

Where's the Pleasure In That? Examining the Impacts of B.C.'s Sex Education System on Women's Sexuality

A focus group - based qualitative research study addressing the impact that sex education has on women's sexual experiences in young adulthood, with specific regard to experiencing sexual pleasure and navigating risks



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Introduction

Women's pleasure has been largely ignored within sexual health education programs. (Lavery et al., 2021). Instead, discourses of danger and risk dominate the curriculum leaving little room for young women to explore the positive aspects of their sexuality (Astle et al., 2021). While previous studies have identified several themes that youth feel are missing from formal sexual health education, few studies differentiate between men and women's experiences. There is a need for research that evaluates the unique impacts of sexual health education on women's future sexual experiences and expressions of sexuality.

Objective

This project will allow participants to reflect on the influence their sex education has on their perceptions and enactments of their sexuality. Additionally, it will offer insights for the continued development of a sexual health education curriculum that supports women to engage in safe and satisfying sexual practices.



Research Questions

- How does the content and delivery of B.C.'s sexual health curriculum impact women's expressions of sexuality, with specific regard to experiencing sexual pleasure and navigating risks?
- To what extent is B.C.'s sexual health curriculum successfully providing women with the tools they need to engage in healthy and fulfilling sexual relationships, and what changes can be made to that end?



Methodology

This project utilizes a feminist approach, which recognizes that women and girls are uniquely impacted by topics in sexual health education and therefore centres their experience (Lenskyj, 1990). This research is also trauma-informed as it prioritizes the well-being of participants throughout all research procedures, therefore giving participants the greatest control over the research process (Campbell et al., 2019).

- Main research activity: qualitative focus group
- Participants: four women in university with B.C. sex education
- Recruitment strategy: word of mouth, feminist community organizations, and the UVic sociology department
- Data collection: transcription of focus group conversation and interview notes
- Data analysis: thematic analysis using Braun & Clarke's (2006) method

Findings

Participants were impacted by a lack of information on the nuances of consent.

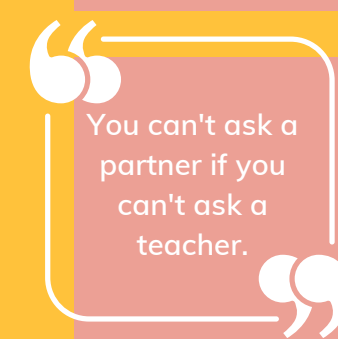
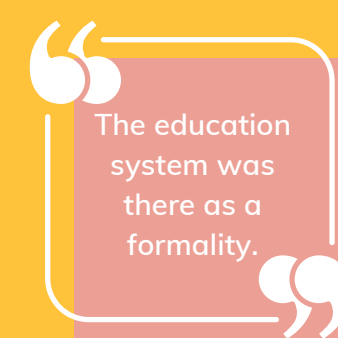
- "[Sex education defined consent as] 'It's a yes...and anything else means no'...leav[ing] so much grey area." - Avery
- "I feel like [the] lack of talk about consent has really affected how I have been assaulted in my life." - Callie
- "I don't think it was ever emphasized that consent should be mutual. And that men should also have just as much opportunity to give consent as a woman." - Avery

Participants were impacted by the lack of information on pleasure.

- "We didn't get a lot of it centred around pleasure. It was to have a baby....My sexual experiences would have been so different [if I'd learned about pleasure]. It wouldn't have taken me so long have a good sexual experience." - Kate
- "[Our science teacher] taught biology for our sex ed...[Sex education] was not about sex." -Avery & Emma

Participants wanted more information that was specific to women's sexuality.

- "Why are we not learning about our bodies [and] sex...It is just as important as math and gym and science." - Callie
- "There's so much about the female body that I still don't know...That's where the education system did fail me." - Kate
- "They didn't really teach you about female birth control, apart from the pills...I would have really liked to... be educated about the pros and the cons [about the IUD before getting one]." -Callie



Participants wanted to learn about sexuality outside of heteronormative sex.

- "They did not talk about any kind of gay sex, or even sexuality. I am pan, so I understand that it's confusing to learn [how to have sex] on your own." - Callie
- "Maybe I could experience sex with the same gender. But I don't think that that information was ever offered..." - Avery
- "[The lack of information on gay sex made me wonder] 'How do I have safe sex with my girlfriend?'" - Kate

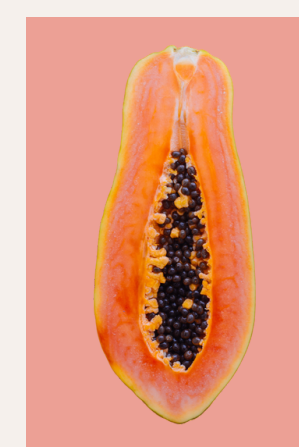
Participants wanted more social-emotional approaches to sex education.

- "I never learned about the emotional side of things...[I was] never taught that how you feel can play a big part in your sex drive and what it means to not have a sex drive." - Emma
- "There should be more of these conversations happening amongst women...The conversations we're having now, where we come together and we can relate on a certain level." - Emma & Avery
- "By not creating safe environments in which you can ask about sex and talk about sex, we're perpetuating, non-communicative, especially unsafe, sex" -Avery



Conclusion

This research supports previous studies by demonstrating how sex education conveys an overwhelming message of danger surrounding women's sexuality (Astle et al., 2021). Women also receive little



information on their sexual health and how to explore their sexual desires (Narushima et al., 2020). This research also demonstrates how gender shapes the content and delivery of sex education, especially in relation to consent. Sex education places the onus of consent on women, implying that women are submissive receivers of men's sexual desires (Fine, 1988).

This research analyzed how messages that women receive from their sex education impact their sexual experiences, which was missing from previous studies. For example, the narratives about sexual pleasure within sex education resulted in feelings of shame when exploring self-pleasure through masturbation or pornography. In addition, the lack of information on women's sexual health, made participants confused by the changes in their bodies associated with sexual activity. And, the participants attributed their experiences with sexual assault to their education – or lack of education – on consent.

This study highlights the considerable impact that sex education has on women's sexuality. The structure of sex education is in direct opposition to the development of women's sexual subjectivity and the pursuit of their authentic desire. As an act of resistance, the participants advocated for social-emotional approaches to sex education. Through building community with other women and having conversations about sex, the participants have begun to unlearn the harmful narratives from their sex education. The focus group provided such a space for the women to engage in social-emotional conversation, provide mutual support during vulnerable moments, and learn from each others' experiences. Through these alternative methods of sex education, the women have found agency to pursue the sexual identities, desires, and experiences that feel authentic to them.

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