The Power of Anonymity: California Students' Opinions of Their Sex Education

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ABSTRACT

Four seniors majoring in Gender Studies at UCLA participated in a focus group to discuss their experiences with the sex education they received after the passing of the California Healthy Youth Act. This study compares the current literature to the findings from the focus group to examine participants' opinions. Specific focus is given to participants' thoughts on discussions being included in sex education in hopes of normalizing the topic and reducing shame. Results showed that participants desired many changes and were uncertain about discussions in sex education. They instead greatly valued question boxes that allowed for anonymity.

Keywords: *comprehensive sex education, California Healthy Youth Act, anonymous sex education, discussion-based sex education, sexual shame*

Introduction

Legally Mandated Sex Education

In 2016, California updated its sex education requirements with the passing of the California Healthy Youth Act. It requires sex education to be taught once in middle school and once in high school, as well as requiring certain topics to be discussed ("*California Healthy,"* 2016). Mandated topics include: STIs, growth, gender, sexual orientation, relationships, contraceptives, pregnancy, and more ("*California Healthy,"* 2016). It also requires that "knowledge and skills necessary to have healthy, positive, and safe relationships" must be taught, and an affirming stance must be taken towards the diversity of sexual orientation and gender ("*California Healthy,"* 2016, General Provisions section). In addition, California Education Code § 51225.36 states that any school that teaches health education must include information on affirmative consent, which is defined by code § 67386 as "affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity" ("*California codes,"* 2025). The goal of this education, as seen by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People 2030 plan, is to reduce underage sex and STI transmission (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2026).

Due to a lack of a federal mandate, sex education differs from state to state, with only 30 states requiring that sex education be taught, four of which do not require the information to be medically accurate. For 34 states, if sex education is taught, it must "emphasize abstinence as correct or preferable to sexual activity," and only 18 states require that consent be mentioned (Guttmacher Institute, 2025, Table 1). In addition, California is one of only nine states that require

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that LGBTQ+ individuals be discussed inclusively. In six states, it is illegal to discuss LGBTQ+ people, and in seven, information about queer people must be presented in a stigmatizing way, meaning educators must present queer identities as "shameful, unacceptable, or illegal" (Guttmacher Institute, 2025, Table 1).

Students' Perceptions of Sex Education Across Countries

Even though sex education is mandated in California, that does not mean it is completed successfully. In prior research, participants stated an overwhelming lack of information and desired major changes. One of the most extensive research papers was a meta-analysis by Pound et al. titled, "What do young people think about their school-based sex and relationship education? A qualitative synthesis of young people's views and experiences." The paper includes 55 papers and 48 total studies conducted from 1991 to 2015 from across the globe. The studies include participants ages six to twenty-five, with a majority of participants ranging from twelve to eighteen. A majority of the studies, twenty-five, originate from the United Kingdom, followed by ten from the US. Other countries include: Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the Republic of Ireland, Japan, Sweden, Brazil, and Iran. Some fascinating conclusions were that "despite the wide geographical reach of the studies, young people's views are strikingly consistent" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 11). It was also found that "students in the USA who had abstinence-only-based SRE [sex and relationship education] were not markedly different from those whose SRE was more comprehensive" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 11). Lastly, there were no major changes in participants' opinions over the twenty-five years. Rather, as society and participants got more progressive, they continued to state their disappointment in outdated education (Pound et al., 2016). Overall, this study found participants' opinions to be similar regardless of country of origin, type of sex education, or year receiving sex education.

Sex Education Frequency, Teachers, and Media Use

Students often voiced that sex education was not taught soon or frequently enough. Data collected for the National Survey of Family Growth by the National Center for Health Statistics supports this statement with the finding that 57% of female adolescents and 53% of male adolescents had already had sex by the time their school addressed it (Guttmacher Policy, 2022). Many participants desired sex education that started earlier, with a benefit being that it may be easier to discuss at a younger age (Pound et al., 2016), therefore normalizing the topic and reducing shame and stigma. An additional study by Hobaica and Kwon (2017) supports this and found that due to the open-mindedness of young children, having a queer-inclusive sex education at a young age helps children become more accepting of queer people. It was also found that sex education varies in the number of sessions that students receive (Koepsel, 2016), with many students voicing a desire for more frequent sessions (Phippen, 2012; Proulx, 2019; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2021). Once sex education is checked off the school's list, the topic is not usually brought up again for another couple of years, leaving students without a comfortable way to address their questions.

A large majority of students felt uncomfortable with their teacher leading sex education. In one study, when asked whether they would like this, only nineteen percent of students said yes (Pound et al., 2016). Teachers often struggle with this topic, as seen by a student sharing, "we had Miss Plum she was a PE teacher but she cried" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 9). Students are very aware

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of their teachers' reactions, and it sends a loud message. One teacher in a study shared that "if your teacher who's a grown up can't talk about it, how are you (supposed to)? That gives you the impression that, oh I'm not really supposed to talk about it" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 9). This may lead to isolation and shame. In addition to the discomfort teacher-led sex education produces, Pound et al. (2016) also mention how the power imbalance between student and teacher, and the blurring of some boundaries that this topic entails, makes this situation somewhat unethical. Instead, many students suggested the use of outside experts or peer educators (Pound et al., 2016; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020; York et al., 2021). Outside experts were seen as "unshockable" and more knowledgeable (Pound et al., 2016, p. 11), allowing for more comfort and confidently presented factual information. This subject requires teachers to not only know the information but also how to deliver it.

Students disagreed on how teachers should utilize media. In some studies, students thought that teachers didn't take enough advantage of media that could help explain complex topics and share personal stories (Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020, 2021; Thianthai, 2019). In other studies, students felt that media was impersonal and that teachers relied too heavily on websites and videos (Jørgensen et al., 2019; York et al., 2021). Pound et al. (2016) found that when teachers were uncomfortable, they would rely on media to teach the class, which limited student engagement. Using media, but not solely relying on it, may be a middle ground that students prefer.

LGBTQ+ Representation

Students frequently mentioned that sex education was heteronormative and lacked LGBTQ+ content. With twenty-two to twenty-eight percent of Generation Z now identifying as LGBTQ+ (Public Religion Research Institute, 2024; "LGBTQ+ Identification," 2024), it is pertinent that sex education includes the identities of all students. Across a plethora of studies, all of which took place in countries that were accepting of LGBTQ+ people, students stated a lack of education on queerness and a desire for it (Forrest et al., 2004; Hobaica & Kwon, 2017; Pound et al., 2016; Proulx, 2019; Thianthai, 2019). A lack of representation not only harms queer students but can also lead to riskier sexual behaviors as queer students are not taught how to protect themselves physically and emotionally (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). Without this information and support, feelings of shame and self-blame may arise (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). With a group that already has high rates of depression and suicide, queer people must be included.

Students' opinions differ on whether sex education should be taught in single-sex groups. One study found that women preferred separated groups, whereas men preferred mixed groups (Pound et al., 2016). This is likely explained by the fact that in many studies, men would disrupt class and harass women who paid attention to sex education (Pound et al., 2016). In other studies, students, regardless of gender, preferred gender separated groups (Jørgensen et al., 2019; Phippen, 2012). One benefit of this may be that students can form a deeper connection with students of the same gender; however, students lose out on information when separated (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). Separating students by gender may also reinforce heteronormativity and the gender binary and harm students who do not fit into it and are forced to pick a gender.

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Lack of Social and Emotional Information in Sex Education

One major theme that frequently arose was the overrepresentation of biological information and a lack of information on the social and emotional aspects of sex. In one study, a student stated, "everything we got in our class had a really clinical feel, it's just like information but it's not related to yourself" (Pound et al., 2016, p. 9). It was commonly reported that sex education was too biological and lacked emotional topics that students wanted to discuss (Pound et al., 2016; Proulx, 2019; Thianthai, 2019; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020). While biology is important and should be taught, there is other information that must be included too. How are students supposed to manage their desires, fears, and range of emotions about such a complex topic and experience without any support? Students stated a desire to learn about relationships, feelings and emotions, how to have sex, how to say no to sex, and how to talk about pressure and abuse (Pound et al., 2016). The information taught in sex education does not mirror what students desire to learn.

Research Question

Although this project is guided by the existing scientific literature, it is also highly personal and shaped by my experiences with sex education. My sex education ended in ninth grade, years before I realized I was queer. I was not interested in the topic in the slightest and was highly uncomfortable with it. This resulted in little to no conversation about this topic with friends, making it feel private and shameful. Once I realized I was queer, I developed a passion for this topic, but these feelings still plagued me and took years to undo. Discussing this topic with friends, in therapy, and with others who work in this field really normalized it and allowed me to realize my thoughts and feelings are quite common. For this paper, I hoped to see what students thought about their sex education, how they would change it, and if they had similar feelings of shame. If those feelings were present in sex education, I proposed that including more discussions would help lessen shame. Prior research supports the idea that students want more discussions in sex education (Jørgensen et al., 2019; Phippen, 2012; Pound et al., 2016; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020; Thianthai, 2019; York et al., 2021). Students stated that they want teachers to talk with them, not "*at* them" (Jørgensen et al., 2019, p. 35). However, in one study, the participants agreed that while discussion should be encouraged, many students would not be comfortable with it (Goldstein, 2020). Pound et al. (2016, p. 8) found this too and stated that "some found the idea of talking straightforwardly about their sexual needs difficult, but others wanted to learn these skills and become more confident in sexual negotiations and discussions." In doing this study, I want to continue this discussion.

Methods

Study Design

I conducted a focus group with four fellow UCLA seniors. I chose a focus group over individual interviews as I was interested to see how participants would discuss the topic and feel about the experience, since discussions in sex education were one of the major focuses of this study. Additionally, I wanted the focus group to focus on women's experiences, as I was curious to see the role shame played in sex education, and I believed that emotion to be more prevalent in women when receiving sex education. Out of convenience, I reached out to four friends with whom

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I took my core gender studies classes, and all agreed to my invitation to participate in the group. We all transferred to UCLA in 2024, and for a year, we saw each other at least twice a week for classes.

Procedure

We met for a one-hour and ten-minute discussion after our classes were finished in a private study room in Powell Library. The room was the most private space we could find on campus, but we could occasionally hear the group next to us, and we assumed they could hear us too. In addition, one of the walls was made of glass, so it was not the most private area for a topic that is often very sensitive. Participants signed consent forms to be included in this project and were told the goal was to hear about their sex education experiences. Before the focus group, I came up with the questions listed in Figure 1 below. Questions were formed through my discussions with my professor, reviewing prior literature, my own sex education experiences, and my genuine curiosity. Many questions got added as they came to mind in the days leading up to the focus group. All of the questions were asked of the participants, with many more questions arising during the discussion. Participants were encouraged to talk with each other and ask questions that came to mind. We sat in a circle around a table, which allowed for easy interaction and hopefully limited some power imbalance between researcher and participants. I made sure there was some structure to the group, but I was equally interested to see where the conversation would lead.

Analysis

The audio was later transcribed and coded for patterns. For my first round of reviewing the transcript, I familiarized myself with it and started to notice topics that repeated and stood out. For the second round, I highlighted quotes and topics that stood out and transferred them to a new document. From there, I noted the topics that each quote touched on, which resulted in the following nineteen topics: anonymous question boxes, students separated by gender, social emphasis, STIs, fear/shame, fanfiction, lack of pleasure information, masturbation, discussion, LGBTQ+, not prepared to have sex, underage sex, sex learned socially, scientific emphasis, abstinence, sex education as important, periods, consent, and college sex education. Lastly, I noted which topics were mentioned most and grouped ideas together.

Participant Demographics

All participants in the focus group were Gender Studies majors, female, used she/her pronouns, and were either 21 or 22. They all asked to remain anonymous and chose their aliases. In addition, they all went to public California high schools and received their sex education after the passing of the California Healthy Youth Act. The goal was to focus mainly on high school sex education, but all school sex education ended up being covered. All participants attended elementary, middle, and high school in the Los Angeles area. Participant one, Iris, is a white, Jewish, lesbian who is middle-class. In addition to her Gender Studies major, she is also a Film, Television, and Digital Media minor. Participant two, Katherine, is white, straight, lower middle class, and is not religious. Participant three, PollyD, is Latina, bisexual, atheist, and lower class. Participant four, Stella, is Persian, Agnostic, and middle-class. While I did not share my experiences in the focus group, some are present in this paper, and my identities are as follows: I

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am white, gay, upper-middle-class, and not religious. In addition to my Gender Studies major, I am also a Sociology major.

Figure 1 – *Focus Group Questions*

Background	Do you remember your sex education well? Was there anything done really well or really poorly? Tell me about your sex education (funny stories, things that stood out, etc.).
Reflection	After sex education, did you feel knowledgeable on the topic? Please explain. How did you feel emotionally during and after your sex education? How do you feel your sex education has impacted you, your relationships, and sex life? Did you feel emotionally prepared to have sex? Knowledgeably prepared? (As in how to have sex, be safe, etc.) Did you have to look for more information elsewhere?
Improvements	What topics, if any, would you have liked discussed in your sex education? Was the clitoris ever mentioned? Pleasure? Masturbation? Lube? From what viewpoint would you have liked sex education discussed? (neutral, factual, sex positive, pleasure-focused, etc.) Please explain. How often would you have liked sex education? What format of instruction would you prefer for sex education? (peer educators, outside educators, discussion-based, videos, etc.) What could have been done to make your sex education amazing, memorable, positive, etc.? How did it feel to talk about all of this?

Limitations

Before discussing the results, it is important to note some things that may have impacted the results. The fact that the interviewees are my friends whom I have known for a while and see frequently likely impacted what information was divulged. It is possible that they felt more comfortable talking with me than they would have with an unknown interviewer, but our frequent interactions may have led them to keep some information private. Our identity as Gender Studies majors also impacts how we view and discuss the topic, as we likely have much more experience thinking about these issues. The use of a focus group instead of individual interviews also impacted the results. The ability to interact with others reminded participants of past experiences they had forgotten, and they also got to compare sex education experiences, with some realizing that their

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sex education was better or worse than they thought. It is also possible that participants may have limited some information due to the limited privacy of the focus group, but this did not appear to be the case.

I am also aware that this project had a very limited number of participants with similar identities. This paper was originally my capstone for one of my degrees, meaning I had 11 weeks to complete my research and paper. Ideally, more people would have been involved in the focus group, but due to time constraints, this was the best I could do. The focus group aligned well with what the author of "Qualitative Research Methods," Monique M. Hennink, says it should include. She advises groups to be five to ten people with similar backgrounds, meet for an hour to an hour and a half, focus on a core topic, and explore different perspectives (Taylor et al., 2016). When it comes to the number of participants in a study, "what is important is the potential of each case to aid the researcher in developing theoretical insights into the area of social life being studied" (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 108). A small number of participants can still be valuable in producing important findings (Toner, 2009). Even with a limited number of participants, the focus group produced a vast amount of information and unique stories. It was an honor to listen to the lived experiences of queer women of color, and their rich experiences add a new perspective to the present topic.

Discussion

Participants' Diverse Experiences

As expected, participants had differences in their sex education, but what continued to stand out throughout the focus group were Iris's and PollyD's experiences. They went to the same high school but were a year apart, with PollyD being one year ahead. As Iris detailed her experience learning about the Santa Monica Rape Treatment Center, LGBTQ+ sex, and consent, PollyD continued to respond in shock as her education lacked all of those topics. When asked if their education included consent, Iris replied with "very much," whereas PollyD replied with no. Through this experience, Iris came to recognize that her sex education was quite phenomenal, while PollyD kept her opinion that hers was just fine. This small example shows just how diverse sex education can be. If students one year apart at the same school are receiving completely different education, then that is likely also true for students across California and the country.

Consistency in Identifying Problems

Participants all agreed on the use of media within sex education, how often it should be taught, and who should be teaching it. Stella mentioned that there are great videos that explain topics easily, but that teachers don't often think to use them. She referenced a video called *Tea Consent* which covers consent in a simple and somewhat funny way, which may help students absorb the information better. This desire for media use is somewhat inconsistent with prior research and may be explained by the fact that media wasn't used much in Stella's education. Had that been the sole mode of transmitting information, she likely would have wanted other methods too. Opinions on the frequency of sex education were also shared by participants, but were different from prior research. They liked having education that grew as they did, and thought that having it once in elementary, middle, and high school was ideal. There was no desire to have it

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more frequently or have it start earlier, although Stella and PollyD did note that they started their periods before that topic was brought up in school. Lastly, consistent with the literature, no one wanted their teacher to lead sex education and instead desired outside experts. Both Iris and PollyD received their sex education from Planned Parenthood, and while PollyD had only a decent experience, she still preferred them over her teacher. These three ways of teaching sex education were unanimous among participants.

A Need for LGBTQ+ Inclusivity

A topic that all participants wanted to learn more about was LGBTQ+ identities. This aligns with prior research and is unsurprising considering participants' identities as gender studies students and queer people. Including queerness in sex education validates and protects queer students. When I was unaware that I was queer, the lack of queerness in sex education was never on my mind. However, as I have entered the world of sex education, I have received a few presentations where my identities were completely ignored, with one presenter stating it was just easier to use cisheteronormative language. I am extremely proud of my queerness, but those experiences hurt and reminded me that to some, I am deviant. The negative impacts of this would likely be greater for those who are not yet confident in their queer identities.

In the focus group, two of the four participants received information on the LGBTQ+ community. However, even though Iris was one of the two who received this education, she stated that she had "gay sex education but not lesbian sex education." This is somewhat surprising as lesbianism is more acceptable in our society than being a gay man. However, this is in large part due to the sexualization of lesbians for the male gaze, which erases women's pleasure and emphasizes men's. Only discussing gay men and not other identities continues the message of men as active and sexual, and women as the opposite. In addition, Iris's experience relates to Kimberle Crenshaw's famous piece on intersectionality and her idea of 'but for' analysis. She states that "sex and race discrimination have come to be defined in terms of the experiences of those who are privileged *but for* their racial *or* [emphasis added] sexual characteristics" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151). Where lesbian sex education would focus on the minority groups of sexuality *and* gender, gay sex education only focuses on one minority group: sexuality. While schools may be including LGBTQ+ education, they may also be focusing "on the experiences of the most privileged" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151), which ignores those who experience discrimination in multiple categories.

Continuing with Iris's experience, because of her lack of lesbian sex education, and because she did not recognize that she was queer when receiving her education, she felt wildly unprepared to have sex. Similar to Iris, I did not realize I was queer until after my sex education; however, I did not receive queer sex education. I remember being told to use condoms, with it being stressed that using two is actually more risky, but none of that aligned with my sex life. Not only was protection only mentioned in regard to heterosexual sex, but it was also mainly focused on as a means to prevent pregnancy. Without a penis in sight, I never even thought to use protection when I first started having sex. I'm not even sure I knew what a dental dam was, as using protection during oral sex was never mentioned. By focusing on heterosexual penetrative sex, it negates sexual practices that may be safer in regard to STIs (Pound et al., 2016). Including queerness in

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sex education would highlight the diverse ways one can have sex and use protection, benefiting all.

The last topic within queer inclusivity that participants discussed was whether students should be separated by gender when receiving sex education. Just like the prior research, participants were divided. Three of the four participants were separated by gender, with Stella and PollyD noting a special sense of community and bonding that occurred within the same sex group. PollyD not only liked the same sex group, but was also wary of having sex education with men. She stated that "our experiences are going to be different because of our gender… You can't really relate to me in that aspect." However, Iris made two good points against gender separated groups. She explained that after receiving sex education, all of the students would discuss the similarities and differences in the information they received, therefore defeating the purpose of separating into two groups. In addition, Iris explained that she has a nonbinary sibling, for whom "sex ed was probably especially hard…. because there was no representation at all" and it must have been "really awkward for kids who don't feel aligned in their gender categories they're given" when separated by gender. No clear solution for this was suggested by participants, as it is hard to balance the sense of community in gender separated groups without alienating queer youth and excluding information.

Conflicting Views and Fear of Promoting Underage Sex

When discussing whether sex education should focus more on biological or social, emotional information, a lively discussion occurred around the fear of promoting underage sex. In prior research, participants were not as worried about this, which may be due to many studies taking place when students were still in middle or high school (Pound et al., 2016). The ability to reflect on past experiences while older and more mature likely made a difference. Stella's education was very "cut and dry" and included coloring in and labelling genitalia. She was content with this. Katherine's education also focused on the biological and constantly mentioned STIs. She stated that "if they ran out of stuff, they'd be like "and don't forget about AIDs, HIV!'" This aligns with the Healthy People 2030 goal of reducing STI rates (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2026). Stella also noted how they inadvertently pushed celibacy, further aligning with the government's desire to reduce underage sex and pregnancy. By emphasizing that "the only way to protect yourself from pregnancy and STDs, like the only bulletproof way to do it is celibacy," it sends the message that this form of protection is more valued than others. Iris's education, on the other hand, had "more of an emphasis on the social aspects of sex." This, however, worried Stella, who feared it might promote sex at a young age, and thought a more neutral position would prevent this. Iris responded that while her education was very sex positive, it did not encourage her or her friends to have sex. She stated, "I don't think more education leads to more sex. I think it just leads to more informed sex." Stella then agreed that as long as it was "sex positive, rather than sex promotional," she would support it.

Participants desired more of a focus on the social and emotional aspects of sex. Topics that were not covered, or only mentioned in passing, included: consent, pleasure, masturbation, foreplay, aftercare, why people have sex, kinks, and power dynamics, among others. Consent stood out as extremely important, with Stella stating, "I didn't need to draw in the anatomical penis and vagina, but I did need to be taught consent." Whether it was regarding sex or not, participants saw

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consent as crucial. They acknowledged that their sex education took place at the beginning of the #MeToo movement, and hoped that sex education now focused more on consent. Some of the topics, however, brought up a conversation about just how much should be covered in sex education and where people should learn certain topics. In regards to pleasure, Iris stated that "I know we mentioned, like the clitoris… that's the pleasure center… that was basically it" with PollyD replying "It was like 'what are you supposed to do with it?'" Their education did not include any methods or tips for making sex easier and more pleasurable, which participants felt would promote sex, but also left them unprepared to have sex. In addition, Iris felt that a topic such as kinks shouldn't be included. Participants felt more comfortable with some things being learned socially, as they all agreed with PollyD's point that "a lot of sex education is social learning." Stella specifically stated that "media was a huge thing for me to figure out how sex and everything worked. Not just fanfiction, but like TV, YouTube, commentary YouTubers." These sources helped Stella feel more prepared to have sex, while preventing what she feared would be sex education's promotion of sex.

Even though sex education has its flaws, participants agreed that it is much needed. Katherine stated that:

> even if it's lacking, school is a good introduction into the topic where you can seek out other sources or maybe be approached by other sources and get further information. It may not be perfect, but it's a better start than anything else.

Iris shared in this sentiment, saying, "I don't know where else I would have gotten it if not school." Neither Iris nor Stella received any conversation about sex from their parents, and PollyD's talk was done by her sister. Katherine was the only one who received a thorough conversation with her parents. If it weren't for school sex education, Iris and Stella may have had to rely on information from peers or media, which may be inaccurate at best and harmful at worst.

Discussions in Sex Education

In the focus group, a common feeling experienced during sex education was shame. Stella explained that "they didn't recognize that there's a stigma around this topic." PollyD noted that a lot of the shame: "is more geared towards the woman than the man. Like if a woman has sex with multiple people they're a slut, but if a man does it, he's an ace, he's a king." She goes on to mention the additional stigma that students may feel if coming from certain cultural or religious backgrounds. Students enter sex education not with an open mind but rather with a plethora of prior feelings about the topic. Teachers then add new experiences and feelings to the mix, with Stella stating that "they didn't shame us for anything, but they didn't bring a lack of shame either." Many students already feel discomfort or shame, requiring teachers to go beyond a neutral stance. Neutrality will not counter or reverse the impacts of shame, but rather add to it and drive students away.

To address this shame, I proposed that including discussions in sex education would help normalize the topic and lessen shame. However, participants strongly disliked this idea, differing from prior research, and felt it would be too awkward to encourage discussion. They brought up the fact that students may have crushes or sexual experiences with people in their class, making

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discussion that much more uncomfortable. This was not something that had crossed my mind since I did not experience attraction until I realized my sexuality after sex education, but it is an extremely valid point. Participants also stated that even as college seniors, they would not want to discuss sex with people they did not know.

Instead of discussions, participants highly recommended the use of anonymous question boxes.[1] Stella's teacher had boxes:

> set up, like in a specific spot in the classroom and at any point in the class, you could put [a question] in there, and at the end of each class, she would go through the newer ones and read them out and answer them out loud.

Instead of having a dedicated time to answer questions, this would allow students to form questions as they learned. This would also benefit students like Iris, who felt very "ashamed and scared to ask questions" and "very safe" with the anonymity. Through this format, students would likely realize that others have similar questions and uncertainties, therefore normalizing the topic and reducing shame without creating as much discomfort as conversation. When this method was used in my sex education, it also facilitated more discussion, as students became more comfortable once the topic was broached by the teacher reading the question.

To address the lack of education and discussion in prior sex education experiences, I also proposed mandated college sex education, which participants greatly despised. Katherine was firmly against the idea of requiring sex education in college, while others thought it would be beneficial to have an optional place to ask questions and learn. Towards the end of the focus group, with the knowledge that participants did not like discussions in sex education or want it mandated in college, I asked them how it felt to discuss this topic. PollyD stated that it was nice, a sentiment shared by Iris, and that "having a conversation like this is kind of needed, even if we're not technically having the education all over again." So while they voiced a dislike of discussions, it appears that under the right conditions, they enjoyed it. Stella stated that she felt slightly uncomfortable with the topic, since it was still taboo in her household, but felt this discomfort would help her grow. This shows that even if it is uncomfortable to discuss this topic, that feeling is likely temporary, and the importance of discussion often outweighs the awkwardness.

[1] When presenting this project to my peers, I ran a small experiment with them to test whether they also valued anonymity in sex education. This was a Gender Studies class with twenty students, and before I discussed my research, I gave them a link to a Google form and asked them to write any questions about sex or relationships. I also told them this topic is my niche, and I am an educator for two different sex-positive organizations. Ten minutes later, twelve students, a large portion of the class, replied with questions ranging from consent and relationships to STI testing and dental dams. I answered a few questions, and some students shared their individual experiences with sex education. One student even shared that a question was hers, and we discussed further. This shows that anonymity in sex education needs to be studied more, since a large percentage of students felt comfortable asking anonymous questions in this class.

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Conclusions

As seen in the meta-analysis by Pound et al., participants' opinions remained fairly consistent with the prior literature. They desired more information on the emotional aspect of sex and LGBTQ+ identities, and preferred experts to lead sex education. They were undecided on separating students by gender and differed from prior research on sex education frequency. The queer women of color included in this study also noted the cultural stigma that is present around this topic, and therefore more highly valued anonymous discussion boxes than others in prior research. They felt it to be a safer and more comfortable way to communicate and learn.

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