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EXCLUSIVE SCHOOL-BASED SEX EDUCATION:

THE LASTING EFFECTS ON QUEER YOUTH

By

Megan Antoinette Kukwa

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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APPROVED

Dr. Brandon Andrew Robinson
Department of Gender & Sexuality Studies

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair
University Honors

ABSTRACT

School-based sex education is a main source of information youth receive and have access to regarding sex. These curriculums often focus on sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy prevention – framing sex in a negative way rather than something that can be positive and pleasurable. In addition to this fearful framing, these curriculums also fail to address non-heterosexual identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ+) youth. With minimal to no LGBQ+ coverage/representation, schools leave queer and questioning youth without a support system to learn about different sexual identities and sex practices that apply to them. This qualitative study draws from in-depth interviews with Southern Californian queer individuals to recall their experiences with the public school sex education system and explore how its limited (or nonexistent) coverage of queer sexuality affected their participation in and understanding of sex, sexuality, and sexual health. As this study found, participants noted instructor resistance to content outside the hetero curriculum, a need to independently compensate for a lack of identity-relevant information, desires to step up as elders, and a consensus that exhaustive, multiyear programs covering more topics would reap greater benefits. These experiences illuminate ways our educational institutions fall short in their responsibility to create comprehensive/inclusive environments necessary for addressing queer youth and their needs. Even in a liberal state such as California, these curriculums retained repressive and heteronormative values which heavily shape and constrain youth's sexual health, practices, and identities – as well as their participation and attitudes toward them in the long term.

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INTRODUCTION

To date, there are no federal policies in place regarding school-based sex education programs (SBSE) in the United States (Garg and Volerman 2021). As a result, each state is left with the power to designate their own laws and standards regarding sex education curriculums and instruction. While it is mandated in 48 states that there is some sort of sex education in public schools (Garg and Volerman 2021), the lack of national continuity creates allowances for significant variation in curriculum and instruction on a state-to-state basis. Moreover, these fluctuations can extend within counties, cities, and even among classrooms within the same school (Carrion and Jensen 2014) as the state laws dictating the required topics are often vague in nature – leaving a fair amount of autonomy with the school district and/or instructor (Percival and Sharpe 2012).

Factors such as the socio-political environment of the state, the dominant racial groups present, and what religions are prominent in the area shape these variations – from the types of programs implemented to the ways in which they are taught (Currin et al. 2017). Examples of this can be seen in traditionally red states such as Alabama, Arizona, South Carolina, and Utah prohibit teaching homosexuality as normal and acceptable (Percival and Sharpe 2012), in the heteronormative and abstinence-focused societal messages Latinas encounter due to being perceived as hypersexualized pregnancy threats (Schmitz, Robinson, and Tabler 2020), and in the push Christian fundamentalists make towards No Promo Homo laws in their communities which denounce premarital sex, abortion, liberal sex education, and homosexuality as incongruous with the Bible’s teachings (McCarty-Caplan 2013). Even in California, despite state mandates requiring otherwise, curriculums experience discrepancies in the subjects implemented (Constantine, Jerman, and Huang 2007). A frequently reported reason for omission being the

direct fear of community opposition and backlash from some of the aforementioned intersectional factors (Constantine et al. 2007) manifesting in instructors and school boards immediate concerns regarding funding and/or job security (Carrion and Jensen 2014).

A steadfast across programs however is the reinforcement of heteronormative ideals which legitimate sexual activity as solely occurring between cisgender men and women for the purpose of reproduction (Schmitz et al. 2020). These values are supported either actively through erasure and purposeful disregard of LGBTQ+ related content or passively in the form of indirect discrimination such as the use of othering language. A common instance being the linguistic trend among sexuality education textbooks to utilize the inclusive pronoun 'we' when describing heterosexual experiences and shift to the alienating pronoun 'they' when discussing homosexual ones – stigmatizing all things queer: identities, desires, and behaviors (Bay-Cheng 2003). In turn, youth are presented with a narrow conception of sex and sexuality that creates a significant knowledge disparity in the ways queer and trans youth, along with their cisgender straight peers, come to understand themselves and others. Albeit, in spite of the curriculum's shortcomings in properly informing of cis-het youth, the fact remains that their identities are recognized – something that cannot be said for LGBT students. As a space supposedly tasked with educating and arming youth with the knowledge and ability to later function in the world, exclusive school-based sex education programs outcast and fail their queer students (Elia and Eliason 2010).

Although most SBSE curriculums are advertised as neutral with no underlying or implicit agendas, there are clear biases that surface and erect barriers for queer youth seeking information. At its inception, the implementation of sexual education in schools across the United States has been meant to contain and perpetuate a specific conception of sexual contact compatible with white, middle class values – one that it is strictly meant for marriage,

monogamy, and procreation (Elia and Eliason 2010). As an institutionalized power, SBSE programs hold a great deal of authority as the potential acting educational introduction youth receive regarding sex. While it is possible that youth may learn about sex elsewhere (i.e., family, religious institutions, the media), exposure and access to these alternative outlets are not guaranteed to every individual in the way that California's mandated school-based sex education program is. In this way, SBSE may very well be the first or only exposure students have to information regarding sex, sexuality, or sexual health in an educational setting. Consequently, the subjects endorsed or rejected by the curriculums are perceived to be the important topics and values students should internalize – which historically, have been derived from a heterocentric perspective (Gowen and Winges-Yanez 2014). With curriculums specifically targeted towards monogamous, heterosexual relations that conform to conventional gender norms (Bay-Cheng, 2003), anyone not falling into these categories – those identifying as queer, polyamorous, non-binary, and so on – are thusly omitted and/or othered by the curriculum. These targeted curriculums go on to purport ideals such as: penis-vaginal penetration is the only or primary way to engage in sex, women must see their purpose in motherhood, and HIV/AID's are to be conflated with being queer – all of which can form strong associations of shame in relation to sex due to the curriculums delineations of what constitutes deviance versus normality.

With programs actively espousing the dangers of sexual activity and most leaving pleasure all but absent from the curriculum (Connell and Elliott 2009), we are able to see how youth can become alienated within their own programs. By negatively characterizing sex as something to avoid and impressing abstinence as the only completely effective method of STI and pregnancy prevention (Percival and Sharpe 2012), programs constrain youth's ability to critically engage with the material – as questioning or challenging it would be recognized as a

departure from normality. For queer youth in specific, this can be, or manifest into, a distressing experience (GLSEN 2017) as their program excludes and/or dismisses their questions or concerns surrounding protected sex – or identities in general. In this way, the SBSE programs succeed in their initial objective of promoting and perpetuating a distinct hegemonic understandings of sex – conveying to youth what the acceptable types of sexual contacts and sexualities are, as well as the circumstances under which they should occur under (Connell and Elliott 2009). An intolerant environment is thusly created where cis-het youth are reprimanded for being sexual and queer youth are punished for being (Elia and Eliason 2010).

Having established that the types of SBSE programs implemented can vary across regions, one might be inclined to think that liberal states would provide more inclusive and comprehensive curriculums compared to their conservative counterparts. This however this is not the case, for despite California's liberal reputation and fondness for progressive politics, they too retain repressive and heteronormative values in their SBSE curricular guideless. From 2003 to 2015, California implemented the California Comprehensive Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Act which only required districts, "to provide HIV prevention education once in middle school and once in high school. Districts that elected to also provide sexual health education were required to do so in a way that was comprehensive, medically accurate, and age appropriate" (ACLU of California 2016). Notwithstanding the fact that there is no mention of inclusivity or LGBT coverage, a study immediately following the mandate's implementation recorded that 88% of the California public schools sampled were found to be in violation of the mandate in one or more ways and that 48% did not cover all required topics (Constantine et al. 2007) in spite of the minimal requirements outlined. Although the mandate has since been updated to reconcile these pitfalls and create greater accountability within schools, the

curriculum remains taught in combination with othering language (Garg and Volerman 2021) which still indirectly insinuate queer youth being considered the ‘them’ in relation to the cis-hetero, conventionally gender conforming ‘us’. In the end, California does not prove to be an exception due to their liberal reputation as a shared result endures – an exclusive curriculum providing information with no real-life advantages or applicability (Bay-Cheng 2003) that simultaneously conveys a sense of alienation and shame in relation to queerness.

This study thusly examines how the Southern California (SoCal) sexual education system’s limited (or nonexistent) coverage of queer sexuality has affected queer youth’s understanding of sex, sexuality, and sexual health throughout their journey into young adulthood. I employ a constructivist and intersectional analysis to qualitatively examine the experiences of 13 queer individuals and explore how they understand their experiences with school sex education, their knowledge regarding queer sex practices, and how they discuss the ways in which their sexual education experience affected their decisions on engaging in sexual activity. As established prior, school-based sex education programs vary widely across state and regional lines which is why this study will solely focus on SBSE programs from Southern California. SoCal encompasses a fair combination of both conservative and liberal districts which allows this sample region to account for possible violations of the state’s mandates due to SBSE curricula’s known geo-political malleability. Participants will thus relay their experiences with the curriculums offered in the SoCal region.

With either minimal or no coverage and representation, public schools leave queer and questioning youth without a support system to learn about sex practices that apply to their identities. As 1 in 10 students identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in the United States (Garg and Volerman 2021), this lack of coverage alienates, and at times, stigmatizes a large portion of

youth from one of the major information outlets in their lives – which is supposedly meant to inform them on such subjects. The present study, in centering queer youth's voices, elucidates the ways in which our educational institutions fall short in their responsibility to create comprehensive and inclusive environments necessary for addressing queer youth and their needs. For if schools are entrusted with the responsibility of preparing students to live in a democratic society and build strong foundations to carry them throughout their lives (Elia and Eliason 2010), the same standards should apply to sex education – especially as it is part of California's mandatory educational curriculum. Furthermore, we are able to see how, even in a liberal state such as California, these curriculums can retain repressive and heteronormative values which heavily shape and constrain youth's sexual health, practices, and identities – as well as their participation and attitudes toward them in the long term. Understanding that early life experiences carry over to influence adulthood, this study explores if and how youth are uniquely impacted by the isolation and lack of supports caused by an exclusive and/or alarmist educational introduction to sex. I ask: How does such a curriculum set the tone for queer youth's views of sex, sexuality, and sexual health? What, if any, are the lasting effects of the sexual education system's limited (or nonexistent) coverage of queer sexuality? Has it affected queer youth's participation in and understanding of sex, sexuality, and sexual health in their lives? How will queer youth's subjective experiences illuminate what is lacking in SoCal sex education, and how the education can be improved? Are queer individuals able to seek out and find more information relevant to their identities? If so, how?

In analyzing participants' experiences, I posit that school-based sex education programs play a role in fortifying queer youth's long-term resiliency and invigorating their inclinations towards resistance. Using a constructivist perspective to abductively draw out themes, I show

that the short-term negative consequences SBSE programs impart unto participants fuel a shared drive to become self-sufficient through independently developing their sexual agency. The study also reveals a passion for community building which illustrates an understanding among participants that many of the barriers they faced in their youth were as a result of lacking a sense of belonging and/or a trusted authority figure. Ultimately participants emphasize a call to action – seeking to change or dismantle the oppressive structures that made their resilience necessary, while still practicing and promoting a culture of reflexivity and continual growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Exclusionary and/or Hostile Class Climates

Analogous to other states possessing their own legislation outlining the required topics for SBSE programs (Garg and Volerman 2021), California's sexuality education statutes were structured in a way that permitted each community to make their own determinations on what form sex education their particular school system would take on (Percival and Sharpe 2012). As discussed prior, California's previous SBSE mandate (the California Comprehensive Sexual Health and HIV/Aids Prevention Education Act) lacked any language directly mentioning the inclusion of LGBT-specific content or affirmation of sexual minority identities or behaviors – meaning that up until its replacement with the California Healthy Youth Act (CHYA) in 2016, queer youth were left without any clear legal support for learning about their identities in their school-based sex education programs (McCarty-Caplan 2013). In spite of CHYA's updated stipulations, vague language and open-ended guidelines persist within the legislation which permits district, or even instructor-to-instructor, flexibility in what specific content is addressed and how said content is delivered (Carrion and Jensen 2014; Sperling 2021). This enables the

possibility of instructors to (purposely or passively) erect in-class barriers such as an uncomfortable and/or hostile class climate for queer students.

According to a national survey, 56.6% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff (GLSEN 2017) and almost all LGBTQ students (98.5%) heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g., “that’s so gay”) while at school (GLSEN 2017). While perhaps not directly endorsed by the school, these homophobic attitudes nevertheless carry over into the classroom setting and can be clearly seen through the ways instructors handle LGBT-related content while executing SBSE programs. One of the most common and telling situations are instances of anti-LGBTQ remarks or bullying during the course of SBSE programs (Connell and Elliott 2009). In cases of student perpetuated discrimination, the silence or reluctance of school officials to protect gay students and punish perpetrators of harassment shows, at the very least, their tacit acceptance of homophobia (Elia and Eliason 2010; McCarty-Caplan 2013). This demonstrates to queer youth that not only are they free to be the subject of discrimination among their peers (if outed or already out), but that the classroom and school personnel charged with guiding their education are not safe spaces for them (Bay-Cheng 2003; McCarty-Caplan 2013).

Additionally, while instructors may believe themselves to be providing a scientific and/or neutral coverage of the required topics, students may instead be retaining a personal argument shaped by the instructor’s own beliefs and opinions as seen through the language they choose to use and the questions they do/do not answer (Carrion and Jensen 2014). For example, the subtle use of ‘them’ in relation to the cis-hetero, conventionally gender conforming ‘us’ can leave queer youth with a sense of alienation and shame as one is imbued with correctness and the other with deviance and individual transgression (Bay-Cheng 2003). What’s more, when examples of queerness are included they are brief and take on a tokenistic quality (Bay-Cheng 2003; Gowen

and Winges-Yanez 2014). A silence surrounding issues of desire and pleasure implicitly shames youth's private experiences and emotions – further alienating those who feel the positive and gratifying aspects of sexuality and gender identity as disingenuous (Bay-Cheng 2003). Such passive or active resistance on behalf of the curriculum or instructors leaves LGBQ students without a space to feel safe to explore their concerns or questions.

An exclusive school-based sex education is a detriment to all – students and faculty alike, regardless of queer identity – as it endorses a sex ed experience motivated by shame and fear. For when sex and sexuality is approached as an uncomfortable subject and action to be evaded in both discussion and practice by the authority figures in youth's lives – the SBSE curriculum, their instructor, their parents, or their peers – youth erect guarded behavior, inhibiting them from being able to freely discuss or ask questions. Due to these apprehensive attitudes and uncomfortable class climates, school-based sex education programs as a whole lack in providing adequate support or information to students – marginalizing their questions and shaming their interest to learn more (de Heer, Brown, and Cheney 2021). As there has been little research on the long-term impact of the negative school climates and lack of information for LGBTQ individuals as they mature into adulthood (Elia and Eliason 2010), this study investigates if and how these exclusionary SBSE climates and practices carry into adulthood.

Practical Application of Curricula

With SBSE programs targeting a specific cis-hetero conception of sexuality, it is rare for queer youth to walk away from their programs with information applicable to their gender and sexual identities. As the primary method of determining efficacy in comprehensive SBSE programs is its policies correlation with lowering STI/STD transmission percentages and the teen pregnancy rate, focus is lost on whether or not the information being taught is relevant and

practical in youths' daily lives and/or future (Bay-Cheng 2003). For when comprehensive programs are executed without intent to produce understanding, an opportunity is missed to foster a sense of sexual agency and the educational institution fails in their overall aim to arm youth with the knowledge and tools needed to take on the world. Rather than discouraging sexual activity and hoping for the best, if SBSE programs were truly dedicated to health and the preventions of disease and pregnancy, masturbation (independent and/or partnered) would be a featured topic given its low associated health risks (Bay-Cheng 2003). This lesson would not only demonstrate how there are different ways to sexually interact, but also provide an exercise that easily transfers into their long-term or daily-lives. In actuality however, the omission of such methods is deliberate as it is inconsistent with the type of sexuality the program aims to purport – one of purity and vulnerable innocence (Sperling 2021) that can be likened to the core values surrounding virginity, monogamy, marriage, and heterosexuality. Youth are therefore left without as many practical or protected strategies for engaging in feelings of sexual pleasure and desire (Elia and Eliason 2010; de Heer et al. 2021; Sperling 2021) and may be left with the impression that sexual pleasure is a shameful pursuit.

As mentioned prior, during the rare occasions where queerness is directly integrated into the curriculum, it is tokenistic and non-insightful in serving queer youth. Markedly, prominent messages framing sex as pre- and post-marital interactions skip over many youths who do not feel that marriage is a viable option, legal or not. This message creates a potentially damaging denial of sexual exploration for all youth, and ensures that conception of sex taught and retained is irrelevant to the gender and sexual experiences of sexually queer and transgender youth (Elia and Eliason 2010). LGBTQ people are often completely erased from sexual health and other pedagogical materials in the educational realm (Robinson 2016) which is fueled by the common

the perception that the LGBTQ student represents a tiny minority of the secondary school population (Elia and Eliason 2010). Thusly, queer youth in particular are disproportionately left with unanswered questions and resources. To respond to this imbalance, this study solicits for what queer individuals believe would have helped their SBSE be more inclusive and applicable to their identities, as well as how they would go about creating a safe space for all (not just queer youth).

Alternate Avenues of Information

Faced with navigating their adolescence in combination with the discrepancies in their SBSE programs, queer youth have been found to independently research their questions and concerns regarding sexual health more often than their cis-het peers (DeHaan et al. 2013; Manduley et al. 2018). This search of relevant and affirming knowledge has been a historical struggle for LGBT individuals particularly (DeHaan et al. 2013) – one whose torch is carried on through the institutionalization of SBSE programs' discourses that continue to reify and reproduce a specific, hegemonic form of white, middle-class heterosexuality (Elia and Eliason 2010). Without a dependable ally in their SBSE programs to learn about their bodies, sex, sexuality, and sexual health, queer youth turn to alternate avenues of information to find answers and/or help. Due to their status as minors however, options remain limited – some reasons overlapping with those that constrain their curriculums. Champion among these reasons however is their limited access to resources – manifesting in means of transportation/proximity to health centers and internet availability (DeHaan et al. 2013; Gowen and Winges-Yanez 2014; Robinson and Moskowitz 2013; Schmitz et al. 2020; Sperling 2021).

Tangible resources such as health centers/clinics, Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs, or even trusted adults in queer youths lives can be daunting to approach as physically interacting

with these outlets creates fear of broken privacy in the form of questioning (e.g. “why were you there?) and the potential of being identified/outed as LGBTQ (Elia and Eliason 2010). Perceiving physical spaces/resources as too public, queer youth pursue digital assistance through the internet. Since SBSE programs have left such an intense legacy of erasure and distrust in marginalized communities, queer folk have been compelled to create their own by-and-for sex education initiatives – many of which now incorporate social media (Manduley et al. 2018).The public availability and searchability of videos, articles, and stories online, combined with options for personal interaction with content creators becomes a key tool for learning and community building – helping combat or ease feeling of shame and isolation in queer individuals while still providing the option for anonymity (Manduley et al. 2018). Additionally, with the internet, queer youth can access sexual scripts outside what is directly available/modeled to them in their SBSE programs, religion, location, and peer/familial structures or the media they consume (de Heer et al. 2021). Such factors (and the intersections between them) can create barriers that limit queer youth understanding of the types of sexual and gender identities that exist (Bay-Cheng 2003; de Heer et al. 2021). Despite these benefits however, online researching can be a detrimental process if youth lack proper media and digital literacy to help sort between unreliable or prejudiced sources meant to develop their health literacy (DeHaan et al. 2013; Manduley et al. 2018). Even so, this is usually the preferred alternative as seeking assistance from a physical person or place can be limited due to age, accessibility to transportation, and overall concern for privacy.

Under the confluence all these social, cognitive, and structural factors, queer youth may be overwhelmed with the labor of learning about and better understanding sex, sexuality, and sexual health as it applies to them. This study thusly follows-up with queer individuals to

understand how they took on this burden in their youth – the avenues they used, if their supplemental resources contributed to their growth, and if they attribute any blame for their lack of knowledge to their SBSE program experience.

METHODS

The findings presented in this study are derived primarily from the qualitative data produced from semi-structured interviews investigating queer individuals' SoCal sex ed experiences. Qualitative research methods are apt to capture the nuances of participants lived experiences in great detail (de Heer et al. 2021) and allot for more distinctive understandings of how participants make sense of their subjective experiences and the meanings they assign to them (Gowen and Winges-Yanez 2014). More specifically, semi-structured interview formats elicit narratives from participants (Currin et al. 2017) which concurrently capture youth's experiences and any specific issues and/or needs (Robinson 2018).

Eligibility required participants to self-identify as queer or non-heterosexual, be 18 years of age or older, proficient in English, and have had attended public school in Southern California during their sex education experience. Participants from the study (N = 13) were recruited using a non-probability method of convenience sampling, augmented by snowball sampling. Convenience, or volunteer sampling, allowed for potential participants to express interest in and sign up for the research study on their own accord (Gill 2020) while snowball, or chain sampling, enabled current or potential participants to recommend/refer other persons who might also be willing to participate in the study (Gill 2020). Moreover, these two types of sampling are regarded as the best methods to recruit for qualitative research with socially stigmatized populations, such as queer individuals, as the focus of said research tends to center around the population's marginalized status (Schmitz, Tyler, and Robinson 2019). Moreover, making

participation voluntary creates an opportunity for the marginalized population to contribute to/participate in research without any pressure from the researcher (Schmitz et al. 2019). I recruited participants by posting information about the study on personal social media outlets as well as by dispersing flyers around the University of California, Riverside through the campus' LGBT Resource Center, queer-affiliated clubs, and emails sent to various university professors. In addition, participants were provided with a digital copy of the recruitment flyer to post or share through their social networks. As my physical and digital footprint resides largely in the Inland Empire and the persons/organizations messaged were based at UCR, convenience and snowball sampling provided a high likelihood that interested parties would also be people from the SoCal area.

The project was advertised as, "a research study about how middle and high school-based sex education programs can have lasting effects on queer youth." Specifically, the flyer outlined the study's purpose and criteria – allowing those interested to scan a QR-code which led to a brief screening survey asking about their gender identity, sexual identity, age, whether they attended a public school during their sex education experience, and the city their school was in. Although none of the information obtained through the eligibility determination process was kept and used as study data, these answers determined if respondents qualified to be in the study and notified me that they were interested in participating. In total, 30 individuals filled out the screening survey, of which 26 (86.7%) met the study's criteria. Of those 26 eligible respondents, 13 (50%) followed through to become participants that scheduled and engaged in an interview.

With COVID-19 sweeping nations, the world was officially declared to be in a global pandemic in March 2020 – one that, at present, has still yet to conclude two years later. As a result of these unforeseen circumstances, in-person data collection has been complicated by the

constraints of social distancing and the prioritization of participants' and researchers' safety (Roberts, Pavlakis, and Richards 2021). Although face-to-face interviewing is a strong methodological approach (Robinson 2018) and has historically been considered the 'gold standard' in qualitative research (Roberts et al. 2021), this study adapted an entirely digital approximate to comply with changing federal and state guidelines that limited in-person contact, to alleviate any possible safety concerns, and to mitigate the potential for transmissions. To mirror the main elements of face-to-face interviews most closely, the video-conferencing software Zoom was adapted in this study – allowing for synchronous exchanges of audio and video between interviewer and participant. With this digital adjustment came further benefits such as the fact that it promoted the opportunity for respondents that no longer resided in the SoCal area to participate without the restriction of needing to attend a specific physical space. Additionally, as the study focused on a vulnerable population, the option of greater privacy was afforded to participants as they possessed the ability to increase their anonymity by choosing whether or not to use their video feeds (Tungohan and Catungal 2022).

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, I conducted all 13 interviews in March 2022. All eligible respondents were emailed the study's informed consent form, information on how to how to schedule an interview, and further instructions regarding how their privacy would be safeguarded during the interview. An audio recording of each interview was mandatory for participation, and as Zoom was the video conference platform utilized to conduct the interviews, safeguards specific to this system were implemented. These precautions included: all interviews taking place via a password protected session, disabling the 'join before host' option, enabling a waiting room to control entrance into the meeting, sending individualized meeting links and information directly to participants (opposed to posting them online), and programing each

meeting to solely record an audio file rather than a video file (UCR 2020). Additionally, participants were asked to change their screen names (e.g., 'interviewee') prior to beginning the interview and to turn-off their cameras to protect their confidentiality. As an extra precaution however, I defaulted all entering users to be muted with their cameras off in the settings (Naftzger 2017).

Each participant engaged in a single semi-structured interview, lasting up to 1 hour, answering questions about their personal experiences with the sex education program they went through at their public school and their feelings surrounding sex and sexual health in relation to their sexual identity. Prior to the start of each interview, study procedures were explained to participants and a verbal recording of informed consent was obtained. As not all participants may have been 'out,' written consent created potential for harm as it could have left a documented trace of the participant's identity. Recorded verbal consent was therefore best to maintain the confidentiality of the research participants. There were no forms of compensation or reimbursement offered to the study's participants in exchange for their time. All respondents were asked the same series of open-ended questions surrounding four major areas of their sex ed experience: coverage of identities, competency in sex and sexual health, consequences of the program, and critiques of the curriculums. Examples of questions include: "How did this [lack of] discussion of identities affect your view of your own, or other queer identities at the time?"; "Were there any examples used to demonstrate non-hetero sex or sexual health? If so, tell me about them."; "How did the program affect your view of sex and your sexual identity at the time? Can you describe your view of your identity and sex now?"; and "What topics do you think should be included in future sex ed programs that would help LGBQ+ youth the most?"

Interviews were mainly guided by the respondents themselves as the research was meant to investigate how participants understood their sexuality, sexual practices, and sexual health as queer youth who had undergone sex education programs from public schools in Southern California (Robinson 2018). To most accurately capture their experiences and examine themes that emerged from their narratives, I only spoke to ask questions from the interview guide and probe for further explanation – asking facilitating questions which partially allowed participants to determine the pace of the interview (Schmitz et al. 2020). In addition, to promote a more comfortable and personal setting, I conducted each interview with my camera on and encouraged participants to do the same if they felt comfortable. I reassured them that no video recording would be produced, and this decision was a personal choice they could opt for or out of. However, I did explain that being able to see one another would help create rapport which could produce a more interactive and meaningful interview experience (Robinson 2018).

I later transcribed all interviews verbatim, treating the process as a preliminary inductive analysis of emerging themes and focuses (Charmaz 2014). I wrote analytical notes about the actions and feelings occurring within my data alongside the transcription process as I sought to illuminate tacit meanings within my participants' experiential accounts. All final themes emerged abductively from the data using a constructivist perspective to emphasize the participants' understandings of their lived realities and the meanings they attached to their experiences (Charmaz 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Pseudonyms were used to ensure respondent confidentiality.

All participants interviewed were between 20 to 24 years old with an average age of 22. As no examples of labels were provided to participants throughout the interviews, participants are described how they identified themselves so as not to impose identity labels upon them. Out

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics. (N=13)

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Sexual Identity	Gender Identity	Age	Race/Ethnicity
Jackie	she/her/they	Bisexual	Woman	22	Hispanic/Latinx
Sage	they/she/he	Queer	Trans-feminine nonbinary	21	White, Hispanic/Latinx
Ariel	any pronouns	Pansexual	Questioning	22	White, Hispanic/Latinx
Tony	him/they	Pansexual	Nonbinary	24	Hispanic/Latinx
Fallon	she/they	Pansexual	Trans Woman	24	Multiracial
Christine	she/her	Bisexual	Woman	22	Hispanic/Latinx
Kourtney	she/they	Bisexual	Woman	20	Hispanic/Latinx
Adam	he/him	Gay	Man	24	Hispanic/Latinx
Sarai	they/them	Queer	Genderqueer/ Nonbinary	22	Filipino
Vanessa	she/they	Bisexual	Woman	21	Hispanic/Latinx
Leilani	she/her	Biromantic asexual	Woman	20	White, non-Hispanic/Latinx
Drew	she/her/they/ them	Pansexual	Questioning	21	Hispanic/Latinx
Jess	she/they/her	Queer	Genderqueer	23	Filipino

Note. All characteristics reflect participants' self-identification in response to open-ended interview questions.

of these 13 participants seven (53.8%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx, two (15.4%) identified as White, Hispanic/Latinx, one (7.7%) identified as White, non-Hispanic/Latinx, two (15.4%) identified as Filipino, and one (7.7%) identified as multiracial. Regarding sexual orientation, four (30.8%) identified as bisexual, 4 (30.8%) identified as pansexual, three (23.1%) identified as queer, one (7.7%) identified as gay, and one (7.7%) identified as biromantic asexual. Concerning gender identity, five (38.5%) identified as women, three (7.7%) identified as

genderqueer/nonbinary, two (15.4%) identified as questioning, one (7.7%) identified as a trans woman, one (7.7%) identified as trans feminine nonbinary, and one (7.7%) identified as a man.

Findings

Four primary themes emerged capturing queer individuals' California SBSE experiences and how maneuvering their exclusionary programs took shape in their adult lives: *managing sex, sexual health, and identity*; *practicing humane forms of self-growth*; *engaging in community building*; and *advocating for comprehensive measures/spaces*. These themes denote consistency in how queer youth channel their negative sex education experiences into growing moments that ultimately contribute to fortifying their long-term resistance and resiliency. Across all interviews, participants described their SBSE experience as heteronormative, inadequate, and requiring improvement in multiple areas such as subject coverage, instructor execution, and overall structure of the program. In a handful of cases, participants directly attributed their limited participation in sex/sexual interactions to the fear-based discourses propagated and impressed on them by their SBSE programs. Certain participants continue to actively resist negative discourses correlating shame and queerness. More than half of the participants strongly emphasized an importance in strengthening support systems within the queer community by stepping up as elders. Relatedly, all participants called for a culture of reflexivity in future SBSE programs – aiming to build safe spaces where youth are comfortable to actively engage with their education.

Managing Sex, Sexual Health, and Identity

All participants noted a predominant concern surrounding STIs/STDs which, in turn, informed their short-term perceptions of and decisions surrounding sex and sexual health during their adolescence. As 11 out of the 13 participants' programs fulfilled the California state

mandate of discussing HIV prevention and other various STIs/STDs, the general impression left was, as Christine put it, “if you do it – if you have sex, you will die”. A 22 year-old bisexual woman, Christine’s case proved representative of the other 10 participants’ experiences as the main route advertised by their programs for guaranteeing sexual health was that of abstinence. In her interview she went on to explain her teacher’s argument that “the biggest way to ensure health is to just not do it, and then you'll be fine.” Sharing this sentiment, Jess, a 23 year-old genderqueer queer individual, recalled, “I felt like the only way to ensure protection was abstinence for me. I was just like, ‘Okay, if I want to feel protected, I will just not go down this route’.”

In addition to this abstinence-centered health approach, programs also impressed a fear of pregnancy among participants with vaginas – what it could do to their body, the responsibilities it came with, and the stigmas surrounding unmarried women who became pregnant. While almost all participants said that condoms were discussed as a means of defense against both outcomes, they also recalled instructors emphasizing that “condoms don’t always work” and therefore they cannot guarantee one’s protection. Using infections, diseases, and pregnancy as a deterrent, the curriculum appeared successful in its aims of disheartening curiosity and participation in sex as Christine and other participants reported being too scared of risking potential pregnancy or transmissions to feel comfortable enough to engage in sexual activity. In particular, Jackie, a 22 year-old bisexual woman, recalled feeling extremely distressed by these consequences, thinking about how, “It scared the shit out of me. So I was like, ‘Oh hell no. I am *never* going to have sex, like that is the last thing I'll do.’” Taught that sex was no more than a form of procreation involving penile-vaginal penetration, most participants reported acting in accordance with their teachers’ warnings and avoided putting themselves in situations that had

the potential to become sexual – believing that any possibility for STD contraction and pregnancy was already too much of a risk to their sexual health. Kourtney, a 20 year-old bisexual woman, attested to the fact that, "it definitely made me a little bit scared to have sex, for sure… I just assumed that if I had sex once then I would just get pregnant because of that one time, you know." Similarly, Christine echoed this sentiment, paraphrasing how she interpreted her curriculum's coverage of STDs:

> It was a lot of scaring 7th graders about, 'Hey, if you have sex unprotected, you can catch *all* of these STDs. Like oh, this one is bad, and this one – you can really die from this one. And this one, you have it for the rest of your life.' That was really scary to hear at 7th grade – which I don't even know how old I was, like 11 or something? I don't know, but that was such a crazy thing, and I think because of that I was really put off by [sex].

In these conversations we are able to see a strong and direct connection between participants' initial level of sexual involvement and the fear-based messages SBSE programs used when discussing sexual health, and by proxy sex. These interactions also relay the amount of trust participants held in their educational institutions and teachers – Jess recalling how, "obviously you're a kid and there are adults telling you these things. And you have to basically trust adults".

These effects were short lived however as most participants reported later engaging in sexual interactions only a few years after their program's conclusion. In young adulthood, participants experienced a shift in their conceptions of sex and sexual health – many of which followed the participants' debunking of the SBSE understanding that "male and female sex [penetrative penile-vaginal sex] is the only sex that exists". Many participants came to learn about masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, and more through alternate information outlets – all of which validated their sense of identity and relieved feelings of abnormality. As Sage explained,

embracing sex meant coming to realize that “sex is a lot more than just a monogamist, missionary, in the dark, heterosexual interaction.” Even more, as a survivor of conversion therapy and sexual violence, Sage discussed how reframing and relearning what sex is, and what it can be, allowed them to “have pleasure again. I could own my body, but also, I could heal and receive pleasure. …I can reclaim this power that was once taken from me.” Other participants shared this sentiment of empowerment as well as the process of redefining sex in a way that made sense to them. Answers ranged from Sage’s view of “sex as power,” to Tony’s idea of “a fun thing,” to Kourtney’s belief that it is an “intimate connection that people have with one another.” The consensus being that, although each of them are still learning, they are no longer afraid of sex in the way they were as youth. In being able to finally explore sex without fear of reprimand or alienation, participants placed an importance on being able to contextualize sex in a way that was compatible with their own lives. It is here where one can start to see liberated sexual agency emerge as a vital contributor to participants’ current management of sex, sexual health, and identity.

Working in combination with this sex-positive attitude is participants’ reevaluation of the sexual health discourses they were taught as youth. Participants noted that their programs’ presentation of STDs/STIs was not lost on them over the years, but rather than allowing fear to dictate their sex lives, they chose to utilize several lines of protection – oftentimes in combination. Sarai exemplified this when discussing how “I realized that testing is very, very important, especially if you're with multiple partners – or even just one partner. It's always, always important to get tested. And to have those meaningful conversations with [your partners]… You have to have those conversations about if you have gotten tested, how many people you are with, etc.” Similar discussions surrounding partner history, regular testing, and

contraceptives (i.e., condoms, dental dams, etc.) were shared among participants – Jess even noting the importance of “having to understand each other's level of understanding [regarding sex practices]”. Notably, all practical methods of protection emphasized by participants placed capability and autonomy with the individual and their partner. In this way we see the value participants tacitly assign to qualities such as transparency and open-mindedness – acknowledging that while these conversations may create vulnerability, they are something to be encouraged rather than embarrassed by. Additionally, these means did not stigmatize STDs/STIs. Sage put it most saliently in his call for the destigmatization of “[STDs/STIs] being dirty… I see it as COVID in a way – that sometimes you get it and you don't even know you have it, and you're passing it along”. Sharing this sentiment of upkeeping one’s well-being, Ariel called for “the normalization of STD testing – that it's not just for AIDs or HIV. It's not just something that you're supposed to do if you feel like something is wrong. It should just be normalized – a normal health checkup.” In addition to Ariel and Sage, Tony, Adam, and Sarai also reported normalizing regular testing within their lives, demonstrating an agreement between certain participants that shame and other negative associations should be removed from STDs/STIs as they do not reflect deficits of character and/or judgement – they just happen sometimes.

In terms of identity, all participants reported feeling more secure and validated as compared to when they experienced their SBSE program. When asking participants what contributed most to this change, every participant touched on the moment of realization that they were not alone in their questions and feelings. Fallon, a 24 year-old pansexual trans woman, directly tied her confidence in her identity to the fact that, “I know many other people like me exist. And there is this community in that”. Fallon’s quote exemplifies community as a source of reassurance – a comfort that you do in fact belong to a group (even if you have not yet

interreacted with it before) – something that makes all the difference in one's development. Jess adds to this idea of pushing past prior feelings of loneliness and goes on to describe her current view of her identity:

> I feel very powerful in who I am. And like, I'm understanding that there isn't really a box to who you are – it's just society putting everybody in a box. And that there's so many different facets of who we are – I feel like it's a spectrum. And understanding that now is so helpful to know that there is no right or wrong [way of being].

All other participants also shared this feeling of empowerment – "confidence", "openness", and "comfortability" being the most common words participants associated with their current view of their identities. Kourtney even reported "I used to identify as pansexual before, but now identify as bi" as she now felt informed and comfortable enough to claim an identity that more accurately reflects her feelings and self-perception. Adam, a 24 year-old gay man, attributes his current openness to the realization that, "When you get older, you see that the world is much bigger than high school. The world is much bigger than your classes, and there's a lot of people, and there's a lot of resources out there – now, you know, you just gotta go find them. So I'm very much more comfortable to talk about sex and my identity now – now that I'm older and out of the high school bubble." Without the constraints of peers, teachers, and the curriculum constantly surveilling and reinforcing cis-heteronormativity, a positive correlation is seen between participants comfortability in their identities and the distance (years or miles) gained from their oppressive environments.

In spite of this overall greater comfortability surrounding identity, some participants with vaginas indicated that they still struggle with self-acceptance in relation to their sexual identities. In these cases, greater amounts of uncertainty surrounded handling sexual interactions and health

when involving partners with vaginas. Ariel, a 22 year-old genderqueer pansexual, recognized that, “my lack of knowledge has kind of made me shy in pursuing other people besides cis-men… [It] just makes me feel like – not that I'm not good enough, but it's like, this is so new to me. And these people are already experienced. So, what if they don't want somebody that is new to all of this because they think that I'm just questioning myself?” In this way we see how Ariel associates her identity’s validity to their knowledgebase surrounding sexual interactions with other persons with vaginas. Moreover, the same participants that share these reservations with Ariel also report difficulties feeling sexually protected with any partner regardless of genitalia – whether that is not being fully informed on the types of birth control or lacking an understanding of preventative measures. Christine admits that, especially in relation to sexually engaging with other women, “honestly sometimes I still kind of am lost and confused and have questions”. In these cases, participants understood they possessed the means for learning the appropriate information but explained they had yet to do so as they do not yet feel ready to leave their comfort zone (the types of partners they are comfortable interacting with).

Overall, these experiences corroborate and expand upon prior findings that while school-based sex education did have a direct and significant impact on participants’ management of sex, sexual health, and identity during their youth (Elia and Eliason 2010), the effects were dampened as they grew older and received greater access and exposure to resources and others within the queer community. In this way we see how participants are able to recover from and navigate the harmful excluding messages and information barriers their SBSE programs extended. Moreover, we see the ways in which participants actively resist against them – embracing fluidity in their identities and perceptions of sex, as well as rejecting stigmatizing rhetoric surrounding STDs/STIs and testing.

Practicing Humane Forms of Self-Growth

As seen above, in describing their current views of themselves, participants demonstrated a trend of positive and forgiving language, using reflexivity while looking back on their adolescent experiences to remind themselves that they were not properly equipped to handle the traumas inflicted upon them. In accordance, I categorize these interactions as humane forms of self-growth as the coping methods presented demonstrate an intent of building compassion and benevolence toward oneself. For most participants trauma manifested in their past, or ongoing, battles of combating feelings of shame surrounding their identity – whether as result of the program or other intersectional factors such as religion and/or family upbringing. Vanessa, a 21 year-old bisexual woman, disclosed that she was currently in therapy to help sort out "my mental health… and what I had gone through in high school regarding my gender identity". In taking the action to seek out professional help, Vanessa demonstrates a dedicated effort toward affirming her identity in a manner conducive to her growth. Rather than allowing her negative high school experiences to rule her emotions, Vanessa engages with resources deliberately meant to aid in maneuvering through her oppression. Similarly, Fallon also reported a drive to "be better to myself as well. And to sort of forgive myself for those years" as a result of trying to force herself into an identity she was not comfortable with. In these cases, we see participants' resilience as they take lessons learned from their past and give them purpose in their journey toward self-betterment. This utilization of social support once again highlights agency as a critical factor in the development of participants' gender and sexual identity trajectories. In the same breath however, we also see the burdens and extra labor participants take on in working to heal themselves from their encounters with structural oppression.

Further underscoring this process was the realization across all participants that their identities are not tied to morality. Sarai, a 22 year-old nonbinary queer participant noted: “In high school, I thought that [being gay] was something to be ashamed of, so I didn't really look further into it. I was like, ‘If I do it, then no one can know. And also, I can never talk about this with anybody cause it's a very shameful and wrong thing. It wasn't taught to us, so I shouldn't be doing it’.” Sarai’s experience in the closet encapsulates how ideas of deviancy are often attached to queer youths understanding of themselves. However, once this notion was eventually dispelled, participants indicated a large weight being lifted from their shoulders – no longer feeling constrained to abide by someone else’s principles of right and wrong. As Sarai put it, “I finally understood that [identity] is … a form of self-expression, and it's something that you can control… within yourself and [is] not somebody else’s to impose on you.” Choosing to be kinder to themselves therefore took shape in limiting feelings of self-reproach relating to their past selves’ decisions and choosing to engage with language that did not further perpetuate their prior feelings of shame. Access to therapy and other such resources is not guaranteed however, as Vanessa acknowledges:

> “I got lucky that [my college] has that diversity and has those resources that I needed. But also, you know, the friends that I've made and the relationships that I've come across. I'm very thankful for that, and I'm very thankful that now I can feel just a little bit more comfortable.”

In these experiences we can see that accessing supportive spaces and resources can be tied to privilege (Robinson and Schmitz 2021) – whether that is in the types of institutions leveraged, what mental health resources are made freely available, or the amount coverage offered for such services under health insurance. In any case, oppression is not only structurally inflicted upon

participants, but sustained through various institutions that make the burden of growth heavier and a more difficult undertaking.

Employing the tools at their disposal, participants demonstrated labor towards counteracting the harmful discourses presented to them in their youth by engaging in discussions that instead center self-growth and acceptance. This understanding reflects participants ability to contextualize their difficulties within the larger heterosexist and cissexist society and in turn, not blame hardships on themselves (Robinson and Schmitz 2021). Once again, we see participants' resilience but should remain cognizant of the oppressive structures and mechanisms that necessitated it. Bringing attention to the challenges participants faced, we are presented with the opportunity to critique the social structures that fail queer youth. With this perspective we can learn how to better, and more proactively, serve queer youth in the future – recognizing their resilience while serving as collaborators, accomplices, and supporters in their resistance.

Engaging in Community Building

To facilitate their own learning as well as others', participants overwhelming noted a desire to become elders in the queer community – extending the tools and knowledge they discovered to younger, future generations. Apart from Ariel, all participants noted lacking an older queer mentor in their lives – either while growing up or even still presently. Christine shares:

> I didn't have like an older person to guide me through those emotions. [The program] just kind of shot information at me and then they're like, 'Okay, you figure it out. We told you that you shouldn't be doing this, and you shouldn't be doing that.' …If anything, it influenced me to learn more myself and then to try and be that older person to, hopefully in the future, guide someone else – cause I didn't, and I still don't have that. I didn't have

> that then; I don't have that now. I'm just doing everything on my own cause there isn't someone older than me who is bisexual who can share their learned experiences

By stepping into the role participants reported wishing for as kids, a tacit understanding was formed that the many barriers they faced in their youth was connected to the lack of a trusted authority figure. Most saliently, Fallon noted how many people died during the AIDs epidemic that would have now been elders, and because of that, "advocating for the young LGBT is important. And making ourselves more available to them is something that is important. You know, saying 'We've been through what you're going through now and we're here for you to help you through it'." Having come to a period of self-acceptance in their lives themselves, participants are able to extend queer youth a hand in gaining accessibility to resources and offer open-ended dialogues regarding queerness. This enthusiasm for community building is sustained when interacting with and seeing youth openly express themselves. As seen through Sarai's encounter:

> I remember the other day at work – cause I'm a math tutor – this kid, he goes, 'When I grow up, I think I'm gonna change my gender'. And I was like, 'Oh, why do you say that?' And he's like, 'Cause I don't think that I want to be a boy forever'. And he just said it so openly. And I was like, 'Oh, cool. That's pretty cool'. And other kids didn't really mind it… I just find that those conversations make me so happy, cause I'm like, 'I wish I could've had that as a kid'. But I'm glad that it's happening now, and the conversation is more open now cause I can only imagine how much more access kids and younger people are going to be getting.

In encouraging open and safe spaces among youth, participants hope that kids will acknowledge the empathy imparted unto them and carry it with them throughout life – applying it not only to themselves, but to others as well.

Recalling middle and high school as a time when homophobia was prominent among peers and teachers, almost all participants reported being closeted until their last year of high school or later. Drew, a 21 year-old questioning pansexual, called back to her SBSE experience with "people who weren't very nice to me and loved to talk about my sexual identity. It was just really weird. So obviously like, I didn't feel comfortable talking and asking questions in that class for that reason". Lacking a safe space to explore their identity, Drew's ability to ask for help was directly constrained by a hostile class environment which inevitably suppressed her intuition to seek out answers. Echoing a similar experience, Ariel was also constrained by their peers as she remembers, "I was really close to coming out as bisexual until… a classmate was saying, 'Yeah girls are just bisexual nowadays cause it's a trend'. So I was like, 'Yeeaaahhh, I'm not coming out'." By stepping into the role of elder, participants attempt to more actively contribute to creating understanding and inclusive spaces within themselves in the hope of sparing younger generations instances such as these where they felt restrained in their identity expression. What's more, if done collectively, a queer and trans support complex could be established (Robinson 2020) which would support young people as well as provide new elders with the greater sense of community they lacked growing up.

Moreover, by choosing to participate in this study participants consistently cited the importance of supporting critical queer work and each other (Schmitz, Tyler, and Robinson 2019) – especially in an academic context such as this one. At the end of our interview, Jess came to realize that "the more this is talked about, the more this is done, the less people have to

go through what I went through. It makes me sad, but also makes me very excited to see that there may be potential changes and I get to be a part of that". While participants like Jess and Fallon volunteered due to specific grievances they held with their sex education experience, others saw the call for community and were intrigued, but held no prior thoughts – Leilani expressing "I just wanted to help out.". Regardless of their motivations, all participants relayed the importance they associated with contributing to the LGBT community and any work calling attention to queer needs. Notably, almost every participant thanked me for the work I was doing and expressed its importance to them and the queer community. Kourtney exclaiming, "Since I couldn't be a part of the team, might as well be an interviewee, you know. Like I think it's really fucking cool that you're doing this. Like this really important work, at least for me personally."

Advocating for Comprehensive Measures/Spaces

Working in combination with community building, participants also expressed a passion for advocacy. In looking back on their SBSE experiences, participants recommendations for future sex ed programs revolved around three major critiques: placing greater trust in youth, requiring instructors specifically trained to teach sex ed, and creating more comprehensive multi-year programs. In regard to the first prong, many participants recalled instructor resistance as a major barrier that stifled a healthy and structured development of their agency. In particular, Jess looked back on an experience full of questions:

> 'Is it just cause I'm a kid and I have to wait until I'm older to really understand why sex is this way? And why it's taught this way?' Because obviously, you're a kid and there are adults telling you these things and you have to basically trust adults. So I just felt like [what I was feeling] was just going to go away. That because no one was really talking about it, that means it's not really important and not really relevant.

In this experience, Jess is taught to ignore their intuition and doubt her emotions. For this reason, most participants called to place power with youth in the future – centering the curriculum around a more trusting relationship between the student and their education. Such policies would promote an active student role in constructing youth's own sexuality educations, thereby emphasizing agency as an important component of sexual learning (Connell and Elliott 2009) and echoing Jess' call to "give in to whatever you're feeling [because] I think that's so important as a kid". In this format, youth are provided the resources and taught the necessary skills to explore (independently or in a group setting) without fear of retaining misinformation or feeling alienated for their questions.

As for requiring specialized instructors, eight of the 13 participants reported their SBSE experience being significantly impacted by its instructor's positionality. Kourtney recounts how her instructor "was really awkward about it… Cause she was also our English teacher, so it was kind of like, 'Oh… I don't necessarily want my English teacher knowing [that about me], or like teaching me about this'." Echoing Drew and Ariel's experiences of feeling restricted in their questions, Kourtney was also dissuaded due to receiving instruction from a teacher they did not feel comfortable being vulnerable around. Similarly, Fallon shared that her teacher for the course, "exclaim[ed] at one point that they were like a PE teacher normally. The entire time they taught this class, they seemed very uncomfortable teaching it. I think because of that, everyone else was also uncomfortable being taught because they did not seem like they wanted to be there". In all of these cases we see youth receiving an introduction to sex from instructors underqualified to teach, let alone address participants concerns – in turn hindering participants gender and sexuality journeys throughout their school career. By requiring specialized speakers

or instructor trainings in the future, participants believe a more welcoming environment can be developed where student can comfortably ask questions and engage with their sex education.

Lastly, in advocating for comprehensive multi-year programs, participants hope to see greater coverage of (including but not limited to): consent, proper usage and care of sex toys, the various gender and sexual identities, support lines for survivors, and how to become a true ally. Regarding consent, Sarai and Jess called back to the fact that they had not learned about it until college – Jess explaining that they had to learn, "how that looks like for different people. And like, how it's so important, no matter what the situation is". In particular, the idea of being and creating allies was targeted the most among participants. Jackie stressed the importance of "mak[ing] sure middle school kids feel like an ally to like the LGBT community and not just grow up not acknowledging them." On the other hand, Sage offered a more pointed opinion and critiqued current programs that "claim that, 'Oh, we have an inclusive space. I'm an LGBT ally', and somehow [they believe] that absolves them from any LGBT violence that they can perpetuate", while Vanessa shared this sentiment and went on to explain that "you can't keep saying that you're an ally if you're just going to keep perpetuating that heteronormative mentality". This active engagement in modifying what it means to be an ally emulates the connection between resistance and participant's experiences with resiliency. In this way, future allies will be less prone to perpetuate harm among their queer peers and more capable of supporting them. Through this question of reimagining their sex education, participants depicted an expansive curriculum that integrated queerness early on and consistently persisted into their high school careers – normalizing it socially and educationally. This allows for greater consolidation of information and does not leave youth destitute, feeling as Jess did when she questioned, "Am I just going to carry that [limited] 7th grade conversation with me and not have

anything else the rest of my life?" In their collective experiences, these are the topics mentioned most that participants also felt to be the most practical in daily life and onward.

Furthermore, participants' advocacy demonstrates a collective determination in holding our institutions accountable – specifically the education institution in its task of informing future generations with the knowledge to succeed in the world (Elia and Eliason 2010). As Jess' experience with intuition reflects, participants were taught to trust the system that failed them, and hope prevent such negligence in future occasions. For, it was in fact the case, that participants SBSE programs were their introduction to sex – only one participant reporting having sex-positive parents and a home situation they could ask questions in comfortably. In all, these themes attest to the overall finding that, while school-based sex education did have a direct and significant impact on participants during their youth, these negative effects were dampened and transformed into growing moments as participants grew older and received greater access and exposure to resources. We then see how resiliency and resistance emerge in confluence with one another as participants persevere through life difficulties – further fortifying resiliency in their young adult lives through methods of resistance such as seeking to change or dismantle the oppressive structures in their lives and communities.

DISCUSSION

Utilizing a constructivist perspective, I abductively analyzed young LGBT adults' understandings of how the SoCal's school-based sex education system influenced their experiences and decisions regarding sex, sexuality, and sexual health in their adolescence and onwards. Across all interviews, participants described their SBSE experience as heteronormative, inadequate, and requiring improvement in multiple areas such as subject coverage, instructor execution, and overall structure of the program. A handful of participants

directly attributed their limited participation in sexual interactions to the fear-based discourses propagated by their SBSE programs. Certain participants continue to actively resist negative discourses correlating shame and queerness. More than half of the participants strongly emphasized an importance in strengthening support systems within the queer community by stepping up as elders. And most notably, all participants called for a culture of reflexivity in future SBSE programs – aiming to build safe spaces where all youth are comfortable actively engaging with their education. With previous research demonstrating a deficit in portrayals of queer youth as resistant (as opposed to at-risk), my analysis employs a combination framework of resilience and resistance – adopting a strengths-based approach to examining participants' contexts and experiences (Robinson and Schmitz 2021). Coincidentally, participants already appeared to be practicing this approach in their daily lives, as the language surrounding their self-conceptions and future sex ed suggestions often tied preventative forward-thinking strategies to an acknowledgement of their prior struggles. In this way, my participants were able to explicitly define their points of oppression when looking back on their sex education experiences and provided insights on the ways they thought best to restructure/dismantle exclusive, and oftentimes, heterosexist school-based sex education programs.

As most school-based sex education programs are built around the dangers of sexual activity (Connell and Elliott 2009), sex becomes negatively characterized as something to avoid. More often than not, curriculums impress upon youth the notion that abstinence is the only completely effective method of STI and pregnancy prevention (Percival and Sharpe 2012). In propagating these fear-based discourses, SBSE programs can have a direct impact on limiting youth's short-term participation in sexual interactions – as seen in the findings. Moving forward however, these findings should be taken as support for abandoning abstinence-centered SBSE.

Not only does this approach leave participants ignorant to other methods of protection, but also creates shame among youth when they do begin to consider engaging in sex (Connell and Elliott 2009). Overall, these findings further corroborate how abstinence-centered approaches are ineffective, uninformative, and detrimental to youth's development of sexual agency.

Despite its subtly, the use of othering language and silence surrounding queerness in SBSE rings loud among LGBT youth. A common example being how the use of 'them' in relation to the cis-hetero, conventionally gender conforming 'us' can leave queer youth with a sense of alienation and shame as one is imbued with correctness and the other with deviance and individual transgression (Bay-Cheng 2003). Similarly, almost all LGBTQ students (98.5%) have colloquially heard "gay" used in a negative way (e.g., "that's so gay") while at school (GLSEN 2017). In my findings, we see participants take issue with perpetuating tacit acceptances of discrimination through their rejection of stigmatizing language surrounding STDs/STIs and testing. It poses the question, if they are using fear-mongering language within their community (Elia and Eliason 2010; McCarty-Caplan 2013), how can they expect to dismantle other forms of oppression?

By stepping into the role of elder, participants attempt to more actively contribute to creating understanding and inclusive spaces within themselves in the hope of sparing younger generations instances such as these where they felt restrained in their identity expression. What's more, if done collectively, could be established (Robinson 2020) which would support young people as well as provide new elders with the greater sense of community they lacked growing up. Moreover, due to apprehensive attitudes and uncomfortable class climates, school-based sex education programs as a whole lack in providing adequate support or information to queer students – marginalizing their questions and shaming their interest to learn more (de Heer et al.

2021) Without a queer mentor, or even a safe place at school, LBGT youth are alienated and left without proper authoritative support. It is for this reason that participants overwhelmingly called for a culture of reflexivity in future SBSE programs – aiming to build safe spaces where all youth are comfortable actively engaging with their education.

Overall, my findings demonstrate how the negative experiences queer youth underwent as result of their exclusive SBSE did in fact affect them in the long term – fortifying their resiliency and invigorating their inclinations towards resistance. While the resilient focus appreciates participants' ability to endure and surmount the explicit or tacit homophobia present in their programs, it must also recognize how this work can unfairly burden youth by pressuring them to achieve normative markers of success (i.e., attending college, retaining an active social life) while simultaneously navigating their oppression (Robinson and Schmitz 2021). In terms of resistance, we see how participants combat the fixed notions of identity their SBSE programs by embracing fluidity – feeling comfortable moving between sexualities and gender expressions as they grow towards understanding which one feels right to them. What's more, having built their resiliency over the years since their sex education experiences, in young adulthood participants were able to engage with a more blended form of the resistance and resilience. For example, having been left unsatisfied with how their school-based sex education programs discussed sexual health, a handful of participants now actively reject stigmatizing language when discussing STDs/STIs and testing as they do not wish to be part of perpetuating a further type of othering within the community. Using their resilience to inform and center their resistance, queer young adults remain firm in their goals of challenging, changing, and dismantling systems that create or contribute to their hardships.

Importantly, as my findings demonstrated, these young LGBT adults also possess a passion for community building and advocacy. With a sound understanding how sexuality education can serve to reproduce inequality (Connell and Elliott 2009), participants' became educator activists in their own right by resisting anti-queer malice. We see this take shape in many forms throughout the findings – from Sage's redefining of what it means to be an ally, to the desire to become elders, to the conceptualization of future SBSE programs that center a healthy and structured development of sexual agency. Moving forward we should learn from these participants and begin enacting change where we can. In affording participants with this ability to center their voices and concerns, this research aims to resist heteronormative structures and build better environments as informed and directed by participants. By implementing and advocating for further use of these transformative frameworks, this study then contributes toward uplifting discourses surrounding LGBTQ youth's resilience and resistance – promoting a more dynamic and complicated look at how marginalized groups navigate and shape their social worlds while understanding resistance, pleasure, and so on (Robinson and Schmitz 2021).

Limitations

This current study and the conclusions made are not without their limitations. As this study predominately centers around queer (or non-hetero) sexuality, the guiding questions drafted and utilized in my interviews placed a more minor emphasis on gender identity. Trans, non-binary, and genderqueer individuals interact with an added layer of queer identity that cisgender queers do not – creating experiences and concerns unique to their interactions with sexuality. While the interview guide and questions left participants with an open dialogue for discussing gender identity and its intersections with their sexuality, my methods were not

constructed with the intent to specifically investigate trans, non-binary, and/or genderqueer individuals – a limitation future research should consider and examine more in depth.

Additionally, based on the ages/years participants reported attending middle and high school, participants in this study experienced SBSE programs based on the prior California Comprehensive Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Act – a mandate that only strictly required the coverage of HIV prevention. This mandate has since been updated and replaced by the California Healthy Youth Act which now requires SBSE instruction and materials to be appropriate for students of all sexual orientations and genders (ACLU of California 2016). Due to this program change, it is possible that SoCal's current SBSE programs have since made headway in directly addressing varying sexualities and gender identities. However, as participants were either concluding or graduated from high school by this time, none of the participants in this study can attest to this possibility. Future research is then necessary in assessing the efficacy of these new mandates and examining if any of the concerns or calls to action identified in this study have since been addressed.

Moreover, all participants also reported or hinted at experiencing college in some way over the course of their interviews. As individuals with access to postsecondary education and its associated resources (i.e., campus clubs, clinics, resource centers), this study's population sample is not representative of the resources available to all queer young adults. Further, I want to emphasize that participants' experiences and feelings of liberation post-high school should not be framed to as an inherently positive perseverance and/or solution as it tacitly accepts and advances the detrimental notion that queer youth must attend college or move away to alleviate bullying and oppression in their lives (Connell and Elliott 2009).

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, school-based sex education in the United States has targeted and perpetuated a particular brand of sexual contact – one solely occurring between married cisgender men and women for the purpose of reproduction (Elia and Eliason 2010; Schmitz et al. 2020). Presented with this narrow conception of sex and sexuality, youth are left ignorant and alienated by the institutionalized power designated with informing their sexual development. While the program acts in disservice to cis-het youth, queer students are especially disadvantaged as their sexual identities are rarely addressed – potentially mentioned in passing when discussing HIV/AIDS (Gowen and Winges-Yanez 2014), if not completely erased from their sexual health discourses altogether (Robinson 2016). It is well established that exclusive SBSE marginalizes, and even stigmatizes, queer and questioning youth through the use of tokenistic course materials, heterosexist language, and omission (Bay-Cheng 2003; Connell and Elliott 2009; Elia and Eliason 2010; Gowen and Winges-Yanez 2014; de Heer et al. 2021), however there is little research examining these impacts in the long term. In response, my study specifically investigated if, and how, queer youth are uniquely impacted by the isolation and lack of supports caused by an exclusive and/or alarmist educational introduction to sex – specifically examining their participation in and understanding of sex, sexuality, and sexual health as they matured into adulthood.

Limits notwithstanding, this study finds that the lessons and messages imparted unto queer youth from their SBSE programs influence their short-term sense of self and ways of knowing (Connell and Elliott 2009) as well as play a role in fortifying their long-term resiliency while invigorating inclinations towards resistance. Although much work remains in challenging

and dismantling systems of oppression, engaging in transformative frameworks such as these is a good place to start.

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