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Urban Early Adolescent Narratives on Sexuality

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Citation

Urban early adolescent narratives on sexuality:
Accidental and intentional influences of family, peers, and the media

Linda Charmaraman, Corinne McKamey

Abstract

In this paper, we examine the ways that early adolescents talked, interacted, and made references to events in their individual and collective lives during photography-based focus groups about sexuality and relationships. Twenty-three participants (10 boys and 13 girls) were recruited from three urban schools participating in a comprehensive sex education impact evaluation in the Northeast. We analyzed conversational narratives that were elicited in a group process while sharing photos of important people, contexts, and situations, showcasing participants' exploration of sexuality and relationships. Our analysis revealed four main themes: (a) Direct and indirect family communication about sexuality, (b) Accidental and intentional Internet usage, (c) Shared and contested peer knowledge, and (d) School as a direct and indirect learning context. Implications and future directions for practice, research, and policy are explored.

In contrast to the Bush era of funding abstinence-only programs, in 2010 President Obama allocated $114 million of federal support toward comprehensive sex education that uses an evidence-based approach. Findings from a recent meta-analysis of 62 evidence-based studies from the CDC-appointed Task Force on Community Preventive Services (2009) indicate that comprehensive risk reduction programs reduce both prevalence and frequency of teen sexual activity. The shift in policy toward providing comprehensive sex education may help to reverse recent increases in teen pregnancies. Although teen pregnancy rates were on the decline before 2005, between 2005-2007 they rose for all racial/ethnic groups, except for Hispanics, with Native American teen pregnancies increasing at the rate of 12%, Black teens at 6%, White teens at 5%, and Asian teens at 2% (CDC, 2010). These alarming statistics make adolescent sexual risk-taking and the precursors and contexts in which this behavior occurs a critical theme in current education policy debates. This paper more closely examines how and in what ways youth talk and think about sex and sex education.

Young adolescents consistently report that they would prefer to learn about sex and topics related to sex from their parents, even though many parents find it difficult to talk with their children about sex (Fisher, 1986; Simanski, 1998). Despite this preference to learn about sex from parental sources, peer groups, school environments, and the media (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002) are also important sources of information and norms about sex, especially in middle to later adolescence (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002). Christopher (2001) has developed a model for understanding these individual and relational influences on sexual activity for early adolescents by combining symbolic interactionism and role theory. Christopher's model posits that shared meanings and roles regarding sexual activity are created and negotiated through interactions with significant others,

such as peers, dating partners, and parents. The reciprocal flow of influence that takes place in interactions with significant others contributes to shaping young adolescents' views about sexual activity. Consequently, many curriculum-based sex education programs which do not address other relational contexts may not be effective because what students learn in a classroom setting is only one part of what and how they learn about sex (Jorgensen, 1983; Martinez, Abma, & Copen, 2010). In order to expand the scope of sex education and to effectively evaluate how best to teach about sex, it is crucial to understand how early adolescents develop their sexuality beliefs and behaviors. Such exploration is often left out of quantitative "evidence-based" methodology, because interactions among adolescents and significant others are difficult to examine through survey methodology. A qualitative lens provides an optimal vehicle to explore relational interactions and meaning making.

This qualitative study examines how early adolescents make meaning of their relational experiences, (e.g. romantic, friendship, familial, sexual) within multiple contexts (Chase, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Herman, 1999; Josselson, 1995). In agreement with Christopher's view that adolescent sexual activity is a set of complex socially constructed phenomena, Gilmore, DeLamater, and Wagstaff (1996) suggest that it is beneficial for researchers to give youth the opportunity to talk about their sexual experiences in their own words, which can offer insights that may inform sexual health interventions (Eyre & Millstein, 1999). Although sexuality education is socially constructed, most curricula focus on biological aspects of reproduction, often isolating these bits of information from the greater context of relationships (Ward & Taylor, 1994). In this paper, we examine the ways that early urban adolescents talked, interacted, and made references to events in their individual and collective lives during photography-based focus groups about sexuality and relationships. This photography-based method draws heavily from

Wang's concept of photovoice, and adapts two of its aims: 1) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about relationships and sexuality through group discussion of photographs, and (2) to inform policymakers and curriculum developers about the perspectives of adolescents for whom policies and programs serve (Luttrell, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Pies, 2004; Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998).

Sexuality education in the middle school years is understudied compared to the high school years (O'Donnell, O'Donnell, & Stueve, 2001). Despite the fact that many sex intervention programs are targeted for young adolescents of color, thus attempting to control minority adolescents' sexual activity (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009), relatively few researchers take into account the perspectives and lived urban realities that these youths face. We utilized a photography project as an entry point to gather insider information on early urban adolescents' inner worlds. The photographs students took became a research tool to invite informal discussion and group thematic analysis about relationships and knowledge about sex. These discussions provide insights into how early adolescents frame knowledge and what beliefs they develop and maintain through relating with others. The photography-based group meetings also allowed sufficient time to develop trust in the confidentiality process and to establish rapport among the students and with the researchers. The social interactions captured through students' spontaneous language made it possible for the researchers to identify and describe students' beliefs, experiences, and attitudes about sex as students represented themselves to a mixed-gender, mixed age group.

In the present study, the following research questions informed the inquiry: What are the contexts and situations in which early urban adolescents informally gather/explore information

on relationships and sexuality? How do early urban adolescents narrate stories of sexuality and relationships through group dialogue and photographs?

<div align="center">Method</div>

Participants

Twenty-three 6th grade adolescents (10 boys and 13 girls aged 11-13) participated in an exploratory photography-based focus group study, recruited from students who participated in an impact evaluation of a comprehensive middle school sex education curriculum developed by a regional affiliate of Planned Parenthood. Participants came from three public middle schools in an urban, metropolitan area of the Northeast. All names used in this study were chosen by participants to protect confidentiality. Racial/ethnic breakdowns are as follows: 61% Black, 26% Latino/a, 9% Multiracial, and 4% White. Almost all participants lived with their mother (86%) whereas only a third lived with their father or stepfather in the home. About one-fifth of the adolescents lived with their grandmother and a few lived with a grandfather, aunt, or niece/nephew (less than 10% respectively). Study participants came from large families with the mean number of siblings at 3.64 and a range of two to eight siblings.

Procedures

Recruitment and consent. In term of our position as researchers, the first author was a female Asian American with a background in adolescent development who was experienced in conducting focus groups with middle school students and performing content and thematic analyses. The other author was a White researcher who had a background in teaching middle school science (and sex education) and had experience conducting narrative discourse analyses. Both researchers had experience in ethnographic field methodology. We obtained institutional ethics approval as well as the necessary school-level permissions before we commenced the

study. A pilot focus group of five 7th grade students from one of the schools was conducted to test procedures and prompts. We then purposively selected three school sites from the pool of 24 schools participating in the impact evaluation that were similar in terms of racial/ethnic student body composition, percent eligible for free/reduced priced lunch, and school size. All 6th grade students at the three schools who were present for the impact evaluation's baseline survey were invited to participate in a multi-session photography-based focus group. As incentives to participate, students were offered free disposable cameras, free photo development and prints, snacks, and monetary compensation ($5 per session). They took home letters including a description of the study, a parent/guardian consent form, and a photo release form. Students were told that since there was limited space in the photography group, admission would be on a first come, first served basis to the first 4 girls and 4 boys who returned signed consent forms from each school. Participation in the study was voluntary at every phase. We worked with school liaisons to schedule the one-hour group sessions at a time when all students were available.

Setting up photography project rules. Focus groups are a qualitative research tool capitalizing on group processes and interpersonal interactions to gain rich experiential data (Asbury, 1995; Carey, 1994; Krueger, 1998). Photovoice, a photography-based focus group research methodology, typically incorporates participatory action research with enhancing participants' "voice" (Wang & Burris, 1994). Wang & Burris' original study invited participants who were from a marginalized group (in this case, Chinese village women), to photograph and share their perspectives and experiences of their daily work and health-related realities. In this study of early adolescents' views about sexuality, we made adaptations to the photovoice method to address the goal of eliciting early adolescents' subjective experiences as informal researchers and data gatherers, valuing their knowledge and insights grounded in their own experiences

embedded in a particular community (Wang, 1999). Sex and relationships are often taboo

subjects for early adolescents, making these topics difficult to photograph and share publicly. We

decided to guide participants in focusing not just on the content of their images they collected but

also on the stories and meanings that were sparked by sharing the photographs. The adaptation

resulted in a design where focus group participants not only engaged in conversations about the

images presented in the group, but they also told stories and talked more generally with each

other about important people and relational contexts where they constructed meanings about

sexual topics. The photography-based discussions provided a generative space for mixed-gender

groups of adolescents to talk with one another and with the researchers about relationships,

health, and sex. Most students eagerly participated, submitting their cameras to be processed and

participating in weekly one-hour sessions that spanned over 4 to 5 weeks. Students told us that

they loved having the opportunity to take photos with their cameras, and enjoyed participating in

the weekly discussions prompted by their photos. That students so readily engaged in the

photography groups contrasts with Tolman's (2005) research experience where she was unable

to convene single sex focus groups in urban schools to discuss sex and sexuality (p. 31). The fact

that we advertised our study as a photography project about middle school relationships might

have helped with initiating students' interest in joining and participating in the focus groups.

The first session consisted of participants getting to know one another and the researchers

laying the groundwork for a safe space to talk about personal lives. During this introductory

socialization period, we were cognizant of our role as early career academic researchers whom

the students had no previous experience with outside of remembering us from the survey data

collection. We described the purpose of the sessions as a research project that gives students

cameras, inviting them to take pictures of important people and events in their lives so that we

can understand their world. We told them that we wanted to learn about their lives through the images they shared with us as well as their stories describing the contexts behind the photographs. We then went into detail about issues of confidentiality, namely that (a) we, as the researchers, would not identify them in any of our public research findings and (b) any personal issues that arose during the project would stay within the walls of the session and would not be repeated outside the group. We discussed who the potential audience of the photographs were, e.g. classmates and family members. Issues of ethics, power, and privacy were also discussed, including asking for permission to photograph others, taking photos in such a way as to disguise the identity of others, or taking photos of something abstract and symbolic. Finally, we discussed the elicitation prompts or thematic questions that would guide their photography, which were depicting a) images of important relationships and b) what draws (or attracts) people together and draws them apart.

Photography protocol. Students had at least four days to take pictures with their 27 exposure, single-use cameras before returning them to us to be developed. Each session entailed captioning photos, a "show and tell" for a select number of photos per student, and group discussion about the photo themes and the stories that framed the photos. We also talked about any problems that arose during the photo-taking period, e.g. *Were the people they wanted to take photos of available? Were they receptive or did they avoid being photographed? Were there other people and contexts that they felt uncomfortable capturing? Why?* All sessions were audio-taped, photographs were catalogued, and field notes were taken. A total of 14 hours of photography sessions were conducted, yielding 453 pages of transcribed dialogue.

Data Analysis

The data for this analysis are derived from the visual and verbal narratives of 23 6th grade photography focus group participants. Although we performed a preliminary content analysis of the photos (Charmaraman & McKamey, 2010), we will focus primarily on the verbal narratives in this paper. Transcriptions of audio from the group sessions were reviewed, verified, and coded by the two authors. We conducted a preliminary coding analysis by reading and rereading transcripts to identify initial themes related to sexuality, relationships, and contextual influences. During each of these successive coding stages, we created a common coding system and data dictionary (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998) for images and transcripts.

According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998), narrative analysis entails different modes of reading which are not always mutually exclusive: holistic-content (i.e. narratives as a whole and not separate units) versus categorical-content (i.e. concentrating on meaningful parts and categories of the text). Conversational narratives were divided into bucket categories (e.g. sexuality-related, relationship-related, etc.) during our initial reading of the transcripts. Once the authors developed a common coding system which refined the initial bucket codes, the first author searched for narratives and explanations that address important relationships, knowledge and any influences on participants' thinking and understanding of sexuality and relating with others. During the analytical process it was necessary to return many times to the original transcripts and photos in order to clarify categories, utilizing both the categorical and holistic-content modes to confirm and deepen the emerging results.

Results and Discussion

Our analysis revealed four main themes that emerged relevant to the first research question involving important people, contexts and situations in the participants' informal exploration of sexuality and relationships. These main themes were (a) Direct and indirect family

communication about sexuality, (b) Accidental and intentional Internet usage, (c) Shared and contested peer knowledge, and (d) School as a direct and indirect learning context. We discuss the second research question — how participants narrated stories of sexuality and relationships through group dialogue and photographs — in the sections below.

Direct and Indirect Family Communication About Sexuality

Our analysis of the group dialogue pertaining to messages about sexuality in the home identified both direct (e.g. face-to-face conversations) and indirect (e.g. avoidance and anxiety) communication about sexual values and attitudes. Participants' stories about talking with family members regarding sexual issues most often addressed the topic of delaying sex, and caregivers often used a variety of strategies and genres to talk about delaying sex. For instance, Roger described a scare tactic his grandmother had used since he was five: [he should] remain a virgin or else his "weewee was going to fall off." Roger confessed that this scary message kept him up at night. Other parents were sometimes vocal about their values around premarital sex and chose to use both direct and indirect language to convey messages to their children. For example, Tweedy Bird reported what her mom thinks about sex:

> It's not good to have at a certain age, and it's not good to have children. And she says that when penises go into the vagina, it isn't good. And at like my age or when I'm sixteen or—I should not probably have sex— she said I'm not supposed to have sex until I'm fifty-one.

The above parent conveys to her daughter the importance of not getting pregnant at a young age through providing an evaluative statement using specific biological terms, "when penises go into the vagina, it isn't good." This statement sends a direct message about her daughter avoiding vaginal intercourse with a male, but at the same time avoids referencing other kinds of intimate

sexual behaviors like petting, oral sex, or intimacy between same sex couples. The mother also avoids discussing when her daughter might realistically engage in any kind of sexual intimacy by referencing a distant target age for having sex, "fifty-one." For Tweety bird, the message about not having vaginal sex and not getting pregnant is conveyed loud and clear. However, in this story, as in most student stories about caregivers talking with them about delaying sex, the parent provides little guidance about navigating and making decisions about when and in what ways the adolescent might navigate participating in different levels of intimacy with a partner.

Siblings also reinforced messages about delaying sex. For instance, Jameila often relied on her older sister to tell her the unwritten rules of talking about sex in their household:

My mom, she doesn't like talking about it in her house. But like my sister, she says

that oh, I shouldn't have it until I'm out of my mom's house—like when I'm older, when

I have my own apartment. And then that um —be safe and don't have no kids."

This pattern of indirect, "trickle down" communication about sensitive topics like sexuality is not uncommon in families with several children (Kornreich, Hearn, Rodriguez, & O'Sullivan, 2003). In a poll of 650 teens aged 13-18, the Kaiser Family Foundation (1998) found that siblings and peers were tied as the most frequently named sources of information about sex. The reliance and trust in sibling advice was demonstrated in our sample by the large numbers of photos of siblings across all three schools – older, younger, half-brothers, stepsisters, etc.

In another example of "trickle down" communication, Tweedy Bird talked about her family history of teen pregnancy and that she was expected not to follow in those footsteps:

Well, my grandmother, she had her first child when she was sixteen. She's sixty-one

now, but she has five children. Well my brother was like I shouldn't be— he said he

wasn't trying to be rude, but he said I shouldn't be like grandma, having kids when I'm

sixteen and dropping out of school. He said pretty much what my mother did.

This story illustrates how two family members encourage Tweedy Bird to resist early parenthood,

which counters the story lived and experienced by her grandmother who became a teen mother.

Her immediate family explained that having sex too young could negatively affect her academic

future. For participants in our study, conversations with siblings about sex often conveyed direct

messages about delaying sex or avoiding parenthood which connects how the past could

consequently affect one's future (Chase, 2010; Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001; Laslett, 1999).

In terms of broader socioeconomic contexts, some participants showed photos of their

working class neighborhoods, sharing the struggles they faced living in overcrowded homes or

shelters, or having parents with substance abuse problems. Prior research has found that

adolescents from more economically stable families reported that parents were more often a

source of information about birth control methods than those coming from economically

struggling families (Sutton et al., 2002). Focusing more on negative consequences and analogies,

urban participants in the present study reported that parents rarely initiated explanations about

general sexual topics, such as bringing up the "birds and the bees" talk or why everyone talks

about sex and relationships. Stories where parents did provide general explanations about sexual

topics typically referenced puberty and biological development. For instance, Taty noted that her

aunt never talked about sex to her, just about getting her period. Participants recalled stories

about parents using an indirect "prop" such as a pregnant family dog in order to broach the

sensitive subject of how puberty is related to being able to get pregnant. Michael told the group:

They said don't get her pregnant on her first period, because it's like bad for her to have

babies—Because if you get them pregnant the first period, then the babies won't come

out as smart as they should be on the second period.

As an indirect conduit for communicating messages about sexuality, talking about a pet is

safe – not human and not the daughter/son in the family. In some cases, participants reported that

older siblings passed down knowledge about puberty to younger siblings. For example, Daddy J

described how his older brother would tell him the facts of life, including his belief that "tidy

whities" restrict testicle growth.

My older brother, he said that he had puberty, because my little brother thought boys

don't have puberty. And he said that your testicles get bigger when you come to the age

of twelve or thirteen, thereabout. They start to get bigger… Oh you would know that if

you wore boxers and this isn't for girls, but, if you wore tidy whities, it stays small.

In two of the schools, a sex education intervention incorporated a family activity for each

lesson to be completed at home, aiming to foster active dialogue with parents/caregivers

regarding sexuality. Most of the participants in our study described a home life where their

parents worked long hours and were often too tired and overwhelmed to spend much one-on-one

time with them. The participants at times perceived these long absences from connecting with

their caregivers as indirect messages of avoidance or disinterest in their general well-being. For

instance, when it was Malcolm's turn to talk about his photos, he chose to share images of his

father on the cell phone or turned away from him, captioning the photo as "seldom father."

Malcolm added that, "But when we're all together, he laughs a lot with us and he has fun with

us…[but] if he has work and he's tired, he doesn't want any of us." Some participants told

stories of their parents as ships passing in the night, e.g. "my mom is a workaholic. By the time I

get home at 6:15, there's not a lot of time left before going to bed" or "My mom goes to work at 6 in the morning. She comes home at 4, eats, and then goes to sleep." Students across the three schools also expressed ambivalence towards communicating with their parents or guardians around sexuality issues. Though most participants lamented that their parents were not as accessible as they had hoped, they also mentioned that it was their own decision to avoid completing the family activity with their parents. For instance, participants would claim that they didn't have time, or wanting to do it alone and only getting their parent to sign off on the family activity, or feeling more comfortable talking to an aunt, grandparent, or sibling about sexuality.

Participants sometimes referenced their experiences in approaching their parents to complete their sex education family activities through presenting photos of parents with their backs turned, cooking in the kitchen, watching TV slumped on the couch, or talking on the phone. Participants at times reported repeated attempts to directly communicate with their parents, often struggling with a desire to connect and frustration around parent's lack of availability or their misunderstanding of the purpose of the family sex activity.

> Selena: I was trying to get my mom's attention and she was sleeping. "Mom, I've got to do my homework." And then she was like, "Go away." I'm like, "Mom, I've got to do my homework." "Go away, go away." I was waking her up. And because of the topic, she was like, "Why are you in sex-ed class? Are you pregnant?" So she was like, "Have you had sex yet?" "No." "As long as you haven't kissed a boy, you're not going to kiss a boy and get pregnant, right?" I was like— "Yeah, just never mind about the homework."

In the above case, there was a misunderstanding about the purpose of sex education as the mother framed it as having relevance for students who were already sexually active or pregnant. Another mother wondered why the class did not incorporate an experiential, hands-on lesson

about caring for an infant: "like did they give you fake babies that actually cry to take care of?' And I was like, 'No.' And she was like, 'Well, they should do that.' " In this case, the mother gave an indirect cue that it is the school's job to educate about childrearing and abruptly ended the conversation. She "fast forwarded" to the consequences of having unprotected sex without addressing what intercourse is or postponing intimate relationships. Many students recalled a similar pattern of approaching their parents about the sex education family activity, but having an all too brief interaction or being anxiously turned away. One mother was disturbed by an assignment that had to do with discussing AIDS. She immediately reacted by saying, "Oh my God…Take this back... I can't even do this." The daughter in this case was unable to complete her family activity due to her mother's reluctance and avoidance of controversial topics.

Participants' talk suggests that members of a family may have significant anxieties about having conversations about sex with each other and that both parental caregivers and adolescents sometimes used strategies to help overcome those anxieties, such as using analogies about animals or scare tactics or going to a sibling for advice. We encountered stories of both direct and indirect messages about sex, especially delaying sex, being passed down and redistributed within families through parents and extended family members, such as siblings and grandparents. As is described in the next section, participants also referenced the Internet as a context where they encountered and learned about sex.

Accidental and Intentional Internet Usage

Our findings revealed many more stories of accidental than intentional uses of the Internet for gathering information about sex and related topics. Some participants recalled stories of learning about sexuality through accidental encounters in the home, particularly in terms of

masturbation and desire. For instance, Tweedy Bird had an accidental lesson when she walked in on her brother watching porn on the Internet in the bedroom:

> Tweedy Bird: Then I saw this man, he was putting his penis in the girl's vagina, and she was bending down and she was slapping herself and touching her breasts. And then I saw my brother putting his hand down and touching his penis and all—(Laughter)
>
> RESEARCHER: HE WASN'T EMBARASSED?
>
> Tweedy Bird: No, because he didn't know I was there! I walked out of nowhere, I was in the hallway—I was like, "(Name of brother). Oh my god!"
>
> RESEARCHER: AND WHAT DID HE DO?
>
> Tweedy Bird: Well, he didn't see me. And then I stopped and I ran to my room, and then he heard my door slam. And then he got pissed, and then he came, and was like, "Were you just out in the hallway?" And I was like, "Yes. What is that?" And he was like, "Oh, I'm so embarrassed."

Students described moments like the one above, where Tweedy Bird witnessed her brother masturbating to Internet porn, or others like finding a used condom in a parent's bedroom, as moments where they witnessed strange or curious acts, artifacts, or interactions. Students talked about these moments as critical incidents that were not talked about, but remained accidental experiences. Without words to debrief or make meaning between the actor and witness, the students do not claim a vantage point from which to consider the accidental event, which then remains experienced but not narrated (Smith, 2005).

The Internet was also referred to as a reliable source of information gathering about health and sexuality. Michael specifically mentioned going directly onto such websites as Google.com and Wikipedia.com to search for class assignments about health. More frequently,

though, the participants described the Internet as a potential site of "accidental" exposure to inappropriate sexualized content. One particular controversial website was spread around the school and the students were highly curious, making intentional choices to see it for themselves:

Taty: One time I was on the Internet, and I accidentally pressed a letter. I think it was 'V,' I think, and I accidentally—and my little sister came out of nowhere and pressed 'Enter,' so it just came to this nasty internet site.

RESEARCHER: WHAT WAS NASTY ABOUT THE SITE?

Kiki: Oh yeah, *everybody* was talking about um—the website—what's it called?

Taty: The nasty part of the website was there was naked girls on it.

Michael: Oh, two girls in one cup. That was the name.

Sunshine Rissa: Everybody came to school, saying "Go on Google and look it up…"

Taty: And what's on the website?

Kiki: It's very nasty.

SidekickBabe: It was on the *Family Guy*.

Sunshine Rissa: It was really nasty.

Michael: I regret it.

SidekickBabe: I just did it because *Family Guy* said it.

Taty: It was bad.

RESEARCHER: DOES IT TELL YOU ON THE WEBSITE THAT YOU SHOULD BE EIGHTEEN TO READ THIS?

Kiki: No, it doesn't. It says you must be eighteen or older to watch this video. And under it, it says "Play Video."

In the above exchange, buzz about this controversial website spread throughout their peer group, yet the act of going on to the website was a private affair which eventually became public as students confessed to knowing its sexual contents. In the above example, SidekickBabe referenced a character on a TV show, *Family Guy* as the source of information about a sexually explicit website. Here and in other group discussions, students often referenced media as sources of knowledge and information about sex and intimacy. Some research suggests that compared with peer groups and parents, media sources like TV programming and websites are often highly accessible, less embarrassing, and nonjudgmental forums where teens can seek information and models about sexuality (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005). Our research suggests that media may have provided adolescents with some exposure to meanings and models about sexuality, and students sometimes voiced regret and unresolved emotions after viewing some media sources. For example, in the above example, that students' talk focused on their reactions to watching the web-streamed video rather than focusing on the plot of the video suggests that students lacked words or ways to make meaning of what they saw. Moreover, Michael's comment that he regrets seeing the video and the multiple comments about the video being "nasty," and "bad" suggests that the video made the students uncomfortable. According to Chase (2010) storytelling is constrained by an array of social circumstances such as the emotional tenor of the story. In this example, participants had difficulty finding words to describe to their peers and to us as researchers how it felt to watch the website and the actual content of what they watched. That students brought up this website in the focus group suggests that students had a desire to find ways to express and talk about their independent experiences of the video. In this and in other Internet-related discussions, it wasn't clear how and in what ways students regularly found support in debriefing and making meaning of their online experiences with others.

There was variability in students' access to the Internet in general and social networking sites, in particular. At one of the schools, individual laptops are given to each student, which can increase students' technological literacy and can also provide more access to exploring a range of Internet sites at school. In terms of social networking usage, a few participants were not allowed by their parents to have a Myspace or Facebook page until they were a certain age, e.g. twelve. The fact that the minimum age to sign up for both social networking sites is 13 did not seem to deter students. Most participants who admitted to ever having a social networking page denied having one currently active or kept their page hidden from general public viewing. Some participants talked about using a networking page on a regular basis. One participant took a picture of his "girlfriend's Myspace page but was careful to take it from far enough away that no one would be able to identify her. Among the comments made about social networking sites, one girl talked about encountering a sexual predator, which caused her to delete her own page.

> Tweedy Bird: I deleted my MySpace when I started to get a message, but I didn't know who it was, and it was like an old person. And then it was like, "You know me." And then I said, "Who is this?" And then they were like, "You know me." And then he was like, "Um, so where do you want to meet tonight?" I'm like, "What?" And then he's like, "Send me a picture of yourself." And I'm like, "Why?" And then he was like, "Because I want to see your sexy body." And then I deleted that. I was so scared.

In these and other examples, students often described having sex-related virtual experiences or encounters on the internet or social networking sites, but they rarely talked about sharing or debriefing these experiences with parents or other adults. While this avoidance of adult authority figures for confirming or disconfirming information is a part of the natural and expected tendency for adolescents to begin to distance themselves from parents and turn to

friends as sources of information (Brown, 1990), the power of media as an important source of knowledge about sex and sexuality remains a context where adolescents are often alone in making sense of what they see and encounter.

Shared and Contested Peer Knowledge

One of the most salient observations pertaining to our second research question of how early adolescents narrated their stories about sexuality was a back and forth dialogue occurring during the group process as if to construct an acceptable script, wherein participants would share a perspective and then a group process of evaluating the truthfulness of that information would ensue. During these conversations among participants, we were attentive to the different scripts and stories that students shared with the group as they together constructed knowledge about sex. Later during analytical coding, we inquired about what contexts – parental relationships, sibling relationships, the sex education program, etc. – students referenced in their stories. Although at times students constructed what many adults might consider "misinformation," we interpreted students' stories as important clues to the ways adolescents constructed meanings about sex.

In researching how youth learn and talk about sex and relationships, we were attentive to the power differentials between us as adult researchers and the adolescents in the photography discussion groups. Because we were interested in understanding how adolescents learn about and talk with one another about sexuality and relationships, we were careful not to insert our own adult positions as "knowing everything" about sex into the conversations, thereby adding ourselves as an additional source of information. As Chin (2007) notes, conducting research with children in schools is tricky because the dominant adult-child dynamic in school positions students as listening and responding to teachers in "appropriate" ways (p. 278). Although our presence as adults impacted and censored some students' conversations, both in visible and

invisible ways, our aim was to foster a dynamic in the group where peers listened to and responded to each other as they talked about their knowledge and understanding of sex and relationships. At the end of data collection, we reported to either the sex education program educators (in the case of intervention schools), or the school counselor (in control schools) general themes and student beliefs about sexual topics that we heard in peer group discussions across schools. Although we have no direct evidence that this knowledge directly influenced policy change within the schools in the short-term[1], this knowledge potentially informed educators about the range of knowledge, peer norms, and curiosity levels that 6th graders have at their particular schools.

In their conversations with each other, participants often used age markers as reference points in their group discussion about sexual timing (Michels et al., 2005). When we prompted them about shared peer norms, most participants believed that it was best to start dating between 7th and 9th grade, with 8th grade being most common. There was a lot of disagreement over when a first kiss usually takes place, anywhere from "my 6 year old brother has a girl" to "I'm not having my first kiss until I'm fifteen at my prom." When discussing definitions of and peer norms about virginity, most participants believed a virgin was someone who "hasn't had sex." Participants often said being a virgin was an individual's choice or that adolescents needed to discuss when to initiate or delay sex with a caregiver. None of the participants in any focus group disclosed that he or she had already had sexual intercourse, but some alluded to having some knowledge of or experience with sexual experimentation, which mirrors what prior focus group research has found for this urban middle school age group (e.g. Vera, Reese, Paikoff, & Jarrett, 1996). When asked about beliefs concerning their peer network, participants guessed that almost

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[1] Within this larger evaluation project, the photography project was not positioned as a formative evaluation that would inform curriculum development, but rather to focus on the variation of the ways students talked about sex and relationships and student experience of the curriculum within urban schools.

all 6th graders were virgins, and that 70-90% of 7th and 8th graders were virgins. These beliefs about losing one's virginity were not consistent across participants, with some alluding to peers not being virgins anymore when they are 12 or 13 and other students saying that they knew of only "one person in 8th grade who has had sex." When discussing norms of having children, the majority of participants wanted only 1 or 2 children, even though most of their families were large with 3 or more siblings. The ages when participants indicated they might have their first child ranged from 17 to 40, with many squeals from their peers objecting that some of them would be too young or too old to have their first child then.

When we asked participants if they had ever initiated a conversation with their parents about sex, some participants said that the responses and reactions they had received left them uncomfortable and still searching for an answer. For instance, Tweedy Bird asked her mom, "How does sex feel?" And her mom said that "she's not ready to tell me that yet." Once Tweedy Bird shared this awkward experience with her mom, the group conversation quickly switched over to how the participants found other means of acquiring the information more readily, such as through televised media sources. Participants eagerly mentioned discovering new knowledge and sexual aspects about others' lives through a multitude of TV shows, with each participant contributing several examples of how the TV told them everything they wanted to know, as Daddy J pointed out — shows such as Discovery Health, 16 and Pregnant, Oprah, Dr. Oz, Manswers, Wendy Williams, Maury, Dr. Phil, and the Steve Wilcos show. The Tyra show, hosted by an African American female model, was one of the most popular shows mentioned across the schools. Students referenced the Tyra show as addressing issues such as dating violence or young girls who were prostitutes, pregnant, and still having sex for pay, "That girl's crazy. That's nasty and disgusting." These shows were at once displaying human stories that

were compelling to watch, yet participants often had strong opinions about moral aspects of the talk show contestants and they eagerly compared notes with each other, e.g. "Jerry Springer is fake" or "I don't get it, why they want to have sex with a girl, but don't want to take responsibility?" These scenarios of peers sharing, contesting, and referring to media sources they watched in common demonstrates the idea that the power of the media is not merely in the medium itself but in its influence among one's peer group (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005).

We inquired about how sex education courses could be more interesting and easier to learn in hopes of inviting a group decision-making process of figuring out what teaching method(s) would be best. One suggestion involved more acting out of scenarios and role-playing. Another idea involved students having more input in the flow and hierarchy of knowledge-sharing, e.g. "if the student also gets to teach [the] class what they know about it, and also they have an opportunity to also give and do projects." During the sessions, participants had opportunities to put into practice their suggestions for students to teach, sharing and contesting group knowledge about sexuality. For instance, Daddy J shared his story of his brother's experience with a condom, and the story provided a common context for participant group members to make meaning about condom use.

Girl: But you can still get pregnant if you use a condom.

RESEARCHER: YOU CAN?

Daddy J: I don't know. My brother impregnated a girl…He had on two condoms, and he impregnated her.

Girl: Well, did like the condom break or something?

Daddy J: No. And she's still pregnant. Use two—two condoms.

In this discussion, the participants began to co-construct their practical solution for a perceived malfunction of the birth control equipment. By the end of the conversation, the group agreed that two or more condoms would be safer than one. A narrator's story is often flexible and shaped by one's audience — at times the point of bringing up a specific event is to entertain or inform, confirm or challenge a pre-existing notion (Bauman, 1986; Chase, 2010; Mishler, 1986). In our discussion groups, we often saw students utilizing a range of storytelling processes (entertaining, informing, challenging, etc.) as they told and built upon stories to come to a shared understanding about a sexual topic or practice. Another incident when the group co-constructed shared knowledge about condoms was when the subject of Vaseline came up:

> Kiki: You're supposed to put Vaseline on it— (Laughter) Oh, you're supposed to wash all the chemicals off the condom before you use it.   That's what it is.
>
> Sunshine Rissa: No, you're not.
>
> M: It can break.
>
> M: Why would you wash it?
>
> RESEARCHER: DID YOU HEAR THAT IN THE CLASS?
>
> Taty: She said watch out for the heat, because it will bust.
>
> Kiki: No, she said something about washing the chemicals on the condom.
>
> Taty: Isn't that something to protect it?
>
> M: It's a lubricant. It's like a juicy thing.
>
> Kiki: Yeah, you're supposed to wash it off so it won't get all over the place.

Participants mentioned that these types of stories were passed down and constructed in the hallways and outside of classroom contexts. It's interesting to note that the conversation about washing condoms stemmed from a sex education course and the fragmented memory of some

technical details. The classmates tried to re-create the classroom lesson and to fill in details that were missing in the logic of using Vaseline and washing the condom. In the examples above, participants' talk is often action-oriented and experiential, involving a process of group explanation, that is, arguing over facts and rules/definitions yet not necessarily arriving at group conclusion. Linde (1993) suggests that people tell explanations about uncomfortable or problematic situations that people have encountered repeatedly and about which they are trying to apply a generalized logic to make meaning about. It seems that the group may have been together grappling with and narrating the process and procedures of condom usage.

School As a Direct and Indirect Learning Context

Participants often reported school as having a social climate in which teachers (a) constrained or limited their physical movement and (b) reinforced and/or sent mixed messages about societal stereotypes. Participants sometimes described a power struggle between students and teachers regarding acceptable behavior within and outside the classroom. For instance, one classmate was described as being upset that the teacher would not let her go to the bathroom during class, so she "took off her pants and pulled them back up… and then she pulled up her shirt and showed her bra to everybody in the classroom." In this example, the participant was recalling a form of social protest in which a teacher was perceived by a classmate to have gone too far in controlling the right to use the bathroom. That type of behavior (exposing oneself) was in contrast to this particular school's strict enforcement of desexualizing the classrooms and hallways, e.g. public displays of affection were strictly prohibited. Illustrating participants' sense of closeness to teachers, in some groups, participants took many photos of teachers who were important to them and in other groups, teachers were completely missing from the photos. Even the prospect of a teacher from a different subject sitting in on their sex education course made

some participants feel wary about exposing themselves in a way that wasn't confidential any longer, as if saying that the teachers would spread their information beyond the private walls.

Rumors about one's sexual reputation and sexual name-calling were recurrent sources of "drama" and gossip. Although the participants in one school claimed they did not date or come close to sexual relations with others, two sixth grade girls, Selena and Juliana were both written about, "tagged" in their own words, in the girls' bathroom at school. The conversation below prompted Juliana to take photos of the bathroom graffiti.

Selena: It was like the fourth time this year someone wrote something about me, and they wrote it in pencil. And then they wrote 1-400—1-800-SLUT.

RESEARCHER: OH. WHY DO YOU THINK THEY WOULD DO THAT?

Selena: I don't know. Because they're jealous.

In further talking about the above incident, participants conveyed dichotomous beliefs about regulating and evaluating students' sexual behavior, including references to sexual behavior in the school. For instance, participants discussed what it meant to be a "slut" and the participants chimed in with synonyms such as "ho, whore, hoodrat, hoochie, ghetto, prostitute, bitch." When asked if there are similar names for boys they said no, but it would be like calling them "a retarded, demented person." The following week, participants reported that the boys' bathroom had been "tagged" with sexual graffiti, including the line "[principal's name] sucks balls." The school administration painted over the graffiti and bolted the doors of the boys' bathroom open. When we asked about whether the graffiti in the girls' bathrooms had been painted over too, participants reported that the writing in the girls' bathroom was "just drama" and that no one cared about what was written there. In ignoring the sexualized graffiti in the girls' bathroom, the school institution conveyed a message that girls' "drama" should be ignored whereas boys and

their "tagging" and "graffiti" needed to be targeted and monitored. In other words, the school environment conveyed an implicit message that "girls will be girls" — that their "drama" was not important enough to take disciplinary action, and that boys needed to be controlled and kept under constant surveillance due to their problems being of a more serious nature and more important to address. In this particular school context, the school was perceived by the participants to be reinforcing and perpetuating a double standard between boys and girls. In talking about the bathroom incidents in the group context, participants conveyed mixed messages about how they interpreted the events. On one hand, students characterized these institutional responses as being culturally acceptable behavior, e.g. scribbles on the girls' bathroom wall was "just drama" where the "tagging" on the boys bathroom wall was deviant behavior. At the same time, students raised questions about the justness of both responses. Students' talk about their school context suggests that institutional rules and interactions with teachers and school administrators conveyed both implicit and explicit messages about which students should be controlled and/or ignored vis a vis gender and sexual behavior (Bay-Cheng, 2003).

Summary

Storied knowledge contrasts with knowledge traditionally conveyed in sex-education curricula, which often focuses on biological terms and health-related behaviors/risks (Luttrell, 2003). This photography-based focus group study provides insights about several storied contexts – family, peer, school and media — in which urban early adolescents construct ideas about sex. In the focus groups students constructed knowledge about sex together through sharing photos, stories, and experiences that happened to them, friends or siblings, or people they observed in media programming. Adolescents most often expressed and constructed their knowledge of sex through individual and co-constructed narratives.

From the results of this analysis, it is evident that both direct and indirect family communication about sexuality and relationships can have profound yet at times subtle influences on early adolescents' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Participants in this study often detailed uncomfortable talks with parents that were also missed opportunities to go in depth on a subject that they were still curious about. When there was direct communication between parent and adolescent, the messages most often concerned the prevention of teenage pregnancy and delaying sex far — sometimes unrealistically far — into the future. The influence of non-parental family members was also prevalent, with siblings being the most frequently discussed influence, both older and younger. Television shows and the World Wide Web provided a powerful shared context for students to collaboratively construct meanings about sex and sexuality. In these contexts, students reported often being on their own when they encountered a sexualized "event" on the Internet, and rarely talked about debriefing experiences with parents or other adults. In contrast, the collective experience of recalling these solitary memories with their peers helped bring out participants' need to share the knowledge they have gathered in an open forum. Schools were often contexts that conveyed explicit and implicit messages about gender, sex and sexuality through both the presence and absence of restrictive policies and regulations.

Implications for Practice

This study focused on the perspectives of a small sample of urban adolescents in three Northeastern U.S. middle schools. Although we cannot generalize our specific content findings to other adolescent populations (e.g. suburban students, students in other geographic regions of the U.S. or other countries), this study does illustrate the power of using student-centered methods to engage adolescents in discussions about sex and relationships. Sex education interventions would benefit from taking a holistic approach to sexuality as it is understood by

adolescents in settings outside of textbooks and didactic contexts. An advantage of photovoice is its flexibility as both a research methodology and a potential pedagogical tool. Photography-based focus group techniques can be used both to gather data about adolescents' ideas around sexuality and to create a more natural setting to learn about sexuality, bringing students' diverse contexts, beliefs, and ways of knowing directly into classroom discussions.

Our findings suggest that exploring alternate forms of teaching and learning can imbue classrooms with creative and engaging learning opportunities, such as incorporating experiential forms of knowledge (e.g. case study, role play, storytelling), which may better capture early adolescents' attention than presentations of de-contextualized facts. Participants in this study yearned for more concrete scenarios, to get out of their chairs and physically get into the characters in a role-playing situation. In sex education classrooms, educators can leverage the power of the social group dynamic to develop thinking and beliefs about sexuality by using small group break-outs to encourage dialogue in a safe space. In Ward and Taylor's (1994) focus group study about how adolescents of color felt about school-based sexuality education, students reported a desire for space to explore emotional processes such as embarrassment, passion or fear that occurred during sexual decision making "in the heat of the moment" (p. 58). Similarly, in our study the students expressed cravings for more discussion on feelings, values, beliefs about intimacy and sex, and a better understanding of the latest thing they heard, asking – "is it true?" Students asked questions about each other's photos at the group sessions, suggesting that students wanted to interact, to question, and to contribute to the collective knowledge of the group. Using developmentally-appropriate collaborative discussion and role playing strategies could better engage and provide opportunities for students to express and share and construct their attitudes, beliefs and ideas about sex together.

To help foster conversations among family members and adolescents, future sex education programs might provide students and parents attending PTO meetings or family nights with opportunities to role play initiating conversations with family members about sex. Parents' focus on delaying sex and absence of talk about negotiating intimacy when it does occur seems to align with Tolman's (2005) finding that urban and suburban girls didn't have contexts in which to talk about desire. Role plays might help to scaffold conversations about how to move beyond the topic of delaying sex to focus on sexual desire, romance and intimacy-related decisions. To better attend to the values, norms, and common decision-making about sex and intimacy encountered by adolescents within a particular school or community, a sex education class might provide opportunities for students to co-write typical scenarios that a teenager in their school might encounter in a virtual or physical relational situation. These locally produced scenarios, distributed in a variety of ways (for example, a podcast, a website) would provide educators insights about issues that are relevant to students and would also potentially provide parents and students with relevant and "local" narratives about which to talk. Dialogues fostered within and across the school community would potentially help to foster a social climate of open communication among parents and teens.

Another recommendation from our findings is to develop family sex education activities with urban minority youth and working families in mind. Pressed for time with little privacy and/or acute anxieties about approaching sensitive, embarrassing material with their children, there is a great need to acknowledge families' limitations, for instance, by designing family activities that can be completed during a pick-up/drop-off ride (or walk) to or from school. Activities that take advantage of the downtime in front of the TV can also be promising curricular strategies for greater family participation. Suggestions for how to include siblings into

the conversation would be welcome in homes where privacy is scarce. Also, the material sent home should be written in the home language, using plain language that is free of jargon. Sex education programs that aim to invite family participation should also take into account nontraditional notions of "caregivers," leaving room for the possibility that important non-parental persons can be key resources who will provide trusted and non-trusted information about sexuality.

School climate is a significant dimension of learning about sexuality, and it is important that teachers, students, and administrators have opportunities to reflect on the implicit and explicit messages about sexuality, gender, and intimacy that are conveyed and constructed within the school context. Our findings suggest that local contextual factors, including school policies, norms about how and in what ways students and teachers relate to one another, and the neighborhood in which schools were located were essential components of how students made meaning of sexuality, gender, and relationships. For example, the same student-created scenarios or situations used for inviting discussion with parents can be utilized within a teacher professional development setting, which may provide opportunities for teachers and students to problem solve issues or obstacles that arise from these discussions. Students and teachers might utilize photovoice to promote school level change through inviting students to take, caption, and display photographs about relationship and intimacy themes. Students and staff could together learn from the collection of images students produce, engaging in topics such as comfort and discomfort around sexuality, the power of peer groups, the presence or absence of trusted teachers to talk to about sexuality, etc. This school-wide effort could engage students and educators in discussions about issues of sex and intimacy that are important to students and staff.

Moving beyond conventional socializing agents, mass media is a powerful sex educator, often providing models for behavior that the teen's own peer group would not condone (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005). Strasburger and Wilson (2002) have hypothesized that when young adolescents are sexually maturing, they may turn to the media as a more available and private source of information on sex than their own peer group. Many modes of media influence were described in the group conversation, including televised media, (e.g. talk shows, media technologies/devices, Internet), and social media (e.g. Facebook). This powerful digitization of cultural contexts necessitates more attention to media literacy in sexual health courses, and even web-based wiki sites. Using wiki-sites and student-generated narratives as learning tools, schools and communities could create a positive and supported information network that attends to the digital realities of students' lives and provides ways for students to engage with peers and adults about accidental and intentional experiences on the Internet. Televised media characters and plot situations are ripe for educational discussion lead-ins in classroom lessons and for impromptu discussions in the home about one's family values and societal norms. According to participants' accounts, the TV show discussion was one of the few successful sex education family activities, suggesting that storied narratives that are fictional and accessible to both parents and students may be important resources for sexuality education. Classroom materials can move beyond textbooks and static diagrams and move toward more audio-visually engaging material and devices, e.g. board games, models, videos, cell phones, and educational websites.

<div align="center">Implications for Research</div>

In terms of future directions for photovoice-inspired research, we suggest that the visual aspects of photo narratives around adolescent sexuality be explored in more depth, such as the contextual and social influences on what images adolescents choose to present their perspectives.

Our study focused on how participants' presented and interpreted their photographs in a mixed gender focus group. Providing participants multiple opportunities to present and interpret images to a range of audiences – e.g. small groups, individual interviews, public exhibitions -- may provide insights into how students re-present themselves and their photographs (Luttrell, 2010). Within these different audience contexts, the ways students talk and also the presence and absence of particular images may inform researchers about the comfort levels and salient contexts of sexual health discovery for middle school youth. By utilizing technological innovations and new media, Chase (2010) emphasizes that researchers discover new avenues for narrating the self and for exploring realities, relationships, and identities. It will be important to conduct more research on the longitudinal impact and intersections of conventional (e.g. classroom-based) and unconventional contexts (e.g. internet-based) on early adolescents' understanding of sexual health and relationships. For instance, in exploring how adolescents utilize new media to discuss sexual topics with their peers, how does the concept of instant messaging change the meaning of "naturally occurring conversations" (Quinn, 2005) as it is understood in narrative theory?

Future research can provide the foundation for developing theoretical models to (a) involve diverse groups of parents and other key family members as active participants in a sex education curriculum, (b) understand how formal and informal ways of learning about sex converge and are cognitively stored in early adolescents' minds, and (c) explore how narrative research methods can be incorporated with more traditional, evidence-based methodology to highlight adolescents' voice and meaning-making around sex within the multiple, intersecting influences of their lives (e.g. Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003).

Implications for Policy

In order to make a positive change on the lives of those who are less often heard (in our study, urban middle school students and their sexuality) it is imperative to make adolescents' perspectives visible to educators and policymakers in order to promote community action (Wang, 2004; Wang & Pies, 2004). This study highlighted the need for (a) increased attention to educational policies that disregard the need for comprehensive sex education and (b) the need for more youth advocates who can help construct contexts where adolescents can seek out information, role models, and support concerning sexuality. For instance, youth-serving organizations, school, and PTA committees that are concerned about district policies that affect the health and access to sex education of early adolescents might utilize media outlets, such as pamphlets and televised public service announcements to attract community attention and provide pressure for policy and systemic changes toward affordability and accessibility of sex education (Keller & Brown, 2002). These media materials can incorporate photographs and narratives taken by students in a school district in hopes of illustrating to policymakers how their constituents need more financial support and attention to middle school sex education, which can eventually contribute to higher graduation rates and greater public health benefits.

In states where alternative sources of sexuality education are limited and abstinence until marriage is the only message allowed in the classroom, local community-wide distribution of sexuality education sites such as www.sxetc.org, www.iwannaknow.org, and www.teenwire.org would provide some access to adolescents eager to be exposed to more scripts from reliable sources and contexts for exploring issues of sexuality. Additionally, some libraries and school districts may limit the ability of young people to conduct key word searches about sexual information due to software programs such as CyberPatrol, which can block out sexual health websites (Hafner, 1998). Rather than framing Internet media as an unregulated, seductive source

of misinformation, educators and policy makers can direct adolescents to sexual health websites

that provide teenagers with social and interactive forums for gathering information on sexuality

(Heins, 2002). In terms of what policymakers can prioritize, they can increase city, state, and

federal funds to support youth-serving organizations and sexual health promoting websites which

focus on providing students with forums to talk with their peers and parents about how to make

reflective decisions about sexual health, which will be critical for linking informal, community-

based, and systems-building collaborations. Additionally, this study, which illustrates that early

adolescents learn about sexuality in a variety of formal and informal contexts, reinforces the

need for middle school comprehensive sex education programs that can help youth navigate the

complex messages about sexuality that they frequently encounter and construct.

Acknowledgments

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