Youth Empowerment in Sex Education

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Abstract

Sex education in public high schools is a critical topic in women and gender studies because sex education content impacts young people's experiences with and understandings of sex, gender, relationships, and behaviors that impact health and quality of life. This paper critiques the sex education policy and practice in Colorado in order to increase opportunities for youth empowerment. The methods utilized in this paper are critical historical analysis of sex education policy development in the United States, critical discourse analysis of a sex education curriculum that is recommended by the Colorado policy, case studies of sex education extracurricular leadership programs, and interviews with high school-aged leaders in the extracurricular programs. Evidence is presented that the sex education policy in Colorado focuses too strongly on narrow outcomes, including increasing condom use, delaying sexual debut, and reducing a student's number of sexual partners. The conclusion suggests that increasing the critical thinking opportunities in sex education design will support student learning and agency within sexual experiences and relationships. The paper calls on policy makers to involve sexual health community leaders and youth perspectives in future policy development.

Key Words: sex, sex education, teens, youth, education, critical policy analysis, empowerment, high school, sexuality, consent

Youth Empowerment in Sex Education

In women's movements and scholarship, reproductive rights are some of the most widely discussed and fought for issues. Activist movements have been grounded in the fight for women to have control over their own reproduction and sexual lives since the earliest incarnations of feminism. As feminist movements have become more intersectional, many have adopted rhetoric that calls for reproductive justice, which works for wider access to sexual, relationship and reproductive health resources, as well as rights and opportunities for all people across communities. Abortion rights and access has historically taken the most space in reproductive rights discussions and activism, but there are a myriad of other issues that must be addressed when ensuring that every person has the resources, rights and opportunities to have healthy sexual lives and relationships. Sex education is an important issue in reproductive justice, because it provides learners with cultural, political, and gendered expectations about how human sexuality should appropriately be experienced. Feminist activists and scholars have a stake in the content that is taught in sex education classes, because feminist sex education can ensure that people get the information they need to make healthier and more empowered choices about their own sexual lives, romantic relationships, and family decisions.

More than 95% of teenagers receive some form of "formal" sex education in their schools, churches, community centers, or other places (Knowles, 2012). It is important for feminist scholars to take part in the development of sex education practices and policies in public schools, because these classes regularly reach millions of students across the United States. These classes inform students' understanding about their bodies, relationships and sexuality, but have widely varying content and approaches to teaching. With greater input in the development of sex education programs, feminist scholars can advance reproductive justice by championing youth

empowerment. Youth-empowerment focused sex education may support young people's development, and help reduce widespread issues including sexual assault and date rape, sexual harassment, bullying, domestic violence, negative body image, unwanted teen pregnancy, transmission of STI's, communication challenges, and relationship struggles.

The ideal sex education for young people is widely discussed in women, gender and queer studies, as well as in mainstream policy development and public health conversations. The main argument about sex education content is whether to teach abstinence-only curricula, or curricula that includes abstinence as well as information about birth control and sexual health resources. Most feminist scholars, as well as leading youth sexual health researchers, agree that comprehensive sex education should be used because it is far more effective in promoting better health behaviors among young people (Kirby 2001, 2007; Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Within the pro-comprehensive sex education discourse, there are many ideas about what outcomes should be prioritized within sex education programs, and what content should be taught to promote those outcomes. Allen (2007) argues that comprehensive sex education discourses reinforce social inequalities and should more strongly prioritize social justice. Lamb (2013) argues that comprehensive sex education models send a sex-negative message that is full of information that tend to marginalize young people and their experiences, and relies heavily on the knowledge of "experts". She argues instead for a sex education program where sex education includes a historical context for sexual and gender constructs, expectations, and other sociopolitical factors that inform health, and that mutuality and the "other" should be highlighted in the sex education curriculum. Finally, Fields (2008) argues neither for comprehensive nor abstinence-based programs, but argues that all programs should privilege sexual subjectivity and self-determination for young people. Previous scholarship provides a substantive background for

a critical analysis of sexual health education policies because it advances notions that youth should be empowered to make decisions based on their own needs, values and desires.

Much of the critical sex education scholarship has sought to identify what youth think about the sexual health programs in their high schools and middle schools. For example, Kassab et al. (2014) studied the views of sex education among gang-involved Latino youth in order to identify frameworks for "developing sexual risk-reduction interventions". They found that multifaceted approaches, including teaching skill-building as well as knowledge-building content, was most effective for engaging gang-involved young men in sex education programming. Gowen & Winges-Yanez (2014) studied LGBTQ youths' perspectives on inclusivity in sex education in their schools and found that most classes failed to be inclusive of young queer people. While both of these studies promote youth-knowledge and value youth experience, both tend to describe the youth participants from a deficit perspective – the youth are portrayed as "at-risk" of negative health outcomes and other negative behaviors, and are framed as needing particular attention in sex education programming development. Other studies that include youth perspectives on sex education look for feedback from youth, but rarely value youth as leaders in the sexual and health education realm (Fields, 2008; Allen, 2007). This paper contributes to the existing body of research by examining three Colorado-based extracurricular sexual and health education leadership programs for teens, and elicits critiques and suggestions for improvement from the youth leaders in these programs.

This paper presents evidence that youth are redefining sexual health and justice by taking responsibility for what their community learns through extracurricular sexual and relationship health leadership programs, but that there must be widespread support for empowerment-focused learning in public schools. This paper promotes youth leaders' ideas about sexual and

relationship health education and community empowerment, because youth sexual health leaders have a unique standpoint from which to gain insight: they are well-informed in the areas of youth and relationship health, social justice and intersectionality - having received rigorous training through their leadership programs - and at the same time, they are a part of the population which they are working to impact. Teen sexual and relationship health leaders have a vantage point from within the target population and the framework and language to contextualize and articulate the problems they observe and experience.

Additionally, this paper argues that while some youth sexual and relationship health leaders are empowered to be agents of community health through their involvement in extracurricular programs, their experience is drastically different from their peers' in traditional sex education classrooms in Colorado. Through a multilayered critical policy analysis, this paper demonstrates that youth in sexual education classrooms are often marginalized by the content presented and the methods of delivery, and argues instead for the adoption of sex education policy that reflects the strengths of the extra curricular programs. The goal of this paper is to call for a policy shift that supports youth empowerment through greater focus on the development of communication skills, discussions on self-determination and mutuality in sexual and romantic relationships, and teaching standards about sexual diversity, inclusivity, and social justice.

This critical policy analysis contributes to the field of sex education studies and policy critiques, because it involves stakeholders in the development of the critique and suggestions for solutions. Policy development and implementation should be informed by bottom-up approaches, because the people who are directly impacted are often the most able to clearly see the desired outcome (Baum, 2007). Additionally, it will benefit sex education policy creators to utilize a horizontal approach in their policy creation process, because they can learn from and adopt the

best practices from independent sector organizations who, like the three presented in this paper, are already making progress in youth sexual and relationship health programming.

This critical policy analysis is divided into four sections. The first describes the methods of analysis. The second describes the development of sex education policy in the U.S. and Colorado. The third section is a discursive analysis of a sex education curriculum recommended by the current Colorado policy, and elucidates what the current education policy might look like if enacted in a classroom. The fourth section provides a critique of Colorado's sex education policy as currently delivered, and provides evidence of the value of sex education that empowers high school students to take agency over their sexual and relationship choices, by describing the work of high school student activists in three peer-to-peer sex education organizations in the Denver-Metro area of Colorado.

Methods and Framework

This research explores sex education by conducting a critical policy analysis on the sex education policy in the state of Colorado. In addition to the far-reaching impact of policy, the language of the policy itself is informative about the ways in which sexual health and sexual health education for teens is understood and constructed by dominant discourses in Colorado's public sphere. This critical policy analysis contributes to the literature regarding sex education, by demonstrating how the current policy marginalizes young people's experiences, knowledge and agency. This analysis demonstrates the ways in which greater emphasis on student empowerment in sex education curriculum might transform sex education spaces from marginalizing young people, especially young people who are sexual minorities. Student-driven sex education can be designed to equip young people with tools to communicate more clearly about their needs and wants, navigate satisfying romantic and sexual relationships, stop teen

dating violence and sexual assault and end bullying and stigmatization of queer people in their communities.

The methods employed in this paper provide an examination of the current policy's shortcomings and as well as ways it can be improved. The following section contrasts traditional policy analysis and critical policy analysis in order to demonstrate why a critical policy analysis is a more realistic approach for creating substantive improvements to sex education.

Traditional Education Policy Analysis

Traditional education policy analysis has advanced arguments for comprehensive sex education in public schools, and therefore, has played a critical role in the improvement of sex education quality in the U.S. However, traditional education policy analysis alone provides an incomplete and problematic assessment, because it fails to look at how societal structures might intersect with and influence the efficacy of the policy in question. Instead, it evaluates intentions and success using four key assumptions, which collectively have the impact of disregarding the differences in social, cultural and political landscapes that will inevitably change the ways in which a policy takes effect in different areas (Diem et al., 2014). These assumptions are:

1. "Changes in educative programs can be planned and have steps", and plans laid forth in policy can be implemented in a wide variety of settings.

2. "One can predict behavior within institutions with fair confidence based on the assumption that goals drive action."

3. The information necessary to decide on a policy strategy is "cumulative and capable of being clearly expressed to others".

4. Issues in policy can be adequately assessed and addressed with changes to the policy. (p. 1070, 1071)

These assumptions neglect to account for social, political and religious climate, as well as physical access to sexual health resources. For example, if a school's goal is to reduce the number of teens at that school who become pregnant, that goal alone may not empower the school to adopt the educative program that will give them the best chance of achieving that goal. A school might not adopt a policy that would likely reduce unintended teen pregnancy because of a directive to teach abstinence-only sex education. Indeed, abstinence-only sex education programs maintain popularity, even though there is scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of comprehensive programs in reducing the number of teen pregnancies (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). In this example, behavior is not driven by goals alone, but is influenced by other political and social factors. Additionally, these assumptions fail to account for the material challenges that schools in less affluent communities and communities of color face when working to implement changes to educative programs, because goals may not be achievable without the necessary resources. Communication about the importance of a policy strategy is likewise uniquely challenging with sex education because adolescent sexuality has been a politically and religiously infused topic in education policy since the late 19th century (Foucault, 1978) and continues to be controversial today (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Therefore, even when statistical evidence demonstrates that one method of teaching sexual health has more positive outcomes than another, the evidence often fails to motivate a policy that would encourage its use (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011).

Another critique of traditional policy analysis is that it limits the responsibility of proponents to conduct robust and innovative evaluations of the impact of a policy. Traditional policy evaluations enable policy-makers and evaluators to look at their proposed solutions in a vacuum, rather than forcing them to examine what external factors might influence the efficacy

of, or creating issues with a program (Diem et al., 2014). Traditional sex education policy analysis in the U.S. historically has focused on impacting community and teen-health factors including teen birth rates, teen pregnancy, and teen STI (sexually transmitted diseases) rates (Kirby, 2007; Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Traditional policy analysis has compared these rates state by state and then looked for patterns in the rates based on the policy for which the state advocates (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Other traditional policy analysis has looked at the literature on curricular styles and made recommendations as to what kinds of curricula should be funded (Kirby, 2007). The aforementioned traditional policy studies support sex education that teach youth about condoms and birth control, called comprehensive sex education. Traditional policy analysis in the field of sex education has had major positive impacts, in that studies have provided substantive evidence that have helped many states adopt comprehensive sex education recommendations. However, the traditional research surrounding sexual education policy fails to adequately address the social and political structures that play a large role in creating the actual experiences of students in sex education classrooms.

Critical Policy Analysis

Critical policy analysis fills gaps in understanding policy as theory and policy in practice, because it assesses the impacts of larger social, political and historical factors on sexual education policies' impacts and efficacy, and provides approaches to creating solutions to some of the wider social factors that influence sexual health education and adolescent sexual health. In contrast to traditional education policy analysis, critical policy examines the systemic structures of privilege and oppression in its assessment of public policies (Diem et al. 2014). Critical policy analysis works to situate the policy in question within wider social and political structures of inequality to identify the ways in which the specific policy reproduces power imbalances and the

ways that it can shift power to create equity. According to Diem et al. (2014) there are five major interventions critical policy analysis makes when assessing policies.

First, a critical policy analysis interrogates the "difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality" (Diem et al., 2014). Critical policy scholarship often examines the ways a policy's rhetoric impacts an issue, and may also look at the disconnects between the rhetoric in a policy and how it is actually implemented (Winton, 2013). When looking at education policy, a rhetorical analysis is especially important, because the rhetoric of a policy frames the way the topic is viewed and the solution is envisioned (Winton, 2013). Additionally, examining the disconnect between the rhetoric and the actual implementation of an educative policy is invaluable because that analysis can inform where the policy needs to allocate supplemental resources and/ or training, and also where the political will to implement change is lacking. This process can help make a policy more effective in creating progress and social equity.

The second type of critical policy analysis questions the assumptions made by a new law. These types of critical interrogation ask: "why did this policy arise? What problem is it trying to solve? Why is it a problem, and to whom?" (Diem et al., 2014). This form of critical policy analysis process adds a reflexive lens to the discussion of a policy's approach by looking at who is calling for a change, and why the specific issue is identified as a problem. In the context of educational policy, the "problems" identified by policy makers are often symptoms of wider, systemic issues that create educational challenges (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Sociocultural differences are frequently sources of frustration for educators, school administrations and policy makers, but they are rarely adequately addressed when they are simply framed as problems that need fixing (Dray, 2007). A critical education policy analysis can help policy-makers avoid the

mistake of attributing an education "problem" to a community without looking at the deeper sources of the behavior.

The third frame critical policy analysis uses is to examine how a policy distributes power, and how it creates winners and losers in the advocacy process (Diem et al. 2014). This frame allows scholars to interrogate the political process itself as a structure that generates and stratifies power. This frame is a valuable critical lens to analyze how education policy functions as a political tool, with young people getting caught in the friction. As U.S. politics, on all levels, become more and more focused on party politics and polarizing approaches to creating and implementing changes, this critical framework continues to serve as fertile ground for discussion and examination (Dumas & Anyon, 2006). In education, the creation of winners and losers in the process means that Democrats and Republicans tend to approach education improvements from different angles, with Democrats working to bridge opportunity gaps between students at schools across the country, and Republicans working to improve schools by working for greater choices for parents and increasing school privatization (Giroux, 2002; Ravitch, 2013).

The fourth frame used by critical policy scholars focuses on "social stratification and the impact the policy has on relationships of inequality" (Bernal, 2005; Diem et al., 2014; Riddell, 2005). This frame utilizes critical race, gender, and sexuality theories to identify how a policy reproduces the status quo of systemic inequalities, or how it might challenge the status quo by creating new structures that support equity (Cruz, 2012; Friere, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). In education policy, this frame additionally challenges the ways in which schools as institutions marginalize young people and create hierarchies within classrooms (Friere, 2005; Matthews, 2006; Olsen, 2009).

The final frame that is utilized in critical policy analysis seeks to understand how non-dominant groups use policy and political participation to contest systemic structures of oppression and create opportunities for empowerment (Rogers, Mediratta, & Shah, 2012). This framework is critical to education policy analysis because it enables marginalized communities to self-advocate, and it also draws attention to alternative political solutions that are designed by non-dominant community groups themselves.

Methodology

Traditional policy evaluation fails to take into account unique problems that need to be addressed by specific policy, and instead uses a homogenous evaluation process, regardless of the types of social impacts the policy is trying to alter (deLeon & Vogenback, 2007). In the alternative, critical education policy analysis strives to replace inadequate exploratory frameworks with multi-dimensional approaches to research. Critical policy analysis calls for a wider range of analytic tools, and suggests that each policy analysis should choose research methodology that is better equipped for addressing the specific problem at hand. The methods adopted by researchers when conducting critical education policy analysis vary widely, and include critical ethnographies, narrative approaches, discursive analysis and critical historical analysis.

The discursive analysis of this paper is based on the concept of policy frames (Verloo 2007), which is an "organizing principle that transforms fragmentary information or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly included," is the basis of my discursive analysis. The goal of using policy frames as a method of analysis is to identify the informal messages that the rhetoric of a policy sends about an issue, like teen sexuality or teen queer identities, how the policy structures solutions to those

problems, and how these problems are informed by social constructions that privilege certain

opinions and identities over others. Policy frames are identified throughout the research; both

frames that marginalize adolescent sexuality and frames that seek to empower youth are

discussed.

Overview of Sex Education Policy in the U.S. and Colorado

United States Sex Education Policy

The following section is a historical outline of the goals and intentions of sex education

and its policy development in the U.S. The evidence will show that sex education in the U.S. has

historical foundations in policing women's behaviors and limiting adolescent sexual freedom in

the name of public good, which is in many ways the policy's current goal.

Sex education in the U.S. arose in the beginning of the 20th century as an opportunity to

help educate the masses about moral purity and to prevent prostitution (Lamb, 2013). By 1920,

about 40% of schools in the U.S. had some form of sex education (Carter, 2001). However,

during this time, there was little policy regarding sex education at state or federal levels. Instead,

schools and districts were left to decide what information they felt was important to teach.

In the 1940's, the goals of sex education moved from promoting morality to focusing on

the science of sexual health as it related to public health (Lamb, 2013). Sex was situated within

discourses of science as a means of assuaging fears about urbanization and the decline of societal

morality (Carter, 2001). The emergence of concern about how sexual education might shape the

morality of young people grew in the 40's, and this concern has continued to pervade

conversations about sex education, to this day. As a response, sex education discourse became

sterilized, and youth sexuality became medicalized, focusing primarily on anatomy, physiology

and venereal diseases (Carter, 2001). During this shift, sex educators and policy makers clearly

framed sexual topics in sex education to focus on *health* and providing information to help youth make the healthiest choices, and morality about decisions faded to the background of the discourse. With the growing emphasis on health and science discourses, discussions of sexual activity or acts became much more sterilized, and teachers in classrooms were ambivalent about discussing youth as sexual actors (Carter, 2001). The science and health-based model of sex education, with its emphasis on preventing venereal diseases, dominated sex education discourse throughout 40's and into the 50's and 60's.

In the second half of the 1960's, a new form of sex education called Family Life and Sex Education focused on providing neutral spaces for high school students to discuss and explore their own values around sexual behavior, and relationships and in many schools, included sexuality and sexual orientation (Lamb, 2013). Though Family Life and Sex Education programs were not adopted widely, they had presence throughout the country and made up a substantial minority of sex education programs during the 1960's and 1970's. Schools that taught Family Life and Sex Education programs had some of the most progressive practices, but they also received negative feedback as moral concerns grew during the conservative backlash in the 1970s.

During the 1970's, "in response to public alarm over births to unwed teen mothers", and 1980's, in response to the rise of HIV/AIDS, many states began passing laws that required some form of sexuality and/ or HIV education ("Brief History," 2010, p. 2). Although states had different policies and standards about what should be taught, this is the first time that the U.S. saw a widespread approach to youth sexual behaviors in public schools.

During the early 1980's, the Reagan Administration and conservative policy makers allocated federal grant funding to programs for abstinence-until-marriage-only programs to be

taught in high school ("Brief History," 2010). Therefore, while states had passed laws that

sought to teach young people about HIV/AIDS and pregnancy prevention, school districts were

incentivized not to teach about safe sex practices and instead focus solely on abstinence as the

only option for preventing pregnancy and the transfer of STIs, HI. During President George W.

Bush's administration, abstinence-only education funding greatly increased, and the Center for

Disease Control discontinued grant funding for sex education curriculum development. Before

the federal funding for research programs discontinued in 2002, 31 sex education programs had

shown efficacy in preventing pregnancy and the spread of STIs among young people, and in

delaying participants' first sexual experiences. President Barack Obama's administration has

renewed the funding for comprehensive sex education, but many states continue to allow school

districts to apply for abstinence-only funding. Together, these conflicting funding streams

muddle curriculum development processes, grant-writing and state-policy making decisions, as

well as district and school curriculum choices.

Since the inception of sex education policies that have focused on impacting teen birth

rate and/ or the spread of HIV/ AIDS and other STI's, discourses of efficacy have always

informed the way sex education policy is articulated. The federal government and the Center for

Disease Control and Prevention allocated research funding to determine which sex education

models were most effective in preventing teen pregnancy, the spread of STD's, and delaying

students' first sexual experiences; proof of efficacy earned these programs the "Evidence-Based"

label ("Brief History," 2010; Kirby, 2007; Kirby et. al, 2007, Kirby 2009; Lamb, 2013; Stanger-

Hall & Hall 2011). The data was gathered in a variety of ways, including students' self-reporting

on surveys, longitudinal studies on students who took part in the program and agreed to discuss

their sexual experiences and choices for years after completion, and with student focus groups.

This methodology was helpful when working to identify content and teaching methods that improve health outcomes. A whole field of public health research and scholarship has developed around creating curriculum that best impacts youth behaviors in positive ways – and the field tends to agree that providing young people with information about condoms and birth control is beneficial. The development of evidence-based testing has benefited sex education policy, because the research has supported progressive lawmakers in arguing why comprehensive sex education is important. Within policy arguments, "evidence-based" effectively mobilized discourses of science and data to help promote youth access to information about birth control and condoms. While evidence-based curriculum has been an excellent development for young people's access to better sex education across communities and states, it has many drawbacks.

A note on local control of education. The sex education policy landscape, like the wider education policy landscape in the U.S. is contoured by the standard of local control. Since its incarnation, the U.S. educational system has been influenced by a mixture of federal, state and local laws, and funding programs (Kirst & Wirt, 2009). From the time of Western expansion, the U.S. federal government has set up granting programs to help provide education to new and growing communities (Kettl, 2011). However, the Constitution (by omission) grants states local control over education policy (Kettl, 2011). Many states take the idea of local control even further by arguing that local entities, like county and district school boards, should have more control than the state does over what is taught in schools. Colorado is a "local control" state, and as such, state education policy tends to provide funding and suggestions for what subjects and content schools should teach, while providing space for local school boards to mandate the curriculum and standards for their schools. Therefore, when examining Colorado's sex education policy, it is important to note that all local school districts have the option to implement the

policy, depending on the local political will and resource availability.

Colorado's Sex Education Policy

The most current sex education legislation for Colorado enables schools to apply for grant funding if they teach comprehensive sexuality education ("A Bill," 2013). This legislation creates provisions for sex education standards, including that programs that receive funding are required to teach education models that are evidence-based, medically accurate, age-appropriate, and culturally sensitive ("A Bill," 2013). Most importantly, this policy sets forth comprehensive sex education as the standard for sex education programs in Colorado ("A Bill," 2013). The rhetoric in this bill declares that "the General Assembly finds and declares that Colorado youth have a right to receive medically and scientifically accurate information to empower them to make informed decisions that promote their individual, physical, mental health and well-being" ("A Bill," 2013). The sex education law makes provisions for a new grant-funding program that can help schools pay for new curricula, but a grant pool has not yet been generated – so this part of the legislation is only rhetoric that has not yet been implemented, and schools in need are left without resources to be able to train teachers or provide curriculum for classrooms.

The Colorado policy employs the discourse of health as a right for all youth. Health here is argued as a right for the individual, rather than as a part of the overall community health, which tends to run counter to the typical discourses of sex education as an important protection for the community's benefit (Lamb, 2013). Additionally, this rhetoric frames *mental* health as a right for young people, and ties mental health to sex education access. In these ways, the discourse of health is transformed to advocate for rights of individual young people, rather than employed in the traditional ways necessary in order to ensure the safety and prosperity of the community as a whole.

Another way this law transforms the traditional ways in which comprehensive sex-education discourses are used, is that efficacy ("evidence-based") and science ("medically accurate" and "age-appropriate") are tied to contributing to individual youth's wellbeing. In these ways, science and efficacy are placed as secondary to the overall goal of youth health. However, the rhetoric employed in this legislation still tends to sterilize the discussion surrounding youth sexual health information. The sterilization and medicalization of conversations about youth sexuality aligns with the traditional policy frames around youth sexual health. This framing serves to pacify concerns over presenting information that might contribute to youth sexual exploration, but also creates the feeling of a sexual health classroom as a clinical space, rather than a space for youth knowledge-seeking and self-empowerment.

How Colorado Policy Looks in a Classroom: Reducing the Risk

Theoretical Frameworks

The theory of biopower is instructive in assessing why the state is involved in adolescent sexual health. Foucault (1978) defines biopower as the state's "power to *foster* life and the power to *disallow* it to the point of death" (p. 138). Foucault says biopower views bodies in one of two ways. First Foucault says, the state treats bodies as machines, and interacts with them in order to *discipline* the functions of the machine and make it run as efficiently as possible (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). Second, the state sees bodies as members of the human species, and therefore works to *regulate* the species as a whole through the regulation of bodies (p. 139). The state has an interest in generating and disseminating health-promoting "knowledge-power [which acts as] an agent of transformation of human life" (Foucault, 1978, p. 143). The dissemination of knowledge through education is part of the overall biopower structure (which includes access to health resources, environmental quality and access to financial institutions) that enables the state,

through policies and discourses, to regulate the distribution of health-promoting resources to its

citizens. As the source of bodies to be regulated, sex becomes of specific importance, and

engenders its own set of disciplines and regulatory processes for control (Foucault, 1978, p. 146).

The ideal sex enables offspring to be raised in a family, and is free of disease, "perversion", and

promiscuity. Within health discourses, adolescent sexuality is seen as a danger to the

reproduction and vitality of the species and therefore it requires regulation (Foucault, 1978, p.

146). Within policy frames, adolescent sexuality is a threat to biopower because it is not

desirable for adolescents to reproduce, and undesirable reproduction endangers the state's overall

control of the human population.

Another informative framework, developed by Lamb (2013), dissects the values

presented in comprehensive, "fact-based" sexual education curricula, as a way of determining the

implicit values presented in ostensibly value-neutral classes. Her analysis identifies discourses of

"efficacy, discourses of health and healthy choices, and discourses of science" (Lamb, 2013).

Discourses of efficacy focus on behavioral impact. Discourses of health utilize rhetoric around

community health, individual health, risk and defense in order to encourage the adoption of

behaviors and discourage others. Discourses of science serve to legitimize authority in

conversations about sexuality, and marginalize youth experiences in the educative space. This

discursive analytic framework is an excellent basis with which to determine the use of biopower

in typical evidence-based sexual education models.

Reducing the Risk

The following section is a discursive analysis of a sexual health curriculum that is

evidence-based, as recommended by Colorado Policy. *Reducing the Risk* was approved by the

CDC in 1991, with multiple updates, including the introduction of an addendum in 2012.

Reducing the Risk is the only comprehensive, evidence-based sex education curriculum that includes a queer-inclusive supplementary teaching module. *Reducing the Risk Understanding Self-Identity* is designed as a supplementary one to two-class teaching model aimed at "Building a Supportive Environment for LGBTQ Students"(Quackenbush, 2012, p. v). This queer-inclusive model is sold as a supplement to *Reducing the Risk* to help teachers better address the needs of all students in the classroom, and has not been subject to evidence-based testing. The curriculum's goal is not only to teach students to self-regulate, but also to be agents of regulation and discipline to their peers.

Discourse of Efficacy

An emphasis on efficacy means that curricula are created in order to produce specific, testable outcomes in students. Sex education curricula can only attain the evidence-based label if they have empirically proven, peer reviewed efficacy in impacting students. A critique of the evidence-based standard is that much like other educational programs, evidence-based sex education curricula "'teach to the test,'" so that students who go through sex education curricula evaluation studies responded favorably to questions regarding behaviors, attitudes and perceived peer norms (Lamb, 2013; Kirby 2001). The behaviors promoted in the *Reducing the Risk* curriculum all surround preventing the spread of HIV and other STD's and preventing pregnancy[1]. Therefore, the target behaviors that the curriculum addresses are about risk-reduction and risk-avoidance. The challenge with focusing on risk-avoidance and risk-reduction as the only goals in sex education curricula is that student empowerment and interpersonal skills

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[1] It should be noted that delaying sexual debut, reducing the number of sexual partners, and reducing the frequency of partners are all considered to be favorable outcomes that would contribute to reducing the spread of HIV and other STD's and preventing teen pregnancy. Whether delaying sexual debut or reducing the frequency of sex are actually the most effective goals when it comes to preventing pregnancy and the spread of HIV is questionable, and would be an excellent area for future critical policy research in this area.

are not developed.

An example of the ways in which these risk-reduction behaviors are the dominant messaging in the curriculum is the titles of the class activities. The 16 class titles, as listed in the teacher's index:

Abstinence, Sex and Protection – Pregnancy Prevention Emphasis (alt. HIV Prevention

Emphasis)

Abstinence: Not Having Sex

Refusals

Using Refusal Skills

Delaying Tactics

Avoiding High-Risk Situations

Getting and Using Protection – I

Getting and Using Protection – II

Knowing and Talking About Protection: Skills Integration – I

Skills Integration – II

Skills Integration – III

Preventing HIV and Other STD

HIV Risk Behaviors

Implementation Protection from STD and Pregnancy

Sticking with Abstinence and Protection

Skills Integration – IV (Barth, 2004, p. iv)

The additional class title in the *Understanding Self-Identity* is called:

Who We Are: Understanding Self-Identity (Quackenbush, 2012, p. vi)

Here words like "abstinence," "refusal," "delaying," "avoidance", and "prevention" all serve to create a sex-negative tone in the classroom, and set forth the expectation that the best choice is to not engage sexually. However, it is important to note that there are many empowering phrases used in these activity titles as well, including: "getting and using protection," "skill integration," and "talking about protection." These titles show that youth choice-making is important to develop, and that youth have the power to act as agents of their own sexual experiences. The curriculum is intended to develop skills in refusing, delaying and avoiding sex, and using protection.

The focus on limit-setting is evident in pedagogical methods in the learning activities. Out of the 28 activities, 17 are written responses to questions presented in class, quizzes or written homework. There are a few activities which require outside research, like discussing with parents and attending or calling a clinic, but none of these activities require young people to discuss norms or behaviors with each other.

The 11 other activities are peer-to-peer communication activities, but they are all scripted in-class role-play assignments. About half of these role-play activities script both sides of the conversation, so that the young people taking part in the activities are just reading lines aloud. The other half only script lines for the negative influencer, the young person who is attempting to coerce the other student to take a risk. In these role-plays, the person who is trying to avoid the risk has the opportunity to improvise their part. This allows for some skill-development, because students get the opportunity to practice articulating why they are not interested, or coming up with defensive strategies. However, these are not opportunities for young people to develop decision-making skills because each role plays states at the top of the role play activity sheet what the expected outcome is. Here is the "Setting the Stage" heading for the role play called

"Presents and Flowers:"

> You've been seeing someone older for a month. He/she has treated you to dinner and the
>
> movies, has driven you places, and buys you presents and flowers. You have really
>
> enjoyed all the attention. During a party at your friend's house, he/she suggests that you
>
> leave the party and go somewhere private. Your date's body language shows that he/she
>
> wants to have sex with you. You do not want to have sex. Your date speaks first.

Here, we see how students are mandated to refuse sex, rather than given the choice to

decide whether or not they would feel comfortable in this situation, or even giving them the

opportunity to discuss what the dangers and benefits might be of choosing to have sex.

Additionally, no part of the teacher instructions for this role play include a discussion about

dating an older person. Instead, the only teacher instructions are about discussing "delaying

tactics" and helping students brainstorm what different delaying tactics looks like. In this lesson,

Class 5, the valuable opportunity to have more rich discussion about some of the social factors

that inform a person's choice to have sex or not have sex (like the pressure that comes from

dating someone older or the pressure that comes from feeling like sex is owed as a repayment for

gifts and nice treatment) is missed when the focus is only on skill-building efficacy.

After, each role play in *Reducing the Risk*, students are given score sheets, where they are

able to score the performance in the following categories: "Refusals: Said 'NO', Body Language

Said 'NO', Repeated Refusal, Suggested Alternative, [and] Built the Relationship" and some

score sheets also include "Delaying Tactics: Used Delay Statement, Used Delay Action, Created

Space, Ended the Situation Quickly, [and] Built the Relationship" (Barth, 2004). Here, students

are learning to test each other's as well as their own efficacy in enacting these prescribed

behaviors, thereby practicing the intended skill of self and peer regulation. Clearly, efficacy is

taught as a value to students, yet the opportunity to generate their own decisions and goals within these scenarios – opportunities that lead to the development of *self-efficacy* - is not made available in the classroom, because the goals are flatly to promote behavior which reduce the number of sexual experiences youth have, and increase the use of condoms when youth do have sex.

Seven of the 11 total role plays require students to practice delaying sex. There are no role-play activities in which a person practices saying yes to sex. This curriculum is consistent with the other evidence-based curricula in this area. As of 2013, there are no evidence-based sex education curricula that give students the opportunity to develop skills around giving consent to taking part in sexual activity (Lamb, 2013). If students are only allowed to practice saying "No," the curriculum falls in line with the public health discourse that wants young people to resist sexuality. Unfortunately, this also leads to the real problem of young people having trouble discerning when they have consent for sex, or even knowing how to ask for consent before engaging in physical activity. The failure to teach about consent has very real consequences for young people in high school and after they graduate, especially with regards to date rape and acquaintance rape. A better sex education curriculum would provide students with opportunities to identify what their goals are with sexual experiences, and provide everyone with information about how to say yes clearly with their bodies and their words, as well as communicating clear no's.

Discourse of Health

Adolescent sexual education is created to instill behaviors that contribute to the maintenance of public health (Lamb, 2013). Through the emphasis on health, students are regulated away from positively experiencing adolescent sexuality, because sexual experiences

are framed as risks that must be avoided, or most liberally, as risks that must be managed, but always as a constant threat to the health of the individual's body. This discourse can be problematic because it puts young people in a constant state of fear. Lupton and Tulloch (1998), theorize that sex education teaches young people to live in a constant state of worry and negotiation about the inherent risks of physical contact. This is a regulatory force of many adolescent sexuality education programs, because the threat of outside illness and danger presented by others' bodies convinces young people to resist sexual experiences.

The forces of biopower are exerted even more strongly on adolescents who experience non-normative sexual attraction or identify with nonnormative genders or sexual orientations. When it comes to adolescent homosexuality or sexual alternative identities, the state acts both as regulator and as disciplinarian. In reference to the notion of the human body as a machine, homosexuality is viewed as a malfunction of the machine – because it fails to reproduce - thus requiring discipline to fix the malfunction (Foucault, 1978, 147). Queer adolescent bodies lie at the crossfire between the structures of biopower that want to discipline the "malfunction" of their bodies and regulate the dangers caused by sexual desires that threaten healthy reproduction. Individuals who are caught in this crossfire experience discipline aimed at erasure of their natural sexuality and regulatory mechanisms that work to delay their desire for intimacy. There is a clear history of adolescent sexuality that is non-normative being regulated out of sex education materials. For example, only twelve states require that sexual orientation be discussed in sex education courses, but three of those states require that being any orientation other than heterosexual is unacceptable to the public, or against state law (Slater, 2013). An additional seven states have laws prohibiting the discussion of sexual orientation in schools (Slater, 2013). Even more troublesome, there are currently no states where discussion of gender identity is

mandated (Slater, 2013). When we look at biopower as a structure, we see that the "health creating knowledge-power" provided by sex education is denied to many students in the U.S.

As a discourse, structures that convene to create biopower blame youth who are gender non-normative and non-heterosexual for failures to "choose" to be healthy. Because young people who identify as sexual minorities or who engage in non-normative sexual behavior fall outside of the measured and normalized behaviors covered in most sex education classes, they are left without access to biopolitical protection. Additionally, the lack of institutionalized sexual knowledge available for queer young people also demonstrates that policy makers believe that their identities are unworthy of health.

Within sex education classrooms, LGBTQ students are disproportionately marked as threatening to community health. In some classes "the only 'official' conversations regarding homosexuality occur when discussing AIDS/ HIV" (Slater, 2013; Friend, 1993; Horshall; 2013). Limiting discussions about homosexuality to AIDS/HIV links homosexuality with danger and pathology (Friend, 1993; Horshall, 2013). Classes that talk about queer identities as strictly pathological attempt to discipline bodies to be perfectly running machines (by warning quality, non-pathological machines – straight students - to stay away from "broken" poorly maintained machines – HIV/AIDS-ridden queer youth), and simultaneously work to regulate the student behavior to stop being non-normative. This is a flaw of sexuality education classes, because it enforces the idea that queer people and behavior is less healthy, less careful, and less clean than heterosexual behavior. At the same time, this selective inclusion about queer people only when in reference to HIV sends the message that students who take part in queer experiences or who identify as queer choose to subject themselves and their community to infectious disease and death. There is little question that this illness framing of queer-identities contributes to the

distrust of, disdain for, and harassment of queer young people in their school communities.

While a major improvement from the original *Reducing the* Risk curriculum, which talks only about heterosexual relationships, the LGBT Supplement to *Reducing the Risk*, entitled *Understanding Self Identity Building a Supportive Environment for LGBT Teens*, reproduces similar necropoloitical associations about queer teens that we unfortunately see in more homophobic curricula. The *Understanding Self Identity* teaching manual begins by citing the disproportionately high rates of queer teen sexual risk behaviors, violence, mental health issues substance abuse, and academic problems (Quackenbush, 2012, p. 2-4). These introductory statements pathologize queer youth, by using deficit-based statistics to discuss the ways in which queer teens are already less healthy than their straight peers. Fortunately, the book also calls to teachers to "make a difference [by] creating inclusive schools for all" (Quackenbush, 2012). This shows that the *Understanding Self Identity* creators recognize their responsibility for helping queer students to be welcomed and understood in the classroom, but the authors are misinformed about how to include students without making them alienated.

Discourse of Science

Finally, the "discourse of science" sets a foundation that shores up the legitimacy of the sex education program's content. By phrasing lessons as "scientific facts" sex education models show the information presented is definitive and not to be challenged by anecdotal or subjective experiences and ways of knowing. Additionally, the discourse of science feigns inclusivity, projecting a posture of "leave no stone unturned" (Lamb, 2013). She argues that depicting sexuality education as coming from this quasi-inclusive scientific background makes students assume that all facts are being discussed, which leaves students to feel that if their experience isn't discussed it is abnormal or wrong (Lamb, 2013). Lamb (2013) argues that a scientific "just

the facts" discourse in the sex education classroom:

> [R]epresents a hegemonic normalization that makes invisible those facts that
>
> do not fit into the model of sex or sexuality…oral contact may also be left out of
>
> descriptions of the arousal response, showing a bias toward sex for reproduction or
>
> heterosexual intercourse. Such renderings of the facts that suggest all the facts are being
>
> presented position some students' arousal responses as deviant. (Lamb, 2013, p. 451)

Failing to represent a more inclusive set of scientific sexuality knowledge, heterosexist education models have a dual impact when depicting queer student behaviors as unnatural or nonexistent. First, for students who are queer, their sex is disciplined as out of bounds, wrong, and deviant, which creates negative self-image and stress over experiences or desires that could be sources of joy. At the same time, students who primarily experience normative, heterosexual desires, are taught to see that there is only one option for sexuality and sexual pleasure, and therefore equate any other sexual experience as wrong, and unworthy of health class recognition. The science-only discourse, when coupled with exclusive renderings of sexual experiences, leads students to believe that certain sexual behaviors are wrong, and that those students who may have an interest in enacting them dually go against the laws of nature and are choosing to be unhealthy and unnatural.

In *Reducing the Risk Understanding Self-Identity,* students are taught about sexualities through a science framework. This is the only part of the whole Reducing the Risk curriculum where students' self-identity and uniqueness is discussed, yet this section is somehow the most science-based and sterilized. This is problematic because self-identities, especially when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity, are extremely personal feelings that shouldn't be quantified or categorized by outsiders looking into a person's experience. It is regressive to teach

about sexual difference from a standpoint of categorization, but that is currently the only curricular option that is recommended by the state of Colorado. At the same time, the discourse of science may be employed here as a tactic to sterilize the extremely controversial topic of teaching about gender identity and sexual orientation. Categorization is more neutral in that it identifies assumptions based on observations of appearance or behavior, rather than on individual feelings of alternative ways of being or seeing. Additionally, the discourse of science frames young people as knowledge-producers, because they get to categorize others. This can also be seen as a favorable outcome to people who have concerns that discussing sexual differences may cause youth to become lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

The *Understanding Self-Identity Teaching* module starts with an activity which asks students to think about who they are in terms of identifying factors, using the activity sheet "Who Am I?" "Who Am I?" is divided into three parts:

Part 1: Things that others can see

1. Gender: male, female, other

2. The kind of jewelry you wear (if any)

3. The style of clothes you usually wear

Part 2: Things other can learn about you

1. Family role: son or daughter, sister or brother, grandchild, niece or nephew, foster son or daughter, living on my own, something else

2. An interest, talent or ability that I have

3. My favorite band or music

4. A spiritual, religious, or political belief I hold

Part 3: Things that are private, and that others might not know. Think about these things. You don't need to write down your answers. You may not have answers for these and that's OK too.

1. A secret dream I have for my future

2. An interest I have that I don't tell most people about.

3. Someone I have, or had, an attraction to that I haven't talked about.

This worksheet is meant to generate students' thoughts about themselves in terms of the different components of themselves that make up their self-identity, which is the focus of the whole *Understanding Self-Identity* teaching module. However, this worksheet also gets students thinking about themselves from a scientific labeling standpoint (especially in regards to the "what can others see" section, which creates less space for students to dive deeply into the inner workings of their unique personalities, and instead asks them to think about the ways they fit into predetermined categories.

While the "Who Am I?" worksheet has both elements where students categorize and label themselves and where they get to explain their unique interests and hopes, it is followed by activities that heavily emphasize using scientific reasoning to define a person's sexual orientation and gender identity. "Who Am I?" is followed by a matching game where students match definitions on sexual orientations and gender identities. During this activity, students are given a handout entitled "Gender Identity and Sexual Attraction Charts", which provide definitions for the following sexual identities and titles: Female, Male, Transgender Male, Transgender Female, Intersex, "I Describe My Gender Differently," Straight/ Heterosexual, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Questioning, and "I Describe My Actions Differently." Then, there are cutout definition cards for each of these terms, and students match the definition to the correct term. This exercise gets students into the mindset of labeling others based on external perceptions of their gender or

orientation.

The next activity is entitled "Stories of Young People: Sexual Identity." During this section, 12 fictional students' stories are shared. Of the stories, five students are heterosexual, four students are homosexual or bisexual, three are questioning their sexual identity, two have different ability status, one is transgender, and one is potentially asexual. After each story the students are asked to discuss four questions:

1. Where on the Gender Identity Chart would this person put himself or herself?

2. Where on the Sexual Attraction Chart would this person put himself or herself?

3. Are there ways this person feels supported and included by friends or classmates?

4. Are there ways this person feels supported by his or her family?" (Quackenbush, 2012, p. 21).

These questions are meant for students to develop a better understanding of the nuances of sexual identities and behaviors, but they ask for definitive answers that require students to quantify the "pretend student's" experiences and feelings. A benefit of this teaching model is that students are finally given the opportunity to engage in discussion with each other about adolescent sexuality. However, the guiding questions for teaching about sexualities fails at the basic level in that it gets young people into the habit of making assumptions about and labeling their peers. Unfortunately, even in this progressive teaching model, students are taught to judge others based on their assumptions, rather than learning skills for communication.

Additionally, it is positive that this teaching model was inclusive of youth who are differently abled, because they have historically been some of the most marginalized students in sex education classrooms. In this vignette, the differently-abled student was performing mentally-lower than his age group. The description was decidedly less erotic than the other

stories. This draws the question of how sexual education curricula frame the sexuality of young

people with different ability statuses and the potentially paternalistic values this promotes for

ability-privileged students. However, it is positive that differently abled young people's

experiences were included and that they were portrayed as sexual beings.

       After reviewing *Reducing the Risk*, some important questions arise for the future: How

can we integrate more opportunities for students to engage in learning activities that promote the

development of self-efficacy, values development, and feelings of empowerment? How can we

bring queer students stories in the classroom without pathologizing, quantifying and labeling

them? How can we move from a model that scares students into behaviors to a model that helps

students define what their best options are? How can we generate a different set of ideal

outcomes for high quality sex education models? As we look toward a future of gender, sexual

and sex equity, one solution is a discussion-based, youth-driven, sex-positive sex education

curriculum. A transformation of the current sex education classroom, with its discourses of

efficacy, health and science, could provide space for students to develop skills for identifying

and acting on feelings of rightness, rather than on the politics and fear-based strategies they

learned in the classroom. Though there hasn't yet been a move for Colorado's policy to reflect

this progressive direction for sex education programs, the state is rich with extracurricular

programs that are modeling how transformative educative spaces can look. The following section

is a comparative institutional ethnography of three such programs.

Critical Policy Analysis Involving Youth Leaders' Perspectives

       Analysis of the sex education curricula in Colorado identifies opportunities for

widespread youth empowerment and access to sexual health resources, and also demonstrates the

ways the policy inadequately provides support for high school students. The inclusion of

Colorado high school-aged youth sexual health leaders strengthens this analysis because they have firsthand experience with how the policy currently impacts their peers. Additionally, youth sexual health leaders have language and education to understand how sex education access is impacted by larger systems of privilege and domination, so they are able to provide a unique perspective. Youth voices were elicited in two forms: primarily, through focus groups conducted for this research, and secondarily, through testimony to the Senate and House of Representatives legislative committees on Health and Human Services by two high student school leaders from Colorado Youth CREATE Council. The methodology for the focus groups is discussed below.

Approval was gained from the University of Colorado Institutional Review Board. Three focus groups were conducted, each with members from one of the three organizations, Sex Eq., Colorado Youth CREATE and Peers Building Justice. Juniors and seniors were recruited for these focus groups, aiming to keep the age range close enough so that every participant felt comfortable discussing sex openly. A total of seven students participated in the focus groups: two from Lafayette, Colorado; two from Boulder and three from Denver. Six participants are women, one student is a man. Three identify as Latina and the other four students are white. Five were juniors and two were seniors. Students were not required to disclose their sexual identity. Three of the students participated in sex education in their high school, two opted out of the sex education, and two attend schools where sex education isn't offered. The students who opted out of sex education at their school were forced to choose between taking sex education class and taking IB and engineering classes offered. Their perspectives about the sex education at their school are based on research they conducted among their peers and observations they made regarding the sexual health climate at their school as part of their leadership program, Sex Eq. Similarly, the two who go to a school where sex education is not offered conducted research

about the sexual and relationship health climate at their school under the direction of their

leadership program, Colorado Youth CREATE.

Each focus group was semi-structured and lasted for an hour. The participants in each

focus group consented to being audio-recorded, and the recordings were later transcribed.

Analysis of the content was conducted by using thematic coding as outlined by Marshall and

Rossman (2010). Trends in the data based on themes that emerged during the three conversations

were examined. Also utilized, was discursive analysis, in which the trends in the data were

identified by the ways in which meaning was constructed around a topic (Pollock, 2008). The

issues students most clearly identified with current sex education policy is that it fails to teach

enough about sexual differences and queer experiences, communication between partners, and

power and domination within relationships. Another criticism is that the policy marginalizes

students who attend high schools with less financial resources, because it fails to adequately

provide resources for all high schools to teach a robust sex education curriculum.

Critique of the Colorado policy. While the requirement to use evidence-based curricula

makes sense as a blanket measure for helping school districts choose effective curriculum, this

requirement is problematic for a myriad of reasons. First, an evidence-based requirement limits

sex education programming to focus on impacting the three or four identified "health-risk

behaviors" including: delaying sexual debut, limiting the number of sexual partners, reducing the

frequency of sex, and increasing the use of condoms (Kirby, 2007; "Support," 2013). These are

limiting because they necessitate that the target outcomes be quantitatively measurable. When

measuring behaviors, a spectrum of behaviors emerge and are categorized by curriculum

developers and evaluators in polarized labels including: healthy/ unhealthy, risky/ safe, and bad/

good (Lamb, 2013). Although the language of many evidence-based sex education programs do

not say directly that adolescents not having sex is good and adolescents having sex is bad, the informal messages of evidence-based sex education programs clearly indicate what behavior is desirable and what is not. This is problematic because youth learn that they are "bad" – period – if they have had sex or are currently sexually active. This deficit messaging also negatively impacts students' willingness to access resources for fear of being caught being "bad" among their peers. Molly stated that a major reason her peers would refrain from accessing a clinic was the fact that, "you don't want someone to see you go in. We're in high school and things spread fast. If one person sees me, the whole school is going to know". The issue of community gossip was cited in each focus group as a likely reason why others students chose not to access sexual resources. Part of the challenge here is that condom use is promoted as a "good" behavior, but sexual activity is generally characterized as a "bad" behavior. Therefore, students get caught in the bind of not wanting to appear sexually active and forego sexual health resources.

When an educative program identifies a behavior as homogenously bad, classes lose the opportunity for students to process their experiences and examine their own desires and values. If students don't have the opportunity to explore their own values, they lose out on the chance to develop a sense of sexual subjectivity, and instead learn that sexual behaviors are prescribed, and one kind fits all (Fields, 2008). Additionally, when sex education classes frame behaviors like wearing a condom, delaying sex in adolescence and having few or only one sexual partner as the only "good" behavioral options, implicitly or explicitly, they marginalize students' whose experiences fall outside of the "good" norm. The goals of evidence-based sex education are heteronormative, especially with regard to condom use and the notion that sexual debut most often refers to "losing one's virginity", which for most people means vaginal intercourse. This means that for students who are not having or do not plan to have sexual relationships in the

"good" ways, they spend their sex education class feeling like they are wrong and bad. Adrian, a CREATE Council member testified to the Colorado State House and Senate Committees about his experience in a seventh grade sex education class sharing, "I didn't know what 'discrimination' was, but I knew that being ignored and excluded hurt a lot" (Nava, 2013). The failure to adequately recognize and teach to students who are queer, questioning and who are transgender or gender non-conforming is a lasting legacy of the teen-pregnancy prevention origins of sex education, but it must be addressed in order to better support queer and trans* youth in their sexual development.

Another problem with evidence-based curricula is the focus on changing individual youth behaviors, rather than relationship behaviors. This is inherently flawed because the sexual experiences discussed always involve two people, yet there is no focus on impacting relationship behaviors or developing interpersonal communication skills. In the focus groups, the sexual health leaders saw this as a major flaw in the current sex education in their communities – and they saw the lack of communication have negative consequences in their peers' lives. Patrick told the story of one of his friends,

> She wasn't planning on having sex on a certain time or didn't have a certain partner at the time or didn't have anyone but felt like if this situation happens, 'I might have sex.' She brings her condom in her purse, a guy gets her drunk on purpose – she didn't use it. She was to the point where she wasn't thinking about it. Then called a friend and needed Plan B. It is something that can ruin your life. Luckily she didn't get pregnant, but it can ruin your life. She thought, 'I have a condom, it's okay, it doesn't matter,' but it's so much more than that.

This story is an example of some of the negative impacts that happen when young people are ill-prepared to negotiate the actual conversations around having safe sex. It also demonstrates the dangers of educative programs that fail to bring up issues of power and domination that may take place between two partners. Other students discussed problems with the lack of attention to communication and interpersonal power dynamics between partners as they related to relationship abuse.

When the education program fails to acknowledge the other actor in the relationship, and instead, places sole responsibility for sexual outcomes on individual choice, students who have been victimized by partners are marginalized in classrooms (Andreou, 2015). A sole focus on individual behavior and practice takes away the opportunity for students who have experienced relationship or sexual abuse or violence to have an opportunity to learn language and gain empowerment and healing about their experiences, and in many cases, can lead a person to blame themselves for the violence that happened to them. For example, Scarlett explained that she felt like a bad person in her sex education class in her high school, even though she later had the language to understand that her experience was one of sexual violence where she was pressured into sex by her partner. This is an example of a missed opportunity that is caused by sex education that focuses only on healthy behaviors at the expense of a more full discussion about the factors that influence sexual and relationship health.

A final problem is that the current policy calls on schools to use evidence-based curricula, but the license to teach an evidence-based sex education curricula can be several hundred dollars for even a smaller school district (Lyons, A., personal communication, March 7, 2015). The cost of purchasing the licenses to use and teach these curricula presents barriers for schools that do not have extra resources. Two of the students in the focus groups go to a school

that doesn't offer sex education. Brenda explained why, "It's mostly because of our class and where we stand in our society, especially in our school - we don't have good grades. How we stand in the whole state. They feel that they need to teach us more math, math core classes instead of focusing on sex education that is not important." Jen then added that, "Nobody really knows anything about that education. The teachers don't feel comfortable teaching it, don't have enough knowledge to talk about it." The sex education law makes provisions for a grant-funding program that can help schools pay for new curricula, but a grant pool has not yet been generated – so this part of the legislation is only rhetoric that has not yet been implemented, and schools in need are left without resources to be able to train teachers or provide curriculum for classrooms.

The students' perspective's on the impact of the sex education policy in their schools in Colorado illuminates areas for improvement. The following section discusses opportunities for improving the current sex education landscape by detailing the program structure and impacts of three sexual and relationship health leadership programs in Colorado. These programs contribute to community health by empowering young people to be agents of social and sexual justice.

Spaces for Youth Empowerment

In multiple countries, extracurricular sexual and relationship health programs supplement the education to which students have access to in their schools (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Kirby et al., 2007). The programs focus on empowering youth to make positive, informed choices around sex and relationships. There are programs that use abstinence-only curriculum, comprehensive curriculum, and a growing number of programs which emphasize reproductive justice as their framework for youth empowerment. The teaching tools in extracurricular sexual health programs also vary widely. In some programs, youth work with mentors or adult community leaders to develop better understandings of safe sex practices. In other programs,

young people work with adult leaders to create educative programs to teach other young people (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002; Mellanby, Newcombe, Rees, & Tripp 2001). Still in others, youth get to work on social justice activism around sexual identities and issues, like in high school Gay Straight Alliances and similar organizations (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004).

Colorado has a wealth of programs devoted to youth empowerment through sexual health education and leadership, running from Southern Colorado and El Paso County up through Fort Collins. The current study is an ethnographic case study of three youth-driven sexual health organizations in Colorado. The organizations all stem from youth-empowerment models, in which young people are co-creators of the content, campaigns, and methodologies. The organizations each cultivate youth leadership in different ways and toward different aims, but all have the overarching goal of improving community health, and supporting safe, informed, healthy teen sexual and relationship experiences.

These ethnographic case studies are presented in order to show innovative ways programs empower youth in their educative models: both by helping them develop greater understanding of the different issues that impact sexual and relationship health, and by empowering students to teach others through the development of their own communication and organizing skills. The three organizations each take a unique approach to empowering youth to be leaders in promoting youth sexual and relationship health. The first organization, Peers Building Justice, frames its young leaders as Campus Organizers. They create art-based campaigns to promote healthy communities and are run by a partnership between two anti-sexual violence nonprofits, Moving to End Sexual Assault (MESA) and Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (SPAN), both based in Boulder County. The second organization, Colorado Youth CREATE Council, frames its young leaders as sexual health education and resource advocates. The CREATE

Council is the youth council for the state-wide nonprofit Colorado Youth Matter, and the youth

council works in partnership with the adults of the nonprofit to help advance legislative goals,

and promote sexual health resource access and the adoption of comprehensive sex education in

public schools around Colorado. The final organization is Sex Eq., which frames its young

people as Peer Educators. Sex Eq. was a student-run organization that was a collaboration

between college students across the state and high school students in Colorado Springs and

Lafayette, Colorado. Sex Eq. high school students researched, wrote and taught curriculum that

intended to fill the gaps in the sex education programs taught at their local high schools.

      The commonality between these three organizations is that youth participants direct each

organization's campaigns, and in their work in creating and enacting these campaigns, each

participant develops their own critical consciousness, leadership skills, and experiences of

efficacy in enacting change in their own community. The differences between these

organizations, both in the ways they frame their young leaders, and in the ways the young leaders

engage in sexual and reproductive health education leadership and advocacy, provide excellent

examples of alternative methods that can promote youth empowerment. The most important

thing we can learn from these different organizational models is that when high school students

are equipped with dynamic, inclusive and progressive information about sexual health and given

the opportunity to take leadership for supporting other young people's sexual health, they take

novel approaches to teaching each other, engaging their peers, and advancing community

progress (R. Roberts, personal communication, March 7, 2015). In the process, students not only

develop a critical consciousness and linguistic tools for understanding and describing social

inequities, they also develop other communication and organizational skills.

In order to learn more about the structural frameworks and day to day activities of Peers Building Justice, I interviewed Renee Roberts, one of the adult facilitators of the organization. Much of the following organizational discussion is based on the interview with her, as well as an analysis of the organization's website and Facebook page. Peers Building Justice is an adult-led, youth-driven organization in which high school students promote healthy relationships and work for the eradication of domestic violence. This organization is multi-tiered: the two adult leaders guest teach evidence-based violence prevention curriculum supplemented with social justice education modules in Boulder Valley School District schools, lead a year-long after school program called the Peers Building Justice Training Institute, and host the Boulder Youth Violence Prevention Council. Peers Building Justice originally had its high school students leaders doing the guest teaching about sexual and teen dating violence prevention in Boulder Valley School District classrooms, but shifted their model to having adult teachers after learning that research presented evidence that youth responded better to sexual violence education when it come from adults. In response to this shift in approach, Peers Building Justice developed the Training Institute so that it could maintain its youth-leadership focus as an organization.

The Peers Building Justice Training Institute is a school-year long program that involves about 15 to 20 youth who meet biweekly to learn about topics in sexual assault and violence, teen dating violence, media literacy, gender and masculinities, reproductive justice, social justice, community organizing, and art skills like photography and zine making. The adults lead the biweekly Training Institute meetings, but the youth select the direction of the art-based community campaigns that take place each year. Throughout the year, the Campus Organizers develop art-based activism projects that promote relationship health and an end to sexual and relationship violence. Near the end of the school year, the Campus Organizers share their art

activism and other young people's work in the Peers Building Justice Showcase. The Showcase

is hosted in a community space, and friends, family and the whole Boulder County are invited to

come take part in an evening of art-based relationship health programming. The Campus

Organizers present their yearly campaign to the community, describing how it relates to their

overall vision for eradicating sexual violence and teen dating violence. Peers Building Justice's

mission is: "We are a youth group that uses arts-based projects to promote social justice and

resist violence in our communities."

Last year, the campaign was focused on self love, positive self esteem, self-image and

how people value themselves. The Campus Organizers identified that self love was fundamental

to healthy relationships, and negative self image is a big contributor to unhealthy relationships.

For this art campaign, the Campus Organizers asked strangers around Boulder County to share

why they loved themselves on a white board and to be photographed with it. This art campaign

provided opportunities for the Campaign Organizers to communicate the importance of positive

self-image as it relates to healthy relationships and ending dating violence to community

members they met while producing the photographs to create their art campaign. This art

campaign also enabled the Campus Organizers to utilize and develop skills in strategic planning,

public speaking and community outreach, civic engagement, and intersectional communication

about the structures and frameworks that contribute to dating violence and sexual violence.

This year's theme for the art campaign is Deconstruct/ Reconstruct, which has meaning

within so many different structures of power and oppression, including sexism, homophobia, and

rape culture. The projects include a timeline of beauty, which depicts how beauty standards have

developed throughout history; a piece on the power of language, which discusses the impact of

common words and calls on people to be mindful about their language; and a video about the

Campus Organizers' work throughout the school year. Peers Building Justice is also currently planning a participatory action research project for the summer of 2015 to identify what policies in Boulder Valley School District should change in order to better support youth freedom from gender and sexual violence within schools. The Campus Organizers will work with their peers in Boulder Valley Schools to identify what are the current ways that the policies around teen dating violence and sexual assault are failing to support youth, and then they will work together to identify solutions to these deficits in the policy. In this work, Campus Organizers get to develop skills in research planning and execution, writing, and advocacy, and they are all focused on the goals of creating better circumstances for young people to be free from relationship violence and sexual violence in their communities.

The second program is Colorado Youth CREATE, which is a youth council made up of ten high school and college students from across Colorado. I took part in Colorado Youth CREATE, so much of the following discussion is based on my experience within the organization, as well as an analysis of documents from the Colorado Youth CREATE Council webpage and Facebook page. The Colorado Youth CREATE Council is primarily an advocacy organization that promotes the passage of beneficial youth sexual health legislation at the state level, and works to promote youth engagement in state and district policy making. An adult coordinator leads the organization, which meets in person for five hours once a month, and biweekly over conference call. A different CREATE Council member facilitates each meeting, and meetings provide a mixture of sexual health and reproductive justice education programming, as well as event and action planning. The CREATE Council members host events that bring together Colorado Youth to advocate for better access to sex education and sexual

health resources, and lead campaigns to get better sex education policies adopted in individual

schools.

The CREATE Council hosts a major youth lobby day in partnership with the wider

organization, Colorado Youth Matter. The lobby day is called Youth Action Day, and usually

hosts between one hundred and two hundred 14 to 21 year olds for a day of reproductive justice

education programming, public policy education, and lobbying about legislation that impacts

youth sexual health education and access to resources. The lobby day is entirely led by young

people, who write the trainings they teach. Trainings of the 2015 Youth Action Day included:

Long-Acting Reversible Birth Control (LARCs), LARC Legislation, the Legislative Process, and

How to Lobby Your Legislators. Another training was called "Know Your Rights", which

discussed why teens should be involved in law-making that included a factsheet of important

laws that impacted youth in a variety of issues, from sexual health and consent rights, to their

rights when dealing with police and as Non-Citizen community members. The Youth Action Day

event is an opportunity for CREATE Council members to develop skills in event planning,

community organizing, public speaking, and fundraising, and most importantly, the CREATE

Council members develop skills in speaking truth to power, and teach their peers how to

communicate with power as well.

The CREATE Council also compiles fact sheets with information about youth sexual

health and rights. Fact sheets include information on current legislation, comprehensive sex

education, and youth-adult partnerships. In 2014, the CREATE Council hosted a workshop for

other youth sexual health leaders to come together to brainstorm information the community

could benefit from. Collectively, they produced fact sheets on How to Be Better Community

Members to Queer Youth, How to Better Support Pregnant and Parenting Teens, Expanding

Sexual Health Resources at Schools, and Improving Comprehensive Sex Education. The fact

sheets produced by Colorado Youth CREATE are distributed by Colorado Youth Matter and

adopted by the larger organization, which demonstrates a commitment to the CREATE Council

members' leadership and demonstrates that their perspectives are valued. In the development of

each of these fact sheets, CREATE Council members conduct research about sexual and

reproductive justice topics and then produce a call to action.

Additional leadership that Colorado Youth CREATE Council members take part in is

teaching at conferences for youth and adults across the state and country. The CREATE Council

speaks at many different conferences and workshops because Colorado Youth Matter works to

keep the members involved in the statewide and national movement for improving the sexual

health landscape for young people. CREATE Council members have presented at conferences

for youth-serving adults, young people who are sexual health leaders in their own communities,

and young people who are doing other social justice work. In these speaking opportunities,

CREATE Council members get the opportunity to develop educative curriculum, and refine their

own knowledge around topics of reproductive justice, community organizing and youth

empowerment.

The third extracurricular program is Sex Eq., which stands for Sexual Equity Education.

Sex Eq. peer educators, who are high school students, research, create and teach their own sexual

education curriculum to their peers in Colorado. The high school students are partnered with

college-aged mentors in order to facilitate their research and teaching process. Sex Eq.'s

organizational goal is to transform the sex education curriculum taught in high schools, by

creating new content that addresses the needs of high school students as they observe them. Sex

Eq. focuses on subjects that are important but are not currently getting adequate or effective

coverage in the high school sex education curriculum.

I founded and directed Sex Eq., and its theoretical background is instructive in

identifying ways that sex education programs can better acknowledge high school students as

experts of their own lived experiences. Sex Eq. generates health through a community

empowerment model, which is defined by Beeker, Guenther-Grey, & Raj (1998) as a program

that:

> seeks to effect community-wide change in health-related behaviors by organizing
>
> communities to define their health problems, to identify the determinants of those
>
> problems, and to engage in effective individual and collective action to change those
>
> determinants. (p. 833)

Sex Eq.'s community empowerment model also draws on theories laid out by education

philosopher Paulo Freire (2005), who advocated for situating youth and the community's

knowledge alongside the teacher's. Friere advocated for an educative program that helps young

people develop their own critical consciousness about their environmental and social context, as

well as about their political position and access in the larger community. The program was

designed to enable high school students to lead in the research and development of the sex

education curriculum, while the college-age mentors provided the scaffolding for the students as

they developed new leadership capacities and faced new challenges.

Sex Eq. peer educators taught workshops in community and youth-centered conference

spaces, organized a research campaign, and advocated for expanded curriculum at the schools

and across the state. One workshop, "Breaking the Box," was created by the youth in the

Lafayette chapter of Sex Eq. and focused on explaining the difference between gender, sex and

sexual orientation. The students surveyed the content that was taught in their high school's sex education, and identified that sexual diversity was an area that was widely lacking in their programs. They created "Breaking the Box" by researching online resources for gender spectrum and identity, and reaching out to other educative programs to learn about the ways in which they teach about gender and identity variation. Breaking the Box was taught at Project YES!, which is a teen space in Lafayette.

Another workshop, "Allyship 101", was taught in Colorado Springs at the Educating Children of Color Summit. "Allyship 101" focused on teaching high school students about bullying of queer youth in middle and high schools. The workshop also included discussion about the ways in which straight-identified youth might better support their queer-identified peers, and the students explored overcoming barriers and fears about acting as allies. This workshop was created based on research about the rates of bullying in schools, as well as the input from the Sex Eq. chapter's partner organization, the Palmer High School GSA.

Sex Eq. presents a radical way for viewing high school age student's strengths in addressing the needs of their community regarding sexual health. Reasons for the dearth of programs in which young people are given full agency over the topics that they teach range from lack of funding for such programs, lack of school and governmental support for such programs, and an overall distrust of young peoples' capacities to adequately address the health challenges and disparities in their community. In the future, youth-empowerment focused education models could widely benefit from privileging their students' experiences and knowledge, because they then can tailor their content to be culturally responsive to the community's unique needs.

Conclusion: Next Steps

As we look toward creating a sexual health policy that is effective in addressing students' lived experiences, it is important to look to youth leaders in the field for guidance. Programs which focus on youth empowerment for sexual health, and youth activism for wider community health, create a knowledge-base of well-informed investigators. The students' experiences in their high school communities enable them to clearly see the challenges their peers face, while their training and leadership development enable them to clearly articulate solutions to strengthen communal approaches to sexual health.

Youth sexual health education must include better approaches to the empowerment of youth, including a greater emphasis on navigating communication in relationships, discussions of dominance and privilege in relationships, and a more robust discussion of sexuality and sexual identity. Sex education would better reach students' needs if it included more opportunities for youth to develop skills and knowledge that will help them avoid oppression in their sexual and romantic lives and identities. A policy that requires emphasis on teaching about communication, power and domination in relationships, and sexual diversity will allow more students across Colorado to maintain agency over their experiences.

In addition to teaching more empowering sexual health content, all sex education programs could benefit from giving youth the opportunity to develop their written, oral and public communication skills about sexual health, which is modeled by the three organizations presented in the case study. As we look toward a future for improving sex education models, it is iformative to look at the Instructional Priorities for the Colorado Academic Standards, as listed by the Colorado Department of Education. They call for:

1. Rigor – Systematic, methodical, and deep engagement to - Develop concepts and skills in each content area. Compel the use of inquiry, critical thinking and creative processes.

2. Relevancy-Authentic and meaningful experiences that - Include real world scenarios that necessitate individual and group problem-solving. – Require the application and transfer of knowledge, concepts and skill across situations and contexts ("Supporting," 2014, p. 1).

If we take our educational priorities to develop student leadership and success in other academic programs, and apply those standards to sex education content, we have the opportunity to empower young people to think critically about their sexual and relationship experiences and expectations. A future where all high school students in Colorado are empowered to be critical thinkers about sexuality and health starts with a robust policy, and can be carried forward with the support of youth leaders and independent sector organizations that are already leading the way.

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