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Sarah Lawrence College

**“Did You Like It?”:
Adolescent Sex Education in the United States, 1980-2018**

by

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Thesis Advisor: Professor Lyde Cullen Sizer

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree
in Women’s History at Sarah Lawrence College

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Abstract

This thesis examines the social and political history of public adolescent sex education in the United States between 1980 and 2018, while working to highlight contemporary teenage narratives. Tying together theories of citizenship, welfare, and adolescence, this thesis explores how American teenagers have been treated as dependent citizens without personal responsibility or choice during this historical moment. I examine how the State justifies denying access to quality comprehensive sex education in favor of punitive abstinence-only curricula based on the position adolescents hold in American society. This marginalization resulting from age intersects with other identities —race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship— to affect young people in a variety of ways. However, this thesis is not a demographic study of effect, rather I examine the production and spread of sex education messaging itself. Drawing on public policy related to federal abstinence-only education funding (1980s – 2000s), national newspaper articles (1990s), Evangelical Christian media (1990s), texts written by educators (1990s), and teen drama television (1994 – 2007), this thesis follows the sex education discourses throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Using interviews I conducted with young people between October 2017 and January 2018, I also add the voices of teenagers affected by this history throughout. The final chapter, which compiles and analyzes my oral history interviews with teenagers, acts not only as testimony to the potential harm of non-comprehensive sex education curricula, but offers solutions for improvement. The young people I spoke to form a community within these pages to illuminate our audience about how sex education could change in order to combat systemic injustice and embolden the bodily autonomy and physical and emotional sexual health of teenagers.

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Finally, I would like to thank all of the teenagers I interviewed. Agreeing to share their stories and to open themselves so genuinely and honestly in support of my work has been an invaluable experience. You are the reason this thesis could be written and the motivation for why this work should be done. To every young person I have spoken to, witnessed, or connected with along the way: I admire you, I value you, and this entire project is dedicated to you.

Abbreviations

ACA	Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Obamacare)
ACF	Administration for Children and Families
AFLA	Adolescent Family Life Act (1981)
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AOUM	Abstinence Only Until Marriage
CBAE	Community-Based Abstinence Education (2005-)
CDC	Centers for Disease Control (1942–1992), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1992–)
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
OWL	Our Whole Lives: Lifespan Sexuality Education
PPFA	Planned Parenthood Federation of America
PRWORA	The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996
NCR	New Christian Right
SIECUS	Sexuality Education and Information Council of the United States
SPRANS–CBAE	Special Projects of Regional and National Significance — Community-Based Abstinence Education (2000-2005)
STD/STI	Sexually Transmitted Disease/ Sexually Transmitted Infection
TIPS	Teen Information and Peer Services (Planned Parenthood Federation of America)
UN	United Nations

Introduction

I have been crying for two days. There are no more tears left when we say our goodbyes. We do so hiding under the front porch of the Rec Hall so that my mother, who has driven north for two days to come pick me up from summer camp, cannot see us kiss. I do not know if I want to tell her yet that I am in love. I am sixteen years old; I have only just figured it out myself.

Later, as we stop in southern Vermont to go swimming, my mother asks, “So...were there any *boys* at camp?”

“Um. There was one. Remember that boy who helped load up the car? We were kind of a thing.”

“Oh.”

We talk about other things: how my friends are doing, how the weather up at camp was, what time I went to bed. We have dinner with my grandmother and little sister in New York. The next morning we get back in the car and keep driving. My mother, who has been working hard not to ask me everything she wants to ask, looks at the backseat to make sure my sister's headphones are on.

Then, tentatively, “Are you and he still together?”

“Sort of. I don't know. He's going off to college. It feels kind of selfish to ask him to be with me.”

“Oh?”

“But he says I should be selfish. He says he wants to be with me.”

We arrive home. My whole family has dinner together for the first time since I went away to camp three weeks ago. Afterwards, my mother and I stand side by side in the kitchen, washing dishes. I am wrong to think I have satisfied her curiosity. My mother has just been pacing herself so as not to scare me away. Hesitantly she brings the topic back around to my sort-of relationship, "So....did you sleep with him?"

"Sleep?"

"Did you have sex with him?"

I pause for what feels like an eternity while I contemplate what it would mean to lie to her right now. My mother has never been strict. She and I are just finding a rhythm again as I exit the most tumultuous part of my teen years, though I am not sure I know this to be true at the time.

Ultimately I decide that if I lie to her now, I will have to lie to her about my first time forever. I am not ready for that commitment.

I take a deep breath and say, "Yes, I had sex with him."

"Were you safe?"

"Yes."

She is tearing up now. She hugs me tight. When she releases me, she wipes her eyes. "Did you like it?" Her second question catches me off guard.

A month later I am on a plane to visit him at college in Alabama. He is my boyfriend. I am sixteen years old and my boyfriend is in college and we have had sex and my mother knows. I am skipping school to fly nearly 1,000 miles across the country to visit him and my mother drove me to the airport.

That December, my mother, my boyfriend, and I are in the car driving home from the same airport. He has come to stay with us for a week. After several conversations between my parents and I, it has been decided that he is going to be allowed to stay in my bedroom. In the car my mother tells us, “Here are the rules: everyone comes out of their room with all of their clothes on and you have to put a sleeping bag on the floor to at least pretend for Dad.”

In 2011 I was sixteen years old and my mother cared about my sex life. She had boundaries, but not hard and fast rules. She wanted me to be safe. She wanted to know if I liked it. As we both navigated this experience for the first time, my mother wanted to make sure I was healthy and enjoying myself. Even as a moderately self-aware teenager, this did not seem particularly radical to me at the time. I did not fully understand how much shame, guilt, moral policing, and fear I had just escaped. I did not entirely realize how differently this conversation could have gone in a different house, for a different kid.

The narrative I had about my adolescent experience of sexuality and sex education felt complete at the time, but I did not have close to all of the information and context I would have needed in order to understand how truly radical my experience was. By asking if I “liked it,” I was being told as a young person that pleasure from sex should be expected. Instead of my sexuality being ignored or controlled, I was respected. Instead of a strict set of rules to govern my sexual behavior and moral code, I was given information with which to make choices. The conversation I had with my mother at the time was reinforced by a progressive consent-based

pleasure positive Sex Talk curriculum I attended every year at that same summer camp.¹ This privilege, for so many young people, does not exist.

A conversation about sex like the one I was able to have —centered around health, pleasure, and choice— is not readily available to teenagers in the United States, especially in public sex schools. Instead, the conversation about sex education in the United States has become a battleground on which adults fight to control adolescent sexuality and behavior.

This thesis will operate upon two basic educated assumptions. The first is that sex education is a social welfare program for people who matter to the State. The second is that, if adolescent sex education was being taught in order to primarily benefit young people, teenagers would be routinely consulted on the creation and implementation of the programming. The object of this project is thus twofold: to examine how and why public sex education and the development of sex education programming is used as a means of control by the State and to bring the voices of youth directly into contemporary sex education discourses. Rather than a demographic study of effects on the sexual health (and beyond) of the population, this thesis examines the production and spread of messaging and discourse itself.

Defining the Adolescent

So who are teenagers? The theory of adolescence was first introduced in the last decades of the nineteenth century through the field of psychology. At the start of the twentieth century, influential American psychologist G. Stanley Hall popularized the theory with his volume,

¹ From the ages of thirteen to eighteen I attended a three week summer session at The Rowe Center in western Massachusetts. Rowe's programming for young people is based on Unitarian Universalist principles, the first of which is valuing the inherent worth and dignity of every person. For more about these values see: Unitarian Universalist Association, "What We Believe," last Modified 2017, accessed November 20, 2017. <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe>; and Skill Set, "Skill Set, June 2017," last Modified 2017, accessed November 20, 2017. <http://skillsetretreat.org>.

*Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education.*² Hall posited that humans are adaptable and ever-evolving creatures, whose psychological and behavioral changes in the modern world deserve to be studied. Hall also made a direct connection between youth development and civilization. Using the (now known to be racist) theory of the early twentieth century Hall distinguished the adolescent development of white Christian American youth as “man,” separate and “above that of the lowest savage or even animals.”³ In this context, Hall described adolescence as an individual stage of development—or “individual evolution and devolution”—at which point “youth needs to anticipate the problems of the old age and even of death, so the young need to feel by anticipation the great reality, but not so seriously as to endanger losing their souls and the world which is so much easier to teach them how to find them again.”⁴ In other words, Hall theorized that the adolescent stage of development was a liminal period between childhood and adulthood wherein young people faced the realities of the modern adult world, while society continued to protect them from those responsibilities. It follows that the periodization of adolescence would vary based upon the responsibilities expected of the individual within their society or culture.

Hall’s study of adolescence was quickly taken up by anthropologists in the early twentieth century. This scholarship resulted in works such as Margaret Mead’s controversial

² G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), v-vii.

³ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vi.

study of adolescent girls, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, first published in 1928.⁵ Soon thereafter sociologists began to study the development of adolescence in educational institutions in the mid-twentieth century. In particular, they studied the rise of adolescent culture in secondary schools.⁶

As psychological and anthropological theorists established adolescence as a time wherein children began to understand some adult responsibilities, their work also responded to the “long-term transformation of the United States from an agricultural into an urban and industrial society; for this change...has exerted a profound influence on the structure of American families.”⁷ As children in an industrial or urban setting had less of a defined purpose as laborers within the family, theories of child-rearing became more popular. This additional freedom from role of laborer also allowed for further and longer education. Historian Joseph Kett argues:

As secondary education became a mass experience, sociologists routinely equated adolescence with the years of secondary schooling, and they conceded that, as a stage of life, adolescence depended on fairly recent developments that had removed teenagers

⁵ Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1928).

Mead’s work is considered controversial as she has been accused, most famously by anthropologist Derek Freeman in the early 1980s, of telling bald-faced lies and skewing data about Samoans. Freeman has since been accused of similar tactics. Mead’s work has also been characterized as opportunistic and exploitative. For decades anthropologists and other scholars have debated the merits of Mead’s scholarship. For a detailed analysis of the Margaret Mead controversy see:

Alice Dreger, “Sex, Lies, and Separating Science From Ideology,” *Atlantic*, February 15, 2013, accessed April 3, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/02/sex-lies-and-separating-science-from-ideology/273169/>.

⁶ For a more detailed source list and breakdown of the interdisciplinary study of adolescence see: Joseph Kett, “Reflections on the History of Adolescence in America,” *History of the Family* 8 (2003): 355-373.

⁷ John Demos and Virginia Demos, “Adolescence in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 31, no.4 (1969):636.

The above article from 1969 is noted as the first analysis to “examine the concept of adolescence as a historical invention.” In Paula S. Fass and Mary Ann Mason, eds., *Childhood in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 132.

from the labor market and prolonged their social dependency. The steady rise in the educational attainment of the American population gave substance to this view, which assumed the cultural values fitted snugly into anterior socioeconomic changes.⁸

Schools became institutions in which youth and adults had a clear separation of goals, patterns, and responsibilities. In their 1969 article, historians John and Virginia Demos posit that this divide within the family would become “chronic” as each adolescent worked on the “formation of an identity.”⁹ They inferred that the role of the adolescent would continue to develop in contrast to that of the adult in the family structure throughout the coming decades.

New social conditions allowed for a state of prolonged dependency. When coupled with the time for concentrated peer-to-peer interactions in school, a new social category emerged in the 1940s: the teenager. Central to the identity of the teenager was the push for independence. Historian Grace Palladino argues, “we tend to assume that the rise of independent teenagers (as opposed to dependent adolescents) is really a tale of cultural decline and parental neglect...in fact, the evolution of teenage culture over the past fifty years is a story of institution building, market expansion, racial desegregation, and family restructuring.”¹⁰ In this regard, the shift from dependent adolescent to independent teenager does not necessarily change the actual amount of responsibility or choice afforded to young people. Instead, the theory reframes the young person in terms of the developing mechanisms of social control and moral codes in modern America. Palladino also argues that the narrative of the respectful, studious, asexual teenager of the past was always an “adult fantasy.”¹¹ She explains that rather than a change in young people

⁸ Kett, “Reflections,” 356.

⁹ Demos, “Adolescence in Historical Perspective,” 637.

¹⁰ Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), xxi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

themselves, the expansion of opportunities and alternatives to the normative path for young people formed the contemporary idea of the teenager.

In the early twenty-first century, the term “teenager” still connotes a liminal period between childhood and adulthood defined by prolonged state of social dependency and, perhaps, by a struggle for independent identity. This idea has been normalized and built into the very structure of American society. In addition, the United Nations (UN) has established a global or multinational definition of “youth” in the twenty-first century. This definition varies contextually, however, as multinational organizations like the UN carry out specific initiatives targeting young people. In a 2017 report about youth, the UN “for statistical consistency across regions, defines ‘youth,’ as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.”¹² This definition uses age, as opposed to position in society, for analytical purposes. The United Nations also characterizes youth as:

a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence and awareness of our interdependence as members of a community. Youth is a more fluid category than a fixed age-group. However, age is the easiest way to define this group, particularly in relation to education and employment. Therefore ‘youth is often indicated as a person between the age where he/she may leave compulsory education, and the age at which he/she finds his/her first employment. This latter age limit has been increasing, as higher levels of unemployment and the cost of setting up an independent household puts many young people into a prolonged period of dependency.¹³

¹² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “What Do We Mean By ‘Youth?’,” UNESCO 2017, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/youth-definition/>.

See also:

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Definition of Youth,” PDF; and United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development, “Youth,” accessed March 25, 2018, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/what-we-do/faq.html>.

¹³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “What Do We Mean By ‘Youth?’,”

This definition gives a basic characterization of a period of life. The UN also acknowledges the history and fluidity of the categorization of young people. This explanation includes the need for context and regional interpretation with respect to any given project.

In the context of my thesis I will refer to youth as anyone between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one, who is, was recently, or will soon be a US high school student. I will use the terms youth, adolescents, teenagers, teens, and young people interchangeably to refer to this group of individuals. Throughout this thesis I cite interviews I conducted with young people about their experience with sex education; each of their answers to the question “do you identify as a teenager?” can be found in the appendix.¹⁴

Defining Citizenship

The category of adolescence and teenagers themselves becomes politically charged in the contemporary context of sex education. I argue that a theory of desirable citizenship becomes integral to the conversation about adolescent sexuality in terms of access to quality sex education which affords choices to young people.

If we understand quality adolescent sex education as both a limited social welfare program, as well as a means of State-funded moral and economic control, then the question of

¹⁴ See methods section in Introduction and Chapter Four. See appendix on page 140.

audience and access to comprehensive information becomes essential to this history.¹⁵

Connections between the desirability of the citizen, their access to public services, and identity politics have been explored by scholars across disciplines. In her considerable work on immigration, citizenship, welfare, and gender, ethnic studies scholar Lynn Fujiwara asserts that, “although no single formal definition of citizenship suffices, three primary notions encompass the logic of citizenship: membership; rights and duties in reciprocity; real participation in practice.”¹⁶ Furthermore, identity-based classifications like race, class, gender, age, documentation, and sexuality define the relative value of the citizen to the State. In this rendering, the State wants to reproduce citizens in a rhetorical image of independence and moral sanctity, while critiquing any inability to conform to this ideal as justification for economic insecurity and social control. This control often appears in the form of a lack of options for an individual. The merits of identity are historically constructed, based upon shifting national ideals and norms.

The language of *dependency* as diametrically opposed to the ideal freedom of *choice* is one that has long been used to separate the desirable citizen from the undesirable. In the United States, these concepts are often closely correlated with discussions about race, sexuality, class,

¹⁵ Economic inequality and public policy scholar Martin Gilens explains that the social welfare programs that make up the “welfare state,” can be broken into three general categories: “education, social insurance, and means-tested programs for the poor.” While social insurance (worker’s compensation, unemployment insurance, veterans assistance) and means-tested programs (cash benefits, food stamps), are programs dedicated primarily to low-income citizens, education benefits “go disproportionately to more economically privileged Americans.” This is due in large part to the ways educational funding is provided primarily by state and local governments, as opposed to federal funding. For a more comprehensive breakdown of the welfare state and a description of how educational programs are funded see: Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 13-17.

¹⁶ Lynn Fujiwara, “Welfare Reform and the Politics of Citizenship,” in *Mothers without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant Families and the Consequences of Welfare Reform* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008: 22-50), 23

gender, etc. The rhetoric that likens “dependence” to a lack of responsibility connects the theory of welfare and citizenship with the theory of adolescence. The specific association between the use of welfare (which in this case refers to cash benefits), sexuality or reproduction, and desirable citizenship is one of the key elements in this conversation about dependency. In her critical work about the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), economic policy and legal scholar Gwendolyn Mink writes:

When the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996 transformed welfare, it also transformed citizenship. Flouting the ideal of universal citizenship, the act distinguishes poor single mothers from other citizens and subjects them to a separate system of law. Under this system of law, poor single mothers forfeit rights the rest of us enjoy as fundamental to our citizenship - family rights, reproductive rights, and vocational liberty - just because they need welfare.”¹⁷

Mink discusses the specific bi-partisan policy acts of the late twentieth century. Rather than remedying or being held accountable for the systems that create and perpetuate inequality, this policy blamed low-income single mothers (primarily single mothers of color) for their own poverty. Historian Rickie Solinger argues that this justified the removal of basic social rights by using “stereotypes associated with the behavior of ‘welfare mothers’ [which] are based on a

¹⁷ Gwendolyn Mink, ed., *Whose Welfare?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 171.

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), also known as the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, *P.L. 104-193*, was a key piece of policy in President Clinton’s attempt to dismantle the welfare state. The effects of this legislation targeted poor single mothers, especially women of color, building upon decades of rhetoric about the mythological Black Welfare Mother. An element of the PRWORA was to have the State establish paternity (through enforced/required paternity testing) and enforce child support laws that involved biological fathers in the lives of their children and the single mothers. Mothers were required to provide personal information to the State and to the biological fathers of their children in order to receive financial support. PRWORA was marketed as a policy that encouraged fathers to take responsibility for their children. However, this legislation allowed the State to further remove the freedom to privacy, the freedom to raise their children independently, and the choices that come with a dependable extra source of income, from low-income single mothers. Meanwhile the legislation was used to absolve the State of financial responsibility for its citizens. For further analysis of the child welfare policy of the PRWORA see: Mink, *Whose Welfare?*

The PRWORA and a critique of welfare policy that disproportionately affected poor single mothers and adolescents will be further explored in Chapter One.

belief in the incompatibility of dependency and sensible or good choices.’¹⁸ This punitive welfare reform encouraged the perpetuation of the image of the black welfare mother, a rhetoric popularized during the Nixon administration, and later recycled by Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and in the 1990s, Bill Clinton.¹⁹

The War on Poverty, initiated by Lyndon B. Johnson in his 1964 State of the Union address, ostensibly aimed to prevent national decline by eradicating poverty through welfare programs like Medicaid and Job Corps.²⁰ Ultimately, however, the War on Poverty became a war on the fundamental rights of low-income women. This in turn defined who was a desirable citizen. This history reflects Fujiwara’s continued analysis of citizenship and welfare:

Welfare recipients, primarily women of color, were often constructed as threats to American families and enemies of the state ...the construction of the ‘internal enemy.’ Regardless of economic and social conditions perpetuating poverty, women’s dependency on the state was likened to degeneracy, pathology, and a breeding of tomorrow’s criminals. The concept of *dependency* became antithetical to *personal responsibility*. Thus, any mother who relied on the state for public assistance was thereby not taking *personal responsibility* for her welfare and her children’s well-being. Although using welfare is not a crime, citizen welfare recipients have long been subjected to state technologies and disciplining that challenge their fundamental rights.²¹

As Fujiwara demonstrates, scholars and politicians have used low-income single mother of color as the primary example of citizen who is both stripped of their rights by modern welfare law, and simultaneously vilified for their dependency upon welfare. In the modern United States, dependency of a low-income individual upon State institutions devalues their citizenship and

¹⁸ Rickie Solinger, “Dependency and Choice: The Two Faces of Eve,” in *Whose Welfare?*, ed. Gwendolyn Mink, 7-35 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999): 11.

¹⁹ The popularization and use of this rhetoric will be further explored in Chapter One.

²⁰ Jaime Fuller, “The 2nd Most Memorable SOTU: LBJ Declares War on Poverty,” *Washington Post*, January 27, 2014, accessed March 30, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/01/27/the-2nd-most-memorable-sotu-lbj-declares-war-on-poverty/?utm_term=.c7feda8345bb.

²¹ Fujiwara, “Welfare Reform and the Politics of Citizenship,” 23.

allows the State to revoke access to choice. This system justifies limiting options for childcare, healthcare, jobs, and education. The underlying intention is that the participation of the low-income citizen in the US social structure becomes limited to devalued labor. A lack of choice impacts access to the public service of sex education as well as social rights around sexuality, like the right to pleasure or the right to information.²²

Theories of welfare and citizenship can be related to theories of adolescence through State rhetoric that likens dependency to irresponsibility and justifies limiting the ability to make choices. The definition of adolescence as a “state of prolonged dependency” wherein responsibilities are different, or viewed as inferior to those of adults, leads to the removal of the right to make individual choices.²³ This justifies State mechanisms of control. If teenagers, by definition, are dependent, and dependent citizens are not to be trusted with the responsibilities or choices of a full citizen, it follows that the removal of personal choice from adolescents is a legitimized political act. Both punitive welfare reform policy and the way in which teenagers are treated as undesirable citizens are political mechanisms that associate dependency with irresponsibility and justify the removal of basic rights. In order to reconstruct teenagers as citizens worthy of access to information, personal choice, and the right to sexual freedom, we must apply a critical eye to these political contrivances.

Teenagers themselves are historically unified as a group by age, social position, and educational level. However young people live at the intersections of a multitude of identities that also affect their access to quality public services and information. Particular to the sex education

²² This pattern continues in 2018 with regards to welfare programs. Women of color are used as scapegoats by the State, while the majority of people receiving benefits are white.

²³ Kett, “Reflections,” 356.

debates, the historical constructions of morality have been dictated by the value placed on certain bodies -namely white, able, middle-class, adult, cisgender, heterosexual, and male- over others.²⁴ These conversations and structural inequalities take place along racial, gendered, and class divides. They are also performed cross-generationally, with age working to modify the assumptions of morality and value to the State. A metaphorical line in the sand has been drawn between not only adults and children, but adults and adolescents.

This divide becomes especially pronounced when referring to the discourses and policy making around sexual behavior and teaching about sexuality. Rather than dispute the contrived contrasts of sexual desires and experiences of teenagers as diametrically opposed to those of adults, for the majority of this project I will use this framework to understand how and why public sex education has been built by a select contingency of (predominantly white, politically powerful) adults, for a (largely white, middle-class) audience of youth. In doing so, I will explore how adolescence has developed into something that provokes both fierce protection and intense disgust.

Historiography

With this project I enter into several existing conversations, weaving them together through a distinct chronology: 1980 to 2018. I intend to tie this historical discussion to contemporary work. Histories of adolescence, sexuality, and education are essential to the arguments contained within this thesis. As historians explored many of these subjects decades

²⁴ I will note that, because of the shifting contexts and subjects of each chapter, the definitions of public and private become a bit muddled within this project. Public is used in reference to public policy, of or relating to the State, government funded, and/or affecting widespread community interests. Private refers to occurrences in the home, personally funded, individual relationships separate from those such as teacher/student funded by the State, and spaces that cannot be accessed by the general population. The discussion of the neoliberal influence in later chapters affects the way these definitions are applied.

after their counterparts in other disciplines, the periodization of the essential historical works in this conversation are congruent with the timeline of these chapters.

In the 1980s, historians Jon D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman published foundational texts to the historical study of adolescent sexuality. Particularly, their 1988 book *Intimate Matters* traced the cultural and political history of sexuality in North America since the wave of colonial settlement in the 1600s.²⁵ This volume was published in large part to “provide legitimacy to the emerging field of sexual history.”²⁶ The final chapter of this book examines the contemporary political crisis around sexuality with a historical perspective. This chapter is especially resonant with the conversation about adolescent sexuality because D’Emilio and Freedman argue that:

Fears about the sexual behavior of youth give the contemporary purity crusade the historical specificity one would expect to find in a social movement. For all the changes in sexual mores that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, the spread of sexual activity among the young marked the sharpest break with the past.²⁷

D’Emilio and Freedman's book merges the history of sexuality with the history of adolescence. Just enough time has passed since the construction of the adolescent as an active sexual being that scholars could provide a historical analysis that resonated with the contemporary social structure.

The historians of adolescence, education, and sexuality of the 1990s traced social patterns of the twentieth century, paying special attention to white middle-class teenagers. Even more regularly their subjects were young women. In 1990 historians of women and education Joyce

²⁵ Jon D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, iv.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 353.

Antler and Sari Knopp Biklen published *Changing Education*.²⁸ Antler and Biklen focused on the histories of women making radical changes in the field of education from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century in the United States. Antler and Biklen devoted specific attention to gender and sexuality, as well as to the institutional power of education. *Changing Education* contributes a gendered analysis of the way educational pedagogy and methodology was changed by and for women over more than a century.

In the early 1990s historian Rickie Solinger published two books about the history of reproductive rights, motherhood, and abortion in the twentieth century. *Wake Up Little Susie*, published in 1992, and *The Abortionist*, published in 1994, analyze the ways in which women's sexuality has been regulated and criminalized in the United States. Solinger periodizes these histories before the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision to effectively legalize abortion.²⁹ The first book, *Wake Up Little Susie*, narrates the ways in which racist, and often sexist, theories about family structure and sexuality affected the social and political value of female fertility before the 1970s. Solinger then illustrates the ways in which abortion politics and reproductive technologies were avenues towards more bodily autonomy for young and single women. Solinger argues that resources for reproductive freedom were, in part, a product of concern about the single mother. In *The Abortionist*, Solinger focuses on the criminalization and vilification of abortion providers, activists, and people who sought such services in the decades before the *Roe* decision. Neither of these early 1990s texts focus particularly on adolescence or sex education,

²⁸ Joyce Antler and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Changing Education: Women as Radicals and Conservators* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990).

²⁹ Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Rickie Solinger, *The Abortionist: Women Against the Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).
Roe v. Wade, 410, US 113 (1973)

instead centering on gendered analyses of sexual history and policy. Solinger's historical arguments about the regulation of female sexuality, reproduction, and access to health and educational services provide a foundation for the sex education narratives.

In 1996, nearly a decade after D'Emilio and Freedman's work began to combine the history of sexuality with the history of adolescence, historian Grace Palladino published *Teenagers*.³⁰ This book differs from its predecessors in that Palladino focuses specifically on the history of the teenager, rather than the adolescent. Palladino argues that teenagers emerged in popular culture in the 1940s and became an impactful demographic in the decades since. This text examines a multitude of anxieties that existed with regards to teenagers between World War II and the early 1990s. Educational methods, juvenile delinquency and criminalization, media influence, political activism, drug use, and sexuality are explored. In *Teenagers* Palladino presents a history of how these themes manifested over half a century. She discusses the culture of young soldiers and "victory girls," as well as Zoot Suiters in the 1940s, the Rock n' Roll generation of the 1950s and 1960s, and youth Civil Rights organizing as well as the anti-Vietnam and free love politics of the 1960s and 1970s.³¹ Throughout the history of youth culture, Palladino highlights the ways in which class, race, and gender influenced these roles. This mid-1990s text not only defined young people as teenagers, but chronicled their experiences with sex and sexuality throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In Palladino's history, teenagers were defined as sexual beings. This was in keeping with the politics of the 1990s.

³⁰ Palladino, *Teenagers*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

"Victory girls" or V-girls were most often teenage girls who entertained relationships with soldiers. Though not an explicitly sexual term, V-girls made national news and "were blamed for the rise of casual sex and venereal disease, as if servicemen were their hapless victims." *Ibid.*, 75.

In 2000, these histories of education, gender, adolescence and sexuality were followed by historian Jeffrey P. Moran's book *Teaching Sex*.³² Much in agreement with Solinger and Palladino's work, Moran analyzes the way adolescence was shaped and defined through the control of sexuality in the twentieth century. *Teaching Sex* brings together the gendered histories of education and the political histories of teenage sexuality to focus more closely on sex education in the United States. Moran argues that sex education has been a product of battling ideologies about sexuality itself. He also asserts that the problems sex education purports to address—like teenage pregnancy—do not necessarily lead to many of the negative consequences associated with sexual behavior. Instead his history demonstrates how factors like poverty are more likely to precede unsafe sex practices due to lack of access to resources and education.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars established a historical connection between adolescence, sexuality, and education. The later work of Rickie Solinger reflects this change. In her 2005 book *Pregnancy and Power*, Solinger begins to analyze the ways in which *Roe v. Wade* and abortion politics affected teenagers specifically.³³ *Pregnancy and Power* includes an examination of the methods through which teenagers, particularly teenage girls, were used in the reproductive rights debate. Solinger argues that this history led to the strict policing of teenage bodies. This occurred through conservative sex education, punitive welfare reform, and limited access to sexual health services. Says Solinger, “the evidence mounts that many young people have internalized the government's message: teenage girls are not to be

³² Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³³ Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

trusted with authority over their own bodies, even their own fertility.”³⁴ This history demonstrates the significance of the debate about sex education, reproductive freedom, and adolescent autonomy that occurred at the end of the twentieth century.

In the late twentieth century, history became an increasingly interdisciplinary field. As such, much of the secondary source material relevant to the conversations in this thesis was not written by historians. It is essential, however, to engage with the historical analysis in the field of adolescent sex education that has occurred outside of the discipline. These texts are significant especially as the periodization of this argument extends into the twenty-first century. Between 2002 and 2013 three essential texts—written by sociologist Janice M. Irvine, scholar of educational leadership and curriculum Dennis L. Carlson, and educational policy scholar Nancy Kendall—function as histories of the contemporary sex education battles in the United States.³⁵ A comparison of these three central texts reveals a pattern documenting the fundamental events and details in the making of contemporary sex education. Each book focuses on the formation and work of the Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) by reproductive rights activists in the 1960s, the rise of the New Christian Right (NCR) throughout the 1970s, and the amalgamation of the AIDS epidemic and the NCR political agenda in the 1990s.³⁶

³⁴ Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 242.

³⁵ Janice M. Irvine, *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); Dennis L. Carlson, *The Education of Eros: A History of Education and the Problem of Adolescent Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2012); and Nancy Kendall, *The Sex Education Debates* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

³⁶ An analysis of the history of the New Christian Right can be found in Chapter One of this thesis. A brief history of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s is included in Chapter Two.

In her 2002 book, *Talk about Sex*, sociologist Janice M. Irvine details the history of sex education policy and pedagogy debates during the 1980s and 1990s.³⁷ Irvine documents the ways in which adolescent sex practices were becoming more visible in the post-sexual revolution age of the late 1970s. She argues that this visibility, coupled with liberal victories in activism and policy-making during the previous decades, offended conservatives and disrupted their moral value systems.

Dennis L. Carlson's 2012 work, *The Education of Eros*, supports Irvine's assertions about sex education policy and the conservative backlash to liberal culture. Carlson also explores how the development of the "family planning" movement, with its eugenic overtures, used the popular concept of degeneracy to justify State regulation of sexual practices for groups of already marginalized people in the early twentieth century.³⁸ *The Education of Eros* then examines how the reinvigorated "family values" ideology of the NCR influenced conservative sex education policy and the institutional control of adolescent sexuality into the twenty-first century.

With her 2013 book, Nancy Kendall is credited with coining the term "the sex education debates."³⁹ Kendall builds upon Carlson and Irvine's analysis of policy and social change to examine sex education in the early twenty-first century. In Part One, *The Sex Education Debates* concentrates on four sex ed programs across the United States —Florida, Wyoming, Wisconsin,

³⁷ Irvine, *Talk about Sex*.

³⁸ For more on theories of sexual degeneracy see: Dennis L. Carlson, "Ideological Conflict and Change in the Sexuality Curriculum," in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, ed. James T. Sears (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 34-58; and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

³⁹ Kendall, *The Sex Education Debates*.

and California— as case studies. She examines the motivations and ideology contained in these curricula. The second part of the book is organized thematically. Kendall analyzes the changing assumptions around homosexuality and gay rights activism, gender roles, and rape culture in the contemporary United States. In this text Kendall endeavors to shift the context of the sex education debates from public health to sociopolitical consequences. In this manner, Kendall's book follows the approaches of the preceding work, expanding the context of the battles over sex education for an interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional analysis of adolescent sex education.

Between the 1980s and early twenty-first century, scholars began to merge the histories of adolescence, sexuality, and education. These texts often include a gendered focus, with more attention directed at women and teenage girls. This pattern is unsurprising, as the subject of adolescent sexuality must invariably include a discussion of control, particularly of women's bodies and female fertility. Education, in many ways, has been an area of contention due to its potential powers of supervision and discipline. The body of this thesis continues the conversation about the regulation of adolescent sexual practices and the ways in which education has, over time, become central to this debate.

Chapter Outline

The core questions of this thesis are: who has contemporary public sex education been made to benefit? And what could adolescent sex education look like with the input of teenagers themselves?

In order to answer these questions Chapter One analyzes the move into conservative politics that sought to enforce a racialized and gendered brand of morality in the late twentieth century. To do so I examine the public policy actions that funded abstinence-only-until-marriage

(AOUM) sex education programming in the United States, primarily between 1981 and 2000. In this chapter I argue that rhetorical myths about the black welfare mother retained and strengthened their influence during this time period. The racializing and gendering of poverty, associated inextricably with sexuality, created a false image of the demographic of people dependent on the State, and thus who held more value as a citizen. As such, the sex education curricula and policy were built to protect the sexual and moral purity of white middle-class girls, as they were to grow up to produce white middle-class (desirable) citizens. This movement was effected by building off of the existing rhetoric of valuable citizenship to further the purity movement in the public sphere. Abstinence-only funding grew as a result of this public concern and the power of conservative rhetoric.

Chapter Two returns to the same time frame as Chapter One (1980s and 1990s) through the lens of the liberal sex educator. In response to teenagers' continued sexual activity, despite the abstinence-only message, progressive sex educators published literature advocating for strategies to teach beyond and around conservative policy. They sought better way to guide the decisions of young people. This chapter studies the influence of the AIDS epidemic and public health rhetoric that helped to shape contemporary sex education. Secondary source materials written by educators and curriculum researchers in the 1990s act as primary documents. This analysis reveals the concerns and debates around sexuality education of the time from the progressive side.

In the third chapter I ask how sex education was portrayed on American and Canadian television shows for a young American audience between 1994 and 2007. Using four television programs as case studies I argue how ideas about teenage sexuality and sex education were

constructed through the neoliberal ideologies of the time. These images were affected by the dominant cultural perceptions of teen sexuality. This new brand of programming put the visibility of adolescent sex education on a public stage. A specific analysis of sex education class on television in this chapter is my unique contribution to this field.

The fourth and final chapter focuses on the twenty-first century. I argue that teenagers are not routinely consulted on their education in general, let alone their education about sexuality. Working from the theory of the teenager as a sexual being different from the adult, I add the voices, thoughts, and opinions of these young people in response to their sexuality education. The primary resources I use are interviews with teenagers I conducted (between October 2017 and January 2018). This project has the specific goal of valuing teen voices. In the final chapter of this thesis that works with the contemporary moment I ask: What would happen if mainstream American society thought of all teenagers as sexual beings whose bodily worth and consent matter? How would that affect the way we teach them sex education? What do teenagers think about the way sex education is taught? And what suggestions would they make if we asked them to help design future curricula?

Methods

As a researcher, I gathered and analyzed the materials contained in this thesis over the better part of two years. This thesis began in its infancy as a series of conference projects to fulfill undergraduate and graduate credits at Sarah Lawrence College between the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017. (I began the Women's History MA through the 5th Year program, working through my final year of undergrad and first year of graduate school concurrently.) Parts of Chapter One, Chapter Two and Chapter Three in the earliest stages can be found in these papers.

Chapter One finds its primary source material in reports from SIECUS and the nonprofit sexual health organization Advocates for Youth. Additionally, I use legal documents such as court cases and federal legislation to compile the history of public policy relating to sex education. In Chapter Two I blur the lines between primary and secondary source, analyzing texts about sex education in the context of their publication dates.

The primary source material in Chapter Three comes from television shows. Due to the confluence of the neoliberal State with media production and extreme technological advances during the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I have chosen to use television shows as case studies in this chapter. There are, of course, other forms of media that discuss or represent adolescent sexuality and sex education; this chapter could be expanded into a thesis of its own. I even read several young adult books and watched teen films that address the subject of sex ed in schools. However, as a researcher and a writer I have found that teen drama television works to illustrate my arguments without becoming tangential or overwhelming my audience. Additionally, specific analyses of sex education class on teen drama television works as my individual contribution to the academic conversation. I use these studies to provide a distinct analysis, unique to the fields of history and media studies.

For the fourth chapter of this thesis I interviewed nine young people between October 2017 and January 2018. These nine young humans vary in ideology, politics, class, family structure, religious background, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and interests. What holds them together is that defining characteristic of age that gives them all a specific position in life in the United States. At the time of these interviews, all of these young people were in, or had just recently graduated from, high school. Underlying this project is a fundamental respect and

appreciation for teenagers. One of the most valuable qualities teenagers have is the ability to identify when someone, particularly an adult, is genuine and sincere in their approach. For these reasons I endeavor to connect earnestly with teenagers. At this point, young people are a group as a whole whose respect I actively aim to earn.⁴⁰

My own experience with sex education in a safe and open environment gave me the privilege to gain control over my own sexuality as a teenager. This reality has fueled my desire to ensure that a productive conversation about the visibility and legitimacy of adolescent sexual desire and pleasure occurs. By developing a thorough understanding of how the American teenager has been constructed and influenced throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the context of sexuality and sex education, this thesis provides a place from which to move forward.

⁴⁰ An extended description of my interview methodology can be found in the introduction to Chapter Four on page 111-112.

Chapter 1

“Sex Outside Marriage is Wrong,” and Other Messages from the State

On a snowy December evening over video chat I spoke with Megan, a white eighteen-year-old girl who previously attended a Washington D.C. public charter school. When I call, Megan’s whole face fills my computer screen as she walks through her house, trying to find the best Wi-Fi connection. I ask her about her first semester of college. We discuss her senior thesis project from high school about how to teach kids to critique internalized misogyny. This interview is not the first time she has thought about sex education in America and she brings a fresh perspective to our discussion. She tells me flat out, “I think the world needs to know that sex isn’t scary and something we need talk about. The world needs to know that education is super important when it comes to this stuff, [and] that we need to start early. We need to not be afraid.”⁴¹ Megan responds in the context of her own experience with a consequence-based curriculum that promoted abstinence, especially for girls. She explains here that her own fear grew from the socialization that sex is something to hide, not something to discuss openly. She thinks that if there were educational programs that counteracted that type of socialization young people would reap the benefits.

When I ask Megan to describe her experience of the week-long sex education course she was given in school she tells me:

I don’t remember the exact words but I remember the feelings. I remember feeling like having sex was *not* ok. They made sex feel dangerous. *Dirty*. Not really something you do if you’re not married. You’re left feeling like virginity is purity. That’s what it felt

⁴¹ “Megan,” interview by author, December 30, 2017, FaceTime, transcript.

like.... So being a virgin is better. It wasn't at all strictly religious. They made it seem like you should save yourself.⁴²

Though her public school provided a non-religious curriculum, Megan's words demonstrate the rhetorical power of the New Christian Right's (NCR) influence in American society, and especially in sex education.⁴³ "Virginity is purity" and "you should save yourself [for marriage]" reflect a religious influence in these educational programs.

We talk further about the effects of this abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) curriculum and how the messaging affected her personally. She explains, "Around that time [of the sex education course] I pledged [to myself] to stay a virgin until marriage. I think part of that may have been because of the way they talked."⁴⁴ Megan's promise was an individual choice; one she was not shy about revealing to her friends, romantic partners, sister, and even parents. Based on the lessons she was given in school, Megan made an active and public decision to place the same value on her virginity that her educators seemingly did. She did not want to be "dirty" or bad, and so she chose to refrain from the sexual activity that would brand her as such. She talks about the personal work she has done since that time:

I don't necessarily feel that same way [like virginity is purity] anymore. I am still a virgin. But, I think I did gain a lot of sexual anxiety. Just from the fact that they made it seem *scary*. Like it would hurt. Again, I don't necessarily agree with that idea anymore, but that idea has stuck with me, whether I like it or not. And it's definitely, with partners I've had, it's definitely caused a lot of issues. And I have a lot of sexual anxiety.⁴⁵

⁴² "Megan," interview.

⁴³ The political rise of the New Christian Right and their influence on sex education policy is detailed later in this chapter.

⁴⁴ "Megan," interview.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Megan is generous in this moment of disclosure. She says, “That [sexual anxiety] could be attributed to that I have anxiety overall, so I can’t really say if it was the education. But I don’t think they made it better.”⁴⁶ Megan’s process with anxiety around sex —despite her complete awareness of its origins— is illuminating. One week spent in abstinence-based programming, coupled with a short lifetime of socialization about expectations for sex and sexuality, left this remarkably introspective young person with the weight of anxiety.

Megan’s negative experience of consequence-based abstinence-only sex education is not a contemporary isolated incident. Instead, this lasting anxiety and fear around sexuality comes from a tradition of AOUM programming that gained traction on a national scale in the early 1980s. The political rise of the NCR during this decade contributed greatly to this trend. Between the fiscal years 1996 and 2010 the federal government paid over \$1.5 billion tax-payer dollars to fund these programs.⁴⁷ Despite mounting evidence that proves AOUM educational initiatives are ineffective, the federal funding for programs like Megan experienced has continued.⁴⁸

This chapter will focus on the most significant public policy actions that funded AOUM sex education in the United States between 1980 and 2000, and that continue to directly impact

⁴⁶ “Megan,” interview.

⁴⁷ Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, *A History of Federal Funding for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs*, 2010. PDF.

⁴⁸ For reports detailing the ineffective results of AOUM programming see: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, *Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs, Final Report*, by Christopher Trenholm Et al. (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.), April 2007; Advocates for Youth, *The Truth About Abstinence-Only Programs*, report (Washington DC: Advocates for Youth, 2007), accessed March 12, 2018, <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/fsabstinenceonly.pdf>; National Center for Biology Information, US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, *Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates: Why We Need Comprehensive Sex Education in the U.S.*, by David W. Hall and Kathrin F. Stanger-Hall, ed. Virginia J. Vitzthum, October 2011. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3194801/>; and John S. Santelli Et al., “Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage: An Updated Review of U.S. Policies and Programs and Their Impact,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 61 (2017): 273-280, accessed March 12, 2018, PDF.

the lives of young people in 2018. During this two decade span at the end of the twentieth century, public sex education became a place of contention for neo-progressive and traditionalist constituencies. While the Left sought support in teaching about contraception, religious fundamentalists controlling the Right attacked birth control, abortion policy, and pro-choice organizations.⁴⁹ The irony of this conflict is that during this time both progressives and conservatives shared the objective to bolster the middle-class family structure.⁵⁰ Because of this belief both attempted to control the flow of information about sexuality that reached young people. Through a bipartisan effort, large streams of federal funding for AOUM sex education programming were established in 1981. Then, according to a report by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), “funding for these unproven programs grew exponentially from 1996 until 2006, particularly during the years of the George W. Bush Administration.”⁵¹

The goal of this chapter is to situate federal AOUM policy into the historical context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. During this time the developing political culture around race, welfare, purity, and morality provided the perfect environment for the growth and continuing popularity of AOUM programming.

⁴⁹ Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 194-214.

⁵⁰ Carlson, “Ideological Conflict, 45.

⁵¹ Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, *Federal Funding*.

While this chapter will provide a historical analysis of the major public policy actions surrounding federal funding for sex education, a complete overview of the financial and demographic data related to the federal funding of abstinence-only-until-marriage programming between 1981 and 2014 can be found in this report.

The yearly reports by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States during this time frame also support the assertion that AOUM programming does not meet its stated goals. These intentions will be explored later in Chapter One.

For full access see: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, “SIECUS Report,” accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=1275>.

Without funding, curricula does not get written or systematically implemented in public schools in the United States. While much of the education system is funded through state and local government, programming that is considered non-essential or ancillary to core subjects is often dependent upon federal funding.⁵² Federal funding for sex education is thus a precious resource designed to create messaging which is then taught to young people.

In March of 1965, not a year after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the foundation of SIECUS, the United States Department of Labor Office of Policy Planning and Research published an internal report entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.⁵³ Penned by then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the publication argued that the root of continued and worsening urban black poverty in the United States was due in large part to the “highly unstable” family structure in African-American communities.⁵⁴ Ultimately Moynihan argued that, as a result of the “incredible mistreatment to which [African Americans have] been subjected to over the last three centuries,” the black population had been “forced into a matriarchal structure,” which, “seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro

⁵² As Gilens notes, “Unlike most of our social programs, which are funded primarily at the federal level, education is overwhelmingly paid for by state and local governments.” Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, 15.

While the statistics in this text (Gilens 1999) are now outdated, this systematic and nuanced analysis of the welfare-state in the twentieth century remains a relevant and essential resource. For a more comprehensive history and analysis of the function of welfare and the funding of public schools see in addition to Gilens:

Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991); Mink, *Whose Welfare?*; and Leslie McCall, *The Undeserving Rich: American Beliefs about Inequality, Opportunity, and Redistribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵³ US Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (March 1965).

⁵⁴ Moynihan was then Assistant Secretary of Labor to President Lyndon B. Johnson. This document is also known as “The Moynihan Report.”

women as well.”⁵⁵ Moynihan effectively tied together employment, education, and race to explain how a non-traditional (single-parent or matriarchal) family structure was at the crux of continuing black poverty in the 1960s. This argument absolved American society and government of pervasive structural racism and inequality in creating and perpetuating these concerns. The report’s analysis included the assertion that “white children without fathers at least perceive all about them the pattern of men working. Negro children without fathers flounder and fail.”⁵⁶ The report legitimized and enforced the stereotype of the low-income black single-mother and the unemployed absentee black father, while blaming the systematic problems that fail black children in the United States on these assumptions about family structure.

Even though Moynihan’s report was not the first of its kind and has since been critiqued extensively, the lasting influence of his argument has woven its way into the fabric of US politics and policy throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.⁵⁷ At the same time as this report was published, President Lyndon Johnson was being pressured by black welfare activists into expanding public assistance programs to include black recipients. This action, which activists succeeded in achieving in the early 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement, was a short-lived victory. Welfare gained a public association with a population already stigmatized as indolent,

⁵⁵ Moynihan, *The Negro Family*, 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁷ For nuanced critiques of the Moynihan Report see: L. Alex Swan, “A Methodological Critique of the Moynihan Report,” *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 9 (June 1974): 18-24, accessed April 1, 2018; Jill S. Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 119-120; Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Revisiting the Moynihan Report, Cont.,” *Atlantic*, June 18, 2013, accessed April 1, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/revisiting-the-moynihan-report-cont/276978/>; and Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 16.

irresponsible, and “overly fertile”: black mothers.⁵⁸ Richard Nixon’s presidency (1969-1974) was marked by rollbacks of limited federal laws supporting black single mothers. During this time, the rhetoric of the woman in need of welfare assistance changed from the white war widow to the “Black Welfare Queen.”⁵⁹ Sociologist and social justice activist Dorothy Roberts argues that the Nixon administration used this transformation as a tool in their economic policy.⁶⁰ This conservative white backlash made significant changes in the American political sphere during the 1970s and 1980s. Motherhood did not signify a protective status for women of color. On the contrary, single motherhood became a racialized phenomenon in the public eye, linking black women’s reproduction and sexuality to poverty, dependence, and lack of responsibility. This stereotype emerged as an element of the conservative effort for American society to return to “traditional” family values.

While Johnson and Nixon battled poverty with a war on black mothers out of a fear of national decline from the 1950s through the 1970s, Evangelical Christians began to perceive an attack on their own moral values. This occurred during the Cold War years in which the threat of Godless communism loomed ever closer and the sexual revolution gained cultural significance. Religious studies scholar Sara Moslener argues that Evangelicals “viewed themselves as victims

⁵⁸ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 207.

⁵⁹ The image of the “worthy white widow” came in the age of patriarchal New Deal policies in the early twentieth century. White feminist welfare reformers used the image of the moralistic white mother (who was “not expected to work”) to expand the access to federal welfare programs mostly directed at white men. These policies systematically excluded Black people from eligibility, “in a deliberate effort to maintain a Black menial labor caste.” When welfare entitlements opened to African-American citizens during the civil rights movement, the image of the black welfare mother was constructed, despite the fact that “the majority of Black women nevertheless continued to work at paid jobs and the majority of welfare recipients remained white.” Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 205-207.

⁶⁰ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 207-208. For more on the history of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon’s War on Poverty see: Gilens, *Why Americans*, 61-132.

of a secular regime.”⁶¹ Christian fundamentalism, a developing “religion of fear,” was a solution to battle the moral chaos overtaking the nation in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶² Evangelical Christianity grew parallel to secular American culture during these decades. By mirroring American media in an effort to advertise the moral decline of American society, and building suburban churches that embraced an American consumerist aesthetic, Evangelical Christian communities *looked* like secular capitalist America.

The political activism in secular society during these years also began to influence this Evangelical Christian Sect. The normalization of premarital and extramarital sex, divorce, reproductive rights, and abortion unsettled conservative evangelicals.⁶³ These new moral standards were antithetical to their values. Evangelicals then turned to grassroots organizing to advocate for their moral codes. Transferring these moral objections to a political platform was new territory for many Evangelical Christians in the 1970s. These political arguments would come to be known rhetorically as “family values.” Ronald Reagan was elected as President in 1980, along with a majority Republican Senate for the first time since 1955. This provided the conservative Evangelical platform (that had helped him get elected) the opportunity to gain

⁶¹ Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 77.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 83.

national political power and the NCR began to gain real traction.⁶⁴ The evidence of this political influence appeared in Reagan's sex education funding policy.

Moynihan's patriarchal and paternalistic critique of black nuclear family structure and its role in American society fit neatly into the mold of gendered debates about sexuality and morality among middle-class white youth during the early and mid-twentieth century. The family values-based political platform of the NCR built upon these ideas. Such attitudes, including withholding information about safe sex from young white women, was meant to keep them out of trouble. In her 1996 book *Teenagers*, historian Grace Palladino explains that in this gendered phenomenon, "ignorance and obedience were also part of the plan."⁶⁵ These debates assumed a position of sexual purity and innocence for young men and women to varying and disparate degrees. Palladino writes:

Up until the 1970s, [teenagers] were not supposed to think about sex at all, except in the context of a sacred relation between (married) men and women. Female chastity and adherence to social rules were the keys to keeping this system in balance. Girls had a social duty to keep boys in line by refusing to go too far, and boys had an obligation to respect their wishes.⁶⁶

Teenage girls were not yet thought of as independent sexual beings and the social stigma around pre-marital sex remained high. It was expected that boys would be interested in sexual behavior,

⁶⁴ In the 1980s the New Christian Right encompassed a wide variety of actors. Conservative Christian organizations such as the Christian Coalition of America, Focus on the Family, Operation Rescue, and Concerned Women for America focused their efforts around pro-life and anti-gay causes. Companies, such as Waterbrook/Multnomah and David C Cook, published Evangelical Christian literature and self-help books. The NCR also contained organizations to support separatist Evangelical education, like the Homeschool Legal Defense Fund. NCR causes were bolstered by participants like conservative media giant Pat Robertson with television programs like *The 700 Club*. Evangelical preachers and conservative politicians, sometimes one in the same, led the moral absolutist charge of the NCR throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

⁶⁵ Palladino, *Teenagers*, 248.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

but that girls who wished to retain their social purity had the responsibility of keeping everyone held to the acceptable moral standard. Prominent social and political figures —like Moynihan— related degeneracy and moral purity to race, class, and gender. Less than desirable behavior from working class people of color, especially women, was therefore to be expected.

In early 1970s the Supreme Court ruled on cases which provided unmarried women with access to birth control and legalized abortion.⁶⁷ This indicated that the sexual practices of young and unmarried people were becoming visible to politicians, educators, and scholars.⁶⁸ General acceptance that adolescents from all demographics engaged in sexual activity during the late 1970s allowed teenagers to be realized as sexual beings without erasing their morality for the first time. The racist, elitist, and sexist implications of this assumption continued the threads of the earlier conversations about morality.

In the early 1980s federal political discourse turned to the monitoring and regulation of adolescent sexual activity in the public sphere. In an analysis of the creation of sex education curricula in the 1980s and 1990s, educational scholar Dennis L. Carlson reflects that, “It was now possible to understand dominant discourses and practices of sexuality education as disciplinary, regulatory, and surveillance technologies designed to produce the ‘normal’ adolescent, performing gendered sexuality within prescribed norms.”⁶⁹ The pro-family movement, however, had its roots in the NCR; the shift from community organizing to national

⁶⁷ *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 405, US 438 (1972) and *Roe v. Wade*, 410, US 113 (1973) gave unmarried people the same rights to obtain contraception as married couples and declared abortion a fundamental right under the US constitution, respectively.

⁶⁸ Irvine, *Talk about Sex*, 88.

⁶⁹ Carlson, *The Education of Eros*, 159.

political debates put conservative activism on the offensive in the sex education debates and the regulation of adolescent sexual behavior.

The NCR gained national political influence during the 1980s in large part due to their platforms about sexual morality in the political climate of abortion and AIDS discourse.⁷⁰ During this time the visibility of conservative ideologies grew on a national scale.⁷¹ Empowered by the Reagan presidency, conservative policy-makers struck back against organizations like the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) and SIECUS. Such organizations had introduced education initiatives in the previous decade to inform the general public, especially women, about sexual health.⁷² Though these programs were not designed specifically for teenagers, their resources could be used by sex education professionals to potentially influence the sexual practices and values of adolescents. Dispensing information about access to contraceptives, abortion, and sexual health services was messaging that presented a threat to the morality crusade of the NCR. During the political rise of the NCR, organizations such as Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America, concentrated their considerable energies on young people and women.⁷³ This ignited a culture of anxiety around sexual purity and degeneracy in American society that, decades later, Megan identified in her own educational experience.

⁷⁰ Irvine, *Talk about Sex*, 88.

Chapter Two will expand on the role of the AIDS crisis on the sex education debates.

⁷¹ Irvine, *Talk about Sex*, 88.

⁷² The PPFA founded its Department of Education in 1979. *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 71.

In the 1980s, youth made easy targets for the backlash of action against this earlier progressivism. Young people were potentially uncorrupted. Armed with the rhetoric of family building and moral consciousness, the New Right focused many of their policy-making efforts on non-comprehensive sex education policy. This action affected those immersed in the services of public education every day. The abstinence-only discourse of the 1980s, aimed with special concern at young white women, did not negate the assumption built in the 1970s that teenagers were sexual beings.⁷⁴ This discourse merely assumed that controlling the sexual behavior of adolescents was the path to a moral society and the supposed restoration of the American family. In a report about 1996 AOUM funding, child-welfare professionals and economists wrote that “the explicit intent of the legislation is to promote programs that feature the unambiguous message that sex outside marriage is wrong and harmful to health.”⁷⁵ One strategy for this control was public sex education that taught teenagers that having sex was not a viable option.

Arguably, the first large and lasting political move from the NCR to influence sex education occurred relatively uneventfully and under the national radar, when the Reagan administration passed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981.⁷⁶ One of the first large-scale fiscal actions of the Reagan administration, this resolution included the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA). The AFLA granted tens of millions of dollars in public funding to public schools that provided AOUM programming. Conservative Republican Senators Jeremiah Denton

⁷⁴ Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 197-200.

⁷⁵ Ron Haskins and Carol Statuto Bevan, “Abstinence Education Under Welfare Reform,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 19, no.5/6 (1997): 465-484.

⁷⁶ Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, Public Law 97-35, 97th Cong. (August 13, 1981): HR3982.

Budget Bills, such as this one, often contain a range of political agendas. This helped the AFLA to pass through inconspicuously.

(AL) and Orrin Hatch (UT), who believed so called “comprehensive” sex education was expensive, and, “promoted teen sexuality and abortion...sponsored the AFLA and quietly shepherded it —without hearings or floor votes in either houses of Congress— through committee and into the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act.”⁷⁷ Nicknamed the “Chastity Act” or the “Chastity Bill,” Rebecca Saul of the Guttmacher Institute explains that the AFLA received not only financial and political support from the evangelicals of the New Christian Right, but an immense amount of financial lobbying support from Catholic organizations.⁷⁸ The federal funding from this program could be used not only by public schools, but by religious programs and parochial schools in the United States.

Throughout the early 1980s much of the AFLA funding was granted to religious organizations to develop the foundational fear-based curricula. This pedagogy relied on scare tactics to advocate for abstinence and often altered facts or provided misleading about methods of contraception and disease prevention.⁷⁹ Among the goals for the AFLA were,

⁷⁷ Rebekah Saul, “Whatever Happened to the Adolescent Family Life Act?,” *The Guttmacher Policy Review* 1, no. 2 (April 1, 1998), accessed February 11, 2018, <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/1998/04/whatever-happened-adolescent-family-life-act>.

⁷⁸ Saul, “Whatever Happened.”

The Guttmacher Institute began as a division of Planned Parenthood. Named for Alan Guttmacher who served as the second president of the PPFA and vice-president of the American Eugenics Society in the mid-twentieth century, the organization’s origins stem from the complicated and violent history of the modern birth control movement. Today, like the PPFA the Guttmacher Institute is an organization that advocates for reproductive rights and abortion access in the United States and worldwide. For more information about Guttmacher and the history of the birth control movement see: James Reed, *The Birth Control Movement and American Society: From Private Vice to Public Virtue* (Princeton: Princeton Legacy Library, 1984); Angela Franks, *Margaret Sanger’s Eugenic Legacy: The Control of Female Fertility* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005); Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2005); and Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.

⁷⁹ Saul, “Whatever Happened.”

The goals of these early programs still look familiar in 2018.

Finding effective means, within the context of the family, of reaching adolescents before the [sic] become sexually active in order to maximize the guidance and support available to adolescents from parents and other family members, and to promote self discipline and other prudent approaches to the problem of adolescent premarital sexual relations, including adolescent pregnancy;⁸⁰

These goals encouraged moving the conversation about sex and abstinence to the private sphere, relying on parents to regulate the sexual behavior of their children. This goal assumed that parents shared the viewpoint that “adolescent premarital sexual relations” were, fundamentally, a problem. This principle also assumed that the ideal parents had the time in which to have these conversations with their children and to monitor their children’s sexual behavior. This second assumption could also infer a certain class status, wherein a parent is able to be home with their child, rather than at work.

Parent involvement was essential to this type of programming. The second goal of the AFLA was “promoting adoption as an alternative for adolescent parents.”⁸¹ The goal to encourage adoption reinforces Christian-morality based ideas: abortion is not a viable option. Additionally, the desirable family structure in the United States included parents old enough to support themselves financially and not become dependent on the State. The endorsement of adoption also reinforced practices employed to maintain secrecy and avoid moral judgement. The third goal was “establishing innovative, comprehensive and integrated approaches to the delivery

⁸⁰ This quotation of the stated goals of the AFLA comes from an appellant brief attached to the 1988 case that later challenged the constitutionality of the legislation, explored later in this chapter.

Otis R. Bowen, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Appellant, v. Chan Kendrick, et. al., Appellees, Brief by American Public Health Association, American Psychological Association, Planned Parenthood Association of America, Inc., and National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association, Inc. as Amici Curiae in Support of Appellees and Cross-Appellants, by Nadine Taub, Judith Levin, John H. Hall, and Mary Sue Henifin (February 13, 1988), 8.

⁸¹ *Otis R. Bowen, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Appellant, v. Chan Kendrick, et. al., Appellees*, Brief (February 13, 1988), 8.

of care services for pregnant adolescents.” This element suggests that, while contraceptives should not be distributed in school, information and services that promote adolescents carrying a baby to term should be available. This language also insinuates that this information should be disseminated in a way that does not adversely affect students who are neither pregnant, nor engaging in sexual activity. The final goal, “supporting research and dissemination of research results on the causes and consequences of adolescent premarital sexual relations, contraceptive use, pregnancy, and childbearing,” is ironic, due to the complete disregard for later research that concluded abstinence-only curricula did not positively impact teen pregnancy rates.⁸²

One effect of the AFLA was that conversations about teen sexuality were pushed into the private sphere, both familial and religious. Factual information was withheld, while misinformation (like false statistics about the effectiveness of birth control) was actively circulated in order to promote abstinence among public school students.⁸³ The AFLA set a new precedent for the morality-based lawmaking around public sex education funding and the type of widespread influence this ideology could have on young people.

In 1988 the *Bowen v. Kendrick* case challenged the constitutionality of the AFLA on the grounds that it violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment (which prohibits the government from establishing a governing religion or abating one religion over any other).⁸⁴ The *Bowen* case was successful in District Court. The ruling was, however, appealed to the Supreme

⁸² *Otis R. Bowen, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Appellant, v. Chan Kendrick, et. al., Appellees*, Brief (February 13, 1988), 8.

See AOUM education impact reports footnoted earlier in Chapter One.

⁸³ Saul, “Whatever Happened.”

⁸⁴ *Bowen v. Kendrick*, 487 US 589 (1988).

The organizations giving testimony to support the repeal included the American Public Health Association, the American Psychological Association, the Planned Parenthood Association of America, Inc., and the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association, Inc.

Court. The opponents of the AFLA argued that the Act prevented healthcare professionals from disseminating accurate information to adolescents about sexual health. They also claimed the policy privileged religious denominations in its intent and practice. The brief of the amici curiae to the court argued that “The Adolescent Family Life Act impermissibly interferes with an adolescent’s constitutional right to make informed reproductive decisions,” and “discriminates among religions by requiring the involvement of religious organizations that do not advocate, promote or encourage abortion.”⁸⁵

Despite third party support of the initial district court ruling, the Supreme Court ultimately upheld the constitutionality of the AFLA. Their ruling found that the statute had a secular purpose to do with economics and public health. The Supreme Court concluded that any advancement to a religious agenda was “incidental and remote,” as the services provided were not explicitly associated with a religious organization.⁸⁶ This ruling ensured AOUM funding through the AFLA for more than two decades. By 2005, programs under the AFLA received \$13 million in federal funding per year.⁸⁷

Conservative influence and pressure ultimately led to continued federal fiscal support for AOUM programming, regardless of the political party of the President.⁸⁸ One such example of this continued bipartisan support of (white middle-class) family values was a new stream of federal grant funding attached to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity

⁸⁵ *Otis R. Bowen, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Appellant, v. Chan Kendrick, et. al., Appellees*, Brief (February 13, 1988), 10, 19.

⁸⁶ *Bowen v. Kendrick* (1988).

⁸⁷ Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, *Federal Funding*.

⁸⁸ The liberal versus conservative ideological tug of war throughout the late 1980s and 1990s will be the subject of Chapter Two.

Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) passed under President Bill Clinton.⁸⁹ Section 912 of the PRWORA amends Title V of the Social Security Act under the moniker "Temporary Assistance to Needy Families" to include further funding to the State for "abstinence education." Telling in the intention and messaging of this legislation is the eight point definition of "abstinence education" attached to the funding from both the Title V legislation and the AFLA.

This definition of abstinence-only encompassed the moral value system held by conservative lawmakers and the NCR. The first point defining "abstinence education" read "[h]as as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, physiological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity."⁹⁰ An AOUM education would not promote anything other than a uniformly positive outcome from sexual abstinence. The relationship between abstinence and all good things is established. AOUM education also "teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage as the expected standard for all school age children," which legitimizes abstinence as the desirable and normative behavior for young people.⁹¹ This language also reinforces the notion that teenagers are *children*. Constituting adolescents as children removes their sexuality, independence, and bodily autonomy. Additionally, abstinence education "teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and other associated health problems."⁹² Not only are contraceptives and other methods of protection not mentioned as preventatives to these concerns,

⁸⁹ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Public Law 104, 104th Cong. (August 22, 1996): HR3734. Also known as the 1996 Welfare Reform Act.

⁹⁰ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, 250.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

abstinence itself is not defined as a contraceptive method. Abstinence is taught as the only way to prevent pregnancy and STIs. The ambiguity of “other associated health problems” contributes to the culture of fear embedded in these programs. This effect was clearly evident in Megan’s experience with sex education.

The next two points lean into religious-based ideas about the sanctity of marriage. Point four reads: “Teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity,” and point five adds, “Teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.”⁹³ These ideas define marriage as a normative standard for adult life. The rigidity of this idea contains an implied heterosexuality and renders all non-heterosexual behaviors as non-normative, personally destructive, or even dangerous. This “outside of marriage” language also implies that any non-marital sexual activity is wrong, regardless of whether the individual is or has been married. The inveterate idea about the sanctity of marriage clearly reflects a religious, particularly Christian, influence.

This definition then expands on the theme of consequences, demanding that abstinence-only education, “teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society.”⁹⁴ This principle reinforces the notion of marriage as the norm and discourages all procreation outside of a heterosexual monogamous context. The implication here is twofold: children born out of wedlock are often raised by single mothers who become dependent on the State (which is undesirable) and single parenthood

⁹³ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, 250.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

prohibits citizens from performing normative gender roles. These two factors would therefore be damaging to the child raised in such conditions and to society at large.

The definition then relates sexual behaviors to substance use. The analysis approaches abstinence from another angle, reading: “Teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances.”⁹⁵ By implying that it is the responsibility of the potential victim to remain sober in order to rebuff or defend against assault, this system relies on victim blaming rhetoric, most often directed at young women. The final principle states that AOUM programming, “teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.”⁹⁶ This part of the definition implies that young people should wait to engage in sexual activity until they are adults and is used as a blanket statement to condemn all adolescent sexual activity. The language included in this statement signifies dependency and strips adolescents of any claim to autonomy. Under this definition, teenagers should therefore not be given the choice whether to engage in sexual activity.⁹⁷

This restrictive and moralistic definition of abstinence education includes messaging that sex outside of monogamous wedlock leads to socially unacceptable consequences like pregnancy, STIs and financial dependence on the State. At the same time the legislation prohibits the mention of contraception or the implication that abstinence is simply one form of contraception. The open ended interpretation of these clauses allows for a wealth of misinformation and misdirection to be transmitted to young people in America. The directives

⁹⁵ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, 250.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ This bill also embodied the democratic liberal Clinton era continuation of the War on Poverty and single mothers. This was reflected in the vilification of dependence and its position antithetical to choice.

contained in the definition was meant to last. The program not only established funding for AOUM programming, but authorized an additional \$50,000,000 to be granted “for each of the fiscal years 1998 through 2002,” bringing Clinton-Era policy into the new millennium.⁹⁸

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the federal government established the third major stream of federal AOUM funding: the Special Projects of Regional and National Significance - Community-Based Abstinence Education (SPRANS-CBAE) grant. The SPRANS-CBAE grant was to begin funding AOUM curricula in 2001, under the George W. Bush Administration. The unique significance of this program was that the discretion for the allocation of the funding surpassed state governments (and thus regulation in public schools). The money was funneled directly from the federal government into community programs. These programs included public schools as well as religious educational environments that purported an AOUM curriculum. In December 2004 a report by the House Committee on Government Reform, led by democratic minority leader Representative Henry Waxman (CA), “documented that 11 of the 13 abstinence-only-until-marriage programs used by the CBAE grantees contained false, misleading, or distorted information about pregnancy, as well as gender stereotypes, moral judgements, religious concepts, and factual errors.”⁹⁹ In 2005 both the SPRANS-CBAE grant and the Title V (PRWORA) program were transferred to the conservative-led Administration for Children and Families (ACF). At this time the SPRANS-CBAE grant was shortened to Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE). In 2001, funding for the CBAE began at \$20 million. By 2006, and under the administrative change, CBAE funding had increased to \$113 million for each of

⁹⁸ Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 250.

⁹⁹ Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, *Federal Funding*.

the year between 2006 to 2008.¹⁰⁰ Despite evidence that AOUM programming does not help young people avoid consequences like teen pregnancy, federal funding was fueled by decades of powerful rhetoric that argued the opposite.

The SIECUS report on the history of AOUM programming eloquently outlines how consulting young people is integral to improving sex education. Those affected by the programming itself helped to instigate some of the first major actions to reverse these policies between 2008 and 2018. The report reads:

In April 2008, Congress held the first-ever hearing on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Three panels of witnesses spoke at the hearing including ...youth speakers who testified to the program's effects on their lives... They called for an end to federal funding for the programs and said that funds should instead be spent on comprehensive sexuality education that had been proven to be effective. This hearing marked the beginning of the end for the SBAE [Community] program; the following year, the program received its first-ever cut and the program was finally ended in Fiscal Year 2010.¹⁰¹

In 2009, the Obama Administration and a democratic majority in Congress allowed the funding for a portion of the AFLA to expire. 2009 also marked the expiration of the Title V (PRWORA) funding, by which time “nearly half the states had chosen not to participate in this program and not to accept federal funds...based on string research and evaluations showing that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are ineffective.”¹⁰² However, as a part of a compromise associated

¹⁰⁰ “Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE),” Advocates for Youth, last Modified 2008, accessed November 2, 2017. <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/755-abstinence-only-until-PDF>.

For further statistics on the financial increases in the three streams of federal AOUM education funding see: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, *Federal Funding*.

¹⁰¹ Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, *Federal Funding*.

¹⁰² Ibid.

with the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA),¹⁰³ \$50 million of the Title V budget was reinstated from 2011- 2014.¹⁰⁴

Between 1980 and the early 2000s, the aggrandizement of morality-based politics, continued racialization and gendering of poverty, and societal fear of teenagers as sexual beings merged. This political marriage resulted in dominant financial policy decisions that established and supported AOUM programming for adolescents. This policy restricted the ways in which sex education could be taught and fed from an environment of fear. The effects of this programing can be seen in stories like Megan's. She explains how the messaging about purity, abstinence, morality, and consequence can lead to intense self-scrutiny and anxiety. If abstinence, consequence-based sex education causes sexual anxiety for young people, it follows that this policy serves to enforce a specific definition of morality and regulation of adolescent behavior, rather than serves to promote the health of teenagers.

Conservative policy-makers influenced the funding and implementation of AOUM programming during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Nevertheless, progressive discourses about comprehensive education continued throughout the same timeline.

¹⁰³ Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Public Law 111-148, 111th Cong. (March 23, 2010): HR3590.

Known colloquially as "Obamacare," the ACA was the most significant change to the structuring and access to American healthcare since the foundation of Medicare and Medicaid in the 1960s. The bill expands the health insurance marketplace, imposes new regulations for employers providing insurance, and establishes rights and protections for patients. The ACA was intended to expand healthcare coverage in the United States and to protect patients from discrimination in the private insurance market. For more accessible information on the ACA see: ———, "Affordable Care Act (ACA)," U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, accessed April 14, 2018, <https://www.healthcare.gov/glossary/affordable-care-act/>.

¹⁰⁴ *End Funding for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs*, report (Washington DC: Advocates for Youth, September 2010), accessed October 25, 2017, http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/end_funding_for_abstinence_only.pdf.

Chapter 2

“We Have Tried Ignorance for a Very Long Time”¹⁰⁵: Educational Approaches in the Era of Public Health

Ruby and I tuck ourselves against a wall of a little café, hoping we have time to finish talking before they close early for New Year’s Eve. Ruby skates through the identity questions with a few giggles: she’s fifteen, white, and non-religious; she has always lived in New York. She tells me later that she identifies as a lesbian. When we get to the questions about school, Ruby is immediately both introspective and conscious of a wider system that she fits into. She says that, on the whole, the social atmosphere at her public school is “pretty relaxed,” that “there aren’t people, kind of, morally policing you, which I think happens sometimes in other high schools.”¹⁰⁶

The moral policing that does exist, as Ruby puts it, comes not socially from her peers, but from teachers. She tells me a few stories about teachers who have strayed from their set curriculum, or even field, to lecture about sex trafficking and abortion regret. These middle-school talks, done out of context and without any follow-up, left a horrifying impression on Ruby as a young person. She reflected on her troubled mental state at the same time these

¹⁰⁵ Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, quoted in ———, “Comments After Speech at the U.N.,” *Washington Post*, December 10, 1994, accessed March 15, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/12/10/comments-after-speech-at-the-un/bd44c3e5-3643-4eff-8bcb-ebc4d5a0aca5/?utm_term=.40112c2651ff.

¹⁰⁶ “Ruby,” interview by author, December 31, 2017, New York, transcript.

lectures occurred during pubescence, and how this led her to think about a project identifying the correlation between conservative sex education and anxiety and depression in young girls.¹⁰⁷

Ruby has ideas about what makes a positive sex education experience, however, so we turn the conversation to teaching. I want to know what she thinks makes a sex educator, in particular, good at their job. Ruby tells me:

In my opinion, I don't think everyone has the answers. And I like people acknowledging that, even as you, like, get older, you don't automatically have all the answers! And like people who have an education (or formal education) don't necessarily know more about sex ed than other people. And like, it's just all, it's all *experience* and like trying to figure stuff out.¹⁰⁸

Here, Ruby explains that she likes to see a little humility in her teachers; she says that this admission of imperfection makes them seem more relatable. Being taught about sex and sexuality by someone who admits they are human and still learning makes an educator feel more trustworthy. She tells me that, if the adults teaching sex education were just open about not having all the answers and learning through experience, young people might realize that they are not inferior because they don't have all of the answers either.

Ruby fits many of the same identity categories as Megan from Chapter One: both are white women from the east coast, with two-parent, middle-class backgrounds. In many ways, the conservative abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) policy implemented since 1981 was developed to protect the purity and morality of just these kind of young people. Yet both young women explained the ways in which conservative sex education provided them with a set of stories and regulations that they identified as causes of anxiety and depression.

¹⁰⁷ For the specifics of these stories, their lasting effects, and Ruby's project, see pages 118-120 in Chapter Four.

¹⁰⁸ "Ruby," interview.

Ruby has faith in sex education which helps young people find the answers that work best for them. Or at least she believes this programming can exist. She knows that there are educators who strive to keep the dialogue about comprehensive sex education going. This conversation I have with Ruby is, in fact, a continuation of the more liberal dialogue about sex education that occurred during the same decades AOUM curricula were funded and popularized.

In the nearly forty years following the passage of the Adolescent Family Life Act in 1981, the place of sex education in public schools has been an ever-evolving debate. Comprehensive sex education policy supporters, such as those who had challenged the constitutionality of the AFLA in 1988, continued to fight for federal funding of non-religious, non-abstinence based programming. One such figure was Jocelyn Elders, appointed the first African American Surgeon General of the United States by President Bill Clinton in 1993. In the early 1990s, Elders became a controversial figure due to her advocacy for making birth control available in schools.¹⁰⁹ These actions earned Elders the nickname “Condom Queen,” from conservative political commentator Rush Limbaugh.¹¹⁰ At the United Nations World AIDS Day in 1994 Elders gained further ridicule because she supported the suggestion that teaching adolescent masturbation could help prevent the spread of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and teen pregnancy.

Elders’ exact words in response to a direct question stated:

As per your specific question in regard to masturbation, I think that is something that is a part of human sexuality and it's a part of something that perhaps should be taught. But we've not even taught our children the very basics. And I feel that we have tried

¹⁰⁹ For more on Elders’ beliefs and thoughts on her own positioning while in office see 1994 *New York Times Magazine* interview: Claudia Dreifus, “Jocelyn Elders,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 30, 1994, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/30/magazine/jocelyn-elders.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹¹⁰ Dreifus, “Jocelyn Elders.”

ignorance for a very long time, and it's time we try education.¹¹¹

Political pressure from inside the White House led President Clinton to ask Elders to resign a week later in December 1994.¹¹²

Elders' short-lived federal public health career demonstrates the contentious climate of the sex education debate during the late 1980s through the 1990s. While progressive public health professionals and educators advocated for more diverse and comprehensive sex education curricula, conservative influence and pressure ultimately led to continued federal fiscal support for AOUM programming, regardless of the political party of the President.

The foundation of contemporary sex education policy during the 1980s and 1990s was a place of public regulation of sexual behavior for young bodies. In line with the intended goals of this policy, sex education teaching moved into the home. Teenagers and their parents were left to navigate sexual activity and knowledge-base in the private sphere.

Radical reformers of sex education have since advocated for curricula that responds to the individualized and varied experiences of the teenage audience. Ideas about comprehensive

¹¹¹ Jocelyn Elders, quoted in ———, “Comments After Speech at the U.N.”

¹¹² A *New York Times* article about Elders' resignation claimed that she was the victim of a conservative crusade to have her fired, even before her statements at the UN. The *Times* reported, “As word of Dr. Elders' most recent comments began to circulate, the White House went out of its way to make clear that her resignation had not been voluntary. Almost as soon as she told Mr. Clinton by telephone that she would step down, and even before she announced the decision herself, Mr. [Leon] Panetta [President Clinton's Chief of Staff] invited reporters to his office to declare that ‘if she had not resigned, she would have been terminated.’”

Douglas Jehl, “Surgeon General Forced to Resign by White House,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1994, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/10/us/surgeon-general-forced-to-resign-by-white-house.html>.

For more on the immediate response to the controversial resignation of Jocelyn Elders see: ———, “Comments After Speech at the U.N.,” *Washington Post*; Ruth Marcus, “President Clinton Fires Elders” *Washington Post*, December 10, 1994, accessed March 15, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/12/10/president-clinton-fires-elders/b6175d7e-8ba1-4f63-a33b-a535a727bf3c/?utm_term=.fccc28aebabf; and Paul Richter and Marlene Cimons, “Clinton Fires Surgeon General Over New Flap,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1994, accessed March 15, 2018, http://articles.latimes.com/1994-12-10/news/mn-7305_1_surgeon-general.

sex education for young people are still considered radical in the 2010s. The process of constructing teenagers as sexual beings and recognizing their subsequent need for practical information that corresponds to their sex lives is ongoing. The discourse kept at a political level between adults perpetuates a culture of anxiety about public health, morality, and fear of change. Teenagers, like Megan and Ruby, are left with a deficit of comprehensive information and an overwhelming susceptibility to that same anxiety.

The concern about public health and morality gained traction in congruence with AOUM sex education policy during its early years. This had largely to do with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic of the 1980s, which incited grassroots organizing and political advocacy for sex education in schools.¹¹³ In 1981 the first cases of AIDS were reported in the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.¹¹⁴ In 1985 the CDC co-sponsored the first International Conference on AIDS. By 1987 the organization launched its national educational campaign, “America Responds to AIDS.” On their website, the CDC claims to have sent

¹¹³ Kendall, *The Sex Education Debates*, 1.

¹¹⁴ At the time the report stated, “In the period October 1980—May 1981, 5 young men, all active homosexuals, were treated for biopsy-confirmed *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia at 3 different hospitals in Los Angeles, California.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “*Pneumocystis* Pneumonia – Los Angeles.” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 30, no. 21 (June 5, 1981):1-3, accessed March 15, 2018, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/june_5.htm.

The CDC report went on to connect the contraction of this illness with extreme immunosuppression. Neither HIV nor AIDS was yet named. This quote is included to illustrate that it took time for the CDC medical professionals to understand how the illness emerged and was transmitted. However, because the focus of this thesis is not the poor institutional handling of AIDS in the 1980s, CDC response will be used to illustrate the overarching narrative of public health and the HIV/AIDS epidemic during this time period in the United States.

The Centers for Disease Control was renamed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1992, but asked by Congress to continue using the initials CDC. “CDC Timeline 1990s,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified June 29, 2016, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/1990.html>.

“Understanding AIDS,” an informational article related to the prevention of HIV, to “every household in America.”¹¹⁵ In 1989 the 100,000th case of AIDS was reported to the CDC.¹¹⁶ This massive increase demonstrates how unprepared those in the medical profession were to respond to HIV and AIDS. By the end of the 1980s the Centers for Disease Control ranked AIDS as the seventh leading cause of death among youth ages 15–24 in the United States.¹¹⁷

Because the increasingly fraught discourse of sex education came of age at the same time as the HIV/AIDS crisis in America, sex education and public health were twinned in a way that has yet to be undone in 2018. Education scholar Susan Shurberg Klein writes that, in 1992, there was a common belief that “schools should play an active role in addressing,” matters of “public concern about AIDS, teen pregnancy, [and] sexual harassment.”¹¹⁸ This public health angle helped fuel the culture of fear embedded in the sex education discourses of the past four decades.

The 1990s brought about a time of heightened contrast between the private lives of teenagers in the United States and the public discourse of adults about adolescent sexuality. The national rhetoric promoting conservative ideology around the sexuality of teenagers did not stop

¹¹⁵ “CDC Timeline 1980s,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified June 29, 2016, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/1980.html>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Janie Victoria Ward and Jill McLean Taylor, “Sexuality Education for Immigrant and Minority Students: Developing a Culturally Appropriate Curriculum,” in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, ed. James T. Sears (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 185.

¹¹⁸ Susan Shurberg Klein, “Why Should We Care About Gender and Sexuality in Education?,” in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, ed. James T. Sears (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 173.

teenagers themselves from having sex.¹¹⁹ If anything, sexual activity among adolescents became more widely socially accepted in the private sphere, as the role of the teenager in American society became more culturally defined.¹²⁰ For example, in her analysis of teenage sexuality, Palladino uses the rhetoric of virginity to measure the increase in sexual activity among teenagers in the late twentieth century.¹²¹ She writes, “in 1973, an estimated 35 percent of high school seniors had lost their virginity; by 1990, 70 percent had - so had 40 percent of the freshmen.”¹²² This trend in the experience of virginity went along with other factors measuring the independence of young people in the late 1980s and 1990s, such as “driving, dating, and staying out late.”¹²³ In the 1990s, notions of teenage identity included bodily autonomy as a marker of freedom. Teenagers took ownership of themselves as sexual beings and some engaged in sexual practices as a part of this independence-based identity.

The neoliberalism of the 1990s moved many services into the private sphere.¹²⁴ Sex education was not exempt from this move. During this time, more liberal-leaning parents began to recognize that the abstinence only education in schools —implemented in the previous decade — was not working for the practical lives of their children.

¹¹⁹ Of course, there were teenagers that abstained from sex for a multitude of reasons. This chapter aims to analyze the actions acknowledging the teens that *were* having sex or engaging in sexual activity. These conversations address the necessity of comprehensive sex education for everyone, even those who abstain from sexual behavior.

¹²⁰ Palladino, *Teenagers*, 250-260.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 250-251.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 250.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ For a definition of neoliberalism and a more comprehensive analysis of its effects in the area of sex education during the 1990s see Chapter Three, pages 77-79.

In the 1990s, then, many teenagers were having sex and politicians were creating policy that inhibited comprehensive sex education and promoted abstinence-only discourses.¹²⁵ With public schools an unreliable source of comprehensive information, and the regulation of teenage sexuality still a priority for many parties, the monitoring of adolescent sexual behavior fell to parents. While the liberal political public was on the defensive in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in private they were on the offensive. Taking direct action in the health and safety of their children's sex lives, especially in the era of AIDS panic, progressive parents adopted new strategies. Portrayed by mainstream media at the time as a national phenomenon, some white middle-class suburban parents were allowing their children to have sex under their roofs. In a 1991 *New York Times* article titled "A Bedtime Story That's Different," journalist Carol Lawson writes:

To most of these parents, allowing sex at home is a way of protecting their children. If teenagers are sexually active, the parents reason, they are better off at home than in a place that might not be safe. Also, parents say, the home allows them to know who their children's sexual partners are.¹²⁶

The parents Lawson describes are all educated, upper-middle-class, suburban couples, whose children are, therefore, the center of the public morality discourse. These families could afford—socially, politically, and economically—the privatization of the regulation of teenage sexual behavior and spaces for practical information to pass from adult to adolescent.

This move into the private sphere occurred on the conservative and religious side of parenting and private teaching as well. Books written by Evangelical Christians for Christian

¹²⁵ Carlson, *The Education of Eros*, 105.

¹²⁶ Carol Lawson, "A Bedtime Story That's Different," *New York Times*, April 4, 1991, accessed October 26, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/04/04/garden/a-bedtime-story-that-s-different.html>.

teens (especially those within the culture of courtship and chastity) worked complimentary to public abstinence-only curricula.¹²⁷ These texts about love, sexuality, and relationships were a byproduct of the contemporary wave of the purity movement. The authors themselves were both in dialogue with one another and with the purity and chastity rhetoric of the most recent decades. Each of the texts were reflective of the therapeutic quality that Religious Studies and Media Studies professors Sara Moslener and Heather Hendershot have identified in their scholarship analyzing the purity movement and Christian media.¹²⁸ That is to say, the texts did not deny the adolescent desire for romantic or sexual intimacy, but offered tools —mostly involving faith and prayer— to temper that desire in pursuit of more self-fulfilling activities and relationships. These principles invoke similar language and values to the definition and goals of AOUM programming. The self-help books also argued that this fulfillment comes when selfish desire is put second to a more godly approach to love, intimacy, and relationships.

Emblematic of all of these texts is Joshua Harris' influential and widely cited book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, which he wrote at the age of 21. In his updated 2003 edition, Pastor Joshua Harris argues that “the fundamental problem with relationships today is that we’ve disconnected romance and commitment.”¹²⁹ Harris' book explores how equating intimacy with commitment can lead to a dating practice (or lack thereof) that allows young people not only to avoid the hurt that he believes comes with commitments that are broken after intimacy, but to

¹²⁷ Some of the more popular texts include: Elisabeth Elliot, *Passion and Purity: Learning to Bring Your Love Life Under Christ's Control*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2002); Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Relationships and Romance*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Publishers, 2003); and Eric Ludy and Leslie Ludy, *When God Writes Your Love Story: The Ultimate Approach to Guy/Girl Relationships*, 2nd ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004).

¹²⁸ See: Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Moslener, *Virgin Nation*.

¹²⁹ Harris, *Kissed Dating Goodbye*, 27.

“experience the goodness of His plan.”¹³⁰ Harris, citing Genesis 2:18, argues that God’s plan includes “the fulfillment of intimacy” as “a by-product of commitment-based love.”¹³¹ Harris believes that God wants everyone to have happiness and a full life, despite the fact that they are all sinners at their core. He argues that in order to achieve God’s plan, teenagers must help themselves by delaying instant gratification and waiting until they are ready to commit to someone for life, before engaging in any sort of romantic intimacy. “Intimacy” in this text is used to refer to emotional engagement in romantic relationships as well as to any displays of sexuality.

Harris’ book and entire approach is clever (or manipulative, depending on your perspective); he does not deny the difficulty or work involved in his philosophy, but promises the rewards will be worth it. Harris writes, “If we desire purity, we have to fight for it. This means adjusting our attitudes and changing our lifestyles.”¹³² Replace the word “purity” with nearly anything else, and Harris’ philosophy would still translate. Almost ironically, he uses this individualized language to appeal to a mass audience. Harris is, essentially, one step ahead of his reader, as he addresses nearly any challenge to his theory. Anything that is not explicitly addressed with a solution or justification is, of course, solved with the catch-all answer common in these religious texts: the belief that “I’m an unworthy sinner that God chose to rescue and forgive. This is love.”¹³³ Assuming his audience also shares this faith, Harris argues:

It’s this grace, this mercy, that should motivate us to live differently for the rest of our lives. . . . And because I’ve experienced it — because Jesus dies for me — I’m committed to a love life that’s controlled by Him. I invite you along. In light of the love He’s given us,

¹³⁰ Harris, *Kissed Dating Goodbye*, 28.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 92.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 23.

let's make purity and blamelessness our priority.¹³⁴

This plea rests not only on the assumption that the audience shares his faith, but that the rhetoric of the Christian purity movement has shaped their cultural context enough that these teenagers' desire deep-down is to be pure.

By analyzing these books with a critical eye we can see how the purity movement has maintained its popularity and influence in America, producing media that corresponds to and places itself in dialogue with the wider culture. In her book *Shaking the World for Jesus*, Heather Hendershot argues that Christian media is not an "imitation" of secular media, but a product with its own history in its own right.¹³⁵ These books both respond to a changing culture that accepts adolescent sexuality and the individualism of adolescents, and to the continuing prevalence of purity and chastity rhetoric, especially within the Evangelical Christian community. Texts like Harris's therefore reach the intended audience from multiple angles, strengthening the pro-chastity arguments.

The push and pull between liberal-leaning practices and religious-based chastity education extended from the national political sphere into the private sphere. Caught in the middle of these ideals in the early 1990s, sex educators were terrified to teach anything outside the lines of abstinence-only curriculum in public schools. Elders' story acted as a warning to those who attempted to speak out. This was a time when sex educators could have been capitalizing on the progress around teenage sexual subjectivity, gay rights movements, and contraception technologies from the previous era, teaching subjects like pleasure and

¹³⁴ Harris, *Kissed Dating Goodbye*, 23.

¹³⁵ Hendershot, *Shaking*, 87.

homosexuality. Even progressives felt they had to “emphasiz[e] the negative consequences for teenagers of having intercourse.”¹³⁶ Instead, they too, based their lessons in abstinence-only sex education. In her 1992 commentary, professor of education and women’s history, Mariamne Whatley writes:

It is clear that both the teachers in training and the experienced teachers in my classes have picked up a strong message that it is dangerous to teach about sexuality and that every care must be taken to avoid attracting notice or stirring up controversy...It is not that they have lost their idealism, but rather that they have put it aside temporarily for this specific topic.¹³⁷

Whatley explains how the concerns of sex educators at the height of the conservative crusade on sex education were focused on how much or how little they could get away with teaching while maintaining job security, rather than on the development of comprehensive curricula emphasizing choice or values. She argues that this pressure on sex educators undermines any progress in the sex education debates of the late twentieth century because the accomplishments of this work are not being implemented on the ground level.

The response to this anxiety appeared in progressive literature, including Whatley’s critique itself, published in the early 1990s. These works both recognized the climate of fear and repression in the field of sex education and at the same time proposed communication between sex educators and teenagers, hoping that an understanding of teens’ personal lives would help adults teach responsible decision making for sexually active adolescents. Those whose first focus

¹³⁶ Mariamne H. Whatley, “Whose Sexuality Is It Anyway?” in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, ed. James T. Sears (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 79.

¹³⁷ Whatley, “Whose Sexuality?” 78.

was the practical education of young people—not a public political agenda—maintained that a sense of reality about the lives of their subjects was integral to teaching sexual education.

A discourse emerged between educators and curriculum scholars about how best to teach above and around the AOUM guidelines and funding. In the first chapter of his 1992 book, *Sexuality and Curriculum*, LGBT scholar James T. Sears argues that knowing one's audience is a key to the success of sex education.¹³⁸ He writes that young people are more liable to retain and apply the information they learn from sex education if the curriculum applies to their own bodies at the time.¹³⁹ Thus, a curriculum for younger adolescents and pre-adolescents should be focused on puberty, physiology, and the colloquial language used among their peers. As teens enter high school their curricula should focus on contraception, abortion, safe sex practices, pregnancy, and the potential health risks of sexual activity. Additionally, to engage with the real lives of these students, less conventional topics, such as sexual desire and sexual pleasure, should be addressed.

Sears also remarks upon race and class demographics of the student body in public schools, asserting that “another factor relating to students’ disinterest in a conventional sexuality education program is white, middle-class content - principally directed at female students.”¹⁴⁰ As the primary concern of white policy-makers in America historically was the morality and innocence of white middle-class women, curricula were developed that addressed and promoted just this. To audiences who were not young, wealthy, white women, this style of teaching did not

¹³⁸ James T. Sears, “Dilemmas and Possibilities of Sexuality Education: Reproducing the Body Politic,” in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-33.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

relate to their experiences in American society. This system thus created the strong possibility that these young people would not apply the information from public sex education to their sex lives.

In addendum to Sears, Whatley argues that most students are ready for a reflexive analysis of sexuality politics, such as race and class implications, in their educations.¹⁴¹ While pop culture was often a suggestion as a means to relate sex education to teens during this time, Whatley says that teens can identify strongly with the acknowledgement of power structures. They feel and experience these structures in their daily lives, so analyzing how they function is an engaging practice for young people. Her continued work included in Sears' volume and beyond focuses on the ways in which State-provided educational texts could be repurposed to teach new lessons. She mentions that many conversations about gender roles include assignments where students bring in magazines or other advertisements to critique. Whatley suggests that this same practice could be done with the conservative sexuality education texts themselves. She also argues that "this exercise could be pushed further to examine race and class issues."¹⁴² This strategy encourages the development of critical thought in a sex education setting that could be taken outside of the classroom and applied to the social lives and sexual experience of young people.

Africana Studies professor Janie Victoria Ward and Gender Studies and Social Justice scholar Jill McLean Taylor also argued that educators should focus on connecting with a specific

¹⁴¹ Whatley, "Whose Sexuality?" 80.

¹⁴² Mariamne H. Whatley, "Keeping Adolescents in the Picture: Construction of Adolescent Sexuality in Textbook Images and Popular Films," in *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities*, ed. Janice M. Irvine (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 199.

audience or class.¹⁴³ In their 1992 essay *Sexuality Education for Immigrant and Minority Students*, they predicate their arguments on research stating that “the norms and consensus guiding the design of sex education in the United States privilege a white, middle-class understanding of sexuality.”¹⁴⁴ What they mean is that sex education curricula in the United States is built on western constructions of adolescent development, acceptable and normative gender-role behaviors, neoliberal individualism, and assumed heterosexuality. Ward and Taylor see that for the course of comprehensive sex education to progress:

Over the next decades American health educators will be confronted with two major challenges: to improve the development and dissemination of sexuality education in primary and secondary schools and to impart this information adequately to a student population that is becoming increasingly multicultural.¹⁴⁵

This statement assumes that the public school population will become less white and middle class in the future. In this respect, they were right: two decades later, in 2014, the majority of elementary and secondary-school aged children were not white for the first time in US history.¹⁴⁶ With this information, the urgency of finding strategies to diversify sex education curricula with respect to a variety of audiences with different experiences and societal contexts becomes paramount.

¹⁴³ Ward and Taylor, “Immigrant and Minority Students,” 183-202.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁴⁶ It is unclear whether Ward and Taylor also assume this demographic change would not be segregated. However the de-facto segregation of US schools ensures homogeneity in the “increasingly multicultural” population. Beverly Daniel Tatum, “‘Why Are All the Black Kids *Still* Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?’ and Other Conversations About Race in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 2-4.

Explicitly continuing this conversation between Whatley and Ward and Taylor, in his 1992 essay, professor of curriculum Dennis L. Carlson argued that both traditionalism and progressivism are dangerous approaches towards sexuality curricula because, though the content of their teachings differ greatly, each emphasizes uniformity of sexual norms, practices, and teaching methods for all students.¹⁴⁷ Carlson, like other scholars and sex educators of the 1990s, acknowledges the institutional power of these two political movements, arguing that "in order to approach the study of human sexuality in these complex ways, sexuality education itself needs to be reconceptualized...the role of public education should not be to indoctrinate or support a shaping of the individual to fit a uniform social mold."¹⁴⁸ It seems Carlson has hung on to some of the disappeared idealism Whatley mentions.

The notion of a fluid and dynamic curriculum was present in later work as well. Sociologist Janice Irvine's 1994 edited volume *Sexual Cultures* argues, "that adolescent sexualities are not manifestations of an essential nature but are multivalent constructions shaped by a range of social influences."¹⁴⁹ The essays included in the collection argue that an approach to sex education that addresses race, class, gender, sexuality, and cultural differences is essential to adolescent development and understanding. Irvine expands on Carlson's ideas about the necessity of a conceptual reconstruction of adolescent sexuality. Both scholars view this as prerequisite for true sex education reform.

¹⁴⁷ Carlson, "Ideological Conflict," 55.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁴⁹ Janice M. Irvine, ed., *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), vii.

Palladino, Whatley, Sears, Carlson, Irvine, Ward and Taylor’s early 1990s analyses argue for comprehensive reform of sex education in the public sphere, encapsulating the shifting discourse of teenagers as complete sexual beings in the 90s. Many of these scholars develop their arguments with strategies for subverting the existing sex education model. Publishing these ideas in a collection on adolescent sexuality that does not specifically market itself as a resource for progressive sex education has resulted in a more holistic approach to adolescent sexuality. This allows for a deeper engagement with their scholarly audience. In the end, these ideas were shared between progressive academics trying to find solutions through academic publications. These same names can be found over and over again as the conversation about comprehensive sex education continued into the twenty-first century. For this reason, many of these scholars also appear in the historiography of this thesis.

Radically progressive versus religious reformers battled for sex education regulation on the political stage, at home, and in the classroom. In Carlson’s 2013 history of US sex education curriculum policy he asserts:

The central ‘problems’ that organized, modern, sex education as a field of research, as policy discourse, and an educational practice —the problem of teenage pregnancy, the problem of STDs, and the problem of homosexuality and the homosexual— still organized the field at the end of the first decade of the 21st century.¹⁵⁰

The concern with these points in question —the concern with family planning, the concern with morality, and the concern with American purity and degeneracy— have all continued to influence modern sex education policy. Framing these factors as “problems” speaks to the power of conservative rhetoric to frame and define the terms of the debate. The result of this has largely been a continued series of reactionary conflicts between conservatives and radical reformers.

¹⁵⁰ Carlson, *The Education of Eros*, 123.

Carlson's later work describes one worrying change: as radical thought, like teaching about homosexuality in the section of the curriculum on sexuality and sexual desire, was introduced into public health education, the space for the section on sexuality was made smaller.¹⁵¹ Desire was replaced by consequence-based educational tactics. Remnants of both sides of this battle exist in the sex education experiences of young people today.

We see this lingering battle in Ruby's story. She testifies to the frustration and anxiety that consequence and fear-based sex education teaching can have. She also expresses a connection to teachers who admit that they are just people, whose teaching strategies diverge from the more punitive messaging and morality policing. The mixed-up effect of the ongoing policy-debate and curriculum discussion leaves insecurity in teenagers today. This division undermines the opportunities for teenagers to gain bodily autonomy and independence. Young people then come to expect these conflicting messages, reiterated by their teachers and their media.

¹⁵¹ Carlson, *The Education of Eros*, 123.

Chapter 3

“This is Very Embarrassing, I Know That”: Sex Education on Teen Television, 1994-2007

Ari is a sixteen-year-old non-binary teen that lives with their mom in Massachusetts. They are bi-racial but identify as black, and they have attended the same predominantly white public charter school since the seventh grade. As we begin our video chat interview Ari speaks more to the pencil in their hand than to me. “Just so you know, I’m drawing because I have a hard time paying attention sometimes,” they inform me gently.¹⁵² I tell them that that is fine, whatever they need to do to feel good. Each time they answer one of my questions, Ari speaks slowly, deliberately, as though they are specifically choosing each word. Their speech is peppered with qualifiers - like, um, I guess, and I don’t know - and I struggle whether to respond in the same way I talk to myself: *but you DO know, you just told me*. I let it go; teenagers already get enough grief about the way they speak.

Ari describes their school as “an arts school and it’s also really social justice focused so it’s a lot more, I guess, progressive than many of the other schools in my area. Even though, you know, Massachusetts is pretty liberal or whatever.”¹⁵³ I realize that because of the way they talk to me - their language and the way they allow their sentences to trail off sometimes - they assume I already know what they’re talking about most of the time. They do not expand on what they mean by “progressive” or that Massachusetts is liberal. I am their audience, and they figure

¹⁵² “Ari,” interview by author, January 3, 2018, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

that I understand. This allows more flow to our conversation, but it also means that some of this interview might not translate to a wider audience. I do my best to contextualize and analyze their ideas.

When I ask them if they ever see themselves or their experience with sex education represented in media they tell me, “All the like sex ed things I’ve seen on T.V. are like ‘Don’t have sex or you’ll get pregnant and then you’ll die of an STI!’”¹⁵⁴ I laugh, and confirm, “Like *Mean Girls*?”¹⁵⁵ They nod in affirmation and explain how they reflect on this type of media, even satirical portrayals like that of *Mean Girls*:

There’s so many sources of media that have that kind of message [of fear] and I think it’s kind of a joke in some but I’m still like, that is really bad. And I’m so glad I’ve never had that experience. Because I have friends who have had, like, similar experiences and it’s like, it’s just awful. And dangerous.¹⁵⁶

While Ari’s experience with sex education in school left them wanting, it was on the more liberal side. They have also attended the Unitarian Universalist Our Whole Lives (OWL) program to receive a comprehensive sex education outside of school.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ “Ari,” interview.

¹⁵⁵ This is a reference to the 2004 film which satirizes the stereotypical American high school experience. *Mean Girls* features a scene where the main character skips the first day of health class taught by the gym teacher. The teacher’s lecture states “Don’t have sex, cuz you will get pregnant and die. Don’t have sex in the missionary position. Don’t have sex standing up. Just, don’t do it. Promise?” He then holds up a plastic bin full of condoms and contradicts himself by saying, “Ok, everybody take some rubbers.” My easy recall of this movie, which is more than a decade old, and Ari’s automatic understanding of what I meant illustrates how pervasive teen media can be. *Mean Girls*, directed by Mark Waters, screenplay by Tina Fey, featuring Lindsay Lohan and Rachel McAdams (Paramount Pictures, 2004).

¹⁵⁶ “Ari,” interview.

¹⁵⁷ Our Whole Lives, better known by the acronym OWL, is a series of interactive, comprehensive sex education lessons that range in audience from kindergarten to adult. The OWL program is a resource created by the Unitarian Universalist church and aims to provide a holistic approach to sex education, sexuality, gender, and relationships. For more information about the OWL program see: “Our Whole Lives: Lifespan Sexuality Education,” Unitarian Universalist Association, last modified 2018, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.uua.org/re/owl>.

This comparison between consequence-based media narratives and the real experienced stories of their peers has Ari reflecting on what they have learned. I ask them to expand: How do you see [the message of fear] as dangerous? Ari gets the most animated they've been this entire conversation. Their words speed up, ideas jumble together, all trying to escape at once. They explain:

Well, teaching abstinence only... I just think it's really unsafe to not give people, especially young people, like all the resources and all the information, because like a variety of situations are going to happen. Like many people are going to have sex before marriage, or whatever. And it's like if they don't know what's happening—and then I also worry about like consent and everything— but just in general just like knowing.¹⁵⁸

This sentiment about withholding information in favor of consequences is an oft-repeated one in these interviews. Ari explains that one of the ways this teaching method is risky or unsafe is the absence of explicit work around consent. They are concerned that this ambiguity could harm communication between partners. They continue:

I think that [lack of information] can negatively impact your self-image (or whatever you want to call it) because you can have all these preconceived ideas about what's gonna happen based on [media, etc.]. I *see* [the harm] with people I know who only were taught abstinence or I don't know, were taught other stuff, but there were a lot of like fear tactics kind of involved: like just focusing on STIs and everything. And so they're like either scared, or they felt like they've done something wrong. It's like really shaming and I think that's dangerous.¹⁵⁹

The fear and shame that comes from non-comprehensive or fear-based sex education appears as a common theme among these interviews.

As previously noted, Megan and Ruby both expressed their concerns about the negative effects of this pedagogy. What Ari explains is that this impacts not only ones' knowledge-base

¹⁵⁸ "Ari," interview.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

around sex and sexuality that would prepare them for sexual interactions and behavior, but can also negatively affect the self-worth of young people. Ari also demonstrates the way in which young people often turn to media to reflect or guide their lives. Stories in popular culture of these sex education narratives are therefore not a separate entity, but another facet of the same sex education dialogue produced by adults for teenagers.

The question of how the American mainstream media perceives sex education is at the center of this chapter. This chapter will analyze the way sex education was portrayed on American and Canadian teen drama television shows for a young American audience between 1994 and 2007.¹⁶⁰ By examining the scenes in these shows as individual case studies, we can understand why sex education was represented this way in the context of this brief, but rapidly changing, historical moment. I argue that the representation of sex education in four specific television programs corresponded directly to the dominant cultural and political attitudes about teen sexuality specific to the time period in which each episode was produced. This is not a demographic analysis of impact, but rather a contextualized discussion of the message itself. As cultural critic Roz Kaveney argues in her 2006 book *Teen Dreams*, “criticism is an intellectual endeavor and a serious one - it should not, however, restrict itself to works and a critical manner that are ponderous and glum. It should hang out with the popular kids and get to go to the prom.”¹⁶¹ This chapter takes Kaveney’s charge seriously.

¹⁶⁰ In her media studies analysis, *Teen Dreams* writer and editor Roz Kaveney says teen drama “has, in the form in which it currently exists, a specific time and place of origin. It also has a specific racial mix, a specific set of class biases and a very interesting set of takes on gender and sexuality. It also has a set of tropes and genre rules which are subject to refinement and revisionism in that constant dialectical process of recall and echo which is the very nature of genre material.”

Roz Kaveney, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Films and Television from Heathers to Veronica Mars* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2006), 3.

¹⁶¹ Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*, 10.

Beginning in the context of the early 1990s and working through the mid-2000s, the portrayal of sex education itself reveals some of the societal attitudes and anxieties about the teenager as a sexual being and sexuality instruction explored in Chapters One and Two. This chapter will begin with an analysis of an early episode of 1990s teen sit-com *Boy Meets World*.¹⁶² Then, in the context of early post-9/11 Bush-era politics, I will discuss an early 2000s episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*.¹⁶³ Moving into the mid-2000s the television tropes in teen drama around sex education were used to bolster the plot lines and character development seen in teen detective drama *Veronica Mars*.¹⁶⁴ Finally, this chapter will look at the shift into marketing to a younger ‘tween’ demographic with the Disney Channel show *Hannah Montana* in

¹⁶² *Boy Meets World*, created by Michael Jacobs and April Kelly (Michael Jacobs Productions, Touchstone Television, ABC, September 24, 1993 – May 5, 2000).

¹⁶³ *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, created by Yan Moore and Linda Schuyler (Epitome Pictures, DC Media, Bell Media, CTV, October 14, 2001 – August 2, 2015). Referred to colloquially as *Degrassi: TNG* or simply *TNG*, distinguishing this iteration of the show from earlier versions. *Degrassi: The Next Generation* is one of many installments in the multigenerational *Degrassi* franchise, airing between 1979 and 2018 on various networks. The current iteration of the *Degrassi* world is Netflix’s *Degrassi: Next Class*.

¹⁶⁴ *Veronica Mars*, created by Rob Thomas, featuring Kristen Bell (Stu Segall Productions, Silver Pictures Television, Rob Thomas Productions, Warner Bros. Television, UPN, The CW, September 22, 2004 – May 22, 2007).

2007.¹⁶⁵ In this discussion of television spanning into the new millennium, I explore the role of media as an institution in the lives of young people.¹⁶⁶

The periodization of the media in this chapter —1994 to 2007— has a direct correlation to the reflection of sex education policy and the attitudes about sex education, as well as the influence of the adolescent as a consumer citizen in the neoliberal State. It is no accident that the teen drama genre developed and reached its peak during this time frame, nor that sex education was portrayed on these shows. It is therefore crucial to discuss how neoliberalism and youth culture became inextricably tied during the 1990s.

Finding its roots in ideology stemming back to the post-WWII years, neoliberalism —as a philosophy and ideology— took hold during the early 1980s and grew steadily into the almost neutral baseline that permeates US culture and economics in 2018; this was the construction of the neoliberal hegemony. Traditional liberalism was based in “increased freedom for the individual” and the spread of worldwide democracy.¹⁶⁷ Neoliberalism is a multifaceted theory built from these traditional ideas. The *Encyclopedia of International Development* defines neoliberalism as “a system of right-wing, yet not conservative, ideas about political democratic

¹⁶⁵ *Hannah Montana*, created by Michael Poryes, Rich Correll, and Barry O’Brien (Its a Laugh Productions, Michael Poryes Productions, Disney Channel, March 24, 2006 – January 16, 2011).

¹⁶⁶ Additionally, I searched, but could not find episodes that included the specific portrayal of sex education on hit UPN sit-com *Moesha* (1996 – 2001), featuring Brandy Norwood. This speaks to the arguments about representation in the white capitalist State. It was also personal let-down, because for my entire childhood I equated Cinderella with Brandy, since the only version my family owned growing up was her 1996 portrayal. That VHS tape was eventually so worn out that the top of the image became distorted and unwatchable.

Moesha, created by Ralph Farquhar, Sara V. Finney and Vida Spears, featuring Brandy Norwood (Regan Jon Productions, Saradipity Productions, Jump at the Sun Productions, Big Ticket Television, Paramount Television, CBS, UPN, January 23, 1996 – May 14, 2001).

Cinderella, directed by Robert Iscove, featuring Brandy Norwood, produced by Whitney Houston et al. (Walt Disney Television, November 2, 1997).

¹⁶⁷ Syed B. Hussain, ed., *Encyclopedia of Capitalism, Volume II H-R*. (New York: Facts on File Inc., 2004), 489.

individual freedom and entrepreneurship” with “a focus...on de-regulation, free markets and the privatization...of previously state-run enterprises.”¹⁶⁸ These characteristics of contemporary neoliberalism translate across political platforms.

Practically, neoliberalism encompasses and defines a range of policy and ideology — from Reaganomics and Thatcherism (1980s), to Clinton’s welfare reform (1996), to George W. Bush’s privatization of the Iraq war (2003–)— that results in a bi-partisan effort to repackage the American Dream (opportunity awaiting those who work hard enough) for a new generation. British environmental and political writer George Monbiot argues, “Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that awards merit and punishes inefficiency.”¹⁶⁹ As neoliberalism is pervasive and infectious, rebranding itself over decades, a singular definition seems nearly impossible. For simplicity’s sake political theorist Joseph Schwartz’s summation is useful. He argues that neoliberalism is “a form of capitalism where the state deregulates the economy, destroys unions, decreases taxes on the rich and corporations and defunds public goods, while repressing and policing the poor, particularly

¹⁶⁸ Tim Forsyth, ed., *Encyclopedia of International Development* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 475.

¹⁶⁹ Monbiot’s definition continues, “...It maintains that ‘the market’ delivers benefits that could never be achieved by [government] planning. Attempts to limit competition are treated as inimical to liberty. Tax and regulation should be minimised, public services should be privatised. The organisation of labour and collective bargaining by trade unions are portrayed as market distortions that impede the formulation of a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. Inequality is recast as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society are both counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve.” This is significant because neoliberalism thus attempts to redefine morality in its image. George Monbiot, “Neoliberalism - the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems,” *The Guardian* (US Edition), April 15, 2016, accessed February 19, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>.

people of color.”¹⁷⁰ In its function, neoliberalism allows the State and ruling classes to encourage a calculated and inveterate competition.

The rhetoric of individual choice and freedom are then arguments for deregulation and defunding social welfare. The illusion of personal freedom and individual potential allows for both the idea of the American Dream —and the underlying system at play— to prosper. This allows those with power to maintain their dominance. These messages are taught through institutions, like schools and the media, and through socialization.

In congruence with the rise of the neoliberal idea, the 1990s saw rapid advances in technology and media, such as the mainstream introduction to DVDs, CD burning, portable CD players and early cell phones. Contemporary culture critic Claire Birchall writes, “The rise of home video (and, in America, the saturation of cable) changed the experience of film consumption. Teen-pics could be viewed again and again the comfort of home.”¹⁷¹ The 24 hour news cycle became a normalized part of American culture during the Gulf War years and the consumption of media became all the more ubiquitous during this time. This proliferation of media meant more possibility for mindless consumption without identification or critique. Following the end of the Cold War years and the globalizing economy, the 1990s were also a time in which social liberalism was coupled with rampant American capitalism. Citizens across the political spectrum embraced the neoliberal ideal.

¹⁷⁰ Schwartz, Joseph, quoted in Brandon Richard, “WTF is Neoliberalism,” Democratic Socialists of America, April 20, 2017, accessed February 17, 2018, http://www.dsausa.org/wtf_is_neoliberalism_dl.

¹⁷¹ Clare Birchall, “‘Feels Like Home’: *Dawson’s Creek*, Nostalgia, and the Young Adult Viewer,” in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption, Identity*, ed. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 177.

Diverse forms of youth culture were clearly caught in (and targeted by) this influence. Behaviors tied into 1990s adolescence —Valley Girl and California Slacker lifestyles, Pacific Northwest grunge, the culture of tattoos and body piercings, the rise in popularity of extreme sports, the prominence of the Sneakerhead— depended on the culture of liberal capitalism across the United States.¹⁷² As a teenager, belonging to something became paramount. Often, in order to belong in the context of 1990s neoliberalism, young people sought to have social and financial access to all of the status symbols of youth culture.

Media played an integral role in the perceptions of adolescent behavior and a new culture of independence during this time.¹⁷³ For example, movies like *Clueless* embodied the aspirational tropes of each of these components of 1990s adolescence: sexual desirability, athletic prowess, excess wealth, popularity, and style.¹⁷⁴ The surge in reality television directed at young people also translated these ideals and behaviors into the “real” world. Journalist and media studies researcher Elana Levine argues that the strong unifying identity of youth culture in this neoliberal age allowed a television market for young consumers to flourish. She writes:

As a category of age rather than of a more culturally specific identity, an association with youth easily translates into an association with the global and the universal...the Americanization of global culture[s] have youth culture as their subtext...this conception of youth as a global identity is a logic regularly articulated by corporations as well as

¹⁷² For more on the capitalist youth trends of the 1990s see: Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), Image 58, caption; and Abigail Tracy, “Flip Wants to Make It Yeezy for Sneakerheads to Buy and Sell Collectible Kicks,” *Forbes*, March 4, 2016, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/abigailtracy/2016/03/04/sneakerheads-ebay-flip-stockx-air-jordans-nike-secondary-market-sneakers-kanye-west-yeezy-adidas/#426d510262b0>.

¹⁷³ Palladino, *Teenagers*, 254.

¹⁷⁴ *Clueless*, directed by Amy Heckerling (Paramount Pictures, July 19, 1995).

cultural commentators....The assumed universality of youthful identity has helped to generate a vibrant market for youth-targets television around the world.¹⁷⁵

The neoliberal market provided the stage for 1990s youth trends. Television directed at adolescent consumers helped to illustrate what was trendy and how to belong; this included not only fashion and style, but behavior and ideology.

Another symptom of the rigged competition of neoliberalism was the pattern of large-scale media corporations buying up television networks, production companies, and other sites of media production.¹⁷⁶ This consolidation was necessitated by the neoliberal goal of those with power to lessen the chances for competition. Film and media studies professor Valerie Wee explains:

One key consequence of this escalating media consolidation was the emergence of a handful of multimedia giants that controlled the steadily increasing range of media outlets and products....Within teen culture, this resulted in an ever-expanding list of teen products in a variety of media, all of which originated from a single hit product.¹⁷⁷

As media corporations converged into consolidated entities in the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the narratives produced across media became uniformly controlled by these production giants with the intention to sell to new demographic of consumer: the teenager. Historian Bill Osgerby

¹⁷⁵ Elana Levine, "National Television, Global Market: Canada's Degraasi: The Next Generation," *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 4 (2009):151-531, accessed February 19, PDF, 527.

¹⁷⁶ According to Wee, "In 1986 Warner Communications, with its film, television, and music holdings expanded its multimedia interests by merging with publishing giant, Time Inc. Subsequently, Sony expanded into film, television and music when it purchased Columbia and CBS Records in 1989. Viacom, whose ownership interests included radio, cable and television services, acquired Paramount Studios in 1994, and bought out Blockbuster Video a year later. 1995 also witnessed Disney's purchase of Cap Cities, which owned the ABC television network, and Seagram's buyout of MCA/Universal."

Valerie Wee, "Selling Teen Culture: How American Multimedia Conglomeration Reshaped Teen Television in the 1990s," in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption, Identity*, ed. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 89.

For an expanded timeline and context for these transactions see: Valerie Wee, "Selling Teen Culture," 87-98.

¹⁷⁷ Wee, *Selling Teen Culture*, 89.

explains, “The rise of ‘teen’ programming in American TV schedules was indebted, at least in part, to market economics. TV series appealing to teenage audiences and depicting the exploits of jaunty teens were a bankable proposition because young people had come to represent a powerful economic force after World War II.”¹⁷⁸ This is undoubtedly due, in part, to the post-war baby boom. By 1996, the estimated 25 million teenagers in the United States aggregated a consumer market worth of \$89 billion, “almost ten times what the market was reportedly worth in 1957.”¹⁷⁹ Osgerby’s analysis explores the cultural and economic significance of this shift as it pertains to the gradual rise of the teen as a consequential consumer force.

The confluence of corporations with the teen market in mind also created a more uniform aesthetic across mediums. The beautiful, predominantly thin, often white, well-dressed, big smile or sultry stare esthetics of the teen drama world were easily recognizable, ensuring that many of these television shows worked in service of a capitalist hegemony that was defined and valorized as white. These identifiable images lent themselves to branding through stylistic similarity and a new intertextuality between television shows and other forms of media. Wee argues that while:

Intertextual referencing is not unique to late 1990’s teen texts...the [late 1990s] is distinctive because the referencing is not restricted to the occasional passing allusion. Rather, in the 1990’s instance...entire episodes of teen television shows and films engage in self-conscious, highly self-reflexive discussions and commentaries on the nature and conventions of other media texts.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Bill Osgerby, “‘So Who’s Got Time for Adults!’: Femininity, Consumption and the Development of Teen TV – from *Gidget* to *Buffy*,” in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption, Identity*, ed. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 72.

¹⁷⁹ Palladino, *Teenagers*, xii.

¹⁸⁰ Wee, *Selling Teen Culture*, 93.

Wee references the way in which teen drama would explore tropes in other television shows, explicitly examine the portrayal of young people in magazines, and work with the stereotypes about teenagers that existed in other media. The resulting self-reflective nature of teen television and recognizable aestheticism meant that their messages were deliberately absorbed into youth culture. Meanwhile, this teen media empire attempted to reflect the lives of young people to appeal to their target audience. Who was reflected, however, is indicative of those valuable to the neoliberal State.

Imbued in this media were dominant cultural anxieties around teenage sexuality, which were often the subject of the discussions included in this programming. The actual portrayal of sex education class in school on television, which developed during this time, was cultivated for its audiences. Included in the messaging directed at the 1990s teen audience was the theme of personal choice and responsibility in the context of the prevalent sex education debates. Representation of public sex education (that was meant to appear moderately realistic to an adolescent audience) on television was especially telling of popular attitudes.

In correlation with the sex education dialogues of the time, the consequences of sex were placed at the forefront. Anxieties about teenage pregnancy stemming from heterosexual unprotected intercourse were the focus of this instruction. These lessons however, relied primarily on humor to make the material engaging (rather than preachy) to the students and the young audience. As explored in Chapter Two, in the outside world, sex educators were restricted in their teaching tactics and curricula was often punitive in nature. Thus this education did not appeal to young people. The use of humor allowed the television show to relate to this conversation without breaking the formula or language of each episode. Though it could be

argued that this was necessary for young people, I demonstrate through analyzing several of these teen shows, that the lessons were also construed as somewhat out of touch with the real lives of many young teens.¹⁸¹ The programming was therefore also a part of the problem. These shows were often representational of mainstream morality concerns, rather than choosing to portray more progressive options.

A prime example of the way sex education looked on television in the early 1990s is on the teen sit-com *Boy Meets World*.¹⁸² *BMW*, which ran for seven seasons between 1993 and 2000 on ABC, follows young protagonist Cory Matthews as he navigates schoolwork, friendship, sexuality, and family throughout his adolescence and young adulthood. Cory comes from a white upper middle class family in Philadelphia; his parents are married and he lives with his older brother, Eric, and younger sister, Morgan. Socioeconomic divisions and kinship concerns are represented by Cory's best friend, Shawn Hunter, who grows up in a trailer park and is eventually left homeless, to live on and off with Cory's family and his teacher, Mr. Turner, when his parents run off.¹⁸³ The show itself is almost entirely white, though Black Haitian actress Trina McGee was added to the main cast in later seasons as Shawn's serious girlfriend, portraying one of the only three-dimensional interracial relationships on network television in the 1990s.¹⁸⁴ Cory's other best friend, and later girlfriend, fiancé, and wife, Topanga Lawrence, is often seen

¹⁸¹ This is one of the reasons why I conducted interviews with young people.

¹⁸² Henceforth abbreviated to *BMW*.

¹⁸³ Shawn's parents are in and out of his life, and he later learns he has an older half-brother, with whom he becomes close. Shawn's plot-lines switch between his role as a charming and popular foil to Cory's general neurosis, and his troubles with family, money, and abandonment. Shawn's adolescent anxieties include his struggle with identity and accepting the love he is given due to his family problems.

¹⁸⁴ Ariana Quiñónez, "Why Shawn and Angela from 'Boy Meets World' Were the Most Groundbreaking Teen Power Couple of the '90s," *Hypable*, June 19, 2015, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.hypable.com/shawn-angela-boy-meets-world/>.

as the brilliant, logical young woman antidote to Cory's impulsive and clueless boyhood.

Throughout the series Cory is developed as a funny, sometimes awkward, loyal teenage boy with a mainstream (white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual) American life. He learns everyday life lessons and works through teenage neuroses (how to talk to a girl, how to deal with bullies, how to gain respect and popularity) with the help of his teachers, parents, siblings, and friends.

BWM's portrayal of sex education would have appealed to its intended audience by representing the struggle between morality and practicality, reflecting cultural attitudes and anxieties around teenage sexuality of the decade. In a 1994 season two episode of *BMW* Cory and Shawn, seventh graders new to the high school, realize that everyone they know has coupled up in romantic partnerships.¹⁸⁵ This is demonstrated through some exposition by Cory and Shawn, as well as physical displays of affection and sexuality (hand holding, kissing) from the couples around them. In the first scene of the episode Cory becomes anxious that he does not have a girlfriend. This anxiety is exacerbated by Shawn's professed charms with women. With a flip of his hair girls come out of the woodwork to talk to Shawn, while Cory cannot figure out how to say "hi" to a girl. The impression that all of his peers have entered into a new stage of life makes Cory feel pressured to conform. After receiving conflicting advice from Shawn, his older brother, his parents, and his teachers, Cory asks the new girl in school out on a date and she consents. At the end of the episode they agree to just be friends and Cory decides that it is fine if he is not ready to be more than friends or at all sexual with a girl. This episode teaches its audience that it is ok to wait to be sexual despite peer pressure, and that different people move at

¹⁸⁵ *Boy Meets World*, season 2, episode 2, "Pairing Off," directed by David Trainer, aired September 30, 1994 on ABC.

their own pace when it comes to sex. These lessons speak to the early 1990s concerns about the rising numbers of teens having sex and the popularity of abstinence curricula at the time.¹⁸⁶

The portrayal of these discourses through sex education comes in an early sequence in the episode. Cory and Shawn are in health class, waiting for their new substitute teacher to arrive. Though they expect a “creepy”¹⁸⁷ old man to teach them, a young, conventionally attractive woman in a short skirt arrives, introducing herself as “Miss Kelly,” their substitute for “the next few days.”¹⁸⁸ Shawn immediately begins to try to flirt with her, though she endeavors to inhibit his advances, saying “we seem to be up to human reproduction, which I hope we can discuss in a *mature fashion*.”¹⁸⁹ Miss Kelly looks directly at Shawn standing in front of her as she deliberately enunciates these last two words. After the class laughs at this exchange, Miss Kelly and Shawn banter about age and maturity, and eventually she instructs him to sit down. Though Shawn gets the last word in, he has clearly been put in his place and his ability to interact with women has been challenged.

Miss Kelly continues the class, asking “Who can tell us the name of the organ where the eggs are stored?”¹⁹⁰

When she calls on him, Cory responds, “What are the gonads?”

Miss Kelly: “No, sorry, I was looking for ‘what are the ovaries?’”

Cory: “oh the o- oh yeah I always mix those two up.”

Miss Kelly: “Try not to; your future will be brighter. Can you tell us anything about ovulation or how pregnancy occurs?”

¹⁸⁶ Palladino, *Teenagers*, 251.

See Chapter One or Two for further evidence.

¹⁸⁷ *Boy Meets World*, “Pairing Off,” 1994.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

C: “Well, the man's got the sperm and the woman's got the egg. Now once a month an egg slides down the Philippine tube towards the uterus.”¹⁹¹

Though Miss Kelly suppresses her laughter, a laugh track also acknowledges Cory's fumble with the language, mistaking fallopian for Philippine.

C: “The first sperm to reach the egg wins. It gets a medal, it's born, you name him Cory, you push him out the door, and nothing makes sense for the rest of his life.”

Miss Kelly: “Well congratulations, you seem to have a thorough understanding of the life cycle.”

Cory: “What can I say? I live it.”¹⁹²

At the end of the scene Miss Kelly asks of the class, “Any questions?” Cory raises his hand and beckons her close to him. He whispers, “How do you get a girl to say hi?” The scene ends with a laugh track and Miss Kelly's amused but sympathetic smile.¹⁹³

This episode of *BMW* uses the established schema of the show to engage in the conversation about sex education. Cory's cluelessness throughout the show is saturated with a boyish charm. He is both the joke teller and entirely empathetic as the target of the joke. The presence of sex education class in the context of the episode plays up both Cory's intellectual ability and humor as well as his complete lack of ability to navigate sexuality. The relatability of this character normalizes his quandary. Shawn, acting as Cory's foil, injects his practical understanding of sexuality throughout the episode, the extent of which is essentially attracting girls through the brush of his fingers through his hair. Ultimately, both Cory and Shawn are relegated to their position as young adolescent boys. Despite previous knowledge of reproductive

¹⁹¹ *Boy Meets World*, “Pairing Off,” 1994.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

biology or the art of seduction, they clearly require the instruction of an adult, even if that person is not creepy or old. Sex education class is thus not out of place in the plot of this episode.

In the context of the sex education policy discourse of the early 1990s, the way in which the episode portrays a disconnect between the lessons learned in non-comprehensive sex education class and the practical application of information for young adolescents is provocative in its accuracy. Cory's final question, "How do you get a girl to say hi," demonstrates the vulnerability and frustrations of teenagers, especially when it comes to access to information about teen sexuality.¹⁹⁴

The actual information provided by the sex education class, however, sticks to the basics: biology and gender essentialism. Human reproduction is framed as a scientific and heterosexual process in which pleasure is not a factor. Historian Jeffrey P. Moran writes of this pattern appearing in the 1990s:

The disconnection between sexual information and sexual behavior suggests that a student's response to education itself is socially determined. The critical question is not whether students understand the mechanics...but whether their vision of their own life... is important enough for [the mechanics] to seem relevant.¹⁹⁵

This last moment shows this exact predicament: how useful is sex education if the information does not translate to the lives of teens? What does the limited information given in the class matter if Cory still cannot answer his own basic question?

The only connection between the mention of "human reproduction" in the class to sex or sexuality comes from the context of the episode. Cory's entire description of the human reproductive process does not mention sex outright, nor does anything Miss Kelly says to the

¹⁹⁴ *Boy Meets World*, "Pairing Off," 1994.

¹⁹⁵ Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 222.

class. While the plot of the episode foregrounds many of the anxieties teenagers have about sex and human interaction, the sex education class itself remains clinical. Any mention of pleasure or enjoyment from sex is notably absent. This detached perspective also reflects the sex education curricula of the early 1990s: sex educators and teenagers alike would have been able to recognize the sterilized and evasive nature of the conversation. With this portrayal of sex education, *BMW* appeals to its teenage audience through humor, the humanization of teenage sexuality, and the experience of sex education. At the same time, the episode avoids any potential backlash from lessons about sex deemed inappropriate for adolescents by conservative viewers.

When *Boy Meets World* went off the air in 2000, the Disney Channel, whose parent company owns ABC, picked up the syndication rights and began airing the reruns on weekday afternoons.¹⁹⁶ ABC Family (now Freeform) also later aired reruns of the show. For more than a decade after the end of the original run a new audience (with socioeconomic access to network or cable television) could view the show in its entirety with ease. Though I was only five years old when *Boy Meets World* ended, I was a part of this second generation of audience members in the early 2000s.

By the time I was in the fourth grade from 2004–2005 I was what they call a “latch-key” kid. At nine or ten years old I hopped off the school bus at the end of my street and wandered home alone. I let myself in, locking the big purple door behind me, and promptly dropped my backpack in the middle of the living room floor. The hardwood floors in the kitchen of my parents’ house still show evidence of where I would drag a chair across them from the table to

¹⁹⁶ Laura Prudom, “Remembering the Best and Worst of ABC’s TGIF Lineup,” *Variety*, June 27, 2014, accessed April 10, 2017, <http://variety.com/2014/tv/features/girl-meets-world-premiere-abc-tgif-lineup-best-worst-1201246633/>.

the cabinet that held the snack foods. I would creep down to the finished basement where we kept the old television that had once belonged to my great grandparents and proceed to completely eschew all household rules about “screen time.” While I waited for my sister and whichever adult to arrive home, I would watch reruns of 90s sitcoms on Disney Channel and ABC Family. *BMW* and *Full House* were staples in my life during that time.¹⁹⁷ I especially loved the later episodes of *BMW* when Cory and Topanga were a real couple in high school and college, sexuality and romance being something both fascinating and foreign to my life. I watched the Matthews family, enraptured by their drama and jokes, and in a way they watched me during the short time I was left home alone.

I refer to this experience to make a point about the changing but overlapping audiences of these television shows during the late 1990s and early 2000s. While *BMW* was produced by the anxieties of a specific moment, those same cultural references, especially to teenage sexuality, translated and were reproduced over time. As demonstrated in previous chapters, while American media and youth culture experienced overhauls throughout these decades, battles about sex education were reiterated and rehashed over and over again. The resonance of 90s sitcoms in syndication in later years must invariably have come in part from audience after audience responding to some of the same cultural preoccupations. Moran explains that despite the shifting tides in policy (explored in Chapter One):

the dominance of danger and disease in thinking about adolescent sexuality, a deep faith in the instrumentalist model of sex education, and a conviction that adolescence is

¹⁹⁷ *Full House*, created by Jeff Franklin (Jeff Franklin Productions, Miller–Boyett Productions, Lorimar–Telepictures, Lorimar Television, Warner Bros. Television, ABC, September 22, 1987 – May 23, 1995).

somehow a thing apart from adult society — these are the unchanging boundaries of the universe within which sex education continues to be conceived.¹⁹⁸

This mentality, that adolescent society is separate from adult society, is a cultural construct that keeps sex education discourses within a stagnant framework in the political and media sphere. In the midst of the conservative policy implementation in the early 2000s, the liberalization of media still rendered visible some of the more progressive disquisition in popular culture.

In *BMW*, the sex education class teaches about human reproduction, but the ultimate lesson of the episode is that adolescents should wait to have sexual relationships. The landscape of education debates of the early 1990s meant that social commentary on sexual education and relatability to teenagers was best portrayed through low-risk humor. In the early 2000s a more direct approach was taken to teaching this same lesson. By this time, books like Moran's and other texts outlining the problems of late twentieth century sex education had been published and were influencing sex education debates among educators.¹⁹⁹ While the consequential and morality-based undertones of sexuality education remained, the notion that mechanical information would not translate without direct application to the lives of adolescents had entered the dialogue. In the first decade of the twenty-first century sex education on television reflected this commentary, using these classes as a way to incite productive discussions between teens. While the message often remained the same —teenagers should wait to have sex— the way in which this lesson was taught was more directly applied through the sex education class.

¹⁹⁸ Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 217.

¹⁹⁹ As previously discussed in Chapter Two.

One example of this candid and engaging portrayal is in a season one episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*.²⁰⁰ This episode—which originally aired in Canada on CTV in 2001, and later in the United States on Nickelodeon’s teen network, The N, in 2002—brought sex education class to the Degrassi Community School in Ontario, Canada.²⁰¹ *Degrassi* features a large ensemble cast of primarily adolescent actors playing characters their own ages. Over the course of the show, the young people at Degrassi face a myriad of challenges relating to the lives of young people, including: eating disorders, depression, sexuality, pregnancy, abortion, drug use, date rape, death, abuse, racism, self-harm and suicide, and gender identity.²⁰² The program works to humanize and de-stigmatize each of these concerns, while teaching a lesson for adolescent audiences with each new drama. The characters themselves act like teenagers, making and learning from their mistakes. Over the course of fourteen seasons of *Degrassi* the audience

²⁰⁰ *Degrassi: The Next Generation* will henceforth be referred to as *Degrassi* in this paper. Degrassi, written without italic, refers to Degrassi Community School, the fictional location for which the show is named.

²⁰¹ While *Degrassi* was produced and originally aired in Canada, the entire series was released on a slightly delayed schedule on American television for an audience in the United States. Canadian media, especially television, in general is the subject of recent discussion about its sacrifice of Canadian identity in favor of appeal to a more global market. This applies specifically to the dominating role of American television production and culture. Returning to the work of media studies researcher Elana Levine, she argues that while *Degrassi*, “is a product of Canada’s contemporary television industry and the ‘media-identity problematic,’” it “can stand as a proud symbol of Canadian culture while simultaneously circulating as a desirable international property.” Additionally, by the airing of the seventh season, the program was funded not only through Canadian networks, but from global broadcasting sales to channels like MTV in the United States. Because of the American influence and intentional global appeal in the heterogeneity of some of the content, as well as the popularity of the program in the US, this program can be analyzed as a product reflecting the national American conscience around adolescent sexuality and sex education programming at the time.

Levine, *National Television*, 516.

²⁰² In 2004, American television networks chose not to air the two-part episode in which a fourteen-year-old student decides to have an abortion. This controversial decision upset many young American fans. For more about the impact of this decision see:

Patrick McDermott, “Accidents Will Always Happen: 13 Years On We Need *Degrassi*’s Infamous Abortion Episode More Than Ever,” *Fader*, February 23, 2017, accessed April 22, 2018, <http://www.thefader.com/2017/02/23/degrassi-abortion-accidents-will-happen-manny-craig>.

witnesses several generations of Degrassi students grow up from pubescence to young adulthood. The season one episode of *Degrassi* featuring a sex education class is emblematic of the ways in which the show as a whole responded to the public anxieties about teens at the turn of the twenty-first century.²⁰³

In the episode entitled “The Mating Game,” young eighth grade couple Ashley and Jimmy try to decide whether they are ready to have sex.²⁰⁴ When Jimmy is assigned the role of Romeo opposite popular alpha-girl Paige’s Juliet in an English class rendition of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Ashley feels jealous.²⁰⁵ She also experiences pressure from her peers to have sexual intercourse in order to preserve her relationship in the face of this perceived threat. When Dr. Sally, “the sex lady,” visits Degrassi to talk to the eighth graders about sex, Ashley and Jimmy’s friends help them decide separately that they must be ready for sex to celebrate their eight month anniversary.²⁰⁶ They each go about buying condoms for their date with the help of their friends. Ultimately, though, Ashley and Jimmy decide together that they are not ready to have sex. They end up blowing up the condoms like balloons and Jimmy assures Ashley that she

²⁰³ *Degrassi* also had episodes with blatant references to earlier works in the teen drama genre. In a season three episode, five of the ensemble cast from different cliques find themselves in Saturday detention for a bottle episode homage to *The Breakfast Club*.

Degrassi: The Next Generation, season 3, episode 16, “Take On Me,” directed by Philip Ershaw, aired in Canada: February 16, 2004 on CTV.

The Breakfast Club, directed by John Hughes, screenplay by John Hughes (A&M Films, Channel Productions, 1985).

²⁰⁴ *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, season 1, episode 6, “The Mating Game,” directed by Anthony Browne, aired in Canada: November 25, 2001 on CTV, aired in USA: April 22, 2002 on The N.

²⁰⁵ Ashley was portrayed by actress Melissa McIntyre while Jimmy was portrayed by a young Aubrey Graham, now known by his stage name “Drake.” Race in their interracial relationship was treated remarkably casually throughout the show.

²⁰⁶ *Degrassi*, “The Mating Game,” 2001.

has no reason to be jealous of Paige. Jimmy and Ashley go back to their friends and, in their own ways, let them know it was not the right time for them to have sex.

While their peers, namely Jimmy's best friend Spinner, are understandably immature about sex for young people their age, Dr. Sally's sex education lesson is direct and honest. The scene with the sex education class opens with Dr. Sally at the front of the room, explaining the physiology of arousal in front of a chalk board with the words "-Herpes -AIDS -Chlamydia - Pregnancy" half concealed behind her. Pregnancy is underlined twice. Dr. Sally, an older woman in a red blazer, is saying "As the male becomes aroused the penis fills with blood and he gets an erection."²⁰⁷ The class giggles in discomfort, but Dr. Sally continues, "Now if you want to avoid herpes, AIDS, chlamydia, and an unplanned pregnancy you must practice safer sex using one of these—" Dr. Sally turns around holding up a condom and a banana, "—a condom," she finishes.²⁰⁸ Ashley, Jimmy, Spinner, and Paige all laugh awkwardly, though conspiratorially, with one another as Dr. Sally unwraps the condom and slides it onto the banana. She narrates, "Roll the condom down over the penis right to the base leaving a space at the tip," as a close up shot shows her hand rolling a condom on a banana and pinching the reservoir at the top.²⁰⁹ Zooming back out on Dr. Sally, she says to the class, "This is very embarrassing, I know that, but it's

²⁰⁷ *Degrassi*, "The Mating Game," 2001.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

something you really need to know. Protection for *both* of you.”²¹⁰ She places the emphasis on the word “both.”

The plot of the episode and the sex education class are then explicitly tied together in the dialogue. Spinner raises his hand and asks a thinly veiled hypothetical question about Ashley and Jimmy: “How are they supposed to know when or if they're ready to, you know, *do it*?”²¹¹ Despite Spinner’s intention to embarrass his friends, Dr. Sally takes Spinner’s question about when teens are ready for sex seriously. Without pause Dr. Sally responds, “Well anatomically, physically, you’re ready right now. But emotionally, psychologically we’re not sure. You have to be able to decide whether you like your body...”²¹² Ashley and Jimmy are both visibly upset by Spinner’s question, though ultimately they refer back to Dr. Sally’s advice when they decide not to have sex.

The closing moral of this *Degrassi* episode is almost identical to that of the *BMW* episode from nearly a decade earlier: both encourage adolescents to wait to explore sexuality until they decide they are ready, not because of pressure from their peers. The significant change in the plot line, however —the emphasis on arousal, being physically and emotionally ready, the need for contraception and protection from STIs— reflects the changes in the sexuality education and teen sexuality discourses of the time. In the earlier show the topics of reproductive health and the practicalities of adolescent relationships are almost entirely separate from one another, removing

²¹⁰ *Degrassi*, “The Mating Game,” 2001.

The focus of the scene moves away from Dr. Sally here, as she explains to the teens that there is more to being ready for sex than the ability to have a physiological response. Dr. Sally begins to tie emotions and personal relationships into the conversation about sex. Her mention of body-image is resonant with Ari’s earlier statement about the connection between information given in sex education, sexual experience, and self-image.

²¹¹ *Degrassi*, “The Mating Game,” 2001.

²¹² *Ibid.*

teenage sexuality from the classroom seen on television. This was representative of the post-1980 conservative sex education policy that promoted abstinence-only education and threatened the livelihood of teachers who strayed from this curricula as demonstrated in Chapters One and Two.

The *Degrassi* episode of 2001/2002 clearly reflects the 1990s and early 2000s discourses between sex educators about teaching sex education in a way that teenagers could apply it to their lives.²¹³ *Degrassi's* portrayal of sex education used the raw honesty of teenagers and the blunt, though age-appropriate, advice of Dr. Sally in response to these discourses. The outright acknowledgement of teens engaging in sexual behavior responded to the same public recognition that had long been occurring in liberal circles among parents, educators, and some politicians (like Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders).²¹⁴ Dr. Sally's class, however, does not escape the overall problems with non-comprehensive sex education policy. Despite her direct approach to addressing adolescent sex and sexuality, Dr. Sally focuses on the potential consequences of sex, like pregnancy and disease, and the differences between adult and adolescent socio-sexual norms. A discussion of pleasure is also noticeably absent from this classroom and episode. The *Degrassi* episode moves further along in alluding to the possibility that teens could be having sex, while ultimately teaching its adolescent audience of the early 2000s that it is best to wait.

Just a few years after this episode of *Degrassi* aired in the United States, the teen drama genre reached its peak. Though this genre developed in popularity throughout the 1990s, by the mid 2000s youth culture and adolescent sexuality held its own distinct place on network and

²¹³ For the specifics of these conversations between progressive educators see Chapter Two.

²¹⁴ See Chapter Two.

cable television.²¹⁵ By this time, teen drama, “had accumulated enough tropes of its own to sustain cross-fertilization with other genres,” like mystery, serialized cop shows, fantasy, and sports dramas.²¹⁶ Teen detective show *Veronica Mars*, which ran for three seasons on UPN then the CW from 2004 to 2007, is one example of this genre cross-over as well as the introspective nature of teen drama that developed in the late 1990s.²¹⁷ *Veronica Mars* combined neo-noir and mystery genres with teen drama, following its title character through her teen years.²¹⁸ Veronica Mars is a quick-witted, impulsive, strong, amateur detective, following in the footsteps of her sheriff-cum-private investigator father. Veronica episodically solves smaller cases to do with her classmates, ranging from dog-napping to credit card fraud to domestic violence, along with helping on her father’s adult cases. Each season also features a longer mystery plot line: in the first season Veronica investigates the murder of her best friend, Lilly Kane (who was also the sister of her ex-boyfriend); in the second season Veronica and her father investigate the cause of a school bus crash that killed several students and put one in a coma. Additionally, in the first two seasons Veronica “is stigmatized as a slut” (because of her behavior under the influence of a date-rape drug), while she deals with the trauma of sexual assault by an unknown perpetrator.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Television Programs like *Beverly Hills, 90210*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *One Tree Hill*, *The O.C.*, and *Gossip Girl* filled the airwaves and the minds of teenage audiences from 1990 – 2012.

²¹⁶ Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*, 177.

²¹⁷ In a move evident of the neoliberal context, UPN and The WB networks merged into The CW in 2006. The CW partnered with CBS, the majority owner of the two smaller networks, to launch this new network and attempt to compete with the larger and more successful programming on FOX and ABC. The CW was named in tribute to CBS and Warner Brothers. For more on this merger see: Lisa de Moraes, “Ta-Ta UPN, So Long, WB. Hello, The CW.” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2006, accessed April 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2006/01/25/ta-ta-upn-so-long-wb-hello-the-cw/53de9625-a6e6-4154-9d5b-ca0eb4a2cf51/?utm_term=.b57ea76835af.

²¹⁸ For further analysis of teen drama tropes as well as one-to-one comparisons between *Veronica Mars* and the earlier texts in the teen drama genre see: Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*, 177-185.

²¹⁹ Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*, 178.

The show contends primarily with relationships between parents and children, teenage sexuality and rape culture, and socio-economic divides. *Veronica Mars* is set in a fictional Neptune, California, “a town without a middle class” where “your parents are either millionaires, or your parents work for millionaires.”²²⁰ Veronica’s status as an outsider (stemming from her lower socio-economic class, her reputation as a slut, and ostracism that occurred years earlier when her sheriff father persecuted the wrong man for the murder of her best friend) allows for a self-conscious twist to many of the stock narratives of teen drama television that still appear in *Veronica Mars*. Several of the themes addressed in this show are treated more intensely and thus feel akin to the real difficulties of young students. The weight of topics like rape and murder push the established cultural boundaries between teenage challenges and adult problems.

Teenage sex on television, and even sex ed class on these programs, was a trope in and of itself by 2005. This is when sex education appeared in the second season of *Veronica Mars*. However, while other teen T.V. shows of the mid 2000s highlight the glamour of high school and sex among high school students, *Veronica Mars* is able to acutely produce the anxieties of high school. Because her character growth and sex life are (for the most part) believable as a high school aged student, in the second season the audience growing up with Veronica becomes just as eager as the character for graduation. Many of the teenage characters on the show engage in sexual relationships, but they also express their hesitation, anxiety about having sex for the first time, and discourses on virginity and on shame stemming from sexuality and sexual activity. The age-appropriateness of the sexual experience and the show’s focus on the school setting also emphasizes the significance of the sex education class that appears in the series. In *Veronica*

²²⁰ *Veronica Mars*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot,” directed by Mark Piznarski, aired September 22, 2004 on UPN.

Mars, sex education class functions more as a plot device than an educational material.

Appearing in two episodes of a twenty two episode season, sex ed is a backdrop for more pressing conversations to do with the central case of the episode, as well as serving reminders about the season's themes as a whole.

The first time sex education class appears on *Veronica Mars* is in a 2005 season two episode in which Veronica and her boyfriend Duncan Kane investigate a child abuse case.²²¹ Duncan was alerted to the psychological abuse of a child when reading emails between his ex-girlfriend, Meg Manning, and Child Protective Services.²²² Veronica and Duncan work their way through the kids Meg babysat for before finally realizing that the abuse victim is actually Meg's youngest sister, Grace. The case in this episode is one of the more profound plot lines of the show. It highlights the intelligence and understanding of Veronica and her peers over that of the adults in their lives, as much of the rest of the show does. The sex education class in this episode is used as a device for Veronica to talk to her classmate, Gia, whose brother was one of Meg's babysitting charges, and Mrs. Hauser, whose son Meg also babysat for.

The class material itself is focused on STIs and how to communicate with one's partner about them. Mrs. Hauser's voice begins the class with, "STDs will kill you."²²³ The teacher commences with consequences of teenage sexual activity that are exaggerated, if not flat out lies. A girl in the front row sneezes and Mrs. Hauser says harshly, "Sexually transmitted diseases are

²²¹ *Veronica Mars*, season 2, episode 7, "Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner," directed by Nick Marck, aired November 16, 2005 on UPN.

²²² At this time Meg Manning is in the hospital in a coma related to the school bus crash. Her sister, Lizzie, gave Duncan Meg's secret computer to hide from their religious and overbearing parents. He has been reading her emails ever since.

²²³ *Veronica Mars*, "Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner," 2005.

no joke, Jane. See how much you're sneezing when you have gonorrhea. This is important, useful information that *you*, trust me, are going to need to know about."²²⁴ When Jane sneezes again Mrs. Hauser sends her out of the classroom. Jane was not laughing out of callousness or immaturity; her sneeze was an involuntary physical response entirely separate from the lecture. Mrs. Hauser's sex education style is to open with a threat about the dangers of sexual activity and to discipline a student immediately. This opening paints Mrs. Hauser as an irrational adult focused on punishment which causes her warning to go unheard by the class.

Mrs. Hauser then asks the class to pair up and inform their partners they have an STD written on a notecard in front of them. Veronica uses this opportunity to become Gia's partner and to later get into her house to check on her brother. Veronica makes a joke of the entire lesson saying, "We can be partners, but no glove no love."²²⁵ This statement's reference to barrier methods of contraception also shows that Veronica's practical knowledge already goes beyond what they are being taught in class. The students around Veronica begin to gossip about Mrs. Hauser's divorce, calling her "bitchy and bitter" and wondering aloud how "the dried up divorcé" could "teach us about sex."²²⁶ Veronica and Gia then make another joke about Chlamydia sounding like the name of a flower. The primary subject of STDs/STIs in the class is indicative of the public health influence that could, by 2005, be expected in consequence-based adolescent sex education. This sex education scene also sets the adult educator and the teenagers distinctly apart from one another and reinforces the problem of ineffective sex education that existed at the time. Because of the perspective of the show, however, the teenagers are shown to

²²⁴ *Veronica Mars*, "Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner," 2005.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

be more knowledgeable than the teacher, making clever and sagacious remarks at her expense and at the expense of the lesson. Much like *BMW*, humor is used to speak to the audience's perspective without breaking the narrative formula of the show.

The general classroom is, for the most part, an ubiquitous setting throughout the series, as Veronica works her way through her last two years of high school, then in the third season her freshman year of college. Because Veronica is framed as the smartest, fastest, quippiest person in the room, the classroom is constructed less as grounds for learning and more as material for jokes and, at times, a means to an end. The audience, always in direct dialogue with Veronica and all she knows through voice over, experiences these classes from her perspective. School thus becomes ambient sound for the audience. Sex education class, though used to further the plot lines, is no exception. The information that is provided in that background is, however, far from innocuous. While the casual treatment of sex education class on T.V. marks the shift in progressive dialogues about teen sex in the media, the punitive and consequence-based content of the sex education class itself reflects the pervading public policy rulings about abstinence-based sex education in public schools in the mid-2000s and preoccupation with public health and teen sexuality. Because the audience experiences this information and setting through Veronica's perspective —dismissive, comical, and superior— the show chooses to highlight the disconnect between sex education policy and the real lives of many teenagers.

While *Veronica Mars* took teen drama to a darker and more serious place in the mid-2000s, a younger, more lighthearted audience came of age on television. In 2006 the Disney Channel began airing hit television show *Hannah Montana*. The program, aimed at the Disney

Channel's tween audience, took the form of a half-hour sitcom.²²⁷ Between 2006 and 2011 *Hannah Montana* followed the double life of Miley Stewart, a normal high school student who is secretly teen pop sensation Hannah Montana when she wears a blonde wig. The only people who know Miley's secret are her single father, her older brother Jackson, and her two best friends, Lilly and Oliver.²²⁸ These characters composing Miley's inner circle are white and wealthy or at least upper-middle-class. The show itself is set in affluent Malibu, California. Miley contends with balancing the everyday anxieties of being a teenager with the secret double life of celebrity. These challenges keep the characters relatable, while the wealth and fame also construct the narrative as aspirational. For the target audience, Miley Stewart was meant to be a (wealthy, white) girl just like you, while Hannah Montana was everything you could become.²²⁹

²²⁷ Elana Levine explains this trend, writing, "The global market for youth-targeted TV grew strongly in the late 1990's and early 2000's when the 'tween' audience, described as ranging anywhere from 8 to 14 years old, became a new target of television programmers worldwide." Levine, *National Television*, 527-528.

²²⁸ Miley Stewart/Hannah Montana was portrayed by actress Miley Cyrus. Her father, Robbie Stewart, was portrayed by Cyrus' actual father, Billy Ray Cyrus. Many parallels were drawn between the real lives of the actors and the characters they portrayed, including the characters' names, Robbie Ray's former career as a country singer, their relationship with Dolly Parton, and the trajectory of Hannah Montana/Miley's career. Miley Cyrus toured the country multiple times as Hannah Montana, promoting the music/television duality of the franchise. The 2007 – 2008 *Best of Both Worlds* tour even had Cyrus eschewing the wig halfway through the show, performing first in character as Hannah, then as herself. (Evidence of the use of a body double during this costume change sparked controversy at the time.) The lines blurred between fictional character and real celebrity, making the show even more relatable and integrated into the lives of its young audience. The concert sold out almost instantly, with some tickets to the *Best of Both Worlds* tour going for over \$1,000 in a well-publicized scalping phenomenon.

For some of the news coverage about the Hannah Montana concert sensation at the time see: Annie Gowen, "Hannah Montana And Her 'Sisters,'" *Washington Post*, October 22, 2007, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/21/AR2007102101512.html>; Scott Moore, "A Concert That is as Big as Montana," *Washington Post*, January 6, 2008, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/04/AR2008010401249.html>; and J. Freedom du Lac, "For Crying Out Loud!" *Washington Post*, January 8, 2008, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/07/AR2008010703797.html>.

²²⁹ For an argument on the direct impact of the aspirational narrative of the show and franchise on the young female audience at the time see: Gowen, "Hannah Montana And Her 'Sisters,'" 2007.

Hannah Montana's target audience was not only younger in age than the other teen drama shows discussed, but this audience was also a new generation of young viewers in the late 2000s. By the air date of the first season in 2006, much of the key thematic elements of the genre had long been established. Teen shows explored sex and dating, family dynamics, responsibility, bullying, and friendship. The stylistic and structural formulas that had shaped the relatable and aesthetic tones that made the genre recognizable had created a space for specific tropes to develop. These include elements like title sequences filled with extra-narrative scenes of good times or outright references to previous works in the teen drama genre, used both for realistic world-building within the programs and a sort of referential nostalgia.²³⁰

By the mid-2000s the health or sex education class as a plot device in teen drama was one such trope. In a 2007 season one episode of *Hannah Montana* entitled "My Boyfriend's Jackson and There's Gonna be Trouble," a school project to "raise a fake baby" fuels the B-plot of the episode.²³¹ Miley's friends Lilly and Oliver spend their time at the beach dealing with Oliver's assignment to treat a sack of flour as his infant child for a short period of time. No preliminary scene in a sex education or health class is shown. Instead, the characters exposit the premise of the assignment through Lilly teasing Oliver. She tells him, "the assignment is to raise a fake baby, you don't get extra credit for turning into Daddy McDork," as he rocks and "burps" the sack of flour (which is adorned in a blue newborn hat and sticker made to look like a smiling baby).²³² Oliver's response to Lilly's teasing is to inform her that, "When you take Mr. Meyer's

²³⁰ Birchall, *Feels Like Home*, 181-183.

²³¹ *Hannah Montana*, season 1, episode 21, "My Boyfriend's Jackson and There's Gonna Be Trouble," directed by Roger Christiansen, aired January 1, 2007 on Disney Channel. Miley and her brother carry the A-plot surrounding some *Hannah Montana*-related drama.

²³² *Hannah Montana*, "My Boyfriend's Jackson and There's Gonna Be Trouble," 2007.

class next semester you can handle the assignment however you want, but I'm gonna take it seriously."²³³ Incredulously Lilly just asks, "Why?"²³⁴ Before Oliver can respond or discuss the merits of the assignment, his partner and classmate, hippie-esque health nut, Sarah arrives.

The trite musings of new parents are played for laughs as well in this episode. The young "parents" speak to the sack of flour in a baby voice about the organic food Sarah bought for it. Placing the bag of flour on a table Oliver says, "Look Sarah sweetheart, he just learned how to sit up on his own."²³⁵ When Sarah walks away, Oliver looks fondly after her. Lilly, observing this interaction, puts two and two together and starts to poke fun at Oliver for having a crush on Sarah. Oliver tells Lilly he has really liked Sarah, "since she became the mother of my assignment."²³⁶ Sarah and Oliver continue to take the assignment seriously throughout the second act of the episode: putting sunscreen on the sack of flour, playing with it, and "feeding" it. Lilly provides the comic relief and perspective of the audience, pointing out how ridiculous the two of them are acting. Sarah says that "one day [the sack of flour] could be a great humanitarian."²³⁷ Lilly interjects, "or a couple dozen cupcakes," then excuses herself in the wake of Sarah and Oliver's appalled faces.²³⁸

The third act of the show explores how the partners behave when they are no longer "parents." When we return to Oliver and Sarah down at the beach they are sitting across the table

²³³ *Hannah Montana*, "My Boyfriend's Jackson and There's Gonna Be Trouble," 2007.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

from one another, the sack of flour and all of its baby accessories conspicuously gone. Breaking an uncomfortable silence Sarah says, “Hey, how about that ‘A’ we got on the baby project,” to which Oliver replies, “Yeah, it’s pretty great.”²³⁹ Both then roll their eyes and go back to the individual activities in front of them. All affection between the partners is gone, replaced with almost unbearable tension and disdainful looks. When Oliver goes over to talk to Lilly he exclaims, “She’s suffocating me!” In mock-tears Lily clarifies, “Sarah? Love of your life? The apple of your eye? The mother of your flour?” Oliver tells her, “That’s just it, without the kid we have nothing to talk about.”²⁴⁰ While Oliver explains that he cannot break up with Sarah because it would break her heart, Sarah walks over and breaks up with him. At the end of the fourth act after the A-plot is also wrapped up, we return to Oliver at the beach, where he sees a young man with his real baby in a baby carrier. As the credits and the laugh track roll the audience is treated to a dream sequence where Oliver is again joyfully playing with his sack of flour as though it were his infant child.

By 2007, the concept of a health or sex education class assignments on television had become so expected that a casual exposition would suffice. In this episode of *Hannah Montana*, the audience does not even see the class happen. *Hannah Montana* relies on the trope of a sex education class in order to construct a narrative that does not include the class itself. The idea of an assignment on reproduction and responsibility is such a recognizable element of a teen drama program that to show the class is redundant. The messages that a sex education class would be sending must therefore be explored through other elements of the story.

²³⁹ *Hannah Montana*, “My Boyfriend’s Jackson and There’s Gonna Be Trouble,” 2007.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

While earlier shows like *BMW* erased human relationships from the lessons of sex education class, *Hannah Montana* puts the relationship at the center. The use of this assignment about human reproduction and childcare is a vehicle for a contrived romantic plot line between two characters with nothing in common. The idea that there is a lesson to be learned about sex or parenting becomes incidental between the focus on this forced romance and the ceaseless stream of Lilly's jokes. Throughout, Lilly makes fun of Oliver and Sarah's relationship as well as the assignment itself. The tone of this humor remains consistent, likening the affected nature of the romance with the artificiality of raising a sack of flour. Additionally, this falseness divorces raising a child with any notion of how that child was made. The audience knows that flour comes from the grocery store, so no discussion of sex is required. When the assignment is over, the relationship quickly dissolves, proving Lilly's point that the two are connected and equally ridiculous.

The fundamental message the audience receives from this plot line is that procreation defines a relationship. When the "baby" exists Oliver and Sarah love each other; when the assignment is over they do not. Oliver's daydream at the end of the episode when he sees the adult father with his real child, however, implies that procreation is a joy when you are older. These combined messages teach the young audience that procreation is desirable, though only at a specific time in life, and with the "right" person. The humorous tone suggests that to stray from these principles would make someone the subject of jokes and perhaps ridicule. For now, it is best to dream of babies. This messaging speaks to the framing around a younger audience, as well as to the renewed funding of abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programming that occurred just previous to the airing of this episode in 2006. In many ways it is no surprised this

whitewashed, elite, save-yourself representation of sex education is a George W. Bush-Era production.

As demonstrated by the previous four case studies, cultural values around the sexual education of teenagers in school are reflected in the portrayal of public sex education on teen-oriented television shows between 1994 and 2007. While the political context and media-scapes of the transforming decade created a distinct change in the portrayals of sex education over time, the overarching themes and assumptions illustrated by each remain overwhelmingly similar. This pattern is due to the deeply embedded morality discourses around American sexuality and the hopes for the American future: youth. The anxieties around teenage sexuality and the distinct separation between teenage sexual behavior and adult sexuality reflect this public moral construction by policy-makers and their supporters.

The attitude about the purposes and messages of the teen drama genre have reflected the discourses and anxieties about teenagers in American society since World War II, eventually carving out an integral space for teen media in the fabric of American society. Though adult production and reflection appears throughout, as Kaveney expresses in her conclusion:

Teenage Americans watch movies about themselves to make sense of their lives, to be reassured that the pangs of adolescence are a universal truth, not a personal wound...For the rest of us...the teen genre is a stylized way of looking at the world which connects to that world but dresses it in artificial light.²⁴¹

Kaveney's argument that young people use these shows to make sense of their lives is not the conceit of this chapter. However, her analysis explains the duality between the ways teenagers perceive the messaging and narratives of these shows with the ways adults might speak to the aforementioned constructed division between the adolescent and adult sexual cultures.

²⁴¹ Kaveney, *Teen Dreams*, 185.

Teen television exists not only for teens to be entertained and potentially connect to an art that portrays their life, but for adults to connect to the lives and perspectives of youth. When audiences witness sex education classes on television, they learn not only the information given in the class, but how some teens receive that information, versus how that information is meant to be received.

Boy Meets World is linked inextricably in my mind to those afternoons at home alone in my childhood: an early independence and one of my first connections to what adolescence would be like. I first watched *Degrassi* in my early teen years when I was babysitting for a family whose cable subscription came with The N. I was consumed by the eighth season of the show, then airing on American television (2008-2009). I bought a used box set of DVDs of the first seven seasons online (indicative of the time), which I proceeded to watch many times throughout high school. I invested myself in those characters; as I grew up so did they, again and again.

The summer I was fourteen years old (2009) a good friend of mine bought the first two seasons of *Veronica Mars* on DVD. We spent four days binge-watching the entire thing, only taking breaks to buy \$0.89 slushies and Reece's Peanut Butter Cups at the gas station down the street. We baked cupcakes and decorated them with the names of the characters (boyfriends) on the show we were rooting for. Later, I made my mother watch an episode of *Veronica Mars* with me, and then another, and another, until she was just as hooked as I was. Despite the teenage target audience, I suppose the darker themes resonated with her. The boyfriend on *Veronica Mars* we both loved (Logan) drove a big yellow Hummer: another sign of the time in which the show was made. Every time my mother or I saw a yellow Hummer on the street in the years following we would text each other a photograph with the caption "Logan says hi."

Teen television represents not only the political discourses of adults, but the specific experience of adolescents as well over this time period. While not all cultural references, like political discourses, retain their relevance over time, enduring themes hold true for young audiences. The exploration of teen sexuality through the portrayal of sex education on teen dramas from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s is an excellent example of how this occurs.

Chapter 4

“The System is Broken, Another World is Possible”²⁴²: Teenage Voices on Contemporary Sex Education

In early March of 2018 I drove from New York to my parents’ house in the suburbs of Washington DC. My eighteen-year-old sister sat in the passenger seat beside me as we journeyed south towards our childhood home. When the car crested the steep slope of the Delaware Memorial Bridge we began to talk about sexuality and relationships. I was reminded of the nearly identical drive, almost seven years ago, when my mother asked me about my summer camp relationship.

My sister explained how she was processing her own romantic encounters —past and present. I asked, “How much of what you’re telling me does Mom know?”

I was gone —hundreds of miles away for college— while my sister went through high school. For the most part, I was not present for her teenage years or her adolescent relationship with our parents. She responded, “Well, she recently asked if I’ve had sex.” I waited while my sister told me the same “first time” narrative she told my mother in response to this question. We talked about how to define sex, and whether either of our definitions might differ from what my mother was asking. Then, without prompting, my sister said, “Mom asked if I was safe. And then she asked if I liked it.” My mother is nothing if not consistent.

²⁴² This quote in the chapter title refers to an activity that activist and consultant Pippi Kessler created for young people. Youth are asked to identify what they think is wrong in the world, then brainstorm solutions for how they would fix these problems and what they would like to see change. Kessler suggests organizing a march or rally to close out the event. For instructions on how to try this activity at home see: Pippi Kessler, “The System is Broken, Another World is Possible,” *Medium* (blog), December 4, 2016, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://medium.com/@PippiKessler/the-system-is-broken-another-world-is-possible-a1faef84a9c7>.

This final chapter is written based upon the assumption that teenagers are not routinely consulted on their education in general, let alone their sexuality education. From the beginning of this thesis process I asked “what would happen if adults with power spent more time asking teens how they would like to be taught about sex and sexuality?” I, therefore, endeavor to add the voices, thoughts, and opinions of several young people in response to their sexuality education.²⁴³ Megan, Ruby, and Ari’s narratives from the previous chapters stand as examples of why direct communication with youth affected by sex education discourses is crucial to understanding the deep impact of its flaws.

In each interview we discussed the interviewee's experiences with sex education programming. They told me their ideas about how these courses and curriculum could be improved. These are teens with all different backgrounds: from pro-America, pro-gun in rural Kentucky, to big Jewish families in suburban New York, to being one of the only black kids in a predominantly white liberal Massachusetts charter school. These young people are diverse in gender, sexuality, family structure, political ideology, and religion. However, two thirds of my subjects identify as white, and a majority comes from middle-class families. This is the nature of the limited time frame and access to teenagers who were willing to be interviewed, as well as my own white-middle class subject position and communities. I was connected to some of these young people through my summer camp, mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. Other subjects are the siblings or friends of people I know. I met one teen in my parents’ kitchen, at a house party my younger sister hosted.

²⁴³ This chapter does not assume there are no organizations, sex educators, or activists that consults teens and even use peer education programs. My questions focus more on a systematic discussion as I endeavor to reflect the sentiments of my interviewees.

Our “interviews” were more like informal conversations. Some were held online over video chat; others happened in coffee shops, which provided enough neutrality and anonymity to keep the young people safe. I have also changed each of their names to protect their identities and keep their participation anonymous. I assured each of the teenagers that their identifying information would be kept private. My notes and voice recordings will be destroyed when the project is over. Each teen knew that our purpose was to discuss their personal experience of sex education, as well as their opinions on the subject as a whole. I also let them know that interviews are not my *forté* —that interviewing makes me anxious and I am not a journalist— to humanize myself and mute some of the expectations of formality. I gave them control over the experience: they all knew they had the freedom to skip as many questions as they wanted for any reason. I invited them to inform me if my questions were either irrelevant or invasive, and to tell me what they thought I should be asking instead. The ultimate goal of these measures was to create a space in which the young people felt like their thoughts and feelings were both safe and valued. I was rewarded with more openness and vulnerability than I ever could have expected.²⁴⁴

To hold young people accountable as witnesses to their own lives requires trusting their ability to be self-aware. The question that proved their capability for analyzing their own experiences more than any other was, “Do you identify as a teenager?” I asked this question after

²⁴⁴ A note on language: I am leaving in the “like”s and other verbal qualifiers used by the teenagers in our interviews because I believe that young people (especially young women and femmes) should not be ignored because of their trained speech patterns. Some of the teens also use colloquialisms, slang terms, and curse words which have been left uncensored. If we are going to give young people the space to talk, then we should allow ourselves the space to listen not just to what they say, but to the way in which they say it.

Additionally, I found while listening back to our conversations, that I would often adjust my own language and cadence to match theirs. There were times listening back to the recording that I found my own vocal fry distracting. However, settling into the energy of non-academic youth speak was a natural and comfortable place for me. I believe that the genuine subconscious shift in my language brought me closer to my subjects. I see this as an advantage in our close proximity in age and cultural experience. Notes on language shifts are mentioned more specifically throughout the chapter.

every interview was otherwise complete. Each young person gave me a unique answer. One of my interview subjects, Cole, reflected:

I do [identify as a teenager] now but it feels different. When I was thirteen I was so excited to be a teenager and be angsty and rambunctious. But now that I'm eighteen I'm realizing I have to start acting like an adult and getting my shit together. I have a future that I need to plan out, starting college in the fall, and I've always been independent but now it really matters. Like some of my friends can't even read a subway map or navigate [city]. I understand that, but I definitely feel more like a "legal adult" for lack of better words. So yes, I still feel like a teenager and go out to parties and stay up late, but I also have a lot of responsibilities that I have to do.²⁴⁵

Cole demonstrates an awareness of his own process through this fraught space in life and contemporary society, as well as his definition of what it means to be a teenager. His answer allows space for growth as well as fluidity between teenager and adult.²⁴⁶

When we had our conversation, Cole video chatted with me from a parked car. It was dark outside, and the dim overhead light occasionally brightened as the trunk opened and his friends wandered in and out of the frame, collecting their belongings for a night in the woods. Cole, an eighteen-year-old high school senior, lives in Massachusetts. This was his home turf. He was completely relaxed, leaning back in his seat and smiling, despite the cold, lack of privacy, and odd circumstances. Our conversation lasted for less than forty minutes, the shortest of all of my interviews, but Cole spoke a mile a minute. When I play back the recording I hear myself speed up to match his pace.

Cole's sex education at an arts-based charter school consisted of one unit in a middle school health class. He explains that the messaging of the class was fairly liberal:

²⁴⁵ "Cole," Facebook message to author, January 1, 2018.

²⁴⁶ For a complete reading of the responses to this question see the Appendix on page 140.

They like brought up abstinence, but I think it really came down to just like do what you're comfortable with with people that you're comfortable with and just make sure everyone feels like safe and it's all consensual and like it doesn't get weird. And if someone says no or stop, stop, like don't continue.²⁴⁷

Throughout our conversation Cole returned to this idea that, while the message might have been comforting or open, the conversation remained on the surface. He emphasized that the discussion did not “feel like it really went all that deep,” especially concerning themes around gender, sexual orientation, and pleasure.²⁴⁸ Cole explained this perceived gap in his education, “I feel like leaving middle school I was just like ‘oh you just like have sex between a man and a woman and that how it works,’ or just like that’s basically it. I didn’t really have an understanding of other things, other ways to pleasure each other.”²⁴⁹ The focus on heterosexual penetrative intercourse and its consequences were a theme that stuck with him.

Cole returns several times to the lessons about teen pregnancy he learned from his middle school sex education curriculum. He mentions the MTV reality television series *16 and Pregnant* as an example of how his peers learn about teen pregnancy.²⁵⁰ This leads to a discussion about media representation of teen sexuality. He talks about the ways in which television shows and movies —such as *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* and *Juno*— have reinforced the

²⁴⁷ “Cole,” interview by author, December 29, 2017, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ *16 and Pregnant* was an American reality television show that aired on MTV from 2009 - 2014. Each episode of the show documented the journey of one teenage girl through her experience with pregnancy and the first months of motherhood. The show was incredibly successful and spawned multiple spin-off series that continued to follow some of the teen mothers for almost a decade. The *16 and Pregnant* franchise attempts to balance typical contrived reality television drama, depictions of how difficult teen parenthood can be, and messages about safe sex.

16 and Pregnant, created by Lauren Dolgen, executive producers Morgan J. Freeman and Dia Sokol Savage (11th Street Productions, Viacom Media Networks, MTV, June 11, 2009 – July 1, 2014).

messaging in school that “a young, like, teen parent isn’t like living the best life that they could. Even if they’re like raising their kid and stuff people will be like, ‘Oh, they must be like a trashy person,’ or ‘Oh they must have gotten into all kinds of trouble with the wrong people and look at where they are now.’”²⁵¹ Cole’s experience shifted between the more constructive messaging about consent and pleasure and the rigid framework that defined sex as heterosexual and teen pregnancy as undesirable and the likely consequence. His analysis provided evidence of conservative State and social influence in more liberal curricula.

Cole’s reflections on the way media influences his life and the perceptions of other young people relates back to the arguments in Chapter Three. I also asked if he sees himself reflected on television. He turned to the ways in which his identities are often erased from mainstream media.

I guess I would identify as Asian-American cuz I’m adopted from Kazakhstan...but I’ve never like met my birth parents and I don’t have any memories of being there so all my memories are like here in the United States with both my white parents...I don’t like really think [I see myself reflected in media]. I feel like, one, like as an Asian man there’s not a whole lot there. And then also as a bisexual Asian man I feel like there’s definitely *not* anything out there that I can relate to super well, at least like from what I’ve seen...I feel like that sexuality is just kind of brushed over a lot. And especially in not-white men, it’s like non-existent in media or on TV.²⁵²

²⁵¹ “Cole,” interview.

The Secret Life of the American Teenager was a teen drama show that aired on ABC Family for four seasons, from 2008 to 2013. The show centers on a fifteen-year-old girl who gets pregnant at band camp after having sex one time with a popular boy. She decides to parent her child. Teen sex and sexuality is discussed almost non-stop throughout the run of the show, during which most of the teenagers have sex and another teen character becomes pregnant.

The Secret Life of the American Teenager. Created by Brenda Hampton. ProdCo Original, American Teenager Inc., ABC Family Original Productions, Disney-ABC Domestic Television, July 1, 2008 – June 3, 2013.

Juno was a quirky 2007 coming-of-age film about a teenage girl (portrayed by Ellen Page) who gets pregnant and decides to place her baby for adoption.

Juno, directed by Jason Reitman, written by Diablo Cody (Mandate Pictures, Mr. Mudd, December 5, 2007).

²⁵² “Cole,” interview.

When we turned to potential tools and solutions to combat this lack of representation and how it reinforces non-comprehensive sex education curricula, he moved from the basics into personal experience and identity.

I would definitely want to hit on like basic anatomy, because I think it is important to like know your body personally. But then also, just like remind them that it's ok to identify however you want to. And like if that changes on a given day that's totally fine, and just like be yourself and do what feels right. And kind of like, so what if people judge you for what you do. It's your body and your choice, so live how you want to live.²⁵³

His focus on individual expression and comfort included mentions of consent, pleasure, and diminishing fear tactics. He said he wishes it was explained to young people, “how sex can feel good. And that like you can get pregnant but there are many ways to prevent it.”²⁵⁴ Cole reckoned with how to teach practical information to sexually active young people without criticism or shame.

This socialization of shame begins at an early age, often before young people are having sex. In discussion about curricula Cole told me that in his opinion sex education, “should start getting taught like around middle-school time, maybe a little earlier, but...that it also should continue up through high school.”²⁵⁵ He emphasized his belief that sex education should be an ongoing and age-appropriate conversation based on recent personal experience:

I feel like as you get older it's like easier in a way. Because I feel like in middle school everyone is uncomfortable, and they don't want to be there and they're all like “ah this is really weird and these are my classmates and I feel all super weird about it.” But I, as I've gotten older...it's like oh [sex] is like a real thing that happens. And you like can have sex with your friends. You can have sex with people who aren't your friends. You can have

²⁵³ “Cole,” interview.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

sex. You don't have to have sex. But just like the basics...I feel like is really important [information] for people to have and as you get older you can be more serious about it because it will pertain to your life in a more personal way than when you're in middle school.²⁵⁶

This idea that sex is something personal, that you should be allowed to do what you choose with your own body and refrain from judging what other people choose to do with theirs, was a common theme in these conversations. He offered this perspective to other young people:

Do what feels comfortable with people that you feel comfortable with...Listen to your gut and yourself and you don't have to take the advice of the people around you. But if you're close with them, like do ask for advice or like help with your problems, because maybe they have a good answer that you wouldn't initially have thought of and they can help you think things through if you trust them.

You should only really focus on your life and if somebody wants to have sex with a lot of people that's like their choice and you shouldn't judge them for that. And if you don't want to have sex with anyone that's your life choice and people shouldn't judge you for that. And just like people are going to do what they want to do, and be with who they want to be with, and it's like not really your business to be figuring out other people's business, or like outing them, or like cracking down and giving them advice on how they feel and what they should do.²⁵⁷

Cole's preoccupation with being judged suggests that this felt like a common occurrence when his peer group started becoming sexually active.

Cole's problem with judgement harkens back to Ruby's mention of moral policing, which she claimed came as much from the adults in her school environment as from her peers. The anxiety about being judged or analyzed by one's peers crops up in many of these conversations, which is tied explicitly into sexual knowledge and experience. How personal this subject is to young people's experiences was brought up often in the critique of sex education. When the young people became vulnerable in their personal reflections on the subject, our intellectual

²⁵⁶ "Cole," interview.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

breakthroughs became more profound. One such moment came during a conversation with my youngest interview subject, whose passion for sex education reform rivaled my own.

On the day of our interview, Ruby ran down the front steps of her white suburban house and to the passenger side of my waiting car, her cheeks already pink from the few seconds of bitter cold. As we drove a few towns over to a coffee shop where we could talk without anyone hearing, we chat about Ruby's winter break from the suburban New York public school where she was currently a sophomore. Ruby is the much younger sister of my close friend from adolescence, so we were familiar with one another before this interview. We had never spent time alone, however, nor had we spoken this candidly about anything so personal.

As Ruby reflected and processed my questions, her passion for the subject was apparent. When I asked Ruby how her investment in sex education reform began she told me about the middle school lectures on the horrors of abortion and sex trafficking, mentioned in Chapter Two.

Those [lectures] are like [some] of the most memorable moments of middle school for me, and I just found that really sad and kind of disturbing, because I just felt like I was being talked to about like mistakes that I was going to make in the future and how to deal with them so I don't like fuck up everything. You know, [the teachers] were just kind of 60-year-old women who were just very angry.²⁵⁸

Ruby's immediate relationship to sex education was with experiences that left her with personal shame about something she had yet to even do. Not only was sex portrayed as a "mistake," it was described as something that would inevitably lead to further mistakes and potential regret.

Abortion was not presented as one option in a series of circumstances that some of these young people might one day face. Rather abortion was a personal failure of women who chose to have (heterosexual, potentially procreative) sex. Unsurprisingly, Ruby took this message personally,

²⁵⁸ "Ruby," interview by author, December 31, 2017, New York, transcript.

and internalized the anxiety that came with these consequences. In this reflection she blamed her anxiety on the disconnect between the teachers and the students.

Reflection about the internalization of shame and regret that came from discussions about sex in school motivated several of these young people to do their own sex education related work. Ruby explained that the topic she had intended to pursue for a research project was about the correlation between sex education and depression in teenage girls. She disclosed:

It came from a very, sort of, emotional place for me because I was thinking about how, you know, middle school and those time when teachers were imposing those very conservative and very harsh beliefs onto me and how *my* mental state was at that time. So then I kind of got thinking about, what about people, like specifically young girls, who go through their whole, like, school experience getting very *harsh* and very *conservative* sort of talking-tos about their like sexual health and um sex ed and like what sort of impact does that have on your mental state.²⁵⁹

Ruby's own experience with sex education provoked a desire to investigate the correlation between depression and anxiety and non-comprehensive sex education class in adolescent girls. She mentioned these lessons felt like "talking-tos," implying a sense of reprimand or warning as opposed to education. I asked Ruby to clarify what she meant by "harsh" and "conservative."

She offered:

I guess that's kind of biased, 'cuz I consider myself to be, like, a liberal person. But I mean those very absolute ideas about [subjects like] abortion. About people who, when they get abortions they are bad people and they've made terrible mistakes. And that it's not, it's not ok to have sex before you're married. And abstinence-only education. I guess by harsh I mean very strict, and almost rule-like ways of educating people.²⁶⁰

As Ruby gave this explanation, my head began to spin about my own research and analysis. "I like that description," I informed her, "that like what they're doing is educating through rules,

²⁵⁹ "Ruby," interview.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

instead of like educating through information. I think that's a really good way to describe conservative sex education. Almost that it's like a withholding of information, and instead it's like a giving of a set of rules." Ruby nodded excitedly in agreement. There was a palpable energy in our conversation, as though together we figured out something important.

The way Ruby described the rigid regulatory manner of approaching sex education recalled the goals of non-comprehensive abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) policy. The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) of 1981 aimed to "promote self-discipline," explicitly stating the intention to impose regulations around sexual behavior for young people.²⁶¹ In the 1990s, the definition of abstinence-only attached to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) funding also read as a set of rules for policing teenage sexuality and sexual behavior, as opposed to a manual for education. The lasting effect of these policies was felt by teens like Ruby, who experienced her own version of guidelines around appropriate sexual behavior and choices decades after these policies began. When Ruby made this distinction, her desire for comprehensive sex education curricula was consistent with the arguments made by progressives for sex education reform. Ruby's experience was her evidence.

Personal experience with being judged, anxiety, regulation, and fear was the basis of many of these interviews. Alongside that reality was a self-aware evaluation of how internalization of these structures could be harmful. When I spoke to Ari (from Chapter Three), they vocalized how they manage this balance. Central to our conversation was Ari's open processing and the space they gave themselves for growth. They revealed:

²⁶¹ *Otis R. Bowen, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Appellant, v. Chan Kendrick, et. al., Appellees*, Brief (February 13, 1988), 8.

I guess I definitely had to examine the sex education I've had over the years...mostly because terminology changes so quickly. And also like being non-binary and...being femme, it's just like I think back on things that I've learned or heard or heard other people like learn, and I'm like wow, like that's not, like we would not say that anymore. Or that's something we should probably update.²⁶²

Ari's analysis was one of their own growth, as well as of the linguistic and ideological chasm that often exists between teacher and student. Like Ruby's examination of the generational difference between herself and the educators who gave sex-negative conservative lectures, Ari explored how changing times means curriculum must change as well. This points to the significant impact young people could have in keeping sex education updated.

Ari also explored the impact of identity on their reflections about the fluidity of sexuality and gender terminology. Across backgrounds, queerness was a prominent theme in my discussions with these young people. Some, like Ari and Cole, spoke to the ways in which their own queer identities can leave them out of dated and mainstream dialogues. Other teens mentioned the heteronormativity of their curricula, or even the outright homophobia present in their school communities. Many of these young people cited language and an acute understanding of identity and identity politics that often differed from that of the teachers, parents, or other authority figures in their lives. Several of the young people pursued this independent education through progressive spaces outside of school, particularly on the internet. This imbalance added to the frustrations they felt about the way teenage sexuality was treated in school. This situation also subverts the teacher/student dynamic, often turning young people into educators, without any of the status.

²⁶² "Ari," interview by author, January 3, 2018, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

With these thoughts about the complexity of identity and language in mind, Ari and I delved into the basic sex education they received during a short unit in eighth grade. Ari explained that, while not abstinence-only, the curriculum provided a limited scope of sex and sexuality: “I guess [the class was] like penis/vagina focused. Like [it] assumed straight cis people, but it wasn’t as much as I expected.”²⁶³ Our conversation seemed to challenge their limited expectations of what a sex education class in school could offer.

Specifically, when asked what they would include in a sex education program for teenagers they jumped to a strategy from their own experience that worked for them. Ari mentioned that their OWL program brought in a panel of people to talk about their experiences with sex and sexuality. What made such a big impact on them was that the students were given the opportunity to request what kinds of identities and experiences they would like to hear from. The intention to focus in on individual aspects of identity and sexuality appealed to Ari. They explained that, for them, an ideal sex education curriculum “would probably just start off with kind of like yourself and self-care and...like everything that has to do with you.”²⁶⁴ They also believed that, in addition to these fundamentals, “really emphasizing all the different experiences that people can have, and like just existing as your own person and also in sexual experiences is really important because you never really know like...what experiences and assumptions students are coming with.”²⁶⁵ Ultimately they explain that, in order to both encourage self-exploration, as well as understanding and acceptance of other people’s perspectives and identities, the core value comes down to, “trying to be as like equal with each experience as you

²⁶³ “Ari,” interview.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

can.”²⁶⁶ Ari’s language around “acceptance” and “assumptions” paralleled Cole and Ruby’s ideas about judgement and policing. The ultimate desire here was for an open education that provides a range of information. This comes in contrast to criteria for criticism that enforces politically constructed norms.

Ari’s inclination towards individualism is indicative of the neoliberal context in which these young people have been educated and socialized. The emphasis the individual sexual self repeated in these narratives is neither a negative idea, nor does it promote other neoliberalist goals for competition between individuals, in this case. The neoliberal context does, however, speak to the resonance of the individualist narrative across these conversations with young people.

In these interviews the teenagers discussed their own experiences with sex education as well as suggestions for how to reach the desired goal of spreading knowledge without shame or judgement. In this context, Ari remarked that their OWL program used an anonymous question box. At the end of each session everyone was required to add a piece of paper to the box, regardless of whether they had a question. At the beginning of the following session the teachers provided an answer to each question about sex, sexuality, or relationships to the group at large.

Ari said this practice:

Has been like really good, not just because I’ve had questions, but because like hearing other people’s questions, and either relating or just being like ‘wow I’ve never thought about that’ is really I don’t know, it’s really helped me. And also like people are able to talk about their personal experiences without feeling really uncomfortable.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ “Ari,” interview.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

The practical application of an anonymous question box seems simple enough. Ari's experience illustrates the ways in which comprehensive sex education can encourage empathy between young people. When the fear of judgement is so close to the surface, the opportunity for kindness and empathy from small changes to sex education programming is profound. Young people are able to use these tools to humanize others. This has the potential to affect the ways in which young people learn to relate to and respect each other in sexual relationships, as well as in everyday encounters.

The theme of fear also continued into Ari's experience with sex education. Ari said, "If you spend too much time —like especially when you're 12 or 13— like people being just like 'these are all the things that can go wrong and it's horrible,' [...] then why would you ever want to like *ever* talk about sex again, really. Even if you're having sex."²⁶⁸ Here, they explore one negative effect of the fear tactics method of sex education. If the conversations around sex only lead to shame, dread, or anxiety, why would people later choose to engage in these conversations. Ari also made the point that not talking about sex does not mean abstaining from sexual behavior. Therefore, creating conversations about sex that are unpleasant from an early age could lead to young people experiencing sexual activity without any guidance for how to communicate positively or effectively with their partner(s). Ari's assumption was that having sex without talking about sex could be potentially harmful or unhealthy.

Like Ari and Cole, Megan (from Chapter One) discussed tailoring lessons to specific age groups so as not to scare away young people or reach them too late. She also veered another

²⁶⁸ "Ari," interview.

direction, however. Instead of focusing on continued education through high school, she argued that lessons combating the misogyny in American culture should start as early as possible:

Kids are so smart and they can catch onto things. And if we don't teach them [about systems of oppression] from that early age they're gonna be, as they get older they're less willing and likely to question. So you gotta start early. So that is, I guess, it's not a perfect solution because America has always been a patriarchal society, pretty much since its foundation. So it's really tough to break through that mold because it's what they know, what we all know, basically the pinnacle of our society. But to start breaking that down and questioning if that's the right thing, you have to start young and that's where we can use the education system to encourage them to seek and question.²⁶⁹

Again, I was stunned by the ease and totality with which young people humanize the experience of others. Megan respected young children, so much so that she wanted to give them tools to fight the structures that oppress, frighten, and repress them.

Megan's ideas came from her own experience of being socialized into fear and a contrived idea about "purity." Megan and I discussed how she thought sex education class should look in order to avoid causing the anxiety she has personally experienced. She said:

Teaching how to have sex and not...I guess that sex isn't *scary* and not [just] a risk. You know, it's supposed to be *enjoyable*. And yeah, it's partially used for making kids and that's ok, but it doesn't have to just be that. I've heard that some places teach, like, pleasure. I don't know if that's really a thing, but that would be cool.²⁷⁰

Megan explained that teaching pleasure-based sex education (as opposed to consequence-based programming) would create a less anxiety-ridden experience and open up the conversation to more kinds of sex. She referenced that teaching pleasure would mean teaching that sex can be non-procreative, allowing space for discussions about non-penetrative or non-heterosexual cisgender sex. Megan also meant:

²⁶⁹ "Megan," interview by author, December 30, 2017, FaceTime, transcript.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

Pleasure-based sex like masturbation. Stuff like that was definitely not in our education curriculum. I think that's cool. Maybe I would have been super uncomfortable with it at the time, like "oh my god why are they talking about masturbation," but like as I've gotten older like, everyone does it, you know.²⁷¹

Megan wanted to maneuver the sex education conversation beyond solely partnered sex, to exploring sexuality with oneself. Much of her anxiety came from being taught that her own body and desires were something to be controlled and tempered. This point is similar to Ari's suggestion that sex education should start with the self. For Megan, teaching about self-pleasure would teach that individual bodies and sexual appetite are valuable parts of the human experience for young people. This conversation could potentially remove the stigma from, as she points out, common behaviors.

Megan's ideas about curricula encompassed a wide variety of concerns. When I asked her what the most essential component of reformed sex education classes would be she said, "encouragement to discover and to go out and learn more. You should leave class going, 'Ok, I really appreciate that. Let me go and find out more.'"²⁷² While the internet provides an unprecedented level of access to free comprehensive information, sometimes sifting through the plethora of content can be overwhelming. If sex education were to guide teenagers to trustworthy resources directed at young people, the desire to learn more about sexuality, identity, relationships, and pleasure outside of school could be fulfilled in healthy and productive ways.

Bringing outside resources into the school environment was already a practice for Jack, who took time out of the New Year's Day celebrations at his suburban New York home to video chat with me. Jack told me that he identifies as a seventeen-year-old, white, Unitarian

²⁷¹ "Megan," interview.

²⁷² Ibid.

Universalist. He did start off our conversation by saying that one of his favorite things about the public high school where he was currently a senior was that it is “one of the most diverse communities I have ever known.”²⁷³ He was immediately open and forthcoming with his answers, requiring very little prompting from me to move from one subject to the next. He seemed to anticipate what I was going to ask him, quite often, so he charged forward with his knowledge and insight. Jack and I had also met before and have been a part of the same summer camp community for years, which likely assuaged any apprehension he may have had about talking to me. This comfort was evident in his anecdotes about giving out condoms in school and the casual way he spoke about sex education.

Jack’s focus for most of our conversation about his experiences with sex education was about community support and open communication. He asserted that, “one of the biggest issues with sexuality education in America is just that it’s taboo [to talk about sex], in my opinion.”²⁷⁴ Jack participates in a program run by Planned Parenthood called Teen Information and Peer Services (TIPS), where he acts as a peer educator at his school. He explained that, “the TIPS training not only gives you the information, but prepares you to deliver the information...so you just like get better at talking about sexuality through experience.”²⁷⁵ He paused, then clarified, “Not like sexual experience. Like educational experience.”²⁷⁶ For Jack, communication was an essential aspect of both sex education and healthy sexual experiences. His ability to educate other teenagers on a peer-to-peer level makes the information more relatable and allows other

²⁷³ “Jack,” interview by author, January 1, 2018, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

young people feel like they have someone to talk to who will understand their position. The communication that happens through peer education also gives young people a model for what healthy articulation between teenage sexual partners could look like.

As a peer educator, Jack is also an avenue towards more resources outside of school. He noted that, “one of the reasons young people don't go to the health center is fear of their parents finding out. So they teach [peer educators] how to redirect someone to Planned Parenthood in a way that will, like, benefit [the teenager].”²⁷⁷ This system affords young people to access sexual health services without the fear of punishment or judgement that appears so often in adolescent narratives. This type of program is also one answer to Megan’s ideas to encourage the continuation of comprehensive sex education outside of the classroom in ways that are practical for teens.

Much of Jack’s perspective came from programs like TIPS and OWL, outside of the public school setting. As we discussed the ways in which these programs compare to in-school sex education curricula, Jack cited not only substantive differences, but contextual ones as well. He illustrated this experience:

When you learn these things [about sex and sexuality] like as a *community*, it is very different from when you learn it like as a student in a curriculum. And I think that when you raise not just individual, but communal awareness, it’s a very different experience. It’s one that I think is, like, important in being able to grow as an individual in a community.²⁷⁸

Essentially, Jack told me, public sex education is taught with a focus on individual learning and grades, much like the rest of school. Several other young people, like Daniel, also mentioned that

²⁷⁷ “Jack,” interview.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

giving grades in sex education class could be detrimental to the process of learning practical tools to apply to one's own experience. In particular, grades add undue stress to sexual health. These young people asserted that this system meant that the goal of sex education class became a single good grade, as opposed to an ongoing healthy sexual experience.

In Jack's experience, community-based programming places a focus on the group learning together as a whole. For lessons around accepting identities and consent, the practice of learning as a group is more effective. The young people help each other and themselves to grow, as opposed to seeing learning as a competition. This community goal works to avoid isolation around sexuality. This method also teaches that sexual behavior can be a supportive experience, as opposed to an amoral individualistic pursuit.

Trouble with the antagonistic school system was a primary focus in my interview with Daniel, a white Jewish seventeen-year-old who attends a specialized New York City public high school. Daniel told me that he feels his school is a "broken bureaucracy," where, to him, "it very much feels like the administration doesn't really care about the students."²⁷⁹ Daniel felt detached from his high school educational experience as a whole and expressed disillusionment with the values of his teachers and most of his peers. Essentially, his attitude (and by his estimation his peers' as well) reflected the general disinterest he felt from the administration. This included his experience with "health class." Daniel's sex education came in the form of a one semester health class during his junior year. There were also few days during gym class at the beginning of every year where the gym teacher read directly from a paper about sexual health. This curriculum did not change year to year.

²⁷⁹ "Daniel," interview by author, January 3, 2018, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

Daniel explained that none of this material was particularly memorable, though “they always make clear that the only method of contraception that is 100% foolproof is abstinence... [and] that abstinence is the better option.”²⁸⁰ When I asked if he remembered any other specific messaging he told me there is “not a single mention of *what sex is*, if any of us are curious.”²⁸¹ Rather than any comprehensive material about sexuality that could engage the students, Daniel felt that the little material taught was kept at a clinical arm's length. This method made the lessons just impactful enough to impress the abstinence-only messaging, while boring enough to discourage any further discussion. When we considered what the consequences of this type of programming have been Daniel sighed, “Let’s just put it this way: I’ve never heard anyone [of my classmates] talk about having sex in a way that makes me think they’re having *safe sex*.”²⁸² He explained this like it was expected: teenagers who do not receive comprehensive sex education go on to have physically and emotionally unsafe sex. While Daniel did not seem to put much faith in his peers’ ability (or desire) to find resources outside of school curricula, his experience with sex education offers some context for why this might be.

When I asked Daniel to think about how sex education could be more engaging in his school he says it would be essential to find a way to “make it different. Make it stand out from all the sex education we’ve had. We’re forced to have this every year and there’s a certain amount of like, I guess, resistance to it because we’re forced to do it and it’s kind of a mess.”²⁸³ He described changing up the curriculum so that teenagers were not enduring the same repeated

²⁸⁰ “Daniel,” interview.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

speech every year. Daniel's critique included several of Jack's ideas about teaching sex education. He said, "maybe if the person teaching it was very young and was more relatable to the students and it was taught in a way that, you know, was more accepting of, and encouraging of sexual activity" the students would be more likely to engage with the material.²⁸⁴ He appeared open to the idea of peer education as a solution to this issue. Daniel remarked: "I think a lot of the time about how these teachers must not remember what it was like to be in high school because it's very just not [relatable]."²⁸⁵ His comments are also akin to Ruby's observations about her sex educators being angry older women. The commonality is the idea that a younger teacher might encourage sexual exploration and relate more easily to their students.

The generational and ideological divide between student and administration was also a fixation for Alex, a white, seventeen-year-old, bigender student at a private college preparatory school in upstate New York. Alex's sex education in school was a single unit in a semester-long health class during their freshman year. The class itself was "not that explicit about [morality]. But there's an underlying assumption, an underlying enforcement, I'd say: abstinence is the answer."²⁸⁶ The sex education class focused mostly on binary gendered ideas about morality and the consequences of sex. Alex explained that the lessons, "did seem very woman centered, like women shouldn't have sex. Women should be virgins and men shouldn't."²⁸⁷ While Alex conceded to the idea that this messaging was part of a larger socialization process they said, "it

²⁸⁴ "Daniel," interview.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ "Alex," interview by author, October 26, 2017, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

would have taken effort on the teachers part counteract that and they never do.”²⁸⁸ Here, Alex made a distinction between the curriculum and the individual educators. They did not ask that the curriculum necessarily take on a tone different than the punitive and moralistic one they were used to. They assumed that a teacher could work with the students to interrogate and become critical of those assumptions. Alex’s thought here is reminiscent of Megan’s desire to teach young children to be critical of their socialization from an early age.

Alex’s frustration with their teachers was a running theme in our conversation. They described a series of confrontations with the administration at their school about gender identity and gender neutral bathrooms. They also found the sex education class they had attended, “very frustrating,” especially when they felt that misinformation was being spread.²⁸⁹ They explained that in one instance their teacher “insisted that men cannot be raped by women.”²⁹⁰ The class response was overwhelmingly negative, disputing this point with the teacher. Alex pointed out: “We were 14. We weren't good arguers yet....She had all the power. She could shut us down whenever she wanted.”²⁹¹ The exploited power imbalance made Alex feel a lack of respect from the teacher and anger with the sex education system as a whole. In this situation, young people expressed a desire for comprehensive and informed discussions about consent and sexual assault. They were met with the conservative method: a series of affected rules with no room for analysis. Additionally, the lasting emotional harm this experience caused makes an argument for balance between teachers and students, especially when the material is so personal.

²⁸⁸ “Alex,” interview.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

These stories illustrate how solutions for navigating the line between personal and educational are essential to a positive sex education experience. Alex explained that in order to create more equilibrium in the classroom, “I think that it would help a lot if there were a way to ask questions anonymously.”²⁹² Much like the context for Ari’s suggestion about an anonymous question box, Alex revealed that, “asking questions is putting yourself out there.”²⁹³ To publicly ask questions in a sex education class, especially one where the student already feels disenfranchised or marginalized in one way, is to make oneself vulnerable. For some, the vulnerability is with their classmates, whom they feel might judge them. For others, the objective is to protect themselves from a personal confrontation with a teacher. The practice of anonymously asking questions unites the class as a group. Receiving feedback and answers as a whole can create a more communal learning environment where an individual is not singled out. This strategy could assist in realizing Jack’s ideas about the benefits of community learning.

The fluidity with which Alex and I floated between talk of sex education, identity politics, and systems of power illustrated their progressivism across ideas. With the other young people that I interviewed, sometimes their politics and their arguments about sex education were separate entities. Ryan, an Indian-American recent high school graduate living in a small, predominantly white, Kentucky town, thought about everything in terms of freedom. Ryan grew up moving between the Mid-Atlantic and Southern United States and India, so his experience with politics and sex education was varied. Throughout our conversation Ryan’s personal political perspectives leaned towards nationalism: he expressed views associated with pro-gun

²⁹² “Alex,” interview.

²⁹³ Ibid.

and pro-war ideologies and appeared to have ultimate faith that the United States government makes the choices they think are best for their citizens. In the context of discussing sexual assault Ryan said, “If I have a daughter, I am giving her a firearm.”²⁹⁴

Unlike many of the conservative policy-makers who hold similar ideas, Ryan’s investment in freedom extended to sex education curricula. Ryan boiled his argument down to a simple point: “why not actually teach [teenagers] everything *before* they actually go out and engage in said sexual activity. Because if they don’t find out in school they’re sure as hell going to find out in the media that they watch or the music that they listen to.”²⁹⁵ Ryan did not have any illusions about abstinence-only education being effective. He observed that many teenagers have sex regardless of any discouragement. He also noted that young people in the United States, even the ones who are not engaging in sexual behavior themselves, have nearly unlimited access to sexualized media. Ryan explicitly stated that he was including pornography as an educational resource for many teenagers. His thinking was that, if teenagers are going to have sex, it would help them to be taught truthful and comprehensive sex education. Ryan rationalized that this programming could work to combat harmful and unrealistic portrayals of sexuality that come from the media.

Like Alex and many of the other young people, Ryan’s experience with sex education was highly gendered. The students were taught primarily about contraception and teenage pregnancy. Ryan revealed:

I have a couple of friends who are teenage mothers and, I mean, they’re very lucky, I would say, to have the support of their famil[ies]. Because, you know, the reason why I

²⁹⁴ “Ryan,” interview by author, December 30, 2017, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

think protection is advocated so much [is] because not all families are gonna support teenage parents. And so they want to make sure there aren't any kids, or there are [a lesser] percentage of kids who go to group homes.²⁹⁶

Ryan's critique of sex education curricula returns to the idea of dependency. At the core of Ryan's analysis is a notion that contraception and consequence-based teaching around teenage pregnancy is to prevent an influx of young people dependent on the State. Ryan's focus, however, was more on the benefits of community. The support of his friends' families allowed them the freedom to choose to parent their children. This contrasts with the messaging of the sex education curricula: that unprotected sex can lead to a situation of dependency and lack of choice.

For Ryan, he wished sex education would focus more on breaking down gendered constructions about sexuality. He stated, "We need to teach our sons that having sex does not make you any more of a man than *not* having sex."²⁹⁷ While much of the sex education curricula focuses on morality for girls, Ryan suggested focusing on responsibility and accountability for teenage boys. He argued that sex education should "teach young people how to view one another: that women aren't sex objects and that men are men regardless of whether they've had sex or not."²⁹⁸ Ryan suggested finding strategies for breaking down the long-established double standards evident in many sex education curricula. He saw the potential for sex education class to provide critical thinking skills that could be applied outside of school. In this conversation Ryan's focus was similar to Megan's ideas about teaching students in school to critique oppressive social conventions.

²⁹⁶ "Ryan," interview.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

Engaging critically with one's surroundings was second nature to Leah, who met me at a coffee shop on a rainy autumn afternoon. We sat by the big front window where she explained that she is 17 years old and from a big white Catholic family: "like 'let's go to church every Sunday' Catholic."²⁹⁹ Leah was a student at a private all-girls Catholic school in upper Manhattan. She had, however, convinced her parents to send her to the Unitarian Universalist summer camp every year, where some of the older girls from her dance class went. I knew Leah from the camp community as well, though we had never spent any real time together. She had a genuine kindness in her attitude, but as our conversation progressed, this did not stop her from critiquing the world around her. Leah expressed her passionate distaste for her family's conservative Catholicism, her determination to bring discussions about consent into her everyday life, and her disappointment in the type of sex education she was given in school.

Rule-following and conforming to prescribed norms was central to Leah's Catholic school education. The students wear uniforms: kilts and button down shirts. The unspoken rule was that, "the gay kids wear the pants [option]."³⁰⁰ During her eight grade sex education class, strict conformity was also the rule. She reported: "we got these big stickers that were red that said 'I'm worth waiting for.' And we had these little, like, business card and you had to sign them promising you wouldn't have sex before marriage."³⁰¹ The "abstinence cards" were accompanied by a story about a young couple who pulled out their signed chastity vows at their wedding to prove their purity to their spouse. I asked Leah if she thought this story was true. She laughed,

²⁹⁹ "Leah," interview by author, October 8, 2017, New York, transcript.

³⁰⁰ Leah describes "coming out" to her parents in high school by saying, "You know I'm gay right?" "Leah," interview.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

“Ugh, I hope not.”³⁰² Leah’s main problems with this program were the regulation of morality, the implicit heterosexuality, and the shame that was inflicted on anyone who posed a challenge to that system.

We discussed the possibilities for changes to the sex education curriculum young people in her catholic school receive. On a systemic level, Leah was not optimistic. She lamented, “I don’t think [comprehensive sex education in Catholic school is] gonna happen any time soon.”³⁰³ Much like Alex, Leah did carry the conviction that an individual teacher could have the potential to disrupt the overarching messages. In her case, a biology teacher (who no longer works at her school) gave an off-the-record PowerPoint presentation about gender, sexuality, and sexual health. This lesson offered a small space in the otherwise stringent setting in which the young people might have a discussion about sex that was not based entirely in abstinence and purity. This brief moment gave several of the students the confidence to try to open up conversations with the more conservative teachers who espoused ideas with which they did not agree. This subversion is reminiscent of the discussions by progressive sex educators of the 1990s, which fought back against conservative messaging.

These nine young people who shared their experiences with me offered a series of common themes and strategies to build on. Many, like Megan, Ryan, Ruby and Alex, focused on the ways sex education could be used to challenge systems of oppression. They explored the notion that sex education is a space of institutional power that could be used to teach critical thinking skills and tools to break down oppressive constructions. They challenged ideas about

³⁰² “Leah,” interview.

³⁰³ Ibid.

gender and sexuality that were being taught in schools but did not match up with their own experiences. Jack's experience with peer education demonstrates the ways in which sex education in schools could address questions related to access to resources and services outside of the classroom.

One of the central ideas of these conversations was the argument that the material taught in sex education should be more relatable to students. They suggested that sex-positivity and a focus on pleasure would help make the material more engaging for young people. These attitudes could also potentially reduce the shame and judgement felt in the classroom. If students felt as though their teachers cared whether they were having safe *and* pleasurable sex, they might be more inclined to listen to the information being taught and apply it to their own lives. Several of these teens indicated that teachers who were closer in age to them, or even peer educators, could help high school students relate to the material. This model could subvert some of the power dynamics that exist in the student/teacher relationship and complicate conversations about adolescent sexuality.

The ideas about building community through sex education were constructive and intriguing. Strategies like anonymous question asking and group discussion could be used to free young people from the fear and judgement associated with adolescent sexual behavior. These methods have the potential to foster empathy and understanding for a variety of experiences, sexual and otherwise. This could help young people to make healthy connections and keep them from judging their own peers as well.

Most of the young people mentioned how important identity and bodily autonomy is to their experience of sex and sexuality. Emphasizing diverse personal experiences and the right to

one's own body in community-oriented settings could also encourage respect between individuals. Additionally, finding new methods of grading or removing grading entirely, from sex education was a popular idea. This design would help to create a supportive community environment in the sex education classroom. It could also work to distinguish sex education programming from the competitive (and often monotonous) environment of regular school. This might encourage young people to apply the lessons they learn in sex ed in their lives outside of the classroom.

In the pages of this thesis the young people and I formed our own community around sex education. In this instance, I was a student and each of them a teacher. We learned from each other. This thesis process, especially the oral history component, has reinforced my belief that sex education curricula could be improved exponentially if educators consulted with teenage students. This project demonstrates that young people have valuable insight into their own education, especially with regards to a discussion as personal as sexuality.

Conversing with young people about sex education has revealed deep truths about the systems that regulate their bodies and behavior. Their individual experiences demonstrate how harmful rule-based curricula can be. From this frustration, anxiety, hurt, and boredom have come concrete ideas for how to change this process. If implemented carefully, these strategies relating to community, communication, and deconstructing oppressive systems through sex education could ultimately benefit young people. Teenagers could potentially walk away from public sex education class with the tools to make decisions about their own physical and emotional sexual health. If this is the intended effect of sex education class then we —scholars, educators, activists, and any invested adult— should work towards these goals.

Appendix

“Do you identify as a teenager?”

Throughout this thesis project I used the term “teenager” to identify my interview subjects. As a conclusion to each of the nine interviews I asked whether the young person themselves identified as a teenager, how they defined that identity, and why. Below is the transcript of these conversations. The double-spaced italicized phrases are my own interjections, while the single-spaced words are the responses.

Cole³⁰⁴

I do [identify as a teenager] now but it feels different. When I was thirteen I was so excited to be a teenager and be angsty and rambunctious. But now that I’m eighteen I’m realizing I have to start acting like an adult and getting my shit together. I have a future that I need to plan out, starting college in the fall, and I’ve always been independent but now it really matters. Like some of my friends can’t even read a subway map or navigate [city]. I understand that but I definitely feel more like a “legal adult” for lack of better words. So yes, I still feel like a teenager and go out to parties and stay up late, but I also have a lot of responsibilities that I have to do.

Ruby³⁰⁵

Do you identify as a teenager?

Yeah.

Why?

Because I feel like very pushed and pulled in different directions, mentally. I feel like in my mind that’s kind of what a teenager is: not only someone who is not only still figuring out who they are, but is still being kind of pulled in different directions, as to like who they’re gonna become.

³⁰⁴ “Cole,” Facebook message to author, January 1, 2018.

³⁰⁵ “Ruby,” interview by author, December 31, 2017, New York, transcript.

Pushed and pulled by whom? Or by what?

Different things. Like it could be other people. I feel like pushed and pulled by the people around me, like my parents and my peers. But I also feel very like, I feel pushed and pulled by my self and just kind of who, who I am.

Ari³⁰⁶

Do you identify as a teenager?

Yes. I do. Um... *laughs*

Why?

Because it's the word that has been kind of placed on me. Um, I've never even thought about it. I think for a long time like...I guess when I was younger I was like "Oh I can't *wait* to be a teenager." And now I'm like, *wow I hate being a teenager*. So it's like kind of, I just like took the word and I'm like, yeah I identify as that. But it's also, I guess, because it's kind of a unifying thing. You can never really get enough of those in high school. Because it seems like everyone is in such different points in their life an their...everything.

Megan³⁰⁷

Do you identify as a teenager? Why or why not? (and if the answer is no, did you six months ago?)

I guess I do now? 6 months ago my answer definitely would be yes, but since then I have turned 18 and so I am a bit confused on my identity in that sense. I think I am because I consider 20+ more adult-ish? I feel like I am still a kid. But at the same time, I am not just a teenager anymore? Sorry for the long winded answer haha, I guess my answer would be more that I am transitioning from a teenager to an adult. So I am kind of both, but I am more of a teenager then an adult.

Jack³⁰⁸

Do you identify as a teenager?

³⁰⁶ "Ari," interview by author, January 3, 2018, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

³⁰⁷ "Megan," e-mail message to author, January 4, 2018.

³⁰⁸ "Jack," interview by author, January 1, 2018, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

Yeah, I definitely identify as a teenager.

Why?

Well I'm 17 years old. I am in high school. I hang out with other people who identify as teenagers. Besides like the age range being what it is. I feel like I'm also in a very big, I feel like it also matches up with the fact that I've been going through consistent, like, transition for the past like how many years? I don't know. I'm just at a point in my life where everything is changing at a very fast rate. Yeah I'm at a point where everything in my life is changing very rapidly and I'm trying to train myself for the adult years.

Awesome.

I think that is a very cool question. I wouldn't have expected that.

Daniel³⁰⁹

Do you identify as a teenager?

Yes! Strongly. Proudly!

Why?

Because I feel like, this is something that I was thinking about recently: I was wondering why I have such a kind of innate and inherent passion for social justice, because like I'm not really someone that *has* to. I mean, I'm white, I'm a man, I'm straight (right now) and, like, [social justice has] never been something that personally affected me. (I'm Jewish, but like I never really cared about that.) And I think part of it is, I really strongly believe that, I'll just say minors in general —anyone under the age of 18— in our society is like completely discounted and discredited. Like no one listens to us.

I mean I definitely, like the concept that someone is three months older than me means...they know more what they're doing than I do [is ridiculous]. I think most of the kids at our school —I'm gonna retract that, I think a lot of the kids at our school— are smarter than a lot of people who are adults. And I think it's not just about intelligence, but in general. Youth often has a perspective on things that no one else has. And no one listens to teenagers: teenagers specifically because adolescence is the point when, on a psychological, developmental level, you've reached the point when you can start thinking about really abstract high concepts and you can be on the same level as adults. But still no one listens to you. And we don't have any power. You know, [things like] teachers not

³⁰⁹ “Daniel,” interview by author, January 3, 2018, Facebook Video Calling, transcript.

letting us go to the bathroom.³¹⁰ At the end of the day, wherever I go, an adult still has complete authority over me. If they *choose* to give me, you know, if they choose to allow me to have my own level of autonomy or whatever *great*. But they can take it away at any point.

And so that like defines being a teenager for you?

Right, I think that as a teenager we're like, I think teenagers are I think that we're underestimated.

I agree. That's one of my favorite questions. I get the best answers.

Well the reason I hesitated [at first] was, as my eighteenth birthday is drawing nearer, since I turned 17 —and I guess this is a little hypocritical because I'm taking everything I just said that was bullshit about society and now believing in it, which is one of the best parts about socialization— but you know, in three months I'm supposed to be an adult. And I don't really feel ready. But also I feel like I've wanted to be an adult for a long time *because* I like wanted that independence and I wanted people to listen to me. So, I want to be considered an adult. Or oh, I don't know, I keep pushing myself recently and thinking like, you're gonna be an adult soon, you're gonna have to start being —even though I guess 18 isn't *really* an adult— but I'm at the point where I'm not gonna be a teenager for long. So it's interesting.

*Well, from my personal experience there's definitely a weird liminal space between teenager and adult because I repeat "I'm an adult" all the time and I don't believe in it and no one else does either so, *laughing.**

Right, I don't think we ever grow up. Honestly, what I feel like I am, deepest down, I still feel like I'm just like a three-year-old. Like I don't think we ever stop being kids. And I never wanted to stop being a kid, you know, I was always in a stage of I wanted to be older so I could be independent, but you know, it's like the Peter Pan song, "*I won't grow up.*" I took that to heart.

³¹⁰ This is a reference to an earlier part of our conversation where Daniel explained that, at his school, there are teachers who do not allow students to use the bathroom during class. Daniel viewed this as an arbitrary exercise of power by his teachers. We discussed how this is especially difficult for trans and gender non-conforming students who wish to use the only gender neutral bathroom, inconveniently located in the nurse's office in a remote part of the school. We also talked about how this policy could be potentially harmful or embarrassing to menstruating students who are not allowed to leave class inconspicuously to use the restroom.

Alex³¹¹

Do you identify as a teenager? And why or why not?

I do, because I haven't reached the point in my life where I see myself as an adult.

Ryan³¹²

How would you define being a teenager?

I would say that it is a period of time where one feels confused about ones identity and standing in society and that it is a time where one feels like they are misunderstood a great deal, mainly from family but that it is also an exciting period in that it is one of the single most fun times in your life due to all the dances teenagers go to alongside the parties. It is also where one (Most often) experiments to discover what their sexuality is.

Leah³¹³

Do you identify as a teenager?

I am by definition a teenager. Do I like to party and hang out with seventeen-year-olds? Not particularly. I don't know if that makes sense. I don't know what other label I could use. I love hanging out with my teachers and people [in their early twenties] etc. but I also know it's weird sometimes because I'm a literal infant comparatively. I don't know if adults love hanging out with me as much as I love hanging out with them. When I'm with adults I think I self-identify as a kid.

³¹¹ "Alex," Facebook message to author, January 1, 2018.

³¹² "Ryan," Facebook message to author, April 14, 2018.

³¹³ "Leah," Facebook message to author, January 1, 2018.
Leah's response is edited slightly for clarity, with permission.

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