from students and altering curricula and the language used to teach it if the need existed, they allowed for a more expansive and positive representation of identity.

Stronghearts also worked to lessen the gender divide which existed in the two other programs. Unlike how things are at Williams, boys are part of the menstruation conversation. Instead of excluding people who don’t menstruate, they are made essential parts of it, which causes their interest in and knowledge about the topic to be far greater than that of the average teenage boy:

[The middle school boys] at the beginning were really unwilling to spend focused, ongoing time on cycling bodies, but by the end of the

year they were really into it and they realized that they had been culturally informed that they were not supposed to be interested in anything relating to bodies that cycle. And then they realized that they really were, so we made these menstrual kits for all the youth organizations in Hudson, and each of the students in that class designed amazing art for each box. And then we went to the store and we bought all the stuff- the boys do that, they go to the store, part of the assignment is that they find somebody at the pharmacy that they ask 3 questions of relating to menstrual products- we've done this for years. And then the boys go- I give the boys money and they buy something- tampons or pads or something, and they choose themselves not to use plastic bags and carry them in public all the way back to our class, which they do and then they make these menstrual kits. And then we drive around Hudson and students deliver them to all these youth centers- well, it was the boys who took the lead on this, who said 'you just stay in the car!' and talked to these organizations about what we say and how the stuff is used and the difference between pads and tampons and where tampons go- these boys are the most unbelievably well informed human beings on the whole topic of anatomical systems that include ovaries.

Having male students take the lead on this community service project and making them go shopping for menstrual products encouraged them to become interested in menstruation and how people experience it. Mica fully believes that boys' disengagement with "girl stuff," like periods and the anatomy of the female reproductive system, results from a cultural, patriarchal imposition of disinterest.

I mean, these boys can tell you the range of vaginas and their anatomy.... Like- they just know so much, but they had to get over that hump of, they've been told it's boring, it's boring, it's like, dead material and supposed to be hidden. And it turns out, into these very enthusiastic young people. Part of the difference between girls and

boys in a sex ed class is that they've been told how they're supposed to be.

Girls and boys in sex ed classes are the way they are partly because of how they are treated by educators. Part of Stronghearts' goal, emergent out of this understanding, is to rewrite the script of how girls and boys are 'supposed to be,' which alters their behavior in the classroom and which information they absorb. This is accomplished through guiding both boys and girls through the menstrual cycle, regardless of any reluctance on the part of boys to learn. Mica wants to teach an expert understanding of sexuality to all her students, and this includes teaching about all gendered experiences to people of all genders.

Chapter Three

Porn pamphlets and penis cookies: pleasure, danger and discursive power in sex ed

Each program positions itself as providing the necessary antidote to parental ignorance as well as a polluted culture of sex in America, in order to meet the sexual health-related needs of young people, interpreted using socially-constructed conceptions of gender. This chapter explores how the three programs discuss sex-educational topics with their students and how these topics are framed. In order to determine this, the programs apply their understanding of what is needed within their curricula. Using Fraser's outline of three types of "needs talk," I found that (conveniently enough) each organization aligned with each of the three types. These branches of needs talk are informed by political discourses and relations of power which determine the validity of certain types of knowledge. Regardless of which branch of needs talk the strategy of teaching what adolescents (and their parents) need to, and *only* what they need to hear about sexuality ends up oversimplifying the complex realities of being a sexual being, and how these realities are informed by other axes of identity. This strategy also delineates certain topics and pedagogical approaches, such as masturbation and demonstrations, as non-needs, which trivializes and devalues potentially valuable information.

'We don't do moral:' Williams' facts-based approach

During our time together, Justin repeatedly referred to the undebatable authority of scientific fact. Justin has found that, in addition to providing students with objective and fact-based (and therefore, amoral) information, parents and administrators respond positively to the science-based curricula. It helps them accept the curricular choices and subjects that Williams covers:

One year I went [to a school] and the evaluation said, 'glad you took out all the moral stuff and you stuck to the science.' Just making that kind of change means less drama, less phone calls, less everything, when we stick to the science, 'cause science can't really- I mean, anyone can argue anything at any time, but science is what it is.

The way Justin characterizes science as ultimately inarguable, the final say, imbues it with objectivity and monolithic authority. Being able to claim rights to science lends educators credibility, while removing some of the 'drama' present in parental anxieties about what gets taught to their children. The scientific discourse mobilized by Williams is constructed as objective, impartial, free of values and, therefore, incontestable: science "is what it is."

As a highly bureaucratized organization Williams exercises what Fraser deems an *expert needs talk*. Expert needs discourses are "the vehicles for translating sufficiently politicized runaway needs into objects of potential state intervention" (1989, 173). Translating sex educational curricular needs into language which makes them easily regulatable by governmental entities (i.e., social science

discourses, legal discourses and administrative discourses) often means that expert needs discourses depoliticize their needs (Fraser 1989, 174), which is precisely what Williams does in taking a “just the facts” approach to sex ed.

Of the three, Williams’ programming is the most contingent upon the input of schools and parents, which means that they have to tread carefully when talking about subjects frequently construed as inappropriate or immoral. Through claiming an approach based in scientific objectivity and eschewing discussions of values, educators, despite their positioning of themselves as sexuality experts, remain silent and uncritical of what these values actually mean for students, and the unbiased lessons they teach nearly always align with normative, essentialized stances on sexuality and gender. The onus is on parents and other “trusted adults,” however ill-equipped they may be, to fill in the blanks.

The ability to designate information as based in either “science” or “morals” provides educators at Williams with a road map of topics that are able to be addressed and how to address them if a question asked by a student is not covered by the curriculum, which has remained the same since the 1970s. Justin talked with me about how Williams educators discuss same-sex attraction, an extracurricular topic:

There is some science to it, but in our programming we don’t currently talk about [same-sex attraction]. If that were to get brought up in a program we would simply let them know that, from a science aspect, are there some things that have been found, yes, but if it’s more so a moral question, like ‘is it okay for me to feel this way?’ ... Everyone has

their own feelings, it's perfectly fine, but we're not going to build on it, because as strangers that's not our place to.

It is an empirical fact that some people are attracted to members of the same sex, but whether or not these feelings are “okay” is not (and cannot be) explainable by extant scientific literature or empirical data. Because of this, instructors at Williams are able to discuss same-sex attraction with students, but only to an extent: they can only confirm the existence of others who are attracted to the same sex. They do not “build on” these feelings of desire and attraction, a nebulous category not easily quantified by scientific methods, because they feel that, as strangers, they can only satisfy students' need for factual information.

One other way science subsumes values is through language. Justin described to me how language used by Williams educators to describe certain reproductive processes, like fertilization, has intentionally shifted to become less and less laden with value judgements over time:

It's starting to shift - even in the past, when we would bring up fertilization, we would say 'when a husband and a wife...' and then after that, we changed it: 'we shouldn't be saying husband and wife; [we should be saying] 'when a male and a female...' And then when we went to male-female we were asked questions [from adults]: 'Well, can you say husband and wife?' and at first, we were like 'yeah, sure, whatever,' but when you think about it that's not science. I mean, clearly not every person is born to parents who are married, so now it's not even man/woman; boy/girl; husband/wife; it's, 'When the sperm cells are released into the vagina, the sperm cells begin to swim up looking for the egg through an act called sexual intercourse,' and parents have never said anything since about not saying “husband/wife” or “male/female.” It's really getting back to the science, I can now look back and say that we were kinda actually throwing in morals- even if we didn't think we were, we were, but it's

something [we're] now cognizant about, any time we're saying something or trying to change something, to try to keep it science, but parents are quietly saying moral, in a positive way.

It became apparent to Williams that using the terms 'husband' and 'wife' to describe the two distinct subjects able to carry out fertilization limited understandings of what fertilization actually was and who it could happen to. Using 'male' and 'female' to explain the process of fertilization was more scientifically accurate, but posed problems to Williams instructors because their adult clientele wanted them to re-inject the values of monogamy and heterosexuality back into their instruction. Therefore, in order to stay true to science and de-politicize the act of fertilization, Williams instructors removed the human subjects entirely from their explanations of fertilization, focusing only on what happens during this process at the cellular level: they detail how sperm cells fertilize egg cells, but do not discuss what types of humans are involved in the process. Through breaking the act of fertilization down to its barest and most essential elements, instructors can avoid discussing the marital status or gender of the bodies who fertilize and are fertilized. In this way, by removing the messier human elements of fertilization, they 'keep it science,' and disengage entirely with potentially problematic gendered and value-laden terminology.

An interesting tension emerges out of Williams' avoidance of values talk and prioritization of science-based information. On one hand, removing the categories of husband/wife and male/female from definitions of fertilization subverts the

schema laid out by the heterosexual imaginary. By disentangling marriage and even the presence of a male and female body from this definition of fertilization, new potential avenues for this process are brought into the realm of possibility. The only thing necessary for fertilization to occur is the meeting of a sperm cell with an egg cell, but this could happen in many different contexts- not only to married couples or male/female pairs. Fertilization could even occur, in part, outside of bodies- as is the case with in-vitro fertilization, or artificial insemination. The removal of human actors using this more scientific (and therefore 'objective') definition of fertilization allows this institution to remain silent on who participates in this 'act called sexual intercourse,' and avoid engagement with discussions of which sexual expressions are normalized and which are not. Parents, who Justin understands as 'quietly saying moral, in a positive way' and as increasingly becoming more progressive in their beliefs (which he sees as a good thing), are responsible for filling in the blanks for their kids: questions about who fertilization can happen to, and how, and why, is left entirely up to them to answer.

Occasionally, Williams educators experience pushback from adults with concerns about the more contentious and 'inappropriate' aspects of their programming. These usually have to do with non-procreative sexual intercourse, which is more difficult to justify talking to young audiences about. One of the organization's strategies to avoid controversy and criticism is to provide only the most necessary of details about these contentious topics. During our interview,

Justin outlined the very subtle, nuanced differences between defining sexual activities (acceptable) and providing instruction on how to enact these (not acceptable) and the concerned reactions from parents:

... for whatever reason, when parents hear the term 'anal sex,' they get really uncomfortable, but they usually think that when we say anal, oral- any of them, that we're going to go into detail and tell them how to do it- like, 'this is how you do anal,' but that's not what we're trying to do at all. We just give them the definition of what it is, and the possible consequences, so that's really been the pushback [from parents and teachers.]

So they don't really like when you go into the mechanics of different sex acts?

Yeah. so it's the how-to's, and then when they hear that it's not a how-to, it's just simply [defining] what it is, then our why- 'why do we bring up anal sex, oral sex'- a lot of parents say that. 'Why are you talking about this stuff in 7th grade, 8th grade?' One, statistically, the number of STIs that happen with young people 25 or younger, it's 50% of sexually active teens [who] will contract an infection at some point in that time period, but then [there's] also the pregnancy aspect. If they don't know, there's not really a way to at least try to help lower, limit, what's happening.

What's the difference between going into the mechanics of sex and 'telling what it is'?

It's just more so definition, so [we'll say] anal sex is intercourse relating to a person's anus, and we have drawings, we'll point out- 'here's the anus'- that's more so definition, versus [saying] someone's tongue, penis, is inserted here, so just very broad definitions versus, that's what I consider mechanic, like 'how-to's'

Perhaps the mention of anal sex is particularly discomfoting to parents because it is associated, more so than other types of intercourse, with (male) homosexuality, disease (HIV/AIDS, in particular) and sexual debasement. This association, and its subsequent moral and legal implication, have a long history: laws

Figure 7: graph showing PornHub's (very sociologically compelling) most searched-for terms of 2017 ("anal" is towards the bottom)

banning sodomy have been around since the Byzantine Empire (McBride & Fortenberry 2010). More recent coverage of anal sex is mostly found in STI awareness campaigns or porn websites-



in 2017, "anal" was one of PornHub's top ten most searched-for terms (PornHub 2018). As long as Williams instructors can assure parents and teachers that they aren't telling their students how to have anal sex, they can discuss and define it-with students at a reasonable age. 'How-to's' are an important dividing line between what is considered appropriate and what is not. While students need to be able to understand what certain sex acts are and look like, as well as the trouble they can lead to, they do not need to know how to engage in those sex acts.

Another non-procreative sexual topic that Williams has trouble addressing, though Justin does believe it is needed, is sexual pleasure. Justin highlights masturbation as a particular object of fascination that his students have:

Do you talk about sexual pleasure?

From us, outwardly no. But pleasure is a topic- like I said, with the new updates we ask teachers, we do all that but we also have our internal

‘what do we need to bring up?’ and pleasure is always, like- where does it fall? I mean, comprehensive sex ed, pleasure has to- there’s an area for it. The ‘why’- masturbation gets brought up, usually in the [boys’ puberty] programs, and then in the STI one they’re usually asking ‘can you get an infection from touching yourself?’ And I know what they’re asking there in terms of masturbation- so currently, us outwardly just bringing it up, no, but if a student were to bring it up in some fashion, if it’s appropriate for the topic- like STIs, pregnancy, that class where we cover that stuff- it’ll be acknowledged as a- depending on the question, yes, or whatever they’re wondering, so from our side outwardly, no, but it’s a topic that’s on the table for our updates because it’s part of life.

Masturbation and pleasure are two sex-educational needs that need to be “figured out” by Williams educators in designing their curricula- where do they fall? As it currently stands, these topics are only brought up if a student asks about them, just like same-sex desire, gender variance or any number of topics not included in the curriculum. If a student does bring these topics up, they are addressed matter-of-factly, but otherwise educators stick to the program. This is another way to avoid parental and bureaucratic ire while providing current and accurate information: if an educator were to discuss something not covered by the parental consent forms sent out to families, the organization could get in trouble, since they ultimately have little say over the sexual values that parents transmit to their children.

The reluctance of the educators at Williams to make value judgements or discuss potentially controversial topics align with Foucauldian understandings of

children's sexuality, wherein "the child's sexual body belongs, and will always belong, to the family space, and no one else will ever have any power over or claim on this body" (Foucault 2003, 257). Williams abides by this in their usage of expert needs discourse, through providing students only with 'objective' scientific information, which very frequently aligns with and does not ever interrogate heteronormative maxims on family life and reproduction. When potentially subversive topics like gender variance and same-sex attraction arise, which are typically not subsumed under these normative scripts, they are explained briefly and in the most normalizing ways possible, with little attention given to the historical, political and sociocultural context in which they are situated.

Mixing statistics and cautionary tales at NO MIX

Under a Fraserian framework, the needs discourse which inform the curricular choices at APC mobilize reprivatization needs discourses, which seek to remove the sex from sex education and place it back safely within the domestic sphere. Fraser writes that reprivatization discourses

seem merely to render explicit those need interpretations that could earlier go without saying. But, on the other hand, by the very act of articulating such interpretations, they simultaneously modify them. Because reprivatization discourses respond to competing, oppositional interpretations, they are internally dialogized, incorporating references to the alternatives they resist, even while rejecting them (Fraser 1989, 172).

This act of referencing opposition is decidedly true of APC: even though they are against teen sex, NO MIX is a program *about* teen sex. Much like the Religious Right,

the first promoters of abstinence-only education, APC is advocating for something that, up until the earlier part of the 20th century, could 'go without saying.' For a long time, sex outside of marriage was constructed as deviant behavior (Moran 2000).⁸ APC, in their efforts to promote abstinence, oppose any sort of comprehensive sex ed they see as directly promoting sex outside marriage, and, like Williams, use depoliticizing language and discourse, though its goal is to return sex back to the realm of the domestic and keep it out of schools through imbuing the issue of abstinence with morality and making it a matter of personal choice.

Like Williams, science and statistics are also used by the NO MIX programming at the Aspire Pregnancy Center- In fact, during their interviews Kim and Justin both cited the same statistic, that 50% of people under 25 have at one point contracted an STI. However, these statistics are interpreted and used differently at Aspire. Unlike Williams' avoidance of values and morality, scientific and statistical data are used to supplement APC's advancement of an abstinence-focused set of sexual ethics:

... Our slideshow has statistics. We don't use scary pictures, but I do touch on statistics. 50% of people have gotten an STI by the time they're 25. We touch on that in a way that's real and not a fear tactic. I reiterate that when teaching - 'I'm not trying to scare you, sex is not a bad thing, it just needs to be dealt with in a safe way where you're ready for the possible outcomes and what might happen, the way it's meant to be dealt with.' So it's not impossible - you can do anything

⁸ Though of course, this does not mean sex was never spoken about in schools or that premarital sex never happened.

you want, it just makes it harder, so it's important to think about your choices.

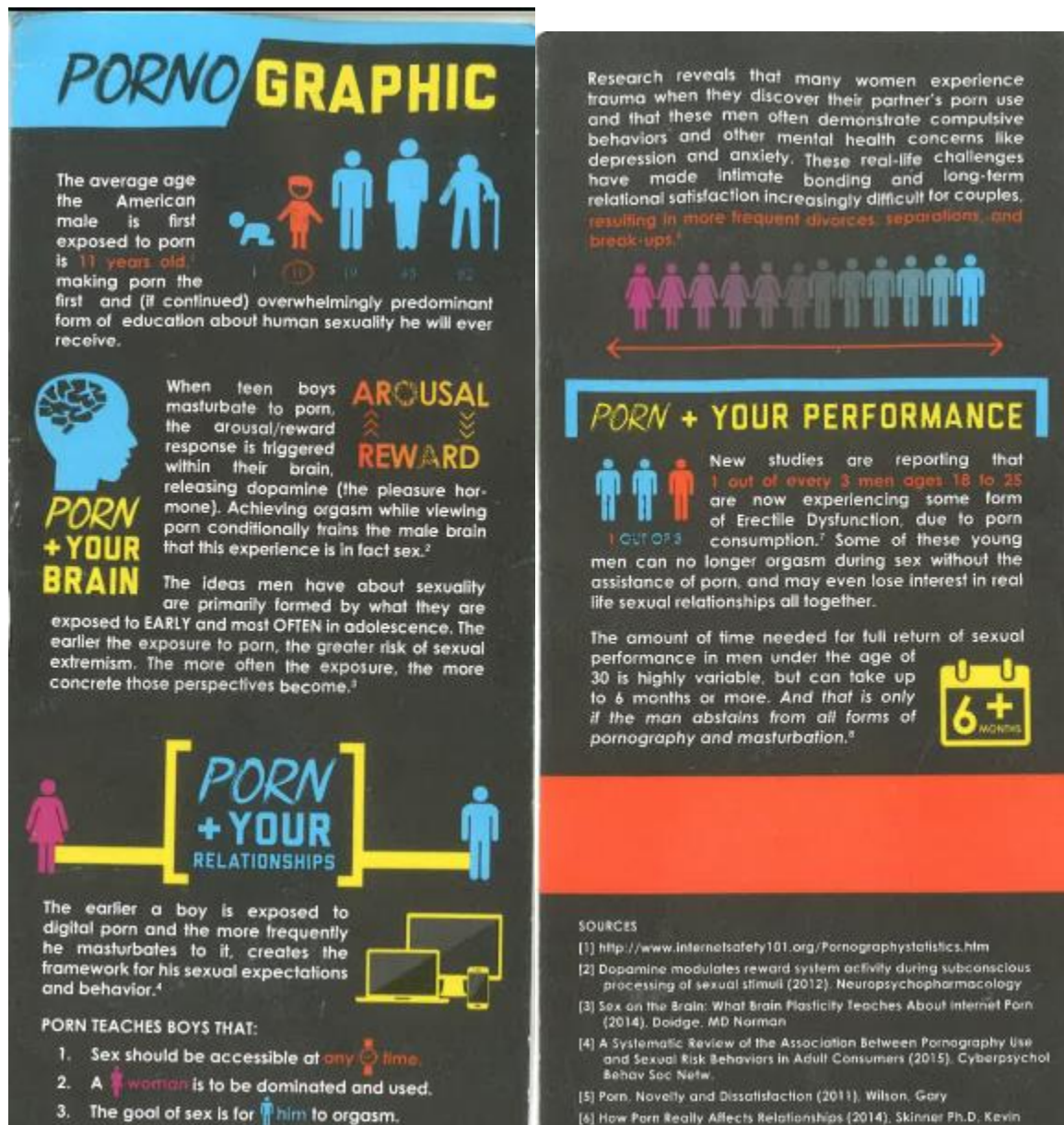
Kim tells me that the presentations of these statistics are not meant to frighten students, but put things into perspective. It is clear, though that the intended effect is to associate teen sex, and sex outside of a committed relationship more generally, with not only emotional risk, but the physical risk of disease. In the understanding of this program, healthy sexuality is only achievable through monogamy- this includes pleasure, intimacy and romance. Kim, who is happily married, reiterated many times during our interview that she didn't see sex as a "bad thing," only the toxic culture around it: "... In the right environment, sex is really good, and really safe and really great- sex is not a bad thing. But if you mix that into a point where you're not ready for it in your life or where your relationship isn't stable, or whatever, that would be a bad mix." In Kim's interpretation, the 'right environment' is always a monogamous one. While at Williams the usage of these statistics are meant to justify talking about sex and strategies for safer sex with teens and for informing both students and parents of current realities, APC puts a distinctly moralizing spin on the statistical and scientific information they use through combining this information with anecdotal evidence about the detrimental effects of premature sexuality. Pamphlets on porn passed out at the end of every NO MIX class cite scientific and psychological research done on porn users to prove their assertion that watching porn warps minds and is an unhealthy way to express

sexuality. By mixing this evidence in with moralist statements like “A man could never be fully committed to you mentally or physically [if he watches porn],” NO MIX sends the message that porn is bad for teens on all fronts. The pamphlets tell readers that, like casual sex, porn offers immediate gratification, but at the long-term costs. Much like Williams’ puberty booklets, these pamphlets reinforce essentialist notions of how men and women experience sexual pleasure and presume the heterosexuality of their readers. They assume that girl students want a man to love them and find them attractive, and that boy students want the same from women. The threat of sexual dysfunction as a result of too much porn are used to implore boys to stop watching, lest their brains become re-wired and corrupted by pornographic tropes and imagery. Boys are told that, if they watch porn, they will not be able to experience sexual pleasure with another person- they will become impotent, the ultimate blow to masculinity. On the girls’ side of things, the negative effects of porn that threaten them only reach them *through* interactions with men, as opposed to through their own viewings. Because of the violence in porn, women suffer from domestic abuse and toxic relationships with men.⁹ These pamphlets propagate the essentialist notion that women do not have their own sexual desires, or that their desires are significantly less potent than

⁹ It is also worth noting that, though the stakes are much higher for women in these pamphlets than they are for men, the physical and emotional harm of domestic violence is painted as equatable to the emasculating embarrassment of sexual dysfunction

men's; they are primarily conduits for male desires, which are more aggressive¹⁰ and require regulation. By only providing boys with information about the effects of porn on the brain, APC is determining that girls do not need this information because the way they express desire and feel sexual pleasure is not as important as the way men do. The pamphlets even take a gendered rhetorical approach to battling porn usage: there are twice as many citations on the boys' pamphlet (8) than the girls' (4). Boys are targeted with empirical evidence, and girls with emotional appeals to morality and the stability of interpersonal relationships.

¹⁰ because men have higher levels of testosterone, widely considered to be the most rageful of all of adolescents' 'raging hormones'



Figures 8 & 9: the pamphlets on pornography APC gives to male students

PORN & YOUR RELATIONSHIPS



88% of all porn involves some form of female degradation. In fact, physical violence, verbal abuse and unwanted sexual acts are more commonly reported in relationships where porn is viewed.²

Porn also affects the ability for couples to connect emotionally. When porn is in the mix, individuals report higher rates of anxiety and depression, a greater number of sexual partners, less satisfaction with their relationships and more frequent break-ups.³

PORN & YOUR WORLD

 It is reported that half of all sex trafficked victims have been forced to make porn. Many researchers now speculate porn to be the leading cause of human trafficking in the United States. In other words, consuming porn directly fuels the victimization of women and girls who are coerced into sex slavery.⁴

Porn can teach you a lot of things, and most of it isn't true. **KILL THE LIES. Give yourself a chance to experience real, meaningful love.**

You are worth it!

SOURCES

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YOU, ME & PORN

1 OUT OF 3

So a lot of people think porn is just a guy thing... but did you know that **1 out of every 3 porn users are women?**¹

PORN & YOU

There are lots of reasons why girls are now into porn. And it seems harmless enough, right?

 **PORN HAS BECOME SEX EDUCATION IN THE MODERN WORLD.** And that's a dangerous thing...

SO WHAT DOES PORN TEACH GIRLS?

- If you want a relationship, you must  **give him whatever kind of sex he wants.**
"If I can't please him someone for something else will."
-  **Your self-worth is tied to your appearance and sexual performance.**
"I only feel pretty when he wants me."
- A  **man** could never be fully committed to you mentally or physically.
"He's just going to do it. He can't control himself."
- That verbal  **and physical abuse**  **is normal and permissible in relationships.**
"It doesn't really bother me. I know he still loves me."

Porn promotes **WARPED IDEAS** about sex. It shapes false ideals of beauty and creates distorted expectations for relationships.

Figures 10 & 11: the pamphlets on pornography APC gives to male students

Though they are significant in the ways they gender pleasure, porn pamphlets are not touched upon in class, because most of the time is devoted to Kim also telling students about the hardships she faced as a young woman. Though one of the intended takeaways from Kim's story is that, like her, people can surmount these hardships and "do anything [they] want," it is also meant to be a firsthand account and cautionary tale of how difficult a young person's life can become when sex is thrown into the mix:

I'm married, I have 3 kids, the first time I was pregnant was at 19 so that's why I had a heart for what [Aspire} does....What I share in the program is my story. So my dad wasn't around growing up, so I had that piece missing, I was looking for someone to care about me and show me that I was worth their time, so, for me, if somebody wanted to have sex with me I saw it as my time being worth it for them. So I had very promiscuous behavior, and it led to a lot of heartbreak and a lot of situations I could've avoided- you know, I had my first child when I was 20 years old. I was going to nursing school and it was really hard to do things that I could've done easily if I had made better decisions and knew how much I was worth- that I was worth more than hookups, and if i didn't want to have sex I could've said no and it's ok to make that decision for yourself. So really it's just about knowing that your worth doesn't change depending on your surroundings or how people treat you..... Being able to share my journey and my heartbreak and where it got me is one of the best parts of this program- I turned my life around and came out of it, but it's not an easy thing to heal from.

Kim's story is a moving one, and it is clear from talking with her that she works hard to engage with students effectively in order to relay the message of self-worth and

abstinence. Combining her story with statistical and scientifically accurate data on STIs in adolescent populations acts as powerful rhetoric against the ‘bad mix’ of teen sex.

Anecdotal, personalized evidence like this is an effective tool for getting one’s point across, but it also has the potential to obfuscate much about the structural aspects of American society that make sex dangerous to teens, particularly young women. The needs associated with the negative ramifications of not being abstinent that Kim discusses, like teenage pregnancy and domestic abuse, are typically understood as located within the domestic sphere, a depoliticized zone which, Fraser points out, “supports relations of dominance and subordination” (1989, 168) and thusly, supports naturalized hierarchies of gender, class and race.

Though Kim’s story is an uplifting one, and sends the message that you can accomplish anything through hard work, this is not the reality for many who have had similar life experiences. The way Kim tells her story in her classes makes it seem like the choice to be ‘promiscuous’ is the only determinant in whether or not a person has a positive, healthy experience of their sexuality, and that willpower is what drives them to overcome hardship- a riff on the classically American maxim of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.” This understanding of sexual health as wholly determined by the personal choice to remain abstinent ignores how deeply embedded, intersectional relations of gender, race and class in America structurally

disadvantage women, people of color and working class people (Crenshaw 1991), and how people belonging to these demographics are more likely to experience abuse and systematic neglect.

Stronghearts: oppositional visions of sex education

In a way, Stronghearts and APC are each other's worst nightmare: one program seeks to promote abstinence outside of a committed, monogamous (heterosexual) relationship, while the other seeks to redefine sexuality as a positive "whole-body experience" and openly discusses masturbation, casual sex and pleasure with students. It is surprising, then, that they share some ideological stances and discursive commitments. APC's usage of reprivatization discourses is, in effect, emergent out of the ways organizations like Stronghearts apply oppositional discursive frameworks to the politicized need of sex education.

The approach Stronghearts takes in teaching sex education is distinctly different from the way the other two programs approach sexual health, particularly in the realm of sexual pleasure. Williams only acknowledges its existence when directly questioned, and Aspire describes sexual pleasure outside monogamy as a dangerous indulgence. Both of the other programs prioritize emphasizing the riskiness of adolescent sexuality over discussions of its pleasurable aspects, because of the prevailing discourses of risk, heterocentric morality and essentializing biology which suggest that teenagers' sexualities are dangerous to

themselves and to the structure of American families, and need to have their sexual desires corralled in order to express sexuality safely and healthily as adults.

I interpreted the needs talk that Stronghearts participates in as oppositional needs talk, wherein discourses are mobilized to articulate needs outside of official, sanctioned sources of knowledge. People who are disadvantaged by the prevailing interpretations of needs, e.g.. women, people of color, queer people, and working class people “contest the established boundaries separating ‘politics’ from... ‘domestics’... offer alternative interpretations of their needs embedded in alternative chains of in-order-to-relations [and] create new discourse publics from which they try to disseminate their interpretations of their needs.” These new discourse publics “challenge, modify, and/or displace hegemonic elements of the means of interpretation and communication; they invent new forms of discourse for interpreting their needs” (Fraser 1989, 171). The curriculum of Stronghearts emerges out of a growing dissatisfaction with sexual health institutions which reproduced patriarchal values and norms, which negatively impacted non-male, non-white, non-bourgeois groups of people and their sex-educational knowledge. In her instruction, Mica pulls from feminist theoretical discourses and the sexual health practices emergent from this body of knowledge, which she was exposed to while working as a nurse in women’s health clinics:

Those years, working in that clinic where we were discovering ourselves being investigative reporters on the female body. Working with women in groups- most of the women have grown up with this model of gynecology where women go in separately to see the OBGYN

or the midwife, and we're draped and we're not told we can put the speculum in by ourselves, that's just so basic for me but that's not normal for most people now and that idea that, whatever gender one is, that we can learn about our bodies together, and that we have a right to do that and a right to know, it's so radical still it's a little shocking for me. But that really informed me and this knowledge from a long time ago: that I can figure this out by myself and so can the people that teach me, that we can figure it out and see how our students respond...

Stronghearts has rejected the prevailing discourses or knowledge sources which inform interpretations of sex educational needs today- public health standards, adolescent developmental psychology, family values, just to name a few- in order to put forward a new type of sex education, led primarily by students and informed by second-wave feminist reproductive health. When I asked about Stronghearts not abiding by, say, the National Sexuality Education Standards, or the SIECUS guidelines, or having any official licensing (something I always associated prior to this interview with far more sexually conservative groups who objected to the sexually liberal content of these guidelines), Mica responded that she felt the use of standards in health education has historically been a hindrance, rather than a help:

In some ways [using standards is] a good thing and in some ways that's a bad thing. Midwifery for example- when it was good to not be licensed, and then there could be black midwives, rural midwives, granny midwives, who had all this experience and birthed babies really safely and then we put all these laws in place and they weren't allowed to work anymore- such a loss!

She isn't wrong- alternative sources of knowledge which afford the power of birth, life and death to structurally oppressed peoples, like midwifery, have a history of

being squashed by governmental bodies.¹¹ Of course, the *lack* of standardization means that what little information American school sex ed classes are required to provide students could potentially be thrown out the window.

Stemming from this oppositional needs talk, Stronghearts' approach to sex education is decidedly not for traditionalists. Emphasis is placed on navigating desire, pleasure, individual agency. It seeks to fill the "missing discourse of desire," which deprives young people - particularly young girls- of agency in sex education and schools (Fine 1998, 2006). Since Stronghearts identifies the needs they meet as opposing patriarchal, hegemonic, oppressive discourses on sexuality that color sexual expression as negative, they seek to meet their students' needs for positive experiences of sexuality by de-emphasizing topics like STI's and teenage pregnancy. Stronghearts' programs challenge conventional notions of what is and is not appropriate to talk about in the sex education classroom by openly acknowledging that sex feels good and is more than a vehicle for reproduction or disease.

As Mica understands it, sexuality is a whole, embodied experience, and inseparable from the world around us. Through engaging with the natural world, students learn about more than just their own bodies, they are able to place them

¹¹ The tradition of midwife persecution, in particular, can even be traced back to the Early Modern European witch hunts (see: Smith 1995, Ettinger 2006, Horsley & Horsley 1987).

within a macro-level understanding of sexual behavior that goes beyond humanity.

Mica sees this engagement with nature as a sex-educational need:

We focus on the human body in relation to the world around us, so the human body is emergent from the natural world, and we lead classes where the natural world enters into our teaching and all of our conversations... We teach human sexuality in relation to biology and animal sexuality and reproduction and animal presence in the world, nature, weather, and we have our students interface with the natural world in a number of ways, through spending time outdoors, gardening, growing and harvesting medicinal plants, et cetera.

Stronghearts' class for children ages 8-12, Botany and the Body, uses the age-old metaphor of plant reproduction to begin discussing how living beings reproduce.

Students are taught to identify the different parts of plant reproductive systems and construct play-dough models of these parts, which prepares them to eventually learn about human reproductive systems in a much, much more in-depth way than the other two programs:

How do you transition between talking about plants and talking about people?

Students in the youngest class are outside a lot and they bring things inside and take flowers apart and look at them under the microscope to learn about different flower parts. And then they'll do things like make flowers out of playdoh with all the different parts, and figure out where the plant is fertilized, where the seeds are developed and how, et cetera. Then they'll move from making flowers to making vulvas, and comparing the parts of the vulva with parts of flowers- this is over a period of years. And they'll be doing "male" flower parts, painting them, constructing them, making cookies that have all the different parts, and then they'll start doing the same thing with penises, et cetera. And from there, talking about what happens to the vulva when

a girl is feeling sexually turned on and same for a penis for boys, we'll do that, so we don't shy away from talking about the body feeling delicious, and why that is, even with our youngest students.

Educators at Stronghearts do not feel the need to shy away from discussing sexual pleasure and 'feeling delicious', they ease into these conversations gradually, guiding them 'over a period of years.' The organization can afford to do this because programming lasts the entire school year, and many families stay with the organization for most of their children's pre-teen and teenage years. Initial discussions of pleasure are decontextualized from sexuality entirely, and sex becomes integrated into these discussions as students start to have their own sexual experiences and feelings:

We teach pleasure starting from young- our youngest students, we spend a lot of time outside and we have a lot of discussion about "what feels good about this," like, in the soil and digging for worms, stuff like that, like "this feels good and why does it feel good- why does it feel good to plant seeds? Why is it good to smell flowers? Why is the body loving pleasure?" ... As students get older and start to have more sexually based experiences whether that's going out on their first date, or holding hands, or kissing- what feels good about that? And that's good- we want students to be growing up and experiencing pleasure in all the forms that they can and believe that that makes a whole healthy sexual person, rather than denying that, we're in that all the way.

Once students are old enough to be in the high school class, discussions of pleasure become more explicitly about sex and sexual experimentation. This experience of pleasure is never framed by the program as a negative, ephemeral or distracting

thing, as it is with . Educators at Stronghearts are also concerned with making sure students are comfortable discussing sex, sexual identity and sexual pleasure with each other, particularly around topics that are usually associated with shame, inappropriateness or privacy. Mica told me that masturbation, a topic many in-school programs do not know how to tackle, plays a starring role in her teen program:

So we really focus on masturbation a lot, which is kinda outlawed at the public schools- it's outlawed at every school, schools don't talk about masturbation but we talk about masturbation as the natural place to learn about your body in-depth and in a really good way, and if you're gonna decide you wanna be in a romantic or sexual relationship with another human, then you can take what you've learned about your own body through masturbation into that relationship and how great that is for both of those people, of any gender or non-gender, that knowing your own body as a source of self pleasuring is a powerful place and much more powerful than being with another person- it's foundational.

Instead of focusing their instruction on relational sexual behavior or filtering it through the understanding that all people want sex and are going to be in a committed sexual relationship someday, educators at Stronghearts primarily discuss sex as something that's first and primarily experienced with oneself. Mica was incorrect in stating that schools don't discuss masturbation, but they do definitely express discomfort with this subject. Justin in our interview and Kim's pamphlets on pornography both mention it by name, but do not credit it as a

positive, foundational sexual experience for young people as Stronghearts' teen program does, or give students the space and discursive tools to discuss it openly.

Though Stronghearts interprets student needs through oppositional discourses which oppose many aspects of conventional sex education, this does not mean that the organization diverges entirely from culturally constructed norms about adolescence and sexuality. Stronghearts operates on principles which align with normative discourses on age-appropriateness as understood by other sex ed programs and American society as a whole: certain topics are not to be broached with young people until they have reached a certain age, which reflects a larger cultural understanding of young children as unable to fully comprehend adult sexuality. Their reluctance to dive right into certain topics like pleasure and reproductive anatomy indicates this.

The program also takes similar stances to the other two programs on certain topics, though they come to these conclusions through different rationalizations. Like Kim and Aspire, Mica is heavily critical of internet porn and its ability to “warp” teen brains. Both women believe that porn is quickly overtaking formalized sex education as teens' primary source of information, and that this is a bad thing. Mica understands the most crucial need she fulfills with her teaching to be fixing the ways porn has compromised the healthy development of teens' sexualities:

At the moment, in the beginning of 2018, this is what I see for students' needs- students of all ages, and we're now seeing this as young as the 5th grade, for example- their choice at the moment, this is what's

offered by the capitalist culture that we live in, is to not learn but think that they're learning about sex and sexuality via porn. And that's their- for most young people now, that's their entrance into what they're considering education about sex and sexuality. That's kind of what they've got. And so that's really interesting and that's an enormous change just over the last 4 years- we would see students in high school having this dilemma about whether to learn via porn that they had access to on their devices or not learn anything, and that's what kids would report to this, becausetheir body is telling them that they need to learn and they want to learn about whole body sexuality... . And the only way that our culture in the United States satisfies that is by offering kids porn sites. So that's where kids go, and it makes an awful lot of sense to me, but it's a shame ... if they're regularly watching porn and participating in that without guidance, their bodies are learning a way of being sexual that's not satisfying, and it doesn't address our whole bodies, and include their minds and their spirits, and it's anti-nature- I'm not talking about all porn, just what kids have access to. So they're training their bodies to have a certain set of desires and a certain way of fulfilling themselves sexually. And the problem with that for kids is that they discover when they start dating or having sex with human beings that they don't know how to fully be with another human being.

Here, Mica's discussion of porn reaching kids at an increasingly younger age and 'training [kids'] bodies' to be aroused by certain imagery directly aligns with what Aspire's anti-porn pamphlets, and the literature they cite, discuss. It is very interesting that two programs with such divergent ideological bents would have such similar viewpoints and even cite the same sources when discussing this topic. This is where the similarities end- their reasonings for why porn is bad differ wildly. While NO MIX's issue with porn is that it messes up the ideal of the committed,

monogamous sexual relationship with no sex outside it, Mica's issues with it are that it messes up students' understanding of their bodies and their sexual selves by providing images of sexuality that are not satisfying and inhibit the body's relationship to nature.

Mica is also critical of sex-ed pedagogy which focuses primarily on disease, pregnancy and other "sexual risks." These types of curricula de-emphasize the pleasurable and wholesome aspects of sex. Stronghearts' own curricula, as a response to the sex negativity of most sex ed programs, downplays discussions about STIs and birth control :

We do very little on that. Very, very little. The way we approach STIs is very basic, like 'well, your whole body gets unwell if your penis gets sick or your vagina gets sick, check it out, here's how you do that'- but we really don't focus on it because it's such a negative.

For birth control, we have our midwife who's on our board come in and get down with the kids, and shes amazing- she'll spread her legs with her pants on and show where a diaphragm goes and insert it in her body, we take the hs students to her home office and go through a mock visit to a gynecological visit, we do it on purpose so their first visit to a health practitioner- they've already done and it they know what it looks like, and we strongly encourage students to go with another person. My goal is that everybody's comfortable. We really kind of sideline [birth control and STI talk] because once a student can be really embodied and knows what's going on in their body, that stuff comes easily.

This 'very basic' approach to STIs and birth control is quite the opposite of most sex ed programs, which emphasize the importance of these topics- particularly STIs, which are used to heighten the sense of risk inherent in teenage sexuality and deter

sexual behavior. In addition to that, more modern and hormonal forms of birth control, like Implanon (the arm implant), IUDs and Depo Provera (the shot) are not discussed with students though these forms of birth control can offer more long term protection and are more effective at preventing pregnancy. Though much of how Stronghearts teaches revolves around addressing teens' needs for agency and autonomy in learning about sex, the fact that students are not provided with comprehensive information about STIs and birth control could have negative ramifications on their understandings of these topics. Just like the unwillingness to discuss condoms at APC emerges out of a commitment to abstinence, Stronghearts' treatment of sex positivity as a necessity means that potentially key information is left out. Must sex positive, 'whole' sexuality education come at a cost to comprehensive knowledge of the potentially harmful aspects of sex?

This chapter is an attempt to unravel the complex interweavings of need interpretation, gendered relations of power and legitimizing discourses which inform these three programs' curricular choices. Understanding sex education through a framework of needs interpretation necessarily means certain aspects of sexuality are designated as non-needs. Each organization sacrifices something in their sex educational programming in order to fill the need of something else- what is sacrificed is determined by which branch of needs talk the organization in question utilized.

Conclusion

The three sex-educational organizations I studied had distinct differences, but also shared many commonalities. Despite their differing approaches to how sex ed should be taught and their different pedagogical philosophies, all of them were informed by the politics of needs interpretation in the building of their curricula, and all of them shared similar constructions of adolescents, parents and their own positionings in relation to the communities they served. However simple and innocuous this setup initially seems, through doing the work of this project I found that interpretations of sex-educational needs, and the ways programs go about meeting these needs, are informed by an expansive network of culturally, socially, historically, politically situated conditions and discourses, which impact the content and form of the lessons taught in the sex ed classroom and determine what students needed- and, more importantly, what they did *not* need to know. The way these organizations interpreted their students' needs, in many cases, reinforced normative and essentialized conceptions of gender, sexuality and many other aspects of identity. The topics which remained undiscussed meant that certain modes of being were foreclosed upon, and that students did not receive certain information necessary to practice safe and healthy expressions of their sexualities.

While many research endeavors have examined American sex-educational curricula and the values that filter into it, few have interrogated how educators

determine what students need to know, and how these constructions of need shape their programming. This, I believe, is an oversight. ‘Need’ is a loaded word which deserves additional interrogation; need is, after all, “also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used” (Foucault 1977, 26). The political dimension of needs warrants an investigation and can provide us with insight into how and why American sex education programming transmits (and omits) certain axioms about sexual behavior to students, informed by cultural anxieties around adolescent sexuality and gender. Applying a theorization of the politics of needs interpretation to sex education has the potential to reveal much about the deeply imbricated sociocultural conditions which impact how sex ed is taught on the ground. Through this project, I attempt to account for this gap in the body of research and address how the politics of sex-educational needs play out within the three organizations I studied.

Of course, this does not mean that people who do sex ed in America always have some sort of hidden agenda to place limitations upon young people’s sexual expression. As Fraser points out, these needs, and the constructions of identity and official discourses that inform them, remain uninterrogated most of the time. This is why I chose to devote a whole nine months’ and hundred pages’ worth of work to deconstructing sex educational needs: if they remain unspoken, sex educators’ curricular choices will be missing crucial information.

Nancy Fraser argued for a rights-based approach to supercede the current reality of the politics of needs interpretation (in Fraser's case) in order to more fully cater to the recipients of these services. A rights-based approach to sex education would have its own issues: as Fraser points out, "rights claims work against radical social transformation by enshrining tenets of bourgeois individualism" (1989, 182). Like Nancy, I'm skeptical that rights claims are necessarily bourgeois: many scholars have worked to rethink what rights discourse is in an attempt to disentangle it from its problematic qualities. Ultimately framing comprehensive sex education as a right, not a need, would possibly remove some of the more insidious hegemonic cultural values which filter their way into the sex ed classroom.

Regardless of whether or not rights claims would be a more effective way to create sex-educational content than needs claims, we are in all likelihood not going to be able to extricate ourselves from needs discourse anytime soon. This thesis certainly won't do much to change the culture. Opting for a more pragmatic approach understanding to fixing sex education is crucial, especially at this moment in time: mere weeks ago, the Trump administration cut off funding to teen pregnancy prevention programs and released new grant guidelines which stipulated an abstinence-only approach to pregnancy prevention and an understanding of teen sex as risky behavior (Kay 2017). While sex educational policy could benefit most by being informed by rights discourse, needs discourse must be used to fight these harmful decisions in the interim.

The future of sex education

Regardless of what I thought about their programming and the ways they interpreted sex-educational needs, the sex educators and organizations who generously allowed me to study them care very much about, and truly enjoy, the work they do. One thing that sex education in America requires to be effective is the presence of dedicated and motivated educators like these folks, who care deeply about their students and the work that they do.

And that's really who all of this is (or should be) about: the students. This, I can say with absolute certainty. There are, of course, other actors that sex educators must negotiate with, who all have their own agendas, but it is imperative that the young people to whom these sex education programs transmit their messages come first. Something I read while researching literature for this project which really struck a chord with me, and rang true each and every step I took in completing this project, was Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine's insistence to look beyond the statistics:

As we turn now to the seductive details of teen sexuality- rates, types and consequences- we hope that the reader will ingest these numbers critically, always imagining real young women developing real bodies at vibrant intersections, affected by distant international and federal policies, local institutions, communities, complex intimate relations, itchy, unformed and still developing desires for a better tomorrow.
(2006, 313)

Those of us who research, practice and advocate for better sex education must be motivated by the desire to help young people, regardless of their positionality, better understand their sexual selves in order to achieve that ‘better tomorrow.’ there is a liberatory potential within sex education: the right approach can empower young people to not only make healthy decisions about their own lives, but also enhance their understandings of how they relate to the world around them. In order for this to happen, attention should be devoted to making sure no student is forcibly silenced in sexuality education class. This can be achieved by ensuring that curricula are comprehensive as possible. Queer or trans students often feel ignored or pathologized by sex education curricula which use fear and othering tactics to discuss STIs and use essentializing language to discuss gender and sexuality. Some topics, like transness, polyamory and intersexuality, are never touched upon by most programs. It is even rarer that sexuality education classes discuss how other aspects of identity impact the development of a person’s sexuality: disability, mental illness, race, class, all inform a person’s conception of their sexual self. Speaking out about these underrepresented aspects of human sexuality in sex education class is a necessary part of providing a comprehensive and identity-inclusive approach to sex education. In order to fully draw students out, one must go beyond merely acknowledging underrepresented aspects of sexuality. Interrogating and providing room for marginalized students’ silences, as Schultz (2005) suggests, draws students out and invites them to participate in other

ways. By providing alternate, non-discussion based classroom activities, sex educators can open up space for all students to engage with the course materials.

Starting with this thesis, my goal as an educator and researcher is to give sex education the makeover it desperately needs. All adolescents need to know how to take care of their sexual health and be empowered to explore their sexualities. Changing the way we teach sex to teens through addressing the ways in which sexuality interacts with other aspects of one's identity will not only ameliorate cultural attitudes about sex, it will also empower successive generations to confront other sources of inequality.

Appendix A

Interview questions

What is your educational and vocational background?

How long have you been teaching sex ed?

What led you to teaching sex education?

To you, what is the most important or necessary part of your job?

Can you talk about your approach to teaching?

What are some of the hardships of teaching sex ed?

Please describe the content of your program's curriculum

How was this curriculum generated? Who was involved in making it?

Do you think your students have particular needs relating to their demographic? If so, can you describe these needs?

What sort of legal standards (if any) are you required to follow in your curriculum?

When teaching, how do you define healthy sexuality vs unhealthy sexuality?

How do you teach about anatomical differences?

How do you teach/discuss LGBTQ issues/identities?

How do you teach/discuss pleasure?

How do you teach/discuss gender & sex differences?

Do you bring in any sort of resources from the news, music, books, community members, etc. into the classroom? What purpose do they serve?

How do you navigate potential discomfort experienced when discussing sexual anatomy, behavior, etc. with students?

Could you provide an example?

Have you ever encountered any pushback from parents, the community, outside parties? What did this look like?

Have students ever disagreed with your lessons, or with each other? How do you handle this conflict?

What types of student-led discussions does your class partake in, if any?

Have you noticed a difference between the way male students and female students act in class?

How do you view the political climate on sex education in the US?

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