A Study in Sex Education and the Long Term Effects on the LGBTQ Community Marjorie Brewer

**My Question**

My research focused on the question, “What impact does sex and gender education have on an adult LGBTQ community member’s identity?” Some supporting questions involved whether or not sex education or gender education was taught in the schools these students attended and what those classes actually entailed. Further questions focused on the content of each of those classes and the corresponding impact the participants feel that subsequent education had on their identities as children and adults.

**Background**

Sex education is often a difficult class to teach in the United States because of the many religious, physical, health and sociological factors that play into what classes choose to emphasize as students begin to enter the adult world. Whether schools are teaching abstinence-only sex education or sex education that focuses on prevention of disease, there is an evident lack of inclusion based sex and gender education for students on the LGBTQ spectrum or identify as non-binary in gender (Bittner, 2012). Though important milestones have been met with regards to gay marriage, this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to full inclusion in the classroom of marginalized communities (Wong, 2015). So what happens to students who sit in classes primarily presented with no viable options or negative claims on how they are to live their lives? This research seeks to find out what role sex education had on children at a young age and the impact it had on them growing up as well as seeks to find a glimmer of hope for the future on how to best educate students.

**Hypothesis**

My hypothesis was that young adult participants of the LGBTQ community will reflect on their sex education as a negative experience as well as had a negative impact on their identity defined potentially as confusion, depression, and alienation. I thought in my control group of people who identify as straight cisgender individuals I would not see the same negative impact on identity but I may see some recount their experiences as negative or unhelpful based on preconceived knowledge of sex education in the 21st century.

**Qualitative Research**

I conducted qualitative research with five 21-year-old adults, four of which identify as members of the LGBTQ community and one who identified as a straight white cisgender female. Of these participants four attended public schools in the United States and one attended private school for primary education and then public school for secondary education. The survey (see appendix) was designed to seek information on the types of sex and gender education participants went as well as their feelings on it at the time, their feelings on it now and how they feel the experience impacted their identities if it did. There was also an optional piece at the end of the survey focusing on changes the participants would make to today’s sex and gender education. To analyze the results I read each survey holistically one at a time, then looked at each question separately and compared them across all surveys in order to find trends.

**Results**

The participants responded in varied ways. With regards to Sex Education their answers describing such experiences were similar in sharing progressive experiences relative to the rest of the United States including instruction that described sex as pleasurable and demonstrations involving menstrual tampons. However, their descriptions also emphasized that there was an assumed hetero-normative nature of the classroom and largely assumed the cisgender identities of all students leaving little to no space for information or understanding in those who later identified as non-binary conforming gender. Early experiences in primary education were reflected on as being more positive than the fear-mongering classes that addressed sexually transmitted diseases in High School. Emphasis in High School was on prevention, protection, and abstinence. Again, it was hetero-normativity that played a central role throughout these secondary experiences. One participant remembered the only mention of homosexual sex was one that depicted the act as potentially dangerous due to potential anal ripping and tearing (Appendix A). Another participant recounted teachers not consistently reprimanding students who were disrespectful towards non-heterosexual lifestyles (Appendix D).

As for gender education, all participants agreed there was a lack of explicit gender education in their primary schooling although there was a great deal of implied gender education through daily classroom rhetoric including the use of “boys and girls”, “mom and dad” (Appendix C and D). These binaries were reported throughout sex education as children were split up based on their genders to receive sex education.

When asked if participants believed there was a relationship between sex education and the development of identities, all five respondents believed there to be a connection in their own lives. Participants identifying as gender fluid, agender or androgynous found the consistent binary rhetoric to lay the groundwork for confusion, alienation and depression later in life. One participant described their socialization through schooling as creating significant stress on their identity as a queer individual and though they began experiencing what seemed to be conflicting attraction at a young age there was no rhetoric or instruction available in school to readily describe what they were feeling (Appendix C). Another participant noted that if they’d never learned the theories behind gender later in life they might still be stuck trying to fit into a standard of feminity that does not accurately depict who they are (Appendix A). Most participants agreed that because they were not provided with the appropriate vocabulary to describe who they were and how they felt, they were limited in their introspection until informal or liberal arts college classes were able to shed light on their identities in a way that traditional schooling had failed to do.

Some participants took extra time in their reflections to offer some optional feedback on ideas for how to improve education for future generations. These options focused on inclusion of language that was non-binary such as referring to children as “students” rather than “boys and girls”. A couple participants also noted that dividing the genders along binary lines for sex education was unhelpful and dismissive of non-heterosexual lifestyles. One participant noted that non-heterosexual experiences should be disseminated across the curriculum in order to provide them with accurate pertinent information to keep all students safe (Appendix D). Other additional ideas involved teaching gender and sex as a spectrum and providing more information on the physical and emotional aspects of sex rather than just reproductive aspects. One participant noted that if made, the changes would offer both immediate and long-term relief to students who struggle with fitting their identities into a societally constructed framework (Appendix C).

**Future Research**

If I could provide a follow up study I would ask more detailed questions about the environmental factors participants experienced growing up including the culture, political and religious views of their schooling community. I would also try to expand the study to incorporate as many viewpoints as possible to find the commonalities in experiences in the United States sex and gender education course. I would also ask follow up questions probing participants about their decision to enroll in gender education as well as their continued interest in the subject and the impact that those courses had on their understanding of their personal identities.

*References*

Bittner, R. (2012). Queering Sex Education: Young Adult Literature with LGBT Content as Complementary Sources of Sex and Sexuality Education. Journal of LGBT Youth, 9(4), 357-372. doi:2012

Wong, C. (2015). Why Is LGBT-Inclusive Sex Education Still So Taboo? Retrieved December 10, 2015, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/07/lgbt-inclusive-sex-education-\_n\_6819854.html