COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION: DOES ONE SIZE FIT ALL?

by

Mychaela Virginia Igarik

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the

ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

We are all Treaty people

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Abstract

Although sex education is required in school curricula across Canada, there is a notable variation in established teaching materials, methods, and learning objectives nationwide. This qualitative research study explores young adults' experiences with and perceptions of the sex education they received in Canadian middle/high schools. Seventeen participants between the ages of 18 and 21 took part in the study; due to the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were offered the choice of completing an online, semi-structured interview or an online, open-ended survey. Results were analyzed using constructivist grounded theory. Influenced by the concepts of sex positivity, intersectionality, and normative and youth sexual cultures, my analysis highlights the variability in how young people prefer to learn about sex, where and with whom they are comfortable discussing topics related to sex, and when they are ready to discuss a variety of topics. I conclude that the so-called 'comprehensive' approach to sex education currently favoured in Canada means different things to different people, and from the perspectivs of many young people is often not that comprehensive after all; that it is unlikely that all the sex education needs of diverse young people can be met through standardized formal curricula; and that, while sex education is not the sole responsibility of public education, schools nevertheless play an important role in providing foundational knowledge for young people to build upon. In addition, this research raises many questions and opportunities for future research to address how to improve sex education for diverse young people, and to further explore the complex and nuanced nature of youth sexual cultures.

List of Abbreviations Used

- CGT: Constructivist Grounded Theory
- FLE: Family Life Education
- HIV/AIDS: Human Immunodeficiency Virus
- LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual +
- SHE: Sexual Health Education
- SE: Sex Education
- SIECCAN: Sex Information and Education Council of Canada
- STIs: Sexually Transmitted Infections
- UNESCO: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
- VD: Venereal Disease

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The basis for this project comes out of my reflection on the sex education I received throughout middle and high school in rural Ontario. My first experiences with sex education were far from memorable. They involved teachers passing out diagrams of vulvas and penises and their associated reproductive systems, incomplete information about menstruation and puberty, and no information about gender, sexuality, and pleasure. My most vivid memory of formal sex education is in eighth grade. At this point, our school had begun to bring in a public health nurse to lead an official public health sex education presentation to various classes over a couple of days each year. Nurse Tammy's presence in the school always spread like wildfire, with rumors and speculations about what we would be learning that day and the sheer excitement of getting a 'free period' and break from regular class work. Frankly, it was a joke, or at least that is how I viewed it at the time. I saw it as a break from classwork and only half-paid attention to the public health nurse's presentations. These presentations included pictures of various sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and information on how to protect yourself and others from the potential consequences of sex, primarily STIs and pregnancy. I remember feeling incredibly awkward when Nurse Tammy would ask for a volunteer to come up and demonstrate how to properly open and apply a condom on a banana, sinking into my chair so as not to be seen and called on. The volunteer usually ended up being one of the boys in class who never took anything seriously, with laughter erupting when they came up to the front to demonstrate, it was hard to take it seriously. Even though I acknowledged that learning how to use a condom correctly was important, there was no way I was about to stand up and let people know that I wanted to learn. Not only was I worried about what my peers thought, but it felt wrong to put a condom on a banana in front of my male math teacher and then vice-principal, who was standing

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off to the side of the class with his one foot propped up on a chair and arms crossed. Grade 8 was the last time I remember having a sex education class beyond learning about reproduction in biology classes in high school.

Overall, the emphasis in my sex education was on reproduction and avoiding risk; educators used the threat of STIs and teenage pregnancy to try and scare us out of having unprotected sex. There was no talk of consent, sexual coercion, assault, or harassment, or of what constituted a healthy platonic or romantic relationship versus unhealthy or toxic ones. Although I left not knowing much but thinking it was enough, it was not until I reflected on my experience years later that I wished I had learned more. Reflecting on these experiences, I concluded that I received and retained very little information from my formal sex education. Most of my knowledge came from the internet, talking with friends, and later, my academic interest in sex and sexuality. I was curious how others' experiences compared to my own and if they were getting what they needed from in-school sex education. It is this reflection and curiosity that inspired my research and my expectations for what I thought I might learn: that other young people in Canada had similar experiences and that the answer would be to improve in-school sex education. However, throughout the process of conducting this research, I came to reflect on how narrow my view of sex education was. In turn, I stopped regarding sex education as something that is solely public education's responsibility, to instead look at the totality of a young adults' experiences with sexual knowledge gathering and building. This expanded scope includes examining young adults' roles as both active and passive sexual knowledge gatherers and the influence of lived experiences on the perception of past experiences, all of which have become a focal point of this research.

1.1 Background: Emerging Conversations in Canadian Sex Education Debates

There is little information available documenting the state of sex education (SE) in Canada. While formal sex education is a mandated component of schooling, there exists considerable variation across the nation as individual provincial and territorial health and education ministries determine their respective SE curricula, evaluation, and accountability policies. As a result, we see notable variation across Canada regarding what students are expected to know and understand in each grade. While these goals are determined by the ministries, teachers are allowed (and often encouraged) to use their professional judgement to determine how students achieve these learning outcomes resulting in variation seen across school boards and within individual schools and classrooms (Action Canada, 2019). Even though reports exist that have analysed provincial and territorial curriculum documents to compare their learning goals and strategies, it is simply impossible to have a clear sense of the sex education young people actually receive in classrooms across the country (Abortion Rights Coalitions of Canada, 2017; Action Canada, 2019). However, the underlying consensus appears to be that sex education in Canada has failed to account for the changing needs of young people due to its outdated nature, as many curricula have not been updated since the late 1990s or early 2000s.

While updates and revisions have been proposed, they were often met with backlash and public protest, influenced by societal attitudes, political agendas, and cultural norms. These debates are often sensationalized by news media as 'culture wars' that pit conservatives, who want abstinence-based SE, against those with more liberal beliefs, who praise safe sex and call for inclusive and comprehensive SE. While protests about SE have occurred across the country since the turn of the century, the most thoroughly documented protests occurred throughout Ontario in 2010, 2015, and 2018. The 2010 protests in Ontario centered around adult and

parental opposition to the Liberal Government's newly proposed curriculum that planned to bring

SE to classrooms as early as grade 1, with personal hygiene lessons, while sexual orientation,

gender identity, and healthy relationships were proposed for Grade 3 (CTV Toronto, 2010).

Ultimately, the revisions were axed following protestors' arguments that the introduction of these

topics at such a young age was destructive and corruptive (CTV Toronto, 2010). Similar debates

reignited in 2015 when a revised version of the proposed 2010 curriculum was accepted by the

provincial education ministry. Fears largely remained the same with many worried about the

morality and innocence of young people, but conversations shifted to also include conversations

surrounding schools' responsibility as a public institution to respect the values of religious and

cultural minorities (CTV News, 2015; Selly, 2015). While opponents called for schools to

exclude any conversations surrounding sexual and gender identity due to the infringement of

religious and cultural rights, supporters called for schools to remain areligious, stating that

religious and cultural values should be taught at home (CTV News, 2015; Selly, 2015). These

conversations highlight a growing understanding of the complexity of meeting diverse needs and

interests and introduce questions about whose values deserve to be represented at schools in

multicultural countries like Canada. The 2018 protests were student-led and motivated by the

reversion to the SE curriculum of 1998 in Ontario. Student upset was a combination of the lack

of inclusive and diverse SE content, and the lack of content about new challenges raised by the

internet and cell phone use; for example, young people now must navigate issues like sexting and

online bullying which past generations did not face (Thompson, N. 2018). Academic interest in

exploring various aspects of Canadian sex education has been growing since the turn of the

century, with many researchers seizing opportunities brought forward by the debates surrounding

sex education in Canada, such as young peoples' experience and perspectives. However, much of

the current literature (2000-2021) is fraught with biases and assumptions about young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests, as discussed in Chapter 2. While the experience of young people with SE remains largely unclear, what is clear is that not all sex education is created equal and the quality of young people's in-school sex education in Canada is dependent upon many factors.

One failure in the literature is the absences of anthropological understandings of context and culture. Anthropology provides ample opportunity to explore the implications these emerging conversations have for sex education. However, as a discipline, anthropology is generally absent from literature that addresses the sexual knowledge needs and interests of young people. Unlike health and psychology research, an anthropological approach to SE emphasizes the importance of situating youth sexual knowledge needs and interest in the broader context of their lives and recognizes youth as active agents in shaping their own sexual identities and behaviours, as outlined in Chapter 2. In an attempt to address this gap, the data collected for this exploratory qualitative research study may be useful for future researchers, policymakers, service providers, and educators in understanding young people's needs, while advocating for changes to curricula that meet these needs. These data add to the limited body of knowledge shaping our current understanding of young adults' perceptions and experiences with sexual knowledge gathering in Canadian middle/high schools and community-based programs, as well as from parents or guardians, friends, and the internet. Furthermore, this study contributes to the discipline of anthropology through deepening its understanding of young adults' experiences and perceptions of sex education, demonstrating the importance of anthropological perspectives to sex education research, and suggesting future anthropological research that could have practical applications within the discipline and Canadian sex education.

1.2 Purpose of the Research Study

The primary purpose of this exploratory qualitative research study is to understand how young adults perceived the quality of the sex education they received in Canadian middle, high school, or community-based programs. This study aims to contribute to the anthropological knowledge on this topic, intending to expand the discipline's understanding of and approach to sex education and research regarding sex education. Thereby supporting social transformation and justice concerning access to sex education that meets the unique needs and interests of diverse audiences of young people.

1.3 Research Questions

Four interrelated questions informed this study. The *primary research question* was: How do young adults feel about the sexual health education they received in school? The first sub-question was: what is the best environment / 'site' for sexual learning? The second sub-question was: what factors influence young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests? The third sub-question was: what do young adults feel should be included in comprehensive sex education?

1.4 Study Design

This exploratory qualitative research study involved collecting data through semi-structured online interviews and open-ended online surveys with a sample of young adults who received sex education in various provinces across Canada. Recruitment, data collection and analysis were guided by three interrelated theoretical frameworks, sex positivity, intersectionality, and social constructionism. This means that this research embraced a non-judgemental and inclusive approach to sexual knowledge needs and interests recognizing the complex intersection of the various socially constructed and fluid aspects of young adults'

identities that shape and influence their experiences with sex education, as well as their unique

sexual knowledge needs and interests.

Study participants were recruited through a 3-step recruitment campaign. The first was

sharing posters with provincial and national young-adult-centered organizations and inviting

them to distribute recruitment posters electronically (via email, newsletters, and social media).

The second was through personal networks, including personal social media, professors, and

other personal contacts. The final step was a physical poster campaign where posters were placed

around Dalhousie Halifax campuses.

This study included a sample of seventeen participants between the ages of 18 and 20.

Participants were recruited across gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, social class,

geographic location, and health status. Any participant who showed interest in the study was

invited to participate if they met the study inclusion criteria and were different from another

participant through at least one characteristic or identity. Data collected from interviews and

surveys were coded and analyzed using grounded theory methodology as outlined by Charmaz

(2014).

1.5 Significance of the Study

This exploratory qualitative research study has significance for the area of anthropology

and education. This study addresses gaps in the literature on the reality of young adults'

experiences with sex education in Canada and, more specifically, reflections on experiences with

in-school sex education.

The data from this exploratory qualitative research study describes how young people

retroactively review and critique the sex education they received in middle/high school or

community-based programs through the lens of their post-SE lives. This thesis focuses on

analyzing participants experiences with SE, as opposed to analyzing the actual materials currently used to teach SE in schools because even with the existence of federal and provincial guides for SE there simply is no way of knowing to what degree they are being incorporated into each school/classroom across Canada. Furthermore, due to the ethical implications of interviewing students (minors) currently attending school with the ability to speak to the current material in-depth, as well as due to the time constraints of a master's level research project, participants over the age of majority were prioritized. However, this means that participants ability to speak directly and confidently about the exact material used in class is limited and therefore so is my ability to analyze it. The information gathered through this research is significant to educators, policymakers, and researchers because understanding what SE information young adults prioritize can help provide insight into how SE curricula can better support young people presently attending schools and interacting with the curricula. Understanding how young adults reflect on formal sex education experience can help educators and policymakers create tools and resources that will address information deficits while also providing accessible information that young people can utilize throughout their life course.

This exploratory qualitative research study provides an overview of how, why, and where a small sample of Canadian young adult's accessed information relevant to their sexual knowledge needs and interests, which refers to the wide range of topics, information and understanding that individuals seek or require related to sexuality, where and with whom they are willing to openly discuss these needs and interests, and how they review, and critique information supplied by educators while they were in school. This information is of value to educators, policymakers, and researchers, as the resources described by the participants are examples of information, they deemed relevant to their lives, situations, and needs. This

information is also valuable as it may inform and alter current approaches to sex education to include more ongoing support and resources that young people can access privately and continue to access throughout their life course in response to the various sexual and reproductive experiences they may have.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To investigate young people's experiences with sex education in Canada, this chapter will provide an analysis of the existing literature that is relevant to the field of study: how sex education and its frameworks are defined, the historical context that shaped modern goals of Canadian sex education, and recent research on sex education in Canada (2000-2021). This chapter also outlines the theoretical frameworks utilized within this thesis, from research design to data analysis. In particular, the review focuses on how anthropology approaches youth sexuality and sex education, as well as on how the frameworks of intersectionality, sex positivity, and social constructionist theory are essential to this thesis and sex education research more broadly.

2.1 Defining Sex Education

Sex/sexuality education (SE) definitions, curricula, and materials have been debated and problematized in many countries around the world for decades (Irvine, 1995; Sauerteig & Davidson, 2009; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016; Zimmerman, 2015). It is rare to see definitions of the terms 'sex education' or 'sexuality education' that are not accompanied by a describing word, usually 'health' [as in, sexual health education]. The addition of 'health' as a describing word can be seen in major national and international reports on sex education curricula and provisions (UNESCO, 2018; SIECCAN, 2019; Action Canada, 2020; UNFPA, 2021) and is seen as a way to address the controversial nature of 'sex education' as inappropriately promoting sexual behaviour among youth (Pearson Canada, n.d.). Referring to 'sexual health education' implies a focus on education about the health-related aspects of sexuality, which tends to be more widely accepted (Pearson Canada, n.d.). Barrett (1991) identifies three schools of thought on the defining of 'sexual health education,' which emerged from the observed debates and

published works coming out of the USA and Canada at the time. The three schools of thought are

identified as:

(1) **Use it sparingly and with caution.** This school of thought emerges from

Barrett's analysis of Gochros' 1984 book chapter on the use of a social work perspective

in sexual health. This chapter highlights the author's reluctance to use the term sexual

health due to its link to disease but notes its overall academic and social acceptance as a

positive-sounding term. This school of thought promotes minimalist definitions, which

focus on the achievement of positively regarded outcomes (self-esteem, non-exploitive

sexual satisfaction) and the avoidance of negatively regarded outcomes (unwanted

pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexual coercion).

(2) **Embrace its use with an optimistic vision**. Definitions that follow this school

of thought tend to include a wide range of sexual health indicators regarded as guiding

philosophies that describe broad indicators of positively regarded sexuality, including

honest and open communication, gender equality, and characteristics of healthy

relationships (Barrett, 1991). While at first glance, definitions that follow this school of

thought appear to sound rather broad and inclusive, they can also be described as vague

and lacking clarity. These definitions tend to provide unspecific and broadly positive

indicators of positive sexual health but do not provide details on how these attributes are

achieved or how they are assessed. In addition, these definitions lack clarity, as they do

not provide clear standards on education content and goals, as well as, assessment

methods and expectations.

(3) **Avoid defining/using it**. According to Schmidt (1987) and Naus (1989), as

quoted in Barrett (1991), by not defining sexual health, we can avoid perpetuating sexual

norms disguised as medical truths that fail to account both for individual and cultural

differences in understandings of sexuality and health and for the social construction of

ideas about sexuality and health. Some definitions of sexual health create rigid boundaries

around what is considered healthy and unhealthy that, by medical standards, may not be

valid. Consequently, these definitions can alienate those who do not fall within the

"healthy" boundaries or who participate in activities that put them more at risk of

"unhealthy" consequences. Therefore, by avoiding the use of the term sexual health,

researchers and policymakers actively avoid placing boundaries around healthy or

unhealthy sexuality and practices commonly tied to the term's use.

Thus, definitions and understandings of sexual health vary, and the use of the term 'sexual health

education.' For the purpose of this thesis, the terms 'sex education' or 'sexuality education' will

be used, and its purpose defined as helping people gain the information, skills, and rights they

need to make the best decisions for themselves about sex and relationships (Sears, 1992). These

terms are favoured over the term 'sexual health education' in accordance with the third school of

thought. Furthermore, through highlighting social constructionist views toward sex, sexuality,

health, and education we will see there are widely divergent in sex education, where health fits,

and who it is relevant to will be a central theme explored throughout this thesis. The next section

will explore common debates surrounding the most effective delivery framework for SE in

general, while the North American/Canadian context will be outlined later in this chapter.

2.2 Debating the Most Effective Delivery Framework

Many of the debates and problematizations surrounding sex education focus on

determining the most effective framework for delivering sexual knowledge to young

people in schools. There are essentially two delivery frameworks. The first is abstinence-

only sex education, which provides students with a single narrative: that in order to protect yourself and others, you must abstain from sex until marriage (Fields, 2008). The second is comprehensive sex education (CSE), whose definition, much like sex education, is far less straightforward. For the purpose of this thesis, the 2009 UNESCO[1] definition of comprehensive sex education will be used, as it reflects the timespan in which many of the study participants would have received sex education in middle/high school:

> an age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sexuality and relationships providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgmental information. (UNESCO, 2009, p. 2)

However, it is important to note that this definition does not mention content expectations beyond providing scientifically accurate, realistic, and non-judgmental information. This lack of clarity means that what topics are expected to be covered, what is considered age and culturally appropriate, and what constitutes comprehensiveness, remain up for debate. In their 2018 technical guidelines for SE UNESCO outlined the following definition of CSE:

> [a] curriculum-based process [that] aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will empower them to: realise their health, well-being, and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives. (UNESCO, 2018, p. 16)

This definition sees a shift away from a particular (culturally relevant) approach to a reframing that outlines learning outcomes, this shift highlights the variation in

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[1] While it is not explicitly clear why UNESCO got involved in the framework delivery debate, the specialized education agency has made it clear why they support CSE. This support is made on the grounds of promoting inclusive and equitable access to evidence-based education, human rights, gender equality and the alignment with positive public health goals (reducing unintended pregnancies and STIs) (UNESCO, 2009, 2015, 2018).

conceptualizations of CSE. In fact, across the literature, there exists no consensus on what

exactly is meant by describing sex education as 'comprehensive.' While the term itself

insinuates a total or near-total approach to SE, Miedema et al. (2020), highlight that

considerable variation exists in understandings of what makes a sex education program or

policy 'comprehensive,' with different actors and authors emphasising differing sets of

learning goals and content expectations[2] or even using 'comprehensive' as an umbrella

term to classify any form of sex education that is not solely abstinence-based. This means

that there is no one ideal of comprehensive sex education, but instead many different

ideals, making it inherently difficult to evaluate 'comprehensiveness.'

2.3 Introduction to Sex Education in Canada

The historical literature on sex education in Canada is a mere fraction of the European

and American writing on the subject, as a result, we are left with a mere glimpse into how sex

education in Canada developed (Canadian Education Association, 1964; Pegis, Gentles & de

Veber, 1986; Ajzenstat & Gentles, 1988; Sethna, 1998). In the following section, I will draw

upon the available resources, including government surveys, research articles, and textbooks, to

outline the social context and cultural landscape by which Canadian sex education was shaped.

While this section explores the history of sex education in Canada, it would be misleading to

suggest a universal 'Canadian' view on or approach to sex education. Sex education has not been

and is not currently standardized in Canada. Each of the ten provinces and three territories have

their own education and health departments or ministries that are responsible for the

organization, delivery, and assessment of health, education, and health and physical education

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[2] Across the literature four frequent themes or topics that act as indicators for 'comprehensiveness' recur; 1) young people's rights, participation, and agency; 2) sexual and reproductive health behaviours; 3) gender equality and power; 4) positive sexualities and respectful relations (Miedema, et al., 2020).

provisions for their respective populations (Government of Canada, n.d.; Council of Ministers of Education, n.d.). While there are similarities across these various educational systems, there are significant variations in curriculum, assessment, and accountability policies between them. These variations are linked to the differing geographical, historical, cultural, linguistic, and correspondingly specialized needs of the populations served (Council of Ministers of Education, n.d.). As a result, sex education in Canada has been described as developing in a slow and eclectic fashion, susceptible to variation due to its mixed geography and cultural values (Pegis et al., 1986). Regardless of the variation, examining the historical instances of sex education will provide important context to modern practices and goals through tracing shifting socio-cultural attitudes and norms, as well as educational practices.

2.3.1 Canadian Sex Education: Decades of Debates

The content and focus of sex education in Canada were largely determined by the political and social climate of the time. First arising in England in the late 1880s following preoccupations with purity, hygiene and the cleanliness of the individual body and sexual and reproductive organs 'purity education' took hold in Canada and remained popular into the early 1990s (Lupton, 1995; Sethna, 2010). One of the earliest recorded accounts of in-school sex education emerges from Ontario, where from 1905 to 1911 'purity agent' Arthur Beall urged boys to avoid the dangers of masturbation which drained the brain of essential 'life fluid' leading to death or insanity (Bliss, 1970; Sethna, 2010). Support for 'purity education' remained steadfast throughout the First World War, the inter-war period, and the Second World War led by the Health League of Canada[3] (Pearsons, n.d.; CMAJ, 2018). The continued enthusiasm for purity education was linked to the fear that teenagers would be easily corrupted during wartime; as

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[3] Started in 1919 by physician Gordon Bates, known initially as the Canadian Council for Combating Venereal Disease and then the Canadian Social Hygiene Council before the Health League of Canada (CMAJ, 2018).

fathers went to war and mothers entered the workforce, young people were less supervised. Despite the growing enthusiasm, sex instruction was still considered highly controversial, so the decision to introduce sex instruction into the curriculum was left to individual schools, and parental permission was required.

With the end of the Second World War and subsequent declining rates of venereal disease but heightened fears over juvenile delinquency and impending sexual revolution, sex education evolved. There was a shift away from the 'purity education' that propelled sex education until the end of the Second World War, toward topics that fell under the umbrella of family life education (FLE) – theory-based teachings that promoted the importance of the stable nuclear family through ideals of marriage, parenthood, opposite-sex attraction, and chastity (Sethna, 1998; CMAJ 2018). The image of the stable nuclear family was modelled after dominant white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon heterosexual norms; anyone who fell outside of this model (i.e. engaged in pre-marital sex or homosexual relations) was othered and stigmatized (Sethna, 1998; Sethna, 2010). With the emphasis placed on traditional family ideals, arguments shifted to whether SE belonged in schools, as the best place to learn about family was in the home (Pegis et al., 1986; Sethna, 2010).

Traditional and conservative views on sex education continued to dominate throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with counterculture perceived as a threat to family, traditional gender roles, and sexual norms[4] (Hutchinson Grodin, 2016). Provincial requirements for in-school sex education were slow-changing, but changing regardless; as in the past, a new social crisis was growing and it placed increased pressure on provincial governments and schools to incorporate SE. Rising rates of STIs amongst youths and growing concern over teen pregnancy combined

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[4] Many of the same arguments are present in the 2010 and 2015 debates about in-school SE in Ontario.

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with an increasing societal openness about sexuality led to *some* inclusion of birth control, but these inclusions were protested by religiously affiliated groups whose goals were to preserve family values and the innocence of youth (Pearsons, n.d; Hutchinson Grodin, 2016). The growing concern over the consequences of STIs and teenage pregnancy continued into the 1980s and 1990s but with one notable difference: AIDS. It wasn't until it became clear that AIDS could also affect heterosexuals, that Canada saw more widespread support for AIDS education to be included in schools. While education was seen as the answer to some, it was seen as kindling to others, local schools were permitted to choose their approach to AIDs education, provided they met the established provincial goals and objectives (Ajzenstat & Gentles, 1988; Allan, 1992).

The analysis of the historical literature highlights the shifting of forms of sex education seen throughout the twentieth century, which respond to the changing social, cultural, and political climate of the times; public acceptance of SE was particularly responsive to social crises (wartime VD, STIs, HIV/AIDS, and teen pregnancy). This analysis also highlights the value-laden nature of Canadian sex education; while views about SE shifted between moral and medical, conservative and liberal throughout the century, they remained primarily focused on addressing the concerns and disseminating the values of White Anglo-Saxon Christian cis-gendered heterosexuals. Furthermore, we see the reoccurrence of debates over the appropriate form and content of in-school SE, many of which continue to permeate modern sex education debates today: fear that school-based SE erodes traditional family values and steals young people's innocence by subjecting them to inappropriate content. Through tracing culturally specific historical accounts of sex education, we gain valuable insights into the evolving attitudes, norms, and educational practices that shaped past SE and continue to shape the ways sex education in Canada is taught and perceived. While this section has focused solely on the

Canadian context, it is also important to explore the culturally variable and contingent aspects of SE – which will be explored later in this literature review (Section 2.5.1).

2.3.2 Modern Goals of Canadian Sex Education

Comprehensive sex education, also sometimes referred to as broadly-based sex education in Canadian literature and reports, has been a goal of the Canadian government since the Expert Interdisciplinary Advisory Committee on Sexually Transmitted Disease in Children and Youth Health Canada and Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Adolescent Reproductive Health highlighted the need for comprehensive and accessible sexual health education to empower individuals in 1991 (SIECCAN, 2019). The Committee recognized the increased emergence of 'healthy sexuality' and 'sexual health' programs in schools and the lack of clear principles to guide and unify those working in this area (SIECCAN, 2019). This led to the Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education, published in 1994. The guidelines have been updated three times since (2003, 2008, and 2019); these updates have addressed changing demographics, the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, technology, LGBTQIA+ and emerging identities, consent related to sexual activity and gender-based violence (SIECCAN, 2019). However impressive and progressive these federal guidelines are, they are not enforced, as sex education curricula and goals are determined at the provincial level. According to Action Canada, a leading voice in sex education promotion, the sex education that most young people in Canada receive is:

> 1. Not meeting international standards and best practices nor is it meeting our own 2019 Canadian Guidelines for sexuality education; 2. Outdated; 3. Not comprehensive; 4. Not monitored or evaluated to ensure high-quality delivery; and 5. Offered by educators who received low to no support by provinces and educational systems and whose comfort levels are often low. (Action Canada, 2020, p. 5)

Furthermore, there is a considerable degree of variability in who receives high-quality sex education, as it depends on the province students live in, the school board, the principal, the educators, and the availability of community-based groups (Action Canada, 2020).

2.4 Recent Research on Sex Education in Canada

In Canada, recent research on young people's views and experiences surrounding sexual knowledge is dominated by the health sciences and psychology. A critical analysis of this research reveals that it is fraught with three problematic assumptions, which I have identified and critiqued for this literature review.

2.4.1 Assumption One: Health Outcomes Are More Important than the Social Aspects of Sexuality

First, it is not uncommon in these fields to emphasize expected health outcomes over the social aspects of sex and sexuality. As the United Nations' 1999 publication on the impact of sexual health education on the sexual behaviour of young people attested, "schools are determined to be important places for the delivery of interventions to prevent and modify risky sexual behaviour" (quoted in MacDonald et al., 2011, p. 443). The desire to prevent and modify risky behaviour is linked to the emphasis placed on health outcomes such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Research focused on improving health outcomes and reducing risk often ignores how sexual decision-making is conceptualized by many people, both young and old, as primarily social rather than health-related (Eyre, Hoffman & Millstein, 1998; Manderson et al., 1999). This means that sexual contact (in its many forms) is initiated regardless of acknowledged health risks, based on a myriad of complex social decisions and perceived rewards (Manderson et al., 1999). For young people specifically, these motivations and rewards could include getting to experience the pleasure-based aspects of sex, sheer fascination,

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connection and intimacy, the desire to fit in, social prestige (gained through boasting), and relationship formation (Eyre et al. 1998). By acknowledging the social aspects of young people's sexual decision-making, educators could potentially see the desired behaviour changes. For example, by acknowledging the social barriers to condom use, such as the perceived lack of trust in relationships that requesting the use of a condom implies, and reframing condom use as relational and a collective good instead of the avoidance of negative health outcomes (STIs and pregnancy), educators can make condom use more conducive to young peoples' experiences and understandings (Eyre et al., 1998). For example, we might try to reframe condom use from a lack of trust in partners to consideration and care for their partners and beneficial for the social good.

2.4.2 Assumption Two: School is the Best Place for Students to Learn

The second assumption much sex education research makes is that the best learning happens using traditional curricula in classrooms. While recent research has been taking into account students' perception of the quality of their in-school SE and topics of interest or disinterest (Allen, 2001; Byers et al, 2013, MacDougall et al, 2020), many fall back on the assumption that SE is best when it has been regulated or determined by schooling systems (middle/high schools or post-secondary institutions) and that a standardized or comprehensive curricula is best in gauging what topics are best to include and how to teach them. For example, Allen (2001) states that young people are more receptive to and gain more relevant sexual knowledge outside of the classroom, through more informal forms of socializing. Nevertheless, Allen concludes by recommending that young adults' areas of interest should be brought into the formal curriculum to make it more comprehensive and increase student engagement with in-school sex education. However, many of these recommendations (like Allen's) are made mainly based on concerns about the credibility (or lack thereof) of informal forms of sex education and

the credentials and training of informal sex educators (Sriranganathan et al., 2010). However, these critiques are made without acknowledging the fact that sex, sexuality, and pleasure are not inherently academic in nature and do not require rigid classroom instruction for young people to understand, that lack of teacher training has been one of the most critiqued aspects of in-school sex education (Browes, 2015; Dalin, 1994; Das, 2013; Francis, 2013; Irvine, 1995) or that the quality of in-school sex education is often not greater than that of informal sources (Van Rooyen, 2021).

2.4.3 Assumption Three: Needs and Interests Are Reducible to Social Identities

A final assumption health and psychology research tends to make is that variations in young people's needs for and interests in sexual knowledge are reducible to their perceived social identities and group memberships, such as religious affiliations and sexual orientation (Causarano et al., 2010; Charest et al., 2016). In other words, drawing on Epstein 2007, research that assumes that social identities correspond to distinct kinds of bodies; the male body, the lesbian body, young Muslim girl bodies, and so on – creates the assumption that these various embodied states have distinct, rigid and predictable sexual knowledge needs, interests and sexual behaviours. For example, the assumption that lesbians aren't susceptible to HIV due to the historical stigmatization of HIV as a disease primarily affecting gay men, and furthermore, the assumption lesbians can't get pregnant from sex due to their perceived/predicted sexual behaviour insinuates that they don't need comprehensive information on forms of contraceptives (internal and external condoms). Therefore, the assumption that needs and interests are reducible to the perceived social identities, sustains heteronormative and reductive lessons that do not account for the inclusivity, or the fluid nature of sexuality and gender and therefore sexual knowledge needs and interests.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

2.5.1 Anthropology of Sexuality and Sex Education

As I have discussed above, it is not uncommon for sexual health research that comes from a health science or psychology perspective to talk about youth sexuality as a collection of problems to solve and risks to be avoided. These kinds of research tend to situate youth within a biological and psychological stage of human development or the transition to or preparation for adulthood (Amit-Talai &Wulff, 1995; Bucholtz, 2002). Anthropology shifts away from this emphasis on development, to the understanding of youth as a cultural category, and emphasises young people's experiences and the social and cultural practices that shape their worlds, rather than how their bodies and minds are shaped for adult futures (Bucholtz, 2002). Therefore, when applied to sex education, anthropological approaches seek to understand youth sexuality and sexual knowledge interests and needs from an emic, or insider, perspective.

Simply put, anthropology is the study of human societies, cultures, and their development, therefore, almost nothing human is spared from the matrix of anthropology (Mukoro, 2017). In fact, anthropological research has broadened our understanding of a multitude of human experiences, including kinship and family life, gender and sexuality, and education, through highlighting the cultural variability in their understandings and practices. For instance, kinship and family life research explores the complex and varied way cultural groups define relationships such as parenthood, marriage, family and community, in addition to exploring social, political or economic roles and expectations (Rivers, 1910; Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Kenny 2007). Early anthropological research has highlighted the variability and social construction of gender and sexuality, for example, Margaret Mead (1935) demonstrates the cultural differences in gender roles, sexual mores and customs. In her 1935 ethnography titled

Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies, Mead explores to what extent temperamental differences between the sexes were culturally determined rather than innate. She does this by contrasting the observed gender roles and sexual behaviours of three distinct Indigenous cultural groups in Papua New Guinea with those prevalent in the United States at the time. Overall, Mead's work challenges the notion of fixed, biologically determined gender roles by showcasing their fluidity and the influence of cultural norms and expectations. Later anthropologists build upon early fundamental ethnographies to include topics related to the experiences of gender/sexual minorities and the stigmatization or normalization of various sexual practices cross-culturally (Herdt 1984; Rubin, 1984), anthropologists also offer cross-cultural comparisons of gender/sexual discrimination and the complex nature of ethnocentric interventions addressing the plight of non-western women (Abu-Lughod, 2013). With regards to education, Mead (1928) highlights how learning is deeply influenced by cultural contexts. She expands the rigid understandings of education beyond formal schooling to highlight how it is embedded in everyday life and cultural practices and plays a crucial role in socializing the young into adult roles and responsibilities. When we consider the disciplines ability to address each of these individual aspects (kinship and family life, gender and sexuality and education), we also highlight the areas of intersection between them. Sex education is an example of one intersection. Therefore, anthropology lends itself well to the in-depth exploration of sex education, more specifically, anthropologists can pull from past knowledge expansions granted by the individual studies of kinship, gender and sexuality and education to explore the lessons young people receive both formally and informally regarding biological relationships, social roles/expectations, as well as, accepted (and unaccepted or stigmatized) gender and sexual mores.

Sex education can be explored and analysed through the notion of sexual culture. In Mukoro's (2017) article exploring culturally sensitive sex education in Nigeria, sexual culture is defined broadly as:

> a discernible assemblage of meanings, conceptualisations, and practices around sex, which is held, shared, lived, communicated, negotiated and even contested within a community. Sexual cultures are closely bound with the various ways sexuality is understood, depicted, expressed, and even practiced. Because of this, whenever sex is mentioned, a sexual culture is automatically referenced or implied. (Mukoro, 2017, p. 2)

To illustrate Mukoros argument further: the sexual culture of the moderator, whether that be a teacher, nurse, parent, etc., plays a role in determining the content and delivery of sex education; therefore, the resulting sex education is usually a reflection of their own learned ideologies and opinions surrounding sex, which may not reflect youth opinions and views. This isn't to say that there is one adult sexual culture, but that due to a lack of comfortability and training with the subject matter, many teachers opt to teach based on their own values and beliefs, using their narratives and values as normative and worth emulating by the students (Browes, 2015; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). While this affords teachers ease in the classroom, it ignores topics of interest that may be more relevant to young people nowadays.

By merging Bucholtz's (2002) research on youth cultures and Mukoro's (2017) research on sexual cultures, the idea of youth sexual cultures emerges (Pavia, 1993; Irvine, 1994; Wood, Lambert & Jewkes, 2007; Attwood & Smith, 2011; Landi, 2017). Through the idea of youth sexual cultures, we can view young people as cultural agents whose sexual identities and subjectivities emerge and are shaped through their local culture and the sexual knowledge, they deem important. Anthropology has approached the idea of youth sexual cultures through a variety of lenses, including the early anthropological work of Margaret Mead in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and more recent works which explore the influence of religion (Lindhardt,

2012; Smith-Hefner, 2019), AIDS (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Dilger, 2003) and media (W. Fongkaew & K. Fongkaew, 2016; Naezer, 2018) on how young people interact with sexual knowledge, material and activities.

Through understanding the different possible interpretations of the meanings attached to terms and concepts, researchers and educators can highlight the translational discrepancies between young people's understandings and the public health or educational discourse to gain further insight into how to tailor SE to be more relatable and useful for young people. For example, in their 2014 ethnography exploring the outcomes of a multi-disciplinary sexual and reproductive health intervention in Latin America, Nelson et al. compare the intervention's goal of fostering 'open communication' between parents and young people regarding topics related to sexual and reproductive health, with the data collected regarding parents and young peoples' experiences and understandings of what topics are truly acceptable to discuss openly and with whom they are comfortable discussing these topics with. Nelson et al. highlight how 'open communication' is a common indicator of healthy sexuality and reflects the goal of combatting stigma that can bind young people to secrecy, however, the young people in the study use the term 'confianza' (trust) which signifies a necessary level of mutual trust and intimacy needed between themselves and the person they wish to disclose to (2014). Nelson et al. (2014), continue to state that 'confianza' is further determined and impacted by the cultural and moral norms about what constitutes appropriate conversations and with whom young people can talk to, further noting that any contradictions reflect conflicts in moral norms and young people's emerging sexual cultures. Anthropological approaches (such as utilized by Nelson et al.,) allow us to look at how youth themselves view sexual learning, their sexual subjectivities, identities, and experiences, while also highlighting the culturally contingent nature of sex education

through addressing how local/traditional ways of knowing shape young people's perceptions and expectations for not only what consists of quality SE, but also how they define things like sexuality, sexual behaviour, relationships, and love. Therefore, anthropological studies reveal that sex education is not a monolithic practice but is deeply embedded in local beliefs, cultural traditions, and societal values, and therefore effective SE must be culturally sensitive and context specific. For example, In Western contexts, like Canada (as well as the US and parts of Europe) as explored in the previous section, SE often emphasizes the biological aspects of sex as well as risk prevention, while anthropological research in non-Western contexts contrasts and questions this emphasis through highlighting the wide array of sex education practices that are closely tied to local cultural norms and knowledge systems. To illustrate this, Maulingin-Gumbaketi et al., highlight how in Papua New Guinea SE is regarded as most beneficial to young women when it includes cultural ways of knowing surrounding menarche; more specifically, the inclusion of the rite of passage of 'making a strong woman' can be used in the development of various educational programs (2021). 'Making a strong woman' is a rite of passage which aims to create awareness about women's changing bodies and status of womanhood during menarche in the complex physical and cultural environment they live in, where open communication about sex and sexuality is shameful (Maulingin-Gumbaketi et al., 2021). While Maulingin-Gumbaketi et al. address the negative experiences that come along with the more restrictive aspects of the rite of passage, such as isolation and restrictive beliefs that can lead to women and young girls experiencing shame and embarrassment, they also address the benefits that a degree of isolation brings to young girls when learning about these socially sensitive topics (2021). The article outlines that by providing young girls with an isolated learning environment (all girls classes), young girls receive the benefit of learning in a safe place to explore menstruation away from the

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restrictive male beliefs about menstrual blood and the associated fear and stigma attached to openly discussing such topics in front of men and boys, while also remaining aligned to the rite of passage. The research concludes that it is essential that educational practices acknowledge the importance of traditional ways of learning which are an ideal practice for young girls to learn about their changing bodies, menstrual health management and the expectations of womanhood This conclusion comes from the recorded inability of westernized ways of learning to address the needs of youth in Papua New Guinea, which lacks attention to cultural determinants of health and lead to increasing rates of sexual and reproductive health issues amongst youth (Maulingin-Gumbaketi et al., 2021). Overall, anthropological literature highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and context-specific approaches to SE, by emphasising that the quality and effectiveness of 'good' sex education is defined by the young people's unique social learned from their communities and cultural context. Therefore, to enhance the relevance, quality, and effectiveness of SE, programs should ensure they resonate with the lived experiences and values of young people in diverse cultural settings.

2.5.2 Intersectionality

This research will utilize an intersectional approach, developed by Crenshaw in 1989, which focuses on examining how social locations and structural forces interact to shape and influence human experience, needs, and interests (Crenshaw, 1991; Hankivsky, 2012). There are multiple conceptions of intersectionality; for the purpose of this research, we will focus on the identifiable central theoretical tenets as outlined in Hankivsky (2012). These tenets include:

> the idea that human lives cannot be reduced to a single characteristics: human experiences cannot be accurately understood by prioritizing any one single factor or constellation of factors: social categories such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are socially constructed, fluid and flexible; and social locations are inseparable and shaped by the interacting and mutually constituting social

processes and structures that are influenced by both time and space. (Hankivsky, 2012, p. 1713)

Therefore, my intersectional analysis will not assume what people want out of their sex education but instead leaves this as an open question and samples from a variety of people to figure that out.

2.5.3 Sex Positivity

This research is built upon a sex-positive perspective, which acknowledges the unique and multifaceted aspects of people's sexuality and sex knowledge needs and interests (Williams et al., 2015). As sexuality and sexual knowledge needs and interests are an integral part of who people are, a positive sexuality approach is complementary to intersectionality, as it is relevant across all levels and types of social structures and identities (William et al., 2015). By taking a sex-positive approach, this research challenges research that predominantly problematizes youth sexuality within a risk framework (Harden, 2014). This problematization can also be referred to as a sex-negative approach. Sex education research that fails to apply a sex-positive approach has been shown to perpetuate numerous social problems including homophobia, sexism, and racism, and create deficiencies in sex education which tends to frame youth sexuality, sexual interests, and needs as risky and in need of management (Harden, 2014; Williams et al., 2015).

2.5.4 Social Constructionist Theory

In addition to the intersectional approach and sex-positive perspective this research takes, it also utilizes social constructionist theory to explore and analyse information surrounding youth sexuality and their sexual knowledge interests and needs. Social constructionist approaches challenge the idea of universal truth. Instead, they acknowledge that knowledge is constructed through and shaped by values, beliefs, and practices, both historically and cross-culturally (Irvine, 1995). The use of social constructionism in the anthropology of sexuality is not new and

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has been challenging essentialist explanations of sexuality and reproduction for decades now (Vance, 1991). Essentialist explanations of sexuality and reproduction place the emphasis on sexuality as a deeply rooted and natural individual expression that is primarily linked to genital activities (Irvine, 1995). Irvine highlights two main assumptions of an essentialist view towards sexuality: 1) that there is an internal and likely biological sex drive/instinct; and 2) that sexuality is consistently and universally expressed throughout different historical times and across different cultures (Irvine, 1995). In contrast, the social constructionist explanation suggests that sexuality is a product, or construction, of social and cultural influences, in a given place at a specific historical time (Irvine, 1995). A notable application of the social construction theory in the anthropology of sexuality has been in work on AIDS education and prevention. In their 1991 article, Vance explores recent research on AIDS, highlighting how safe sex campaigns spear-headed by the gay community challenge the re-medicalization and essentialist ideals of sexuality by emphasizing the malleability of sexual behaviour and the agency of those who participate in sexual acts.

When applied to sex education, social constructionism argues against the over-emphasis placed on health outcomes and the tendency to medicalize content that supports and reinforces essentialist claims that sexuality is individual, internal (biologically driven), and timeless seen within the field (Irvine, 1995). We see examples of these essentialist claims throughout the section exploring the assumptions recent research in Canada tend to make. For example, through focusing on avoiding negative health outcomes, (STIs and pregnancy) a narrow and reductive meaning of sex as sexual intercourse is constructed and presented as the universal meaning, furthermore, it is not uncommon for youth to be described as 'walking hormones' implies that sexual behaviour is biologically driven and predetermined (Irvine, 1994; Irvine, 1995). In

contrast, social construction recognizes that: 1) sex has capacity beyond certain physical acts to include emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and values; 2) sexuality is not a fixed arena of human existence that unfolds in predictable ways; 3) the meanings that young people attach to sexuality and relationships will vary depending on the many messages they receive from their social worlds and therefore, are shaped by various factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual identity, and life experiences and are historically and culturally variable (Irvine, 1995). Sex education curriculum that recognizes social constructionist theory draws attention to how educational strategies are rooted in the beliefs and practices of the dominant cultural group and therefore, highlight and challenge normative and reductive ideologies put forward that are not consistent or receptive to audiences' worldviews (Irvine 1995).

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1 Statement of Research Goals

Sex education research is dominated by the fields of health sciences and psychology. These disciplines consistently frame youth sexuality, sexual knowledge needs and interests, and sex education through three key assumptions: that health outcomes are more important than the social aspects of sexuality; that sexual knowledge needs and interests are reducible to social identities; and that school is the best place for young people to learn about sex. In response to these assumptions, this anthropological study aimed to investigate how young adults perceived the quality of the sex education they received in Canadian middle school, high school, or community-based programs, and to gain insight into how young people prefer to gain information regarding their sexual knowledge needs and interests. As well, it was important to explicitly explore young people's sexual knowledge-gathering preferences through an agentive lens, employing a holistic perspective that acknowledges how their lived experiences influence/impact their experiences with sexual knowledge-gathering and roles as knowledge creators and consumers. This framing was important as through analysing young peoples' experiences and perceptions through an agentive and holistic lens we can help to evaluate the quality of in-school sex education and its abilities to meet a variety of students unique needs and interests, while also, providing insight that will help this research in making realistic and beneficial recommendations for improving young peoples' access to sexual knowledge resources in ways that fit their unique needs and interests and ways of learning.

Accordingly, four interrelated research questions guided this exploratory study. The *primary research question* was: how do young adults feel about the sex education they received in school? Three secondary questions were: what is the best environment / 'site' for sexual

learning? What factors influence young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests? And what do young adults feel should be included in comprehensive sex education? The project was theoretically positioned within three intersecting frameworks: sex positivity (Harden, 2014; Williams, et al., 2015), intersectionality (Havinsky, 2012), and social constructionist theory (Irvine, 1995). These frameworks guided recruitment, data collection, and analysis by embracing a non-judgemental and inclusive approach to sexuality that recognizes and acknowledges the socially constructed and fluid nature of identities and lived experiences, which are influenced by social norms and power dynamics. The following chapter outlines the methodology that was employed to fulfill this research study's objective of exploring how young adults feel about the sexual health education they received in school. I include a discussion justifying the research methods and procedures for data collection, management, and analysis and review relevant ethical concerns, limitations, and plans for knowledge translation upon completion of the project.

3.2 Research Sample

I sought a maximum variation sample, recruiting heterogeneous participants of different genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, religions, social classes, geographic locations, and health statuses (Liamputtong, 2009). The goal was that by including people from a wide variety of backgrounds in the sample, I would be able to explore how different factors in people's backgrounds shape their sexual knowledge needs and interests. The exclusion criterion for this study was age, with the target sample being recent high school graduates aged 18-20 who received sexual health education in Canada (middle school, high school, or a community-based program) and who were comfortable participating in English (as the researcher did not speak any other languages). This exclusion criterion avoided the ethical complications of interviewing minors about matters related to sexuality, and limited participants to those who could reflect on

contemporary sex education and their recent memories of it. As well, by limiting participation to those who received sexual health education in Canada, participants' experiences could be compared with others within the Canadian context. My goal was to recruit 15 and 20 young adults for this study. The range of participants was chosen in consultation with the thesis committee and was deemed appropriate and feasible for a master's level research project

3.2.1 Recruitment

To recruit as diverse a sample as possible, this study employed a chain-referral sampling method, known for its value in studies of elusive sub-populations and exploratory work (Bhutta, 2012; Penrod, Preston, Cain & Starks, 2003). Chain-referral sampling is similar to that of multiple snowball sampling in that it relies on a series of participant referrals to others. However, unlike multiple snowball sampling, multiple networks were strategically accessed to expand the scope of my investigation beyond a single social network (Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003). Participants were recruited through posters (Appendix A) distributed over email to a diverse range of local (Nova Scotia) and national youth/young adult groups and organizations. Organizations were:

> **National:** Action Canada, Ally Squared, Boys and Girls Club Canada, Canadian Unitarian Council, Federation de la Jeunesse Canadienne-Francais, Rising Youth, and Venture Academy Young Adults Programs.
>
> **Local:** Heartwood Centre for Community Development, Inclusion Nova Scotia, Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project, The Multicultural Association of Nova Scotia, The Posse Project, Phoenix Youth.

These organizations were invited to share my posters through their personal networks, community newsletters, and websites, as well as social media platforms. In addition, I recruited

through personal networks, including professors and personal contacts who could directly refer individuals to the study or distribute recruitment posters to their classes via Brightspace or class emails. A poster campaign also was conducted around Dalhousie Halifax campuses. Dalhousie Halifax campuses were selected as appropriate locations for poster campaigns, due to the researcher's ease of access to buildings and facilities. Posters directed prospective participants to contact me through the study contact email address (my Dalhousie student email address) to complete the brief screening questionnaire.

3.2.2 Screening and Sampling

Upon receiving prospective participant's initial emails, I responded with the Microsoft Forms link to fill out a brief screening demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). Within the questionnaire, prospective participants were asked to provide information that was useful for purposive sampling for diversity and to ensure they met the inclusion criterion (stated above). Screening questions included, but were not limited to; How do you currently describe your gender identity? How would you describe your sexual identity? Where did you receive your sex education? Do you identify as a person with any disability or impairment?

From the sample of prospective participants who completed the screening questionnaire, select participants were purposively selected based on the requirement that their background differs from somebody else who has already been recruited in at least one way. Examples of what this means include attending different schools in the same province or having a different gender or sexual identity, but coming from a similar religious background. Therefore, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to specifically recruit to include as diverse a population of young adults who received sex education in a Canadian middle or high school or community-

based program as possible, which could contribute to the emergent theoretical themes concerning young adults' experiences with sex education.

My goal was to interview 15 to 20 young adults for this study. After three months I had successfully recruited seventeen participants – nine young adults were interviewed, and eight completed the online survey. The sample size of seventeen participants was deemed adequate because of the time constraints of recruitment and it was within the previously determined goal range.

3.2.3 Limitations

Acknowledging the limitations of the research process is critical to ensuring the study's transparency and credibility by providing critical context for the findings, their interpretation, and the extent to which they meet the research goals.

First, sexual knowledge needs, interests and experiences with sexual knowledge gathering are personal topics, and many potential participants may not have been willing to discuss these experiences with a researcher, leading to an over-sampling of participants comfortable discussing their experiences. Furthermore, although the sampling requirement that every participant was different from the others in at least one way was met, the sample lacks significant variation in the categories of disability or impairment status, religion, and racial/ethnic backgrounds of participants. This means that variations in experience across these categories cannot be directly discussed. Furthermore, with only one male participant, it is hard to speak to male experiences with sex education. As a result, this study describes the experiences of a small and rather homogenous group of young adults, primarily white cis-gendered heterosexual women and white LGBTQIA+ women or gender-fluid individuals.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

There are several ethical considerations associated with the study. Prior to conducting interviews/surveys, I received ethics approval for this study from Dalhousie University. As topics pertaining to sex are sensitive, sex-positive language was used throughout recruitment posters, correspondences, and reports. Sex-positive language includes inclusive terms that promote social equity and cultural salience and allows for all identities and experiences to be respectfully acknowledged and analyzed (William et al., 2015). Furthermore, due to the sensitive and personal nature of topics related to sex, participants were given the choice between interviews and surveys (with preference indicated through the screening processes demographic questionnaire); this allowed participants to choose the option that best suited them. This flexibility grants the participants a sense of agency and authority over the conversation as experts on their own experiences and perspectives, which is an essential consideration when conducting sensitive research (Leeon, 2002; Liamputtong, 2009). Consent forms were given to participants and needed to be signed and returned before interviews or surveys were scheduled to ensure plenty of time for reflection or questions and to ensure that their consent was given voluntarily (Creswell, 2014). The process of consent was ongoing throughout the interview, including regular check-ins with participants throughout the interview session to ensure their continued comfort with the process. Participants who chose to complete online surveys were made aware that surveys were designed to be completed at their desired pace, and that they didn't have to answer any survey questions and survey follow-up questions (sent via email) they did not feel comfortable answering. Also, because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter, I had a list of support resources on hand in case the interview/survey questions triggered past traumas or caused the participant emotional distress. Resources included Kids Help Phone, Trans Lifeline,

Crisis Services Canada, and other relevant mental and sexual health support services available Canada-wide.

Confidentiality was maintained using several measures, including holding interviews online and only attending (as the interviewer) from my private home office. Identifying information, such as names of people and places, was removed from all interview and survey transcripts. Throughout the thesis, participants are referred to by the pseudonyms that they chose or that I created for them. A unique identification number was assigned to each participant, and identifying information was stored separately from the identification numbers. Data were stored on password-protected encrypted files and were only accessible to the researcher. Demographic data collected from someone during the screening processes who was not selected to participate in the study were deleted promptly and not stored on the researcher's laptop. When the data collection period ended, all Microsoft Forms surveys (demographic and study surveys) were deleted from the platform.

3.4 Data collection: Interviews and Surveys

When presented with the option of either an online interview or an online survey, nine participants chose an interview and eight chose to complete surveys. Participants were asked the same 12 semi-structured questions in interviews and surveys (Appendix C).

Each interview lasted approximately .5 – 1.5 hours and was audio recorded with permission. In-depth semi-structured interviews are a valuable tool in exploring the perceptions of the participants and the meaning they give to their experiences, assisting the researcher in addressing the subjective experiences of the participants (Liamputtong, 2009). In addition, the flexible nature of in-depth interviews provides the participants with more power and control over how they speak and what they will speak about, allowing for the interview to be carried out in a

manner that suits the needs of the participants (Liamputtong, 2009). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams (Teams) online platform. This flexibility allowed the researcher to conduct research from Halifax with any participants located outside the province.

Online interview surveys were conducted via Microsoft Forms and were designed in an open-ended manner to ensure that participants could answer each question in their own words. This method allowed participants to freely share their personal experiences, especially given the sensitive nature of matters related to sex in their own words, and allowed greater room for individual expression (Albudaiwi, 2017). Participants were urged to answer each question in as much detail as possible but were reminded that they could pass on answering any question they would rather not respond to.

3.5 Data Analysis: Constructivist Grounded Theory

Data analysis and data gathering occurred simultaneously, with the analysis of interviews and surveys starting only after the one-week grace period after their completion date. After this time, participants were informed they could no longer withdraw their contribution to the study. For the purpose of this research, interview and survey transcripts were coded using the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodology set forth by Charmaz (1996). Grounded theory holds enormous appeal for a range of disciplines due to its flexible and adaptive nature (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Grounded theory is generally defined as an inductive tradition that attempts to describe, explain, and understand the lived experiences of a group of people (Charmaz, 1996). A CGT approach builds upon this by emphasising the active role of the researcher in the process and product of research, as data and theories are not simply 'discovered'; the researcher is a part of that discovery. This approach highlights the interaction

between the researcher and participants in co-constructing knowledge (Charmaz 1996). The CGT allows for the exploration and understanding of diverse perspectives, making it useful for exploring and engaging with the various ways participants frame their experiences with sexual knowledge gathering, and for reflecting on my own preconceptions and ideas about sex education.

Data were analysed following the three phases outlined by Charmaz (1996; 2014): 1) initial coding; 2) focused coding; 3) memo-writing and constant comparison.

1) Initial coding involves transcripts being coded line-by-line to inductively generate codes through highlighting and labeling keywords or groups of words (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). Initial codes are expected to be simple, concise, and as similar to the data as possible to refrain from inputting your own motives, fears, and unresolved personal issues onto your collected data (Charmaz, 2014).

2) Focused coding involves taking the line-by-line codes and applying them to large amounts of data, wherein categories are created and tried out to describe themes and patterns across several codes (Charmaz, 1996). During this stage, Charmaz stresses the importance of researcher reflexivity in challenging any preconceptions they hold; the goal is to ensure interpretation that emerges from the data rather than the imposition of pre-existing frames upon them (Charmaz, 2014).

3) Memo-writing and constant comparison are both analytical and reflective processes used in CGT. Memo-writing represents the reflective interpretations that document ideas, events, and thought processes the researcher has throughout the research process, whereas the constant comparative technique involves the continued comparison of codes, categories, and emerging data to find consistencies and

differences and continually refine concepts and relevant categories (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019).

Due to the flexible nature of grounded theory analysis, I was able to move between data collection and analysis through memo-writing and theoretical sampling to follow leads, explore hunches, and refine ideas. Furthermore, CGT enabled me to identify how participants perceived their sex education and how these experiences shaped their practices and preferences regarding sexual knowledge gathering. Through analysing and interpreting participants' accounts in terms of the wider contextual understandings, I was able to explore contradictions between their experiences and their recommendations to highlight how the types of messages they received from various sources and comfort level with these sources infused their socio-cultural constructions of sexual knowledge needs and interest. This process further emphasises my role as an interpreter, therefore, it is important to reiterate that conclusions about young adults' experiences with sexual knowledge gathering are based on *my interpretation* of their accounts.

3.6 Researcher Reflection

When I first proposed this research to the department through my thesis proposal and presentation, I introduced my interest in it as emerging from reflection on my own experiences with sex education and curiosity about how young adults felt about their experiences with in-school sex education. I presented the department with a brief reflection on my experiences with sex education, experiences explicitly with sex education in middle school (grades six to eight). I had expected to hear about participants' negative or lackluster experiences with sex education, albeit offset by some positive ones that showcased sex education done right. However, from conducting this research, I came to reflect on how narrow my view was of what sex education is. I was an adamant supporter of in-school sex education. I was confident that the answer to

improving sex education and the sexual knowledge-gathering experience for young adults was to improve in-school sex education. While I am confident that my findings do provide insight into how in-school sex education could be improved, it also moves beyond that narrow scope because my scope as a researcher has been expanded. It was from hearing and reading participants' experiences exploring the various sources of their sexual knowledge that I took a step back and expanded my definition of sex education beyond formal in-school sex education, to include all the opportunities and sources that teach someone about various topics related to sex and sexuality. I began reflecting on my own instances of sex education beyond the classroom, such as receiving books about puberty and relationships from my step-mother that I never bothered to read; or how, when I asked my mom to go on birth control (not because I was sexually active, just because everyone else was on it and it felt like something I should be doing to fit in), she and the doctor did not educate me on what that meant; or the many times I visited un-mediated and what I would consider sketchy internet discussion forums (for example: Quora), where I couldn't discern fact from fiction to learn about various topics such as, masturbation and periods. In turn, I stopped regarding sex education as something that is solely the school's responsibility, to instead look at the totality of a young adult's experiences with sexual knowledge gathering and building. This expanded scope includes examining young adults' roles as both active and passive sexual knowledge gatherers and the influence of lived experiences on the perception of past experiences, all of which have become a focal point of this research.

3.7 Knowledge Translation

The findings from the study were written into this master's thesis. After the approval of the thesis, findings will be shared with participants via the indicated desired format (entire thesis or summary) as indicated through a checkbox on their consent form. Furthermore, as

opportunities arise, the data may also be presented in conference presentations and journal

articles.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Meet the Participants

This section will provide a brief introduction to the participants in this study. Introductions include key demographic data at the time of the interview or survey, gender, sexuality, pronouns, religious affiliation, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and province in which they received sex education. In addition to demographic data, these introductions also serve to introduce each participant's unique experiences with sex education and can/will provide context to their experiences outlined in the following sections. All the names of participants have been changed to reflect their chosen pseudonym or if desired the one chosen for them by the researcher. Participant introductions are done in no particular order.

Dora Rock is a twenty-year-old queer cisgender female who uses she/they pronouns. Dora Rock describes her religious affiliation as a non-practicing Christian and her racial and ethnic background as Canadian with European ancestry. She attended public school in rural Prince Edward Island. She describes her general experience with finding information about sex as not super difficult but attributed this to personal community and luck rather than direct education by teachers and adults. She received most of her sexual knowledge from talks with her friends and surrounding LGBTQ+ community in person and online circles. Dora Rock directed her questions to the internet, because of the lack of open conversations about sex at home. Overall, she agrees that school is an appropriate place to learn about sex but states that the best place to learn about sex is ideally the home.

Miranda is an eighteen-year-old gender-fluid pansexual who uses she/her pronouns. Miranda describes her religious affiliation as primarily agnostic. However, she was raised Christian. She describes her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian with Celtic

ancestry. She attended public school in rural Nova Scotia where she received most of her sexual knowledge from teachers during her in-school sex education. Miranda describes her general experience with finding information about sex as good, especially thanks to the internet and school. Miranda's questions were directed to friends due to comfort level. Overall, Miranda agrees that school is an appropriate place to learn about sex, especially the science and health aspects. However, she remains unsure if it is the best place to learn.

Samantha is a twenty-year-old pansexual cisgender female who uses she/they pronouns. Samantha describes her religious affiliation as atheist and her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian. She attended public school in rural Ontario and received sex education both in school and through a community-based program. Google was the source she got most of her sexual knowledge from. She found this approach made it relatively easy to find information but difficult to find credible sources that were not filled with medical jargon. Any questions she had were directed to friends or the internet, depending on the comfort level of those involved. Samantha stated that she first recalls receiving in-school sex education in grade four or five in a Co-Ed setting. However, the sex education Samantha received in grade 9 taught by a teacher and public health nurse in her all-girls gym class was a very negative experience. She also attended a community-based program designed to support and educate young LGBTQ+ people. Overall, Samantha agrees that school is an appropriate place to learn about sex. However, she believes that a lot of changes need to be made to make it better.

Ainsley is a nineteen-year-old, queer and gender-fluid person who uses she/they pronouns. Ainsley describes her religious affiliation growing up as devoutly Catholic/Christian, with many of her foundational beliefs stemming from Christianity. However, now she considers herself faithful, not represented by any major organized religion or group. She states her racial

and ethnic background as being Irish-Italian Canadian. She attended a Catholic school in urban Ontario. She described friends as a first and primary resource of sexual knowledge but stated that the internet was another valuable source. Any questions she had were also directed to friends and the internet, depending on the comfort level of those involved and the subject matter. Ainsley shared negative experiences at home due to their relationship with her conservative parents. She also stated that there was not an emphasis on sex education at their conservative Catholic school and described it as a terrible experience in general. Overall, Ainsley considers school as the most appropriate place for young people to learn about sex. However, when it comes to whether or not school is the best place to learn, she considers it one of the best, but not able to stand alone.

Chelsea is a twenty-year-old bisexual cisgender female who uses she/her pronouns. She describes her religious affiliation as previously Christian but currently agnostic. Her racial and ethnic background is white Canadian. Chelsea attended public school in urban Nova Scotia. She describes her general experience with sexual knowledge gathering as homemade, receiving little from her in-school sex education. The main sources she received sexual knowledge from were the internet through YouTube videos and general internet searches, and resources shared by parents and siblings. Any questions Chelsea had were directed to the internet. Overall, Chelsea agrees that school is an appropriate place for young people to learn about sex. Her opinion on whether or not school is the best environment is more ambivalent, but she leans more toward agreeing that it is the best environment, because school is a mandatory learning environment.

Mary-Jane is a twenty-year-old lesbian cisgender female who uses she/her pronouns. She states her religious affliction as atheist and her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian. Mary-Jane attended public school in rural Nova Scotia. She describes her general experience with finding information about sex as alright, stating that her parents were always

open to answering any questions she had and served as her first sex educators. In addition to her parents, school, friends, and the internet were the main sources from which she received her sexual knowledge. Any questions Mary-Jane had, were directed to the internet or friends, depending on her comfort level. Health-related questions were directed to her mother or other women in her life. Overall, Mary-Jane considers school as not only an appropriate place to learn about sex but the best place.

Rebecca is an eighteen-year-old heterosexual, cisgender female who uses she/her pronouns. She describes her religious affiliation as Jewish and atheist and her racial and ethnic background as European Canadian. She attended a Jewish day school in urban Manitoba. She describes her general experience with finding information about sex as positive, usually very accessible, and sometimes biased. The main source she received sexual knowledge from was the internet and general media consumption. Any questions Rebecca had, were directed to friends or the internet. Overall, Rebecca agrees that school is an appropriate place to learn about sex. However, she states that it is not the best because of the tendency for it to be awkward with peers.

Cedar Rose is a nineteen-year-old heterosexual, cisgender female who uses she/her pronouns. She describes her religious affiliation as Christian and her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian. While she moved around a bit, she received most of her sex education at a private school in urban British Columbia. She considers school, parents, friends, and the internet as her main sources of sexual knowledge and states that, overall, she had a positive general experience. She attributed this positive experience to starting sex education early at an all-girls school, in addition to her mothers' openness and frankness with discussing topics related to sex and puberty. If Cedar Rose had questions, she would direct them to resources her

mother gave her, stating her growing discomfort in approaching her mother directly as she got older. Overall, she agrees that school is an appropriate place for young people to learn about sex, but states that it is likely not the best environment. Instead, Cedar Rose states the importance of access to a combination of sources including school, family, friends, and alternative sources (books, internet).

Molly is a nineteen-year-old heterosexual, cisgender female who uses she/her pronouns. Molly describes her religious views as Christian and states that while she doesn't regularly attend church or live by the Bible, she believes in God. Her racial and ethnic background is described as white Canadian and half Acadian. She attended public school in urban New Brunswick. She describes her general experience gathering information about sex as very independent, stating that her in-school sex education was primarily focused on sexual health and puberty. As a result, Molly considers the internet and friends as her primary source of sexual knowledge and any questions she had were directed to the internet. Overall, Molly agrees that school is an appropriate place and the best place for young people to learn about sex.

Stephanie is a nineteen-year-old heterosexual, cisgender female who uses she/her pronouns. Stephanie describes her religious affiliation as atheist, and her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian, with European and French heritage. She attended public school in rural New Brunswick, her in-school sex education started in grade four or five, and she recalls being generally uncomfortable with the subject matter and uninterested in discussing it. Stephanie's main source of sexual knowledge was the internet, which she also stated as being where she would go with any questions. Overall, Stephanie agrees that school is an appropriate environment for young people to learn about sex. However, she states that it is perhaps not the best place to learn, suggesting instead the home as the ideal environment.

Abigail is a twenty-year-old asexual cisgender female who uses she/her pronouns. She describes her religious worldview as atheist and her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian. She attended public school and community programming in urban British Columbia. Abigail considers her general experience finding information about sex to be 'pretty accessible' and states that school and the internet were her main sources for sex education. If she had any questions, she would direct them to the internet because, while she considers her family to be 'super sex positive,' she felt uncomfortable bringing up questions with them. Overall, Abigail agrees that school is an appropriate place to learn about sex. However, she is unsure if it is the best place to learn.

Tara is a nineteen-year-old cisgender bisexual woman who uses she/her pronouns. Tara describes her religious affiliation as atheist and agnostic and her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian. She attended public school in rural New Brunswick. She explained that the sex education she received in school was limited and came across as very negative. Her school required consent forms to be signed for students to be allowed to attend sex education classes. Tara turned to other sources for sexual knowledge gathering and considered the internet and media as her main sources. If she had any questions, she would ask her mom, stating that sex and other conversations carried a more neutral air at home. However, Tara shared that she would approach friends with questions as she grew older. Tara agrees that school is an appropriate place for young people to learn about sex. However, she remains unsure if it is the best place, suggesting instead the home as the ideal environment.

Tiffany is an eighteen-year-old bicurious cis-gender female who uses she/her pronouns. Tiffany considers herself non-religious and describes her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian. Tiffany attended public school in rural New Brunswick. She describes her general

experiences finding information about sex as very self-directed, with school having provided a "basic overview of a vast and diverse subject." She considers the internet and friends as the sources she received most of her sexual knowledge from. Any questions she had were directed to friends or the internet, depending on the comfort level of those involved. Overall, Tiffany agrees that school is not only an appropriate place for young people to learn about sex but the best and only environment.

Augustus is an eighteen-year-old gender-fluid lesbian who uses she/they pronouns. Augustus describes their religious affiliation as atheist and their racial and ethnic background as white Canadian. She attended public school in urban Alberta and states that she had a positive experience with in-school sex education and felt their high-school did a good job by bringing in educators from a local sexual health center to teach them. Augustus states that school and the internet were their primary sources of sexual knowledge. Any questions she had would be directed to the internet, as they didn't feel comfortable talking to their parents. Overall, Augustus agrees that school is an appropriate place for young people to learn about sex. However, she is less sure if it is the best place, instead insisting it is simply a good place for young people to learn.

Thyme is a twenty-year-old lesbian, transgender woman who uses she/her pronouns. Thyme describes her religious affiliation as a Unitarian Universalist and considers herself to be spiritual. Thyme's racial and ethnic background is white American. She grew up and attended school in the United States. When she moved to urban Quebec for university, she attended a community-based program designed to support and educate LGBTQ+ individuals. She considers conversations with friends and internet use as her main sources for gathering sexual knowledge and directed any questions to the internet. Transitioning as a young person, she had many

'uncomfortable' conversations about gender and sexual health with her parents, specifically regarding freezing sperm at fourteen years old as part of her transition. Overall, Thyme agrees that school is an appropriate place for young people to learn about sex. However, she does not think it is the best place and instead states that, ideally, all young people would have access to community programs.

Jack is a twenty-year-old heterosexual, cisgender male who uses he/him pronouns. Jack is Catholic and is very connected to his faith. He describes his racial and ethnic background as Acadian Canadian. He attended public school in rural New Brunswick. Jack considers his general experiences with sex education as 'not exactly noteworthy,' claiming that he had the same experience as many other English-speaking young people in his area/school. He states that his friends, the internet, and general media consumption were his main sources for sexual knowledge gathering. Any questions Jack had, were directed to the internet. Overall, Jack agrees that school is an appropriate place for young people to learn about sex. However, he adamantly disagrees that it is the best place and instead suggests the home as the best place.

Heather is a twenty-year-old heterosexual, cisgender female who uses she/her pronouns. Heather describes her religious affiliation as atheist and her racial and ethnic background as white Canadian with Irish heritage. She attended public school in urban Ontario. Heather considers her general experience with finding information about sex to be privileged, stating that she felt lucky to have adults around her who provided useful resources and information. Heather considers school as her main source of sexual knowledge gathering. However, Heather's questions were directed to the internet or her friends. Overall, she agrees that school is both an appropriate and the best place for young people to learn about sex because it is "a comfortable setting where students can ask questions without fear of judgement".

4.2 Sources and Experiences in Gathering Information About Sex

When asked how they would describe their general experiences finding/receiving information about sex, participants' responses represented a sliding scale of perceived quality of experience, from negative to neutral to positive. Participants used a variety of words to illustrate their experiences, including uncomfortable, difficult to navigate, not noteworthy, self-directed, alright, generally positive, easy, and accessible. However, while this question was meant to explore participants' general experiences across the multiple identified sources/sites, for many, the general perception of their experiences with sexual knowledge gathering was a reflection or direct result of their experiences with in-school sex education.

> Honestly, terrible, I'm not going to lie. I grew up in a really conservative Catholic
> school system. The only real sex education was like girls cover up, boys don't look,
> but we understand you have urges and just don't have sex until you get married. That
> was pretty much it… *Ainsley* (She/they).

> I would describe my experience finding information about sex to be homemade. I
> received very little formal information from school… (Chelsea).

> In general, encompassing all aspects of life, I would say it has not been super difficult,
> but that's more due to personal community and experience than direct education…
> (Dora Rock).

> Um, I think it was generally pretty positive. I know a lot of people didn't have that, but
> I felt my high school, in particular, did a really good job of it…(Augustus).

Even though through their responses, many participants highlighted school as a major, if not the major contributor to their general experience with finding/receiving information about sex, when asked which sources/sites learning they used, participant responses highlighted other

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sources that were used just as much if not more than school. Participants identified four main sources they received/gathered sexual knowledge from, with eleven out of seventeen participants stating the use of two or more sources. The identified sources are the internet or general media consumption (13), school (7), friends (7), and family (2). While responses provide information on which sources participants found the most useful, participants also considered the amount of information about sex, sexuality, and relationships within these sites/sources.

When reflecting on where or who they would go to, with questions about topics related to their sexual knowledge needs and interests, participants' reasoning shifted from the site's abundance of information to also include participants' levels of comfortability and their perceptions of whether sources would judge them negatively for asking questions about those topics. Responses highlighted the same four main sites: Internet (13), friends (7), family (2) and school (1). Interestingly, compared to the previous established relevance of the identified sites of learning (in previous paragraph), the status of school (and only school) as a main site of learning has changed as many participants did not consider it an appropriate or comfortable place for them to ask questions about topics related to their sexual knowledge needs and interests. The following section will explore participants' experiences with in-school sex education and outline the reasoning behind this consideration and subsequent fall of schools' status, with participants experiences with the other sources following.

4.3 Experiences in Schools

4.3.1 Mediocre In-School Sex Education

Many participants shared a general sense of indifference toward their in-school sex education. They considered it mediocre or lackluster by providing a basic overview (STIs, contraceptives, anatomy, and puberty) of a complex and nuanced subject. Those whose sex

education extended beyond this basic overview to include conversations on consent (Augustus), healthy relationships (Abigail), pleasure, gender, and sexualities (Heather) shared feelings of luck that they were presented with this information. In-school sex education was primarily described as repetitive and monotonous, with a risk-based curriculum centering around heteronormative and male-focused content and learning expectations.

For many, the foundation of their formal sex education curriculum was scientific/biological and health-based, focusing on puberty, anatomy, and reproduction. Seemingly, with the focus on health and biology, there was a tendency to focus on **risk**. Learning outcomes and goals were focused on teaching participants to avoid the unwanted consequences of sex, such as STIs and teen pregnancy.

> What I did learn from junior high was more explaining basic reproduction, different STIs, and how to prevent them and pregnancy… (Mary-Jane).

> We only ever learned about condoms, STIs, and birth control… as my religion is Catholicism – anything about artificial contraception is against the teachings of the Catholic church… so everything we learned was useless for me to apply… (Jack).

Despite Jack's critique, he admitted that while he couldn't necessarily apply the information, he still enjoyed learning about safe sex methods and saw value in learning about topics outside of his interests. Based off of other participants' reflections general opinions about their safe sex education were two-fold: (1) While I wasn't currently sexually active, the information shared with me was good to know, as I wanted to be aware of how to protect myself in the future; or (2) At the time, I thought I would always wear a condom, so the constant focus on safe sex seemed redundant. Most participants received sex education where abstinence was only mentioned in passing as the most effective way to avoid consequences associated with sex. Molly's experience,

however, is a reminder that abstinence-only frameworks remain present within Canadian schools:

> Sex education basically taught us that if you weren't ready to be raising a child, you should not be having sex… according to them [teachers], other than abstinence, the other contraceptive methods were not super reliable, so abstinence was what we should follow until we are ready for kids… (Molly).

Although Molly learned about contraceptives, it was done in a manner that pushed abstinence as the only reliable method to follow until one was ready to have kids - ultimately creating the illusion that sex is merely a **reproductive** act. This illusion is further reinforced by the acceptability and prevalence of topics related to puberty and reproduction.

The emphasis on procreative sex, where cis-gendered male and female penetrative sex was the default sexual act, was also identified by participants as adding to the overwhelmingly **heteronormative** nature of their education. A gender and sexuality-inclusive approach to contraceptives and safe sex were noted as being hardly discussed. Alternatively, when inclusive forms of contraceptives were discussed, they were mentioned in passing and effectively failed to acknowledge numerous different gender identities and their rights to and need for accurate and inclusive information.

> They talked about pretty much all forms of contraception and talked about dental dams too. They didn't talk about queer sex much, but they did give us that... (Augustus).

> The sexual health educator came in and mentioned queer sexual health, but she didn't go into a lot of detail because she asked, "Is anyone here queer? Does anyone identify that way? "… obviously, not a single person raised their hand … she said that and

brushed it over. She was basically like, gay people can use condoms and don't need

birth control… (Dora Rock).

I will say there was no sex education for queer people … for gay people especially

you just kind of assume that they will figure it out on their own… queer people aren't

suddenly around; it's just that they are not being talked about in schools… it points out

people who don't follow the norm, they feel left out…(Abigail).

Participants who identified as cis-gendered and heterosexual or members of the LGBTQIA+ community highlighted their dissatisfaction with the lack of conversation surrounding gender and sexuality, transgender and intersex identities throughout their formal sex education. As a result, some participants linked identifying as LGBTQIA+ to being left to their own devices – that their identity increased their need to go and find information relevant to them and their sexual knowledge needs and interests because the school didn't address them. However, the answer doesn't appear to be as simple as just including more LGBTQIA+ topics and content, as some participants reported worries about being outed, experiencing homophobia, and a general sense of discomfort around peers and teachers.

Many cis-gender female and gender-fluid participants also felt left to their own devices, finding their formal sex education predominantly **male-focused**, including a focus on male anatomy and puberty. This focus resulted in many participants feeling left in the dark about the functions of their bodies, namely, menstruation and pleasure.

I felt like I was kept in the dark about my own body… I know how the male orgasm

works, but I don't know the parts of my own vagina, and I can't ask why I'm getting

hair in places I used to not have hair… I feel like I was robbed of that comfortableness

that I am still learning now that I could have learned way earlier… (Ainsley).

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It was more male-oriented in high school. They never talked about masturbation… it

was only guys' masturbation and wet dreams… it was never what pleasure was for

girls… (Cedar Rose)

In addition, many reported that male-focused sex education creates unequal expectations for girls

to be more knowledgeable and aware of how to avoid pregnancy and STIs rather than it being a

shared responsibility.

It was clear halfway through the unit [anatomy] that it wasn't for us women. It was

more to know everything about the male side of it so you [women] could avoid getting

pregnant or to avoid getting an STI instead of the other way around… (Samantha).

With only one male participant (Jack) whose in-school sex education was co-ed, it is difficult to

speak to the other side of this claim thoroughly. However, as Jack stated that "we only ever

learned about condoms, STIs and birth control," perhaps the assumption can be made that the

workings of female bodies, such as female orgasm, fertility, and ovulation, were not discussed at

length.

4.3.2 Educators as Contributing Factors to Participants' Positive or Negative Experiences

As the main facilitators of sex education in schools, teachers' attitudes, approachability,

and teaching style were integral to participants' positive or negative perceptions of their

experiences. While some participants shared a general comfort in being educated by their

teachers, others shared that it was hard to take the content seriously when you knew you would

see the teacher daily.

I think the teachers who taught us probably had an effect on the information we

obtained. It's kind of hard to take information seriously from a teacher you see every

day … especially because you know the next day it will be back to normal class topics, and we won't talk about sex again – which is maybe better socially… (Chelsea).

My math teacher taught me… I think she did a good job because we knew her… I would have felt more comfortable asking questions to a stranger. With my teacher, if I asked her a question, she still had to teach me math afterward… (Tara).

Based on participant responses, comfort or inability to take the topic seriously when taught by teachers essentially boils down to the belief that sharing an interest in the topic or sharing personal information about sexual knowledge needs and interests crosses a boundary. By crossing the boundary, the relationship between student and teacher is altered because the teacher now has knowledge of one's private or intimate interests/identity.

This connection between the private nature of sexual knowledge needs and interests and the public nature of the student-teacher relationship is also relevant to participants' discomfort with asking questions. However, it is not the only relevant factor. Participants' discomfort was further reinforced by the fact that they did not regard schools as safe places to explore sexual knowledge needs and interests beyond what was being taught.

I think it would have made me uncomfortable [asking questions] … especially with the kind of culture at my school, which was more of that ambient homophobia where if you're talking about it, you are probably going to be called a slur … avoiding that experience whenever possible was preferred… (Thyme).

My school was in a hick, homophobic and racist neighborhood… teachers never corrected students when certain things were being said, so often, the burden was on

students to stand up … or correct things that were being heard …. If they felt

comfortable with it… (Samantha).

Thyme's and Samantha's observations highlight how general community and school cultures

could leave young people hesitant and even fearful to ask questions in the classroom. These fears

were occasionally brought to life by teachers or educators shutting down and shaming students

for their questions.

> I remember there was one girl who asked a question about her menstrual cycle and
>
> ovulation, and the teacher refused…She had said, 'Why would you need to know that
>
> unless you want to get pregnant?' The girl had no idea how to response – she was so
>
> embarrassed… (Samantha).

Not only was this student shut down and embarrassed for asking a question, but the teacher's

response effectively denied knowledge related to the menstrual cycle and ovulation to those

women deemed ready to reproduce. Some teachers, aware that young people may not be

comfortable asking questions outright for numerous reasons, supplied a box for students to

anonymously write in questions that could later be addressed in front of the class. Despite this

effort, participants shared fears over classmates being able to determine who submitted

questions. In addition, the idea of the question box itself reinforced for some the notion that sex

and sexuality are topics we shouldn't be discussing or should be embarrassed about.

4.3.3 Uninterested and Unqualified Educators: Teaching Methods

Participants stated that it was clear when teachers were uninterested or unqualified to

teach the subject, with the teachers' disdain reflected in their teaching methods or lack thereof.

For example, Jack shared how his teacher simply handed out crosswords and word searches

related to sexual topics. Another example is Dora Rock's teacher using a Barbie doll as a prop

during anatomy lessons despite the doll's apparent lack of anatomical features. These negative experiences do not mean that all teachers used poor teaching methods. Heather, for example, stated that her gender studies teacher used a clitoris puppet to show how large the clitoris is. Other participants reported the use of various teaching aids that kept them engaged with the material due to their hands-on nature, including condoms on bananas or wooden penises, comically referred to as 'Woody' (Miranda, Cedar Rose). However, beyond finding it amusing that the wooden penis was referred to as Woody, participants linked the presence of laughter, or giggling within SE with a general lack of maturity due to their age. For example, Miranda highlighted how teachers would try to remind students that they were in a safe space and to try not to giggle or make jokes, but she felt like they understood that due to their age laughter is inevitable. Therefore, the presence of giggling or feeling silly when shown pictures of genitalia (Samantha, Tara) can be a marker of embarrassment, lack of comfort and an effort to diffuse these feelings. Teachers' responses to laughter can be an example of militating an experience, where management of laughter is centered in a way that prioritize adult comfort and ideals about maturity. Teachers' efforts to maintain professionalism result in lessons that lack emotional connection, vulnerability and personability, which consequently overlook students' experiences and perceptions.

Another teaching method highlighted through participant responses is the separation of girls and boys, whether by intentionally taking the boys out of the room when girls' topics were brought up or through gym classes in high school when students were already separated by gender. In some cases, girls only learned about themselves; in others, they learned about themselves and boys. Some participants shared that it created a secretive air around puberty. When they questioned their male classmates about what they were learning or if they had learned

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about female bodies, they responded no – adding to the male-focused aspect of in-school education. It is important to note that with only one male participant who experienced co-ed sex education, my ability to speak to young men's experience is very limited.

Cognisant of the limitations of teachers in being effective sex educators, some schools chose to bring in other types of educators, including public health nurses, sex toy shop owners, and representatives from sexual health centers. The initiative of schools to bring in outside educators was met with praise from many participants, who noted that these educators brought in more resources (such as information on STI testing centers) and different perspectives than their teachers. However, to Dora Rock, it was clear that sometimes, even those trained as sexual health educators do not create welcoming and inclusive environments for students. This is apparent through her uncomfortable experience with a sexual health educator who, when mentioning queer sexual health, asked anyone who identified as queer to raise their hands; when no one raised their hands, she quickly moved on, concluding that no one needed the information.

4.3.4 Participants Didn't Need any More Information at the Time

Despite critiques of the sex education they received in school, some participants confessed that they were uncomfortable with the topic when they were young and simply weren't interested in sex at the time. Their minimal sex education was in line with their needs at the time. These participants' lack of interest in the subject also included a lack of motivation to seek out more information.

> To be honest, I don't think I was curious about anything … I was like, oh, this is good
> to know; safe sex is great, but I'm not exploring anything... I didn't need to know
> anything – I didn't really care… (Abigail).

I was not interested in being sexually active at all when I was in junior high, so I never

put much thought into anything past the information being presented… (Mary-Jane).

This lack of motivation/interest is made clear in that although some schools made out-of-classroom experiences (after-school programs, boys and girls clubs, school counselors) available, few took advantage of the opportunities for more information. It wasn't until participants became sexually active that they reported having more questions and concerns regarding their expanding sexual knowledge needs and interests, highlighting the hindsight of sexual experience that many participants applied to their analysis and perception of their in-school sex education.

4.4 School as an Appropriate vs. Best Place to Learn

4.4.1 Contradictory Support for School as an Appropriate Site to Learn About Sex

All participants shared the belief that school was an appropriate site to learn about sex, with sex regarded as a normal and a universal fact of life and schools carrying the obligation to teach young people about life. Appropriateness was further established through schools' ability to provide a reliable, objective (information about sex is shared in a way that is not influenced by the educators' personal opinions or beliefs), and forced learning environment, resulting in a similar level of education for a large population of young people.

Yes. School is a kind of forced learning environment that provides the information

directly to you without having to search for yourself… (Rebecca).

Yes. Sex and sexual health are not inappropriate topics or taboo, as people make them

out to be. It is an important topic that needs to be taught… (Molly).

I think school is certainly an appropriate place for students to learn about sex; they

teach you everything else – why not sex? … you should be able to get the necessary

information from your school… (Chelsea).

What is interesting is the contradictory nature of these claims. First, the claims that sex is an

appropriate and not taboo topic in school are contradicted by the fear and discomfort

surrounding asking questions and seeking information from teachers, which instead reinforces

the idea discussing sexual knowledge needs and interests in class is taboo or that some topics are

more appropriate than others. Secondly, the claims that school has the ability to provide a

similar level of education for all young Canadians is contradicted throughout the above section,

where participant responses to interview and survey questions highlight the unreliable and

uneven reality of in-school sex education. Finally, the claims that in-school sex education

eliminates the need to search for information oneself is contradicted by the possibility that one's

sex education does not include information relevant to one's sexual knowledge needs and

interests – which is not uncommon given the fact the foundation of many participants' in-school

sex education was risk-based, heteronormative, and male-focused.

Despite the contradictions participants responses highlight, it is clear that school is

regarded as an important place for young people to learn about sex--an important place but not

necessarily the best place. Perhaps participants' claims are better associated with their fear that if

sex education was deemed inappropriate for school, governments would have a reason to

abolish it and then young people would be left entirely to their own devices or to rely on parents

and guardians. With this fear in mind, many participants acceded that a bare-bones in-school sex

education would be better than no in-school sex education.

4.4.2 Is School the Best Place to Learn About Sex?

When the question was reframed to consider if school is the best place for young people to learn about sex, the majority remained uncertain or disagreed, based on the realization that, realistically, there are limitations to what schools can achieve. These limitations boil down to a common theme: student comfortability or lack thereof. This lack of comfort is associated with the fear and lack of anonymity many young people associate with asking questions about and displaying interest in sex in their school's classrooms. Furthermore, participants emphasized that everyone is ready to learn different things at different times and that school cannot be expected to teach everything a young person may need to know and when they need to know it. This emphasis establishes standardization as a problem, wherein by having a standardized curriculum, some topics or conversations may add to student discomfort if they are not ready to learn them. However, standardization is needed to ensure students get similar education. Participants who vocalized their support for school as the best site/source to learn reiterated the belief that school was a mandatory, reliable, and unbiased place for them to learn, which was better than searching for the information themselves. Alternative suggestions were that school is essential to provide young people with sex education but should not be the only place sex education is learned, with many noting their belief that the home is an ideal site.

> I think school is the best place to learn about sex. Ideally, school shouldn't be the only place students learn about sex. Multiple outlets and safe spaces would be best… (Mary-Jane).

> I think the best place to learn about sex is ideally the home from their parents… but because parents don't teach their kids properly, the best place, currently, to focus on improving sex education is in the school… (Dora Rock).

While alternative suggestions highlight this ideal, they also point to the reality that sex education in the home is sparse for many. This is further explored in the next section, which addresses participant responses to interview/survey questions regarding the family's role in meeting sexual knowledge needs and interests

4.5 Experiences with Family

It was not uncommon for participants to have never had the birds and the bees conversation with their parents (Chelsea, Molly, Augustus, Dora Rock, Jack, Tara, Samantha, and Miranda). Those who did (Mary-Jane and Cedar Rose) reported that their parents were their first sex educators, teaching them about their bodies and other 'basics.' They and other participants (Chelsea and Augustus) reported receiving resources from their parents or siblings (hand-me-downs). These resources included books or pamphlets on puberty and growing up, such as the *American Girl* book series they could refer to answer their questions.

4.5.1 Uncomfortable Parents and Uncomfortable Children

There was a general sense of discomfort when participants brought up experiences of sex education with their parents, both with regards to their comfort and their parents. Many attributed their parent's lack of comfort to the lack of sex education their parents received and to generational differences in views about gender and sexuality due to social change since one's parents grew up. Furthermore, participants drew attention to the apparent perpetuation of the 'knowledgeable female' discourse that was created through the male-focused foundation of their in-school sex education within the home. More specifically, mothers were referred to the most; therefore, they are established as being the dominant source of sexual/reproductive knowledge at home. Even when fathers were mentioned, their lack of knowledge on female-related topics and lack of responsibility/comfort to answer those questions were highlighted

I would have been more comfortable asking my dad, but then again, I would not have gone to my dad for those questions; I would have gone to my mom… (Samantha).

My father has five daughters, but if I have a question, he still doesn't feel comfortable talking about it; like dude, you have had five daughters at this point, you should feel comfortable or at least more okay with talking about it… (Miranda).

For some participants, the sheer thought of talking to parents about their sexual knowledge needs and interests was enough to make them feel uncomfortable. Alternatively, some participants were made uncomfortable by their parents' comments surrounding sex, puberty, or sexuality, leaving them unwilling to ask questions and hesitant to share intimate details about their lives. Other participants reported being directly shut down or blown off by their parents when they asked questions.

My relationship with my parents is not good; they are very conservative, and I am very not… they were also not the most supportive when I came out to them… they are always pushing me to be with men, specifically cis-gendered men… so talking to them about sex from an objective perspective like – this is what's going on in my body, and this is what I'm feeling right now – would rarely ever happen… (Ainsley).

I went home and asked my mom about it [menstruation], and she said something along the lines of 'ask me in three years'… I started my period before those three years were up… I thought I was dying or something – it was not good… I told my dad, who was on the phone with my aunt, and he said, "Oh, I've got to go. She just started the 'thing'"… (Dora Rock).

What Dora Rock and Ainsley's seemingly different experiences have in common is the reluctance to be open and honest when discussing topics related to puberty, sexuality,

relationships, and even health questions with parents that lasted into their adult years. For example, Ainsley went on to state that talking to their parents about their experience with Accutane (a prescription acne drug) and what it was doing to their body and hormones was one of the worst experiences of their life besides coming out. Despite this, both Dora Rock and Ainsley stated their belief that the home was an important site for learning about sex and related topics, claiming that parents could provide a more emotional lens to these topics that school simply cannot.

Participants who reported feeling comfortable asking their parents questions stuck to questions related to health or puberty topics, as questions about sexuality and gender were perceived as intimate, private, or taboo.

> My mother told me if I ever needed condoms to ask her, and she would get me some, but nothing went beyond that… I trust my mom, and I definitely feel comfortable asking her questions, but it's sex, which you never really want to talk about with anyone, let alone a parent… (Chelsea).

> My parents were always open about any questions regarding reproduction or sexual health, so I always felt comfortable asking them questions… when it came to more intimate questions, as well as sexual orientation, that information always seemed more taboo and not as open for discussion… I also didn't want to have those conversations with my parents… (Mary-Jane).

> My mom explained sex young to me, and it wasn't a big deal – she just explained it… I don't think I had questions until I was feeling all awkward and didn't want to talk about it with my mom… (Cedar Rose).

Interestingly, although Chelsea, Mary-Jane, and Cedar Rose reported having positive experiences and a sense of comfort/trust with their parents, they were uncomfortable when asking questions or discussing sexuality, which they deemed a more private and intimate topic. They stated that they didn't want to talk to *anyone* about sexuality. When we consider the totality of participant experiences with their parents (positive and negative), it suggests that parents can't win because young people simply do not feel comfortable discussing their sexual knowledge needs and interests with their parents. Furthermore, the questions remain is there a way parents can do what their kids want with regards to sex education at home? And if young people don't feel comfortable discussing sexual knowledge needs and interests in schools or at home, where do they?

4.6 Experiences with Friends

4.6.1 Comfort with General Topics

Friends were viewed as a trustworthy and relatable source that provided emotional connection and comfort when discussing *general* topics related to puberty and relationships. While some attributed their comfort to the fact that, like themselves, participants' friends were going through similar things, others experienced ambivalence towards seeking out friends' advice for the same reason. This ambivalence boiled down to the fact that if they were experiencing the same things, they were also likely in a similar state of not knowing or not wanting/needing to know and, therefore, were not reliable or effective sources of information. However, for Tiffany, this brought her and her friends closer, in that they could research it together or even form their own theories if they didn't know the answers. Discomfort increased around topics related to topics deemed more intimate or private, further reinforcing the boundary between private and public knowledge and conversations. Ainsley shared that their discomfort

grew with age when they inevitably entered different phases of their lives. While she felt comfort in discussing topics related to puberty and menstruation, as they got older and their interests became more niche and specific to them (sexuality), they found it harder to comfortably approach their friends.

4.6.2 Fear of Crossing Boundaries

Some participants shared their fear of crossing boundaries and making friends uncomfortable. Often, friends were used to gauge the social acceptability of topics and interests. Through casual conversation, participants could judge and define the boundaries of acceptable conversations.

> I think whenever I did go through friends, it was more of an informal way of trying to gauge whether or not the experiences I had or hadn't had were like socially acceptable or not… (Thyme).

> I would ask questions there [to friends] to get a feel for where people's attitudes to whatever my question would be… obviously some things are considered personal and private. Some people don't want to cross those boundaries… (Samantha).

Opting to remain within these perceived boundaries, participants would then direct their queries about the perceived inappropriate or uncomfortable topics to the safety of the internet. In many instances, friends and the internet were used in tandem, where if participants felt reassured about the acceptability of their interest or question by their internet search, they would feel more confident to approach friends with the topics.

4.7 Experiences with the Internet and Media

4.7.1 The Internet as a Tool for Exploration

The internet was regarded as a tool for exploration, where intentional searching or specific questions were not always considered necessary due to the sheer abundance of information available that they might 'stumble' upon. Furthermore, the quick, easy, accessible, and entertaining nature of the internet/media made them popular learning tools for many participants. Sources participants reported utilizing ranged from general Google searches to social media platforms, including Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, to medical journals, magazines, podcasts, and general media consumption of television shows and movies. Through the internet, participants could seek out sources or platforms that highlight various lived experiences, allowing participants to contextualize the information they were receiving and make connections between their experiences and identities and those of others. For example, while Dora Rock stated that she was able to find a sense of community and support through online circles geared towards LGBTQIA+, Tiffany used the internet to learn about sex and how it can mean something different to everyone.

4.7.2 Comfort in Anonymity

Participants highlighted the primary benefits of internet use as privacy and anonymity. Therefore, the internet provided participants with a sense of safety and comfort in asking questions and exploring topics they considered personal, private, or taboo and were reluctant to discuss with others (educators, parents, siblings, or friends).

> I went to the internet because it felt way more anonymous… sex still has a little bit of a taboo around, especially when I was younger… exploring your sexuality and masturbating and going through puberty was inherently uncomfortable… I went to

online forums or alternative sites like Tumblr where I don't know this person at all,

and I'm not using a username or email attached to my name that anybody associates

with me; therefore, I'm allowed to go and explore… (Thyme).

I never knew what I wanted to learn. I had no questions, and then you go on the

internet, and you find something you want to explore more, and it's anonymous, you

get to ask questions, and you will get answers… (Abigail).

The desire for privacy and anonymity was especially acute for participants exploring their gender
and sexual identity. In these cases, the internet and the sense of community it provides were used
to explore LGBTQIA+ topics in-depth without fear of being outed or judged by others and to
gain basic information that was limited or not provided at all in school or at home.

4.7.3 Caution! Misinformation Potential!

Despite the many benefits the internet provides young learners, some participants shared
concern about the dangerous potential of internet traps of misinformation from unreliable
sources.

Online, you can ask any question you want, and you will get a response from

anyone... you can get answers from someone totally uneducated… I knew this when I

went online to find information, so I always double or even triple-checked the

source… (Chelsea).

Unlike Chelsea, few other participants mentioned actively fact/source checking or consulting
multiple sources to ensure accurate information. Another danger to the internet and media use
participants highlighted was the question of age appropriateness and exposure. Thyme stated that
she was exposed to some stuff that she probably could have waited a couple of years to see,
while Dora Rock noted that even though she was exposed to things in a weird and not

necessarily positive way (raunchy TV shows like Family Guy) that weren't necessarily age-appropriate, it made her more aware of and curious about sex in general.

4.8 Experiences with Community-Based Programming

Out of seventeen, three participants received sex education from a community-based program. Each participant lived in a different province and attended a community-based program at a different age and stage in their lives. Abigail's community-based program was woven into a summer camp she attended, while Samantha and Thyme attended drop-in community-based programs that provided safe spaces, specialized education and events for LGBTQIA+ youths. For all three participants (Abigail, Samantha, Thyme), the benefit of community-based learning was two-fold: (1) a safer, more welcoming, and understanding environment led by diverse and educated (formal or through lived experience) community members or organizations; (2) improved access to LGBTQIA+ specific information and resources, including inclusive forms of contraception.

While these three participants shared their positive experiences with community-based programming, other participant responses shed light on three critiques that highlight community-based programming's lack of effectiveness and approachability for all. First, participant responses highlight a lack of awareness, in that young people are simply unaware that community programs exist. Samantha and Abigail's experiences are exceptional in that a parent signed them up or brought the program to their attention. Second, hand in hand with a lack of awareness is a lack of interest in receiving or searching for more information outside of school and the internet. In contrast to Thyme, who was personally motivated to attend a community-based program, many participants stated that they didn't feel the need to look outside of what they were already receiving, adopting a 'whatever came my way' attitude towards learning about

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topics related to sex. A third critique participants highlighted was associated with negative personal feelings towards community-based learning, including discomfort in discussing such topics with strangers. For example, Miranda received sex education in rural Nova Scotia. She feared that searching for and attending queer community-based programs would effectively out herself as queer in her small rural community.

4.9 Were You Adequately Prepared? The Reliance on School to Prepare Young People

Despite sharing experiences with sexual knowledge gathering across many sources/sites, when asked if their sex education adequately prepared them to take care of themselves and others, many participants defaulted to talking mostly about their formal in-school sex education.

> No, I definitely learned more through Google, podcasts, and television… my formal education was probably the least beneficial form of learning… (Rebecca).

> Not what I received in school, I think I became prepared … but if I had started having sex at age 15, I would have been fucked. The education was not there… social media and the community are great, but that's not where I should have gotten it… (Dora Rock).

> On the basis of STIs, yes, but on most other bases, no… I feel like the majority of the important information I learned about sex came from other sources like the internet or friends and their siblings… (Molly)

> I don't think that the sex education did that because we didn't learn about actually having sex, so I didn't know how to make sure my partner was okay and what you should do before and after sex… (Tara).

Those who responded 'No' critiqued their formal sex education for not meeting their needs, leaving them to prepare themselves. Those who felt prepared either simply stated, 'Yes, my sex education prepared me,' or that they felt prepared to protect themselves from STIs and pregnancies. However, with regards to their other sexual knowledge needs and interests, participants stated that they had to prepare themselves.

These responses contradict many of the realisations participants had when discussing if school is the best place to learn about sex; there is a limit to what school can do, and it can't be expected to teach everything. However, it is clear that the majority of participants still held the view that it was the responsibility of their school education to have better prepared them and their potential sexual knowledge needs and interests and offered many recommendations for improving in-school sex education.

4.10 Suggestions for Improving Sex Education

4.10.1 Regarding Content: What Should/Shouldn't be Included in In-School Sex Education

When asked what content they think should or shouldn't be included in sex education, many participants simply stated that everything should be included and nothing should be excluded.

> Young people are insecure enough without restricting their access to sexual health
>
> information, allowing the curriculum to decide what is 'allowed' or 'important' instead
>
> of whatever is relevant to the children… (Mary-Jane)

> They should provide as much information as people want to know… just don't
>
> withhold information from people… (Augustus).

Participants' responses highlighted numerous topics they wished their in-school sex education had discussed. These topics can be placed into two categories: (1) escaping the binaries, (2) healthy relationships and consent.

1. Escaping the binaries

For sex education to be equitable, participants highlighted that it must be inclusive and diverse in its nature. Every participant saw purpose in learning outside their interests, in the spirit that it fosters empathy and compassion towards others. This goal was deemed achievable by including more conversations beyond the binary, emphasizing the diverse nature of not only sexual knowledge needs and interests but also the biological variation found within anatomy and puberty. Thus, while participants called for more information for sexual and gender minorities, they also called for information on anatomical differences (labia length, penis shape), timelines of puberty, variation in menstrual cycles (period blood, discharge), and common menstrual and reproductive conditions (PCOS, endometriosis).

The notion of extending sex education beyond the binary was also applied by participants with regards to the procreative emphasis and risk-based nature of in-school sex education that commonly avoids any mention of pleasure or, more specifically, female pleasure. This desired shift is not to say that participants thought safe sex conversations were not necessary. Many participants actively stated that information on contraception and safe sex practices (STI testing windows) were integral to in-school sex education - but that it should not be the sole focus. For some, the pleasure discourse could be amended through the mention of pleasure anatomy (clitoris), types of sex (oral, anal, vaginal), types of sexual aids and toys (lubricant, vibrators), and even kinks and fetishes.

> I don't think specific sex acts should be included, like, um, how people can have sex –
> just say something that happens and move on… I remember one teacher saying that
> there are many ways to have sex, like position-wise, which was pretty weird to be
> brought up in class… it depends on age level… like it's definitely good to know oral
> sex, anal sex, and vaginal sex, and then as you get older have importance on foreplay,
> and that sex is more than penetrative… (Miranda)

However, Miranda's experience highlights how not everyone could be comfortable with certain aspects or in-depth conversations surrounding pleasure. While her comment specifically considers age-appropriateness, it is also essential to consider that religious and cultural beliefs may impact a young person's comfortability when a part of these conversations. To truly create an equitable learning experience, we must examine not only schools' ability to meet young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests but also consider if this is truly schools' responsibility.

2. **Healthy relationships and consent**

The aspects of healthy relationships were another key category participants' responses highlighted. Within this category, participants call for more information on healthy romantic and platonic relationships and relationships to self and the characteristics of unhealthy ones. To meet these needs, participants suggest including conversations about peer pressure, body image, power dynamics, masturbation, and the misrepresentation of sex in porn. For these conversations to be fruitful, participants highlighted the need for them to be connected to inclusion efforts by discussing diverse needs, interests, and identities.

Consent is another topic that could be included in this category and many participants stated their formal sex education did not address consent.

I think that there should be a lot of focus on consent… I don't think that was

something that was really covered until college… I wish I would have heard it back

then because I probably would have said no, and I wish I wasn't in some situations I

had… (Thyme).

I didn't learn that certain things that happened to me were called sexual assault until

the dynamics of consent were highlighted more… (Samantha).

I also don't recall learning much about consent during sex education… people claim

that 'they didn't know grabbing someone's butt was sexual harassment/ assault…'

These things should be laid out so they have no excuse for not knowing… (Molly).

Thyme's, Samantha's, and Molly's accounts highlight the danger and reality of not discussing

consent. The consensus appeared to be that modeling healthy relationships and the acts of giving

and accepting ongoing consent for students at a very young age can combat the perceived social

consequences of saying no to unwelcome, unwanted, or unsafe advances or activities, whether

sexual or not.

4.10.2 Methods for Improving Sex Education

General recommendations for improving in-school sex education address participant

critiques surrounding educators and teaching methods. Namely, participants recommend having

qualified and enthusiastic educators, mixed methods for knowledge distribution (discussions,

videos, slide shows), and interactive demonstrations on how things work (condoms, menstrual

products). In addition, participants recommended making it mandatory that sex education be

taught in schools and called for it to start early and end later. The call to extended in-school sex

education was made with the desire to not only provide younger students with accurate

anatomical information but to integrate concepts such as consent and healthy relationships that

can be built upon throughout their schooling to include other relevant topics (puberty, types of sex, STIs, rape, etc.). This call to extend in-school sex education could also help to account for variability in when people start puberty, which means that the nature of sex education would need to be repetitive to provide people with the information they need when they need it. However, this is in direct contradiction to their critique that in-school SE was boring and monotonous because it was so repetitive. Some participants recommended that schools offer opportunities for students to access private resources like reading materials and online sites or modules where they could easily find information, instead of having to search the internet themselves. However, the emphasis remained that students need a secure and anonymous way to access these resources, to avoid feeling of shame and guilt associated with showing interest in topics deemed personal and private.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings chapter provided a detailed exploration of young adult's reflections of the perceived quality of their formal SE and the utilization of different sources/sites for sexual knowledge gathering. Participants highlighted four main sites/sources that they utilized for sexual knowledge gathering: school, family, friends, and the internet. In many cases participants explained how each site or source was useful or had the potential to be useful for different reasons, but their overall use of the sites came down to: ease of access; abundance of information; perceived stigma associated with discussing topics or questions (with or in the specific site/source); and personal levels of comfort. Through this exploration three major themes emerged: 1) There are limitations to schools' abilities to meet young people's diverse sexual knowledge needs and interests; 2) Sexual knowledge needs and interests are a personal or private matter; 3) Young adults perceived their past experiences with sex education through a retrospective lens. Within these discussions young adults also offered insight into how to possibly make SE more inclusive and responsive to young people's needs. The following chapter will offer a grounded theory-based analysis of these findings to situate them within the broader cultural context, while outlining the potential implications of this study for SE and recommendations for future research.

5.1 The Reality of In-School Sex Education

Schools are regarded as key sites for many young people in the process of becoming someone, both with regards to their own identity-making and schools' role in preparing youth for adulthood or full cultural membership (Elliot, 2014; Tinning, 2014). Schools teach young people how to be members of a specific culture through the curriculum, such as history, English and social studies classes that teach students about their (the countries) cultural heritage and the

norms and values of their society. When applied to sexuality, sex education teaches young people about the cultural beliefs, practices and expectations surrounding sexuality, as a result, to be permitted to full cultural membership one must adhere to the parameters of acceptable and appropriate sexual expression. This section will explore the ways in which, according to participant experiences, Canadian sex education prepared them (or didn't) for full cultural membership related to sex. To do this, my analysis will explore the ways in which sex education is used as a form of social control which implicitly and explicitly constructs and confirms the category of 'normal' sexuality. By revisiting participants' experiences with SE in Canadian middle and high schools we can highlight common forms of surveillance and monitoring with relation to SE, determine what ideas were put forward about what it means to be a 'normal' sexual being in Canada, as well as explore whose values are being taught and whose needs are being met.

5.1.1 Sex Education as a Form of Social Control

According to Thorogood, sex education does not occur in a neutral environment; it is essentially value-laden and acts a form of control and governance in the Foucauldian sense (1992; 2000). Forms of control and governance can be seen at macro levels – where the very act of having government guidelines and advisory groups (e.g. SIECCAN; *Canadian Guidelines for Sex Education*) confirms the government's interest in monitoring sexual activity amongst young people (Thorogood, 2000), and also at micro levels – where individual schools have their own goals and structures for SE, and teachers' lessons plans can be reflections of their own values, opinions and comfort regarding SE topics. Through participants' experiences we see different examples of monitoring, surveillance and disciplinary techniques used by schools and teachers to regulate individual bodies. These examples include teachers refusing to answer questions about

ovulation due to its connection with reproduction and parenthood (Samantha); students receiving disciplinary punishments if caught having sex at private school (Cedar Rose); school dress codes that implore young girls to cover up while asking boys not to look (Ainsley); and, teachers who make indirect comments about students' 'unhealthy' eating habits aloud to the class (Dora Rock). While these are but a few examples, they clearly highlight common methods used to monitor young bodies in schools (withholding information, dress codes and gendered expectations, disciplinary action, indirect or direct comments on bodies) and showcase how the boundaries of 'normal' and 'deviant' or 'desirable' and 'undesirable' are enforced and reinforced.

5.1.2 What Young People Are (and Aren't) Learning Through School: The Dominant Sexual Culture

According to participant experiences, school-based SE in Canada is risk-based, heteronormative, reproduction-focused, and male-focused. This means that to be accepted within the dominant and 'normal' sexual culture in Canada, one is a cis-gendered, heterosexual male or female, who avoids risky sexual acts until they are old enough, married, or prepared to be parents. While cis-gendered heterosexual women are included under this idea of 'normal', the focus on teaching about sexuality that is heterosexual, penetrative, and reproductive, constructs male sexuality as active, expressive, and in need of being kept in check by the more passive, responsible, and knowledgeable female (Grant & Nash, 2019). This reflects how many participants felt during their sex education, when knowledge of male bodies was unequally prioritized, often leaving their needs, bodies, and pleasure in the background. While heterosexual women's cultural membership may be contingent on fulfilling their male partners' needs, LGBTQIA+ students and their identities continue to be implicitly and explicitly excluded from access to sexual culture membership altogether. Participants highlighted ways in which content

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and educators reinforced the othering of LGBTQIA+ students; these included providing inaccurate or stereotypical information (if any), asking students to raise their hands if they were queer, and not addressing homophobic comments and harassment when heard.

5.1.3 Whose Values Are We Teaching? Whose Needs Are We Meeting?

The dominant sexual culture reflects the dominant culture's ideas and values, meaning that the sex education a young person receives while attending a Canadian middle or high school is built upon western biomedical standards and cultural values of sex, relationships, gender, health, and safety. Furthermore, it is largely a reflection of adult educators' views and opinions of youth sexual cultures as inherently risky, where sexual behaviour is predetermined and biologically driven by the changes related to puberty (Irvine, 1994; Attwood & Smith, 2011). As a result, Canadian SE fails to recognize difference, presenting young people as a monolithic group, illustrating their sexuality as universally shared, static and in need of monitoring or intervention. The reductive nature of in-school sex education minimizes the complexity and multiplicity of young people's experiences and knowledge needs by ignoring the socio-cultural influences that affect sexual beliefs and behaviours (Irvine, 1994; 1995; Attwood & Smith, 2011; Landi, 2017). Participants' reflections show how difference (namely sexuality and gender) is commonly ignored or badly presented in classrooms and highlight opportunities for further research into those differences, as well as the others that this research is unable to speak on (ethnicity, race, religion).

However, it is unclear to what level participants' needs were or weren't met through in-school SE at the time of attendance. While some participants reflected that at the time they didn't need or want any more information beyond what was being presented, others critiqued that school didn't prepare them for future experiences or the realities of their current identities and

therefore has not met their needs. Due to the emphasis placed on safe sex within many SE curricula, most participants felt that their SE adequately prepared them with regards to safe sex, even though many weren't interested in having sex and using the provided information at the time. But they stress that the lack of content related to the social aspects of sexuality (relationships, consent) has impacted their lives to this day, and that a focus on these topics may have better benefitted them at the time, given the lack of desire to be sexually active and the opinion that these topics are foundational to sexual wellness. Interestingly, when considering if SE belongs in schools, some shared the belief that a limited curriculum (much like they experienced) would be better than no SE at all.

5.2 The DIY Experience

Participants commonly critiqued their lack of adequate in-school SE. They stated that they had to turn to the internet to fill the gaps with information that better suited their needs and interests and that was delivered in an engaging and entertaining way. What I call the do-it-yourself experience was regarded as a burden to participants, who thought school should have provided them with the information they needed. This section explores participants' use of the internet from an agentive lens, examining their desire for privacy; highlights the internet's role as a cultural tool young people utilize to expand definitions of 'normal'; and outlines the potential risks associated with the DIY experience.

5.2.1 Privacy Versus Private

Throughout the study participants highlighted their desire and preference for privacy when exploring their sexual knowledge needs and interests. While health topics were regarded as inherently accepted and appropriate to discuss in public (although many participants didn't necessarily want to), topics pertaining to sexual and gender identity, sex mechanics, and pleasure

were deemed less acceptable and appropriate for public discussion. Participants' reflections emphasize how the boundaries between what is public and private are contingent and shifting due to the layers of perceived comfort and safeness with(in) certain sites/sources (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000; Sperling, 2022). These shifts are evident when we consider how participants' willingness and comfort (or lack thereof) with asking questions related to their sexual knowledge needs and interests with teachers, parents, and friends are impacted by each source's own willingness and comfort to answer (perceived or evidenced). As a result, the internet was quickly established as a 'safe' space to explore one's sexual knowledge needs and interests away from potential judgment, embarrassment, and discomfort due to the private nature of its use.

What isn't clear is if this desire for privacy is a personal preference or if it is an internalized subconscious reinforcement of the lack of open conversation available with others. This remains unclear because, despite the desire for privacy, there is also a preference given to internet sources that highlight lived experiences of others, like YouTube, podcasts, forums, and blogs, which requires a public display of sexuality from someone. While this may just be related to the culture of self-presentation that is integral to social media, it also highlights an interesting and fluid relationship between the private and public boundaries that participants defined earlier, perhaps suggesting inconsistency between concerns about privacy and the actual private nature of these needs (Albury & Byron 2018).

5.2.2 The Internet as a Cultural Tool: The Expansion of Normal

The internet is an example of a cultural tool that young people use when in-school sex education doesn't meet their needs (Attwood & Smith, 2011). While variation exists, common motivations for internet use are illustrated throughout participants' experiences. Examples of these motivations are the desire to connect to peers and communities to access information

anonymously, and to access non-heteronormative spaces (Barak & Fisher, 2001; Attwood & Smith, 2011; Robards, et al., 2018). The Internet provides young people (especially young LGBTQIA+ people) with safer spaces to explore topics that were either not brought up in school or were uncomfortable to raise in school. Therefore, the internet essentially provides opportunity to expand the definition of 'normal,' not only through its wealth of information but also its ability to alleviate the potential shame and embarrassment that individuals may have about sexuality (Levine, 2007). For example, participants reported using the internet to explore topics and interests that were potentially outside of the boundaries of acceptable or comfortable topics of conversation with others (friends, family, and educators), such as gender and sexual identity and pleasure. However, it is important to note that the engagement with ideas and discourses surrounding sexual knowledge needs and interests on the internet and social media carries the ability to either reinforce or challenge the hegemonic ideas and discourses (Sira, 2016).

Access to and use of the internet allows young people to resist the power imbalances they experience in schools, as a result of the fact that young people are largely regarded as in need of education and monitoring. The internet allows young people the ability to exercise power in two main ways: by contributing knowledge to collaborative spaces, which carries the potential to influence others' behaviour, opinions, and knowledge; and by gathering knowledge about bodies, sexuality, gender, sexual practices, etc. and applying it to their own bodies or simply leaving with greater knowledge (Levine, 2007; Sirna, 2016) However, when participants regard their use of the internet solely as a backup plan for filling the gaps their school education should have addressed, they minimize the potential and opportunities of this active form of learning and engaging with the world, which dismisses their ability to reclaim power over what they learn and how they learn it.

5.2.3 'Safety' Within the Internet

Despite the reported benefits and opportunities the internet provides through ease of access and privacy, it is important for young people to be aware of the risks associated with its use, as these spaces can turn problematic and toxic, perpetuating isolation, exclusion, and harassment (Robards, et al., 2018). Few participants mentioned risks associated with young people searching for sexual knowledge online (misinformation and exposure to non-age-appropriate content) and even fewer mentioned ways they actively avoided or minimized risk (fact-checking). While some academics (Simon & Daneback, 2013) argue that young people are savvy and capable of determining if a resource is trustworthy or useful, others (Sira, 2016) remind us that media literacy and critically engaging with online content aren't innate skills. By not dismissing the potential harms associated with online sexual behaviour and knowledge seeking, but by broadening our lens to understand why and how young people utilize these sources despite the perceived risk, we acknowledge the value of these activities for young people and the ways they relate to their shared digital, sexual, and social cultures, and we facilitate conversations rather than simply advocating that young people stop using the internet (Albury & Bryon, 2018). When we consider the availability of the internet, as well as the usefulness noted by many participants, interventions aimed at convincing young people to simply stop seeking sexual information on the internet due to the risks – will likely see push back. Furthermore, these interventions ignore the socio-cultural reasonings why young people find the internet to be a safe and effective learning tool.

5.3 Considerations and Implications for Improving School-Based Sex Education

Despite mixed reviews on the ability of formal sex education to meet young people's vast and unique sexual knowledge needs and interests, and the attention drawn to young people's lack

of comfort discussing these needs and interests in a setting shrouded with perceived (and experienced) judgement and embarrassment, participants' recommendations for improving young people's sexual literacy were to make SE a mandatory subject in schools across Canada. Furthermore, they advocated to include 'everything and anything' in school-based SE, and to offer private access to resources and internet-based programs in schools. This section offers various considerations and implications associated with the desire to improve school-based SE, based on participant recommendations and their associated contradictory experiences.

5.3.1 The Empowerment Model: Boundaries and Limitations

While participants called for comprehensive sex education to include all the information students need, their experiences and the emphasis they place on empathy, equitability, and desire to be supplied with more information and resources that better represent their interests and needs are more aligned with an empowerment model of SE. Empowerment models are characterized as those where schools facilitate learning by addressing problems students themselves define and allowing students to actively participate in problem-solving and decision-making (Wight, 1999; Spencer, Maxwell & Aggleton, 2008). Despite the increasing support for empowerment models of sex education, it is important to consider the implications and restrictions these sorts of programs have. This model requires the active and open participation of students in deciding the content and delivery of their SE. In other words, it requires students to have experiences they are willing to discuss, to actively want information or to anticipate the information that might be useful to them in the future (Wight, 1999; Naezer, Rommes & Jansen, 2017). Therefore, the empowerment model's success hinges on young people feeling confident, comfortable, and trusting enough in their environment and relationships to publicly disclose what their perceived needs are. This also means that the empowerment model could potentially remain risk-based and

heteronormative, with LGBTQIA+ students not feeling safe or comfortable disclosing their identity, needs or interests. Therefore, models of sex education in which student input and participation are increasingly advocated, may meet resistance from learners who do not feel comfortable or safe sharing their diverse needs and interests.

5.3.2 Silence and Safe Spaces

Throughout the study participants described their discomfort discussing their sexual knowledge needs and interests in classrooms due to the public nature of the space. Even when given the opportunity to anonymously ask questions through a questions box, participants reiterated their fear that classmates and teachers would know who wrote them. As a result, many participants chose to remain silent in classrooms. While silence can be seen as oppressive in the sense that some identities are silenced or excluded from class content, it is also a way young people can actively resist the impact of stigma, shame, and embarrassment (Fields, 2008; Fielden, Chapman & Cadell, 2011). However, it is important to note that students' silence and discomfort asking questions does not mean the creation of 'safe spaces' and inclusive discussions is unnecessary; increased sex positivity, diversity and inclusion remain important even if students don't feel comfortable asking questions or participating directly. With that in mind, Sperling (2022) notes that safe spaces require deep and intentional thought about what are normatively consider 'safe spaces,' as well as an understanding that there are layers to perceived comfort and safeness, such that certain topics can be discussed freely while others can not. Participants in this study highlight a couple of recommendations to make in-school SE a safer place, including more knowledgeable educators who are willing to have open and frank conversations, and access to inclusive and diverse content in anonymous spaces (like the internet).

5.3.3 Meeting Diverse Needs: The Expansion of Surveillance

While traditional SE can be accused of leaving out LGBTQIA+ people, the very act of rendering these forms of experiences valid and visible also constructs them as sites of monitoring and regulation as the objects of the disciplinary power (Thorogood, 2000). This can allow others the ability to define what part(s) of our identity are valid and visible and in turn, which aspects they deem as the most in need of monitoring and regulation. Participants are both weary of and resistant to this fact, in that they draw attention to the fact that SE others LGBTQIA+, but they also share their fears over the improper representation of their identities (over-sexualization and other stereotypical beliefs) and the private nature of defining one's sexual and gender identity for oneself (fear of outing). No matter the model and its goals, sex education is centrally a site for surveillance, monitoring, and regulation, therefore increasing the diversity of content in sex education would also increase the policing of students and their sexuality (Thorogood, 2000).

5.3.4 Meeting Diverse Needs: The Question of Standardization

When asked if school was the best place for young people to learn about sex, many participants shared the belief that while school has its pros and cons, it is arguably the best site for learning because it can guarantee a similar level of education to all young people across Canada. While this argument is undermined by the current system in which sex education across Canada varies substantially (because it is a provincial and territorial responsibility), it does reflect participants' desire for a level of standardization when it comes to sex education in schools. This idea of sex education as a standardized process challenges the efficacy of an empowerment model, where the diverse needs and interests of the students (at least those comfortable disclosing their needs and interests) within a given school/classroom are prioritized and discussed over the students who are not comfortable disclosing, not currently aware of their

needs and/or simply not present. Not only does diversity pose a challenge to standardized ideas of sex education, but it also highlights that in-school sex education classes may never be sufficient (or capable) of covering all topics young people are interested in (Naezer, et al. 2017). Therefore, while themes participants brought forward (pleasure, consent, healthy relationships) may be offered through formal education, the variety of topics, needs and interests among students make it impossible for schools to cover all of it (Naezer, et al. 2017; Thorogood, 2000). Given the fact that participants' experiences highlight a general sense of discomfort in school when it comes to sex education and the desire to explore their more personal and intimate needs and interests in private, the question remains: is it realistic to expect school-based sex education to meet all these needs, or will it always fall short?

5.3.5 Internet-Driven Sex Education

Discussions of the benefits and opportunities of internet-driven sex education are not new (Barak & Fisher, 2001; Simon & Daneback, 2013; Robards, et al. 2018). The argument has been made that internet-based educational programs can complement standard educational practices, by providing access in remote locations and those with limited SE programming while accounting for a very wide range of learner needs and interests (Barak & Fisher, 2001). The potential benefits of internet-based programs were highlighted by participants, as an effective way schools can provide private and anonymous ways for young people to learn at their own pace. However, it remains unclear who should oversee the creation and maintenance of this material, what material should be included, how it should be delivered (as a complementary resource for students to use if they want, or mandatory learning modules students complete for a grade) and furthermore if this is a program that schools should be responsible for providing.

5.4 The Limits of Retrospection: Future Directions

Due to the retrospective nature of this research, steps were taken throughout the study to limit the potential problems associated with retrospective research. These steps include minimizing the time between events and data collection (by recruiting only young adults as participants) and using open-ended interview and survey questions which were ordered in a way that starts vague and general to provide a contextual framework within which life events could then be situated to aid recall (Dovetail, 2023; Liamputtong, 2009). However, it is impossible to avoid certain problems associated with retrospective research. These include participants' changing beliefs, values, and experiences which influence memories (Dovetail, 2023, Wight, 1999; Naezer, et al. 2017). As a result, this thesis questions/highlights whether participants' accounts of their experiences and recommendations should be taken at face value as representing the sex education they received at the time they received it, or whether they reflect the development of participants' lives and views post-school-based sex education. Some participants were aware of this potential and were forthright with the fact that, at the time of their in-school sex education, they didn't need, want, or desire more information than that which was being presented to them. Others' reflections framed their school-based SE as a failure because it didn't prepare them for needs and interests of the person they currently are.

Either way, it is clear that this research, and other research, which is retrospective in nature, cannot speak to how youth receiving sex education today feel about it, and of course sex education continues to evolve in content and form. But this research does shed light on the complexity of meeting diverse young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests, showing how people need and value different approaches to information and different information at different points in their lives. Furthermore, despite the relative homogeneity of the research

sample, there was considerable evidence of the variation in informational needs and interests, therefore, we could expect that the full range of students receiving sex education, in all their diversity, would express even more widely varying needs and interests. This research highlights the many opportunities for further research on young people's sexual knowledge needs, interests, and gathering behaviours that exist. Given participants' desire for standardization and use of words like basics and basis, future research could explore if there is a consensual understanding among youth of the basic information that they would consider preparatory, beneficial, and sufficient for schools to provide. In association with this, future research can explore young people's internet sexual knowledge-gathering behaviours, exploring their internet habits, sources, and types of information they utilize, while also considering the range of information they access and the extent to which they actively seek out or interact with information outside of their direct needs and interests. Future research could also explore the desired outcomes of internet-based SE programs, what they should look like, and who should create them.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to understand young adults' experiences with and perceptions of the SE they received in Canadian middle/high schools. Understanding participants' experiences, perspectives, and preferences for sexual knowledge gathering was fundamental to exploring how to better support young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests across Canada. The secondary purpose of this study was to contribute to the discipline of anthropology's growing body of knowledge on SE while highlighting the unique and holistic perspective that anthropology brings to SE research. This perspective highlights the importance of exploring socio-cultural attributes of sexuality which much of the current research either ignores or analyses in a reductive, health-focused, and risk-based way.

This exploratory qualitative study was conducted through a reflective lens, shaped by the researcher's personal experiences, underpinned by sex positivity theory, and informed by the theories of social construction and intersectionality. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews or/and open-ended surveys with seventeen young people between the ages of 18 and 20, who received sex education in a Canadian middle/high school or a community-based program. Collected data were analyzed using grounded theory as outlined by Charmaz (2014). Study limitations include the lack of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity and the lack of male-identifying participants. Also, given the potentially sensitive nature of sexual knowledge needs and interests, not everyone may have felt comfortable discussing them with a researcher, therefore leading to oversampling of those who felt comfortable. As a result, this study describes the experiences of a small and rather homogenous group of young adults, white cis-gendered heterosexual women and white LGBTQIA+ women or gender-fluid individuals. Despite the limitations of a homogenous sample, this research highlights the complex and nuanced nature of

sexual knowledge needs and interests, concerning desired information, preference of approach to information (school, family, friends, internet, community-based learning), the time and place they access information, levels of comfort and desire for privacy (regarding content and with(in) certain source/site).

The discipline of anthropology, specifically the anthropology of youth, which acknowledges and interacts with youth cultures, is characterized by its attention to the agency of young people, examining the practices through which culture is produced and how they define, and negotiate their access to full cultural membership – while also admitting the ideological realities of categories and the flexibility of identity (Bucholtz, 2002). Therefore, the discipline of anthropology provides opportunities to highlight and examine the complexity of meeting diverse young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests through various sources and sites. This lens contrasts with research that focuses on formal forms of sex education; such research emphasizes how young people are directly guided into full dominant cultural membership through formal sex ed, obscures the more informal ways in which young people socialize themselves and one another, and ignores the messages they receive from their respective non-dominant cultures and religion. Furthermore, much research on formal forms of sex education expresses an ideal that young people be fully prepared for the myriad of experiences they will encounter throughout their life course. In reality, there is little likelihood that even the most comprehensive and radically progressive sex education could provide every young person with all the information they could possibly want (Thorogood, 2000).

This research contributes to the discipline of anthropology through shedding light on the complexities of young adults' experiences with sex education, fostering a deeper understanding of young people as cultural agents and the nuances and diversity of their unique sexual

knowledge needs and interest, shaped by the many messages they received from their social worlds. This research also opens opportunities for a further comparative approach with other cultures, and for dialogue between minority and dominant cultures in Canada and between adults and youth. It also recommends collaboration between all parties regarding sex education provisions, acknowledging the conservative views of some while offering opportunities for those who may want more information.

The findings of this exploratory study have raised many questions for future anthropological inquiry regarding sex education and young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests. The findings speak to the need to conduct more research on how diverse young people currently receiving SE feel about participating in SE in school, how they access and interpret information online and through media, and what information they specifically seek. It is clear that research like this, which is retrospective, cannot speak to how youth receiving sex education today feel about it, and of course, sex education continues to evolve in content and form. That said, the findings from this research help to inform and alter the approach to sex education to include more ongoing support and resources that young people can access privately and continue to access throughout their life course in response to the various experiences they may have. The findings highlight a variety of recommendations, including the necessity for all genders to be taught about how the female body works, the importance of bringing accredited sex educators into schools to provide lessons, and the need for the creation and implementation of a standardized base curriculum that students could then build off of utilizing outside resources. However, with regards to standardization it is hard to know what would be a good standard, even for the participants in this research who were a relatively homogenous sample; we can assume an even greater variety of needs and interests in a more diverse population. Therefore, while it is

clear that what is currently being taught is not fulfilling the needs of young women and non-binary students, more research is needed to help establish the parameters of a standardized base curriculum that is responsive to a diverse range of identities, needs and interests. It is hoped that the research from this thesis has increased understanding of and stimulated interest in the complex and nuanced nature of youth sexual cultures, which may in turn raise awareness about the utility of an anthropological and social constructionist approach to understanding young people's sexual knowledge needs and interests. While we are left with many questions, it is evident that when it comes to sex education, one size does not fit all.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Poster: Facebook/Email/Newsletter

Recruitment Poster: Social media post

Appendix B

Self-Identifying Demographic Questionnaire

Preamble:
Thank you for your interest in this study exploring young adults and their experiences with sex education!

This questionnaire will be used to get to know you! you do not have to answer any question you are not comfortable answering, simply skip the question or select the 'prefer not to answer' button.

By completing this questionnaire, you consent to the gathering of personally identifiable data. Please note that if you are not chosen to participate in the study, or choose not to continue your participation in the study, your questionnaire will be deleted by November 30th 2021.

If you have any questions, please contact: mychaela.igarik@dal.ca. I look forward to receiving your responses!

Questions:
1. What is your email address?
2. How old are you?
3. What are your pronouns?
4. Are you comfortable participating in English?
5. How would you describe your residency status? [please check all that apply]
   a. Canadian citizen or permanent resident
   b. Immigrant
   c. Refugee
   d. International student
   e. Prefer not to say
6. Did you receive sex education in a Canadian middle or high school or a community-based program (not school-based)?
   a. Middle or high school
   b. Community-based program
   c. Neither
   d. Prefer not to say
7. Where did you receive your sex education? (please specify province(s) or territory)
8. Did you receive sex education in an urban or rural area?
   a. Urban area (city or town)
   b. Rural area
   c. Prefer not to say
9. How would you describe your gender identity?
10. How would you describe your sexual identity?
11. How would you describe your religion, spiritual practices or existential worldview? (Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, etc.):

12. With which racial and ethnic group(s) do you identify? Please specify your race(s) (examples: Asian, European, Black, White, Hispanic or Latino, etc.) and your ethnicity/ethnicities (examples: Canadian, English, French, Korean, Indian, American, Indigenous peoples: Métis, Inuit etc).

13. Do you identify as a person with any disability or impairment? If yes and you feel comfortable, please specify below.

14. Which study participation method would you prefer?
    a. Online interview
    b. Online survey (completed through short essay format)

15. What would you like your pseudonym to be? Please specify below. If you would like the research to assign a pseudonym for you, please leave this question blank.

16. Please use this question to include any additional information that you think identities who you are as a person.

Appendix C

Survey/Interview Questions and prompts

Semi-structure interview and asynchronous survey Questions and Prompts
Questions
- How would you describe your general experience with finding information about sex?
- What are the sources you got most of your sexual knowledge from?
    - Why those sources?
- If you had a question pertaining to your sexual knowledge needs and interest, where would you go or who would you go to?
    - Why?
- What sexual health/sex topics were you most interested in learning about when you were receiving sex education?
    - Why those topics?
- What were the sexual health/ sex topics you were least interested in learning about?
    - Why were you less interested in those topics?
    - Are there any benefits to learning about these topics?
- What do you think should or shouldn't be included in sex education? Why?
- Were there opportunities for you to gather evidence-based sexual information outside of school?
    - If yes, could you describe them and did you make use of them?
    - If no, why not?
    - Would you have liked opportunities to get evidence-based sexual information outside school?
- Have you heard of the term 'Comprehensive' used to describe sex education?
    - If yes, what does comprehensive sex education mean to you?
- In your opinion is school an appropriate place for students to learn about sex?
    - If yes, why?
    - If no, why not?
- In your opinion is school the best place for student to learn about sex?
    - If yes, why?
    - If no, why not?
- Are there other topics or methods of content delivery that you think would have been beneficial to you as a youth?

- Do you feel like your sex education adequately prepared you to take care of yourself and others?

Probing Questions/Questions based off of observations
- Could you use an example to explain what you mean by ____?
- Could you tell me more about ____?
- How do you feel about _____?
- Why do you think that …...?
- How common is …...?

- In your experience …….?