

Consent is a low bar:  
Building a pleasure-centred practice for violence prevention

by  
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B.A., University of Victoria, 2019

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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We acknowledge and respect the ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## **Abstract**

Indigenous resistance to colonial gender-based violence, Black feminism, and the broader anti-violence movement have brought issues of sexual harassment and assault into mainstream discourse. This advocacy has led to the creation of violence prevention programs, typically led by non-profit organizations, which advocate for educational workshops as a method for preventing sexual assault. Through my own experiences working in anti-violence education, I have come to question the ways that such prevention efforts can rely solely on teaching consent and reduce conversations about sex to the avoidance of assault.

In this research, I sought to understand how youth education could be expanded to better resist oppression and account for pleasure. To do so, I asked eight community-based educators what they have come to understand as core principles of sex positive, queer, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist education about sex and relationships. My research emphasizes the necessity of using a structural analysis of power dynamics, ensuring that education represents the youth that it seeks to serve, and using de-stigmatized and contextually relevant information. By synthesizing academic and community perspectives, this research then articulates strategies for enacting consent education that is informed by Black feminism, Indigenous resurgence, and queer theories. This research offers a vision of sex-positive violence prevention education framework which raises the bar far above consent.

## Table of Contents

<i>Supervisory Committee</i> .....	<i>ii</i>
<i>Abstract</i> .....	<i>iii</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i> .....	<i>iv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>Dedication</i> .....	<i>viii</i>
<b><i>Introduction</i></b> .....	<b><i>1</i></b>
<b>Researcher Positionality</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Redefining Key Concepts</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Overview of Chapters</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b><i>Chapter One: Readings</i></b> .....	<b><i>9</i></b>
<b>Consent Education in Context: Colonization, Racism, and Gender</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Historical Context.....	11
Ongoing Violence(s).....	12
Theoretical Foundations .....	14
<b>Consent</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Oversimplified.....	17
Reifying Binaries.....	18
Consent Never Takes Place in a Vacuum .....	19
<b>Pleasure</b> .....	<b>21</b>
The Pitfalls of Pleasure.....	22
Nuancing and Expanding Pleasure.....	23
<b>Rejecting white feminism</b> .....	<b>24</b>
Dropping the Ball on Anti-Racist Practices.....	25
Deficit Framings.....	27
The State is a Perpetrator.....	28
<b>Structural violence</b> .....	<b>28</b>
Gender Diversity .....	28
Broadening the Intersections .....	29
White Supremacy and Black Masculinities.....	31
Choosing Relevancy.....	33
Grounded in Culture.....	34
<b>Prevention Education in Practice</b> .....	<b>35</b>
Non-Profit Industrial Complex.....	36
School Industrial Complex.....	38
Pedagogy .....	39
<b>Peer-led</b> .....	<b>40</b>
Bystander Intervention .....	43
Harm reduction.....	43
Indigenous Resurgence and Body Sovereignty .....	44
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<b><i>Chapter Two: Relationships (Research Methodology)</i></b> .....	<b><i>47</i></b>

<b>Research Objective</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>Research Question</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>Critical emancipatory research: Overarching paradigm</b> .....	<b>48</b>
<b>Community Engaged, Insider, and Relationship-based Research</b> .....	<b>50</b>
Insider Research .....	51
Relationship-Based Research .....	52
Anti-Oppressive Relationality .....	53
<b>Methods</b> .....	<b>55</b>
Planning .....	55
Participant Selection .....	56
Interviews .....	57
<b>Data analysis</b> .....	<b>58</b>
Reflexive Thematic Analysis.....	58
Focus Group .....	59
<b>Evaluation</b> .....	<b>60</b>
<b>Ethical Considerations</b> .....	<b>60</b>
<b>Limitations</b> .....	<b>62</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b><i>Chapter Three: Stories</i></b> .....	<b>64</b>
<b>Introductions</b> .....	<b>65</b>
Bea.....	65
Charlie Vaughn* .....	66
Jasmine Feather Dionne .....	67
Kenya Rogers .....	67
Marshall.....	68
Nichola Watson.....	68
Niko Mumford.....	69
Serena Bhandar.....	70
<b>Mainstream Education</b> .....	<b>70</b>
Bea.....	70
Charlie* .....	71
Jasmine .....	72
Kenya.....	73
Marshall.....	75
Nichola .....	77
Niko .....	77
Serena .....	78
<b>By and For Education</b> .....	<b>79</b>
Bea.....	79
Charlie* .....	80
Jasmine .....	80
Kenya.....	81
Marshall.....	81
Nichola .....	82
Niko .....	82
Serena .....	83
<b>Reimagining Prevention Education</b> .....	<b>84</b>

Bea.....	84
Charlie* .....	85
Jasmine .....	86
Kenya.....	87
Marshall.....	87
Nichola .....	88
Niko .....	89
Serena .....	90
<b>Complex Topics in Practice .....</b>	<b>90</b>
STBBIs .....	91
Substances .....	93
Pleasure.....	96
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b><i>Chapter Four: Learnings.....</i></b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Theme: Structural Analysis .....</b>	<b>99</b>
Resisting Normative Approaches .....	99
Structural Analysis.....	102
Addressing State and Colonial Violence .....	105
<b>Theme: What Information Matters? .....</b>	<b>107</b>
Adult Voices Overriding Youth Needs.....	107
The Risks of Risk Management .....	108
Becoming Relevant .....	111
<b>Theme: Voice and Representation .....</b>	<b>114</b>
Representation .....	114
Pedagogy .....	116
Youth-led .....	117
<b>Moving Beyond Consent Education .....</b>	<b>118</b>
Individualized .....	119
One-size-fits-all .....	120
Embodied and relational.....	122
Pleasure.....	123
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>126</b>
<b><i>Conclusion: Moving Forward Together.....</i></b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Relationships .....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Weaving Together Literature and Stories .....</b>	<b>128</b>
Voice and Representation .....	129
Prevention Education in Practice.....	132
Reapproaching Consent Education.....	134
<b>Closing Thoughts.....</b>	<b>138</b>
<b><i>Reference List.....</i></b>	<b>139</b>
<b><i>Appendices.....</i></b>	<b>155</b>
<b>Appendix A: Consent Form.....</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>Appendix B: Interview Questions .....</b>	<b>158</b>

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## **Dedication**

For all my nieces, nephews, niblings, and relatives who are yet to come. May this work support us in growing a world in which your access to joy, pleasure, and creativity is without limits.

With love,  
Your Auntie

## **Introduction**

Indigenous resistance to colonial gender-based violence; Black feminism; and the broader movement against gender-based violence have brought issues of sexual harassment and assault into mainstream discourse over recent decades. This advocacy has led to the creation of violence prevention programs, typically led by non-profit organizations, which advocate for educational workshops as a method for preventing sexual assault. However, despite the proliferation of prevention programming, rates of sexual health issues and violence have remained stable which suggests that conventional approaches are limited in their effectiveness (McCauley et al., 2019). The goal of this thesis is to consider the shortcomings of mainstream interventions, while making space for alternatives.

In the more recent aftermath of #MeToo and high-profile exposures of abuse, consent education is increasingly positioned as the solution to preventing violence. Although a relatively useful tool in law and policy (Fischel, 2019), many definitions of consent currently used in educational settings rely upon rigid expectations for behaviour which leave little space for diversity in human communication. Through my own experiences working in anti-violence education, I have come to question how anti-violence education that solely focuses on consent can inadvertently oversimplify discussions about sex and sideline issues of justice, pleasure, and intersectionality. This questioning remains consistent across vastly different approaches as some programs reinforce heteronormative assumptions, gender stereotypes, and abstinence, while others reject those beliefs, but fail to offer young people the skills needed to navigate communication about sex in practice. Moreover, much mainstream violence prevention curricula emerges from urban post-secondary campus in the Global North and takes white, middle-class norms for granted.

In a 2023 survey of over three thousand youth, participants expressed a clear desire for inclusive and evidence-based sexual health education that addresses both positive aspects of sexuality and prevention of harms (Sex Information and Education Council of Canada [SIECCAN], 2023). A significant portion of youth reported gaps in their sexual health education, particularly regarding Indigenous knowledge, cultural diversity, pleasure, media literacy, and masturbation (SIECCAN, 2023). Further, 2024 research demonstrates that while parents and school are the most common sources of sexual health information for youth ages 15 to 17, friends and the internet are the next most common sources (Rotermann & McKay, 2024). Taken together, these statistics highlight the need for prevention education that incorporates diverse perspectives, peer knowledge, and the growing role of social media.

Broadening the scope of education requires looking to other fields. For instance, harm reduction scholars have identified the role that pleasure can play in making education and health interventions meaningful (Derricott, 2014; Race, 2008). Further, Indigenous communities and organizations have pushed the scope of what is considered ‘prevention.’ Indigenous scholars emphasize the importance of broadening the scope of prevention initiatives to encompass support for sovereignty, self-determination, land preservation, ceremonial reclamation, and fostering connections between youth and elders (Flicker et al., 2019). For example, Dr. James Makokis (Saddle Lake Cree Nation) highlighted how trans youth participating in ceremony can be understood as a form of suicide prevention (Makokis et al., 2021). Instead of taking the typical parameters of sexual health and violence for granted, I seek to challenge the norms, worldviews, and beliefs which place boundaries around what is considered ‘violence prevention.’ As such, I discuss violence prevention programming in connection with sexual health education, as these topics are co-constructed; put plainly, how can someone consent to sex if they do not have basic

sexual health information to understand the impacts of that decision, and can sex ever be considered ‘safe’ if it is not free from violence and coercion?

By critiquing the ways that anti-violence education is currently falling short, it is possible to build frameworks for more holistic and meaningful ways of supporting young people to learn about sex, communication, and intimate relationships in contextually relevant ways. In this research study, I question how youth education can affirm how bodily autonomy, liberation, and pleasure are practiced in sex positive, decolonial, non-normatively abled, anti-racist and gender expansive ways. To do so, I asked eight community-based educators to engage in a space of imagining about the teachings they wish they received as young people and what they have learned to be the core principles of sex positive, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist education about sex and relationships.

Although this question could and should be asked of high-school aged youth directly, my thesis research will focus on interviewing young community-based educators who either participated in anti-violence efforts while in high school or older educators who are held up in the community for prioritizing the voices of youth. I chose this focus due to my unique position as an anti-violence educator who is part of an informal community of practice that has maintained relationships over many years. However, it is my hope that this thesis will support future community-engaged research with youth.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I was born on x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy<sup>ə</sup>m (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətəl (Tseil-Waututh) Nation’s land, and I have lived as an uninvited settler on lək<sup>w</sup>əŋən and WSÁNEĆ territories since 2010. I am a queer cis woman of European (Scottish, English, Irish, and Romanian) ancestry. As the first in my family to pursue graduate education, I am grateful to

have received scholarship and research funding which has made it possible for me to complete graduate studies.

I was drawn to sexualized violence prevention work because of my own experiences with childhood abuse, which led me to take a volunteer training program with the Anti-Violence Project (UVic's on-campus sexual assault centre). From 2018 to 2020 I then worked at the Victoria Sexual Assault Centre (VSAC) as the Prevention Coordinator where I oversaw and delivered workshops to high-school aged youth about gender, consent, and respect. After leaving VSAC, I moved into the harm reduction field doing both overdose response and youth education. Most recently, I worked as a Violence Prevention and Response Worker at an organization serving sex workers. My work in community deepened my understanding of how consent norms vary amongst communities and the mistakes that are made when educators assume that they have more knowledge than youth and community members. I was also inspired by efforts to reject labeling behaviours 'risky' or people 'at risk' which erases the role of systems like patriarchy and criminalization in leading to many of harms associated with sex and substance use.

While my previous community and work experience has provided me with a depth of knowledge, in considering my social location as a white, cisgender settler I seek to prioritize scholarly work and community voices which speak to experiences beyond the limits of my own. The methodologies and theories which I will utilize have been intentionally chosen to support me in actualizing my commitments to anti-racism, decolonization, and anti-oppressive practices. Further, my role as a community member in relationship to many of the people I will be interviewing requires a higher degree of accountability and transparency from me than if I was an 'outsider.' And while I have worked alongside most of my research participants, they also

hold many identities and experiences which I do not. Making space for and holding these experiences with care is central to the ethics I seek to enact through this research.

### **Redefining Key Concepts**

In this section, I offer a brief summary of how I understand and apply some key concepts in this research. Rather than being exhaustive, these concepts are discussed here to illustrate their specific use in this research.

- Pleasure, interestingly, is not defined in much of the literature about sexual health, which led me to wonder if it is often conflated with orgasm. However, I take up an understanding of pleasure that is not limited to sexual interactions and can also be found in relationship to self, identity, culture, and place.
- Conceptualizations of consent, emerging from legal theory and defined in a multitude of ways, are generally used to refer to agreement about engaging in sexual activity or physical contact. I use the term affirmative consent to refer to explicit, verbal agreements.
- In this research I use the term youth primarily to refer to high-school aged youth; however, some of the research I draw upon includes college and post-secondary as part of the category of youth.
- Sexual health can be understood through both a narrow (ex. Sexually transmitted and blood borne infection [STBBI] education) or broad lens (ex. desire). In this research, education about sexual health includes both formalized lessons in school as well as conversations happening in community-based or social settings. When discussing my analysis and participant data, I use sexual health to refer to medical, emotional, spiritual, and relational elements.

- Violence prevention seeks to address root causes and to prevent harm or violence from occurring (in contrast to violence response, which addresses the impact and recovery from harm). While prevention education may be used to address suicide, overdose, STI transmission, and other harms, this research focuses specifically on the prevention of sexual assault (with the acknowledgement that many of these issues are interconnected).
- Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to the range of harms which are enacted on people who experience patriarchy, especially physical and sexual assault.
- Sexualized violence, often used as a synonym for gender-based violence, is used in this research to account for harm of a sexual nature which can be experienced by people of any gender and sexuality, including cis-men and within queer relationships.
- Intersectionality, emerging from Black feminism, highlights the ways that various systems of oppression interlock with each other to impact people based on all aspects of their being, not just their race or gender in isolation. In this research, intersectionality is central to accounting for the ways that gender-based violence is co-constructed by systems of racial, colonial, classist, and ableist oppression.
- The acronym BIPOC, standing for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, is used throughout this thesis to be consistent with much of the literature cited and the language that most participants use. I recognize that alternative language is also being used such as People of the Global Majority, IBPOC, or BIMPOC (Black, Indigenous, Mixed-Race, and People of Colour). While I use the term BIPOC to acknowledge collective efforts to challenge colonialism and white supremacy, I also strive to reject the collapsing of unique experiences and identities.

- This research took place on ləkʷəŋən and WSÁNEĆ lands. As a settler living uninvited on these lands, I seek to uphold Indigenous languages for the names of people and places, as well as Indigenous knowledge concepts. Wherever possible, I use culturally appropriate dialect and spelling to honour Indigenous sovereignty; however, I know that these attempts are imperfect, and I strive to continue learning how I can improve.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In the first chapter of this research, I bring academic and community-based perspectives together to establish the theoretical underpinning for sex-positive violence prevention education. This chapter delves into various crucial themes, including the limitations of affirmative consent paradigms, the significance of pleasure, the enduring influence of white feminism, the imperative for structural analysis, diverse opinions on educational delivery methods, and the pivotal role of youth leadership.

In Chapter Two, I discuss my use of critical emancipatory research paradigms and a relationship-based methodology (inspired by community-engaged research principles). Subsequently, I delve into my methods which comprise semi-structured interviews and a focus group, as well as my use of reflexive thematic analysis. Ethical considerations and research limitations are also discussed in this section.

Moving to Chapter Three, I delve into the narratives shared by participants, detailing their motivations for engaging in anti-violence work, challenges encountered in contesting normative education, the significance of peer-led initiatives, and aspirations for inclusive and progressive education. Furthermore, I outline participant insights on contentious topics within violence prevention education, such as substance use, sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBIs) and pleasure.

Chapter Four unfolds with an analysis of four pivotal themes, namely structural analysis, information relevance, representation, and reapproaching consent. Critiquing conventional approaches to violence prevention, I advocate for a structural analysis to comprehend the underlying causes of sexualized violence, emphasizing the incorporation of state violence into this framework. Additionally, I explore participant perspectives on the information encompassed in violence prevention efforts, highlighting culturally grounded strategies and the necessity for a broader age range approach. The section on representation underscores the importance of ensuring youth see themselves mirrored in facilitation teams and educational materials, intertwining with discussions on pedagogy and youth-led initiatives. Lastly, I challenge individualized and rigid consent paradigms originating from post-secondary feminist spaces, advocating instead for an embodied, relational, and pleasure-centred understanding of consent rooted in participants' lived experiences and influenced by Indigenous resurgence, Black feminism, and queer theory.

My conclusion is as a plain-language summary addressed to people in the community who are doing anti-violence education and want to apply some of the findings but may not have time to read this work in full.

## **Chapter One: Readings**

This chapter will offer a summary of key discussions in the academic literature about sexualized violence prevention for high-school-aged youth, typically conducted through consent workshops. Community-based work has made powerful strides towards making young people safer and, where possible, I will include non-academic sources emerging from the community that make necessary interventions in gender-based violence prevention knowledge. By bringing together a range of literature on sex-positive, feminist approaches to violence prevention, this chapter will highlight what is already known about how to meaningfully support youth education about sex, as well as the limitations of mainstream programming. This chapter will be divided into sections on consent, pleasure, decentring whiteness, structural oppression, program design, and youth leadership.

Throughout this chapter I will discuss several key tensions in the violence prevention field: for example, coercive, harmful, and unpleasurable sex occurs regularly, even when verbal consent is obtained, illustrating the limits of consent as a tool for supporting youth to engage in the meaningful intimacy they desire (Fischel, 2019). While pleasure is an intrinsic motivation for having sex for people of all ages, Logie, Perez-Brumer, and Parker (2021) found that there is notably less research which directly addresses pleasure. Further, academic and community activists assert that racism and white supremacy are inseparable from gender-based violence because power relations are founded on social constructions of both race and gender that privilege a white, cisgender, masculine, and heterosexual norm; therefore violence prevention programming must directly address these intersecting oppressions (Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016; MacDougall et al., 2022; Women's Earth Alliance [WEA] & Native Youth Sexual Health Network [NYSHN], 2016).

It has also been pointed out that “sexual pleasure research and sex-positive sexual scripts have primarily focused on the Global North” (Logie et al., 2021, p. 658). Given that consent is increasingly being used around the globe as a violence prevention tool (Wright & Greenberg, 2023), this omission in the research appears to replicate racist ideologies which depict white sexualities and norms as the most liberated and progressive, while the Global Majority is constructed as less evolved (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to extensively engage with research from beyond Canada and the United States; however, I have included several research papers (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021; Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Waling et al., 2021) from outside Turtle Island to account for the globalized world that young people are part of and to seek to account for the range of cultural backgrounds held by students attending high schools on ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ territories.

The literature discussed in this chapter provides a backdrop for the anti-violence work that my thesis research emerges from as well as the diverse viewpoints shared by interview participants. To adequately account for power, sovereignty, and justice, I found it crucial to incorporate sources that go beyond a specific focus on violence prevention for youth but offered necessary interventions, such as Black feminism, Indigenous scholarship, and queer theory. This chapter sets the stage for my engagement, in Chapters Three and Four, with trauma-informed, anti-oppressive, and pleasure-centred practices that mainstream academic literature has only recently begun to engage with.

### **Consent Education in Context: Colonization, Racism, and Gender**

In this section, I will discuss the historical context of gender-based violence and enduring disproportionate rates of violence. Then, I discuss how these realities inform the theoretical foundations and underpinnings of my research.

## **Historical Context**

Through my work in community, I have been taught that Indigenous nations on Turtle Island have long histories of maintaining communities that do not tolerate sexualized violence and practicing legal orders with inclusive gender structures. Many Indigenous scholars point out that prior to the arrival of settlers, gender roles did not rest on heteropatriarchy and queer sex was not persecuted (Hunt, 2016b; L. Simpson, 2014b; Burns, 2020; A. Simpson, 2016). By refusing to recognize the leadership of women and Two-Spirit people, colonial governments intentionally disrupted systems that were previously based on clan, family group, and nation-specific legal traditions (L. Simpson, 2014b). Further, colonial law and the Residential School System imposed a rigid gender binary upon Indigenous nations based on Euro-Christian norms of femininity and masculinity (L. Simpson, 2014b). These genocidal practices included removing children from their communities, dividing children by sex, preventing children from speaking their language(s), punishing non-European gender expressions, and subjecting children to endemic sexual abuse.

The entangled connections between settler colonialism and patriarchy laid the foundation for legacies which continue to this day. Furniss (1999) points out that settler colonial ideologies oversexualize and objectify Indigenous women and Two-Spirit peoples which leads to extremely high rates of violence, which are especially visible in spaces like the Highway of Tears and Vancouver's Downton Eastside. Although activism by Indigenous women, Two-Spirit people, and community leaders (including pushing for the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls) has led to greater awareness about sexualized violence, much education and policy still fails to account for anti-Indigenous racism (Palmer, 2016). The WEA & NYSHN (2016) explain that extractive industrialism, environmental violence, and colonial policies are unrelenting in perpetuating gender-based violence on Indigenous bodies and communities. The imposition of patriarchal legislation (e.g., the *Indian Act's* removal of status if

women married non-Indigenous partners) and establishment of temporary workcamps in rural resource extraction zones (which are well known to correspond with spikes in sexual assault) are ongoing examples of how colonialism and gender-based violence intersect. Violence against the land cannot be separated from violence against bodies, as both serve to continue infringements on Indigenous sovereignty (WEA & NYSHN, 2016).

Colonial violence is at the foundation of other forms of racism, such as the enslavement and forced relocation of African peoples to provide labour in colonies, leading to systemic and ongoing anti-Blackness. The Battered Women's Support Services [BWSS], a Vancouver-based organization, recently published a report stating that "Indigenous, Black, newcomer immigrant/refugee, and racialized survivors do not experience gender-based violence solely as a tool of heteropatriarchal control but, importantly, also as a tool of racial control" (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 17). These interconnected and compounding forces of racial and sexual violence not only lead to increased rates of violence and coercion but also erase centuries of resistance and community-based activism (Bierria, 2007; Kim, 2020)

### **Ongoing Violence(s)**

Commonly circulated statistics estimate that one in three women, one in two trans people, and one in six boys will experience sexual assault (Forge Forward, 2012). However, statistics about sexualized violence are often exclusionary and limited in scope as it is difficult to collect data about experiences that survivors are unwilling or unable to report. For example, a research project led by Palmater (2016) found that when reporting violence to the police a large majority of female victims report negative experiences as a result of their interactions with the police and leave feeling "either abandoned or devastated" (p. 276). The secondary victimization experienced during reporting to police provides context as to why, in Canada, around only 3% of

sexual assaults are reported to police and only .3% of assaults end in conviction (Palmer, 2016, p. 276). Further, the 2022 BWSS report “Colour of Violence” states that:

Indigenous survivors reported the highest rates of criminalization, and were more likely not to contact anti-violence services due to fear that the police, criminal legal system, or child services would be contacted.

Black survivors reported the least trust in police to keep them safe, and also reported lack of access to culturally-relevant support services.

Newcomer immigrant/refugee survivors reported the greatest barriers to linguistic and culturally-appropriate services, and also expressed fears of contacting anti-violence services due to their immigration status. (MacDougall et al., p. 7)

It bears repeating that Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit peoples experience the highest rates of gendered violence in so-called Canada, “including trafficking, sexual exploitation, survival sex work, and intimate partner violence” (de Finney et al., 2021 p. 2). In the United States, a recent paper highlights that “2021 was the deadliest on record for” trans and non-binary communities (Berke & Collins, 2023, p. 115). Further, it is often reported that people with disabilities experience higher rates of sexualized violence (Chugani et al., 2021). These disproportionate levels of violence are likely also experienced by youth of marginalized identities.

Historically, sexual health and education have used exploitative practices on “BIPOC, disabled folks, and sex workers in the healthcare system” (Kamuhanda, 2023, para. 7). For example, many programs divide students by sex assigned at birth “rendering gender diverse students invisible in prevention efforts” (Orchowski et al., 2023, p. 2882). Others identify that

“sex education neglect” (Thom, 2020, para. 2) leaves racialized and trans students “invisibilized, ignored, and occasionally outright demonized” (Thom, 2020, para. 2).

While violence prevention curriculums use many different theoretical and pedagogical traditions, this thesis will focus on education delivered on what is known as Southern Vancouver Island. There is also a strong tradition of community non-profits offering violence prevention and sexual health workshops that are delivered in schools, but this is not universal and many students still receive sexual health delivered by teachers (Sanjakdar, 2019; SIECCAN, 2023; Wright & Greenberg, 2023). However, emerging research reveals that youth report that peer information sharing and porn are becoming dominant sources of information (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Waling et al., 2021). Finally, while the pervasiveness of sexual violence is acknowledged and the root causes of violence are increasingly discussed within violence prevention work, the “prevalence of sexual violence has remained remarkably stable, suggesting that we must challenge each other to do our work in different ways” (McCauley et al., 2019, p. 1912).

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Given the prevalence of violence experienced by Indigenous and Black people, decolonial and anti-racist theories must be prioritized in violence prevention work to ensure that the root causes of gender-based violence are fully accounted for and dismantled. Black feminist thought has a long tradition of engaging with questions of sexuality and pleasure, from the Combahee River Collective (1986/1977) and Audre Lorde’s (1984) famous “Uses of the Erotic” to bell hook’s work (2001). The Combahee River Collective (1986/1977) describes Black feminism as “the political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions all women of colour face” (p. 1). Further, the emergence of intersectionality theory from Black feminism seeks to identify “the structural relationship of multiple forms of inequality constituted through and reinforcing one another, which then materially informs our lived experiences”

(MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 15). Black feminist work also highlights that consent emerges from colonial legal traditions which dehumanized Black women as type of property while absolving enslavers of the rape that they perpetuated (Nash, 2019). These legacies continue today as Black women are report “being marginalized within rape crisis and sexual assault centres” (Maynard, 2017, p. 154) and that there is a lack of inquiry into their experiences of sexual violence, “in part due to their lack of status as ‘ideal victims’” (Wooten, 2017, p. 408). In resistance, Black feminist theories assert a commitment to “reframe the existing narrative about black female sexuality by positioning desire, agency and black women’s engagements with pleasure as a viable theoretical paradigm” (Morgan, 2015, p. 36). In addition, the ongoing emergence of a Black queer feminist analysis challenges feminists to centre the voices that are typically most silenced in social movements (Bonsu, 2018, p. 214)

Within decolonial work, Indigenous leaders challenge state violence and foreground the work that communities have always been doing to create safety. For instance, WEA and NYSHN (2016) discusses the necessity of “culturally-rooted, nation-specific responses” (p. 3) to violence that incorporate worldview, spirituality, and intergenerational teachings to engage whole communities in identifying long-term solutions. Such work is evidenced in Bonnie Dickie’s (2000) documentary about an Ojibway nation’s use of community justice, healing, and sentencing circles to meaningfully address intergenerational trauma. For Indigenous youth, significantly higher levels of wellness are reported when cultural beliefs are incorporated into educational programs (Ansloos & Dent, 2021; Clark, 2016b). Further, the connection between “body sovereignty and Indigenous self-determination” (de Finney, 2017, p. 10) understands Indigenous youth not as individuals but rather as part of “complex kinship networks, across generations, and in relationship with ancestors, lands, and all relations” (de Finney, 2017, p. 10).

When it comes to prevention, Chantelle Spicer argues that education must include how “Indigenous Peoples have known and know holistic, expansive worlds of consent” (Jin, 2022, para. 23) through protocol and natural laws governing relationships with both human and non-human relations. Further, scholars foreground that “asserting a Two-Spirit, queer Indigenous identity are practices of Indigenous futurity” (Ellasante, 2021, p. 1522). By making these critiques central to my analysis, this thesis seeks to take up the call for settlers to align with struggles for sovereignty and construct alternatives to colonial relationships to “move forward in a shared future” (Flowers, 2015, p. 35).

### **Consent**

In keeping with Graybill’s (2017) approach, my analysis begins with the recognition that consent is a necessary and important tool in sexual interactions, but “it is also essential to think through the larger and perhaps unthought implications of a discourse of consent, which intersect with issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality, as well as access to sexual pleasure” (p. 175). Like all social interactions, sex is a site of power relations where implicit, explicit, and internalized stereotypes and biases inform how two (or more) people arrive at an interaction and come to understand and behave towards each other. Violence prevention must also recognize how consent frameworks are used in Indigenous-led struggles against settler colonialism, such as through calls for Free Prior and Informed Consent to be honoured in order to uphold Indigenous self-determination over land and bodies (Hunt, 2016a).

Fischel (2019) points out that while consent is a reasonable legal framework, it rarely serves to attend to issues of pleasure and power inequity. For example, in prevention programming, conversations about intimacy are often framed around risk avoidance to satisfy funding or curriculum requirements, or because organizations uncritically consider certain youth

as being at risk<sup>1</sup> for violence (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021; de Finney et al., 2021; Logie et al., 2021). Consent then becomes a tool for managing personal liability within a paradigm of neoliberal risk management (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021). However, avoiding an accusation of assault is not the same as preventing harm from occurring and risk management can quickly slide into a strategy for ensuring that accusations of assault are easily dismissed. When violence prevention programming replicates consent as liability management, it ultimately fails to provide young people with the range of skills and analysis that they need to effectively navigate the complexities of intimacy and to ensure that all involved feel respected and positive about the interaction. In this section, I will discuss how mainstream framings of consent are oversimplified, serve to reify binaries, and operate in a vacuum.

### **Oversimplified**

Consent cannot (or should not) be oversimplified as a communication error, unambiguous, or one-size-fits-all. The claim that non-consensual sexual experiences are a result of a communication error at best fails to account for intentional assault and, at worst, constructs survivors as bad at communication (Derricott, 2014; Wright & Greenberg, 2023). Put bluntly, “[a]ffirmative consent education cannot prevent rape in the moment because the problem is not that the rapist did not get the other person to say ‘yes’ out loud” (Harris, 2018, p. 164). While holding space for the challenges of communicating openly about sexual desire in a culture that is often sex-negative, patriarchal, and racist, reducing assault to a communication error is inaccurate and harmful. Indeed, attempts at “encouraging ‘active,’ ‘enthusiastic,’ ‘verbal’ consent” (Nash, 2019, p. 205) can even be taken up as “a tactic of avoiding exposure to liability, to investigation, to tarnished reputation, to expulsion” (Nash, 2019, p. 205).

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<sup>1</sup> The conceptualization of youth as ‘at risk’ will be discussed in greater detail in the section titled “Deficit Framings.”

Scholars point out that assault cannot be reduced to a miscommunication of desires between parties or a misinterpretation, because sometimes people deliberately choose to ignore or coerce someone's boundaries (Harris, 2018; Wright & Greenberg, 2023). Although non-consensual sex is not simply a communication error, scholars also question whether perfect, unambiguous communication about consent is truly possible in practice (Harris, 2018).

Renowned activist and facilitator Kai Cheng Thom (2020) similarly critiques that "100% explicit and ongoing consent 100% of the time is at best aspirational" (para. 9) because, in reality, sex is a dynamic activity. On a broad level, affirmative consent can lead to calls for "a procedural logic that misrecognises sexuality as a transparent, communicative, and rational experience and mistakes compliance for learning" (Gilbert, 2018, p. 268). Such attempts to ensure that consent is unambiguous and affirmative can encourage a silencing of complexity and hesitancy while depoliticizing and separating sex from complex histories of liberation and oppression (Harris, 2018).

Finally, mantras such as "explicit, ongoing, informed, enthusiastic" consent (Thom, 2020, para. 8) present a one-size-fits-all code for communication about sex. Campaigns centred around slogans such as "consent is sexy" are well intentioned, but even researchers note that they are limited in their ability to influence young people's decision making (Hovick & Silver, 2019). Although the amount of nuance possible in a poster campaign is admittedly limited, this discussion offers an important intervention into the ways that oversimplifying consent can under resource youth to tackle the very questions that violence prevention seeks to respond to.

### **Reifying Binaries**

When asked to analyze case studies of potential assault, participants in a 2020 study did not just consider affirmative consent but they also factored in perceived pleasure demonstrating how "consent, wantedness, and pleasure" (Hills et al., 2020, p. 171) can become conflated.

Framed another way, if someone did not consent to an activity but is perceived to have found parts of it pleasurable, was no harm done? Resisting the collapse between perceived pleasure and consent is necessary for affirming survivor's experiences and points to the broader harms of binary thinking about sex. For instance, some prevention programs strive to include discussions about the gender binary and to affirm the experiences of Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary youth. However, Wright and Greenberg (2023) point out that teaching consent as a binary between yes and no binary can erase "grey area experiences" (p.1). This replication of binary thinking serves to render fluid gender expression as less legible and legitimate, thereby increasing the erasure that non-binary youth experience (Wright and Greenberg, 2023). Further, binary thinking can leave little space for youth who find themselves straddling multiple aspects of identity such as being mixed race, bisexual, or having an intermittent disability. These examples demonstrate that treating consent as a binary between an 'enthusiastic yes' and a 'definite no' fails to account for the complexity of human experience and can invalidate the very real emotional experience of finding oneself in the grey zone of 'maybe.'

### **Consent Never Takes Place in a Vacuum**

A third theme in the literature about consent is the rejection of consent without context. Practically, sometimes verbal and ongoing consent is not technically possible, such as in situations where one or more partners use ASL to communicate (Harris, 2018). Regardless of whether consent is verbal or not, however, it is never acontextual. For instance, slogans such as 'yes means yes' can inadvertently circulate the idea that yes always means yes, which is not true in cases of coercion. Further, these "arguments problematically suggest that people can disconnect 'yes' from not only the immediate relational dynamics that precede and follow 'yes,' but also social history" (Harris, 2018, p. 164). Bodies in sexual encounters can never be separated from their socialization, identities, beliefs, and biases. Erasure of such context

oversimplifies beliefs about violence as a miscommunication issue (as introduced above), which leads to claims that it is “women’s (or non-binary people’s) lack of communication skills that causes gender-based violence rather than dehumanizing systems of oppression” (Wright & Greenberg, 2023, p. 11). Gilbert (2018) also points out that codified and legislated affirmative consent will likely “end up focusing on queers and people of colour whose sexuality is too often perceived as a threat” (p. 276), therefore hurting the very communities who are most impacted by sexualized violence. Consent legislation does not exist in a vacuum and, therefore, will replicate the same disproportionate incrimination and targeting of other crimes; specifically of Black, Indigenous, and queer people.

Consent is only simple when devoid of all context (Harris, 2018). Instead of avoiding this reality, anti-violence curricula would better serve young people by supporting them to “learn how to act ethically in the midst of inevitable and unavoidable ambiguity” (Harris, 2018, p. 162). I believe that starting from a place of acknowledging complexity also opens the door to the question: “Is ‘consensual’ all that is required of sex for it to be ‘good’?” (Graybill, 2017, p. 176). adrienne maree brown’s (2019) chapter in her edited collection *Pleasure Activism* invites survivors to imagine consent beyond the binary of a one-word response, and instead as a practice of reclaiming agency over one’s body, mind, and spirit. In academia, scholars like Joseph Fischel (2019), author of *Screw Consent*, and Robin Bauer (2014), author of *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries*, challenge the limits of consent and make space for necessary conversations about agency, power, and pleasure. Further, sex therapists (and workers) such as Betty Martin and Robyn Dalzen (2021) and Kai Cheng Thom (2020), ask how the body is (and is not) brought into highly rational conversations about consent, and strive to make practices for more embodied ways of relating accessible.

## **Pleasure**

While useful in understanding if sex is mutually agreed upon, consent cannot, on its own, address if an experience was pleasurable, enjoyable, or fulfilling (Nash, 2019). In the literature about youth prevention education, there are two key themes: the necessity of employing an equity lens in discussions of pleasure and the power of pleasure in resisting risk-oriented framings of sex. Studies with youth research participants are generally quite clear that pleasure is important to young people, and that they want educators who are well-equipped to navigate conversations about enjoyment and exploration (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Waling et al., 2021). Some researchers call for the “creation of guidelines for sexuality education that are culturally competent, inclusive, and that position pleasure as central to sexual health has the potential to be effective in forming a sexually empowered youth equipped to make healthy decisions around their sexual life” (Mark et al., 2021, p. 561). While I did not come across an outright rejection of the role of pleasure in the literature, prevention educators may encounter such beliefs in practice amongst school administrators who fear backlash from parents who believe sex should not be discussed in schools at all or disagree with the inclusion of certain topics. However, when it comes to incorporating pleasure, many scholars raise important questions about power (Gaspar et al., 2021), inclusion (Wood et al., 2019), cooptation (Nash, 2019), and violence (WEA & NYSHN, 2016).

The stakes of this conversation are high. Sexuality and intimacy are sites of liberation, autonomy, and pleasure, but they can also be sites of oppression, carceral logic, and trauma. Sexualized and intimate partner violence can lead some survivors to call for increased criminalization of sexual violence and harsher sentencing, which ultimately advances the very structural oppressions which lead to high rates of violence in the first place. What are the dangers of pleasure without a power analysis? If some people’s experiences of comfort and pleasure are

centred, can this create more harm instead of less? In this section, I will discuss pitfalls in using a pleasure centred approach and possibilities for expanding conceptions of pleasure to account for power.

### **The Pitfalls of Pleasure**

While certain literature identifies pleasure as an innovative and emerging concept to include in education (Logie et al., 2021; Mark et al., 2021), other scholars engage with and respond to long-standing feminist debates about equal experiences of pleasure (e.g., the orgasm gap between cisgender men and women in straight relationships) (Morgan, 2015; Nash, 2019). Further, some researchers position pleasure as an answer or solution to eliminating risk-oriented framings (Fulcher et al., 2019; Logie et al., 2021; Mark et al., 2021; Waling et al., 2021) while others point out that pleasure is not immune to issues of power (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Wood et al., 2019). For example, a study with sex educators in the U.K. revealed that although there are positive benefits of a pleasure approach to sex education, this must come along with a critical analysis of power relations (Wood et al., 2019). For instance, while peer-to-peer dialogue is more focused on pleasure than mainstream curriculum, informal conversation can be steeped in unchecked misogyny and stereotypes (Hodes & Gittings, 2019). Further, Nash (2019) critiques how the language of pleasure is often used to rebrand consent as a pleasure maximization strategy, which obscures the origins of consent as a “regulatory regime that distinguishes legal and illegal sex” (p. 200) and its limited applicability to matters of enjoyment. These works highlight that without the use of critical race theory and intersectionality in discussions of how to put pleasure to work in violence prevention, pleasure paradigms will marginalize the same young people who are disproportionately impacted by sexualized violence.

## **Nuancing and Expanding Pleasure**

There are many expansive questions raised in the literature about considering pleasure through an intersectional analysis. For instance, Morgan (2015) discusses pleasure as a useful “resistance strategy for black women” (p. 42) to redefine dominant narratives that advance erasure, white beauty standards, fetishization, and dehumanization of their bodies and experiences. Another discussion in the literature is the connection between land, colonialism, and pleasure. Osorio (2020) demonstrates how queer lifeways that existed before colonization have been under attack by settler patriarchy because “queer Kānaka Maoli, unsettle white settler logics of belonging and occupation when we insist on celebrating and practicing our pleasure and intimacies” (p. 348). Practicing pleasure, according to Osorio, includes having relationships with land, waters, and other non-human life, as well as assertions of Indigenous sovereignty. This demonstrates the importance of disrupting dominant white and Western ways of understanding pleasure as individualized and apolitical. Further, queer men articulate that queer sexuality is stereotypically associated with risk and deviancy thereby erasing queer joy, care, and pleasure (Gaspar et al., 2021). These examples demonstrate possibilities for discussing pleasure alongside power, oppression, and justice.

In conclusion, much of the literature about sex, anti-violence, and consent education advocates for the inclusion of pleasure. However, there are debates as to whether pleasure can account for power, as well as the amount of space it should take up in violence prevention work. In this thesis, I will critically take up the possibility of a pleasure paradigm to move beyond the avoidance of assault and toward a more just and liberated sexual culture. This is in keeping with Black feminist thought that “a politics of pleasure is capable of intersecting, challenging, and redefining dominant narratives about race, beauty, health and sex in ways that are generative and necessary” (Morgan, 2015, p. 42).

### **Rejecting white feminism**

For decades, and especially since the foundational work done by INCITE! Women of Colour Against violence in the early 2000s, survivors have been pointing out how racialized experiences of violence are erased when (white) femininity is assumed to be a universal experience. Further, the WEA and NYSHN (2016) report *Violence on the Land, Violence on our Bodies* highlights the connection between gender-based violence and the ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands. Therefore, it is necessary to centre the reality that Indigenous people are resisting, and have always resisted, colonial violence (WEA & NYSHN, 2016) through activism, community-based safety measures, legal challenges, and continuing to exist on their own lands.

In the academic literature, there are now calls and efforts to decentre whiteness in violence prevention, consent, and pleasure. This is possible because community activists have demonstrated that “Indigenous, Black, newcomer immigrant/refugee, and racialized survivors do not experience gender-based violence solely as a tool of heteropatriarchal control but, importantly, also as a tool of racial control” (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 17). However, mainstream sexualized violence work often fails to account for race and continues to focus on the experiences and perspectives of white women (McCauley et al., 2019; Wooten, 2017). Even in purportedly anti-oppressive spaces, ethnocentrism makes itself visible when progressive and justice-oriented values around sex are conflated with Western, colonial ways of relating (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021). This erasure of Indigenous and racialized practices of communication, justice, and care deeply undermines the integrity of anti-violence work. Further, Harris (2018) points out that education emerging from post-secondary campuses is “often organized around whiteness and middle-class norms” (p. 169). The essential role of community organizations, organizers, and activists in resisting white feminism cannot be understated and while this chapter focuses on published literature, these discussions are only possible because of that tireless

community-based work by scholar-activists like Robyn Maynard (2017), Anna Ortega-Williams (2020), Pam Palmater (2016), and Mimi Kim (2020). There are key themes amongst BIPOC feminists who challenge the dominance of white feminism in anti-violence research and services: a lack of intersectional representation and programming in mainstream anti-violence programming, the prevalence of binary framings about BIPOC, and the importance of more fully incorporating resistance to state violence into future violence prevention work.

### **Dropping the Ball on Anti-Racist Practices**

The strongest theme throughout this chapter is the lack of effective anti-racist practices in mainstream anti-violence discourse, policy, and programming. In a 2007 survey of sexual assault centre staff in Canada, 24% of the participants raised racism as an issue through statements such as “I think the whole rape crisis center thing is still a ‘White feminist’ women’s movement thing, and I think it’s still painfully obvious” (Ullman & Townsend, 2007, p. 428). On a cultural level, Puar (2017) writes about the ways that healthy sexuality and queerness are conflated with whiteness and secularity, which erases many BIPOC experiences and obscures racialized violence. In practice, Critical Resistance & INCITE! (2016) points out that when organizations focus on either state or interpersonal violence, they erase and invalidate the experiences of women of colour who experience multi-layers of violence. This commonly occurs when diverse communities are grouped under the category of women, which Black women have continuously called out for undermining “their particular histories, needs, and concerns while simultaneously privileging White frameworks and understandings of sexual violence” (Wooten, 2017, p. 413). Further, Maynard (2017) notes that while Black women are more likely to experience violence, they are less likely to receive adequate support or solidarity from white feminist anti-violence organizations and movements. Similarly, de Finney et al. (2021) emphasize that Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people face the highest levels of violence but youth report that

“white, mainstream violence prevention frameworks do not speak to their histories and realities” (p. 2). For Two-Spirit youth, this leads to a double bind where their “lives are not fully accounted for in either current LGBTQ literature or in aboriginal gender-based frameworks” (Hunt, 2016b, p. 9) due to the erasure of Indigenous experiences and the impacts of colonization within LGBTQ research. I would extend that these tendencies also serve to erase and invalidate the experiences of Indigenous men who experience racialized and sexualized abuse perpetuated by white women; for example, through the residential school system (Qwul’sih’yah’maht, 2000)

This important literature works together to make visible the ways that the universal subject of violence prevention and intervention is constructed as a white and middle-class hetero, cis-gender, able-bodied woman. In considering solutions, many authors, directly and indirectly, raise the importance of centring the voices of people who experience multiple axes of intersecting oppression (de Finney et al., 2021; Hunt, 2013; Maynard, 2017). Bonsu (2018) formulates that by utilizing “a Black Queer Feminist lens, a theory of radical inclusivity, we are intentional about bringing the people who are most marginalized in our communities to the center of our work” (p. 213). However, attempts to prioritize BIPOC experiences can reinforce the very injustices they seek to undermine. For example, many anti-violence organizations create an “ethnic dash or race dash specific specialty programs that exist within a ‘general’ operation” (Durazo, 2007, p. 115). This can also occur through prevention efforts that target groups who are considered high-risk (Brush & Miller, 2023). However, these efforts leave intact an organizational “assumption of universal whiteness” (Durazo, 2007, p. 115) and “may inadvertently reproduce and perpetuate structural inequities and oppressions” (Brush & Miller, 2023, p. 1682). This is not to say that identity-based organizing is not necessary and powerful; indeed, collectives like INCITE! and the NYSHN have provided extensive leadership and voice

in the anti-violence movement. However, attention must be paid to white settler organizations which seek to include identity-based work so they can check off an anti-racism box, without meaningfully transforming the entirety of their work (a phenomenon discussed further in the section on Non-Profit Industrial complex).

### **Deficit Framings**

In addition to an outright lack of anti-racist analysis and practice, attempts at representation in anti-violence work often construct BIPOC communities through a deficit framing. Examples of deficit framings include the over-sexualization of Indigenous women (Hunt, 2013), the erasure of racialized queers (especially newcomers of faith) (Puar, 2017), and the lack of attention given to Black women who experience state violence (Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016). However, de Finney et al. (2021) also make a broader intervention into the general focus on violence, risk, and damage in programming for Indigenous youth. When racial identity is treated as a ‘risk factor’, the structural violence that harms Indigenous and racialized people is made invisible (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021). In other words, a risk-oriented framing can “serve to pathologise Indigenous girls for living in a systematically violent colonial context” (de Finney, 2017, p. 19). Within this framework, resistance to structures of violence is often belittled or dismissed for not fitting into white norms (Clark, 2016a). Further, Richardson and Wade (2010) challenge the ways that psychology and mainstream anti-violence frameworks tend to depict people who experience harm as passive while constructing people who cause harm as lacking dignity or the ability to make different choices. These framings work together to undermine the agency and resistance of the very communities that have resisted gender-based violence since the beginnings of colonization, enslavement, and racism.

### **The State is a Perpetrator**

The third theme I found in the literature is the importance of including discussions of and resistance to state violence. By taking up an analysis of state violence (through incarceration, policing, legislation, and colonial authority) that anti-racist feminists have been advancing for decades, the anti-violence movement can make itself more relevant, engaging, and useful to Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities. This accounting must address how colonization on Turtle Island imposes a rigid gender binary on Indigenous nations (L. Simpson, 2014b) and that ongoing state violence is perpetuated on both a domestic and international scale (Puar, 2017). Given the importance of both a justice and pleasure orientation to anti-violence programming for youth, I have dedicated the next section of this chapter to compiling a structural analysis from a wide range of thinkers.

### **Structural violence**

Community-generated literature points to the need for questions of healing, accountability, and justice to be made central alongside the necessary work of incorporating pleasure into mainstream sexual health and anti-violence prevention education. I will strive to bring Black feminism, Indigenous knowledge, queer theory, and disability justice together to advance an intersectional analysis of sexualized violence. Chapters Three and Four will expand on the challenges of putting these ideas into practice. This section is divided into key themes of gender, intersectionality, relevancy, and cultural grounding.

### **Gender Diversity**

Unfortunately, many anti-violence programs replicate traditional sexual education practices of dividing students by sex assigned at birth, which reifies binary understanding of sex and gender and makes “gender diverse students invisible in prevention efforts” (Orchowski et al., 2023, p. 2882). Today, most sex education “typically lacks any representation of 2SLGBTQIA+

or is actively harmful” (Wright & Greenberg, 2023, p. 4). The following excerpt from a 2021 study with youth in Australia so accurately captures the need for gender expansive sexual health that I have included it in full:

We need Queer inclusive sex-Ed, and sex-Ed that acknowledges that female partners also experience pleasure. I shouldn’t have to learn about dental dams from a lesbian friend. They should be taught just like condoms. Safe anal sex is also important. And don’t separate the girls from the boys when it comes to menstruation—too many boys don’t know what it is and it’s so important for them and their future relationships/friendships that they know what it is and that it’s not disgusting. (trans man, 17, bisexual, post-school, Australian Capital Territory). (Waling et al., 2021, p. 1120)

Queer and trans youth are clear about the failings of current sexual health and anti-violence curricula, and the conclusion of this thesis includes examples of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth articulating exactly how education can be made more meaningful. In academia, Morgan (2015) points out that the “hegemonic narrative of black female sexuality” (p. 39) serves to “erase queer and transgender subjects” (p. 39). Responding to this erasure, a 2023 study calls for trust in the “expertise and vision of Black and Brown TNB leaders, who embody transformation and survival” (Berke & Collins, p. 117). It is undeniable that “investing in bold violence-prevention solutions that resist and reimagine the structural conditions of violence that prevent Black TNBs from thriving” (Berke & Collins, 2023, p. 117) would strengthen efforts to address gender-based violence, queer erasure, and white supremacy.

### **Broadening the Intersections**

To meaningfully disrupt and ultimately end violence, it is necessary to change the material and structural conditions which lead to harm occurring in the first place. Critical Resistance and INCITE! (2016) describe such interventions as “strategies to end violence that do

not isolate individual acts of violence (either committed by the state or individuals) from their larger contexts” (p. 226). With roots in Black feminism (Combahee 1986/1977; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2001; Lorde, 1984), today’s anti-violence workers describe intersectionality as “the structural relationship of multiple forms of inequality constituted through and reinforcing one another, which then materially informs our lived experiences” (MacDougall et al., 2022, p. 15). Further, Natalie Clark (2016a) notes that “Indigenous ontology is inherently intersectional and complex in its challenging of the notions of time, age, space, and relationship” (p. 49). Taking up “Red Intersectionality” (Clark, 2016a) can therefore confront the ways that Euro-Canadian (white) values such as self-sufficiency, materialism, and equality (Furniss, 1999) are taken for granted. These values inform and pre-determine who is considered an effective anti-violence worker, how a ‘good’ survivor should conduct themselves, and appropriate ways that communities should work together. Anti-violence organizations may also need to consider the long (and ongoing) legacy of exploitation in sexual health care, such as for racialized, sex-working, and disabled communities (Kamuhanda, 2023). Further, many sex-positive “models of sex education are often lacking in that they tend to be under-conceptualized, idealizing a certain type of sex, usually centring bodies that are white, neurotypical, young, STI-negative, and non-disabled” (Thom, 2020).

Facilitating conversations about the intersectional nature of gender-based violence requires space for the ways that racism, colonialism, hetero-patriarchy, ableism, and classism work together to oppress, marginalize, and police bodies who resist or fall outside dominant expectations. Such strategies “must address how entire communities of all genders are affected in multiple ways by both state violence and interpersonal gender violence” (Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016, p. 226). Pamela Palmater (2016), a prominent scholar and lawyer, points out

how in addition to racism, gender-based violence against Indigenous peoples is not “only overlooked by police but also in fact committed by them” (p. 282). More broadly, Audra Simpson (2016) asserts that the settler state’s sovereignty relies upon the death and disappearance of Indigenous women, while Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014b) emphasizes that because the state is a perpetrator of violence, it cannot be part of the solution. These realities make it problematic that many mainstream anti-violence organizations have chosen to rely “on the criminal justice system as the frontline approach toward ending violence against women of color” (Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016, p. 223). Indeed, I find that position to be irreconcilable and question the ethics of collaborations which expose racialized survivors to legal systems which are designed to absolve the harms that are committed against them. Instead, anti-violence organizations would benefit from rejecting an individualized focus and instead taking up approaches like body sovereignty which locate resistance in “complex kinship networks, across generations, and in relationship with ancestors, lands, and all relations” (de Finney, 2017, p. 10). To do so meaningfully, violence prevention organizations must actively support efforts to end infringements on Indigenous sovereignty and to ensure that Indigenous people’s rights are upheld.

### **White Supremacy and Black Masculinities**

On a webinar with Holistic Resistance, a Black-led trauma healing organization, Aaron Johnson stated that no sexual health education is complete without a discussion of lynching (personal communication, March 12, 2024). As someone who is aware of these histories and who has experimented with including an analysis of anti-Blackness in violence prevention education (while being cautious to not recirculate violent images of Black bodies), this stood out to me. Below is an expert from “‘I’m Already Seen as a Sexual Predator From Saying Hello’: Black Men’s Perception of Sexual Violence” which discusses experiences of anti-Blackness in detail:

Black men's experiences of gendered racism may be qualitatively different from those of Black women and from gender discrimination experienced by men of other racial groups. To illustrate, one of the most prevalent forms of gendered racism that Black men face is rooted in the stereotype that they are hypermasculine and prone to sexual violence (Beckley, 2008; Ferber, 2007; Hall, 2001). Depictions of African American men as "Black Bucks" have their origins in U.S. slavery and are still perpetuated today through the media (Collins, 2004; Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003). Compared with Asian and White men, a sample of undergraduates (69% White women) perceived African American men to be the most masculine (Wilkins, Chan, & Kaiser, 2011). In this regard, Black men are often viewed as being tall and physically strong, having large penises and superior sexual capabilities, being sexually dominant, and prone to sexual violence (Hall, 2001; Schwing, Wong, & Fann, 2013; Wilson et al., 2009; Wong et al., 2013). (Zounlome et al., 2021, p. NP10812)

The vilification of Black men's sexuality on Turtle Island demonstrates the necessity of intersectional and critical conversations, especially with white youth, about racial violence. Indeed, how can youth be considered educated and well-equipped to navigate intimate relationships if they have not been invited to recognize violent narratives informing mainstream beliefs? Further, attention must be paid to the long history of letting white men off the hook for violence. As Chapman and Withers (2019) point out, "it's important to note that white men who raped any woman of any race were never lynched. In fact, most often there was no consequence at all" (p. 98). Taking this history seriously and connecting it to today's anti-violence movements can lead to uncomfortable and deeply unsettling conversations. For example, how does the

mantra ‘we believe all survivors’ stand up in response to white women who falsely accuse Black men of rape? Or to someone’s claim that a Black man walking behind them is dangerous?

Although affirming and supporting experiences of harm is important, this cannot come without a critical analysis of “white supremacist framings of Black and racialized men as particularly prone to rape and other patriarchal violence” (Chapman & Withers, 2019, p. 98).

### **Choosing Relevancy**

While an intersectional lens is necessary to ensure that violence prevention is effective at undermining the conditions which lead to harm, these approaches are also more relevant and engaging to young people. In a 2021 study, American college students with disabilities described prevention programming “as ineffective and irrelevant to their experiences, including referring to programs as “a joke” (Chugani et al., p. 281). Similarly, consent rooted in “white liberal personhood” (Nash, 2019, p. 201) can obscure “the ways in which black women have, historically, been unable to offer or withhold consent” (Nash, 2019, p. 201). Attending to these realities and bringing them into conversations about justice and pleasure will only lead to more comprehensive and engaging education programs. Indeed, “by emphasizing rather than renouncing complexity, feminists can more fully support politically engaged consent” (Harris, 2018, p. 172). Young people are already navigating a globalized world that exists at their fingertips and are more than capable of complex and layered dialogue; indeed, they are already doing it whether adults choose to acknowledge such.

Choosing relevancy means building solidarity and relationships across sexual and anti-violence movements but also through learning from “Indigenous rights, anti-racism, and other liberation movements” (Logie et al., 2021, p. 660) about how to build “stronger and intersectional social movements for sexual rights” (Logie et al., 2021, p. 660). This must happen on a theoretical level, but also through combining community interventions with personal skill-

building (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009) and strategies that intervene everywhere from the individual to the societal level (Flood, 2011). Further, Bierria (2007) describes the difference between anti-violence programming that is “accessible to marginalized people” versus having “the marginalization of people inform how we define violence and what kind of work we would do” (p. 153). Anti-violence education founded upon this type of intersectional feminist analysis would start from the perspective of racialized and queer experiences. Further, the objective would not be “ensuring that hegemonic groups (‘the center’) tolerate the others (‘the margins’) but rather at transforming the classroom” (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021, p. 11) into a space that has the potential to form relationships of care and accountability amongst students. Some examples of approaches which may increase relevancy are questioning rigid identity categories, school authoritarianism and dehumanizing ideologies (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021), as well as analyzing ongoing “reliance on surveillance and discipline in prevention of sexual violence” (Brush & Miller, 2023, p. 1684).

### **Grounded in Culture**

Acknowledging earlier critiques of organizations which seek to become anti-racist by sending minority youth down the hall to ‘their’ program while leaving the rest of the organization unchanged, the literature points to the relevancy of curricula which is culturally relevant and engaged. Ansloos and Dent’s (2021) work on suicide prevention found that while young people feel that a variety of approaches to change (such as abolition and reform) can be useful, they were very clear “that there is no mental health and wellness promotion that is meaningful or substantive for Indigenous communities, unless it is meaningfully tethered to actions which address structural and systemic oppression” (p. 47). Further, Indigenous feminist scholars (Clark, 2016b; de Finney et al 2021; Flicker et al., 2019; WEA & NYSHN, 2016) amplify calls from Indigenous youth for culturally grounded programming and research that

reflects the realities of their lives. Such culturally grounded initiatives should be co-created by the youth they seek to serve (Wong et al., 2017).

### **Prevention Education in Practice**

Many authors (including this one) note the challenges of discussing pleasure in the context of highly sexually conservative political contexts where abstinence and fear-based messages are still actively advocated for by many decision-makers (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Mark et al., 2021; Waling et al., 2021). It is certainly brave, given this, that one research study is titled “Please teach students that sex is a healthy part of growing up”: Australian students’ desires for relationships and sexuality education” (Waling et al., 2021). Unfortunately, there are instances where researchers identify conservative curriculums as a barrier while simultaneously recirculating the rhetoric that delayed initiation of sex amongst youth is a positive result of sexual health education (Mark et al., 2021). As such, it appears that research can be both pleasure oriented and sex negative and can recirculate beliefs that respectable sexual activity only occurs in the context of long-term monogamous relationships.

Amongst these varying opinions and debates, youth and anti-violence educators also raise necessary questions about the practicalities of enacting education on the ground. The lack of rigid answers in the literature may at first be discouraging but is reassuring upon further reflection. For education to be meaningful it must be contextually and temporally relevant. While there are no one-size-fits-all responses to the four questions in this section title, there are ideas and questions in the literature worth discussing. For example, one study found that while young people did not exhibit a definitive preference for external educators, they wanted their teachers to have more training if they were to facilitate dialogue about sexuality (Waling et al., 2021). Although not necessarily accounted for in most teacher training programs, classrooms “are themselves sites of race, class, gender/sexuality privilege and struggle” (Brewer, 2014, p. 167)

and students want competent allies in developing a critical analysis. Other research with college students noted “the importance of avoiding gimmicky program names” (Chugani et al., 2021, p. 289) as well as the benefit of making violence prevention material mandatory (Chugani et al., 2021). Again, the importance of experienced and well-informed facilitators was emphasized (Chugani et al., 2021). In addition, many noted that anti-violence programming must go far beyond a single workshop (Orchowski, 2023; Thom, 2020). As Thom (2020) puts it, “this is more than a ‘one or two workshops’ conversation. This is a lifetime conversation” (para. 18). Similarly, a 2023 study on sexual violence in high schools asserts that prevention education is most effective through a multi-pronged approach which “integrates social norms, bystander behavior, and sexual violence prevention skills” (Orchowski, p. 2879).

### **Non-Profit Industrial Complex**

Whilst there is healthy debate about how best to facilitate anti-violence education, critical anti-racist feminist scholars are united in their discussion of how the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) profoundly impacts the scope and quality of the programming (Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016). NPIC describes the ways that funding bodies seek to impose their motivations of monitoring social justice movements, managing the amount of dissent that is possible, and redirecting community organizers into “career-based modes of organizing instead of a mass-based organizing capable of actually transforming society” (Smith, 2007, p. 3). While the NPIC is often perpetuated by private philanthropists and foundations, it is also a method by which the state enacts influence on social service organizations. By funding (or, in most cases, underfunding) projects in communities that are resisting racism and colonialism, the state effectively pre-determines and limits the transformative potential of their work through convoluted grant requirements, reporting, and deliverables (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018, p. 445).

While the NPIC can seem like an abstract theory about funding, its impact on anti-violence work is extensive. For example, Maynard (2017) points out how funding for anti-violence work often replicates racial inequities by underfunding work specific to racialized communities. Further, Berke and Collins (2023) point out that funding is most often granted to “White cisgender-led organizations” (p. 116) which forces racialized and trans-led organizations to form partnerships with funded non-profits that often lead to tokenization, extractivism, and invisibilization. This renders it nearly impossible for organizations to “seek strategies to transform the way communities confronted sexual violence” (Bierria, 2007, p. 152) and to go beyond providing services that manage the impacts of sexual assault. Even within well-funded organizations, the NPIC creates a level of precarity and scarcity which makes it deeply challenging to do quality work. “Limited staff time, high case loads, and high staff turnover” (Kim, 2020, p. 250) are often cited examples of this phenomenon. Further, a Toronto-based study found that Latinx community workers report “an increasing dependency on short-term, project-based grant funding to sustain the operations of NGOs, which often limited their work to securing grants, instead of building trusting relationships with community members and supporting them in advocacy initiatives” (Cahuas, 2019, p. 75). For these reasons, Critical Resistance and INCITE! (2016) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014a) question whether the state should have any role in supporting or funding solutions to gender-based violence due to the perpetuation of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. Bonsu (2018), for example, argues for a shift away from the role of the state in creating solutions and instead towards entirely community-based organizing and political education. Although uncommon, it appears that more organizations and collectives dedicated to radical transformation are choosing to refuse grant-

based funding and instead operate on mutual aid models (for example, the NYSHN and Nesting Doula Collective<sup>2</sup>).

Although worthy of more discussion than the scope of this chapter will allow, the NPIC also plays a key role in the professionalization of anti-violence work. Professionalization emphasizes post-secondary degrees and formal training over valuable lived and community-based experience. This serves to undermine advocacy efforts (Ullman & Townsend, 2007), pathologize survivors (Bierria, 2007), create distance from unpaid community organizing (Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016) and treat program participants as customers (Bierria, 2007). Resisting professionalization and instead emphasizing ongoing learning about feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial practices is necessary for transformative anti-violence work.

### **School Industrial Complex**

Although not identified as such in the literature, I found significant discussion of the ways that normative values assert themselves in schools, which I will not so affectionately call the school industrial complex. Black activists in the U.S. have problematized the ways that Black students are targeted for disciplinary measures that lead to cycle of ongoing carceral treatment, often called the school to prison pipeline (Kaba, 2021). A 2021 study found that while the implementation of a restorative justice model in three public schools lowered overall suspension rates, the proportion of Black youth who received suspensions increased (Davison et al.). The researchers theorize this is because restorative justice, on its own, “was not successful in transforming the underlying racial logics of punishment and anti-Blackness that place Black students at heightened risk of experiencing exclusionary discipline” (Davison et al., 2021, p.

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<sup>2</sup> A local by and for BIPOC doula collective providing accessible birth support.

708). As a sex educator who used to work in schools, Emma Schwartz (2023) connects the school industrial complex to consent education:

It's not a coincidence that we're not taught about consent in most schools: consent is the antithesis of capitalism and colonialism. The state strips people of their autonomy, forcing us to work to survive, depriving us of necessities like health care and housing, and forcing family structures onto us (para. 4).

As mentioned previously, this underscores the need for teachers to get additional training so they can effectively navigate conversations about sex and violence with their students (Wright & Greenberg, 2023). Further, given the evidence that prevention activities are most effective when youth are engaged on multiple occasions (Jones & Mitchell, 2022), teachers are positioned to facilitate ongoing dialogue. Indeed, Brewer (2014) states that the “classroom can be a site of transformatory education” (p. 166) if it is “connected to communities of change within and outside the academy” (p. 166). Chapter Three will highlight debates among research participants about whether to focus energies on reforming school curriculum and training for teachers or to prioritize expanding meaningful work which is already taking place at the community level.

### **Pedagogy**

Similar to the range of opinions on logistical aspects of prevention programming, there are ongoing discussions about effective pedagogy. While there is no one-size-fits-all pedagogy, I find it useful to learn from experimented approaches. Sanjakdar (2019) analyzes classroom dialogue to uncover how teachers succeed or fail to employ facilitation tools in discussions of sexuality. This research finds that there are many missed opportunities for students to be empowered, affirmed, and challenged. In response, Sanjakdar proposes an expanded use of dialogic teaching which emphasizes shared meaning making, relationality, and systematic thinking. Alternatively, Wong (2018) writes about the benefits of a “re-embodied pedagogy —

that is, the reunion of our mind with our body, emotions, and spirit in teaching and learning” (p. 8) which can better support students to put what they learn into practice. A project in Inuit territories experimented with a tool called body mapping which incorporated arts-based pedagogy and effectively supported young people in “self-reflection, introspection, personal connectedness, and processing difficult emotions” (Lys et al., 2018, p. 1185). Finally, theatre of the oppressed (Augusto Boal’s extensively used theatre tool based on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) may also be useful in anti-violence education because of its attention to participants as active agents of social change (Bierria, 2007). This discussion of pedagogy is not exhaustive and future research could explore the benefits, limitations, and applicability of various pedagogies. In summary, further consideration of pedagogy is necessary as the most innovative and transformative theoretical curriculum will fail if the delivery replicates conservative ideologies.

### **Peer-led**

Throughout liberation movements, there is a long history of rejecting the role of outsiders and calls for leadership by people who have lived and personal connection to the oppression that is being resisted. “Nothing about us without us” is an often-used slogan in the harm reduction movement which speaks specifically to the harm outsiders can cause when seeking to fix or do good. In social work and education, there are long legacies of colonial paternalism which have isolated and excluded Indigenous, Black, racialized, ill, and trans leaders. Over the past 20 years, anti-violence has only been “increasingly characterized by professionalization, individualized direct service delivery, and reliance on crime control” (Kim, 2020, p. 225). Before discussing current peer-led anti-violence work, I note that many Black and Indigenous communities have always been doing work by and for their community. For example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Black community services workers “reached across rather than down” (Chapman and withers,

2019, p. 115) and Cree nations in the 1990s were already implementing community-based responses to sexualized violence healing and prevention (Dickie, 2000); the work is visible today is part of these ongoing legacies.

In the anti-violence movement, some organizations are staffed by people who have lived experience with sexual assault, while others are mostly made up of ‘professionals’ who are favoured for their distance from community members (Ullman & Townsend, 2007). Due to the advocacy of community-based activists, many non-profits have slowly (and imperfectly) made attempts to shift away from professionalized models and towards the inclusion of people with lived experience, especially of racialized violence. Community leaders like those who make up INCITE! emphasize that their approach is to treat survivors “less as clients and more as potential comrades in struggle for social justice” (Bierria, 2007, p. 161). Mimi Kim (2020), a co-founder of INCITE!, describes the role of service providers as acting “as a facilitator, offering resources that support the decision-making of survivors and their social networks” (p. 228). When it comes to engaging young people in leading and creating violence prevention programming, it is unsurprising that youth who have experienced sexualized violence are often the most engaged (Hutchison et al., 2022).

While young people are clear that they are already aware of high rates of gender-based violence and structural sources of oppression, they report a “lack of opportunities to engage in open and knowledgably facilitated discussions about SV” (Chugani et al., 2021, p. 289). This is an important starting point (that youth are already aware, capable, and versed in conversations about sexualized violence), as many scholars do not consider the benefits of including and uplifting youth voices in anti-violence work. In contrast, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014a), discusses Indigenous methodologies which consider youth as critical members of

movements that seek to end violence. Creating space for youth to lead ensures that interventions are effective and useful, as youth report that peer information is a primary source of information about sex (Hodes & Gittings, 2019).

A study with youth from three different European countries confirmed that youth are “clear that they have a role to play when it comes to reaching and informing their peers” (Cody, 2017, p. 221) and that they are capable of managing the risks associated with doing anti-violence education. Researchers involved with a Brooklyn-based youth led community organizing program note the therapeutic role of storytelling, the power of group leadership, and the importance of acknowledging difficult emotions that arise (Ortega-Williams et al., 2020). Further, the literature highlights that markers of successful programming can include: leadership by youth “occupying marginalized social identities” (Edwards et al., 2022, p.1391); using multiple mediums for engagement, such as social media and music (Cody, 2017); offering honoraria (Hutchison et al., 2022); strategic organization such as having youth lead workshops in schools that they do not attend themselves (Cody, 2017); and prioritizing small group, community-based opportunities (Cody, 2017). An example of these principles in practice is the NYSHN’s (2021) *You are Made of Medicine: A Mental Health Peer Support Manual* which explains that “Because our peers share similar experiences, we don't have to worry about having to explain what it's like to grow up in your community, or what it's like being Indigiqueer, two-spirit or LGBTQ+” (p. 7). The manual is notable for how it supports young people to feel confident in their skills, rather than pressuring them to prioritize external supports. Below is a more detailed discussion of three community-based and peer-led organizing strategies: bystander intervention, harm reduction, and Indigenous resurgence.

## **Bystander Intervention**

Bystander intervention models have emerged out of mainstream anti-violence movements and have become increasingly common on post-secondary campuses, as well as in high-school-aged programming. Although there is a vast range of values within which bystander intervention can be conducted, the core principle is supporting community members to take social action, typically through interventions in low aggression gender-based violence (ex. slut shaming, slurs). While bystander intervention can fall prey to neoliberalism's grasp and serve to replicate individualized solutions to violence, when paired with a structural analysis the approach can serve to "move beyond a focus on individual-level attitudes and frame sexual violence as a community issue" (Brush & Miller, 2023, p. 1679). For programs seeking to increase youth leadership, bystander intervention can support a greater understanding of gender-based violence and offer concrete tools for young people to make the changes they want to see in their communities.

## **Harm reduction**

Although not commonly referenced in the mainstream academic literature about violence prevention, Indigenous, queer, and sex-working communities demonstrate an important connection to substance use harm reduction movements. This became very clear to me while working in an overdose prevention site and viewing work by Magdalena Harris (Derricott, 2014), who fiercely advances a vision of support for people who use drugs that relies on pleasure maximization strategies, rather than patronizing public health messages. Further, Race (2008) describes harm reduction as "an aversion to pathologization" (p. 419). Kîwetinohk Kîsik (2018), a long-time anti-violence worker on lək'wəŋən territories, explains that harm reduction is an opportunity to suspend judgment about where people are currently at and instead to seek to be relevant and useful given the current realities. In practice, this means "not judging people or

disposing of them for not knowing about consent” (Kîwetinohk Kîsik, 2018, para. 4). In sex worker support services, many organizations circulate bad date lists which seek to provide workers with information so they can make informed choices about clients and risk, without being pressured to leave their jobs. Further, NYSHN (2021) explains that preventing violence through a harm reduction approach can include everything from peer crisis intervention to offering someone a ride to a ceremony. Similarly, many queer and trans communities have taken up harm reduction protocols for kink and BDSM spaces (especially party and play scenes which typically involve both substance use and sex) which “are extensive, explicit, and continuously negotiated and re-negotiated to ensure safety and mutual pleasure” (Wright & Greenberg, 2023, p. 10). Some queer community members report that navigating sexual boundaries in queer BDSM spaces is easier than in non-kink communities, because of the emphasis on ongoing communication (Gaspar et al., 2021). These examples offer a glimpse into emerging collaborations between harm reduction and violence prevention movements which may serve to strengthen both substance use and sexual health education for youth.

### **Indigenous Resurgence and Body Sovereignty**

As discussed previously, “Cultural connectedness is identified by Indigenous youth as the primary determinant of their health, even more so than other social determinants of health” (Ansloos & Dent, 2021, p. 32). Clark (2016b) echoes this by pointing out that youth report higher resiliency and greater health when cultural beliefs and practices are incorporated into programming. The WEA & NYSHN (2016) highlights the necessity of “culturally-rooted, nation-specific responses to the unrelenting traumas Indigenous communities face” (p. 3) which they implement through a decentralized organizing model. The work that Indigenous communities, and youth in particular, are already doing can be seen as part of the broader resurgence movement which is “centered on reclaiming, restoring, and regenerating homeland

relationships” (Cornassel & Bryce, 2012, p.153). In “‘Stay strong, stay sexy, stay Native’: storying Indigenous youth HIV prevention activism,” researchers identify key themes in prevention as a “focus on (1) the role of family and elders, (2) traditional sacred notions of sexuality, (3) the importance of education, (4) reclaiming history, (5) focusing on strength, (6) Indigenous cosmology and (7) overcoming addictions” (Flicker et al., 2019, p. 324). By responding directly to and prioritizing questions from participants over rigid curriculums, researchers found that young people reported being better able to absorb information (Flicker et al., 2019). Their work also revealed that HIV prevention has inherent and necessary connections to sexual health, sexualized violence prevention, self-determination, and sovereignty (Flicker et al., 2019) which demonstrates the necessity of rejecting the silos that can emerge among different prevention efforts. Finally, Indigenous academics are advancing the importance of body sovereignty and the concept of a “Sovereign Erotic” to capture the ways that Indigenous peoples reject colonial values (Burns, 2020). This analytical work makes visible how “land and sexuality are tied together” (Burns, 2020, pp. 29-30) and that reclamations of sexuality are an assertion of sovereignty. By learning from the resurgence work that Indigenous communities are already doing and being curious about how body sovereignty connects to violence prevention, the leadership of young people can be centred and transformative possibilities for ending colonial patriarchal violence can be realized. This must happen alongside ongoing consideration of the ways that recolonizing logics can assert themselves when white settler people and organizations attempt to be in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, organizations, and nations (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have brought together academic and community-based voices to provide a theoretical foundation for my research about sex-positive violence prevention education. Key

themes included the limitations of affirmative consent paradigms, the importance of pleasure, the ongoing negative impact of white feminism, the need for structural analysis, the varying opinions about best practices for education delivery, and the importance of youth leadership. While this chapter provides a contextual and theoretical foundation for my research, the following chapter will address how I apply these concepts to my research design and analysis.

## **Chapter Two: Relationships (Research Methodology)**

In this chapter, I will discuss my research paradigm, methodologies, and methods. First, I will discuss the critical emancipatory paradigms underpinning my research and how I took up community-engaged research methodologies using a relationship-based approach. Next, I will summarize the methods in this project, including eight semi-structured interviews and one focus group with local anti-violence educators. Finally, I will consider some limitations and ethical considerations impacting this research.

### **Research Objective**

The objective of this research is to provide an opportunity for anti-violence educators to dream and imagine curriculum outside the typical limitations of non-profit organizations, such as limited funding, high burnout rates, and top-down leadership. As a part of the anti-violence community, I brought a high degree of relationality as I engaged a group of research participants who have worked alongside each other and myself for many years. Further, I endeavoured to bring voices and perspectives which are often structurally sidelined into the centre of conversations about sexualized violence and sexual justice. Without becoming prescriptive or acontextual, I sought to identify principles of sex-positive, anti-racist and feminist violence prevention education which could be directly applicable to community-based programming.

### **Research Question**

In thinking about how to move beyond the limits of current anti-violence programming, my research sought to engage community-based educators in a space of dreaming (reimagining) about the teachings they wish they had received as young people and how they came to know what they know now about sexualized violence. To develop principles for prevention education, I asked what anti-violence educators have learned to be the core principles of sex-positive, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist education about sex and relationships.

### **Critical emancipatory research: Overarching paradigm**

As a violence prevention educator, social worker, and researcher, I seek to practice critical self-reflexivity (ongoing critical reflection on my thoughts and actions), action-oriented social justice, and relationality (deep and sustained relationship building across axis of difference). For this research project, critical emancipatory approaches to research offered the most helpful guidance as they prioritize critical conversations about power. Critical research paradigms assert that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore influenced by structural power relations (Pease, 2010). In addition, critical research paradigms assert that power inequities can be addressed through social change (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Such paradigms invited me to question how violence prevention is typically understood to be a workshop that explicitly discussing sexual assault and consent, a trend which emerges from post-secondary campuses. However, a critique of how knowledge is socially constructed revealed how these mainstream understandings can erase important interventions which take a broader focus than sexual assault. Further, critical paradigms led me to reflect on the importance of making visible the foundations and origins of dominant approaches, in order to meaningfully transform education to account for conversations about race, sexuality, colonialism, and disability.

Emerging from disability studies scholarship in the 1990s, critical emancipatory research more deeply emphasizes research as a method to achieve social change and prioritizes the experiences of participants (Pease, 2010). To do so, emancipatory researchers seek to challenge oppression by building reciprocal relationships of solidarity with participants (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). Although emancipatory approaches resist prescriptive guidelines, a core tenet is that “research practices should be developed for and with those impacted by the research so together we might support systemic change and promote liberation” (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021, p. 6). Another tenet of emancipatory approaches is the importance of ongoing researcher reflexivity.

As a cisgender white settler woman, my access to numerous axes of social privilege renders it necessary for me to reflect explicitly and critically on how my social location impacts the research process. For example, Potts and Brown (2015) stress that research findings do not exist to be discovered, but rather are produced through interactions between people with numerous identities, privileges, and biases. This led me to avoid words such as “discover” (also steeped in settler colonial logics of discovery and *terra nullius*), “revealed,” and “emerged” which would obscure my role as a researcher with a worldview that is actively constructing the knowledge claims made in this thesis. By applying critical emancipatory research paradigms, I seek to ground my research in anti-oppressive social justice principles and to actively work toward liberation for communities that must resist oppressive violence.

Having spent considerable time in coursework learning from Indigenous research methodologies, I have been shaped and influenced by those teachings. As a white settler, I do not have the lived experience necessary to take up Indigenous methodologies in my research and I seek to resist oversimplification or cherry-picking of key tenets. Instead, I take Tłaliłila’ogwa Sarah Hunt’s (2014) encouragement that “becoming unhinged, uncomfortable, or stepping beyond the position of ‘expert’ in order to also be a witness or listener” (p. 31) is a necessary goal for non-Indigenous researchers. Further, I am cautious to avoid becoming a non-Indigenous scholar doing research *about* Indigenous communities without disrupting Western worldviews (Reading, 2014). In this research, I sought to resist researching down or about, and instead to reach across to connect with educators who are my peers and colleagues. As my community is made up of people with a vast range of experiences, this also necessitated researching across differing lived experiences and actively attending to power differentials. In my interviews with participants, especially those who have experienced colonial violence, I intentionally did not

inquire or probe into experiences of trauma in order to practice “active resistance to trading in pain and humiliation” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812) which the settler colonial gaze so often seeks out. Kovach (2015), a nêhiyaw and Saulteaux scholar who focuses on Indigenous research methodologies, proposes that non-Indigenous methodologies which “do not hide from but rather embrace the political nature of research” (p. 60) are most likely to affirm Indigenous methodologies. As a settler researcher, I sought to take up Kovach’s call by using critical emancipatory and community informed methodologies which place identity and power at the centre of analysis.

### **Community Engaged, Insider, and Relationship-based Research**

Community-based research seeks to disrupt power differentials by involving participants and community members to ensure that the research process fully disrupts normative patterns of research that occur in isolation from the community the research intends to affect (McCauley et al., 2019). I am inspired by community-engaged research methodologies which promote co-creation with participants and use research as a tool for social change (Krause et al., 2017). While a Participatory Action Research project involving youth participation in the research design from the beginning to end would likely lead to powerful and inspiring outcomes, that is beyond the scope of this project. As Wallace (2005) notes, community-engaged research should build community resources, and not drain them. Asking youth to engage in a multi-month project without providing extensive compensation would be unaligned with principles of equity and social justice, and my values. Rather than researching ‘down’ (by interviewing youth) or ‘up’ (e.g., policy makers), I focused on working with other adults who are part of my informal community of practice thereby researching ‘with.’ Further, I incorporated some elements of community-engaged research methodologies into my thesis research. For example, a) soliciting ongoing feedback, b) ensuring that my questions were open-ended enough to allow participants

to bring in what they felt was important, and c) ensuring that participants were acknowledged for their contributions in ways that felt meaningful to them (e.g., by name if preferred) are a few practices that I borrowed from community-engaged research.

### **Insider Research**

When researchers are part of the community or group that they are researching, this is often called insider research. Although insider research may be dismissed or looked down upon by traditional positivist paradigms which prioritize researcher objectiveness, many critical paradigms affirm its potential benefits (Bulk & Collins, 2023; Hoffman-Cooper, 2021; McCauley et al., 2019). Insider research has been an important advocacy strategy for centering the experiences of groups who have historically been excluded from academic communities, such as racialized and poor communities. Further, Indigenous communities have advocated for insider knowledge production as part of knowledge sovereignty and self-determination (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). I believe that doing research with a community I am part of allowed me to seek and support much greater depth in conversation. For example, when I selected research participants, I prioritized educators who had worked in the same or connected programming as this enabled me to elicit multiple opinions and perspectives on specific curriculum tools. Throughout my interviews, research participants referenced each other as people they had learned from and with. Further, I was able to offer a high degree of care and flexibility to research participants because of my established relationships, which I believe increased accessibility and ability for participants to be fully present.

However, there are also ethical challenges to doing insider research. In Hoffman-Cooper's (2021) discussion of doing research about foster care as a former youth in care, it becomes clear the category of insider is more complicated. She points out there is still a power dynamic held by the researcher over participants and that one shared identity category or

experience should not erase other axes of difference. In other words, if “insider research involves doing research with one’s own people, who are one’s own people and who decides?” (Bulk & Collins, 2023, “Addressing what Research Is”). Further, Kanuha (2000) points out that just because someone is a member of a group, this does not mean that “the insider researcher has intimate knowledge of the particular and situated experiences of all members of the group” (p. 443). This is evident in my own research given that while I share aspects of identity with many participants and consider them all to be part of the local anti-violence community, many participants have lived experiences that are beyond my own. As such, researcher reflexivity is potentially even more vital for insider research (Bulk & Collins, 2023). This is not only due to relationships with participants as both insider and outsider status, but also because of the unique ethical dilemmas that an inside researcher faces (Kanuha, 2000), such as engaging in social or familial relationships while simultaneously conducting research.

### **Relationship-Based Research**

While my research bears many connections to insider research because I exist within the same professional and advocacy community as my research participants, there are also many differences between my social positionality and that of my participants. To avoid absolving those dynamics and prioritizing sameness over difference, I have come to think of this project as relationship-based. This speaks to the preexisting connections I had with participants and the relationships that were formed while working alongside each other in programs that are tasked with navigating subjects which can be controversial to the mainstream (e.g., youth experiences of pleasure). While I did not work at the same organization as all the research participants, we have been part of a shared informal community of practice which gave us opportunities to problem solve, debrief, and seek support from each other. As mentioned previously, these existing relationships also enabled me to offer care far beyond what I would feel comfortable

doing with someone I had just met. For some participants, this looked like interviewing at their home because that was most accessible, safe, and comfortable for them. Another participant needed a ride to the ferry after our interview, which made it possible for us to meet. And for other participants, I had enough knowledge that I was able to share a personalized gift to show my depth of appreciation.

In my experience, relationship-based research presented some ethical dilemmas, such as ensuring confidentiality when participants were excited to share that they were involved with the project and ensuring that interviews remained trauma-informed by not extending past 90 minutes (which, in one case, led me to suggest that we pause and resume a different day). Because I care deeply for each participant, these dilemmas were important for me to navigate well, but I did not view them as a burden. At times, I felt intimidated by doing research with my community and concerned about making mistakes. However, I believe that my community will hold me accountable if I make mistakes because they also care deeply for me and want my work to be successful. In fact, because the research participants have previous knowledge about me, I found that they were able to ask questions and challenge me in ways that were very meaningful and shifted the atmosphere closer to researching with and alongside.

### **Anti-Oppressive Relationality**

Doing insider research requires a commitment to actively addressing power dynamics (Potts & Brown, 2015), which I took seriously in my relationship-based methodology. I looked to anti-oppressive research principles for guidance, as they foreground relationships and resulting power dynamics. Moosa-Mitha (2015) points out that anti-oppressive research practices should de-centre normative experiences and reject that knowledge is universal and value-neutral. For my research analysis, this illustrated the importance of naming and actively unsettling commonly circulated tropes about victimhood (e.g., a young, white woman walking down the street

attacked by a stranger) as well as the frequency with which anti-violence organizations are almost entirely staffed by white cis women. And when analyzing interview data, I sought to use anti-oppressive “strategies of resistance that target formal, structural, and cultural analysis in resisting oppression and moving toward a vision of a difference-centred society” (Moosa-Mitha, 2015, p. 88). These frameworks offered me tools for holding myself accountable to practice self-reflexivity, humility, and responsiveness as a researcher. It was also my hope that by putting these theories into practice I would be able to create space for research participants to bring in all the parts of themselves because aspects of identity do not exist in isolation. For example, by drawing upon feminist theories which account for the social construction of gender, I affirmed and included the experiences of trans, genderqueer and Two-Spirit people.

Although I did not draw upon or re-engage with Shawn Wilson’s (2008) work in the process of my thesis research, I was impacted and changed by *Research as Ceremony*. While there are not specific ways that I applied his work as a non-Indigenous researcher, his teachings informed my overall worldview and analysis. Specifically, Shawn Wilson’s concept of relationality provided me with a theoretical space to think critically about the role and power of my relationships with participants as a researcher, and the centrality of relationships in informing how I come to know what I know as a researcher. Looking back, I realize that Shawn Wilson’s work and Tłaliłila’ogwa Sarah Hunt’s (2014) encouragement to consider insider research were core reasons why I felt brave enough to pursue relationship-based research. Prior to this, I was afraid to acknowledge my relationship with participants as I worried it would be considered inappropriate and a detriment to the research. I was also very uncomfortable with the idea of establishing distance in order to satisfy normative research expectations; to me, it would be a failing of my research if I denied and erased the intimate moments I have shared with

participants, from processing salmon together to babysitting their children and supporting each other through struggles at work. Indigenous methodologies and relationality have created space within colonial academic institutions for research to honour and appreciate relationship-based research, and as a white settler, I continue to ask myself how I will show gratitude and be in reciprocity with this important work.

### **Methods**

In this section, I will discuss my research methods in more detail and the steps I followed to complete data collection.

#### **Planning**

Building on critical emancipatory and relationship-based approaches to research, I opted to use semi-structured interviews and one focus group. These methods allowed me to prioritize attunement, flexibility, and responsiveness to participants' reflections and needs. Further, by using open-ended questions I sought to allow participant's experiences to guide the direction of the interview. The focus group also created space for community building and to receive feedback from participants about my initial analysis of the data.

In my first ethics application, I submitted a proposal for one-on-one interviews with protocols to ensure emotional safety, confidentiality, researcher accountability, and informed consent. The University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) approved my application in September 2023 (Protocol Number 23-0261). I later submitted an amendment to add the focus group discussion, where I explained some differences in anonymity and confidentiality due to the group setting. In both applications, I addressed my role as an insider researcher who has preexisting relationships with the research participants.

## **Participant Selection**

Using a purposive sampling approach, I selected eight educators who are working or have worked in violence prevention programming on ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ territories. The participants were community-based educators, most of whom have been employed by local non-profits, although their work took place in a variety of contexts (e.g., community centres, local Indigenous nations, secondary schools). In selecting participants, I prioritized educators who worked in anti-violence advocacy as young (or younger) people and therefore have additional lived connections with youth prevention education. However, I balanced this with the importance of including voices which are often erased and marginalized in mainstream anti-violence, especially those of people who are racialized, Indigenous, trans/non-binary/Two-Spirit, and/or sex working. Purposive sampling, rather than doing a general call-out, allowed me to ensure that educators who have substantial experience in this field and are known to use a feminist/anti-racist/decolonial approach were prioritized, as well as to ensure that a range of lived experiences and perspectives were included.

As I am part of the anti-violence educator community, I have non-hierarchical professional relationships with all the participants. For all participants, I made it clear in the recruitment script and consent form (Appendix A) that they should not feel pressure or obligation to participate in this study due to a pre-existing relationship with me. I also emphasized that there would be no repercussions if they decided to not participate.

Starting in October 2023, I began contacting possible research participants with an initial email introducing my research and the consent form (Appendix A). All participants replied quickly to my email, and I invited participants to suggest a time and location that would be best for them.

## **Interviews**

Between October 2023 and January 2024, I held eight interviews. Interviews were between 30 and 90 minutes and conducted at a location most convenient for the participant. The interviews were semi-structured and began with an explanation of the consent form (Appendix A), confidentiality, and scope of research. I also reminded participants that they could end the interview at any time and that they would be provided with a copy of the interview transcript to review for redactions or alterations. Interview participants were provided with a list of questions before the interview (Appendix B) and invited at the beginning of the interview to answer them in an order of their choosing and to skip or come back to questions as desired. Participants were also provided with an \$80 honorarium at the beginning of the interview to compensate for their time. The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and downloaded on a password-protected computer. In one case, an interview was getting close to 90 minutes, so I asked the participant that we pause and meet again at another date. It was important to me that the interviews not extend past 90 minutes to ensure that the participant's emotional safety was maintained. In another case, a participant was unable to meet in person and requested a Zoom interview. Throughout the interviews, I expressed gratitude and affirmation for the responses that participants shared, especially when stories involved discussions of harm or abuse. At times, I also reflected and related to shared experiences. These actions were important for me in maintaining relationality and actively placing myself in conversation with participants. At the end of the interview, I reminded participants of their options in terms of confidentiality and invited them to adjust their consent form (Appendix A) if desired. As interviews were completed, I transcribed the audio in full and invited participants to share any redactions or edits to the written transcription.

### **Data analysis**

Once my interview data was collected, I analyzed it using thematic content analysis to prepare a summary which I brought back to the interviewees for review. I also provided participants with a transcript of the interview which included my coding, so there was a greater degree of transparency about which sections I planned to use in the final research product.

### **Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

Reflexive thematic analysis, as identified by Braun and Clark (2019), highlights the role of the researcher in creating an analysis of data. Instead of viewing themes as hidden treasures waiting to be discovered, reflexive thematic analysis calls upon the researcher to be aware of and transparent about the ways that their worldview and knowledge impact the analysis (Braun & Clark, 2019)

I followed an inductive (data-driven) approach of becoming familiar with the interview data, coding the data, organizing data into themes, and going back to the data numerous times. Throughout each stage, I sought to reflect on how my positionality as a white cis-gender woman impacted how I interacted with the data. And as Tuck and Yang (2014) ask, “When coding data, how do researchers enact our own refusals” (p. 816)? For me, this involved placing some stories in a “safe-keeping box” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 816) because they were not mine to share or because publishing them could present risks to participants. However, these stories and my community-based work in violence prevention have changed and informed how I understand the root causes of and solutions to gender-based violence.

After immersing myself in reflexive thematic analysis theory and transcribing the interviews, I created an initial brainstorm of key themes which could be used as codes to organize the data. As I began coding the transcripts, I added themes and modified others. This

process led me to go back to the data and literature multiple times. After coding the interviews, I organized the data into a spreadsheet which allowed me to compare comments from each participant within each separate code. I then created a large brainstorm of curriculum principles which I organized and re-organized into core principles, with sub-themes. By engaging with both data and external literature on violence prevention, I employed both inductive and deductive approaches. This involved integrating interview data with theory and a wide range of voices, leading to a more nuanced analysis.

### **Focus Group**

Upon completing interviews and coding data, I identified seven core principles of sex-positive and justice-oriented violence prevention curriculum (discussed in Chapter Four). Then, I sent an invitation to the eight interview participants for a focus group discussion of the principles. The focus group provided an opportunity to deepen a sense of community and connection amongst local anti-violence educators, many of whom have worked in the same field for years but are rarely offered opportunities to connect due to the limits of non-profit funding which typically has little to no budget for professional development. Further, Potts and Brown (2015) highlight the benefits of creating space for researchers and participants “to step back from the analysis for a while in order to reflect upon the data, the analysis, and the destination of the research” (p. 16). The focus group therefore presented an opportunity for myself and the research participants to meet the data again and to further refine the principles, as well as to collectively hold up the strength of community-based work, which is often done quietly and humbly.

As the focus group was not included in the original invitation, I made it clear to participants that attendance was optional. Participants who were unable to attend the focus group were still contacted to review their transcript and, if desired, to provide input on my analysis of the core principles. The focus group included dinner and a cedar rose weaving workshop, and

participants were provided with an \$80 honorarium to compensate for the two-hour time commitment. While participants could choose to use their first name only or a pseudonym in the final research product, they were informed that due to the small nature of the community participating in this research, there would likely be participants at the focus group whom they knew. Therefore, it was not reasonable to assume that a participant could remain anonymous. However, at the beginning of the focus group, I discussed the importance of confidentiality, and all participants were asked to keep focus group information private (unless they have explicit permission). In the focus group, themes from the interview data were discussed, without reference to quotes from interviews or other identifying information.

### **Evaluation**

The most important evaluators of this research are the participants, as I am seeking to hold up their lived and learned experiences with integrity. Identifying themes from the interviews and bringing that data to the same participants in a focus group enabled a higher level of engagement throughout the research process than in traditional interviews. Further, I frequently sought informal feedback and reflection from participants about their experiences during the research process. Through my connections with the broader youth-serving and anti-violence community, I was also able to access informal peer review when I was asked about my research; these opportunities to articulate the goal of the project and to share dilemmas supported me in refining my focus. Finally, my supervisory committee includes three experienced and knowledgeable scholars who were able to offer me a vast range of theoretical and practical guidance.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Engaging in any research about violence, abuse, and harm requires careful attention to the experience of research participants to ensure there are adequate plans and tools to mitigate

the possibility of further harm. However, it is necessary to acknowledge and orient from the reality that the possibility of harm cannot be eliminated. Although participants were not asked directly about experiences of sexual assault, it was often the case that stories of violence were shared because they were important parts of the participants' journeys to anti-violence work, and because they held important lessons for developing programming. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were reminded that they could withdraw their participation at any time, including after their interview was completed, if they felt uncomfortable with all or part of what they shared. Before beginning an interview, participants were given the choice as to whether they wanted to be identified by their name, initials, or pseudonym. For me, it was important to offer a high degree of confidentiality and privacy in conjunction with options for participants to be acknowledged for their contributions.

Another key ethical consideration was my relationship with participants as “ethics take different meaning when you are a member of the community with which you are working.” (Clark et al., 2010, p. 250). As the participants reflected in my research are people doing anti-violence education in my community, I have a professional connection with all the participants and, in some cases, a personal relationship as well. When applying for ethics board approval I disclosed this and elaborated on strategies for ensuring integrity and transparency. To ensure that participants felt both valued and honoured, I compensated participants, selected methodologies that prioritized care, shared transparently about why I was engaging in this research question, discussed my intentions for the final research material, and ensured that any information shared (including the decision to engage in an interview) was kept to the level of confidentiality requested. For example, I clearly stated the possibility that research findings may be published on academic or community-based platforms so that participants could make informed decisions

about their contributions. While ethical issues cannot be erased or absolved, throughout this resource project I sought to actively address and name complexity whenever possible.

### **Limitations**

Some limitations of this work are that I am not engaging educators beyond my local community who could likely also make meaningful contributions and interventions. Similarly, there may be people who are newer to anti-violence work that I am not connected with yet and were therefore not included. However, I balanced this with the unique opportunity to do research do research with people within a community of practice who have worked alongside each other and therefore engaged in conversations with a higher degree of nuance.

In addition, choosing to do live interviews and focus groups does require substantial time on the part of participants and scheduling coordination. To mitigate this, I secured funding to ensure that I could compensate participants for their time in keeping with my commitments to equity and valuing lived experience. Although the honoraria provided (\$80/1.5 hour interview) was comparable with average wages in the field, I would have liked to provide participants with additional compensation to recognize their contributions and the unjustly low wages that are common in the field. To mitigate this and increase relationality, I sought to provide personalized gifts based on my prior knowledge of participants.

Finally, I realized that my research participants did not include any cis-men or white cis-women. It was a goal of my research to highlight voices which are often marginalized in violence prevention work; however, I may have missed an opportunity to capture dynamics more fully within the field. Further, as it typical of a thesis project, much of the research collection and analysis was conducted by me alone. As a cis-gender white settler, I used methodologies and theories which supported and challenged me to practice self-reflexivity and anti-oppressive practices. Throughout the research process I also sought to engage participants as much as was

possible and respectful to strive towards transparency, trustworthiness, and shared sense of ownership.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed my use of critical emancipatory research paradigms as well as a relationship-based methodology (informed by community-engaged research principles and Shawn Wilson's (2008) discussion of relationality). I then moved into a discussion of my purposive sampling approach and chosen methods (semi-structured interviews and a focus group). Finally, I discussed some ethical considerations and limitations present in this research.

### **Chapter Three: Stories**

Previous chapters discussed academic and community-based literature about violence prevention work and the methodologies used in this research. This chapter will focus on the stories that participants shared with me in interviews. To do so, I will diverge from a traditional thematic analysis approach of presenting data divided up into codes and grouped into themes. Instead, I have chosen to structure the beginning of this chapter like an in-person discussion, where a question is posed and each voice is given space to respond. While I used semi-structured one-on-one interviews in this project, nearly all participants referred to and discussed each other's work, so my interview data began to read more as a group interview than a series of individual interviews. While I found coding and themes useful for generating my analysis and identification of core principles (as discussed in Chapter Four), I feel it would be unaligned with the values and theoretical underpinnings of this research to present interview data devoid of its context and voice. In particular, I aim to conduct research rooted in context and lived experience, while prioritizing the relationships among research participants, which could be lost by grouping data into one voice.

Although I seek to tell these stories with careful attention to the language and tone that participants used, they are filtered through my analysis and worldview. I have also made some omissions when I had concerns that a participant could experience backlash or stigmatization over a particular piece of information. As such, this chapter must be read as a retelling of stories and teachings that were shared with me throughout this research project, and not as biographic excerpts about the participants. Further, I have omitted organization names; this project is about community leaders and grassroots activism, so I am intentionally decentring the institutions that employed participants, especially as many participants reported fraught relationships with non-profits which replicate dominant and capitalist ideologies.

Throughout interviews many participants directly referred to sources included in Chapter One, demonstrating the centrality of questions about consent, pleasure, white feminism, structural violence, prevention education in practice, and peer-led education. This Chapter will begin with three ‘rounds’ within which a question is posed, and each participant’s stories are shared in response. In the later part of the chapter, I will use a more thematic approach to summarize participant responses on three topics in practice: substance use, pleasure, and STBBIs. Chapter Four will shift to the tone of a collective presentation which summarizes the themes throughout this research.

### **Introductions**

At the beginning of each interview, I invited participants to share information about themselves and their identities that they wanted to be acknowledged in the final research. I also invited reflection about how they came to know what they know now about prevention education.

#### **Bea**

Bea is an Indigenous woman from WSÁNEĆ territories who grew up on Tsartlip reserve and has connections to Songhees and Esquimalt nations through her mom’s side. She describes that a personal journey led her to violence prevention work. Soon after her two kids were born, Bea lost her sister. She reflected on how much of her sister’s life had been negatively impacted by the residential school system, intergenerational trauma, and substance use. Bea knew that what happened to her sister was profoundly unjust and this inspired her to turn towards her parents, territories, and teachings to support her own healing. Doing land-based learning and teaching led Bea to want to be part of community healing, which she describes as “a personal journey, but also a journey you can share with other people and a journey you could share on the land that you were living on.” Bea started to imagine and generate ideas for a youth-led

restoration project. She secured funding from a local sexual assault centre and started Project Reclaim “for youth to reclaim land identity and culture in ways that felt good for them.” Through the project, she worked alongside young people in her community to support conversations about colonial and gender-based violence, while offering education opportunities to non-Indigenous people.

**Charlie Vaughn\* <sup>3</sup>**

Charlie is known for her fierce commitment to fighting for street-based sex workers, disability justice, and spaces for queer people to thrive. As a child, Charlie grew up in a Christian, military household where there was a lot of shame around sex, sexuality, and sexual health. Starting in her teens, Charlie started learning about education, law, and social justice from her sex-working peers. In our interview, Charlie and I talked about how being a sex worker and engaging in collective safety practices was, in many ways, the beginning of her anti-violence work. Being part of the sex work community then led her to harm reduction and legal work, which Charlie credits to peer positions: “Like at one point I was on one side of the table and then I got a job on the other side of the table because of peer-based roles”.<sup>4</sup> For Charlie, working in prevention programs felt like a natural step because of her experiences being part of criminalized and stigmatized communities who were doing sex work and using opioids. As a survivor of sexual assault, a person who is disabled, and a queer immigrant, Charlie connects with community members on a deeply personal and political level. She is also deeply reflective about how her experiences as a white settler who passes as cisgender (although she is non-binary) and has post-secondary education have given her privileges.

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<sup>3</sup> The asterisk indicates that this is a pseudonym.

<sup>4</sup> Peer-based roles were named in numerous interviews as positions which are staffed by and for the communities they are serving (e.g., peer-roles in sex work organizations which are served for current or former sex workers).

### **Jasmine Feather Dionne**

Jasmine is a queer, Indigenous PhD student. They are nehiyaw and Métis on their father's side and a Turkish settler on their mother's side. Jasmine grew up near the Athabasca oil sands, an extractive industrial site which perpetuates violence against Indigenous lands and Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit queer folk's bodies. Although this violence is normalized in the region and by settler governments, the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous relatives is what brought Jasmine to work in violence prevention. For Jasmine, the university provided an environment where they were learning from Indigenous thinkers and started to see themselves as an educator. Jasmine finds theories and concepts about body sovereignty to be essential interventions into mainstream anti-violence thinking. As Jasmine explains:

I think the main difference that I try to put forward is the importance of bodily sovereignty and how it connects to indigenous epistemology and axiology. And that that is sort of a really great starting place to teach young people about not only their bodies, but their bodies in the certain context that they're forced to live in.

### **Kenya Rogers**

Kenya is a queer woman who grew up on Syilx territory in the Okanagan and has been living on lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ territories for over 10 years with brief stints in Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories as well. On her mom's side, Kenya is Ukrainian and she has a mix of Irish and Black heritage on her dad's side. She is amused by the amount of time that she has spent in the academy completing an undergrad, masters, and working towards a law degree (in both Canadian common and Indigenous law). Kenya says, "anti-violence education brought me into anti-violence education work, 'cause I was fortunate to be exposed to a consent workshop run by the anti-violence project in my first year of university." For Kenya, that workshop introduced her to the language of "survivor" and critical conversations about violence,

which she felt connected to and seen by. This led her to get involved with campus activism and to seek mentorship from Dr. Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, who takes a critical anti-colonial approach to gender-based violence, to guide Kenya's thesis research (Rogers, 2020). Kenya credited years of observing and being mentored by experienced anti-violence educators as foundational in shaping who she is as an educator.

### **Marshall**

Marshall is a white settler of Irish and English heritage on his dad's side and English on his mom's side. He is queer, trans, neurodiverse, and accesses disability benefits because of significant experience with mental illness. His experiences of housing instability, poverty, and sexual abuse began early in life and informed his journey to learn about sex and consent. He recalled that being socialized and treated as a girl came along with many messages about purity and virginity myths and that sexual abuse profoundly impacted his relationship with sex. In his early 20s he began reclaiming his relationship to sex and gender and became a self-proclaimed geek as part of processing his own trauma. Through this process, he started volunteering at a queer men's health program run by a local harm reduction organization which dramatically increased his comfort and confidence in becoming a sexual health educator. Meeting other sex nerds, attending conferences, participating in webinars, volunteering and becoming a facilitator were major parts of Marshall's journey to violence prevention work. Marshall went on to become a coordinator of the same program he volunteered in where he worked tirelessly to expand its inclusion to all queer and trans folks.

### **Nichola Watson**

Nichola was raised in Jamaica until her family moved to Canada when she was in middle school. Her ancestry is African, and her ancestors were enslaved and brought to Jamaica by European colonizers. She is a clinical therapist who specializes in addressing interpersonal

violence and focuses on sexualized violence and racialized violence. The experiences that brought her to anti-violence are connected to her own experiences of sexualized and racialized violence. She is critical of the ongoing normalization of violence against Black women, which rests upon histories of white enslavers raping Black women as part of establishing racial, capitalist and religious control. Nichola also credited her father as a foundational figure in affirming her agency and right to remove herself from violent situations. Building off her clinical counselling work, Nichola supported the development of the Black Youth Empowerment project to support young people to develop a workshop in response to the racism they were experiencing at school.

### **Niko Mumford**

Niko is a white settler of primarily Scottish, Welsh, and Scandinavian ancestry. They are trans, queer, neurodivergent, disabled and working class. Along with many of their high school peer group, Niko became a member of Project Respect, a youth social action team run by a local sexual assault centre. They reflect that youth were drawn to that project because of the violence they were experiencing in their own lives, “be it sexualized violence, gender-based violence, ableist violence, racialized violence, and really coming to this space hungry for social justice and action.” For Niko, seeing queer and trans adults thriving, leading, and mentoring youth in the project was foundational. They value that they had the opportunity to learn about facilitation, participatory action, and popular education as a youth, and feel that set them up to “approach anti-violence work from anti-colonial, anti-oppressive, and expansive lenses”. They reflected that entering anti-violence work informed by the voices of people who are most impacted by violence and building relationships with Indigenous, racialized, queer and trans educators was foundational to how they understand prevention education. As an adult, they worked in the very

program they became involved with as a youth and later moved to working in campus-based education and prevention programming.

### **Serena Bhandar**

Serena is a witch and a published writer who worked for many years at an on-campus sexual assault centre. She thinks a lot about power dynamics and how to address them. Serena reflects that she was offered very little relevant sexual health and relationship education as a youth, and she mourns the fact that there were no queer adults in her high school who she could have sought support from. As she got older, Serena became connected with a local sexual health clinic and gender-affirming health care, as well as community-based advocacy. For Serena it has always been essential to take a by-and-for approach to community work where she has learned alongside the people she is working with. As Serena explains,

I came to anti-violence work because I thought that my identities and my lived experience of being trans feminine and racialized would benefit, I think, the work that I was able to do and supporting the communities that I'm a part of.

Serena became a coordinator with an on-campus sexual assault centre and has supported many other organizations to improve their gender, sexuality, and racial justice practices.

### **Mainstream Education**

After discussing how they came to anti-violence work, participants shared their perspectives on problems that are present in normative education about sex and consent.

Participants were also invited to reflect on how they have witnessed or been part of contesting those norms.

### **Bea**

Bea recalled that her public school sexual health education included a “basic puberty video with eighties graphics” and a presentation from a local sexual health clinic about birth

control, barriers, and testing services. When reflecting on that education, Bea felt that there were many lost opportunities for expanding those conversations, but often teachers are not equipped or supported to do so. Similarly, Bea shared that mainstream education is starting too late and is limited to one or two conversations. She emphasized that she has witnessed “the violence that happens when you don't have those conversations and it's brutal.” For instance, extremely high rates of sexualized violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples have become-normalized, which is rarely directly addressed in school settings. She also cautioned that some attempts to insert Indigenous teachings into mainstream education can be incompatible and rest upon the inaccurate idea that it is possible to decolonize a colonial system.

While working in the non-profit sector, Bea found that there was often a centralization of resources, influence, and power in large organizations. From a position of assumed authority, such organizations often explicitly or implicitly assert that there is only one way to teach youth about consent. Bea was critical of such top-down approaches and challenged that funding should be shared beyond province-led curriculum development and large non-profits. After many months of meeting with teachers and principals about offering Indigenous-led violence prevention programming for students, Bea’s work was repeatedly shut down; she reflected that “if the system isn't ready for it, you just end up wasting people's time.” She shared how depleting that process was and pondered the extremely high rates of burnout amongst anti-violence workers; Bea asked “how could so many well-meaning and lovely people come together and then become absolutely burned out?”

### **Charlie\***

When reflecting on public school education, Charlie recalled receiving a lot of messages about abstinence and condoms but nothing about pleasure or bodily autonomy. She remembered leaving unaware of what an orgasm is, or even that women could have sexual desire. Charlie also

reflected on the complexity of delivering sexual health and consent workshops in schools when youth sometimes have no choice as to whether they participate or not, which can leave youth feeling that adults think they are not capable of making decisions for themselves. This is compounded by “cookie cutter definitions of consent” that are presented as the one and true way to navigate a range of complex social situations. While Charlie values that current violence prevention programming most often has good intentions (unlike moralizing, Christian programming of the past), they are concerned that “due to dominant social scripts, capitalism, and current laws, violence prevention and anti-violence education is personalized as individual issues versus collective responsibilities.” For instance, in Charlie’s work they consistently encounter laws and norms which invalidate the harms that sex workers face by focusing on moral judgements over a critique of capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal conditions which lead to rampant sexualized violence.

### **Jasmine**

Jasmine grew up in rural northern Alberta, where Athabasca oil sands companies are required to fund schools as part of community responsibility agreements. Oil companies typically funded Christian schools, and although Jasmine attended an arts-focused school, much of the curriculum was very Catholic coded. In health class this included an emphasis on abstinence, stigma about STI’s, and sex as taboo. Jasmine recalled that the health class curriculum was then replaced with world religions, which asked students to “read parts of the Bible that compared gay people to dirt” and “demonized” the LGBTQ+ community. Such an introduction to sexual relationships was traumatizing for Jasmine, and they recall that conversations about sex were always premised on procreation while being devoid of reproductive justice (such as equitable access to abortion, perinatal, birth and postnatal care). Ironically, Jasmine pointed out, there was “never a conversation as well, now that I think about

it, about asexuality.” Looking back, Jasmine reflected that oil companies sought to maximize profits by funding Catholic schools in order to reinforce the importance of reproduction and nuclear family structures, which would produce new labourers to work in the oil sands.

For Jasmine, living near the oil sands also meant that they “grew up around land and body violence that targeted Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit queer folks.” As Jasmine got older, they began to reject how colonial violence was normalized and erased from sex education. Instead, Jasmine turned towards the concept of body sovereignty which supports “young Indigenous people to think about their bodies as political orders.” Further, Jasmine appreciated the Native Youth Sexual Health Network’s approach to addressing “justice before choice even becomes a possibility,” to reflect the reality that making choices for sexual pleasure is nearly impossible when Indigenous women are actively being disappeared, assaulted, and murdered (especially in extractive industry territories). Additionally, Jasmine was critical of white feminist approaches to consent which are prescriptive and inflexible. Even in progressive spaces, Jasmine found that prescriptive approaches can rest on Western hegemonic and binary thinking that assumes there is a good/right and a bad/wrong way to do things, and people must be taught to do the good thing. Jasmine reflected that consent paradigms which rest upon the importance of receiving a yes or no, without a deeper systemic analysis, are themselves part of the problem.

### **Kenya**

Growing up in a small city, Kenya recalled that nearly everyone in her school, community, and family were taught sex ed by the same woman. Kenya shared that “the vast majority of our conversations were about teen pregnancy and contraception.” This did include a thorough discussion of birth control options as well as internal condoms, which Kenya appreciated. Looking back, Kenya reflected that she left high school with a limited

understanding of conception, and that the discussion of queer sex (especially queer cis male sex) was limited to a comment or two. For Kenya, there was sadness that she didn't have more information about how to navigate gender affirmation and pleasure with her queer and trans partners in high school; she suggested that "I'm sure my partners would have loved me to know more about queer sex when I was in high school." However, Kenya shared that she appreciates that her sex ed took more of a harm reduction than abstinence approach, and that students with cognitive disabilities were actively included in the conversations. Ultimately, the harm that the education was trying to prevent was pregnancy and STIs, with no discussion of sexualized violence or consent. Kenya shared a lot of empathy with the single teacher tasked with delivering sexual health education, and that "it was way too large of a burden to bear," likely without adequate funding, training, or support.

Kenya also reflected on trends in violence prevention education at a post-secondary level. In her experience, there was always an "acknowledgement that we're swimming in opportunities and cultures of violence" and that consent is a pathway for reducing harm. She also shared that on-campus student-led education has consistently used a systemic analysis of sexualized violence that addresses root causes, and not just symptoms. Reflecting on her decade of involvement on campus, Kenya highlighted the importance of constantly updating and evolving the curriculum to reflect what "doesn't really fit anymore" or needs more nuance. However, she questioned whether some language and terms are broken down enough to ensure that content is accessible. As almost all workshops on campus are optional, Kenya wondered if there can be a level of "preaching to the choir."

In terms of institution-led education, Kenya expressed deep frustration with the university's dismissal of student activist calls for better sexualized violence policy, prevention,

and response, until the province mandated that all post-secondary institutions must have a sexualized violence policy. Although provincial mandates were a major win, Kenya was concerned about the creation of an emerging economy where violence prevention curriculums can be bought and sold in order to reduce institutional liability to accusations of neglect and mismanagement. This “commodification and neoliberalization of sexual violence education” has led to content being trademarked, which disrupts and erases long standing legacies of collaboration and content sharing amongst violence prevention educators. Kenya is concerned that this trend is pushing education towards risk management and liability reduction, and away from a community-led commitment to prevent people from experiencing harm.

### **Marshall**

In elementary school, Marshall remembered his class being split in two and girls were sent to learn about periods. He recalled that discussions about puberty typically revolved around girls’ bodies becoming capable of having babies and the importance of avoiding pregnancy until married and in a nuclear family structure. In later years, the content shifted to be all about STIs, paired with new fear tactics (including a video of a birth). Looking back, Marshall shared that he didn’t remember “there being a lot of talk about consent and relationships” or any focus on pleasure. Marshall challenged how unrealistic it is for public health educators to set a goal of zero teen pregnancies and STI transmissions. He also rejected the use of fear mongering, dividing students by gender, nuclear family assumptions, and approaches which end up creating additional discomfort, rather than less, in talking about sex.

While facilitating workshops and education, Marshall encountered new struggles. Marshall reflected on a few instances where experiences of childhood sexual assault were disclosed and handled poorly by facilitators; he began to wonder how often survivors of childhood abuse feel isolated in prevention and sexual health workshops. Similarly, in a queer

men's space he observed a question about dating trans-men being ignored, demonstrating a lack of meaningful inclusion. While he acknowledged that it is not necessary for every person to know the inner workings of every topic (e.g., Prep for HIV transmission prevention), education should address a wide range of "situations for folks to be aware of the nuances" and to avoid recirculating stigma.

In terms of consent education, Marshall questioned how requirements for verbal communication at every step can be overly prescriptive and leave little space for "an in-between" which accounts for the need for clarity, while also allowing for personal preference and context (e.g., how often do we ask a long-term partner for consent before each new activity?). He also highlighted the importance of consent paradigms which account for consensual experiences of pain and encouraged active conversation about language for body parts and actions performed on body parts (which is especially relevant for trans folks). Marshall also shared how consent can operate differently outside of "very cis heteronormative clusters." For example, cruising and bathhouse spaces are often "consent assumed sex positive spaces" that use an established "culture of nonverbal communication and cues." However, learning about the norms of consent assumed spaces can present accessibility concerns for people new to the community or trans men who may experience transantagonism.

He challenged that funders are often focused on measurable outcomes such as increased condom use in order to lower health care costs, which also leads to money being centralized in large organizations that are focused on securing ongoing funding rather than prioritizing community needs. In particular, Marshall was frustrated by barriers to securing and accessing funding to fairly compensate queer, trans, Indigenous and People of Colour to speak from their lived experiences.

**Nichola**

As a child, Nichola attended a Catholic school and she remembered learning very little about sex and relationships beyond that women should wait until marriage and use protection against STIs. Nichola recalled that those lessons were scary and completely unengaging for her and her peers. She challenged the ongoing prevalence of Christian shame-based education as a result of colonial occupation that disrupted African practices and teachings about family. Mainstream curricula also omit the reality that “rape was common from white people” during slavery and that “Black women were raped specifically for capitalism” in order to produce more labourers and stifle attempts at escape. For Nichola, such colonial legacies are a root cause for “racism in schools” on Vancouver Island which “is prevalent against IBPOC students.” She has also found that many feminist spaces centre white women and that, as a Black woman, she looks “more at Black feminism” in order to prioritize and centre the experiences of Black women and people as well as justice and freedom for society as a whole.

**Niko**

Niko recalled that the sex education they received as a youth wasn't bad but could have been better because it was missing representations of gender and sexuality diversity as well as any conversation about pleasure. Further, the education they received was missing an anti-oppressive, intersectional approach or recognition of “colonialism as a root cause of sexualized and gender-based violence.” Niko also reflected that there was no conversation about sex and disability. During our interview, they remembered with fondness the resistance they have seen young people enact, such as writing on posters that lack a critical analysis and finding the sexual health information they actually want on the internet. As a youth, Niko and their peers recognized that their “goal wasn't to necessarily teach but to facilitate realizations” and to affirm the knowledge that youth already have. However, they also reflected that some of the earlier

programming they were part of had inconsistencies in applying healing, trauma-informed, and survivor-centred principles.

Something Niko feels deeply concerned about and frustrated by is the way that consent can become reduced to an individual strategy to avoid getting in trouble. They critiqued institutionalized approaches to sexualized violence prevention which are liability-based and may include definitions of anti-oppression or colonialism but fail to pull “those threads into the heart of the conversation.” By striving for supposed relatability, normative approaches “end up being pretty exclusive and do not attend to the needs of the majority of students who are racialized, queer, trans, disabled.” An example of this is found in the pressure for violence prevention curriculums to keep workshops to the length of a 40-minute school block which Niko found to be an impossibly short amount of time to cover any topic in depth. Niko problematized the idea of a single definition of consent and the importance of pushing back against individualized prevention frameworks, such as programs targeting alcohol use or girls, as they lack an analysis which is complex enough to adequately address violence.

### **Serena**

In school, Serena remembered being divided by sex assigned at birth, shown a video of childbirth, and doing an exercise involving cups of water with food dye to demonstrate how STIs spread. While some of this information was useful, Serena found that the delivery left students feeling traumatized and replicated the type of abstinence-based, sex-negative education that teachers received when they were youth. Serena suggested that teachers would benefit from more extensive training about sexual health, because students can quickly pick up on discomfort or insecurity. Alternatively, community groups can be better situated to facilitate these discussions, although she was also concerned about that space that NGOs may take up if they are deeply imbedded in the non-profit industrial complex which prioritizes securing ongoing funding over

eliminating injustice. Regardless of who is educating, Serena stressed that sex education cannot be “one person giving you the all the information” and that didactic, prescriptive approaches are often frustrating to youth. Further, Serena shared that “sometimes it feels like we learn more about animal bodies or plant life than we do about our own bodies.” She suggested that sexual health information should be included in everyday conversations and addressed throughout various classes (e.g., English, literature, media studies, biology) to break down information into accessible pieces.

In school and community-based education, Serena appreciated that the universal principles of consent can be applied in many different contexts, but she expressed concern about treating encounters as if they occur in a vacuum. Instead, she suggested there are so many “narratives and scripts” that come into play, from the language used to talk about body parts to whether someone feels comfortable and safe enough to say no.

### **By and For Education**

Throughout interviews, participants shared their varying engagement with youth and peer-led programming. These stories often occurred alongside discussions of intersectionality, representation and personal experiences of sexualized violence. In this section, I will summarize what each participant shared about the importance and complexity of education by and for youth.

#### **Bea**

For Bea, each person has a responsibility and a role in addressing gender-based violence: she shared that “it's not just her problem, his problem, their problem.” She also shared the importance of “marginalized groups to be together and vision a beautiful, safe world and a world with less harm.” She recalled that listening to and learning from older cousins was a big part of her learning as a young person. Bea observed that such peer education is only more common today, especially on social media, and that “kids and youth now, they're the ones that are ready.”

At the end of Project Reclaim, Bea organized a gathering that directly responded to what young people had asked for, without other agendas present. She reflected on how often funding organizations limit the parameters of violence prevention which can result in people feeling forced into leaving as a refusal to do work that is not grounded in community.

**Charlie\***

Charlie stressed the importance of having violence prevention educators from a range of social locations. She also reflected that most of her learning was entirely peer-based, and how knowledgeable sex workers are about sexual health, navigating boundaries, and having open conversations about pleasure.

**Jasmine**

Jasmine had conflicting feelings about representational politics; they value highly visible people who are open about stigmatized subjects (e.g., living with HIV), but they are also cautious about representation being used to increase profits for corporations or individual influencers. They also noted how visual representation of concepts has been one of the most affirming experiences for them, such as commonly used rape culture pyramid and mapping tools that track where Indigenous people have gone missing or been murdered.

For Jasmine, peer-led education is necessary to remove power dynamics between adult educators and students, but also because teachers “don't necessarily have access to maybe the same social justice knowledge that young people just seem innately to have.” Successful peer-learning, in Jasmine's experience, occurs when an environment of kinship and mutual accountability has been fostered. In Indigenous communities and spaces, Jasmine expressed appreciation for the emphasis on roles that extended family (e.g., cousins, aunts) can play in educating and supporting young people.

**Kenya**

For Kenya, “being a survivor is the thing that brought” her to “critical systemic conversations about violence” and anti-violence education work. She reflected on how many anti-violence workers are also survivors, and the lack of cis-men seeking to get involved; Kenya was concerned about the labour which then falls on survivors, as well as the lack of role models for boys and young men to look up to. Although under 30 herself, Kenya shared that it is necessary to centre young people “who are thinking deeply and critically in different ways than my generation thinks about this stuff.” Kenya repeatedly emphasized the importance of mentorship amongst educators, which allows for the transfer of knowledge, accountability, and ongoing emotional support as being essential for the success of any violence prevention program.

**Marshall**

For Marshall, peer education has been incredibly impactful. He recalls watching his mentor conduct a condom demonstration at a local queer nightclub and later facilitating a similar demonstration for the line outside that very same club. As a trans guy, the legacy of queer sex positive activism prompted Marshall to unpack his own relationship with sex and trauma, and to blow his world open about the expansiveness of gender which opened up new “pleasure and power.” For Marshall, supporting people who are struggling with stigma about their sexuality or the impacts of sexual violence requires relationality. This includes sufficient funding to ensure that guest speakers from a range of perspectives can be included (especially so youth have opportunities to learn from people who they share lived experience with), as well as taking a relational approach to facilitation. For Marshall, this requires facilitators to share pieces of their own stories and experiences, making space for open discussion, focusing on a heart-centred connection, and encouraging people with more access to privilege to listen more than they speak.

Finally, Marshall emphasized the absolute necessity of resources and graphics which depict people of colour, queer people, and visibly disabled people.

### **Nichola**

Through her work with the Black Youth Empowerment project, Nichola shared a wealth of experience in centring youth leadership. Nichola noted the importance of approaching this work not from the perspective of what she thought as a youth, but rather to “sit down with young people and ask them about the issues that are important to them.” Nichola outlined her approach in a series of questions: “what's important to you?, what do you want other people to learn?, how can I help you?, do you even want my help?, and what do you need?” Through asking those questions, she learned about the racism that students were experiencing with other students as well as teachers, and she supported the group to develop a curriculum that they delivered themselves. For Nichola, youth-centred approaches are informed by principles that she lives by and her lived experience of childhood sexualized violence.

### **Niko**

As Niko has direct experience being part of youth-led violence prevention, they emphasize the importance of facilitators working from the perspective that youth know their experiences best. For Niko, this means that youth should be involved from the very beginning of a violence prevention project, especially in determining curriculum content, format, and workshop length. Youth leadership should begin at the development stages and extend to evaluation processes. Niko reflected that the majority of people they worked with also identified as survivors of gender-based violence; while this connection informed by lived experience is important, they note the emotional weight of doing violence prevention work as a survivor. For Niko, much of this strain comes from pushback against sex-positive programming or micro-aggressions that survivor-advocates experience at work. They noted that organizations which are

survivor-led typically have deeper “commitments to doing the work in radical ways but also in flexible ways that are adaptable.” This highlights how curriculum informed by lived experiences and peer-based approaches must be accompanied with adequate supports and frameworks to ensure the work is sustainable for the staff involved.

When doing violence prevention as a youth, Niko realized how impactful it was to see queer and trans adults not only included but centred in prevention work. Later in life, they realized that this representation was essential in leading them to feel okay about being queer and trans themselves. Niko felt that representation of how people live “in disabled bodies and Indigenous bodies, black bodies, in queer and trans bodies” is essential for young people. As such, Niko noted the importance of affirming asexuality. Niko also reflected that one of the most useful strategies has been to make education a tool to understand “the impacts of colonialism, of white supremacy,” and systemic harms on how we relate to each other. Niko learned that to be effective and relevant, curricula must evolve and change alongside shifts in identity, language, and social norms. While affirming the importance of youth-led, intersectional violence prevention, Niko reflected on the amount of resistance that educators experience, which can sometimes make it challenging to even get in the door of a local school and nearly impossible to have conversations about race and queerness in some contexts.

### **Serena**

Serena reflected how lost she felt navigating her first crush without having any queer adults in her school. Although there was a group loosely oriented towards queer students in her school for a brief amount of time, she remembered struggling to feel comfortable accessing the space. While she expressed the necessity of affinity group spaces, she also felt strongly that non-hierarchical, mutual exchange of knowledge can build capacity for conversations that shift power dynamics. She proposed the importance of educators being part of the community they are

supporting, acknowledging power dynamics, and striving for authenticity and honesty over presenting an image of perfectionism.

### **Reimagining Prevention Education**

This section summarizes participants' responses to being asked what they understand sex-positive, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist education about sex and relationships to be.

Participants were asked this in conjunction with an invitation to imagine the education that they wish they received as a youth.

#### **Bea**

For Bea, Indigenous laws and teachings present a natural opening to conversations about violence prevention. Historically, in WSÁNEĆ territories, Bea shared that “there was zero tolerance for sexualized violence” and that relationships with the natural world “set a foundation for relationships of care.” She also suggested that WSÁNEĆ relationships with TENEW (land and water) are a way to conceptualize consent. Through this approach, Bea also resisted individualized understandings of consent in order to encourage young people to imagine practicing care in a myriad of relationship structures (e.g., friends, family, dating) and to “vision ways of making this place become a place of consent” again.

Bea also proposed that core teachings about respect and bodies should be incorporated into early years and across different subject curricula. Concepts of respect, diversity, and acceptance can be powerful even if they are not focused on prescribing names or gender, sexuality, and race identities. Bea felt that such early years teachings may have meant that her youngest child would not have worried that her friends would find out what sex she was assigned at birth.

Finally, Bea emphasized the importance of relationality. She imaged that this would include opportunities for elementary-aged kids to practice consent, boundary setting, and

respectful relationships in their friendships. This relational approach should extend to both community-based and school educators, Bea added, so that work is not happening in silos or conflict, but rather “beautiful places where people are working towards the same thing in different ways.” She imagined and hoped for space for multiple approaches because “you can't serve everyone through a one size fits all approach.”

### **Charlie\***

For Charlie, effective education begins before the workshop by reaching out to participants to find out what they want to learn and to gather their questions. Charlie also highlighted the necessity of an environment that is free of shame for how people relate to and live in their bodies; this also includes not shaming youth for what they don't know or for their discomfort with talking about sex in a group. Charlie reflected that they deserved much more information about their body and “what it could do” as well as an accessible learning environment, with options for opting in or out of activities. Sex-positive and feminist education must also include disrupting myths about virginity and activities which seek to instill fear about birth control, pregnancy, and abortion.

By rejecting oppressive histories of sex education, Charlie imagined that violence prevention would actively elevate diverse gender and sexuality spectrums. Charlie noted the importance of harm reduction approaches to STBBI prevention and treatment within conversations about consent. This approach should include ample content “about developing, practicing and normalizing self-defined consent and boundary setting” as well as making space for culturally specific perspectives about communication, sex, and sexuality. Charlie expressed that all education must account for the reality that “some bodies are oppressed more than others and how that impacts experiences of pleasure and pain.” Schools need to hire facilitators who are skilled at “consistently correcting oppressive social scripts.” In Charlie's dreams, education

would include discussions about pleasure for disabled and neurodivergent people, as well as conversations about sex work and the inclusion of sex worker's voices.

### **Jasmine**

Addressing state violence is one of the most important aspects of violence prevention education for Jasmine. By addressing the broader context, rather than individual situations, Jasmine was hopeful that marginalization, which is often made invisible, could be brought to the forefront. From that starting place, youth can learn how “structures are impacting” an embodied sense of “pleasure, joy, and your ability to consent.” Jasmine also dreamed of the word taboo becoming irrelevant, more exposure to “arts-based explanations for gender expression,” guidance about how to use the internet in useful ways, and increased visual representation of concepts. Jasmine suggested that education in Indigenous contexts often combines anti-racism, feminism, and decolonial theory while staying rooted in “cultural relevance, reverence and safety,” which could offer leadership for broader anti-violence programming.

In imagining education for Indigenous youth, Jasmine emphasized the benefits of body sovereignty as a way to “teach young people about not only their bodies, but their bodies in the certain context that they're forced to live in.” Connecting body to land could also be used to challenge framings of Indigenous people as at risk, which “disempowers people from feeling as though they can feel joy and pleasure through participating in anti-violence.” Further, Jasmine expressed a strong desire for spaces which invite Indigenous youth to apply their languages to anti-violence concepts, in order to affirm that much violence prevention is often “already a part of our [Indigenous] world view.” Finally, Jasmine shared a dream for Indigenous youth to learn about consent and pleasure on their own lands, for example “sitting on the moss in the forest, literally learning about sex toys and your own bodily pleasure.” For Jasmine, that land-based connection “would help put that education in a place that it's striving to be.”

## **Kenya**

Kenya was clear that that the thing she “needed as a young person was someone to talk about violence and consent” in order to disrupt the normalization of gender-based violence in her school and community. As an educator, she reflected that “we want people to have pleasurable, good experiences but you can't like talk about that without also talking about how we can hurt each other pretty bad.” Beginning from that systemic analysis might have opened more dialogue about the “virgin slut dichotomy.”<sup>5</sup>

Kenya also imagined discussions about what consent looks like in practice, what consent feels like, and how it's connected to pleasure; for Kenya, this included a “head and heart connection between like what feels consensual and what feels good.” She was optimistic that those sorts of conversations could support “more pleasurable, respectful, safer relationships.” Kenya hoped for education which does not prescribe definitive answers, but rather seeks to facilitate dialogue through defensiveness and to connect people with action. Finally, Kenya shared the importance of preserving data about patterns, trends, and workshop evaluation in order to support the ongoing growth and improvement of community-based education.

## **Marshall**

For Marshall, the success of an education program should be measured on whether a youth has “engaged with the material in a way that's going to benefit them in their lives.” For instance, this framing shifts the focus from learning about diseases, to supporting open conversations about sexual health practices which make for more pleasurable experiences. Marshall encouraged the inclusion of different communication styles, especially to account for the impact of neurodiversity and disability on communication. Further, he aspired towards gender and queer expansiveness which makes space for a range of body configurations,

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<sup>5</sup> Also known as the Madonna-Whore complex, within which feminized bodies are sorted into a saintly, pious, and chaste category or understood to be sexually promiscuous and shameful.

activities, sex toys, and kink. For Marshall, harm reduction is an important conversation, but he encouraged educators to go beyond telling people to use condoms and to encourage more expansive dialogue (e.g., When was the last time you were tested? Do you use barriers with other partners?). This accounts for the reality that people will sometimes choose to not use condoms and that there are varying contextually specific norms; Marshall shared that rather than telling people what to do, he aims to “load people with the information that they need to make harm reduction based informed choices about the risks that they're going to take.”

In education about sex and relationships, Marshall also noted the importance of making visible a range of family structures (e.g., queer families, households made up of an extended family network) and culturally grounded communication norms which inform consent practices. When talking about stigmatized subjects like sex, Marshall also encouraged an educational environment which does not shame or judge youth for giggling or expressing awkwardness. He suggested that this should extend to parents as well because some adults “are afraid of their kids learning about this stuff because they don't know about it either.” Marshall proposed that perhaps parents should be offered opportunities to receive this education alongside their kids. In all contexts, Marshall noted the usefulness of anonymous question and feedback opportunities in increasing safety.

### **Nichola**

In thinking about education for youth, Nichola was clear about the importance of critically analyzing the impact of colonization on Turtle Island, and the harms done to Indigenous women through rape, forced sterilization, and ongoing health disparities. She expressed the importance of education that is free from shame and affirms that “physical touch is important” and that it’s okay for young people to engage in consensual intimacy. As a youth, Nichola would have appreciated information about consent and safer sex practices. Violence

prevention education must also understand that youth are very tech savvy so there is an even greater need to ensure that education is responding to their needs. Nichola also pointed out that issues of colorism can be present amongst Caribbean (and other) diasporas, which demonstrates the globalized and nuanced experiences of violence amongst youth living on Coast Salish territories today. Finally, for Nichola, “anti-violence is not just a belief, it's a value” which means that it informs how she shows up in everything, far beyond the walls of a classroom.

### **Niko**

For Niko, “sex-positive, feminist, decolonial and anti-racist education about sex and relationships is rooted in self-determination.” Again, Niko emphasized the importance of curricula that evolve and the importance of queer and trans facilitators. They also imagined peer-led education which affirm youth in their knowledge and experiences.

Niko shared the importance of violence prevention programming to be healing and trauma-informed, so that education and conversations about these topics are not at the cost of “a lack of safety for the participants in their room.” In the programming that they dream of, Niko hoped for consent to be talked about as a tool for youth to take care of each other and to make “relationships places that are comfortable and safe and joyful to live in.” Conversations about consent would also include an acknowledgement that “everyone is capable of harm, everybody is capable of being harmed and often those things intersect.” Niko shared that SEXPO, an event organized by students on the UVic campus, stands out as a strong example of a sex-positive event and workshop series which sought to fill the gap for what youth would have wanted in high school; SEXPO included everything from panels about BDSM to drag performances and sex toy's for sale.

## **Serena**

Serena imagined a world where young people can engage in intimacy in all the ways that feel good to them, and still have their boundaries respected. Given important discourses around prioritizing people whose experiences are most marginalized, Serena felt that young people of all identities would benefit from more knowledge about the range of experiences present for their peers. For example, Serena spoke about the importance of both representing fat and disabled bodies and shifting the paradigm from inclusion but to celebration, for example by creating space for young people to appreciate that their body is changing to look more like an aunt who they look up to. Similarly, Serena flagged that consent workshops almost always fail to acknowledge varying cultural norms around communication, which leads to a lack of culturally informed conversations, especially for youth who are from the Global South. She suggested that specialized community groups could play a larger role in education and the ongoing importance of spaces for youth outside of schools that are directly focused on experiences of gender, queerness, and race.

In addition, Serena proposed that consent education should not shy away from complicated topics. For example, instead of shaming youth for accessing porn, critical media conversations could be facilitated. Serena also hoped that capacity to support people who have caused harm to learn and be accounted for will increase. As Serena has witnessed, facilitating accountability and learning for people who have (or are) causing harm can “snowball in these really incredible ways when it is done well.”

## **Complex Topics in Practice**

In interviews, I asked participants about three topics that I have witnessed many contentious conversations about: STBBIs, substance use, and pleasure. In queer feminist spaces, I have heard a rejection of including any information about STBBIs and the suggestion that

youth can simply seek that information if they desire it. In schools, while I have experienced some openness to overdose response training, there is very little flexibility in discussing substance use more broadly and even less so when sex is part of the conversation as well. I wanted to bring these tensions to participants to gather their insights. As participants come from a range of educational backgrounds, not all participants commented on every topic, as some felt that it was outside of their scope or area of expertise. As such, this section is organized by topic with a summary of relevant participant responses.

### **STBBIs**

Throughout interviews, discussions of STBBIs were consistently linked to stigma. Kenya reported her sex education including “horror stories about STIs” which seemed designed to discourage youth from having sex. Marshall recalled that a student in his sex ed class fainted when graphic images of genitals affected by STBBIs were displayed. Nichola echoed the amount of judgment around unprotected sex in both educational and healthcare settings, despite sex being a natural human activity. Notably, Kenya and Serena both shared stories of massive confusion that youth were left with around the transmission of STBBI’s, which undoubtedly would make it very challenging for youth to make accurate decisions for themselves. Kenya, for example, shared that she remembered her peers thinking, “if you weren’t using every single contraception all the time, you were 100% at risk of” pregnancy and an STBBI. Rather than being one part of sexual health class, Niko shared, “So much of my traditional sex ed in my high school classroom was identifying different STIs” and how to protect students from them. Indeed, for many participants, STBBIs were nearly the only thing they remember learning about.

According to Charlie\*, Marshall and Niko, effective education would treat STBBIs like common infections and flu, without added stigma. Marshall suggested content such as “STIs are a part of having sex” and “STIs can happen the first time you have sex; they can happen the

hundredth time you have sex.” Further, Niko highlighted that destigmatizing STBBIs would likely also increase comfort about disclosing to partners, which would ultimately result in more effective harm reduction efforts. Marshall shared,

I think it needs to be a lot more normalized that like, you know, it’s part of having sex and like, you know, we should take the steps that we feel like we need to protect ourselves. But at the same time, like if it happens, we also just need to be able to be prepared for like, okay, well now what do we do?

Sexual health education working from such a perspective would better create the conditions for planning and discussing the steps for navigating a positive STBBI test. Serena pointed out that sexual health could also be a place to bring in disability justice, values such as “no life is ruined by getting sick,” or living with an untreatable STBBI. Within this paradigm, STBBIs can be understood as a “risk that is associated with normative human behaviour” (Niko).

Further, Charlie\* questioned if a focus on STBBIs is overly narrow and can leave out other important health-related information. For example, she suggested that normalizing gender variation was an unintended outcome of the graphic images displayed in her high school education and that she wished she had learned about things like distinguishing ingrown hairs from potential infections. Although not specifically stated by interview participants, this suggestion gestures to other health information which impacts genitals is typically absent, and yet relevant to, sexual health (e.g., yeast infections, urinary tract infections, anal fissures).

In thinking about sex-positive education, Kenya suggested that practical information about testing clinics and the benefits of getting tested regularly, regardless of symptoms, as the most useful takeaways. Niko pointed out that increased access to the internet for youth over the past 15 years has transformed the accessibility of information about sex. Niko also echoed the

suggestion to move away from spending significant time describing STBBIs and symptoms; they shared that it is no longer required that “sex ed must include the definition of chlamydia ‘cause actually I can look that up.” In addition, Kenya highlighted the importance of using communication and consent tools with partners when navigating conversations about safer sex. Marshall suggested the following prompts for discussing safer sex with partners:

So when was the last time you were tested? When was the last time your partner was tested? How many times have they been with other people without condoms since then? How well do you know these people in their practices? Is this somebody completely brand new to you who you don’t, maybe you don’t know, don’t fully trust what they’re telling you versus somebody who you know really well.

Questions such as these could also open space for sharing practical advice; some suggestions included avoiding oral sex while a partner has a cold sore and peeing after intercourse (for people with vulvas).

### **Substances**

The second topic I discussed with participants was the overlap between sexual activity and substance use (including alcohol, criminalized substances, and prescription drugs used for recreational purposes). In her interview, Nichola was very clear about the harm that occurs when survivors are victim blamed because they were using substances when assaulted. In addition, Kenya highlighted how substance use has been used as a defence for perpetrators who were intoxicated at the time of an assault. Nichola highlighted how illogical this is because “we know people who don't drink are violated” and that often “perpetrators are sober” when causing harm. She posited that “violence is often intentional, whether you're drinking or not and that everyone has a right to consume substances and be safe from sexual assault.”

While substance use is not a reason to absolve someone from responsibility for sexual assault, participants discussed the relationships between substance use, trauma, and oppression. Niko made the connection that people may intentionally use substances before intimacy because they have trauma (sexual and otherwise) that can complicate their relationship with sex. Bea echoed that trauma and injustice are often root causes of substance use dependence and overdose. Further, Marshall suggested that when it comes to substance use,

there's lots of complex reasons why people do it and it's better to understand those reasons and try to give people the tools that they need to do it in a safer way than it is to demonize it and tell people that they shouldn't do it.

Similarly, Kenya acknowledged that while conversations about youth using substances are complicated and should be approached intentionally, choosing not to have the discussion can leave youth to enter into “a really risky situation without the tools.”

According to Niko, telling students that they should never mix substances and sex, or that all substance use will lead to assault, is very “behind” the conversations and understandings that students are already having about harm reduction and risk assessment. Bea theorized that “you can stand up in front of” youth and tell them “don't have sex while you're drunk” but that will likely have “less meaning” coming from an unknown adult. When abstinence and avoidance is emphasized in mainstream education, Charlie\* found that people can end up feeling like they should abandon or dismiss consent practices when in those situations; such a lack of flexibility and nuance forecloses conversations about how to practice consent when substances are involved. Kenya extended that it makes very little sense to say to someone “oh, well, you're already high so don't use those tools” yet substance use abstinence is often considered the standard approach when doing education with youth. For Charlie\*, this also left “very little room

for self-determination and youth development of trust of self and others” or differentiating between consensual and unconsensual sexual experiences when substance use was present.

Jasmine challenged that it can be beneficial to affirm that substance use and pleasure can coexist; indeed, implying that this is impossible can be perceived as very inauthentic to youth. Further, Niko highlighted that they had come to realize that moralistic approaches to substance use did not align with work that had been done to “integrate harm reduction principles into the work that we were doing.” Marshall pointed out that party and play spaces have become a cultural norm amongst many queer men, and that youth are likely already aware that substances and sex are sometimes intentionally mixed. Kenya suggested that a destigmatized approach would open dialogue about sex and substances with the acknowledgement that “because we already live in a risky world”, substance use has the possibility to elevate risk.

For Kenya, consent and intimacy tools for navigating conversations about pleasure are harm reduction practices in their own right that only become more important in the context of substance use. In imagining effective curricula, Charlie\* felt it was essential to include “anything at all” about “sex while high or drunk.” Jasmine echoed that harm reduction is an “essential part of that education,” especially information about drug testing options amidst the ongoing overdose epidemic. Charlie\* shared that another example of a harm reduction principle which is relevant to sexual intimacy is “start low and go slow.” Jasmine highlighted that young people are likely still learning about healthy limits and tolerances for their bodies. Similarly, Kenya described that there is a “level of experimentation” present for youth because they are likely just beginning to consume substances. While there are no universal or standard metrics, Jasmine suggested that general information about factors for tolerance (e.g., height, weight, average doses, half-life) may help support youth to understand and make sense of how a particular

substance will be experienced. Similarly, Jasmine suggested that storying experiences of substance use (e.g., this is how mushrooms make me feel) could support youth to make more informed decisions about if and how they might engage with substances.

Finally, Marshall pointed out that “when there are power dynamics at play” in a context where sex and substances are mixing, it is particularly important for people to be aware of and address those dynamics. Kenya also mentioned this and summarized the importance of ongoing conversation and practice because

If we are doing the work, practicing the work, practicing it in lots of different settings, not just settings where we're sober or not just settings where we're not sober, you know, then you are hopefully giving yourself some better tools to manage risk, because we all take risks. We take risks for pleasure.

### **Pleasure**

The third topic discussed in interviews was the role of pleasure in violence prevention education. When it comes to youth education, Niko reported that pleasure has consistently been sanitized out of curriculum; in their 10 years working in this field, they cannot think of a slogan or workshop activity which explicitly addressed pleasure. Charlie\* theorized that pleasure is “upheld as a thing that adults do” when it is assumed that pleasure is inaccessible to teenagers. Marshall found this particularly incoherent because sex is “something that people do because it feels good.” While Kenya did recall her sexual health teacher speaking briefly about pleasure, she remembered that conversation feeling vastly disconnected from youth experiences and a lack of any content about “queer pleasure, queer manifestations of love and life in general.”

When asked about pleasure, Nichola shared that she thinks about consent as a core foundation for enjoyable experiences that send “happy brain chemicals binging.” Marshall suggested that understanding physiology and responses to arousal can support people to

“advocate for things that do make them feel good.” Kenya suggested that demystifying pleasure for people assigned female at birth is of particular necessity.

Marshall pointed out that self-pleasure is often neglected in “the sex talk” when the focus remains on preventing pregnancy and STI’s. Bea also noted that having a pleasurable relationship with oneself is powerful, and she highlighted the need for more language about the entire subject of pleasure. Jasmine was curious about the role that peer-led self-pleasure education could play in increasing youth self-knowledge, gender expression, and exploration.

From the primary reason that most people choose to have sex, to the importance of self-pleasure, participants affirmed the necessity of including pleasure in sexual health, violence prevention, and harm reduction education for youth. Niko suggested that conversations about pleasure can also open up space for discussion about the range of human experiences based on disability, relationship structure, gender and more.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I discussed the stories that participants shared with me about what brought them to anti-violence work, their experiences contesting normative education, the importance of peer-led education, and imaginings for sex-positive, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist education. I then summarized participant discussion of three often debated topics in violence prevention education: substance use, STBBIs, and pleasure. In Chapter Four, I will outline and discuss my analysis of the interview data.

## **Chapter Four: Learnings**

In this chapter, I will discuss principles for sex-positive, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist education about sex and relationships. I drafted these principles using a reflexive thematic analysis of my interview data, which I coded and grouped into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Subsequently, I reorganized the themes and sub-themes to distill recurring insights gleaned from both interviews and a focus group discussion. I then organized the principles into three broad themes: what information matters, structural analysis, and voice and representation. In this chapter, I will synthesize participant data, literature, and my own analysis to discuss each theme. Rather than offering prescriptive curriculum tools, this chapter offers core beliefs and values that are applicable across diverse educational contexts. By focusing on core principles, I aim to resist superficial ‘add and stir’ approaches, which might incorporate topics like power dynamics without challenging the underlying worldview that shapes and constrains the development of curricula.

Moreover, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) has provided a structured approach for acknowledging and addressing my worldview, perspective, and biases. When incorporating my own perspective, I sought to maintain a distinction between my voice and those of the participants, aiming for enhanced transparency and consideration of my own social context. It's important to note, however, that due to the relatively limited sample size confined to a specific geographic area, the principles elucidated here are not universally applicable or exhaustive. Further, I resist the tendency to create standardized or universalized curricula as such attempts are unaligned with my commitment to anti-colonial practices. Rather, these identified themes stem from the collective knowledge and experiences of my participants, who form an integral part of my informal community of practice and have maintained connections with me (and each other) over many years. Furthermore, these insights serve to extend and pay homage to

the legacies of violence prevention advocacy and resistance advanced by Indigenous nations, Black feminists, and leaders within queer and trans communities.

In this chapter, I have structured my discussion around three main themes: structural analysis, information relevance, and representation. Each theme encompasses several principles, weaving together participant data, research and literature, and my own insights as an educator. This approach mirrors the cyclical process used throughout this research: listening, reading, and reflection. Following this, I will delve into the possibility of reimagining consent as a unique contribution to the literature on violence prevention.

### **Theme: Structural Analysis**

In this section I will discuss normative approaches to violence prevention, possibilities for applying a structural analysis, and the necessity of accounting for state violence.

### **Resisting Normative Approaches**

For previous generations, abstinence-based sex education was nearly universal. For those of us in our 20s and early 30s, some of our experiences with education were less focused on abstinence but not entirely sex positive. As an adult facilitator, I appreciated the freedom to diverge from any messaging suggesting that youth should abstain from sex and instead emphasized teaching consent as a tool for safer sex. However, I have begun to question how even the most feminist and progressive violence prevention programs may inadvertently perpetuate normative ideas. For example, programs that narrowly focus on affirmative consent may unintentionally teach students with more social power to manipulate partners into giving verbal consent, primarily to mitigate their own liability in case of accusations of harm. This became especially evident to me upon learning about multiple apps developed to record affirmative consent declarations between partners before engaging in sexual activity, thereby minimizing the ability of an individuals to report the experiences as an assault (Harris, 2018).

While I have never been part of a program with the explicit goal of liability reduction, an emphasis on affirmative consent without ongoing discussion of power dynamics may inadvertently lead to this outcome. Rather than simply teaching youth how to secure consent when desired, education must also address power dynamics and strive to promote increased experiences of respect, care, and pleasure.

Throughout this research, I recalled encounters with a teacher from a local high school who exuded thoughtfulness, care, and a genuine commitment to his students' well-being. He expressed his desire for students to feel at ease accessing necessary information yet had concerns that his identity as a cisgender white man could alienate some students. What struck me was the valid apprehension that a young girl might hesitate to approach a male teacher with questions about menstruation. Despite his awareness of power dynamics, the inherent realities of social positioning remain unavoidable. While there is undoubtedly a pressing need for teachers to receive additional training and support in navigating discussions on sexual health, it is equally crucial for students to have access to resources beyond the confines of the teacher-student power dynamic. In addition to the ways that teacher-student relationships are influenced by dynamics of age and authority, settler colonial and binary gender logics are imbedded in schools which limit the ability of teachers to become meaningful sources of prevention and sexual health information (Slovin, 2020). This is especially evident given ongoing teacher and administrator collaboration with police and child apprehension social workers.

Throughout interviews and the focus group, participants were unanimous about the importance of using a structural analysis of oppression to understand sexualized violence. For instance, Niko shared that “Oppression is at the root of the harm that we cause to each other.” This reflects what is discussed in the literature. As Bonsu (2018) puts it, education “is done best

when it connects people's lived experiences to a structural analysis" (p. 220). Prevention education, if it neglects to recognize structural oppression, risks perpetuating the very injustices it seeks to remedy. For instance, by privileging certain voices and enforcing affirmative consent standards influenced by white feminism, it may simply trade patriarchal norms for racist ones, without tackling systemic issues. This approach does not lead to a paradigm shift but rather a transition from one set of rules to another, while maintaining harmful conditions. A more impactful strategy entails transcending normative frameworks, prioritizing transformative education that is deeply rooted in contextual understanding and specificity.

Multiple participants raised the importance of integrating more focused attention on topics that are often excluded or only briefly acknowledged in consent education. For example, participants emphasized slut shaming and the virgin-whore complex as necessary subjects for discussions with high-school aged youth. Further, participants repeatedly noted that they could not remember pleasure being named or discussed as part of their sexual health information. In fact, participants and I could only remember discussions about how first experiences of sex would likely be painful. How might it impact young people if undesired pain is more normalized than pleasure? I posit that this is one of the greatest failings of many mainstream violence prevention and sexual health programs.

Normative beliefs can also emerge through tools and analogies. For instance, I witnessed a program that used the analogy of 'your body is a house' to encourage girls to 'lock the doors' to protect themselves from sexual assault. Not only does this neglect the fact that most assault is experienced with someone that a survivor knows well (Statistics Canada, 2023), but it also replicates colonial ideas of ownership and conflates feelings of safety with crime prevention (e.g., theft, sexual assault). These framings foreclose more effective and expansive ways of

understanding violence, while reinforcing carceral victim blaming (i.e., if you didn't lock the door, it was your fault). Such victim-blaming narratives also reinforce ideas about who is a victim deserving of justice and empathy. What about people who open the 'door' to a friend, and are then assaulted? Or youth abused by family members in their household? Abstractly 'locking the door' would not prevent violence in those situations and serves to individualize a systemic issue. Thus, this analogy not only fails to capture the complexities of violence but also perpetuates harmful narratives about victimhood.

Bringing in a structural analysis resists and deconstructs normative ideas about sex and relationships by highlighting that “some bodies are oppressed more than others and [discussing] how that impacts experiences of pleasure and pain” (Charlie\*). A structural analysis delves beyond individual interactions, aiming to comprehend the intricate distribution of social, gender, racial, and economic power. As Jasmine suggested, education includes learning how “structures are impacting” an embodied sense of “pleasure, joy, and your ability to consent.” Therefore, education without a structural analysis is ineffective and can end up causing harm to participants, particularly those who are most excluded and policed by normative ideas of sex and relationships.

### **Structural Analysis**

A structural analysis is pivotal in resisting normative frameworks because it makes visible how systems of privilege and oppression shape all aspects of human interaction. Jasmine explains this as accounting for all the factors leading up to two people engaging in intimacy, and the systemic factors that influence their ability to say yes or no. For instance, explicit discussions about how race and other intersecting identities influence consent highlight the multifaceted nature of power dynamics in interpersonal relationships. In our interview, Nichola emphasized the long history of rape being used as a tool of racial control, especially during the trans-Atlantic

slave trade, and the ongoing legacies of slavery which normalize sexual violence against Black women. This context is relevant to learning about consent both for youth who have not experienced racism and need context beyond their own lived experience, as well as for youth who would feel invalidated and disillusioned by conversations which do not account for their realities.

A structural questioning of institutional practices opens spaces for conversations about the ethics of mandatory anti-violence education for youth. When students are forced to attend anti-violence workshops, questions arise regarding the efficacy and safety of education in spaces when youth's agency around participation is constrained. While transformative moments may occur in these contexts, I am skeptical about the depth of impact in settings where individuals are compelled rather than willing participants. This is especially true when workshops become dominated by youth or teachers with many axes of social privilege who challenge basic principles, such as the existence of racism and gender beyond the binary (an experience I have had on many occasions, often while co-facilitating with research participants). Therefore, education delivered in schools can inadvertently cause harm to students who are subject to oppressive ideas about their identities or who may not feel adequate safety to participate in the conversations. For instance, Marshall highlighted that rates of childhood sexual abuse mean that there are inevitably youth in the room who have experienced abuse. Educators must actively plan to care for youth who have experienced abuse, and to resist an emphasis on 'first sexual experiences' which can be isolating and shame-filled for youth who have survived childhood sexual abuse. Although I do not argue for or against mandatory education, I propose that any education delivered in schools where autonomy is limited must use a structural analysis to carefully balance the risks of causing harm to students in the room.

In taking a structural analysis of power and oppression, prevention education must be transparent about the intentions of a workshop (even if they are constrained by funding). For instance, many research participants identified how sexual health classes seemed to focus entirely on STBBIs and avoiding pregnancy, without any acknowledgement or discussion about why those topics were selected as the primary focus. Using a structural analysis requires educators to get very clear about the goal of the education they are providing and to communicate that to participants. Although youth may be frustrated and disserved by a workshop with such a narrow focus, I would argue that, if the scope is limited, that should at least be acknowledged; for example, if a sexual health workshop only covers birth control, then it could accurately be titled 'Pregnancy Prevention'. Further, instead of beginning a violence prevention workshop assuming the importance of consent, youth would be better served by a structural analysis that both addresses why the topic is relevant to youth and integrates critical analysis of power. Kenya proposed a framing that acknowledges "we're swimming in opportunities and cultures of violence" and that "consent is a pathway for reducing harm."

Further, I have been challenged by young people on endless occasions when education does not account for the complexity that is already present in their lives. For instance, numerous interview participants raised the contradiction present when discussing consent on stolen land which settlers do not have permission to be on. By addressing these larger picture questions, educators can unsettle the dominance of normative approaches which "end up being pretty exclusive and do not attend to the needs of the majority of students who are racialized, queer, trans, disabled" (Niko). Instead of trying to boil education down to a focus on consent, violence prevention could take a broader approach in order to engage the critical questions that youth are asking of themselves and each other about the complex world that they live within. This would

also enable prevention education to support young people in developing an analysis and strategies to end violence that do not isolate individual acts of violence, either committed by the state or individuals, from their larger contexts (Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016). By understanding issues such as gender-based violence and colonialism to be deeply intertwined, more meaningful conversations can be had about solutions to address the intersecting forms of violence that youth are already experiencing. Although mainstream violence prevention is lacking in sustained and critical engagement with a structural analysis, community-based efforts led by Indigenous, racialized, and queer communities are already addressing these intersections (de Finney et al, 2021; Flicker et al., 2019; MacDougal et al., 2022; NYSHN, 2021; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020).

### **Addressing State and Colonial Violence**

To address sexualized violence, a structural analysis must be accompanied by a critique of state violence. To do so, sexual education must move beyond “ensuring that hegemonic groups (‘the center’) tolerate the others (‘the margins’)” (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021, p. 11) and instead, follow Brush and Miller’s (2023) encouragement of “prevention efforts that engage diverse communities in changing violence perpetration and individual (mis)perceptions of social norms” (p. 1680) alongside disruptions to institutional and state neglect. Similarly, Critical Resistance and INCITE! (2016) highlights that “strategies must address how entire communities of all genders are affected in multiple ways by both state violence and interpersonal gender violence” (p. 226). While there are some scholars and community groups explicitly addressing state violence, mainstream violence prevention often overlooks this.

In contrast to mainstream approaches, many participants highlighted the importance of turning attention towards the state. For instance, Jasmine offered that a structural analysis necessitates a discussion of state violence. Similarly, Bea highlighted how prior to the arrival of

colonizers, there was no tolerance for sexualized violence on WSÁNEĆ lands. This speaks to the role of the settler state in creating the conditions for sexualized violence to become commonplace. Speaking from an Anishinaabe perspective, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014b) echoes Bea's comments about colonial imposition of heteropatriarchy, while also highlighting the importance of young people in Indigenous resurgence movements. This underlines the necessity of transforming the classroom "into a space that promotes social change through a transgressive educational practice" that questions "normative ethnocentrism" and values other ways of being (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021, p. 11). By aspiring to not only end violence, but to "create a society based on radical freedom, mutual accountability, and passionate reciprocity" (Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016, p. 226), violence prevention can move far beyond a narrow focus on preventing assault.

Indigenous resurgence embodies a profound reclamation of ancestral connections, cultural traditions, and community bonds, serving as a powerful counterforce against the ongoing legacies of colonialism. Rooted in the wisdom of local knowledge holders and the imperative of reclaiming homelands, Indigenous resurgence aims to restore sovereignty and self-determination while nurturing intergenerational ties and fostering holistic well-being (Corntassel & Bryce, 2012). This resurgence expands beyond traditional notions of prevention, encompassing initiatives that uphold cultural practices, support land preservation, and promote sexual health and abuse prevention within Indigenous communities (Flicker et al., 2019). Such efforts to further Indigenous self-determination are grounded in the restoration of Indigenous legal orders, which advance a cultural shift towards understanding Indigenous peoples and knowledges as sources of governance, especially in efforts to prevent gender-based violence (Snyder, Napoleon, & Borrows, 2015).

Harm reduction strategies, such as offering rides to ceremonies (NYSHN, 2021) or facilitating participation of trans youth in cultural rites (Makokis et al., 2021), are integral components of this approach, reflecting a paradigm shift towards collective healing and community resilience. By using a decolonial lens, violence prevention could acknowledge the interconnectedness of global Indigenous struggles, recognizing the need to confront both domestic and foreign manifestations of state violence, patriarchy, and colonization (Puar, 2017; Kuokkanen, 2008). Through these efforts, Indigenous resurgence emerges as a potent force for reclaiming autonomy, revitalizing cultural heritage, and nurturing thriving, resilient communities in the face of ongoing colonial pressures. In Bea’s words, “global healing” is needed to “be able to get to where we want to be” amidst such high levels of violence everywhere.

### **Theme: What Information Matters?**

In this section, I will analyze how and what information typically ends up in violence prevention workshops, as well as possibilities for increasing relevancy for young people.

#### **Adult Voices Overriding Youth Needs**

Similar to findings described in the literature (Chugani et al., 2021; Cody, 2017; SIECCAN, 2023; Waling et al., 2021) participants identified the substantial gaps in information in their sexual health classes, particularly when the information was not relevant to them. For example, when asked about their recollections of sexual health, participants were critical of the overfocus on STBBIs, and the amount of shame and confusion that dominated the learning environment. However, in prevention scholarship there is increasing discussion about the importance of relevancy and attunement to participant needs. For instance, college students in one study emphasized “the importance of avoiding gimmicky program names” (Chugani et al., 2021, p. 289) and having well-trained facilitators. Other scholars emphasize the necessity of

additional training for teachers about sexual health information and tools for facilitating a safe and engaged learning environment (Wright & Greenberg, 2023).

Expanding on existing literature, participants I spoke to emphasized that for information to be relevant to the lives and experiences of youth, it must be presented in a de-stigmatized way and include up to date information. In particular, participants explained that while STBBIs, anatomy, and puberty are important parts of sexual health education, they should not sideline important discussions about consent, boundaries, pleasure, and social oppression. In Chapter One, I highlighted how moral panic about youth sexuality can lead to the use of abstinence and scare tactics. Although these approaches are often rejected in sex-positive, feminist spaces, the other end of the spectrum might include conversations that critically analyze social norms and power but provide few practical tools for youth to apply that analysis in practice. Similarly, while information about STIs and pregnancy are helpful for navigating sexual decision making, exhaustive detail about the symptoms associated with every STI does little to support youth in practical conversations and decision making. Instead, many participants called for accurate information that is delivered without stigma, such as treating STIs with the same tone and intensity that other common infections are discussed. Participants also highlighted the need for information to be paired with practical tools for communication, consent, and boundary setting, which can meaningfully support youth self-determination and autonomy.

### **The Risks of Risk Management**

These findings are consistent with my experiences working for both violence prevention and harm reduction programs where I found limitations of workshop content that focused entirely on consent and power dynamics, or entirely on safer sex practices. In terms of consent education, risk-oriented frameworks position consent as a tool for reducing individual risk to accusations of harm. How can youth identify sexual boundaries if they have been provided

inaccurate, highly stigmatized, or fear laden (e.g., photo of genitals actively affected by a rare and severe STI) information about STBBIs? Being mindful of the knowledge systems that are informing critical approaches to consent education must be paired with accurate information; this is a necessary component for youth to be able to make the decisions which are right for them. This highlights that while sexual health and violence prevention are often separated into different workshops delivered by different educators or organizations, there are many interconnected and co-constructing elements. These narrow and siloed approaches are often a result of specific funding requirements which narrowly focus on one area of risk (i.e., assault, STBBI transmission) and add additional barriers to greater collaboration. Rather than treating violence prevention and sexual health education as distinct areas of focus, they should be understood as interconnected and co-constructed. In practice, this might include approaching sexual health and consent from a holistic perspective, and including topics that are often considered too taboo or controversial for either workshop (e.g., porn, substance use).

Increasingly, research advocates for a departure from risk-oriented frameworks in favor of approaches that prioritize empowerment, self-determination, and community accountability in addressing issues such as violence prevention (de Finney, 2017). The NYSHN's approach, for instance, emphasizes meeting youth where they are, acknowledging their strengths, and allowing them to define their own experiences within a framework of self-determination (Hunt, 2016b). By reframing narratives away from pathologizing labels such as at-risk, promiscuous, or engaging in risk taking behaviours, this approach focuses on identifying risk factors stemming from systemic injustices rather than individual challenges. Moreover, the emerging literature on community accountability underscores the limitations of targeting specific 'high-risk' groups, as it may inadvertently perpetuate structural inequities (Brush & Miller, 2023). In contrast, harm

reduction practices aim to have balanced conversations about risk, creating conditions for individuals to make practical choices regarding their safety and well-being without moral judgment or stigma (Race, 2008). Overall, this highlights the importance of adopting holistic, community-centred approaches that address the root causes of social issues while respecting individual agency and autonomy.

Empowering all youth with the information that they need to make decisions for themselves requires education to go beyond an over focus on risk, and to instead address a wider range of information that is needed for sexual and relationship wellness. One study (Fowler et al., 2022) found that a majority of TikTok content tagged as sexual health focuses on anatomy and pleasure (especially for people assigned female at birth). Another research project with youth found that young people want sexual health information shared on a wide variety of mediums, from social media to art and music (Cody, 2017). Similarly, Jasmine, Serena and Nichola all highlighted the importance of supporting young people to develop tools to use social media in useful ways. Serena also suggested that critical conversations about porn may be useful. Serena and I discussed how it is considered standard practice to show youth how to put a condom on, but that so often young people turn to porn for information and ideas about what to do after that. As a youth, I remember looking at porn under the 'lesbian' category because I was insecure and confused about the options for queer sex.

Acknowledging the need for appropriate boundaries in a classroom setting and that some youth may be asexual or uninterested in sex, educators would benefit from considering or asking for input from youth directly about the questions they seek to answer on the internet. Further, the increased role of social media in youths' lives only underscores the need for curriculum which is adaptive and constantly evolving. Niko and Kenya highlighted how curriculum must regularly

(not annually or even monthly, but sometimes weekly) change to reflect the spread of both information and misinformation on social media, as well as evolutions in language use. Instead of viewing social media as a risk to youth, or only as a source of misinformation, education could more effectively support young people by seeking to acknowledge social media's relevance and support the development of harm reduction strategies when using it as a source of information. An overreliance on managing risk can both lead to more stigma about natural parts of the human experience (e.g., STIs) and dismissal of strategies that youth are already using to navigate a complex world (e.g., social media). Instead, prevention education should strive to provide practical information that youth want and to address the realities of living in a risky world.

### **Becoming Relevant**

#### *Starting Earlier*

As sex education strives to become more relevant to young people, questions arise regarding the scope it can encompass, while typically confined to a few workshops or classes throughout a student's entire education. Gilbert (2018) agrees that “We may ask too much of sex education” (p. 267) in balancing the complexities of sexual decision-making, addressing structural inequalities, fostering girls' sexual empowerment, recognizing societal perceptions of sexuality, and embracing the unpredictability of sexual encounters. Participants emphasized the importance of expanding the scope of education, and they had tangible strategies for doing so. Bea proposed that core teachings about respect, consent, and diversity could be included in much earlier grades to facilitate a safe and positive environment for students which can pave the way for higher stakes conversations about sex in later years. Further, Serena wondered about the inclusion of consent and sexual health information across grades and subject matter, for example, discussing STBBI in biology class, reading books by queer authors in English.

While questioning the siloing of sexual health information to a few sessions, participants highlighted how this offered little (or no) support for youth to develop a deep sense of self-knowledge about their bodies, identities, and relationships. Given the high level of physical, cognitive, and emotional changes that children and youth are navigating, sexual education is needed at many stages and ages throughout life. Participants highlighted the importance of having autonomy over one's body as a first step to emotional safety, which can be supported by providing youth with the information that they want and need. Charlie\* and Kenya highlighted the irony that sexual health focuses on STBBIs, some of which have very low transmission rates, while common ailments like UTIs, ingrown hairs, and unwanted birth control side effects are most often not addressed at all, leaving youth with a lack of clarity about changes that may be occurring in their bodies. Striving towards a generation of young people who “know their bodies better” (Jasmine) also requires supporting and validating that youth may not know what they want, and that self-knowledge is an ongoing process. Youth deserve to have the knowledge that they need to approach changes like puberty alongside the affirmation that they deserve care and that maturing “can be a beautiful time of your life” (Bea). Participants assert that a pleasurable relationship with self is a deeply supportive foundation for engaging with others.

### *Cultural Relevance*

In the past five to ten years, scholars have increasingly discussed the importance of relevant and culturally grounded education in order to disrupt normative beliefs that become bound up in ‘neutral’ education (Brush & Miller, 2023). As discussed in Chapter One, ethnocentrism constructs Western knowledge, which is the basis of mainstream education, as assumed and superior (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021), which fails to support young people to develop an understanding of the vast range of human experiences. Another facet of ethnocentrism is the imposition of the Western gender binary and erasure of culture, nation, and

language specific terms for Trans, nonbinary, and Two-Spirit people (Laing, 2021). Discussing gender in relation to culture creates space for the vast diversity of gender roles, norms, and identities existing around the world, as well as the resurgence of Indigenous languages.

When it comes to education about sex and relationships, college students who have disabilities reported feeling like sex education was “a joke” (Chugani et al., 2021, p. 281) because it was so disconnected from their lived experiences. Further, multiple studies found that cultural connectedness and inclusion of cultural beliefs in education is one of the largest determinants of health for young Indigenous people (Ansloos & Dent, 2021; Clark, 2016b). Research with Black men in the U.S. similarly called for “culturally grounded sexual violence education” (Zounlome, 2021, p. NP10809). This literature emphasizes that the knowledge frameworks that inform consent education can make the difference in whether information is relevant to or useful for youth.

Likewise, participants were clear about the necessity of consent and sexual health education that can account for and engage with the cultural contexts that young people exist within, and repeatedly mentioned the importance of education being delivered in ways that positively engage youth existing outside white middle-class realities. Marshall and Serena both highlighted the necessity of identifying the dominance of Western consent paradigms and norms, and making space for dialogue about the ways that communication norms can vary based on culture. However, Bea cautioned that Indigenous teachings cannot simply be added into non-Indigenous frameworks and suggested that the overall framework must also be transformed. This shows that cultural relevance must be integrated into violence prevention in order to more fully account for the experiences that young people are navigating as well as to provide useful and engaging tools for wellness.

### **Theme: Voice and Representation**

In this section I will raise questions about the role of voice and representation in violence prevention programming, before discussing effective pedagogies and youth-led education.

#### **Representation**

Indigenous and racialized scholars underscore the importance of prioritizing often underrepresented voices and communities in activism and education. They critique the distancing effect of professionalization, which risks objectifying survivors and disconnecting advocates from the communities they serve by prioritizing hiring experts with formal credentials (Berke & Collins, 2023; Bierria, 2007; Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2018; Hunt, 2014). This shift towards expertise-based approaches sidelines the experiential knowledge of those directly affected by the issues at hand (Bierria, 2007, p. 159). It is notable that nearly all research participants (including myself, the researcher) explicitly stated that personal experiences of sexualized violence motivated our engagement in violence prevention work. Additionally, there are calls to trust in the expertise of Black and Brown Trans, Two-Spirit, and non-binary leaders, emphasizing the need for inclusive, community-centred solutions to address systemic violence and oppression (Berke & Collins, 2023). While affirming the importance of diversity in educators, Jasmine cautioned that representation alone can be tokenizing and prioritizes individuals within identity groups that have more relative power than their kin. To nuance representation, I turn to Flowers' (2015) definition of solidarity as a practice of de-centring oneself and resisting "the impulse to claim to know or have authority over a struggle" (p. 35).

While academic literature on violence prevention does not extensively explore how educators can tackle power dynamics, leaders in Black feminism (Wooten, 2017), disability justice (Chugani et al., 2021), and decolonial theory (de Finney et al., 2021) provide numerous

interventions emphasizing the importance of moving beyond assumptions of a white, able-bodied subject. Teachings from these fields were continually emphasized by participants as having the potential to transform violence prevention to account for and prioritize experiences beyond those of a white cis woman. Niko, Jasmine, and Marshall emphasized representation of a range of bodies in educational materials, especially depicting how people live “in disabled bodies and Indigenous bodies, Black bodies, in queer and trans bodies” (Niko). Challenging the gender binary can also make space to represent a range of body configurations, activities, and language used for body parts. Notably, half of the participants specifically highlighted the importance of making visible the intersection of sex and disability, while Niko and Jasmine also called for the inclusion of asexuality.

Throughout interviews, I was struck by how clearly participants could remember who facilitated their sexual health education and how those sessions made them feel. While some participants could remember particular tools or exercises, these were most often ones that were particularly upsetting or traumatizing. I started to reflect on how many hours I have personally spent refining, revising, and recreating workshop content. I wonder, in ten years, how many youth will remember a specific workshop exercise? While not exhaustive, interview participants have led me to realize that it is far more likely that youth will remember who was facilitating and how they felt during a workshop, than the specific words or information that was shared. Although well intentioned, this focus on curriculum content may be distracting educators from the most impactful work of ensuring that educators represent a diverse range of experiences, and that the learning environment is one of mutual respect, appreciation and curiosity. While it is easy to claim that a learning environment is shame-free because it does not encourage abstinence, I have witnessed many workshops which veer into passing judgement on ways of

relating and communication which exist outside models that emerge from feminist, post-secondary spaces. These challenges highlight the necessity of centring the experiences and voices of educators who share experiences of oppression and resistance with youth in the room and challenging the role of ‘experts.’ It is notable, that aside from INCITE! and NYSHN, very little existing literature about violence prevention highlights these issues, and that they were perhaps the most unanimously discussed by participants.

### **Pedagogy**

Regardless of who is facilitating, youth can tell when adults are not being authentic and honest. In my experience as an educator, I encountered many smart young people who challenged or questioned workshop that was overly simplistic or prescriptive. For instance, I have had young people directly ask me if I practice verbal consent (as called for in many workshops) every time I engage in sex and intimacy. In reality, I do not. Gilbert (2018) challenges the merit of advancing models of affirmative consent when “we fail to live up to that standard ourselves” (p. 276) as educators. When educators depict themselves as perfect at practicing consent or reinforce rigidity, this can inadvertently isolate young people who are seeking honesty and transparency. These tendencies also run counter to feminist approaches which emphasize learning, growth, accountability, and self-reflection over the idea that anyone can be perfect all the time. Rather than ‘training’ youth to strive for perfection, I hope that violence prevention might recentre on a more transformative goal of supporting young people to develop the skills, tools, and supports to receive feedback when their actions have negatively impacted others.

To address Jasmine’s concerns about representation politics and to ensure that facilitators are meaningfully making space for a diversity of experiences, participants raised the importance of fostering an environment of authenticity and co-learning. For Marshall, this means working

from the understanding that facilitators are not experts (and that no one is ever an expert on someone else's experience), and that educators learn as much from workshop participants as they learn from adults. Similarly, Kenya raised the importance of education which does not prescribe definitive answers, but rather seeks to facilitate dialogue with curiosity and to connect people with action. These contributions build upon anti-racist pedagogies which strive to create space where "activists, scholars and students co-create knowledge" (Brewer, 2014, p. 167) and assert that the relationship between learner and educator is a central component of success (Sanjakdar, 2019). For Marshall, the goal is not to inform youth of the right choices to make but rather to provide the information that people need to make informed decisions for themselves. In order to reduce feelings of shame or isolation, facilitators can use different strategies to create opportunities for youth to inform their learning. For example, both Marshall and Charlie\* emphasized the importance of anonymous questions in practicing responsiveness and valuing curiosity from students.

### **Youth-led**

Around the world, peer knowledge sharing is a major source of information for youth (Hodes & Gittings, 2019). Although not widespread, there is also some research about the role of youth-led sexual health education which found that "young people are clear that they have a role to play when it comes to reaching and informing their peers" (Cody, 2017, p. 221). In interviews, participants consistently emphasized the importance of peer learning and affirming youth knowledge in educational settings. While the literature highlighted the role of peer-led education in effectively engaging youth, participants also expressed how peer education can attend to power dynamics. For instance, Jasmine highlighted how peer learning can mitigate power dynamics and foster kinship by inviting youth to take ownership and responsibility for creating a learning environment that they are engaged by. Niko reflected that when doing peer-led work as

a teen, the “goal wasn't to necessarily teach, but to facilitate realizations” and to affirm the knowledge that youth already have. The intention here is to place facilitators and participants in a less hierarchical dynamic. Bea pointed out that the role of social media is only increasing peer learning as youth use platforms to share information with friends, and to disseminate knowledge through extensive online communities. Taken together, these insights emphasize the value of peer-led approaches and the need to prioritize youth perspectives in educational initiatives.

Notably, throughout the external literature review I conducted and interviews with research participants, there was no definitive call for education to be entirely youth-led all of the time. Indeed, Serena pointed out that “comprehensive sex education doesn't mean that one person is giving you the all the information,” which points to a need for education to be delivered by both youth and adult allies. At the focus group, I raised this question and participants affirmed that the question of youth-led education must be considered contextually. Generally, they echoed encouragements to increase the role of youth and the support for peer-led education (Banyard et al., 2022; Cody, 2017; Edwards et al., 2022; Wright, Fonarev, & Ellis Greenberg, 2023). In taking up a structural analysis, it is also important to notice and be critical of which youth’s voices are elevated. Indeed, centring cis-white youth over queer and BIPOC adult educators might only undermine the very goals of transformative education. Further, a structural analysis and transformative education practices can inform how education is facilitated and the ways that power is addressed in the classroom itself.

### **Moving Beyond Consent Education**

Building off the themes identified above, this section is my response to the risk-based, sex negative forms of prevention and sexual health information that research participants and I have been resisting for years. By bringing together participant contributions and existing literature, I consider a few key principles for how consent education can be reapproached from

and eclipsed by embodied, relational, and pleasure-oriented frameworks. I hope that this will serve as a step towards actualizing dreams of young people sitting outside and leading each other in conversations about self-pleasure, before turning to a plant growing beside them and discussing its usefulness as an ingredient in lube (just one example of a vision shared by participants, as discussed in my interview with Jasmine). It is important to note that while this section begins by offering critiques of mainstream Western consent paradigms and then imagines alternatives, these ideas are formed in relationship to people, cultures, and groups who have long practiced ways of relating beyond the limits of colonial heteropatriarchy.

### **Individualized**

In Chapter One, I discussed the limitations of oversimplified notions of consent, such as the analogy that consent is as simple as asking someone if they want tea, which, while well-intentioned, can obscure the complexities inherent in consent dynamics. Such oversimplifications perpetuate a procedural logic that misconstrues sexuality as inherently transparent and rational, conflating compliance with genuine understanding (Gilbert, 2018). Moreover, this reinforces the misconception that youth can only comprehend straightforward instructions, disregarding the nuances of uncertainty and ambivalence in sexual relationships (Wright & Greenberg, 2023). Echoing the literature, Kenya, Niko, Bea, and Charlie\* collectively underscored the inadequacy and potential harm in oversimplifying consent as merely individual interactions, failing to consider the broader contextual factors influencing agency and navigating complexity. For instance, Nash (2019) highlights that addressing the impact of gender roles in sexual intimacy cannot be adequately addressed through a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ mandate, nor can it be effectively conveyed in a brief skit.

Charlie\* cautioned against personalizing anti-violence education as solely individual concerns rather than recognizing collective responsibilities, while Niko highlighted how an

individualized consent approach might inadvertently reduce consent to a risk mitigation tool, neglecting deeper issues of power and institutional neglect for safety. By reducing consent to a binary ‘yes or no’ question, prevention education overlooks critical issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and access to sexual pleasure (Graybill, 2017). Bea proposed an alternative approach, suggesting that grounding education in discussions about the historical context of the land can disrupt tendencies to overly focus on individual interactions. Jasmine emphasized the significance of body sovereignty, particularly for Indigenous youth, advocating for education that connects to the land and removes barriers hindering Indigenous youth from engaging with their territories.

### **One-size-fits-all**

In addition to individualized framings, Wright and Greenberg (2023) critique the notion that miscommunication is an explanation for abuse, which rests upon the idea “that it is women’s (or non-binary people’s) lack of communication skills that causes gender-based violence rather than dehumanizing systems of oppression” (p. 11). Unfortunately, the communication myth has paved the way for overly rigid definitions. Even in progressive feminist spaces that reject heteronormativity and nuclear family structures, I have witnessed a reliance on consent as a rigid code that must be adhered to. For instance, Marshall questioned how requirements for verbal communication at every step can be overly prescriptive and leave little space for personal preference and context. Another example is consent workshops which position substance use and sex as incompatible and always harmful, inadvertently reinforcing unhelpful abstinence-based messages. Further, Wooten (2017) finds it necessary “to resist the neo-liberal call for one-size-fits-all educational policies” (p. 414) in order to centre “Black women’s needs, perspectives, and voices within higher education” (p. 414). Affirmative consent paradigms that provide a rigid checklist can also veer into an attempt to regulate the problem of abuse away. Nash (2019)

highlights that consent can also be used a tactic for “avoiding exposure to liability, to investigation, to tarnished reputation, to expulsion” (p. 205). Again, this stands in contrast to participants’ visions of violence prevention which acknowledge sex as a site of vulnerability and seeks to facilitate webs of care and respect.

Throughout interviews, participants challenged how individualized framings of consent also rely on a one-size-fits-all model. Bea was particularly concerned about top-down approaches that are created by management and imposed upon grassroots community conversations. In our interview, Jasmine and I discussed how codified consent can advance one right way of doing sex and relationships, which is reminiscent of white moral superiority. According to Harris (2018), embracing the complexity of sexual interactions “can more fully support politically engaged consent” (p. 172). This includes discussions of intersectionality which account for the ways that “binary gender roles constrain the possibilities for sexual liberation as they are based in cis-heteronormative, colonial discourses that prescribe limited sexual scripts” (Wright & Greenberg, 2023, p. 11). Serena shared that consent workshops almost always fail to acknowledge varying cultural norms around communication, which leads to a lack of culturally informed conversations, especially for youth who are from the Global South. Moving away from normative, depoliticized approaches can also support a move toward “transformative anti-carceral commitments to gender equity and racial justice” (Brush & Miller, 2023, p. 1684) which prioritize the experiences of community members who experience the most marginalization. In contrast to prescriptive definitions, participants proposed that consent could be practiced in a wide range of contexts, and especially to navigate conversations about substance use and STBBIs.

### **Embodied and relational**

Although not common place in violence prevention literature, some education scholars are increasingly discussing the benefits of re-embodied and mindful pedagogy for connecting body, emotion, and spirit in order to integrate what “one learns and knows with how one acts” (Wong, 2018, para. 11). In the focus group discussion, participants discussed and emphasized the need to move towards understandings of consent as relational and embodied. The author of the highly circulated *Pleasure Activism* imagines that consent beyond binary form can be understood as reclamation and agency over one’s body (brown, 2019). Put in simple terms by a dear friend of mine, consent can be understood as “when the body says yes” (Kluane Buser-Rivet, personal communication, May 1, 2024).

Participants also identified the transformative possibilities of consent education that is grounded in self-determination and as a tool to take care of each other, while also accounting for context and power dynamics. For instance, Charlie\* proposed curriculum content “about developing, practicing and normalizing self-defined consent and boundary setting” as well as making space for culturally specific perspectives about communication, sex, and sexuality. Embodied understandings of consent could better support youth to know for themselves what is a yes and what is a no, which is no small task. An example of both relational and embodied consent is supporting youth to navigate conversations about language used for body parts, which Marshall and Serena highlighted as being especially important for queer and trans folks. In Niko’s words, consent and relationality can make “relationships places that are comfortable and safe and joyful to live in.” For Bea, consent is also a tool for practicing relationality and being in good relationship with both human and non-human relatives. For instance, making the connection between body sovereignty, self-determination and sovereignty may better locate consent and sexuality “in complex kinship networks, across generations, and in relationship with

ancestors, lands, and all relations” (de Finney, 2017, p. 10). For Jasmine, body sovereignty is an essential concept for supporting Indigenous youth to understand and be in relationship with their bodies, but also the contexts that they exist within. Not only does this support a depth of understanding about coercion and power, but it can bring about more holistic and expansive support for one’s sexual self.

Although focus group discussions emphasized the importance of embodied experiences of consent, this was an area that was less specifically conceptualized. In her interview, Kenya proposed that embodied consent might look like a “head and heart connection between what feels consensual and what feels good.” In sexual modalities, there are emerging models, such as the Wheel of Consent (Martin & Dalzen, 2021) which seek to parse out the different embodied experiences of giving and receiving, as well the ways that sexual communication can lack a clear identification of who an activity is for (potentially leaving both parties thinking it is for the other person). Kai Cheng Thom (2020), an educator and former social worker, highlights the relatively new practice of somatic sex education which “is a form of body-centred sex education and healing work that emphasizes the importance of pleasure, embodied consent, and permission-giving or de-shaming” (para. 5). Although some of these models are not possible or appropriate to incorporate in group education formats, they may offer valuable lessons for expanding consent to become an embodied and relational pedagogy.

### **Pleasure**

While consent is pivotal for fostering healthy sexuality, prioritizing it exclusively overlooks the broader conversation about pleasure and its social implications (Graybill, 2017). In the realm of youth education, Niko pointed out a glaring omission: pleasure rarely features in the curriculum. Despite a decade in the field, they couldn’t recall any slogans or activities that directly addressed pleasure. The literature affirms that young people want information about

pleasure, especially for bodies with vulvas (Waling et al., 2021), and are concerned about their partner's experiences of pleasure (Hodes & Gittings, 2019). This underscores the multifaceted nature of pleasure in sexual discourse and calls for a shift beyond a mere focus on consent to a more holistic consideration of pleasure as a political issue (Graybill, 2017). Further, by embracing a politics of pleasure, violence prevention can challenge dominant narratives surrounding race, beauty, and health, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic approach to sexual discourse that acknowledges diverse experiences and desires while promoting safety, care, and bodily autonomy (Wood et al., 2019). Niko reiterated that conversations about pleasure could serve as a gateway to discussing the diverse range of human experiences, encompassing disability, relationship dynamics, gender identity, and beyond. This includes recognizing pleasure as a political tool integral to asserting autonomy and affirming identity; according to Morgan (2015) this is especially true for those resisting anti-Black racism.

Outside of pleasurable relations with others, Marshall highlighted how discussions about self-pleasure are frequently sidelined in talks about sex, foreclosing an important tool for young people to feel affirmed in their bodies, gender, and sexuality. While some scholars caution against a "pleasure imperative" (Wood et al., 2019, p. 1) that may inadvertently reinforce societal norms a focus on self-pleasure can avoid such pitfalls because it removes the focus on other people providing or being responsible for our own pleasure and sense of self. For instance, Bea emphasized the empowering aspect of cultivating a pleasurable relationship with oneself and stressed the need for more open dialogue on the topic. Within such a paradigm, pleasure can be understood as part of relationship with self, with identity, and with land. Serena also pointed out how pleasurable it is for queer and trans youth to have their identity affirmed. Jasmine agreed

that peer-led self-pleasure education may contribute to youths' self-awareness, gender exploration, and self-expression.

Participants unanimously agreed on the effectiveness of integrating discussions on pleasure into sexual health, violence prevention, and harm reduction education for young people. As Marshall explained, pleasure, particularly in the context of sex, is a driving force of many human behaviours. Harm reduction research highlights how pleasure is often dismissed by punitive political environments but holds significant possibility for conceiving of practical strategies to increase safety and care while reducing risk (Race, 2008). I found a 2014 lecture by Magdalena Harris (Derricott, 2014) to capture this idea with clarity: she points out that harm reduction efforts often discourage people from using used needles to avoid diseases, but that a focus on new needles as less painful would likely be far more relevant to the realities of daily injection drug users. Amidst high rates of sexualized violence, it can be hard to make space for conversations about pleasure, which is often treated as a 'bonus' when having sex. However, does a pleasurable relationship not include one that is free of coercion and abuse? Might we live one day live in a world where young people are able to fulfill their sexual desires and feel confident that their partners are respected in the process?

The idea that talking about pleasure will encourage youth to have sex seems to rest upon the premise that youth do not already know that people have sex for pleasure, which seems nearly impossible for any youth with access to the internet or peers. However, not talking about pleasure can leave youth without the tools that they need to find experiences and relationships that are positive, or to know how to recognize for themselves what they want and need. Instead, pleasure can be understood as offering an engaging foundation for young people to learn about their own bodies and to imagine affirming, respectful, and supportive relationships with others.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed four themes in my research: structural analysis, information relevance, representation, and reapproaching consent. After critiquing normative approaches to violence prevention, I proposed the importance of using a structural analysis to understand the root causes of sexualized violence and the necessity of including state violence in this analysis. In the following section, I discussed findings about the factors determining what information is included in violence prevention and the tendency to work within risk-oriented frameworks. As an alternative, I highlighted participant data and literature that outlined strategies for violence prevention that are relevant, culturally grounded, and span a much broader age range. In the section on representation, I discussed participant emphasis on ensuring that youth see themselves reflected in the facilitation team and materials being used. I then connected the importance of representation to debates about pedagogy and youth-led education. Finally, I critiqued individualized and one-size-fits-all consent paradigms which emerge from post-secondary feminist spaces. Instead, I advanced an embodied, relational, and pleasure-centred understanding of consent rooted in participant's lived experiences and legacies of Indigenous resurgence, Black feminism, and queer theory.

### **Conclusion: Moving Forward Together**

I want to re-introduce myself because of my commitment to critical self-reflexivity and as it has been many pages since I shared my positionality. My name is Sarah, and I am a queer white settler who has done violence prevention work on ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ lands since 2017. I started in this work when I was 20 because of my own experiences of abuse, and out of love for my kin who have been hurt by and lost to systemic violence. My years in violence prevention have been some of the most challenging, healing, discouraging, and creative times in my life. I hold the long legacy of this work with deep reverence, appreciation, and apprehension. As I became increasingly disillusioned by feminist and non-profit spaces, which tend to overfocus on the experiences of cis and white people like me, I sought reprieve from the cycle of burnout through grad school. While I can't say that I am less burned out, this project has given me space to ask questions that I was carrying about the flaws in the sexual health, violence prevention, and harm reduction work that I have done.

For this concluding chapter, I have chosen to write directly to my colleagues, friends, and peers who are doing community-based education. Colleagues, I know you are probably on the edge of burnout, and that the competing demands from funders, schools, parents, bosses, and conservative opposition can be overwhelming on the best of days. I know that your energy to read a 100+ page document may be minimal. This last chapter is my offering to you: a simplified summary so you can obtain some of the core information and findings of this work through a more digestible format. Despite all the demands on your time, I hope we can continue to co-create support for youth that is imaginative, grounded, relevant, and transformative.

### **Relationships**

This thesis is grounded in relationships. From the beginning, this informed why I did this research and how I went about it. I chose to use critical emancipatory methodologies as they

offered the most helpful guidance in prioritizing critical conversations about power. As a cisgender white settler woman, my access to numerous axes of social privilege makes it necessary for me to reflect explicitly and critically on how my social location impacts my research. Rather than researching ‘down’ (by interviewing youth) or ‘up’ (e.g., policy makers), I interviewed other adults who are part of my informal community of practice - thereby researching ‘with.’ While my research has similarities to inside-research because I exist within the same professional and advocacy community as my research participants, there are also many differences between my social positionality and that of my participants. To make visible those dynamics, I think of this project as relationship-based.

After selecting eight educators who are currently working or have previously worked in violence prevention on ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ territories, I conducted semi-structured interviews and one focus group. I prioritized educators who worked in anti-violence advocacy as young (or younger) people and therefore have additional lived connections with youth prevention education. I also aimed to balance the importance of including voices which are often erased and marginalized in mainstream anti-violence, especially those of people who are racialized, Indigenous, trans/non-binary/Two-Spirit, and/or sex working.

### **Weaving Together Literature and Stories**

Many Indigenous scholars explain that prior to colonization, gender roles were not defined by patriarchy and sexual violence was not tolerated (Hunt, 2016b; L. Simpson, 2014b). While activism by Indigenous women, Two-Spirit people, and community leaders (especially through long-term grassroots efforts which led to the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls) has led to greater awareness about sexualized violence, policies still fail to account for racism and colonialism. However, racism and white supremacy are

closely linked to gender-based violence (WEA & NYSHN, 2016; Critical Resistance & INCITE!, 2016; MacDougall et al., 2022). Today, many mainstream approaches to preventing violence are still based in non-profit organizations that centre around white feminist philosophy.

My research concludes that to truly end violence, we must change the conditions which lead to violence occurring in the first place. To do so, anti-violence organizations must move away from focusing solely on individual actions and also account for structural and state violence (INCITE!, 2016). This means addressing the intersections of racism, colonialism, hetero-patriarchy, ableism, and classism that oppress and marginalize. However, there is a difference between anti-violence programming that is “accessible to marginalized people” versus having “the marginalization of people inform how we define violence and what kind of work we would do” (Bierria, 2007, p. 153). Anti-violence education founded upon this kind of intersectional feminist analysis would be rooted in racialized, disabled, and queer experiences.

What follows is a summary of some learnings that emerged from this research project, which I hope offer guidelines and roadmaps to inspire you in your own work. These learnings are grounded in Black feminism and decolonial scholarship for critical interventions that disrupt colonial norms in consent education.

### **Voice and Representation**

When prevention education neglects to recognize oppression, it risks perpetuating the very injustices it seeks to remedy. Many of our shared experiences working in this field and the literature show that many sexualized violence policies still fail to account for racial difference and prioritize the experiences of white women. Organizations like Battered Women’s Support Services and INCITE! highlight that gender-based violence affects Indigenous, Black, immigrant/refugee, and racialized people as a tool of patriarchy but also of racism (MacDougall

et al., 2022). Not only do Indigenous women and girls (MacDougall et al., 2022) and Two-Spirit people (Lezard et al., 2021) face the highest rates of violence in so-called Canada, but Black people (MacDougall et al., 2022; Maynard, 2017), those with disabilities (Chugani et al., 2021), and trans individuals (Berke & Collins, 2023) also experience elevated levels of violence. And yet the literature and participant experience demonstrates that, in practice, prevention education so often erases and excludes these communities.

Even in purportedly anti-oppressive spaces, ethnocentrism is visible when progressive values about sex are conflated with Western relationship norms (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021). This conflation (between whiteness and sexual freedom) results in the erasure of Indigenous and racialized practices of communication, justice, and care which undermines the integrity of anti-violence work. In addition, we must critically examine stereotypes that portray Black and racialized men as more prone to violence (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Zounlome et al., 2021). Further, funding applications often replicate risk-oriented frameworks which construct BIPOC communities through in a deficit framework and pathologize resistance (i.e., labeling youth ‘at-risk’). However, ‘inclusion’ efforts can also end up tokenizing staff when they do not meaningfully challenge the entire organization’s norms and practices. Given these limitations, it is not surprising that despite prevention efforts, sexualized violence rates remain high (McCauley et al., 2019, p. 1912). By addressing state violence and its intersections with gender-based violence, the anti-violence movement can make itself more relevant, engaging, and useful to Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities.

While Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities have always been doing work by and for their community, there is a long legacy of paternalism in education and social work. Many scholars still do not consider the benefits of including and uplifting youth voices in anti-

violence work. This is despite that fact that youth are already navigating a globalized world that exists at their fingertips and are more than capable of complex dialogue; indeed, they are already doing it whether adults choose to acknowledge that. Further, “by emphasizing rather than renouncing complexity, feminists can more fully support politically engaged consent” (Harris, 2018, p. 172). Violence prevention could move far beyond a narrow focus on preventing assault by aspiring to equip youth with the skills to “create a society based on radical freedom, mutual accountability, and passionate reciprocity” (INCITE!, 2016, p. 226).

### **Recommendations:**

- Ensure that graphics represent a range of bodies, genders, cultures, and families, especially disabled, trans, Black, and Indigenous people.
- Centre the leadership of organizations that directly address the intersection of gender-based violence with other systems of oppression (e.g., Native Youth Sexual Health Network). Honour and acknowledge decades long activism by Indigenous women, Two-Spirit people, and community leaders to raise awareness about colonial violence.
- Actively work towards including a diverse range of voices in management positions, and not only in casual or part-time positions.
- Ensure that facilitators are skilled at fostering an environment of authenticity and co-learning. Resist prescriptive answers and instead strive for dialogue and curiosity. Rather than ‘training’ youth to strive for perfection, support youth to develop the skills, tools, and supports to receive feedback when their actions have negatively impacted others
- Youth may not remember the specific data included in a workshop, but they will remember how they felt afterwards and who was speaking. Resist the urge to focus

entirely or mostly on content, and instead ensure that who is facilitating and how they are facilitating is given ample attention.

- Seek to make more space for youth to guide, create, and lead education work in their communities. Consider the benefits of youth-led education through peer education programs, education campaigns, or social action projects.
- Strive to ensure that teachers have more in-depth training about discussing sexual health, and that students have access to resources beyond the traditional teacher-student dynamic.

### **Prevention Education in Practice**

Although not exhaustive, there were some key points from the literature about putting good education into practice. For education to be effective, it needs to be contextually relevant. To do so, anti-violence programs must extend beyond a one-time workshop (Orchowski, 2023; Thom, 2020). However, in practice, the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) significantly influences the quality and scope of anti-violence programs, often replicating racial inequities in funding allocation (INCITE!, 2016; Maynard, 2017; Berke and Collins, 2023). The NPIC also promotes professionalization in anti-violence work, prioritizing formal education over community-based experience, which can undermine advocacy efforts and pathologize survivors (Ullman & Townsend, 2007; INCITE!, 2016; Bierria, 2007).

Participants in my research reported major gaps in the sexual health classes they received, which aligns with what other studies have found (Chugani et al., 2021; Waling et al., 2021; SIECCAN, 2023; Cody, 2017). Participants expressed that while STBBIs, anatomy, and puberty are important parts of sexual health education, they should not sideline important discussions about pleasure and power. Finally, participants highlighted the need for information to be paired

with practical tools for communication, consent, and boundary setting, which can meaningfully support youth self-determination and autonomy.

And finally, the pedagogy used by educators is crucial; even the most innovative curriculum and programming can fail if the delivery replicates conservative ideologies. Participants stressed that for sexual health information to be useful for young people, it needs to be presented in a way that is non-judgmental and includes up-to-date data. This echoes research which indicates that young people prefer educators who are well-trained in discussing sexuality, regardless of whether they are external facilitators or teachers (Waling et al., 2021).

### **Recommendations:**

- Reject stigmatizing risk-oriented framings of sex and substance use. For example, STBBIs should be talked about in the same way we talk about other common infections (e.g., colds).
- Ask youth what information they want and need (e.g., through anonymous questions). As a goal, educators can strive to answer the questions that youth will otherwise turn to the internet or social media for information about.
- Accept the growing role of social media and support youth to develop the critical media skills that they need to use online tools effectively and safely.
- Expand the scope of education: start earlier and spread information across subject matter. Many lessons about body image, consent, and respect can begin in earlier years to provide young people with the foundation for future conversations. Further, one class focusing on sexual health is not comprehensive. Consider ways to weave content into a range of classes (e.g., discussing STBBIs in biology class).

- Make space for the range of cultural contexts and communities that young people exist within and that norms around communication, family structure, and appearance can vary. Actively support young people to bring their full selves into learning spaces.
- When incorporating Indigenous knowledge into programming, ensure that those teachings are not inserted into colonial frameworks. Instead, strive to transform the foundation and worldview which typically defines programming. Prioritize the voices of Indigenous people, especially those from local nations, in this process.
- Advance models of education which understand violence prevention, sexual health, and harm reduction to be deeply interconnected. Resist the siloing of sexualized violence prevention work and instead seek to collaborate with harm reduction, bystander intervention, restorative justice, and youth health programs.
- Carefully consider the ethics of mandatory anti-violence education, with attention to the potential of youth in the room experiencing harm while oppressive stereotypes and beliefs are being unpacked.
- Clearly articulate the focus of a workshop, even if it is constrained by funding. If a session focuses on birth control, then it will be less harmful to call that a Pregnancy Prevention workshop than to claim to cover sexual health more broadly and fail to deliver.

### **Reapproaching Consent Education**

The literature shows that when violence prevention programming treats consent as a tool for avoiding assault (or liability to accusation of assault), we fail to provide young people with the range of skills and analysis that they need to effectively build reciprocal and respectful relationships (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2021; Nash, 2019). For instance, programs concentrating

solely on affirmative consent can end up equipping those with more social power with strategies for convincing a partner to saying yes and to protect themselves from an accusation of assault. Further, it can be harmful to reduce assault to a miscommunication or a misinterpretation, because sometimes people deliberately choose to ignore or coerce boundaries (Harris, 2018; Wright & Greenberg, 2023). In other words, consent is not as simple as ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and implying that it can be only serves to erase the complex context of decisions about sex.

Instead of teaching how to ‘get’ consent, education needs to tackle power dynamics and promote respect, care, and pleasure. A structural analysis is pivotal in resisting normative frameworks because it makes visible how systems of privilege and oppression shape every aspect of human interaction. One participant, Jasmine, explained this as addressing all the factors leading up to two people engaging in intimacy and the systemic forces which influence their ability to say yes or no in that moment. Further, participants questioned prescriptive one-size-fits-all models that insufficiently accounting for dis(ability), culture, and the reality of human communication. Participants also emphasized the pitfall of simplifying consent to individual interactions which ignores important factors like gender, power, and history. By acknowledging these complexities and tensions, anti-violence programs could directly address the realities of consent in practice and seek to support youth to make ethical decisions amidst ambiguity and power dynamics (Harris, 2018).

Amidst high rates of sexualized violence, it can be hard to make space for conversations about pleasure. Gaps in the literature regarding pleasure-centred sex education also point to discomfort and taboo within the educational field. However, young people want educators who can talk openly about pleasure (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Waling et al., 2021; SIECCAN, 2023). Further, not talking about pleasure can leave youth without the tools that they need to find

experiences and relationships that are positive, or to know how to recognize for themselves what they want and need. While some scholars advocate for including pleasure in education about sex and consent, there are also debates as to whether pleasure can account for power, as well as the amount of space it should take up in violence prevention work (Gaspar et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019; Nash, 2019). I am inspired by Black feminists who strategize that pleasure is a way to challenge dominant narratives about race, beauty, health, and sex, and to create a more just and liberated sexual culture for all (Morgan, 2015; Nash, 2019). Further, participants highlighted how pleasure can be expanded to include having relationships with self, identity, and non-human life.

### **Recommendations:**

Decolonial approaches that:

- Contextualize consent as building good relationships, not just with people, but also with the non-human world around us. Discuss how settlers do not have permission to live on Indigenous lands, and how this presents inherent contradictions when discussing consent.
- Centre the leadership of local nations, youth, and community leaders. Ground education in discussions about the historical context of the land.
- Take leadership from Indigenous resurgence movements by resisting the boundaries which typically define what is considered ‘prevention education.’ Make space for culturally grounded, holistic, and land-based programming.
- Strive to support body sovereignty and connecting Indigenous youth with their territories in order to better support transformative possibilities for ending colonial patriarchal violence.

Embodied and relational approaches that:

- Centre relationality by moving away from solely focusing on individual actions.

- Empower youth to take care of each other while addressing power dynamics. For example, teaching about self-defining consent and boundaries, while making space for culturally specific perspectives about communication, sex, and sexuality.
- Introduce embodied understandings of consent which connect the heart, mind, and body. Provide youth with tools to identify what is a yes or a no for themselves. Talk about consent as an experience that happens both in one's body, and in relationship to others.
- Support youth to navigate conversations about substance use, sexually transmitted infections, and the language used for their body parts (which is especially important for queer and trans folks),
- Offer activities that engage with emerging models, such as the Wheel of Consent (Martin & Dalzen, 2021), that can offer valuable lessons in making consent education more practical and relational.

Pleasure-based approaches that:

- Understand pleasure as an engaging foundation for young people to learn about their own bodies and to imagine affirming, respectful, and supportive relationships with others.
- Consider how pleasure can be an opening for conversations about coercion, informed decision making, mutual respect, reciprocity, and self-knowledge.
- Affirm that young people have the right to pleasure in their identity, body, and relationships. Ensure this framing is alongside teachings that while it is never someone else's responsibility to give us pleasure, we can always seek to access pleasure in our relationship to ourselves.

## Closing Thoughts

In 2020, I facilitated a sexual health and harm reduction peer education program for high-school aged youth. When I invited two previous participants in the program to deliver a Queer Sex Ed workshop, they talked about everything from how to make dental dams out of internal condoms, to consent and DIY kink tools (it turns out that wooden spoons are an affordable option). It was an honour and a joy to witness how they held space for us (I was 23 at the time) to be open and curious. I hope that this research breathes energy into spaces and education that invites youth to bring their full selves and to ask those questions that so often get typed into an incognito browser search. At the time of writing, this is a list of projects which continue to inspire me: [Sexfluent](#), [Native Youth Sexual Health Network](#), [Queer Sexual Joy Project](#), [Kinship Rising](#), and [Social Justice Peer Education Program](#). I hope that you too may be inspired by some of the brilliant work that is already happening, and that you feel held up in your efforts to bring these practices to life.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a Thesis project titled “Consent is a low bar: Building a pleasure centered practice for violence prevention” that I, Sarah Graham, am conducting. I am a graduate student in the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria and you may contact me if you have any questions by email at sarahpjgraham@gmail.com.

My thesis supervisors also available should you have questions or concerns, including: Dr. Bruce Wallace (School of Social Work), Dr. Sarah Hunt (School of Environmental Studies), and Dr. Mehmoona Moosa Mitha (School of Social Work).

#### *Purpose and Objectives*

The objective of this research is to examine how to move beyond the limits of current anti-violence programming. To do so, I will ask community-based educators to engage in a space of dreaming about the teachings they wish they received as young people. I hope to collectively identify what anti-violence educators have learned to be the core principles of sex positive, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist education about sex and relationships.

#### *Participant Selection*

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are an experienced anti-violence educator who is over the age of 19.

#### *What is Involved*

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a 60-90 minute audio-recorded in person interview at a time and date that is most convenient for you. **After each interview is complete, I will send provide participants with a transcript of the portions of the interview that I intend to use for my research for their review. To ensure privacy, participants will be given a password to access the transcripts via an encrypted email. Participants can choose to identify approval/edits/redactions.** To respect the time and energy you will be sharing with me, I would like to offer all participants an \$80 honorarium.

#### *Inconvenience and Risks*

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time involved in planning, scheduling, and participating in the interview. The interview process will involve discussion of sexualized violence, consent, and prevention education; however, no participant will be asked to share their personal experiences of sexualized violence directly. Ensuring that you feel supported is a priority to me and, if relevant, I am prepared to use my skills to respond to disclosures of harm or overwhelming emotions. Before deciding to participate, you should evaluate any risks you perceive around your participation in this study.

Should you express any form of discomfort at any point during the interview, I will immediately stop the interview and discuss next steps – for example, taking a break, discontinuing the interview, and resuming it on another date, completely withdrawing from the

study (honoraria will still be provided). I will also ensure that I have a list of resources available should external or additional support be needed.

### *Benefits*

The potential benefits of your participation include having the opportunity to reflect on your experience of working in the sexualized violence advocacy community and to contribute to the body of knowledge about feminist, anti-racist education.

### *Voluntary Participation*

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. You should participate only if you wish to be involved, and not out of any obligation to the researcher due to a pre-existing relationship. If you do feel a sense of obligation or pressure, you should decline to participate. There will be no repercussions if you decide to participate or not. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without consequence or explanation (and you will still receive an honoraria). If you do withdraw from the study, your data will only be used should you give your written permission. If you do not give your written permission, your data will be destroyed and will not be used in the final thesis.

### *Ongoing Consent*

At any point up until the completion of the research project, you may withdraw from the study without any consequence or explanation and your results will be destroyed unless you give written permission indicating that they can still be used in the project. Currently, I have no plan to use this data beyond the purposes of my thesis research. If a reason arises in the future, I will contact participants to explain the potential data use, ask for permission, and communicate that I will only use data from participants who answer affirmatively.

### *Anonymity and Confidentiality*

In terms of protecting your anonymity, I ask that you select a pseudonym that will be referred to in the written results.

Please indicate your preference:

\_\_\_\_\_ I wish to remain anonymous with: (check all that apply)

- a) \_\_\_\_\_ the use of a pseudonym
- b) \_\_\_\_\_ no name
- c) \_\_\_\_\_ removal of all identifying information such as race, ethnicity, gender or sexuality.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not wish to remain anonymous (**you will be named as a participant in the study and may be identified with the data you have provided**)

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data (audio-recorded interview) will be protected by password-protected electronic storage on my personal computer located in my home; your consent form and any other print material involved in the interview process will be stored in a locked drawer in my home.

### *Dissemination of Results*



## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and what brought you to work in anti-violence education? In the final version of this research I will describe the voices who were included these discussions, would you be able to share some basic demographic information that you would like included?
2. Tell me a bit about the education you received as a youth about intimate relationships, sex, and sexual health.
3. What are the differences between the education you received as a youth and the education that you deliver/delivered as an anti-violence educator?
4. In your own words, can you describe sex positive, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist education about sex and relationships? How did you come to know what you know about education aligned with these principles?
5. Can you describe the strengths of current violence prevention programming? How is anti-violence education currently falling short?
6. If you could create a curriculum which captured all the things you wish you knew as a youth, what would be included? What would not be included?
7. There are three topics which I have found to require nuance and can be particularly contentious in relation to anti-violence education. Could you comment on the role of conversations about 1) pleasure, 2) STBBI's, and 3) substance use in education about intimacy for young people?
  - a) *Case study: "Best practiced sober" is a commonly used slogan. In your opinion, what are the positive and negatives impacts? Do you have alternative suggestions?*
8. Are there barriers that you have experienced and/or foresee in putting sex positive, feminist, decolonial, and anti-racist consent education into practice?
9. In addition to core curriculum principles, what are important considerations for how anti-violence education programs are organized, facilitated, and evaluated?
10. Do you have anything else you would like to share?