“It was a personal research effort”: LGBTQ-Identified UIUC Student Experiences with Pre-College Sex Education

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May 10th, 2012
About the Researcher

I am currently an undergraduate student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. My major concentrations are in Psychology and Gender & Women’s Studies, and my research interests lie primarily in the areas of sexuality, sexual health, gender identity and expression, mental health, and holistic wellness. I am queer-identified, and have lived in the Champaign-Urbana area for my entire life. I have been passionate about sexual health education since my high school years, when I worked on sexual health outreach with other high school students in the Champaign-Urbana area. I’ve recently become more interested in learning about the ways in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identified students experience sexual health education and am curious about the ways in which sexual health education curricula can be written to be more inclusive of these students.

Sexual Health Education and LGBTQ Identity Existing Literature

Sexual health education in American schools is a largely contested topic in many ways. Since formal, in-school sex education was first placed in the public eye in the early 1900’s, individuals have opposed the notion of children learning about sex. In the 1970’s, however, a push for representation and protection of lesbian and gay identities in schools caused a large amount of backlash from the religious right in the form of Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign and the California Briggs’ Initiative (Blount 2003, p 614). Since then, the Obama Administration has implemented policy geared toward protecting lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in the form of the Mathew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 2009 and the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell in 2011, just to name a few. However, LGBTQ identities are often not acknowledged in formal classroom sex education whatsoever.
Roffman (2000) presents four models for school’s policy on teaching about gay identity: the Acquiescence Model (permitting homophobic attitudes and heterosexism to remain the norm, not confronting the issues), the Heterosexism Model (officially embracing and anti-gay position for the school), the Tolerance Model (defining homosexuality as a controversial issue but tolerating support for those identities), and the Equity Model (actively rejecting negative myths and stereotypes, enforcing equality) (p 135). Christopher Fisher’s (2009) research with LGBTQ-identified young adults about their experiences with sex education reveals that the Acquiescence Model and Heterosexism Model seem to be pervasive, and that there is an active silence around LGBTQ identity and relevant information in the sex education classroom as well as frequent hostility toward students of these identities. Fisher’s research findings also indicate that participants were resilient in the face of the challenges presented to them, both interpersonally and informationally (p73). This research seeks to build on Fisher’s findings but investigating not only the ways in which LGBTQ-identified college students experienced the sex education that they received before college, but also the ways in which the students believe that this education has or has not impacted their experiences with sex and sexuality during their college years. Additionally, almost all research done on sexual education and its exclusion of certain identities has not included much focus on transgender identities, save for the “T’ being part of the LGBTQ acronym. As Jessica Fields (2003) writes,

The boy-girl world that sex education insistently presents discourages any acknowledgment or exploration of the possibility of gender or sexual ambiguity. This neglect is increasingly important at the turn of the twenty-first century as educators and researchers learn more about the experiences of intersex and transgendered youth whose experiences do not conform to a rigidly dichotomous gender/sex system. (p113)
An important goal of this research was to include the perspective of at least one individual who identified as transgender in order to understand gaps in education inclusivity that may exist for those identities as well.

**Research Questions**

Given the existing literature on pre-college sexual health education programs and the information currently available, this research sought to answer three main questions:

- How have self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign experienced sexuality education?
- What effects does the sex education these students received at their middle schools and high schools have on these students’ lives at UIUC?
- In what ways can sexuality education be more inclusive of and helpful to LGBTQ students?

These questions were identified because it felt important to explore not only the sex education that participants had received, but also the ways in which they believed this education was impacting their lives at this time, as young adults and as a part of the UIUC community at large.

**Participants**

A total of five participants were interviewed for this project. Participants were recruited through the LGBT Resource Center’s listserv, InQueeri, as well as by word of mouth. Requirements for participation were LGBTQ self-identification, UIUC undergraduate status, and
an age of 18 or older. The sexual orientation makeup of participants was as follows: one gay-identified participant, one lesbian-identified participant, one bisexual-identified participant, one queer-identified participant, and one participant who described their sexuality as “attracted to women”. Two men, two women, and one transmasculine genderqueer individual were interviewed. Two participants described their race and ethnicity as White, one identified as Polish-American, one as Chinese-American, and one as Korean-American. Two participants attended high school in the Champaign-Urbana area, one in a Chicago suburb, one in Chicago, and one in a rural town in Southern Illinois. One participant attended elementary and middle school in South Korea before moving to Illinois for high school. Three participants were seniors at UIUC, and two were juniors.

**Method**

I gathered information through the use of semi-structured interviews with five participants. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. These interviews included questions about the structure and elements of participants’ formal (in-class) pre-college sex education and participants’ personal feelings about this formal education. Participants were asked to describe any informal sex education they received before college (stories from friends, internet, television, etc.) and were also asked to describe their feelings about sex and sexuality now. Finally, participants were asked which parts of their sex education curriculum were helpful, what they wish had been included (if anything), and what they would change about the curriculum. At the end of each interview, the participant was asked to describe their sexual orientation, gender identity, and racial/ethnic identity, as well as any other identity that was important to them. All interviews were transcribed by interviewer, and identifying information was removed. Audio
recordings were then destroyed. After analyzing the five interviews, four main themes emerged from the participants’ narratives.

**Feeling Out of Place in the Classroom**

One important theme that emerged from participants’ narratives was the idea of feeling as if they did not belong in the classroom environment when sexual practices were being discussed. According to participant responses, sex education curricula tend to be heteronormative (focusing entirely on heterosexual sex and corresponding methods of protection and presenting this information as the only “normal” or “natural” practices). As a result, participants described feeling as if their needs were being neglected and that the information they were receiving was not useful or practical for them. Daniel, a queer-identified Asian male, reported that “Inside my mind there was something like ‘This doesn’t apply to me’ and that was hard for me...” The impression that the sexual health material presented did not apply to participants was pervasive, and was mentioned at least once in every interview. Patrick, a white gay male, shared that “When I started figuring out that I was gay and we were having sex ed, you know, it was all male-female sex, and I was just like ‘Okay, don’t really know what I’m supposed to do.’”

Participant stories included more than just glossing over or forgetting about LGBTQ identities and sexual practices – some interviews revealed an openly avoidant or even hostile attitude toward these topics. Daniel recalled one specific instance of this:

I remember someone asking “what if you wanted to engage in anal sex?” but not in a mature way. It was like, you know, “what if?” And the teacher refused to comment on it. That was it. So there was no discussion whatsoever.

Based on Daniel’s story, it seems that his classroom adopted the Acquiescence Model of teaching about LGBTQ identity – the teacher avoided the topic at all costs and refused to
acknowledge it when addressed. Jessica, a white, bisexual female, described a similarly intentional silence around LGBTQ issues in the classroom at her school. She, however, attempted to make sense of her school’s decision to leave these topics out of the curriculum.

I think that it was a catch-22. Because if we didn’t talk about it, it led to homophobia, but I think that to talk about it wouldn’t have helped it, and could have sometimes made it worse.

Even in the sexual health education that came from outside of the classroom, participants noticed heteronormativity and felt that the information was not applicable to them. Lisa, an Asian lesbian woman, described the sex education she received from her parents.

I guess that my parents did have a very brief birds & bees conversation, but it wasn’t really all that helpful to me. [laughs] Just because I wasn’t out then, and so they didn’t really know, but it wasn’t really relevant.

Overall, a main theme in participant narratives revealed that sex education curricula (as well as informal sex education methods) tended to be extremely heteronormative and leave LGBTQ students feeling left out and without information that they could utilize in their own lives.

“Extra Credit” Research

By far the most interesting and rich theme that emerged from participant narratives was the theme of “extra credit” research. Each participant reported doing a large amount of research on their own time in order to educate themselves on sexual health topics – usually because of a perceived deficit in the education they were receiving in school. Patrick brought this topic up early in his interview.

When I would get home from school there would be a, from like three until six I’d have the house to myself. That’s when my parents get home from work. So then, I’d uh, I would use that time to uh, go and, you know, I would say do some extra credit research. You know. So, when I would hear a term like, blowjob, or like, rimming or something like that, I would go look it up. And that would lead to, you know, definitions, and
pictures, and the pictures led to more pictures, and I guess that’s where I kind of got most of my information about, you know, how sex actually works. And, you know, what’s the process and you know, different positions and where do things go? And what can you do with different things and the more, like I said the more out-of-the-box activities like the not conventional, you know, man-woman, missionary style of having sex.

The internet was referenced by every participant as a main source of knowledge about sexuality and sexual health. Participants reported using message boards, chat rooms, porn sites, Wikipedia, personal blogs, and fan fiction as places that they were able to access sexual health information. While discussing informal sex education, participants reported feeling that they were not receiving enough information relevant to their sexualities from their school’s curriculum and felt that their only option was to seek out the information on their own. Jessica expressed great pride in her ability to obtain do this without any assistance from adults, saying “So that worked. My informal way of teaching myself, the Abraham Lincoln way of doing it - I did, I learned it very well. The school did not help me at all.”

Because participants were forced to use unregulated sources to learn about sexual health and sexuality, the information obtained was not always accurate or appropriate. Sam, a white, transmasculine genderqueer individual, described hir experiences of learning about sex from older members of hir marching band.

I was the only not-boy in my section of like, 30 people. And um, they would get like, really explicit, because they could kind of ignore me. And they’d get really explicit and really misogynistic and it was kind of awful and horrifying. But it also was probably pretty good, blunt education. I don’t know if it was good education, but probably thorough is the best word. It was a thorough education.

What Sam describes here is alarming, and it is important to keep in mind that by leaving LGBTQ-applicable information out of sex education curriculums, schools are giving students two choices: not to learn about their sexuality and corresponding safe sex practices at all, or to
put their physical and emotional health in jeopardy by learning about these important topics from sources that are not generally reliable and are almost always unregulated.

**Desire for a “Safe Space” in the Classroom**

During each interview, participants were asked to describe what they would change about their pre-college sex education curriculum, if anything. Most participants had a lot to say in response to this question, and the bulk of these responses focused on the environment of the sex education classroom. Safety came up often when discussing features of an ideal sex education classroom. Jessica discussed her personal fear of violence if people found out about her sexuality.

I got away pretty clean. I got away, cause I caught on to the true harassment aspect of it going ‘I’d better be careful or I’m gonna get my ass kicked. Calm down, hide that away.’ And none of my friends from high school, none of them know. None… I think being able to make it a safe space would have been a really good thing. Because even in the classroom it wasn’t a safe space. Not even slightly. Because there was the general common discourse and you’d hear it... And you didn’t want to go against it. You didn’t want to be seen as that “other”.

Daniel described what he believed to be the ideal sex education classroom:

I think sex ed should be a very inclusive place, and I think it should be a place where people can identify with each other. It’s about breaking through the barrier first and then having a discussion about it, rather than being afraid of facing it or worrying about the outcome.

As these participants’ narratives show us, perceived lack of physical and emotional safety for LGBTQ students in sex education classrooms and schools is a potential barrier to students’ learning and gaining the maximum amount of information and resources from their sex education.

**Identity Confusion and Effects on College Life**
The main goal of this project was to understand the ways in which pre-college sex education impacts the lives of LGBTQ-identified students later in life, particularly in college. One narrative that came up in interviews centers on identity development and the transition to college from high school. Sam described feelings of confusion and shame about hir gender and sexual orientation identities related to hir lack of sexual education before college.

The idea of straight sex, honestly, I remember being like, terrified because it sounded so unpleasant. And if I had maybe heard how, like, lesbian sex worked or thought “That sounds more appealing,” maybe I would have come out sooner. I don’t know. But, I mean, if I had had it in a formal setting, I probably wouldn’t have had as much shame about it as I did.

Patrick, who was able to take part in a sex education curriculum during high school, was still not exposed to LGBTQ-relevant information during this curriculum. He describes feelings of belonging when he began transitioning into college life and meeting other gay men.

So then I got introduced to, um, gay sex and my first introduction to what that was and I was like “Oh, this makes more sense to me. Don’t know about the rest of that stuff, but this is for me.” I’d never experienced it yet, but it was kind of like, that internal, like, you know.

At the end of their interviews, participants were asked if there was anything they would like to share or include in their interview that hadn’t already been mentioned. At this point, Daniel shared a piece of advice for teachers and policy makers.

I mean, everyone kinda knows, we kinda know that college students experiment, and they really should think about the future for these kids. They always talk about like planning their schools, and planning their path, but they don’t think about the social aspects of these students, and I think if they looked far ahead into college years, I don’t think they would be as reserved.

As Daniel asserts, sex education should provide all students with skills that they will ideally be able to apply for the rest of their lives. When certain identities and practices are left out of the
curriculum, students in those identity groups are put at potential risk during their future, when they may lack the information necessary to make healthy and informed choices.

**Conclusion and Implications for Further Research**

These findings show that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identified students experience sex education in a variety of ways, and that this education can have a large impact on the ways in which individuals experience sex and sexuality as adults. Participants reported feelings deliberately left out in the physical space of the classroom as well as the curriculum, reporting feeling “othered” and feeling as if their identities were not valid or safe to express in school. Participants reported obtaining information about sex almost entirely from sources outside of the classroom, including the internet, pornography, television, friends, and novels. Participants described the impact that their education had on their college lives, including shame about sexuality and sexual desires and suppression of individual social identity. Fortunately, some participants described feeling a sense of belonging if they were able to find an LGBTQ community on campus, and stated that it was a feeling that they had not previously known.

While the narratives presented here indicate that LGBTQ students were able to learn about sex and seek information in alternative ways, the findings also imply that there is much work to be done to make sex education inclusive of all gender and sexual identities. In order to make this possible, further research is required to determine the most effective and inclusive methods of transmitting sexual health information to LGBTQ populations. For college students to fully develop and feel comfortable with their gender and sexual identities, they must be given relevant and accurate foundational information about safe sexual practices in an environment that
feels safe and inclusive before they arrive at the University. The University can also play a role in this process by offering students a safe place to realize their identity as well as validating spaces to reinforce positive feelings about identity or to counteract feelings of shame and identity confusion that were created before college.
References


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