Sex Education for Teachers: A Graduate Course Preparing Educators for Inclusion in a Polarized Political Landscape

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Abstract

In the educational policy reversals making schools less inclusive for youth identities, including their sexuality and gender identities, informal interventions and education provided by teachers are even more important. Teachers need opportunities to learn about sexuality and gender identities to be capable of answering student questions and advocating for their inclusion and safety in schools. In this paper we explore what a graduate course for teachers could offer P-12 students in terms of access to authoritative and useful information about sexualities and genders, to create more inclusive classrooms, both within sex education or health classrooms and in other subject areas and spaces within school buildings. We offer this piece as a resistance to the anti-trans and anti-queer and anti-diversity moment that we find ourselves in in the United States, as a hope that teacher educators and teachers will quietly provide safety and resources to students, as they are able.

Keywords: *educational justice, sexuality, gender, teacher education*

Since at least 1968, when Malfetti and Rubin presented evidence that parents, educators, and community groups were in favor of providing more sex education to children, and many thought that it should take place within the schools, the place of knowledge about sexuality and gender in schooling has been contested. A problem they identified was that teachers were not receiving enough sex education themselves to adequately provide it to children (Malfetti & Rubin, 1968). Throughout the twentieth and 21st centuries in the United States, communities have continued to debate (Irvine, 2002, 2020; Zimmerman, 2002) and educational organizations (SIECUS, 2025) and teacher education programs (O'Brien et al., 2021) have tried to address the need to educate young people about "sexual citizenship" (Evans, 1993). This need for educating sexual citizens is not limited to sex education classrooms, but includes welcoming bodies, emotions, and feelings into educational spaces. Thus the body becomes a site of possibility and "most importantly, since the body is the material foundation of our yearning for human liberation, it is only in our bodies that we can ultimately enact a revolutionary love, a love grounded in shared human kinship, political self-determination, and economic justice" (Darder, 2009, p. 231). As Darder asserts, we similarly believe that the role of providing education on relationships, bodies, feelings, and identities should belong to all adults in schools, as a foundation for justice.

Education that includes sexual and gender diversity and welcomes student emotions and desires is an issue of educational equity, and represents necessary information for living a fulfilled life. One way this is achieved is through a comprehensive sexuality education that must be advocated for as a topic of study for students within schools (Fraser et al., 2021). Women and racialized communities (Fine, 1998; Tolman, 1994, Fine & McClelland, 2006), queer and trans communities (Estes, 2017), and people with disabilities (Crehan, Schwartz, & Schmidt, 2023) have experienced injustices because of limited access to information and safety about sexuality and gender identities, as well as reproductive justice (Barcelos, 2020). Sexuality has often only been seen as a right of able-bodied (white) men (Srinivasan, 2021; Fields, et al., 2015); education is one way to counter that social inequity and create access to information that entitles students of all identities to sexuality, pleasure, and agency in intimate relationships. While traditionally thought of as happening within the sexuality education classroom, these lessons are imparted across the curriculum, and by teachers in many different content areas, through literature, history, biology, and physical education, for example, and in non-curricular spaces as well (Donovan et al., 2023; van Leent & Spina, 2023, Wozolek, 2020). We think of the education that teachers need in order to invite student identities into the classroom in their bodies, rather than in spite of their bodies.

In this paper we explore what a graduate course for teachers could offer in terms of access to authoritative and useful information about sexualities and genders, to create more inclusive classrooms, both within sex education or health classrooms and in other subject areas and spaces within school buildings. We offer this piece as a resistance to the anti-trans and anti-queer and anti-diversity moment that we find ourselves in in the United States, as a hope that teacher educators and teachers will quietly provide safety and resources to students, as they are able.

Sex Panics Having a Moment

Versions of the "sex panic" (Irvine, 2002, 2020; Zimmerman, 2002) have been used throughout the second half of the 20th and the 21st century as resistance to changes to social mores about sex, sexuality, and gender. Protests against sex education have taken place in school board meetings (Lipschutz & Rosenblatt, 2006; Irvine, 2020), on local and national media (Kramer, 2019), and have appeared as political discourse to propel conservative politicians into office (Bialystok et al., 2020; Quinan, 2025). New technologies offer new platforms for conservative or regressive movements such as Moms for Liberty (Cooter et al., 2025; Denise, 2015) and offer a space to name educators as dangerous for engaging students in thinking about sexuality and gender ("US Department", 2025). Tiffany Justice, Co-Founder of Moms for Liberty argued,

> For years, parents have been begging schools to focus on teaching their kids practical skills like reading, writing, and math, instead of pushing critical theory, rogue sex education and divisive ideologies—but their concerns have been brushed off, mocked, or shut down entirely. Parents, now is the time that you share the receipts of the betrayal that has happened in our public schools.

Sex panics exaggerate and amplify confusion and sensation around identity issues such as LGBTQI+ and nonbinary youth (Cooter et al., 2025), drag queens (Marwick et al., 2024), and book bans (Pinsky & Brenner, 2025). Educators know that banning teaching of sexuality and gender topics does not prevent students from accessing them, however, as they are widely available

online, in the conversations of their peers, and in movies and television shows that bring conversations about sexuality and gender into schools regardless of what teachers teach. Critical educators desire to address topics that students are encountering, to provide resources that students can use to make decisions and choices to live an ethical and fulfilled life (Darder, 2004).

In the current panic, which is connected to backlash against all diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts ("US Department", 2025; Cooter, et al., 2025), parents, teachers, students, and other community members can voice their concerns about what they deem inappropriate content to the Department of Education's "End DEI" portal. As we have seen in attempts to withhold state and district funding, the portal has the potential to punish schools that do not comply with directives to dismantle their DEI initiatives, including supporting trans students, offering comprehensive sexuality education, and employing inclusive policies that welcome and provide safety for students based on gender and sexuality ("U.S. Department of Education Announces Consequences for Maine's Title IX Noncompliance", 2025). Political discourse surrounding sex and gender education heightens the risk for teachers as politicians feel compelled to act on the inflamed rhetoric and enact legislation that limits what teachers can teach (Sheppard, 2023).

Pen America reports that a total of 18 states (https://pen.org/report/educational-intimidation/) have "intimidation education bills", which are laws that enable parents to inspect and object to instructional material in the classroom (Friedman et al., 2023) and the Supreme Court just overturned a lower court decision, now requiring schools to allow parents to remove their children from classrooms where the teaching conflicts with the parents' religion (Maniccia, 2025). Some of these laws punish teachers and schools. For instance, HB 1775 in Oklahoma can terminate a teacher's license and accreditation to teach for discussing topics related to sex (Parks et al., 2024). The "Don't Say Gay" bill, officially known as the Florida Parental Rights in Education Act, enables parents to restrict their children from topics and discussions at school surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity and parents may file a complaint if they believe their school is engaging in unlawful instruction about said material (The Florida Legislature, 2025). Sarah Dahlston (Roliff, 2023), the senior director of education for Planned Parenthood's Southwest Ohio region, illustrates how political pressure often forces a strategic and pedagogical retreat; by targeting gender and sexual identity, administrators hollow out the broader sex education curriculum to avoid controversy:

> When we talk about gender and sexual identity, it tends to make schools or admin or teachers a little nervous because of the climate that we're in right now, she said. It's typically one of the first [lessons] to get cut. They'd rather us focus on relationships, or anatomy or puberty, and not go into gender and identity.

The escalation of negative political rhetoric about diversity and queer and trans rights affects the provision of comprehensive sex education, as anti-inclusion voices become elevated and frame all education about sexuality and gender as harmful by introducing students to information about sexual behaviors that they would not be interested in exploring or curious about otherwise (Cooter, 2025; Fields, et al., 2015; Loutzenheiser, 2015). The distraction of moral panic techniques that reference contagion myths (Sokol, 2026) - producing fear that sexuality or gender identities discussions in schools will encourage young people to engage in activities or try identities - creates impediments for teaching about sexuality and gender even in sex educational classrooms. In schools, teachers confront students who bring or reference sexualized images, sexual content, gender expansive ideas, and sometimes the harassment of their peers, and providing information and

education about the ideas that students arrive with is a critical part of the work that teachers do in support of young people (Developmental Assets). Restrictions on speech and curricular content about sexuality and gender (see House Bill 2026) make it harder for teachers to include stories that are representative of all student or family identities, to help students assess and critically understand information they find online or elsewhere, to get the most authoritative information (Fraser et al., 2021).

The State of Sex Education in Georgia

In the United States, SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change, reports on the availability of sexuality education on their website and in their publications. Their assessment of sex education policies and practices evaluates states on whether they require sex education, HIV education, or healthy relationship instruction. They also evaluate the contents of sex education on criteria such as whether or not it is required to be medically accurate, whether it must include LGBTQIA+ identities, and whether it includes instruction on contraception (SIECUS, 2025).

In the state of Georgia, where both authors previously taught, SIECUS issued a grade of D+ for the state of sex ed. "Sex education is mandated in Georgia, but it is not required to be comprehensive or medically accurate, and instruction must stress abstinence" (SIECUS, 2023). Contents of sexuality education in Georgia typically include how to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships and the benefits of being sexually abstinent, with an assumption of heterosexuality. In the case of students who are sexually active, some Georgia middle schools and high schools report teaching about methods of contraception other than condoms (6.9% in grades 6, 7, 8 and 71.1% in grades 9-12) and teaching how to use condoms (21% in grades 6-8 and 45% in grades 9-12), although only 37% of Georgia secondary schools report providing any curricula relevant to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning youth (SIECUS, 2023). Accurate health information, including sexual health information, as well as information about healthy relationships, contribute to students' feeling of safety and competence, as well as better mental health outcomes for students (Linville, 2011; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). However, based on the contents of the sexual health information provided to students, only some students presumed to be engaging in heterosexual, penetrative sex were provided access to explicit information about safely engaging in sexual behaviors and relationship dynamics that are healthy. And although some schools at the time of the SIECUS state profile compilation reported teaching students about diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities, it is not clear from the report if that teaching continues to happen after the 2022 passage of HB 1084, the Georgia "Divisive Concepts" law (Georgia General Assembly, 2022).

In Georgia, legislative rollbacks of protections for youth based on their identities, including sexual and gender identities, has been enacted through what is called "divisive concepts legislation" (Sheppard, 2023). Although HB 1084 does not explicitly prohibit gender identities, it functions within a broader ecosystem of surveillance where any teaching read as acknowledging gender-expansive identities is heavily policed (Georgia General Assembly, 2022). This chilling effect materialized when fifth-grade educator Katie Rinderle was terminated by the Cobb County School Board after reading *My Shadow is Purple* (Stuart, 2022), a children's picture book that utilizes a purple shadow as an explicit metaphor for non-binary gender identities beyond traditional pink for girls and blue for boys binaries. While local administrators weaponized vague district controversial materials policies to enforce the dismissal, the state-level backing of this administrative reach was solidified when the Georgia State Board of Education formally voted to uphold the termination

("Georgia Board", 2024). Following this precedent, Georgia has further institutionalized the marginalization of queer youth by enacting a ban on sports participation for transgender students matching their gender identity (ACLU GA, 2025), and similar legislation that allows parents to opt children out of lessons has been proposed. Legislators have attempted to pass legislation to make it harder for schools to use student preferred names and chosen gender pronouns or provide access to a safe bathroom (Williams, 2024). These changes, if passed in future legislative sessions, will make schools less safe for all students, and make all gender curious students less safe in their communities (Lee et al., 2024).

The loss of protections for trans youth (Williamson, 2016), for LGBTQIA+ youth (Sadowski, 2020), and for the inclusion of relationship and consent education in k-12 schools (Umar, et al., 2025; Szucs, et al., 2023) reverse gains that had been made to make schools more welcoming and inclusive of youth identities and more responsive to youth gender and sexuality explorations and growth (Willis, et al., 2018). Although the political rhetoric targets trans and queer youth, the protections previously won deepened the conversation about sexuality, gender, gender roles, and sexual harassment in ways that have been protective of other students, particularly cis-girls and women (Mar, 2023). Hateful political rhetoric often appears in school as harassment and bullying among students and adults (Horton, 2021), and current anti-bullying laws in Georgia, for example, do not encourage or require school districts to train teachers on bullying-prevention and intervention strategies, nor do they encourage or require school districts to provide mental health support to students currently involved in bullying (StopBullying.gov, 2023). This can make schools more dangerous and violent places for all.

All Teachers Need Better Sex Education

As the claims that information is dangerous get elevated in the political rhetoric, teachers are less willing to have conversations about sex, sexuality, or gender identity with youth, or to help point youth toward reliable or authoritative sources to get information that will help them make safer choices and seek medical, psychological, or other help if they need it (Jayne et al., 2024). To effectively support students, educators must first reconcile their own experiences within the broad spectrum of gender, sexual identity, and sex education. Often, there are deficits in teacher training, leaving them to rely on their own, limited, and often clinical, backgrounds–frameworks that reduce sex education to sterile biological mechanics and risk prevention rather than addressing the complex social and emotional dimensions of identity. As Jayne et al. (2024) argue, without more sex education for themselves, teachers may also not have learned that it is healthy to know what gives them pleasure and how to ask for it, or where to find more information (Burkholder & Keehn, 2024). This lack of self-knowledge extends to how teachers navigate their own identities and gender expressions. When educators are denied a holistic understanding of these intersecting domains, they are less equipped to model the autonomy and self-advocacy for their students to thrive. (Jayne et al., 2024).

Displays of resistance or discomfort may be a sign that teachers need better sexuality and gender education within their training (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). Kehly (2002) points out that educators' own sexual education histories significantly impact their teaching methods, with personal experiences shaping their empathetic approaches toward students' emotional challenges. Even when the political rhetoric is less heated, teachers may be uncomfortable teaching sex education or supporting students in getting information or asking questions about their relationships or identities in other subject areas (Kedley, 2015). Pre-service teachers, even within the field of

health, have low confidence especially teaching sex education to students with special needs and LGBTQIA+ students (Kitchen & Bellini, 2012). Their reticence may reflect suspicions that their knowledge is insufficient to lead discussions about and with students who are queer and trans or who have disabilities (Coulter et al., 2021). Additionally, there are inconsistencies throughout sex education courses or programs that create gaps in teachers' knowledge (O'Brien et al., 2021).

As for in-service teachers, Whitney et al. (2021) reveal that many teachers, even after attending a workshop training, were reluctant to commit to ensuring an inclusive classroom for LGBTQIA+ students. Resistance towards LGBTQIA+ topics is sometimes related to personal or cultural beliefs that espouse negative views of sexual and gender minorities, further diminishing the effectiveness of learning opportunities for teachers (Payne & Smith, 2010), as can a failure to create a safe, open environment for discussion (Bialystok et al., 2020, Britzman & Gilbert, 2004). Referencing common tropes like childhood innocence (Boas, 2012) and framing trans access to bathrooms as in conflict with cisgender student or adult access to the bathroom (Atwood et al., 2023) is one way that teachers misunderstand power and frame equity issues as threatening (Cooter et al., 2025). Comments like "Explain why it's okay to supersede cis rights to a gender specific bathroom" and "Shame on you convincing children who are vulnerable" are some of the resistance voiced by teachers that strongly disagree with integrating LGBTQIA+ topics in sex education curricula (Whitney et al., 2021). Effective sexual and gender identity education is essential for equipping teachers not only with skills, knowledge, and resources, but also empathy and compassion to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for their students (Fields, 2008).

How to Build a Subversive Curriculum

The spark that led to our work together was a course in an advanced graduate program in Educational Studies. Janet, a graduate student, completed a critique of the curriculum in health education and proposed additional content that would contribute to more justice for more students. Her project intersected with Darla's interest in creating more just school environments for queer and trans youth by including their identities in curriculum, policies, and school and teacher practices. Darla knew from her previous research that although there are many ways that schools signal to queer and trans youth that they are not welcome or celebrated within schools, key pieces missing for many queer and trans youth are health education (Linville, 2011) and a social and institutional acknowledgement of their identities (Linville, 2017). These elements make young people feel more welcomed and understood within schools. Janet's professional experience as a health educator and advocate for comprehensive sexuality education curriculum in her district expanded our understanding of the needs of students and the discomfort felt by some teachers and administrators.

At the time when Darla and Janet met, the graduate educational studies program at the university needed new elective courses. The curriculum of the program is grounded in culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), and as such attracts teachers who are interested in applying a critical lens to their practices and building out their capacities to make their teaching more inclusive. Many students in this program find joy in acquiring pedagogical skills to make their practices more inclusive and responsive to students.

In this setting, we (Darla and Janet) decided to work together to build an elective called *Sex Ed for Teachers*. Although we sometimes think that this work is harder to do in the south, with a socially conservative majority in many areas of the state, the conservatism coexists with concern about teen pregnancy (see the work of Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power & Potential,

gcapp.org/comprehensive-sex-ed), a wish to ensure safety in schools (Shelton, 2022), and the desire to treat our students with fairness and dignity. In fact, it is probably not harder to do this work here than elsewhere in the US (and other similar nations), but just somewhat inflected by the local concerns and political discourse. We will discuss the ways that we created this course to be responsive to Georgia educators' needs. We designed our course around three broad areas: teacher beliefs about and comfort with sex education, curriculum and pedagogy in sex education, and advocacy and policy concerning sex education.

What do Teachers Know and Believe about Sex Education

Our first conversations consisted of brainstorming what teachers need to know. We collected information to support our explorations: quotes from discussion boards of courses and professional developments Darla had taught, and hallway conversations that Janet has been involved in. Within these discussions, we saw comments such as (almagams), "sexuality should be taught in the home/schools should not get involved," "expectations are different for boys and girls/this is natural/they are different," "how do I know if students are *really* trans," "students in grade X are too young for this conversation," and "our community is too conservative to do this." These comments are not different from the concerns and misinformation circulating in the media to alarm people and make it seem like queer and trans youth are a threat to the community or other students (Horton, 2021; Quinan, 2025), rather than those being threatened. We built the course to address questions about teacher beliefs and teacher comfort about gender and sexual identity and sex education first.

We began searching for educational research literature that helps to address these concerns with teachers, so that they can be more inclusive and welcoming of the youth sexual development that is happening at every age for school age children, so that they could engage critical conversations about gender identities and roles in society, and so they could be introduced to best practice literature that suggested novel ways to help youth develop relationship skills that would lead to more equitable and healthy relationships. These areas of scholarship and skills are applicable across grade and age levels.

As we discussed above when examining the research literature in this area, teachers experience discomfort when it comes to discussing sexuality and gender identity and roles. The discomfort stems from societal perceptions that vary widely among parents and politicians, leading to disagreements about which topics should be included, how they should be taught, and at what age. Consequently, teachers avoid discussing sex education topics for fear of backlash. Some teachers believe they should refrain from bringing up sex, sexuality, and gender because parents are the primary educators in their child's sex education (Zen et al., 2023), and parents have also expressed their disdain for their children learning about LGBTQIA+ topics (Harris et al., 2014). Since the beginning of the COVID era, some parents have become increasingly resistant to sex ed, and there has been a decrease in the amount taught (Mosley, 2025).

Other teachers may want to support students' explorations of their sexuality and gender identities but also think bringing up identity and gender in the classroom may cause disruption to the learning environment (Thein, 2013). They may worry that if sexual and gender identities become part of the curriculum, students may use that opening to bully or harass other students. When it comes to addressing bullying and sexual harassment among students, teachers have limited knowledge and time to address these issues effectively. Students perceive teachers as ignorant and ill-equipped (Earnshaw et al., 2020) and inconsistent (Hillard et al., 2014). Additionally, gaps in

knowledge on violence prevention cause unequal protections for vulnerable groups of LGBTQIA+ students (Adams et al., 2022).

Teachers are burdened with heavy workloads and limited time, and end up prioritizing instruction of materials that are required to prepare students for tests over cultural, gender, or sexuality inclusiveness (Schey, 2022). They also may brush aside addressing conflicts, especially if they feel unprepared to intervene (Meyer & Leonard, 2018). Additionally, schools may lack the necessary resources, such as counseling services or clear policies, to effectively deal with cases of harassment or bullying. Without strong support from school administration or a collaborative environment with other staff, teachers might feel isolated in their efforts to combat these issues (Payne & Smith, 2010).

In our anecdotal and classroom discussions with teachers on issues of sex education, sexuality, and gender identities, we found that teachers wanted to know more, but were not sure how to find accurate and authoritative information, felt that their knowledge was outdated, and were insecure about using correct vocabulary. Many also felt embarrassed or distracted by discussions of sexuality, and assumed that students were unaware of or not ready for conversations about sex, sexuality, or gender. We hope that these readings covering research on teachers and the variety of ways that they understand the need for and their ability to teach sexuality education opens a door for discussions that can critically evaluate our students' own perspectives, and prime them to think about different kinds of engagement of sexuality and gender topics in their classrooms.

The Curriculum and How it should be Taught

In modules three and four of the course students examine the curriculum and pedagogy of sex education in the literature. In the readings for these modules, students encounter readings from public health, education, psychology, and medicine examining what young people should know about sexuality and gender at what age, and how they can best learn about it. In this section students will begin to question what sexuality and gender discourses are, and what they do; that is, how they order and regulate relationships, families, and society. We open this section with a proposal that the economic goals of reducing teen pregnancy by regulating reproductive desire to conform with middle class values is perhaps not in line with all communities' wishes for their children, and in fact may draw on tropes of population control and similar injustices that groups have experienced (Barcelos, 2020; Boas, 2012). Questioning the taken-for-granted goals of sex education can change the discourse among teachers about what sex education is for and who should engage conversations about identity with youth.

We are interested in starting the conversation about what should be taught about sex and gender by following Erica Boas's lead in imagining what is taught in schools, officially or unofficially, as a curriculum of middle-class appropriateness, an exertion of power into the lives of the families of K-12 students. Boas imagines the curriculum of sexuality and gender, not just in sexuality education courses but in all public and private interactions, as a place where we can see the teacher as training the whole family in appropriate gender roles and sexual behavior. Teachers are "agents of the state, [so] they must embody the type of citizen that the state desires (Boas, 2012, p. 135). In elementary schools, teachers teach children the "appropriate" gender and sexuality behaviors, such as binary gender roles and where and when a child can touch another child, but these lessons also become socializing conversations with parents and families, when teachers have to reach out to discuss children's behaviors with guardians. Gilbert (2017) and Fields (2008) also see sex education for teens in similar terms, and ask about teaching young people about negotiating

consensual sexual relationships within coercive and unequal power relationships, for example, when youth are viewed as unable to make decisions for themselves and in need of controlling. Blaise (2009) shows that adults use the excuse of protecting childhood innocence to treat kids as if they have no agency. This excuse justifies adults policing and controlling children's identities because they assume children are too young to know who they are. Examining the curriculum of sexuality and gender, allows our in-service teacher students to question teachers' roles in asserting and disseminating this curriculum to shape the acquisition of dominant values.

Literature classrooms and teachers can similarly engage inclusion practices in which representation of LGBTQ+ lives is assumed to create more acceptance, and also employ pedagogical practices that "(dis)orient" (Schey, 2022) their students, queering the classroom. Pedagogical moves that center intersectionality and the construction of identities as well as focusing students on utilizing intersectional epistemological frames to critique representations of structures of domination in fiction or nonfiction readings could be seen as "literary (dis)orientations" (Schey, 2022). Kedley (2015) queers the "heteronorm" of teacher identity, the teacher presentation fitting easily into binaries of hetero/homo, man/woman, by noting where students presume a normative identity or connections between sex, gender, and sexuality, and disrupting or questioning their assumptions. The teacher's body and presence become a queer text in the classroom.

Further, in this module on curriculum, we ask our students who are teachers to think about what it would look like to teach about sex, sexuality, and gender as pleasurable rather than just risky or dangerous (Bialystok et al., 2020). Pleasures such as children enjoying feeling sexy by mimicking pop stars or other celebrities are often viewed as precocious and discomfiting to adults, and the children can be viewed as needing rescue if appearing too adult (Walkerdine, 1998). But adolescents, as well, are "at-risk" if they express joy in their gendered and sexual presentations, if they are too obsessed with sexual or dating conquests, if they are "boy-crazy," or if they present in a way that does not conform with their perceived gender (Pascoe, 2008, 2023). It has long been asserted that the pleasure discourse is absent from sex education (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1994; Fine & McClelland, 2006), and some teachers still believe that pleasure is too risky to take up in the classroom. This module asks teachers to grapple with pleasure as a key component of sexual rights and health (Allen, 2024; Balter et al., 2018), and to view student learning in this area as necessary for their sexual decision-making and identity development (Kantor & Lindberg, 2020; Fraser et al., 2021). Some of the models discussed include the fantastical presentation of sex education in the Netflix series *Sex Education*, which presents pleasure for teens in many relationship configurations and identities as it contends that sexuality is normal in the lives of teens (Allen, 2024).

The course also explores the community desires for sex education for youth through a participatory research project aimed at understanding what communities of color desire for young people (Caruso et al., 2023). Readings introduce the idea that sex education sometimes contains damaging stereotypes of communities, and that youth may resist the messages if they feel already labeled by the content of sex educational materials (Barcelos, 2020), or like their identities are ignored (Mulholland, Sandjakdar & Opie, 2024). These materials ask the students in our course to examine questions about educator professionalism in responding to student information needs and how to best differentiate instruction in classes like sex education to attend to youth intersectional identities (Gougeon, 2009; Crehan, et al., 2023). Youth need information that allows them to navigate social pressure, desires, and media messages, and make critical decisions that honor their own present wishes as well as their hopes for the future (Guyon, et al., 2023). They may also need information about how to choose to become a parent and how to navigate systems of support that they are entitled to if they do. They may also need information about gender and sexual identities

and how to safely explore what the right way to be is for themselves (Jayne et al., 2024). The curriculum section of our sex education course for teachers asks teachers to imagine the possibilities for meeting these needs (Albert; 2022; Fraser et al., 2021; Schey, 2022).

Policies Governing Sex Education and how to Advocate within our Communities

Sex education in the United States is primarily governed at the state and local levels. In this section of the course students learn about the various ways that states approach sex education. Many states do not mandate comprehensive sex education, leading to significant differences between what is taught in different areas. SIECUS (2025) reports that in some states, education may focus solely on abstinence, while others may provide a broader understanding of sexual health, consent, and relationships (https://siecus.org/siecus-state-profiles/). Individual school districts have the discretion to develop and implement sex education curricula based on state guidelines. This means that even within the same state, schools may adopt different approaches to sex education. Students in the course may learn while investigating their own setting that some counties in Georgia are learning a new curriculum called FLASH while other counties keep teaching a curriculum that has been taught since the 1990s named Choosing the Best (Corely, 2022). Sex education is often understood as a topic under local control, therefore, cultural, religious, and political beliefs heavily influence the content and delivery of sex education, which may result in leaving out essential topics such as LGBTQIA+ issues, contraception, and consent.

In-service teacher students in this course will follow bills through the legislative session, such as Georgia Senate Bills 501 and 379, which aim to bring religious elements into public schools and Senate Bill 394, a bill proposing to establish strict criteria for identifying materials that censor LGBTQIA+ literature (Williams, 2024). Even potential bills to be passed, like Senate Bill 532, intend to prohibit sex education below 5th grade and shift opt-out policies into an opt-in model (Williams, 2024).

The section also addresses the federal government's role in sex education. At the federal level, there is no national standard for sex education; however, it can influence states through funding. Between 1998 and 2016, conservative states received $692 million in federal abstinence funding (Fox et al., 2019). Fox and colleagues (2019) suggest that abstinence-only funding may be associated with increased adolescent birth rates. In contrast, one study found that funding spent on comprehensive sex education programs reduced teen birth rates by 3% across multiple regions of counties in the United States (Mark & Wu, 2022). It is necessary to consider how federal funding is spent on sex education to produce positive health outcomes, as well as how positive health outcomes are defined. Students will critique the curriculum of these programs and legislation for what they contain and what they do not contain, as many lack an attention to consent or sexual assault (Guyon, et al., 2023).

Local communities, parents, and advocacy groups have an impact on shaping sex education. They may advocate for certain types of curricula or push for changes to existing programs based on community values and needs. As mentioned above, one of the largest and most diverse counties in Georgia adopted a new K-12 health education curriculum but felt pressured by conservative backlash from the community to exclude its sexual health component, which includes topics beyond abstinence like gender, anatomy, reproduction, and sexuality (Reyes, 2023). Fear of stepping beyond a traditional sex education curriculum that emphasizes abstinence-only until marriage is not unusual in southern states. In another example, beginning in 1994, the State Board of Education in Texas deemed sex education repulsive and out-of-line with student learning (Wilson

et al., 2012). Texas continues to implement sex education with inaccurate information, shame-based instructional strategies, and harmful depictions of the LGBTQIA+ community (Wilson et al., 2012). However, the voices of young people, parents, and practitioners that support comprehensive and inclusive sex education collectively bolster advocacy efforts for equity and social justice in sexual health education (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017). Community voices are integral to challenging antiquated notions of gender and sexuality that may still permeate educational policies.

In Georgia, students have spoken out about a lack of comprehensive sex education. Students from Monroe County Public Schools have expressed their concerns about the Choosing the Best curriculum because it is, "'...closed-minded of gender stereotypes and things that we don't think are accurate or fact-based'" (Corely, 2022). Students across the state are speaking out and are hopeful about Gwinnett County Public School replacing Choosing the Best with HealthSmart, "'With condoms, for example, we talked about the times they don't work…If you tell someone information in a way where you focus on the negative, they'll probably stick to the negative'" (Reyes, 2023). Since the 1990s, students in conservative districts and states have been advocating for comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education (Irvine, 2002).

Leveraging relationships with supportive legislators is another crucial component of advocacy. Williams (2017) highlights that data collected through the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) is invaluable for shaping future legislation. In one case study, the Louisiana Adolescent Reproductive Health Coalition (LARHC) used YRBS data that emphasized the correlation between quality sex education and health outcomes and successfully influenced discussions around sex education policy and received testimonies in support from various legislators-even those from the opposing party. In Georgia, the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Power & Potential (GCAPP), a nonprofit organization focused on promoting the sexual health and well-being of youth in Georgia, has been part of various initiatives, including comprehensive sex education and advocacy for youth rights, successfully helping schools like those in Fulton County adopt new comprehensive sex education materials and training at no cost (Corely, 2022). Georgia Equality, the largest statewide LGBTQIA+ rights advocacy group in Georgia since 1995, engages in various forms of advocacy including political action, education, and mobilization to achieve passing pro-equality legislation and electing fair-minded officials to support queer and allied groups. One notable achievement the advocacy group and its partners achieved was passing an updated anti-bullying law that now "...accurately defines the scope and impact of bullying, requires local school systems to work with faculty, parents, and students to adopt and enforce anti-bullying policies, and makes it easier for students and necessary for school employees to report information about bullying" (Georgia Safe For Schools Coalition, 2025). Becoming familiar with advocacy groups in our state and how they work with the legislature, as well as resources they offer to teachers and schools, is an important part of the learning in this course.

Educators and students also have a voice through various advocacy groups. The Georgia Safe For Schools Coalition is a collaborative effort aimed at promoting safe, inclusive, and supportive educational environments for all students in Georgia, particularly focusing on the needs of the LGBTQIA+ youth. The coalition often involves a network of educators, parents, and community organizations, and advocates who work together to address issues such as bullying, discrimination, and inadequate access to comprehensive sex education. Currently, they are working towards ensuring enumerated categories are included in the recent anti-bullying law that Georgia Equality helped to pass in Georgia Legislation (Georgia Safe For Schools Coalition, 2025). This is significant to mention because research shows that queer youth in states with enumerated laws

identify their schools as more affirming and are less likely to attempt suicide (Krantz et al., 2024). Another important feature the coalition demonstrates is its support and resources for creating Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) clubs in schools. These clubs provide a safe space for LGBTQIA+ students and allies and allow students the opportunity to engage in advocacy work to promote positive change for their community. The 2021 GSA Study Report (Truong et al., 2021) reports that GSA clubs increase greater feelings of belonging and self-esteem and lower rates of depression among queer students.

Discussion and Conclusions

This course is important now more than ever as political discourse in the United States is trending in what Sherman calls sexual conservatism (Mosely, 2025). This conservatism prevents access to sex education and is a disservice to students. By sidelining discussions on gender and sexuality, students are denied the opportunity to explore and understand themselves and the diverse world around them, escalating misunderstanding and hostility. Recently, the United States Supreme Court determined it unlawful for a Maryland school to deny parents the option to opt their children out of classes involving LGBTQIA+ themed lessons, claiming that the school was in violation of the First Amendment and imposed on the family's right to express their religious freedom. This case has the potential to influence other schools around the country to enable parents to opt their children out of not only sex education courses but rather any lesson being taught at school that includes LGBTQIA+ identities and themes or other topics that could be seen as contradicting religious teachings.

Some might argue that parents have the right to exercise their caretaker responsibilities (Gresle-Favier, 2013) because parents are the primary authorities that know what is best for their children and want to preserve their familial traditions with their children; however, this approach is childist in that it discriminates children by taking away their rights of autonomy and voice in their own decision-making (Ansell 2005, as cited in Gresle-Favier, 2013). Peer relationships are significant when it comes to sex and gender education and preventing access to information that includes diverse experiences and identities has negative consequences on how students engage with other people. Jayne et al. (2024) recount the feelings of a queer student, "If all your peers learn that information…then perhaps transphobia and homophobia would have gone down at least a little bit. At least they would have at some point heard about what it's like to be gay or trans, and that would have been enormously helpful" (p.163). Learning about those who are different from us, and encountering new ideas, are often viewed as ways to address hatred and violence (Kosciw et al., 2020). Sexual harassment and bullying has been a problem for LGBTQIA+ students (Centers for Disease Control, 2023). In 2023, the CDC's YRBS Data Summary and Trends Report revealed that 30% of LGBTQIA+ high school students in the United States experience bullying, with 20% missing school due to safety concerns. Nex Benedict, a student who identified as non-binary, was brutally beaten in the bathroom at school and later passed away from injury complications. Nex was not only a victim of bullying but also a result of a school that failed to address the problem appropriately. Nex is one of 52% of LGBTQIA+ youth who are bullied, and who are three times more likely to commit suicide (The Trevor Project, 2021).

Sex and gender education can help prevent or reduce sexual harassment and bullying. Proulx et al. (2020) reveal that students receiving LGBTQIA+ inclusive sex education curricula have lower odds of bullying and poor mental health outcomes for these vulnerable student groups. Students who further understand concepts of consent, healthy relationships, and mutual respect are

more likely to recognize and reject inappropriate behaviors, both as victims and bystanders. Gender stereotypes and norms are challenged, which fosters an environment of inclusivity and acceptance, reducing the stigma faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, a root cause of bullying.

We imagine the Sex Ed For Teachers course as a class for any teacher, to equip them with knowledge, strategies, and understanding to better support Georgia's growing diverse population (Maternal and Child Health Bureau, 2022). As previously stated, many teachers feel uncomfortable discussing issues related to sexuality and gender due to a lack of training, support, and overall personal discomfort with these topics. Despite these limitations, a willingness to confront the discomfort is necessary to make an impactful change to better support students.

Our desire is to create a graduate course that can help teachers with the opportunity to explore and expand their current perceptions about sexuality and gender while also engaging in an open dialogue with peers. Janet recalls collaborating with a classmate for a book club project in one of Dr. Darla's courses, where they chose to analyze the text *Tomboys and Other Gender Heroes* and propose useful implications for practice to better protect LGBTQIA+ students across school communities. Her colleague, a K-5 Arts teacher, and Janet, a K-5 Health teacher, found the experience extremely empowering and special, and it helped them understand how they could support all of the students in their positions. Oswalt et al (2015) support that a participant, regardless of their discipline background, that takes a human sexuality course results in being more accepting of diverse sexual behaviors and identities. The Sex Ed For Teachers course provides many other avenues for exploring, including this important way of students learning about themselves and interacting with others, to enrich the education system.

Our goal is that teachers who take the course will walk away feeling empowered to cultivate the joy that sexuality and gender can bring into their classrooms. Collaborative art-making, an example of one of the course's activities, allows teachers to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to learning about and teaching sexuality, pleasure, desire, and queer joy (Burkholder & Keehn, 2024). A book club, a format in which part of the course utilizes, is also known to be a vital space for educators to discuss LGBTQIA+ inclusive literature, allowing them to articulate concerns about resistance while considering how these texts can serve as backup resources in their teaching (Wargo et al., 2024). These learning experiences are reflective processes that help teachers and researchers explore tangible solutions and criticisms that may often go unnoticed in traditional sexuality education practices.

Many institutional practices inadvertently stifle queer joy, often as a result of allowing discomfort to escalate into fear and hatred. When individuals encounter what they do not understand or cannot control, their instinct may be to look away or react defensively. Recognizing this cycle presents a valuable opportunity to transform discomfort into a force for positive change within school communities. Discomfort can emerge when people face their own biases, but instead of letting it create a cultural divide, it can be viewed as a prompt for self-reflection. This encourages individuals to explore the roots of their beliefs and to take responsibility for how their actions may impact others. While discomfort can be a challenging emotion to navigate, it is an essential step toward creating more inclusive and empathetic classroom environments. By embracing these feelings and channeling them into constructive actions, educators and schools can foster a more supportive atmosphere for all students, ultimately enhancing the sense of belonging and joy for everyone involved.

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