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# Queering Sex Ed: The Need for Inclusivity in Sexual Education Curricula

By: Sage Burdge, *Arcadia University*

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## Introduction

From its beginning, sexual education in the United States has been widely debated by scholars, educators, parents, and policymakers. Almost everyone has an opinion on what the curriculum should include, as well as how and when it should be taught. In earlier days, the population these decisions affected the most, the youth, were not included in this conversation; however, contemporary literature has begun to make up for this shortcoming. Much of the work in this field focused on students' perceptions and thoughts on how sex education programs in their schools serve them. Scholars found the typical models of sex education today omit an often-silenced group: LGBTQ+ youth. This omission proved to have detrimental effects on the sexual and mental well-being of this population, such as a higher risk of sexually transmitted infections, intimate partner violence, and higher rates of suicide and substance abuse. This review highlights the ways current sex education curricula fail sexual minorities and illustrates how this exclusion perpetuates social inequality of the LGBTQ+ community.

## Background

In this paper, the term LGBTQ+ is synonymous with "sexual minorities" and is defined as any sexual or gender identity that is not heterosexual and cisgender. This includes, but is not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (nonbinary, genderqueer, or agender), queer/questioning, asexual/aromantic, and intersex. Heterosexual is used when referring to any person who identifies as heterosexual and cisgender. Cisgender is defined as a person whose gender aligns with the sex assigned at birth.

Currently, there are a few different categories of sex education programs generally recognized by experts in this field. The categories referred to in this paper are comprehensive, abstinence-only, inclusive, and exclusive. Comprehensive education refers to programs that instruct students on specific subjects of sexuality and relationships, such as birth control use,

sexually transmitted infections, anatomy, and healthy relationships. Abstinence-only programs advocate exclusively for abstinence until marriage for all students and do not include any instruction on sexual health practices. Inclusive sex education programs include all sexual and gender identities in the content of the program, rather than just heterosexuality. Exclusive programs are the opposite of inclusive, comprised only of content applicable to heterosexual sex.

Combinations of these described characteristics can be present in a single set of sexual education curriculum. For example, a program can include comprehensive sexual health information but still be exclusive of sexual minorities. Any program that excludes sexual minorities can be described as heteronormative. The content of heteronormative programs focuses only on heterosexuality, assumes heterosexuality of all students and the general population, and places it above all other sexualities in terms of acceptability and legitimacy.

## Review of the Literature

### Introduction

Sexual education programs in schools vary in content and approach, but most of these programs exclude, pathologize, or ignore sexual minorities. The mainstream politics of sex education ignores this issue; most often the argument is between whether or not sex education programs should even include information on sexual health or merely advocate for abstinence until marriage. This diminishes the consequences posed by excluding sexual minorities from sex education. The absence of information relevant to sexual minorities in sex education programs can result in negative consequences, such as discrimination and higher incidences of unsafe sexual practices. LGBTQ+ youth may also feel alienated from their peers because of the exclusion of their identities from the curriculum. Sex education that is inclusive of all identities is necessary to improve school climate and prepare sexual minorities to practice safe sex. Scholars support

this statement but, in order to drive progress, studies on existing programs and comprehensive proposals for improvement are needed.

### **History of Sex Education in the United States**

Since its inception in the early 20th century, sexual education has been predominantly heteronormative. Initially, sexual reform in education disguised intent to maintain the institution of marriage and instill values of socially acceptable sexuality in youths. This phenomenon grew in popularity quickly in the U.S., with nearly 3,000 schools offering some form of sexuality-related education to students by 1920.<sup>1</sup> Around this time, the federal government became more involved in controlling public sexual health information, initially focusing on reducing the spread of sexually transmitted infections. The federal government continues to exercise control over sexual education to this day.

Sexual education remained intensely conservative until the 1960s, when the birth control pill came on the market and began to garner attention; with this came a push from liberal organizations for reform in sex education. The public demanded more accessible and comprehensive sexual health information to supplement the growing awareness of both government controlled information and sexuality in American society. In the 1980s, with the threat of AIDS looming, the federal government began to fund strict abstinence-only sex education programs, built mostly on misinformation that instilled fear and shame. Contemporarily, the federal government continues to fund abstinence-only programs. However, many states have begun to turn away from abstinence-only education, shifting to comprehensive based programs. In recent years, the mainstream argument over best practices in sex education exists between abstinence-only and comprehensive programs. This debate ignores the lack of inclusivity for marginalized identities within sex education.

### **Heteronormativity and Exclusion in Contemporary Sex Education**

One of the cornerstones of abstinence-on-

ly programs is the prevention of unplanned teenage pregnancy. This is a significant representation of the heteronormativity and exclusion in sexual education simply because of its disregard for students in same-sex relationships who do not need pregnancy prevention. However, many of the comprehensive curricula also lack information for sexual minorities. Typical comprehensive programs, much like abstinence-only programs, focus on heterosexual relations and pregnancy prevention. The comprehensive programs that include LGBTQ+ information often attach a negative social stigma to non-heterosexuality. One of the most well-known instances of this are programs that only include homosexuality in instruction on HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup>

Several authors have broken down sexual education curricula into a spectrum ranging from inclusive to exclusive. Many programs on the exclusive side actively silence, ignore, and pathologize any behaviors existing outside of heterosexuality.<sup>3</sup> Pathologizing minority sexualities is even more harmful than complete ignorance because this implies sexual minorities are a lesser alternative to heterosexuality. These programs LGBTQ+ content is inherently dangerous. Most sexual education not only is exclusive of LGBTQ+ youth, but also covertly promotes a certain brand of heterosexuality that excludes anyone outside of the white, middle-class image.<sup>4</sup> Scholars refer to this phenomenon as the “hidden curriculum” within sex education. Additionally, sexual curricula often only recognize vaginal intercourse as sex, which excludes other forms of sexual expression and behaviors. This limits LGBTQ+ individuals, while leaving heterosexual students with only a partial understanding of sexual practices and behaviors.

Despite being focused on the inclusion of all sexual minorities, most scholarly work on inclusive sex education seems to omit any mention of intersex, asexuality, and gender identities outside of the binary. These identities are crucial in creating an inclusive sexual education curriculum that genuinely includes all students. There is a need for further research to fill this gap and address these identities.

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1 Jonathan Zimmerman, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

2 Robert McGarry, “Build a Curriculum That Includes Everyone,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 94, no. 5 (2013): 27-31; Kris L. Gowen and Nichole Wings-Yanez, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning Youths’ Perspectives of Inclusive School-Based Sexuality Education,” *Journal of Sex Research* 51, no. 7 (2014): 788-800.

3 McGarry, “Build a Curriculum,” 27-31; Gowen and Wings-Yanez, “Youths’ Perspectives,” 788-800.

4 Tanya McNeill, “Sex Education and the Promotion of Heteronormativity,” *Sexualities*, 16, no. 7 (2013): 826-846.

## Implications for Exclusive Education and the Need for Inclusivity

The push for inclusivity in sex education is not just for the sake of doing so. Many studies have shown that LGBTQ+ youth face great hardship because of their identities.<sup>5</sup> LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of suicide and mental illness that are often the result of experiencing homophobia.<sup>6</sup> They also have been shown to engage in risky sexual behaviors and to use drugs and alcohol more frequently in comparison to heterosexual youth.<sup>7</sup> A study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) shows that hostile school climates can harm students' grades, attendance, and other extracurricular or academic achievements.<sup>8</sup> It can also negatively affect students' mental well-being and self-esteem.<sup>9</sup> It is undeniably essential for all students to feel safe and welcome in their schools. The introduction of inclusive education can lessen the struggles of sexual minorities and the discrimination they face by reducing the stigma surrounding them and improving the climate for LGBTQ+ youth in schools. This inclusivity can lead to better school experiences for sexual minorities in which they can reach their full potential and have opportunities equal to their peers.

Implementing inclusive education would improve school climate concerning the treatment of LGBTQ+ students. Inclusive sex education has also been shown to lead to healthier relationships, to significantly increase students' knowledge of sexual health, and more importantly, to increase the likelihood of application of this knowledge.<sup>10</sup> The information presented in inclusive sex education can benefit heterosexual, cisgender students and teachers as well. Being more aware of LGBTQ+ topics can lead them to a better understanding of their sexualities and their

relationships with non-heterosexual people in their lives.

## Suggestions for Improvement

Scholarly works on inclusivity in sex education often make suggestions to educators and administrators on how to move towards more inclusive curricula.<sup>11</sup> Many go beyond sexual health and relationship content to discuss broadening the curriculum by including themes of social justice and anti-oppressive messages and attitudes. The National School Climate Survey by GLSEN suggests enacting bullying prevention policies and ensuring exposure to LGBTQ+ content areas of academic study outside of sex education in order to make school environments more inclusive for LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>12</sup> Administrative support of Gay-Straight Alliances and other LGBTQ+ clubs in schools is another manner in which schools can be more inclusive for sexual minorities. The approaches mentioned above are often motivated by a concern for the "hidden curriculum", or potentially harmful climate toward LGBTQ+ students. The approaches emphasize how providing sex education that includes all identities will work to improve school climate by boosting tolerance and acceptance.

As demonstrated, there is an abundance of suggestions focused on school climate and broader approaches to increase inclusivity. While focusing on school climate is essential, scholars seem to take for granted an administrator's ability to know what information would best benefit minorities when reforming sex education. Despite the push for improving programs and plenty of work describing the positive outcomes of doing so, there is a simultaneous lack of concrete discussion or information on how to accomplish such a task. All of these suggestions from scholars, along with actual LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual

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5 Maxime Charest, Peggy J. Kleinplatz, and Jessie I. Lund, "Sexual health information disparities between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ young adults: Implications for sexual health" *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 25, no. 2 (2016): 74-85; John Elia and Mickey Eliason, "Dangerous Omissions: Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage School-Based Sexuality Education and the Betrayal of LGBTQ Youth," *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 5, no. 1 (2010): 17-35; Joseph Kosciw, et al, "The 2011 National School Climate Survey" (New York: GLSEN, 2012); Carla Schlesinger, Cassandra Davis, and John Kelly, "Substance Use by Same Sex Attracted Young People: Prevalence, perceptions, and homophobia," *Drug and Alcohol Review* 10, nos. 1-2 (2015): 358-365.

6 Elia, "Dangerous Omissions," 17-35.

7 Charest, "Implications for sexual health," 74-85; Schlesinger, "Prevalence, perceptions, and homophobia," 17-35.

8 Kosciw, "School Climate Survey."

9 Elia, "Dangerous Omissions," 17-35.

10 Brian Mustanski, et al, "Feasibility, Acceptability, and Initial Efficacy of an Online Sexual Health Promotion Program for LGBT Youth: The Queer Sex Ed Intervention," *Journal of Sex Research* 52, no. 2 (2015): 220-230.

11 Elia, "Dangerous Omissions," 17-35; Gowen, "Youths' Perspectives," 788-800; Kosciw, "School Climate Survey"; McGarry, "Curriculum," 27-31.

12 Kosciw, "School Climate Survey."

health information, must be made into a concrete curriculum that can be used in schools.

Additionally, there is a lack of data on already existing inclusive sex education programs. This suggests there are not many inclusive programs, and the ones that do exist are not being evaluated or discussed in the professional sphere. Mustanski's study investigating the efficacy of an online sex education program for LGBTQ+ youth is one of the only works that studies a specific program and how the participants received aspects of the program.<sup>13</sup> This study showed positive user feedback and increased learning from the participants, boding well for much needed future research. Other scholars, like Gowen and Wings-Yanez, have studied how students feel about the programs they have experienced, but these studies include many different programs without going into detail about the sexual health content missing from the programs, further demonstrating the need for future research.<sup>14</sup>

### **Theoretical Background**

In Bourdieu's social and cultural reproduction theory, he argues that education systems favoring the middle class leave lower class students behind, in turn reproducing their class status.<sup>15</sup> This theory is applicable when considering the exclusivity of sex education. Most contemporary programs only cater to cisgender and heterosexual people, leaving sexual minorities out of the curriculum. In line with Bourdieu, one can say heterosexual students, already having the upper hand over sexual minorities coming into adulthood, will continue to be given this advantage through exclusive sex education. The cultural capital (a set of cultural knowledge, skills, and behaviors that act as social assets) both groups hold continues to be reproduced, which means a continued disadvantage for sexual minorities.

Another aspect of Bourdieu's theory can be applied when considering sex education. He argues the kind of education described above socializes students in a way that perpetuates the privilege of the dominant group.<sup>16</sup> If schools shape culture, then exclusive education will continue to shape a society in which sexual minorities are excluded and oppressed. Addi-

tionally, students on an individual level will internalize these values of exclusion and develop a disposition of discrimination against sexual minorities.

### **Argument One**

LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education is needed in schools to improve the well-being of sexual minorities. The primary goal of sex education is to provide students with information on sexual health and relationships. Current sex education is failing in this regard for sexual minorities. Therefore, reform must be enacted to have a curriculum that serves all students and gives them the knowledge to be careful and healthy. Inclusive education is needed to ensure this goal so that sexual minorities have the same opportunities as their peers.

As highlighted previously in the literature review, the school climate for sexual minorities is dependent mainly on their inclusion in the curriculum. Studies have shown that most schools in the U.S. have adverse climates toward LGBTQ+ students, which can lead to poor attendance, poor academic performance, and poor mental and physical well-being for these students.<sup>17</sup> An inclusive sex education program would be a step in the right direction towards the improved treatment of sexual minorities from peers and staff for a better school experience.

Inclusive education would also play a significant role in working toward a solution for an issue that many sexual minorities face: acceptance of their own identities. Many sexual minorities struggle at young ages to accept and understand themselves, since most have been socialized in an environment where being LGBTQ+ is wrong or unusual. By introducing sex education that includes information on the LGBTQ+ community early in students' education, the community would be normalized. This normalization would aid minorities in understanding and accepting their own identities sooner and with less distress. It would also lead to more sensitivity and tolerance from heterosexuals, since being exposed to this information would reinforce the normalcy of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, due to all of these outcomes, inclusive education is a form of activism which works towards

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13 Mustanski, "Feasibility," 220-230.

14 Gowen, "Youths' Perspectives," 788-800.

15 Roy Nash, "Bourdieu on Education and Social and Cultural Reproduction," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 11, no. 4 (1990): 431-447.

16 Nash, "Bourdieu," 431-447.

17 Kosciw, "School Climate Survey."

equality for the LGBTQ+ community by demanding visibility.

Perhaps the most persuasive part of the argument for inclusive education is that it remains unchallenged by academic professionals. They understand the necessity of positive representation of all gender and sexual identities in curricula. That being said, it is also essential to recognize the opposition that stagnates progress. Parents voice most of the opposition to inclusive education, grounded in religious reasoning or prejudice toward the LGBTQ+ community. It is difficult to argue with people who are unwilling to hear out the opposing side. However, it is crucial when challenging this argument to remember that exclusive education is dangerous for LGBTQ+ youth, and students' safety in schools should be a top concern.<sup>18</sup>

### **Argument Two**

There is a need for more inclusive, accessible, and specific information regarding the improvement of current sex education programs. Many scholars push for inclusive sex education in schools and make suggestions for ways to work toward this goal, but these suggestions are often vague and do not include specific sexual health information that would be useful to sexual minorities. To effect real change in sex education, it is essential to give administrators and educators the tools to achieve it. The clearer and more accessible the information is, the better the chances are educators will use it to improve the curriculum. Creating accessible curricula or comprehensive plans for improvement to current curricula is the next step for the inclusive education movement.

The current studies in this field are often exclusive of asexual, intersex, and nonbinary identities. It is crucial to include these identities when proposing sexual education reform, as they are often generally underrepresented. Administrators are not always aware of these often-forgotten identities and therefore must be aided during reform so these identities will not continue to be left out.

### **Conclusion**

With all of the struggles the youth of this age face, schools must do their part in providing an accepting environment that supports inclusive learning and discovery. Most current sex education programs inhibit this process, as they lack the ability to educate

and inform sexual minorities on sexual health and romantic relationships. Therefore, major reform in sex education is needed to achieve this goal and, in turn, foster acceptance and respect for students of all identities in schools. Inclusive programs prove essential for improving the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth and progressing toward social equality for the LGBTQ+ community. Because school is a central part of development and socialization for youth, the introduction of LGBTQ+ topics early into students' lives will normalize the LGBTQ+ community and reduce prejudice from heterosexual peers. It will also help sexual minorities to accept their own identities with greater ease and at an earlier age. While there are pieces of literature in this field of study supporting these objectives, there is a lack of representation of all sexual minorities, specifically in inclusive sex education literature. The strongest parts of current programs and the proposed improvements offered by scholars must be gathered and amalgamated to create a cohesive, comprehensive curriculum. The inclusive education that results will instill in LGBTQ+ youth the notion that they are just as deserving of equal education and opportunities as their heterosexual peers.

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18 Charest, "Implications for sexual health," 74-85; Elia, "Dangerous Omissions," 17-35; Kosciw, "School Climate Survey;" Schlesinger, "Prevalence, perceptions, and homophobia," 17-35.

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