

THE SEXUAL PLEASURE GAP:
**EXPLORING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GENDERED PLEASURE
DISPARITIES AND SEX EDUCATION**

by

Neve M. Brown

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Honors Degree in Major with Distinction.

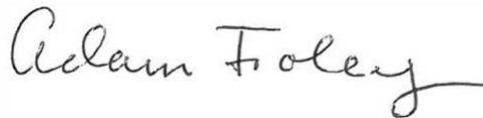
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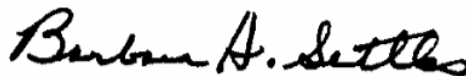
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ABSTRACT

Current sex education curricula in American public schools fails to adequately equip students with knowledge about their bodies, leading to poor pleasure outcomes— particularly amongst students assigned female at birth (AFAB). This research seeks to explore the impact sex education has on the sexual pleasure gap, evaluating its potential as a tool for closing this gap. Additionally, it aims to move beyond traditional gender binaries present throughout prior research by making space for people assigned female at birth who do not identify as cisgender women. In order to evaluate the aforementioned connection, a survey was distributed which questioned respondents about their sex education experiences and the quality of their sexual experiences, as well as their understanding of their anatomy and pleasure preferences at the time of sexual debut. Responses revealed a need for curricula that moves beyond cisheteronormative ideals and combats stereotypes based in gender roles, improved anatomy lessons (particularly as it relates to female genitalia), and an increased focus on healthy communication and relationship dynamics— among other improvements. These findings suggest that sex education in American public schools does not positively contribute to students’ sexual wellbeing and pleasure, but instead negatively impacts them in various ways. Additionally, the connections drawn between sex education and the pleasure gap imply that, if adjusted to meet student’s needs, sex education could possibly serve as a tool in closing the sexual pleasure gap as it currently exists. This leaves numerous further directions to be explored including

analyzing the impact of “hidden curriculum” in sex education, the exploration of sexual pleasure beyond orgasms, and the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ students.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

As research covering sexual satisfaction has increased, data analyzing women's sexual experiences has revealed troubling implications about the equity of sexual pleasure between sexual partners of opposing sexes. Unexplained by biology alone, individuals assigned female at birth often report lower orgasm (Wade, 2005) and higher pain rates (Herbenick, 2015) than their opposite-sex partners— leading to the recognition of the *sexual pleasure gap*. This term rose in popularity after the coining of the term *orgasm gap*, first used by researcher Dr. Lisa Wade in 2005. Wade's research study surveyed undergraduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for two semesters, tracking her participants' orgasm rates and analyzing their potential correlation with sex. Wade's results were appalling: 91% of male-identified participants reported always, or almost always, having an orgasm during partnered sex, yet only 39% of female-identified participants reported the same— presenting a 52% gap. These numbers, while slightly more severe than what we have seen in the two decades following Dr. Wade's paper (2005), corroborated the findings of prior data collected within the Representative National Survey of Sexuality (Laumann et al., 1994) and have, in turn, been certified by continuing data reinforcing the existence and prevalence of the issue, with some studies reporting even worse numbers (Armstrong England, and Fogarty, 2012).

The female orgasm has long been a source of both social and scientific debate (Gerhard, 2001; Meston et. al, 2004). Yet, discussions concerning female pleasure still pale in comparison to the ways in which male sexual pleasure has been standardized within our culture. With research linking the pleasure gap to broader trends of gender-based oppression (Rowland, 2020), it's no wonder we see no lack of resources catering to the sexual preferences and experience of heterosexual men. Under social systems of patriarchy (and other forms of systemic oppression) women— especially queer women— have had their sexuality dismissed and degraded throughout every medium. Whether in scientific studies, erotica, or popular culture, individuals assigned female at birth are left out of mainstream narratives, with their pleasure framed as a secondary concern— if valued at all (Loofbourow, 2018).

Sex education is certainly no exception to this rule. Despite an expansion of research about sexuality, sex education is still best described as risk-avoidant in the United States. Most curricula place a significant focus on avoiding *socially undesirable outcomes*, such as: teenage pregnancy, the spread of STIs, “and the proximate sexual and contraceptive behaviors related to these [occurrences],” failing to mention pleasure of any kind (Kantor & Lindberg 2020). Further, in many states, girls and boys are separated for early sex education lessons with “boys learning about erections, wet dreams, and ejaculation and girls learning about menstruation (Mintz, 2020). Dr. Laurie Mintz, author of *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters -- And How To Get It*, shares that, in the United States, “even the most progressive sex education classes cover only women's internal genital anatomy (e.g.,

uterus, vaginal canal, ovaries), and fails to cover women's external genital anatomy”—where the primary orgasm for female sexual pleasure is located (Mintz, 2020). Simply stated “it's as if the vulva and labia, let alone the clitoris, doesn't exist” (Orenstein, 2016). This approach blatantly ignores scientific guidelines linked to positive *health outcomes*— such as SIECUS’s *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, K-12* (2004) and *Advocates for Youth’s Future of Sex Education: National Sexuality Education Standards* (2020), two organizations spearheading the fight for comprehensive sex education in the United States. Additionally, curricula which neglects to cover all anatomy fails to address critical themes which are thought to be contributing factors to the sexual pleasure gap, including the broader effects of gender inequity, cisgender and heteronormative sexual scripts, and a lack of understanding of vaginal anatomy.

Most of the troubling sexuality-related information present in public schools today can be traced back to political conflicts which began in the 1960s. Sex education was largely absent from public schools until 1964, when advocate (and Physician) Mary Calderone founded the first ever single-issue organization for sex education: the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) (Irvine, 2002). SIECUS aimed to expand the accessibility of sexual health information and combat existing stigma. At the time of SIECUS’ creation, there were no requirements that sex education be taught at all within the United States, with most educational facilities opting out completely. Moreover, even more progressive schools often limited their messaging to lessons about “sexual hygiene.” This term refers to

curricula built off lessons taught in public school throughout the 1940's, which focused primarily on personal hygiene and the concept of sex without any connections drawn to human sexual behavior. Sexual Hygiene, however, took a more personal approach, emphasizing moral purity and students' expected role in the nuclear family unit. "This new change in the curriculum wanted to also help students to focus more on 'wholesome decisions'... The teachers would present the students with questions such as, should young girls be learning about sex? Should they be able to make the decision as to whether or not to have sex or to remain in celibacy?" (Lamb, S. 2013). Young people were often shamed by their sex educators, given misinformation, and led to believe that they should practice stronger self-discipline, abstaining from sex entirely (Irvine, 2002).

SIECUS worked to combat these harmful narratives, partnering with advocates of the decade's larger social movements to broaden the public perception of sex education and fight the oppressive forces contributing to the stigmatization of sex outside of a heterosexual marriage (Irvine, 2002). The organization challenged existing curricula, pushing for sex education material which destigmatized the importance of pleasure during sexual encounters and allowed contraceptive methods and STI's to be discussed, presenting the possibility for mutual enjoyment between partners. Unfortunately, their vision was largely stifled by right-wing sex ed opponents; conservative politicians and religious organizations adopted a strategy for attack (Irvine, 2002). Using explicit language and the existing fear of communism to their advantage, opponents excited smear campaigns which effectively framed sex

educators as threats to white sexual purity, capitalism, and American culture (Irvine, 2002). The success of these campaigns and the subsequent power gained by leaders within the anti-sex education movement (combined with the rise of the HIV/AIDS crisis) led to an explosion of abstinence only sex education requirements which have largely prevented sex education from moving beyond its original stigmatizing and **cisheteronormative framework, severely limiting research concerning female sexuality and anatomy** (Irvine, 2002). Cisheteronormativity refers to ideology that assumes and/or promotes that idea that being cisgender and heterosexual is the norm. In doing so, it assumes that having these identities is ideal and preferable over any and all identities which fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

The Current Study

This study explores the connection between existing sexual pleasure disparities and the sex education curricula taught within American public schools. Given the gendered nature of the sexual pleasure gap, the study focuses on the experiences of people assigned female at birth. Although restrictions were not placed on age, the majority of participants ended up being in their late teens and early twenties. This was particularly beneficial, given that participants likely had a clearer memory of their sexuality education and initial sexual experiences due to their age. Additionally, this helped to gather responses that accurately reflect the curricula currently being taught in classrooms across the United States. While gendered language is used fairly frequently throughout the Literature Review section, this is done only to accurately

reflect data previously conducted. This study recognizes the sex education and pleasure experiences of all people assigned female at birth, regardless of their gender identity.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical and Ongoing Exclusion

In 2005, Dr. Elisabeth Lloyd, a professor at the University of Indiana's Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, set out to write a book analyzing all existing theories of the female orgasm. Despite the prevalence of literature covering male sexuality and pleasure, Lloyd found "only 32 studies, conducted over 74 years," examining the female orgasm, all of which focused solely on "the frequency of female orgasm during intercourse" (Smith, 2005). Collectively, these studies produced "21 published theories," most of which fell into two main categories: those related to "byproduct theory," and those related to the "pair-bond theory" (Scutti, 2016).

The byproduct theory suggests that, just as males develop nipples despite lacking their need in the same way females do, females develop the ability to orgasm due to the necessity of the male orgasm in reproduction (Scutti, 2016). The pair-bond theory, on the other hand, suggests that the female orgasm is adaptation-based, having evolved "for the purpose of strengthening the relationship between a male and a female" (Scutti, 2016). In other words, "the pleasurable feeling of an orgasm would encourage a woman to return to the man for more" (Scutti, 2016). While based somewhat on demonstrated scientific theories (with foundations in biological development and evolution), both categories center male bodies and experiences

within their related theories. This pattern— as well as the sheer lack of theories which exist surrounding the female orgasm— demonstrate a longstanding lack of regard for female sexual health and pleasure. Lloyd names the troubling implications of this exclusion stating that “men’s expectations about women’s normal sexuality, about how women should perform, are built around” the limited and flawed theories which currently exist (Lloyd, 2005, as cited in Smith, 2005).

Discussion of female orgasm in generations past provide ample evidence of these implications, as well as the perpetuation of the sexual pleasure gap. Sigmund Freud’s research— as early as 1905— set the stage for much of the early framing around the female orgasm. He used the diagnosis of frigidity, defined as the absence of an orgasm during intercourse, to establish the parameters of normal female heterosexuality (Gerhard, 2000). He also placed the burden on AFAB individuals to conform to cisheteronormative sexual ideals, claiming that “hysteria could be cured by marriage and “normal” sexual intercourse” (Clark-Lepard and Wilson, 2016, pg. 3).

Furthermore, Freud placed limitations on the permissibility of female orgasms, claiming “that when women were immature they experienced clitoral orgasms (analogous to the male orgasm) and when they matured they were able to experience vaginal orgasms during intercourse (Wallen and Lloyd, 2011, as cited in Clark-Lepard and Wilson, 2016). This idea was challenged throughout the 1950’s, particularly after Alfred Kinsey’s 1953 publication *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. By the 1960’s, research chronicled the debate occurring between sexuality professionals about whether the female orgasm was important within a marriage (already placing

heterosexual and marital confines on arguments concerning female pleasure) (Stokes, 1968). Attesting to the social narratives present in the 1960's, Stokes communicated the impact of gender inequity by recounting a story in which one of his clients received the following marital advice from her mother:

It is said that there are women who enjoy sexual contact with a man but this has never been known in the history of our family. I am sure you will not enjoy the sex act but if you should, never let your husband know, for no decent man can respect a woman who does, [going on to describe penetrative sex as] revolting physical contact, yet [advising her daughter to] endure [and] submit to [male desires]. (Stokes, 1968, p. 226)

While one may argue that this evidence is anecdotal, the pervasiveness of this narrative within women's personal relationships speaks volumes about its widespread acceptance across multiple generations. The language used moves beyond individual dislike, instead presenting the ability to endure sexual pain, boredom, and discomfort as a measurement of both individual and marital worth. This messaging is further supported by religious narratives surrounding women's sexuality. Research suggests that, for individuals assigned female at birth, "religion plays a significant and often hidden role in... sexuality, even for those "who do not currently identify as religious" (Blum, 2015). When coupled with the influence of patriarchy within the United States, narratives which associate women's sexuality with their morality (i.e narratives emphasizing purity, obedience, and the approval of a higher

authority and/or power) create an intergenerational acceptance of injustice communicated through sexist narratives (Blum, 2015).

Often, this begins before one is even conscious of the narratives at play. Although no evidence suggests that women are born with less desire for pleasure than men (Nuwer, 2016), they may be more likely to accept lesser sexual outcomes after being bogged down by the narratives perpetuated under misogynistic power structures. As children, young girls frequently receive unsolicited comments evaluating their beauty and subsequently rewarding or punishing them for their appearance. In many cases, these experiences set the foundation of women's understanding that "a lot of their social value resides in how much others are looking at them," subconsciously teaching them to "take pleasure in other people's pleasure" (Loofbourow, 2018).

Adolescence further builds upon this dynamic, using the wider social implications of masculinity and femininity to bulldoze girls' confidence (Missari, 2013). Existing research suggests that while boys typically see increases in their self-esteem following puberty and the acquisition of societally valued masculinity, girls consistently report decreased self-esteem, seeing "devalued, over-sexualized femininity on the other side of puberty" (Missari, 2013, pg. 16). Girls struggle because perceived cultural differences in male and female sexuality are continuously reinforced across a variety of mediums—including the media, legislation governing body autonomy, peers, and parents (Missari, 2013).

Over time, these messages erode both women's and men's expectation for female pleasure, often before they ever engage in intercourse. Therefore, by the time

they reach sexual debut, the expectation for women to “sacrifice orgasm mutuality in order to avoid the inevitable stresses on the relationship by rocking the androcentric boat,” is normalized, and thus, often goes unchallenged or recognized (Wade, 2005, pg. 121). Women and girls have either already learned that sexual pleasure is not a reality for them in the same way it is for men, or “quickly learn that it is not and adjust their expectation,” and the sex education they’re receiving in American public schools is certainly not pushing back on these judgements (Wade, 2005, pg. 121). These realizations lead to lower rates of sexual satisfaction which both illustrate the importance of introducing children to age-appropriate sex education materials before they hit puberty and, in the long term, sever women’s ability to define sexual standards that serve their bodies and lives— especially with male partner.

Unsurprisingly, Stokes denies women this same freedom in his prior article, demonstrating the effects of paternalism on women’s sexuality. While he does defend the importance of the female orgasm, he does so by identifying orgasm as a requirement for “a woman to function at her best as either wife or mother,” and condemning women who enjoy casual and/or kinky sex (Stokes, 1968, p. 229). Additionally, as a sex therapist, Stokes illustrates the way women’s experiences with pleasure have continuously been dismissed within the medical sphere, declaring that he excludes from his definition of satisfactory orgasm “that which can be attained only by means of manual or oral stimulation of the clitoris or other parts of the body,” claiming that “the female orgasmic experience is fully satisfactory only when there is enthusiastic, unrestrained acceptance of intravaginal intercourse” (Stokes, 1968, p.

229). This is only a small progression from the widely accepted 20th century belief that women who were unable to achieve orgasm during heterosexual sex were *frigid*— a derogatory term typically used to mean abnormally averse to sex (Kleinplatz, 2018). Despite no effort to research the needs and desires of people assigned female at birth (beyond Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which was published in 1953), “marriage manuals [throughout the 1940’s and 1950’s indicated that sex ought to result in simultaneous orgasms as the climax of intercourse. Women who did not achieve orgasm in this way were pathologized and sent for psychoanalysis” (Kleinplatz, 2018, p. 35), and almost all information related to sex education was framed within the context of marriage and family life (Lavin, 2020). This paved the way for the normalization of women not experiencing pleasure during sex which, in more recent years, is even often reflected by OBGYNs.

In 2007, the Guttmacher Institute published research exposing the failure of OBGYNs and other medical clinicians to consider sexual pleasure when discussing contraceptive options with their patients (Higgins and Hirsh, 2007). No information was given about the potential effects of different contraceptive methods on libido or sexual pleasure (Higgins and Hirsh, 2007). This oversight, especially when analyzed alongside data that found that women consistently indicate valuing sexual pleasure at the same rates men do, highlights the detrimental effect of paternalistic narratives on women’s sexual and reproductive health (Higgins and Hirsh, 2007). Additionally, Guttmacher found that “few systematic reviews exist of [contraceptive] effects on women’s libido, enjoyment, lubrication or ability to achieve orgasm,” in the first

place, reinforcing the idea that, even within the women's health field, female sexual pleasure is not a primary concern (Higgins and Hirsh, 2007, pg. 134). This finding, and the history preceding it, demonstrate the institutional nature of the sexual pleasure gap, raising the necessity for reform that moves beyond simply acknowledging its existence, instead working to dismantle the forces which contribute to inequitable pleasure outcomes in the first place.

2.2 Social Identities

Author and researcher Katherine Rowland confirms the importance of dismantling these forces in her book *The Pleasure Gap: American Women and the Unfinished Sexual Revolution*, which shares the results of 120 interviews conducted with women across the United States from 2014-2019. Discussing her research, Rowland (2020) explains that while individually targeted programs may partially assist in closing the gap, solutions cannot truly be successful if they do not confront the cultural ideals shaping its existence:

While their paths to sexual healing varied, the women I spoke to made plain that satisfaction was rooted in their social power, in being entitled to explore and express their sexuality and in feeling equal to their partners. Pleasure and its value can be learned, and once learned, are not readily relinquished.

(Rowland, 2020)

Furthermore, implementing sex education curricula that confront institutional causes of oppression and that consider the relevance of social power is particularly important for students with additional marginalized identities. While data examining the connection between differing social identities and their self-reported sexual satisfaction is limited, existing research is compelling. One 2009 study, which studied misalignment between sexual satisfaction and sexual activity among women, and its correlation with social location, found some correlation between higher rates of oppression and lower rates of sexual satisfaction (Fahs and Swank, 2010). By grouping participants into 4 categories (which labelled both sexual frequency and sexual enjoyment as high or low), researchers found that women considered to hold “lower statuses” were clustered in the low satisfaction and high activity group, while women with higher levels of societal privilege tended to report higher satisfaction and lower rates of activity. This finding is critical because it supports the notion that, if sex education is better able to level the playing field when it comes to social power, it may also have potential to diminish the severity of the sexual pleasure gap.

Further, many of the specific factors that researchers believe may make someone more likely to engage in sex, despite a lack of enjoyment and/or desire, are closely tied to the identities of many students. These factors include being unmarried, having less education, being working-class, being younger, being non-white, being unemployed, and not having children (Fahs and Swank, 2010). Additionally, these identifiers span multiple intersections of marginalization, speaking to the ways in which differing types of oppression may affect women in their most intimate setting

and suggesting that women holding these identities have been socialized beyond just their gender to prioritize their partners' pleasure over their own (Fahs and Swank, 2011). Therefore, it is essential that, in working to improve sex education, curriculum adjustments are both trauma-informed and intersectional, helping to share information in a way that combats not only gender inequity, but other forms of oppression as well.

2.3 Sexual Concordance and Double Standards

Sexual concordance is one critical factor to consider when working towards improving curricula. As Rowland (2020) explains it, sexual concordance is simply “the extent to which mind and body...are in sync” during sexual activity. When analyzed, it helps reveal the extent to which existing sexual pleasure disparities are due to emotional misalignments, rather than physical misalignments during sex—allowing for a better understanding of the approach sex education should take in creating curricula that combats the root causes of the pleasure gap.

A 2010 study which analyzed female vocalizations during sexual activity found that disparities existed in the experiences and expressions of respondent's sexual pleasure. While research continues to reflect that people assigned female at birth are more likely to orgasm during sexual activity leading up to penis-in-vagina (PIV) sex, than they are during male penetration and ejaculation, researchers found that, during sex with a male partner, female copulatory vocalizations most commonly occur in alignment with male ejaculation (Brewer and Hendrie, 2010). This finding

demonstrates a clear disassociation between women's experiences with pleasure and their expressions of it. When Brewer and Hendrie asked women about the motivations behind their vocalizations, "92% of participants felt very strongly that these vocalizations boosted their partner's self-esteem and 87% reported using them for this purpose," and an additional 66% of respondents reported using copulatory vocalizations in misalignment with their own experiences to "relieve discomfort/pain, boredom, and fatigue in equal proportion, as well as because of time limitations" (2010, p. 562). While wanting to boost your partner's self-esteem is certainly not inherently harmful, these findings speak to the larger conditioning of how men's desires, pleasure, and self-esteem are prioritized above women in American society—and then internalized by women during intimate experiences.

Additionally, with data reflecting "80% of females reporting making copulatory vocalizations even when they knew they were not going to orgasm themselves," we begin to see the ways in which people assigned female at birth are trained to view sex as an obligation and performance (Brewer and Hendrie, 2010, p. 562-563). Respondents demonstrate a desire to ensure and encourage the male orgasm, even in the absence of opportunity for their own, paralleling larger social gender scripts which prioritize men unilaterally and allow for women's discomfort to become the baseline for sexual and romantic desire.

These baseline expectations and actions are further demonstrated by naming the differing expectations that surround women and men within the United States, especially in terms of attractiveness and desire (Loofbourow, 2018). Loofbourow

(2018) does so by comparing the expectation for women to “perform comfort and pleasure they do not feel under conditions that make genuine comfort almost impossible” (acknowledging the discomfort and burden associated with compressionary undergarments, heeled shoes, Botox, and hair removal procedures, among other examples), to men’s ability to be appealing without ever sacrificing their own comfort. While it’s certainly important to note that this burden does not fall equally among women, with women of color and transgender women facing further scrutiny and harsher threats due to Eurocentric and cisheteronormative beauty standards, drawing the connection between sex appeal and gender roles may explain how prioritization disparities develop during sexual activity. Further, data from Brewer and Hendrie’s (2010) study suggests that existing disparities transcend relationship titles, reinforcing Rowland’s earlier point about the need for women’s autonomy and sexual liberation. When asked if they “*would stay with an otherwise satisfactory partner, even if they never reached orgasm with them,*” Brewer and Hendrie found that 68% of female respondents stated that they would (563).

2.4 The Presence and Impact of Phallocentric Imperatives

The term *phallocentric imperatives* is used throughout this paper to describe “gendered sexual scripts that prioritize men’s sexual experience,” and prioritize the pleasure experiences of those with penile anatomy over those without it (Willis et al., 2018).

Dissatisfactory sex education may be one contributing factor which allows this thought pattern to develop into adulthood. For example, the tendency for sex education programs to equate erections with menstruation (drawing references to their mutual relevance to reproduction) tends to allow more space to discuss male pleasure than it does female pleasure. One study, which examined the exclusion of female pleasure during sex education in England, found that:

discursive silence around pleasure for women was reinforced by the focus on their 'risky' bodies and their responsibility for avoiding pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and rape. Much of this framing can be directly attributed to sex education curricula, with authors noting that 'Sex for women was presented as 'scary' and negative, and participants in this study explicitly noted the lack of curricular space given to learning about pleasure for women. (Sundaram and Sauntson, 2016, pg. 251)

Some students within the United States have also confirmed the presence of fear when discussing their own curriculum, pointing out that, in some cases, it seemed as if their curricula intended to “try to scare kids away from sex [and] make it more frightening,” inciting fear by overly emphasizing risk (Pong, 2015). This is especially important, given studies which reflect worse health outcomes for students whose curricula is focused on sexual risk, rather than sexual health (Kantor and Lindberg, 2020). Also notable, respondents within the study shared that “while they were taught about erections and male orgasms, they were given no information about the

equivalent for girls” (Sundaram and Sauntson, 2016, p. 251). When sex education frames sex as a male-centered event, it allows for the development of *phallogentric sexual scripts*, especially within heterosexual relationships (Willis, 2018). One example of this problematic frame is found in our linguistic expression. The word “sex” itself is, within popular culture, almost exclusively used to refer to penis-in-vagina (PIV) intercourse. Other types of sexual activity, which may better represent a wider range of people, are othered from this definition— framing them as lesser alternatives expressed through qualifying adjectives (ex: “oral sex” and “anal sex”) or separate vocabulary entirely (ex: “foreplay”). This frame is particularly exclusionary of individuals with vaginal anatomy, as well as people, who may be in relationships where PIV is not relevant and/or possible. LGBTQ+ individuals are particularly excluded from most sex education curricula, since most instructors use language which enforces the gender binary and assumes that most students identify as heterosexual. As of December 2021, 39 states and the District of Columbia (DC) require sex education to be taught in some form. However, only “10 states and DC require inclusive content with regard to sexual orientation” (Guttmacher, 2021). Worse, an additional “5 states require only negative information to be provided on homosexuality and/or positive emphasis on heterosexuality,” furthering the oppression queer and trans people continue to endure in the United States (Guttmacher, 2021). Additionally, language is specifically relevant to sex education (and, in turn, the pleasure gap) because of the weight it holds within our society.

Language is the avenue through which we communicate and identify our values. Vocabulary that centers men and reinforces cisheteronormativity is both a reflection and tool of gender inequity which limits the expression and recognition of female sexual experiences from the get-go. Presenting PIV as “the epitome of sex” is inherently exclusionary (Willis, 2018, p. 1556), especially when considering studies which reflect “only 4% [of female respondents] indicate penetration alone” as their most reliable route to orgasm (Mahar, Mintz, and Akers 2020, p. 27). Furthermore, identifying the activities during which women orgasm the most frequently as “foreplay” frames these methods as accessories to the main event: the male orgasm, which is then reinforced doubly by narratives marking it as the signifier that sex has ended. This linguistic mold not only upholds a misogynistic power structure since it disregards vaginal anatomy, but also plays a compelling role in centering sex around heterosexual activity. Still, it’s important to note the limitations placed on sex educators by their local schoolboards and broader political environments. Since no universal standards exist for sex education at a national level, many sex education teachers have their curricula determined by schoolboards at the local level— requiring more than just those teaching sex education to allow and embrace this linguistic shift.

When analyzing how the sexual pleasure gap functions in queer relationships, research consistently reports much lower pleasure disparities, with lesbian and bisexual women both reporting higher orgasm rates than heterosexual women (Willis, 2018). This is particularly notable because, unlike women, data finds that men’s orgasm rates do not differ across varying sexual orientations (Mintz, 2015). However,

research suggests that these disparities are not inherent to individuals with vaginal anatomy, but rather a reflection of gendered sexual scripts present within certain dynamics. Researchers have further suggested that women who have sex with women are “more likely to engage in a more diverse array of sexual behaviors,” free from the obligation of centering male pleasure when exploring their sexual preferences or ending the event once men orgasm (Willis, 2018, p. 1567). Therefore, there is reason to believe that the sexual pleasure gap between men and women can be partially reduced by accounting for factors such as “sexual variety and self-oriented orgasm goals,” which work to counteract “the effects of phallogocentric imperatives” by prioritizing equal pleasure among partners and encouraging the exploration of multiple approaches to orgasm (Willis, 2018, p.1572).

This approach is particularly important within sex education because it introduces healthy dynamics to young people, normalizing relationships in which all partners feel comfortable making equal pleasure-related requests and exploring techniques compatible with their anatomy and preferences. Additionally, the introduction and adoption of self-oriented pleasure goals, alongside broader messages rejecting gendered double standards, present the opportunity to improve students’ internal relationships, since women who have sex with men consistently report higher beliefs and adherence to androcentric myths during masturbation than women who have sex with women do (Willis, 2018). This finding illustrates how gender inequality and gender roles have infiltrated both heterosexual women’s external and internal sexual relationships (Willis, 2018). Moreover, data finds that women’s orgasm rates

tend to increase as they become more comfortable asserting and communicating their needs, regardless of whether their partner shares the same needs and goals (Castleman, 2016). Therefore, sex education should aim to reinforce students' rights to boundaries, comfort, and pleasure.

While many programs fail to acknowledge consent at all, those that do often approach the conversation in a problematic way. Discussions emphasize self-protection, ultimately encouraging students to “get consent so you don’t get in trouble,” failing to communicate the importance of respecting their partner’s boundaries for reasons outside of legal consequences (Tatter, 2018). Some experts have objected to this approach, naming the importance of ensuring that students “understand the concept of mutuality — making decisions with a partner and understanding and addressing other people’s concerns or wishes — and spend time developing their own sense of right and wrong” (Tatter, 2018). Furthermore, “If a young person is not in a healthy relationship, they can’t negotiate sex in a meaningful way. Even if they’re not having sex yet, they’re grappling with the idea of what a healthy relationship is” (Tatter, 2018). Tatter’s *Sexual Ethics and Caring Curriculum* moves beyond draconian limitations, encouraging students to analyze discussions of sex in society and engage in a variety of related and often overlooked topics, including sexual shame, the media’s role in gendered objectification, and sex across a range of relationship dynamics. The need for this and similar curricula is further reinforced by Hirsch and Khan (2021), who explore the role of the creation of personal sexual scripts in how young people become sexual citizens.

2.5 Sexual Pleasure Inhibitions

Lessons plans like Tatter's help combat the idea that anyone's pleasure or autonomy is secondary to their partner's, which— alongside of myriad of other crucial benefits— is critical to nullifying current trends which illustrate the extent to which women go beyond accepting their pleasure as secondary, enduring both physical and emotional pain for the benefit of male partners. This dynamic is particularly relevant in cases of (giving) oral and (receiving) anal sex, which are often excluded from discussions surrounding the sexual pleasure gap— despite one study sharing that “100% of women in some age groups report pain during their most recent sexual event” (Herbenick, 2015, p. 1048). Two researchers dove deeper into the causes and frequency of this issue, analyzing 20 interviews with women who discussed the negotiation process they sustain during sexual activity. Their research revealed unequal standards largely based on narratives entrenched in male entitlement, where women reported experiencing less pleasure than heterosexual men, bearing more pain during anal sex than gay men, and were found to be “four times more likely than men to report engaging in anal sex even if they frankly disliked it” (Fahs and Swank, 2021, p. 233). When discussing these disparities, female respondents noted lower expectations for reciprocity during sex with men, being pressured by their partners when stating their boundaries and advocating for their needs, and internal feelings of obligation in connection with gendered emotional labor practices.

On the reciprocity front, female participants justified their tolerance of a one-sided arrangement by citing the expectation to adhere to gendered caretaker roles during sex, an acceptance that men were just not good at giving oral sex, and feelings of insecurity. When discussing the latter in the context of oral sex, one woman admitted steering her partners away from “not *having* to do it to me,” implying that her anatomy and pleasure was somehow not worthy of equal consideration or pleasure (Fahs and Swank, 2021, p. 225). This theme is echoed throughout other studies, during which female respondents have expressed feeling guilty when setting boundaries and advocating for their own pleasure, believing that they were obligated to present themselves in an available and pleasing manner, even if they did not want to be touched in a certain way (Rowland, 2020). These themes of emotional turmoil illustrate the narratives sex education typically encourages women to internalize and demonstrate the need for curricula which addresses the root causes of the sexual pleasure gap, allowing young people to unlearn unequal sexual scripts they may have internalized due to other societal sources.

Further, some women in Fahs’ and Swank’s study discussed experiencing coercion and force when saying no to oral/anal sex, stating that male partners perceived their refusal as a starting point for negotiation. Speaking to her marital experience, one woman shared that, if she tries to decline her husband’s advances, “he’ll say, ‘Come on, you know you like it. You know I can make you say yes’” (Fahs and Swank, 2021, p. 226). This rhetoric exemplifies how awarding men a

disproportionate amount of power can prevent women from exploring sexual desire and pleasure even if they're able to identify the harm phallocentric practices have on their sex life. This suggests a link exists between the lack of pleasure one experiences due to the sexual pleasure gap and a heightened inability to negotiate consent on a broader level. From a sex education standpoint, it's then likely that pleasure-centered curricula would also have positive benefits on students' comfortability exercising consent. Additionally, it demonstrates one of the ways in which the sexual pleasure gap is a systemic issue. Additionally, Fahs and Swank found that a whopping 25% of women reported seeing "oral and anal sex as a kind of emotional labor that was expected of them" (p. 226), highlighting not only the messages AFAB folks internalize, but also the extent to which their partners expect them to perform during sexual activity, despite discomfort.

Individuals assigned female at birth have their rights to autonomy and pleasure denied within both their relationships and their classrooms, forcing them into situations where they end up performing "chore-like sex [full of] unenthusiastic consent and ubiquitous pretending" (Rowland, 2020). These situations disrupt intimate partnerships between men and women, furthering sexual disconnection in general. In a study analyzing the way women and men address pain during sex, researchers found men less likely to communicate with their partner about their pain than women (66% vs. 43%, respectively) creating clear blockades to the reframing of sex as a mutually pleasure activity (Herbenick, 2015). Male respondents tolerated pain because of their desire to adhere to the sexual scripts they felt were expected of them; these scripts

largely equated masculinity with the rejection of vulnerability (demonstrating one way the pleasure gap also harms men). Female respondents, however, were more likely to stop in the short term if sexual pain continued past lubrication and position changes (Herbenick, 2015), but struggled to achieve desire and pleasure consistently over long spans of time. These findings suggest that, while it's important to introduce young people to potential suggestions such as increased foreplay, relaxation, and lubrication, those solutions are not adequate if sexual partners are unable to engage in healthy communication. Sex education curricula which includes lesson plans that allow young people to recognize and practice healthy communication skills may, in the long term, empower people of all genders with the tools to overcome these emotional barriers and align their sexual priorities in an equitable way (Rowland, 2020).

2.6 Anatomy Education

Likewise, lessons which provide a detailed and accurate view of vaginal anatomy could potentially diminish another overarching theme associated with the sexual pleasure gap: a lack of understanding surrounding female sexual organs and anatomy. It must be noted: education alone is certainly not a cure-all to the sexual pleasure gap. If previously discussed components are disregarded, results will likely echo Wade's findings in her original study:

Knowledge does not necessarily give women the agency required to pursue sexual health. Information alone may not be able to compensate for a

culturally prescriptive institution of heterosexuality that shapes interpersonal sexual interaction in ways that reinscribe gender inequality by enforcing female passivity. (135)

Still, there is evidence that education is helpful to some degree; especially since in naming how men are failing to give women orgasms, research has found that “many men believe that women “should” have orgasms during intercourse,” because of unsatisfactory education sources (Castleman, 2016). This misinformation has led many men to be unaware of how sexual pleasure differs between men and women, even within their own relationships. For example, while the term orgasm gap is most widely known for its usage throughout this paper (to refer to the differing rates of orgasm between women and men), it has, to a lesser degree, also been used to refer to the discrepancy in men’s perception of female orgasm rates and women’s actual, self-reported orgasm rates (Mahar, Mintz, and Akers, 2020). This secondary usage came about after multiple news outlets shared data from a study which found a 21% discrepancy in place — with 85% of male respondents believing their female partners had orgasmed but only 64% of female respondents self-reporting having done so (Mahar, Mintz, and Akers, 2020). These findings display male respondents’ fundamental misunderstanding of what pleasure for women feels and looks like and, while this misunderstanding likely has many contributing factors, data suggests a strong correlation with lacking anatomical knowledge.

Unfortunately, this lack of understanding and knowledge seems to impact individuals with vaginal anatomy as well as individuals without. For example, one

2010 study, which asked college students in the Midwest a series of questions related to vaginal anatomy and gynecology, found that knowledge was lacking across the board. Researchers found that only 40% of participants answered at least 75% of the questions correctly, with men scoring significantly lower than women on gynecological knowledge (Volck, 2013, p. 163). Yet, factors found to improve participants' chances of answering correctly all displayed a strong connection to education; these included having been STI tested before, having parents who discussed anatomy with them, and increasing age amongst participants. Furthermore, recent data supports the idea that literature is particularly helpful in improving people's understanding of female anatomy and, thus, closing the pleasure gap (Warshowsky et al., 2019). Research from Dr. Elizabeth Mahar highlights several potential benefits of further education, with data from one of her recent studies finding measurable increases in knowledge amongst both male and female participants after reading Laurie Mintz' *Becoming Cliterate*. More specifically, this study found that women "improved on multiple measures of sexual well-being, including orgasm," after reading the book in its entirety, and that men "showed improvement on clitoral knowledge, sexual communication, dysfunctional beliefs about women's sexual satisfaction, and dysfunctional beliefs conflating masculinity and sexual performance" after reading a summary chapter oriented towards men specifically (Warshowsky et al., 2019, p. 30). Warshowsky's and Volck's points are critical because they both confirm that education, even just within one's personal life, can have a real impact on

social and sexual inequities— especially when educational efforts are specifically tailored to one’s sex.

Moreover, some researchers are working to evaluate the success of educational programs in more formal settings, such as within collegiate institutions. One recent study explored this by analyzing the impact that several different undergraduate courses had in reducing the orgasm gap, and improving sexual wellness, overall, for female students across one semester. The classes analyzed included: Psychology of Human Sexuality (PHS) (which discussed the orgasm gap and its causes), Psychology of Personality (POP) (which explicitly excluded sexual content), and Human Sexuality and Culture (HSC) (which contained sexual content but did not specifically cover the orgasm gap). Participants were evaluated based on the following measures: overall feelings towards female genitalia, cognitive distraction during sex (sexual concordance), one’s self reflection on whether they felt deserving of pleasure and were able to achieve it, the frequency and overall satisfaction of their orgasms, and the ease and frequency of communication with their sexual partner(s) (Warshowsky et al., 2019). Data collected before and after participation in these classes found that while students in HSC did have higher post-test scores than those enrolled in POP, PHS students outperformed both groups of students on all measures. Yet, when comparing the two measures that included only women active in partnered sexual activity, no differences were observed between students who had completed any course (Warshowsky et al., 2019). This suggests that while tailoring to men and women differently can be helpful, classes addressing the improvement of partnered sexual

activities may be difficult to accomplish over a short period of time. Given limitations in conducting long term analysis, the study detailed below aims to approach the correlation between sexual pleasure and sex education retroactively, collecting data on the extent and ways in which respondents believe they were affected by their own sex education experiences.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview

This study explores the correlation between sex education and the sexual pleasure gap. It both aims to move beyond the binary limitations of traditional gender identity distinctions and understand how students assigned female at birth have been affected by their sex education experiences. It examines the sex education experiences of people assigned female at birth to draw connections between the curricula and approach of public sex education in the United States and themes and factors known to be correlated with the existence of the pleasure gap. In doing so, the study exposes themes throughout participant responses and attempts to lay the foundation for further research.

3.2 Participants

This study placed no restrictions on the location, sexuality, gender identity, sexuality, race, or ability status of respondents, although it did require them to be at least 18 years old and assigned female at birth. This decision was made with the intention of generating data which centered the experiences of those most affected by the sexual pleasure gap, while also allowing transgender, nonbinary, and other gender-nonconforming people to share their experiences. Additionally, to recognize and affirm these experiences, I made the decision to use “AFAB” and “AMAB,” to refer to

people assigned female at birth and male at birth, respectively. While it's critical to recognize that even these labels are somewhat exclusionary (particularly as it relates to intersex folks), they move away from the approach of prior research, which typically equates sex with their gender identity. Moreover, while the term "female anatomy" is used sparsely within this paper, it is done so only due to the lack of a gender-inclusive equivalent. This is not used to suggest that all people with anatomy typically associated as "biologically female" should or do identify as "female," nor is it intended to erase the experiences and identities of intersex and two-spirit people.

Furthermore, all participant responses remained anonymous, with no identifiable information submitted. They were, however, asked to provide their gender identity, age, race, and sexuality if they felt comfortable doing so; this information was collected in order to draw trends among data, making it possible to recognize any themes found in responses from participants with shared identities.

Prior to recruiting participants, all survey questions were sent to my university's Institutional Review Board for initial review and approval. The study was granted exemption from full review.

3.3 Recruitment Procedures

These two graphic sets were shared across my social media platforms to recruit participants. Posts were shared 2 weeks apart, on both Instagram and Facebook. Additionally, my professors and other contacts at the University of Delaware helped

distribute the survey further via email, after I reached out to them. We received 169 responses over the course of two months; the link was active from December 2021 to February 2022.

It is likely that a large percentage of respondents are currently college students, due to the method through which the survey was distributed. Additionally, the limitations of my own personal network make it likely that most respondents are from the United States, although it possible that a small percentage could have received sex education in another country. Regardless, I do not believe this possibility detracts from the overall conclusions drawn by the data— due to it being unlikely— and am confident that the questions included within the survey allow us to adequately draw conclusions about the connection between participants’ sex education experiences and sexual pleasure experiences regardless of their geographic location.

3.4 Research Design & Procedures

This thesis takes a feminist lens to the research conducted. Although responses were later grouped and coded by similarity— producing quantitative data— the survey sent out was created with the intention of allowing participants the freedom to offer as much detail as they found appropriate, comfortable, and relevant (see Appendix B). I found it imperative to allow respondents the ability to share their experiences beyond the binary limitations of multiple-choice questions— largely because of the inherent

complexity of sexual experiences, as well as the wide variations in both individuals' pleasure and education experiences.

This survey was formatted using Qualtrics. Respondents were able to complete the survey using any digital devices. They were also given the ability to step away from the survey after beginning and return to complete it at a later time. In order to make the survey easier to locate, the link itself was simplified with Bit.ly and shared with participants as bit.ly/ImproveSexEd.

Participants were asked a total of 27 questions, that were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Excluding the demographic questions at the conclusion of the study—which were free response items—and the consent confirmation needed to begin, 21 questions were fully free response, three were strictly multiple choice, and three were multiple choice with the choice to utilize an optional text box if participants felt it to be necessary.

The first few questions asked participants about their sex education experiences, gathering information about the type of school they went to, if/when they received sex education within school, and the topics covered in their curricula. Participants were then introduced to questions related to the sexual pleasure gap. A definition for this phenomenon was presented, followed by a question asking whether participants had experienced this gap in their own lives. Participants were then asked three questions about the gender of their past/current partner(s) and

whether they typically experienced more sexual pleasure during masturbation or with said partner(s). The next two questions touched on participants' evaluation of both their own and their partner(s) understanding of vaginal anatomy, with the opportunity for respondents to indicate whether they felt the gender of their partner influenced their understanding. Additionally, participants were asked an additional two questions to evaluate their understanding of both their anatomy and pleasure preferences when they first begun having partnered sex.

Two free response questions touched on the prioritization of pleasure as well. These questions asked participants whether their partner(s) had equally valued their pleasure during partnered sex, as well as whether they do and have equally valued their own pleasure. The following seven questions asked participants to name any factors that either limited or increased their ability to feel sexual pleasure, as well as about the impacts of both gender roles and sexual shame on their pleasure experiences.

Finally, respondents were asked a question whether they believed resolving the sexual pleasure gap was importance to achieving gender equity and if they believed any specific changes could be made to existing curricula to help lessen the pleasure gap as it currently exists.

After all data had been gathered and the survey was officially closed, participant responses were reviewed and scanned for initial themes, with popular

sentiments and main themes written down for each question. Once this process had been completed, each question was analyzed again, in much further detail. Here, I identified any existing outliers, reviewed and expanded upon previous notes, and pulled out a series of quotes for each question. These quotes were then grouped into a list of reoccurring themes and coded accordingly. This coding system helped to reveal both the frequency at which each theme popped up, as well as any potential links between questions.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

I received 169 responses over the course of about two months; the survey was open from December 23rd, 2021 to February 9th, 2022. The average age of participants was 23 years old, with the majority of participants between 21 and 22 years old. Most participants identified with a sexuality included under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Yet, since these responses spanned across a variety of specific labels, the plurality of participants identified as heterosexual. More information about this specific breakdown is available in Table 1 of Appendix B. The vast majority of participants identified as either fully or partially white (88% of participants fully identified as white/Caucasian and an additional 5% identified as partially white), with very few responses from people of color. The specific breakdown of all racial identity percentages can be found in Table 2 of Appendix B.

84% of my respondents stated that they had strictly attended public school, while 10% stated only having attended private school. 6% of respondents shared that they had attended both, 86% of which received their sex education through the public education system. In general, 94% of participants shared that they had received sex education in school, with less than 6% reporting never having received it in this setting. Those who did receive sex education reported having covered a range of topics, including heterosexual sex, contraception, STDs/STIs, abstinence, basic anatomy, and the basics of reproduction. No respondents reported pleasure as a topic

included in their curricula; a few specifically remarked on its absence. Everyone who reported not receiving sex education in school noted that it was never offered to them as an option.

When asked where they gained most of their knowledge regarding sexual pleasure, participants named experience (including both partnered sex and masturbation), various online resources (most commonly social media platforms and/or pornography), other sources of media (tv shows, documentaries, films), and discussions with their friends. Among these answers, the internet was, by far, the most significant resource mentioned by respondents (64%).

A slight majority of participants indicated that they had previously heard of the sexual pleasure gap (56%). When asked about the presence of this phenomenon within their own lives, 49% of respondents reported experiencing less pleasure than their partners during the majority of their prior sexual experiences (with an additional 6% expressing uncertainty).

Additionally, despite the majority of respondents (64%) at least partially identifying with a label other than heterosexual/straight (with both LGBTQ+ identifying individuals and other respondents expressing uncertainty over a specific label but identifying a clear desire to explore their feelings of same-sex attraction), most also indicated only having prior sexual experience with people assigned male at birth.

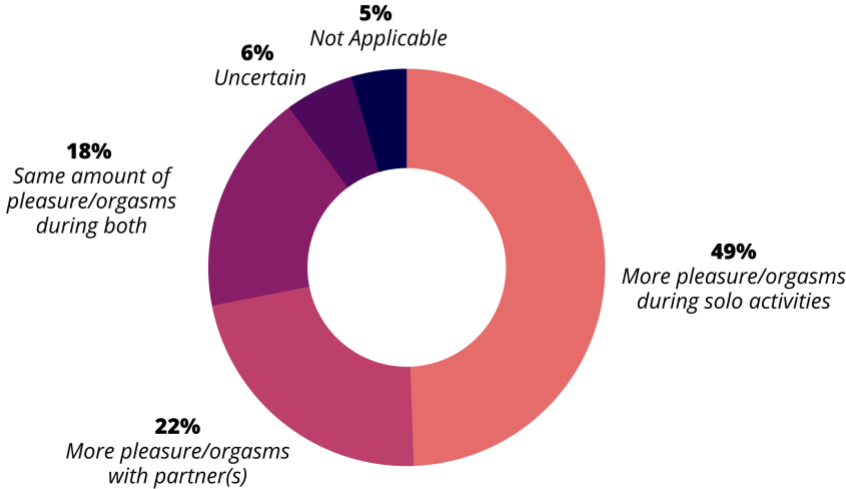
When asked whether they believed the sex or gender of their partner has affected the presence of a sexual gap, 70% respondents said yes, with most responses specifically naming the difficulties they've faced with AMAB partners. An additional 13% of respondents responded by naming that this question was not applicable to them, given that they had only had sex with partners of one sex. Additionally, it's important to note that of the 10 "no" responses, 70% were from respondents who had exclusively been with partners of a specific sex (with almost all of the respondents indicating only AMAB partners). While this doesn't invalidate their experiences, it may imply that the perception of gender roles during sex is more difficult to perceive for folks exclusively attracted to partners of a certain sex— most of which identified as heterosexual.

Additionally, about half of respondents (49%) reported achieving higher rates of pleasure during masturbation than during partnered sex. Of those who indicated experiencing *more* pleasure/orgasms during partnered activities, 50% only had prior experience with AMAB partners, 40% had prior experience with both AFAB and AMAB partners, and 10% only had experience with AFAB partners (this 10% represents 66% of the total survey participants who noted exclusively having experience with AFAB partners). However, respondents who noted prior experience with AMAB partners expressed lower satisfaction overall; almost all of these participants stressed that, despite partnered sex being more pleasurable for them than masturbation, they were still experiencing significantly less pleasure than their

partner(s). Those with AFAB and AMAB partner experience reported significantly more pleasure during their experiences with AFAB folks, with some folks also noting the ability to experience pleasure almost immediately with AFAB partners—something that could take months with AMAB partners. This discontent is demonstrated through responses which highlighted participants’ lack of understanding of their own anatomy and acknowledged the ways in which their education experiences had been confined within a cisheteronormative lens.

Figure 1:

Do you experience more or less pleasure (including but not limited to orgasm frequency) during masturbation or during sex with one or more partners?



Still, responses were more varied when participants were asked about their partner’s understanding of their anatomy, with 46% of respondents stating that, at least to some extent, their partner seemed confused about their anatomy. The response was

also particularly popular among people describing experiences with AMAB partners. Furthermore, 17% of participants attributed their partner's understanding to their shared anatomy.

Participants reflected mixed prioritizations of their own pleasure. While 57% of respondents said they did currently value their pleasure equitably to their partners (even if they hadn't in the past), a significant number discussed struggles with doing so. These respondents shared that they felt obligated to prioritize their partner, whether because of past interactions or societal expectations to prioritize men.

A similar trend was demonstrated throughout responses to *Question 15: Do you feel like most of your partners have valued your sexual pleasure equally?*, although responses were more equally split on both sides. Additionally, respondents specifically named more frequent issues with AMAB partners. Further, many participants reported feelings of shame, embarrassment, and/or unworthiness which were closely linked to gender roles.

When asked specifically about factors that limit their ability to experience pleasure during sex, participants named a range of problematic, sexist narratives that most sex education curricula fail to adequately push back on. Several responses highlighted shame born from social scripts dictating *who's entitled to pleasure*, and the idea "constantly imposed on girls that sex is... dirty or wrong in a way" (Personal Communication, December 23rd, 2021). It's also worth noting the popularity of responses related to issues of body image (especially in conjunction with anxiety over their partner's perception of them), various medications (namely birth control and

SSRIs), and mental health issues such as ADHD, anxiety, and the long-term effects of sexual trauma. A few participants also named the role religious trauma has played in causing them sexual shame. Additionally, only 18% of participants responded yes when asked if they felt as if they had a strong understanding of their pleasure preferences when they began having partnered sex.

When asked to name the factors that improved their ability to experience sexual pleasure, participants highlighted communication as one critical aspect. While doing so, many respondents acknowledged both the direct impact the depth and emotional closeness of the relationship had on feeling comfortable communicating with their partner, as well as the importance of their partner's reaction when receiving feedback. These themes were also echoed throughout responses to Question 14: *What, if anything, affects how comfortable you are communicating the presence of pain and/or your sexual pleasure needs to your partner?* Other popular responses mentioned the inclusion of sex toys, foreplay, mental relaxation, and whether or not they were sober (with proponents for and against the inclusion of various substances during sexual activity).

When asked whether gender roles had influenced participants' past experiences in any way, 77% of respondents confirmed that they had, expanding on their individual experiences. Here, participants named the way expectations surrounding femininity have impacted how comfortable they are expressing and exploring their sexuality, communicating with their partner, initiating sex, prioritizing their own

sexual pleasure, being dominant during sex, etc. Some responses also acknowledged the affect gender roles had played in influencing their partner(s) behavior, mostly in conjunction with masculinity. There was little to no elaboration provided by respondents who said no.

Finally, when asked if and how they thought sex education could be improved to address the sexual pleasure gap, many respondents highlighted the need for improved anatomy education (particularly surrounding female genitalia), LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons, more discussions about consent, curricula which acknowledges the impact gender roles can play in influencing sexual dynamics, stronger discussions of sexuality and identity, a need move beyond cisheteronormative frames, and a less clinical approach which places a stronger focus on sexual pleasure throughout.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 Survey Purpose and Hypothesis

For the present study I hypothesized that public sex education in America has, at best, not positively contributed to the sexual wellbeing and pleasure of students assigned female at birth and, at worst, has negatively impact students' experiences with pleasure. The literature addressing the sexual pleasure gap— and it's contributing factors— presents a strong understanding of the role that systemic gender inequity plays, both in inhibiting pleasure amongst individuals assigned female at birth, and in shaping the way their pleasure is perceived by people of all genders (Missari, 2013). Historical and ongoing attacks on comprehensive sex education demonstrate a sustained effort to prevent progressive, accurate, and pleasure-informed curricula, which addresses and pushes back on the harm people assigned female at birth shoulder throughout society and present-day systems (McGeeney and Kehily, 2016). Currently, there are no existing federal standards mandating comprehensive (or any) sex education, leading to wide variations in the quality and type of content covered. This presents problematic implications for sexual pleasure equity and, when compounded with the knowledge that even states with the most comprehensive sex education requirements fail to take a pleasure-informed approach, I am led to believe that improvements can be made if correlation is adequately examined.

5.2 Moving Beyond Cisheteronormativity

Existing research fails to adequately acknowledge the experiences of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people. While many of these people are affected by the sexual pleasure gap— especially if they have a vagina— they too often either have their identities erased by studies which label them female participants or are excluded from research entirely. This exclusion negates the impact that being raised and assigned female-at-birth has on the way in which one experiences socialization.

For example, several trans and nonbinary respondents discussed the way growing up as an AFAB person affected their outlook and understanding of sex, remarking on the way weak boundaries and inadequate knowledge of their anatomy has been normalized within their lives, naming the hypersexualization they've received due to their "feminine body," and the pressure they've felt to explore pleasure and sex in accordance with the standards dictated by traditional gender roles. Some stated that their sex lives had improved since coming out, with partners more easily understanding their desire to reject cisheteronormative standards. These claims parallel the findings of other studies, which indicated lesser pleasure gaps within queer relationships (Willis, 2018), further demonstrating how approaching sex with a cisheteronormative lens harms AFAB individuals.

Additionally, gender diverse respondents provided a unique perspective when speaking about factors that may be linked to their gender identity (such as hormone therapy, gender dysphoria, etc.) and the impact they have on their experiences with sexual pleasure. With many of these factors being relevant to sex education, the inclusion and affirmation of their voices is essential to furthering our understanding of how curricula can best meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students.

This need was particularly apparent throughout responses from LGBTQ+ respondents who repeatedly acknowledged their curricula's failure to discuss queer relationships and sex, leaving them confused and forced to seek information from external resources. Data suggests this exclusion has adverse health outcomes, too; one research study found LGBTQ+ high school students to be more likely to use alcohol and other illicit substances prior to sex and less likely to utilize condoms and contraception during (Rasberry 2018). Therefore, it is essential that, in working to improve sex education, curriculum adjustments are both trauma-informed and intersectional, helping to share information in a way that combats not only gender inequity, but other forms of oppression as well.

5.3 Inadequate Anatomy Lessons

An overwhelming number of respondents highlighted struggling with a lack of understanding concerning their own anatomy after sex education, acknowledging the ways in which their educational experiences had been confined within a

cisheteronormative lens. When asked “*Do you feel like you had a strong understanding of your pleasure preferences when first you started having partnered sex?*” only 18% of respondents said yes. Additionally, when asked “*Do you feel like you had a strong understanding of your anatomy when you first started having partnered sex?*” 60% of respondents said no.

Respondents also discussed the issues this has caused them, echoing sentiments such as “I did not know about the clit, could not tell you where my g spot was— I didn’t know much of anything when it came to the anatomy of pleasure. This really impacted my ability to enjoy sex,” (Personal Communication, December 23rd, 2021) when describing issues during partnered sex. These responses demonstrate the way sex education is not only failing to help, but going so far as to hinder the sexual communication skills of AFAB students. Research suggests that women’s orgasm rates increase as they grow more comfortable communicating their needs to their sexual partner(s), but AFAB students are not being given the information necessary to communicate in the first place (Castleman, 2016). Curricula isn’t preparing students for safe, healthy, and pleasurable relationships, but instead continues to normalize one-sided pleasure and set up the same phallogentric imperatives previously identified as contributing factors to the pleasure gap (Willis, 2018).

However, it’s important to note that pleasure discourse isn’t just denied to folks assigned female at birth. All students are harmed by the way discussions of pleasure are stigmatized and avoided in sex education classrooms because it prevents

them from being able to learn about sex in realistic terms. This refusal forces students to rely on cisheteronormative media framings of pleasure for knowledge, leading to the further exclusion of AFAB folks.

Unfortunately, the harms of this exclusion are certainly not just restricted to partnered sex; participants also mentioned the issues they've had achieving pleasure independently, saying "I knew virtually nothing. Female orgasm was NEVER discussed and explained to me ever. I didn't even know that what I was experiencing during solo time was orgasms until I went on the internet." (Personal Communication, December 23rd, 2021). Several participants reported having little to no masturbation experience by the time they started having sex, understanding pleasure as solely associated with penetration— an assumption that can be dismantled by the incorporation of information concerning the clitoris within our curricula. This is particularly striking when considered in conjunction with research revealing positive links between masturbation and improved genital self-image, improved understanding of one's body, and improved sexual efficacy (Bowman, 2013). Bowman's study in particular "lend[s] support to the feminist theory that when women are able to focus on their own sexual pleasure or learning, without the concerns of pregnancy or pleasing a partner, they may feel sexually empowered" (Bowman, 2013).

Furthermore, the failure to address pleasure in any capacity restricts the ability sex education has to push back on unrealistic narratives often featured in media portrayals of sex. One respondent reflected on this specifically saying, "Before having

partnered sex, I was under the impression, mainly from internet porn, that sex was not something I had to learn about in order to enjoy. I figured that once it began, I would enjoy it easily just as much as the women in porn did” (Personal Communication, January 25th, 2022). This assumption raises a larger concern that AFAB students are having their expectations for sex, in general, crafted by the dynamics demonstrated within pornography— which, while a perfectly valid form of work, often depict harmful relationships, violent physical activity, and unrealistic body ideals.

Overall, regardless of their specific focus, responses in this area demonstrated clear themes of disconnection, with respondents continuously noting difficulty communicating with their partners during unsatisfying sexual encounters because, struggling to understand their own bodies, they were unsure how to identify what could be done to improve their experience. In some ways, setting students up with inadequate understandings of their bodies parallels broader historical and ongoing efforts to exclude and erase AFAB anatomy. Examples of this include the use of inaccurate terms to describe female anatomy (such as the use of the word “vagina” even when exclusively referring to the vulva), and taboo nature and intentional exclusion of the clitoris from curricula and mainstream portrayals of sex in media, the ongoing debate about the G-spot, etc.

5.4 Gender Roles

Additionally, many participants reported feelings of shame, embarrassment, and/or unworthiness they linked to gender roles. When asked specifically about factors that limit their ability to experience pleasure during sex, participants named a range of problematic, sexist narratives that most sex education curricula fails to adequately push back on. Devastatingly common were responses which mentioned feeling obligated to ensure pleasure for AMAB partners, even at the expense of their own comfort, relaxation, and pleasure. Respondents focused on the pressure they felt to both make their partner orgasm and achieve their own orgasm— but only to ensure their partner’s happiness and satisfaction. Reinforcing previously echoed feelings about the effects of cisheteronormativity, they also discussed absorbing the message that **“the purpose of PIV sex is to reach male orgasm,”** never considering their own pleasure in the process (Personal Communication, December 23rd, 2021, Quote bolded for emphasis).

Many respondents also named the impact of shame over their sexual performance, sharing the way their confidence has been eroded through sentiments such as “I also internalized from my last relationship that if I couldn’t orgasm in a short time frame, **I was faulty in some way**” (Personal Communication, December 23rd, 2021) and “As a woman, I feel as though I have to be quiet and let the masculine person take over, **and have their pleasure be worth more than mine,**” as well as the

expectation to maintain less sexual partners than men (Personal Communication, December 23rd, 2021, Quote bolded for emphasis).

These expressions were especially troublesome because they demonstrate how gendered expectations can inhibit a person's confidence to the point of personal shame. Participants were quick to devalue themselves—prescribing derogatory labels to themselves like “faulty”—and their sex education curricula failed to challenge these assumptions. By solely focusing on the importance of the male orgasm, sex education effectively leaves AFAB individuals feeling as if they're expected to “sacrifice [their] pleasure to please the other person” (Personal Communication, January 25th, 2022) and “prove [their] worth through sex to men” (Personal Communication, January 25th, 2022). This not only leads to the decimation of individual feelings of worth amongst AFAB individuals, but also frames sex as a whole in a problematic way. By failing to value AFAB students equitably, sex education curricula communicates the prioritization of male pleasure to generations of students across all gender identities.

Many respondents reported prior sexual experiences where AMAB partners demonstrated both a lack of effort and anatomical understanding, neglecting to make a real effort to ensure respondents' pleasure. Most responses typically took one of two approaches. They either currently or previously brushed off this lack of effort to learn, chalking it up to the norm, despite their dissatisfaction, or they discussed how this behavior has impacted the value they place on their own pleasure, echoing sentiments

like **“If it were the norm, I would value [my pleasure] more”** (Personal Communication, December 24th, 2022, Quote bolded for emphasis). Respondents who fell outside of these two categories were more likely to emphasize the value of their own pleasure, communicating the disdain they held for partners who didn’t adequately prioritize them. These respondents were more aware of the pleasure gap in the first place.

Moreover, the gendered dynamics at play here may provide some insight into why, despite the majority of survey participants identifying as something other than heterosexual/straight, they had only engaged in sexual activity with male partners. When pleasure is framed as something AFAB people give to men, not something they strive for themselves, AMAB people are not only assumed to be included, but also centralized during sex. This approach fails to present AFAB folks with the education necessary for them to envision themselves in the types of interactions they desire, harming the quality of their sexual experiences from the beginning. Additionally, with sex education failing to present LGBTQ+ relationships as an option in the majority of places, it’s likely that many queer respondents were not given the tools they needed to adequately assess their sexuality by the time of sexual debut, having already been intimate with AMAB folks before they even solidify a label for themselves.

5.5 Participant Suggestions

In order to directly assess the link between the sexual pleasure gap and sex education (as well as the wider implications of the pleasure gap in general), participants were asked the following question: *What, if anything, do you think could be changed/included in sex education programs to lessen the sexual pleasure gap? Do you believe closing the sexual pleasure gap is important to achieving overall gender equity?*

Here, respondents reinforced many of the ideas discussed above, emphasizing the need for curricula that moves beyond the idea that sex is centered around or solely confined to PIV, instead presenting students with information about a wide range of sexual practices— ensuring their knowledge of and ability to safely navigate these situations. This recommendation would also help draw attention to the issues previously discussed with language, allowing activities like oral sex to be seen as individual (and equally weighted) events, rather than a lead up to the male orgasm. This reframing is helpful because it both helps to increase the validation of sexual practices which typically involve greater clitoral stimulation than PIV, and because it helps push back on the idea that consenting to one type of sex implies consent to another. Furthermore, lesson plans which discuss queer relationships and sex provide a wider range of students with information that's both relevant and affirming to their sexualities.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of teaching students both where the clitoris is located and what its function is, as well as the destigmatization of masturbation— especially for AFAB folks. The inclusion of discussion oriented around self-pleasure is particularly crucial in helping students of all genders feel as if they're deserving and capable of pleasure, which could potentially increase their comfort asserting this when with a partner. This pushes back on the idea that pleasure is not necessary or realistic for AFAB students and provides them with the information they need to begin assessing their own anatomy and pleasure preferences, without the pressure or nerves that may be present during partnered sex.

Other suggestions emphasized the importance of teaching consent— something confirmed by sexual and reproductive health organizations like Planned Parenthood who've previously found survey participants across the United States to have significantly varied understandings of what actually constitutes sexual during sex ("PPFA Consent Survey Results Summary," 2016).

Increasing lessons surrounding consent and other healthy sexual behaviors would also likely be useful in providing students with foundational knowledge about sexual communication— another important point stressed by respondents. When asked to name the factors that improved their ability to experience sexual pleasure, participants highlighted communication as one of the most critical aspects. While doing so, many respondents noted the significance both the relationship depth and emotional closeness they shared with their sexual partners had here, universally

agreeing that the stronger these were the more comfortable they typically felt communicating with their partner.

Additionally, respondents highlighted the importance of their partner's reaction to their feedback as a critical factor, validating the importance of consent discussions which equip students with healthy tools to both state their own boundaries and respond to other's. These two themes were also echoed throughout responses to Question 14 which asked "*What, if anything, affects how comfortable you are communicating the presence of pain and/or your sexual pleasure needs to your partner?*" Other popular responses to this question mentioned the inclusion of sex toys, foreplay, mental relaxation, and whether or not they were sober (with responses from proponents both for and against the inclusion of various substances during sexual activity).

Some people noted the importance of specifically discussing the complexity often present in sexual relationships, without reverting to the scare tactics currently present in many popular curricular models today. Some examples of common scare tactics include presenting certain decisions—most popularly abstinence until marriage— as morally superior to others, the demonization of sex in general (particularly for people assigned female at birth), efforts to lead young people to believe that other people will know if they've engaged in sexual activity, and efforts to lead students to believe they will be punished for having sex (whether within a religious, social, or other context). Other popular tactics are the presentation and normalization of sex as a painful experience (most often combined with a failure to provide students with resources to resolve and mitigate discomfort and/or pain), and

overly disturbing and/or dramatized lessons about sexual transmitted diseases (STDs) and infections (STIs); these often require students to view severe and horrifyingly graphic pictures of various infections, most of which have often gone untreated for long periods of time

These tactics are problematic because they misinform students, often preying on their lack of existing knowledge (as well as their lack of access to factual and non-stigmatizing information). Additionally, they're rooted in an anti-pleasure framework, perpetuating the factors which fuel the sexual pleasure gap in the first place.

Remaining suggestions primarily spanned the topics covered in more detail above such as dismantling stereotypes based in gender roles and other social scripts and expanding both the inclusivity of and amount of time spent teaching sex education materials.

Finally, respondents consistently affirmed the importance of dismantling the sexual pleasure gap, both in improving the individual experiences of AFAB folks and the relationships they hold with AMAB people, as well as achieving broader goals of gender equity. Speaking to its broader connection, one participant summarized the role gender inequity plays in sustaining the pleasure gap, stating “Social scripting and biased attitudes are pervasive, even in the bedroom, and they can't be ignored without perpetuating those little inequalities” (Personal Communication, January 22nd, 2022). Other participants concluded that closing the present gap would require cultural ideal shifts, prohibiting men from continuing to view women as objects for their pleasure, rather than full and complex human beings.

Chapter 6

LIMITATIONS

Although the findings from my study provide a strong overview into the ways in which sex education contributes to the sexual pleasure gap (and explores its potential as a means for closing it), a number of limitations must be acknowledged.

While I originally hoped to gather responses through random sampling, limitations under university procedures prevented me from doing so. Instead, the survey was advertised on various social media platforms, as well as distributed to my professional network through email. The inability to gather responses through a random sampling process unfortunately places limits on the populations to which I was able to advertise the study. My own connection to the Women's and Gender Studies department at my institution presents the possibility of participants being more aware of the pleasure gap than the average population due to their academic background, which could potentially change the way some respondents approach their sexual experiences.

Other possible limitations include potentially limited memory about the specifics of one's sex education lesson(s), due to the length of time since participants first learned the information, and the influence of the current political climate. A handful of participants did, at times, express that they could not remember the specifics of their curricula due to this gap. This is, however, arguably significant

because it reflects the limited impact sex education had on the formation of their sexual identities.

Additionally, with increased attacks on LGBTQ+ students popping up around the country (such as Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill and Texas Governor Greg Abbott’s attempt to have the parents of transgender children reported for child abuse if they allow their child to seek gender-affirming medical care), it must be recognized that different groups of people may have varying comfort levels participating in these kinds of studies and/or sharing information about their specific identities. This further reinforces the need to cultivate safer spaces for LGBTQ+ students, both within sex education classrooms, and within all other facets of society.

In addition, since it’s likely that a significant proportion of participants are University of Delaware students, it must be noted that racial representation is largely not representative of the overall American population. An overwhelming majority of survey participants identified themselves as white/Caucasian, with very little participation from people of color. This is significant because it suggests that participant responses may not be representative of the sexual pleasure experiences of AFAB folks of color. It should also be noted that not all participants filled out every question.

I would also like to restate the limitations that impacted my ability to use gender-affirming language throughout certain sections of this paper— namely the use

of the gender binary within prior studies referenced and research collected. Data on the severity of the sexual pleasure gap itself identifies the different orgasm rates in cisgender men and women, leaving no space to analyze the experiences of those who fall outside of those binaries.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide evidence that sex education does have lasting impacts on AFAB folks' experiences with sexual pleasure. Findings suggest that sex education curricula in American public schools has the potential to improve these experiences if it's adapted to combat the various issues raised by participants during discussions of sex education itself, and address the specific factors identified as both harmful and helpful to achieving pleasure during sex.

This leaves numerous further directions to be explored. Responses indicate that participants are internalizing narratives not explicitly stated by their sex education teachers but communicated nonetheless through the environment created. One potential direction for further research might be diving deeper into this "hidden curriculum," analyzing the unspoken messages absorbed by students and their connection to both the sexual pleasure gap and sexual pleasure as a whole for AFAB people. Specific types of hidden curriculum that may be useful to examine include the topics explicitly avoided by sex education curricula, the classroom environment itself, the approach of sex educators, the specific language used to describe sex in its various forms, and the adherence of gender roles when engaging with students. This would be beneficial in exposing the changes that can be made within American public school sex education classrooms to foster healthy learning environments.

Additionally, the field of research concerning AFAB people's experiences with sexuality, would likely benefit from further research on sexual pleasure as it exists beyond and independent from orgasms. The centralization of orgasms within discussions of pleasure is, in itself, rooted in cisheteronormativity; it places reproduction-centered limitations on our conceptualization of pleasure and ignores the wider scope of pleasure experienced during sexual activity. This is particularly important to sex education because current curricula centers reproduction above all other aspects of sex and sexuality, influencing the way pleasure is introduced to students.

Lastly, focusing specifically on the experiences of trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming folks here could also be a possible future direction for research. Being largely excluded from existing studies, there is little data, to my knowledge, that exists to document the prominence of the sexual pleasure gap outside of cisgender relationships. Additionally, there's very little data which reflects how the perception of sex education and its potential effects on sexual pleasure are influenced by the experience of being a transgender person in the public education system. Research which analyzes these experiences across various US states could be especially beneficial in producing data reflecting how the pleasure experiences of trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming students are impacted by both their sex education environments and their political environments.

All of the aforementioned directions would positively impact the field of research regarding AFAB folks' sexuality and work towards achieving pleasure equity amongst partners of different genders. The findings of my research reinforce the need for curricula which addresses student's needs on both a systemic and individual level, working to combat oppressive narratives which devalue AFAB pleasure and equip all students with the skills necessary to build healthy communication patterns and relationships. Further research into the implementation of pleasure-oriented curricula is critically necessary to the liberation of AFAB people, and people of other marginalized genders.

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Chapter 8

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Recruitment Graphics

Figure 2, shared December 23rd, 2021:

Examining the correlation between
SEX ED & THE SEXUAL PLEASURE GAP
Survey Opportunity

This research project is open to all people assigned female at birth. Swipe to learn more!

<https://bit.ly/ImproveSexEd>

In completion of my undergraduate thesis, I've elected to study the relationship between the sex education one receives and their experiences with the sexual pleasure gap.

Survey participants will be asked about their experiences with both sex education and sexual pleasure. Responses will be used to better understand the role sex education can play in eliminating the sexual pleasure gap.

All responses are anonymous and will be kept confidential. All data will be destroyed upon completion of the project. Participants are encouraged to share only as much as they're comfortable with.

More information can be found at bit.ly/ImproveSexEd.
IG: @nevebrown_

Figure 3, shared January 6th, 2022:

Examining the correlation between
SEX ED & THE SEXUAL PLEASURE GAP
Survey Opportunity

This research project is open to all people assigned female at birth. Swipe to learn more!

<https://bit.ly/ImproveSexEd>

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More information can be found at bit.ly/ImproveSexEd.
IG: @nevebrown_

Appendix B: Participant Demographic Breakdowns

Table 1: Detailed Breakdown of Respondent Sexuality Identifications

Participant Self-Identification Labels:	Percentage of Responses:
Straight/heterosexual	39%
Bisexual	29%
Bisexual-ish	2%
Bisexual/bicurious	3%
Pansexual/Queer	2%
Pansexual	8%
Unsure	2%
Queer	5%
Queer, lesbian	2%
Lesbian	3%
Queer/bisexual	3%
Straight but questioning/straight?	3%
Straight but bicurious	2%
Same-sex partner	2%

Table 2: Detailed Breakdown of Respondent Racial Identifications

Participant Self-Identification Labels:	Percentage of Responses:
White	79%
Black	1%

Latino	1%
Middle Eastern	1%
Bi-racial, white, and indigenous	1%
Mexican/Caucasian	1%
White/Middle Eastern	1%
Caucasian	6%
Caucasian/white	1%
White non-hispanic/Latinx	1%
White/Asian	1%
Asian, White	1%
Mixed	1%

Table 3: Detailed Breakdown of Respondent Gender Identifications

Participant Self-Identification Labels:	Percentage of Responses:
Female	68%
Cis-Woman/Cis Female	4%
Woman	7%
Genderfluid	3%
Female/Non-Binary	1%
Non-Binary Trans Masc	1%
Non-Binary	4%
Woman/Non-Binary/Confusing	1%
AFAB	1%

Non-Binary but female-aligned	1%
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Appendix C: Survey Instrument

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Project: Undergraduate Thesis Project: Creating Equitable Pleasure Outcomes Through Sex Education

Principal Investigator(s): Neve Brown

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form tells you about the study including its purpose, what you will be asked to do if you decide to take part, and the risks and benefits of being in the study.

Please read the information below and ask us any questions you may have before you decide whether or not you agree to participate.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to identify how American public schools can adjust sex education curriculum to improve long-term sexual pleasure outcomes for students assigned female at birth (AFAB). You are being asked to participate because your experience as an AFAB person may be helpful in identifying what sex education can do to help students assigned female at birth achieve the same sexual pleasure outcomes as students assigned male at birth.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

As part of this study, you will be asked to participate in the following survey, which asks about your sex education experiences, experience with sexual pleasure, and any factors you believe may have influenced either.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

Discussions of sex and sexuality-related topics have the potential to make some people uncomfortable. If you experience discomfort while filling out this survey, it is encouraged that you prioritize your wellbeing and skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. All questions are optional for this reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS?

Participants in this study have the opportunity to further contribute to knowledge as it relates to improving sex education and working towards gender equity and sexual justice.

HOW WILL CONFIDENTIALITY BE MAINTAINED? WHO MAY KNOW THAT YOU PARTICIPATED IN THIS RESEARCH?

There is no way for your answers to be traced back to you specifically, so nobody will know you've participated in this study unless you choose to share that information with them. Confidentiality will be maintained for all participants throughout the duration of the study. If you participate in this study, your name and contact information will not be disclosed to the researcher, nor anyone else, at any time.

All responses provided, although not connected to identifying information, will be kept confidential and stored on the principal investigator's OneDrive account (connected to their University of Delaware email) in a password protected file until the conclusion of this project (June 2022). Upon the completion of this project, this data will be permanently deleted from OneDrive.

The confidentiality of your records will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your research records may be viewed by the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board, which is a committee formally designated to approve, monitor, and review biomedical and behavioral research involving humans. Records relating to this research will be kept for at least three years after the research study has been completed.

WILL THERE BE ANY COSTS TO YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH?

There are no costs associated with participating in this research.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION?

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this research.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

Taking part in this research study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time and choose not to answer any questions you don't feel comfortable answering. If you decide not to participate or if you decide to stop taking part in the research at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to stop participation, or not to participate, will not influence current or future relationships with the University of Delaware.

WHO SHOULD YOU CALL IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board at hsrb-research@udel.edu or (302) 831-2137.

DO YOU CONSENT AND WISH TO PROCEED TO THE FOLLOWING SURVEY?

Selecting the yes button provided below means that:

You are at least 18 years old. You have read and understand the information given in this form. You have asked any questions you have about the research and the questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You accept the terms in the form and volunteer to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

DO YOU CONSENT AND WISH TO PROCEED TO THE FOLLOWING SURVEY?

Selecting the yes button provided below means that:

- You are at least 18 years old
 - You have read and understand the information given in this form
 - You have asked any questions you have about the research and the questions have been answered to your satisfaction
 - You accept the terms in the form and volunteer to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.
- Yes, I consent. (1)
 - No, I do not consent or wish to take the survey.

Q1 Did you go to public or private school?

- Public
 - Private
 - Homeschool/Other
 - Combination, but my sex ed was at
-

Q2 What does sex education mean to you?

Q3: Did you receive sex education in school?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q4: IF YES: What did your sex education lessons entail & what grade(s) did you receive instruction during?

Q5: If NO: Was it offered? What swayed you away from taking this course?

Q6: Where do you feel you've gained the majority of your information regarding sexual pleasure?

Q7: One aspect of sexuality education that's been discussed in rising popularity is the sexual pleasure gap. Have you heard this term before?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Unsure (3)

Q8: For the purposes of this study, we will be defining the term "sexual pleasure gap" as the tendency for people assigned female at birth (AFAB) to experience less sexual pleasure/fewer orgasms and more pain than those assigned male at birth (AMAB). This is particularly prevalent during sexual activity between an AFAB and AMAB partner. Have you found this phenomenon to be present in your life?

Q9: Have you engaged in sexual activity with:

- Only partners assigned female at birth (AFAB)
- Only partners assigned male at birth (AMAB)
- A mix of AFAB and AMAB partners
- Other: _____

Q10: Do you feel that the sex or gender of your partner(s) has affected the presence of a sexual pleasure gap? How so?

Q11: Do you experience more or less pleasure (including but not limited to orgasm frequency) during masturbation or during sex with one or more partners?

- More pleasure/orgasms during solo activity
- More pleasure/orgasms with partner(s) (
- The same amount of pleasure/orgasms during both
- Not Applicable
- Uncertain

Q12: Do you feel like you have an adequate understanding of your sexual anatomy?

- Yes _____
- No _____

Q13: Do you feel that most of your partners have understood your sexual anatomy?

- Yes, regardless of their own anatomy
- Yes, if/because they have the same anatomy
- Yes, if/because they have different anatomy
- No, regardless of their anatomy
- No, even if they have the same anatomy
- No, and they have different anatomy
- Further explanation:

Q14: Do you feel like most of your partners valued your sexual pleasure equally?

Q15: Do you feel like you value your sexual pleasure equally during partnered sex?

Q16: What, if anything, affects how comfortable you are communicating the presence of pain and/or your sexual pleasure needs to your partner(s)?

Q17: Do you feel like you had a strong understanding of your anatomy when you first started having partnered sex?

Q18: Do you feel like you had a strong understanding of your pleasure preferences when first you started having partnered sex?

Q19: If either of these things has grown over time: do you think this has to do with age, experience, both, or neither?

Q20: Do you feel as if your ability to feel sexual pleasure is limited in any way?

Q21: IF YES: What limits this ability?

Q22: What, if anything, improves your ability to feel sexual pleasure?

Q23: Have you ever experienced shame surrounding sex? If you're comfortable sharing: what did you feel ashamed about?

Q24: Do you feel as if gender roles have influenced your sexual experiences in any way? If so, how?

Q25: What, if anything, do you think could be changed/included in sex education programs to lessen the sexual pleasure gap? Do you believe closing the sexual pleasure gap is important to achieving overall gender equity?

Q26: Is there anything else you'd like to share or any relevant information you want to include that you didn't feel was covered previously?

Q27: If you feel comfortable sharing, please provide your demographic information below:

Gender: _____

Race: _____

Age: _____

Sexuality: _____