

### **Nobody's Talking: Transgender and Intersex Topics in Sex Education**

Formal sex education in the United States is often surrounded by controversy — some people want schools to teach mostly sexual abstinence; others want schools to focus on healthy relationships or contraceptive methods. Some feel that sex education should be mandatory for all students, while others feel that parents have the right to remove their children from any curriculum that doesn't correspond with their personal beliefs. This controversy is fueled by a lack of federal regulation and widely varying state regulation, as well as recent changes in federally endorsed programs and federal funding towards sex education curricula (Guttmacher Institute 2013; Boonstra 2010; Dailard 2006).

An aspect of formal sex education that is much less frequently addressed is the inclusion of information on gender identity and expression, particularly information on the needs, health concerns, and social issues of transgender and intersex individuals. There is a distinct lack of focus on these topics in sex education curricula, regulation, and research. The consequences of these omissions are obvious and significant; transgender and intersex students are not being given sufficient access to knowledge of their bodies and health risks, nor are they being provided with sex education that promotes their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

In this paper, I will provide critical analysis of the discussion of gender identity in formal sex education and sex education research in the United States through the following subtopics: historical context practices in sex education and research, comparison of current practices to historical ones, and examination of a selection of current curricular guidelines from different organizations and parts of the United States. Finally, I will provide examples of sex education research, materials, and guidelines that

succeed in addressing the needs and circumstances of transgender or intersex students. The intent of this research is not to provide an exhaustive review of the research and curricula currently being produced in the United States; that is outside the scope of this project. I intend instead to provide evidence that many programs and academic works fall short in these areas and to give suggestions as to how improvement can be made in these areas.

### **Historical Literature**

When examining literature on sex education, it can be difficult to tell where to draw the line between historical and contemporary literature. For the purposes of this paper, I am designating any literature published more than 20 years ago (that is, prior to 1993) as historical and all literature from the past 20 years as contemporary or recent. In the nearly 30 year span that the literature I reviewed covers, there is very little discussion of gender deviance or non-conformity and no acknowledgement of intersex conditions. The lack of attention given to intersexuality is not surprising considering public acknowledgement of and advocacy for intersex individuals is a very recent and still developing phenomenon (Fausto-Sterling 2000:81).

Interestingly, discussion of any issues related to gender identity was primarily found in three of the four oldest articles reviewed. Kirkendall and Hamilton briefly note that psychological and social aspects of sex, including sex roles, are increasingly viewed as an important part of sex education (1954:143), while Kirkendall and Miles address the role of sex education in youth acceptance of and comfort with socially appropriate sex roles (1968:530-3). Baker and Darcy, in surveying teachers on what topics they included

in sex education, list the topics “masculine-feminine differences” and “psychological differences in male-female sexuality” (1970:231). One more recent article, a review of excellent non-school sex education programs, states that most of the programs examined cover sex roles (Scales and Kirby 1981:240).

The way that male-female differences and sex roles are discussed in these articles provides a glimpse into the way these topics were viewed during that time period. The use of the term “sex roles” seems to correspond somewhat with the contemporary term “gender roles,” though the use of the word “sex” instead of “gender” shows that social roles were seen as being tied to biology. The way sex differences and sex roles are discussed by Kirkendall and Miles (1968) and Baker and Darcy (1970) also suggests that it was seen as important in this era for adolescents to develop normative sex characteristics that correspond with their biological sex. Kirkendall and Miles in particular tie abnormal sex role development to deviant sexual behavior. Sex roles are also mentioned in connection with preparation for marriage (Baker and Darcy 1970; Scales and Kirby 1981); traditional sex roles in this context are viewed as essential to a successful marriage.

Several other articles make no mention of gender identity or gender/sex roles at all. Dawson (1986), Marsiglio and Mott (1986), and Weichmann and Ellis (1969) all research the impact of sex education on adolescent sexual activity and behavior without any mention of gender identity or gender roles. While it is certainly better for transgender, intersex, or other gender-nonconforming students to be taught that they are not deviant or perverted, not acknowledging gender identity or expression at all produces only slight improvements. When such discussion is absent, education and conversations

about sex and dating can easily be confusing, alienating, or embarrassing for students who don't fit into a typical female-feminine/male-masculine dichotomy of sex and gender. When this erasure occurs in research on sex education programs and their effects, the result is a complete lack of data on transgender or intersex adolescents' needs, concerns, and behavior. This is particularly true when other aspects of sex education programs and research implicitly reinforce heterosexual and cissexual norms.

Nearly every piece of historical literature reviewed discussed adolescent sexual behavior primarily within the context of premarital sexual activity (Baker and Darcy 1970; Dawson 1986; Kirkendall and Hamilton 1954; Kirkendall and Miles 1968; Marsiglio and Mott 1986; Weichmann and Ellis 1969). While this may not seem significant, defining all sexual activity outside of marriage as premarital implies that students are expected to eventually marry. Since marriage has, until recently, only been legal between a man and a woman, this kind of language erases many relationships that aren't cissexual and heterosexual. Transgender and intersex individuals may find their gender or sex legally contested, barring them from marriage and necessarily excluding them from any discussion of pre- or postmarital sexual activity. Compounding the issues with framing all sex as pre- or post-marital is the framing of all sex as involving a penis and a vagina. Some articles reviewed don't even bother defining sexual intercourse or coitus, and the heterosexual and cissexual nature of these acts is merely assumed (Dawson 1986; Marsiglio and Mott 1986; Weichmann and Ellis 1969).

It is clear from this brief examination of historical literature that transgender and intersex individuals and their experiences have traditionally been ignored, dismissed, or shamed in sex education and the research surrounding it. As I have demonstrated, sex

education has a history of assuming that all students are cissexual and heterosexual (in the rare case that this is not assumed, such students are viewed as deviant or perverted). Have improvements been made since the 1980s? Have certain areas improved more than others? In my next section, I will review a selection of research and writing on sex education programs and regulation and compare the trends I observe to the trends discussed in this section to answer these questions.

### **Contemporary Literature and Policies**

At the federal level, the last 20 years have been marked by significant changes in policy and funding. In 1996, the Clinton Administration approved a new plan that allocated \$50 million each year for sex education programs whose “exclusive purpose” was to encourage abstinence until marriage (Boonstra 2010:2; Dailard 2006:12; Duberstein, Santelli, and Singh 2006:182). While this decision, as well as the Bush Administration’s doubling down on policy that promoted an abstinence-until-marriage focus in sex education, has drawn increasing amounts of criticism and been the subject of important and highly publicized research, most of the controversy and discussion has focused on abstinence-only programs’ effectiveness in reducing rates of teen pregnancy and, to a lesser extent, STIs (Boonstra 2012; Dailard 2006). However, placing such a heavy emphasis on abstinence until marriage has psychosocial consequences as well as physiological ones. As addressed in my review of historical literature, teaching that marriage and reproduction is the natural context in which sex occurs alienates transgender and intersex students who may not be able to get married or reproduce. Programs centered around enforcing abstinence until marriage have also been known to

rely on traditional gender roles to deliver their message, which will only further upset or confuse students whose gender identity doesn't follow traditional norms (Rose 2005:1209).

In 2010, the Obama administration turned away from the abstinence-until-marriage approach to sex education funding, instead directing federal funds towards programs deemed medically accurate and research-based, though questions still remain as to how these requirements will be implemented and defined (Boonstra 2010:2-4). While this new policy is undoubtedly an improvement over the last two, it is not yet clear whether it will lead to major improvements in the way sex education addresses the needs and concerns of transgender and intersex students. It does not challenge the U.S. paradigm of viewing sex education as primarily about teen pregnancy prevention (Boonstra 2010:6), meaning issues pertaining to sex and relationships wherein one partner has a fully functioning male reproductive system and the other a fully functioning female reproductive system. The question remains whether such a focus will remain the primary focus of many sex education programs. This can alienate intersex and transgender(?) students, for whom pregnancy may be difficult or impossible. It also means that psychosocial issues like gender identity, roles, and expression may not be a priority in many programs, which may leave transgender and intersex students without a context or framework for understanding their own identity and feelings. On the positive side, the current administration's funding of effective, research-based, medically accurate programs could mean better information on and for transgender and intersex students.

Of course, for that to occur, there must be a substantial amount of research and medical information available on the effectiveness of sex education programs for

transgender and intersex individuals. Currently this is an area where research and academic literature are still sorely lacking. Articles that otherwise outline compelling arguments against these policies and the type of curriculum they encourage don't contain any discussion of the ways that this policy ignores and harms transgender and intersex youth (Boonstra 2010; Dailard 2006; Duberstein, Santelli, and Singh 2006). For example, Duberstein, Santelli, and Singh simply define comprehensive sex education as providing balanced coverage of both abstinence and birth control (2006:182), rather than covering a range of sex-related issues including gender identity.

Rose is one exception to this rule — she does analyze the ways in which sex education programs in the United States perpetuate traditional gender roles, and she acknowledges, albeit briefly, the way that a marriage-focused approach alienates transgender students (2005:1209,1214-8). Acknowledging the problems with the way that ideas on gender are currently taught in sex education programs is one important part of making sex education better for transgender and intersex students. Another author that demonstrates awareness of the ways that gender roles can affect sex education is Lever (1995), who discusses how gender studies can improve education on condom use. However, Lever still falls short of a truly inclusive analysis; her article explores gender studies and condom education only within the context of cissexual, heterosexual sex.

An exclusive focus on heterosexual and cissexual sex still plagues research on adolescent sexual behavior. Much like the articles I reviewed above, dating from the 1960s to the 1980s, articles published in the last 20 years, which also investigate connections between sex education and sexual behavior, tend to define sexual activity only as penile-vaginal intercourse (Duberstein, Santelli, and Singh 2006; Lever 1995;

Sabia 2006). If researchers only examine rates of penile-vaginal intercourse among adolescents, the experiences of any adolescents who participate in sex with someone who has their same genitals or ambiguous genitalia get erased, and it becomes nearly impossible to determine how sex education may affect their behavior. Dailard does acknowledge some of the problems with focusing only on penile-vaginal intercourse in research and policy, yet in her discussion of why adolescents may engage in oral sex but not penile-vaginal sex, she fails to even mention the fact that some adolescent couples are not physically equipped to have penile-vaginal intercourse (2006:14) If educators were to go by her analysis, they would be left thinking that the only couples engaging in oral sex and not penile-vaginal sex were heterosexual, cissexual couples making a conscious choice to engage in the former and not the latter.

Clearly, there is still a need for vast improvements to be made in the realm of research and national policy when it comes to the topics of gender identity and expression, gender roles, and the concerns of transgender and intersex students. In the next section, I will go further in depth in exploring how various state guidelines and programs, including sex education materials and guidelines from different organizations, fail to address the needs of these students.

### **Analysis of Current Curricula and Guidelines**

Because the scale of this paper does not allow for an exhaustive analysis of state and other organizations' sex education guidelines, I will begin this section by giving an overview of differences between various state regulations, after which I will discuss information on sex education from four states' education department websites. The states



I selected for the more in-depth analysis are Minnesota, California, Texas, and New York; I picked these to represent different regions of the United States. Because California's website included links to other resources, I also examined some of those outside educational resources.

State legislation on sex education in public schools is, in a word, patchy. Only 12 states require that information presented in sex/HIV education be medically accurate, and only two prohibit such programs from promoting religion. Among states that have requirements on sex education, 19 require instruction on the importance of abstinence until marriage, whereas only 12 require discussion of sexual orientation — only nine of which require inclusive information on sexual orientation (Guttmacher Institute 2013). While legislators in many states have attempted to pass legislation requiring sex education to be comprehensive and medically accurate, these efforts have had mixed success, meeting failure in states such as Arizona, Kentucky, Missouri, and Nevada (National Conference of State Legislatures 2013).

On the Minnesota Department of Education website, there is a guide for evaluating a sex education curriculum. The guidelines for a good curriculum display some aspects that are promising in their potential for meeting transgender and intersex students' needs, while other aspects are not so promising. There is a heavy emphasis on assessing and meeting the unique needs of one's students (Minnesota Department of Education 2011:2-3), which provides a good framework for encouraging educators to include information beyond abstinence until marriage or pregnancy prevention. The guidelines also discuss risk reduction and other topics in gender-neutral language

(Minnesota Department of Education 2011), though this does not necessarily mean that all Minnesota sex education programs will present the information in such a manner.

There is also the requirement, according to the guidelines, that all programs help students remain abstinent until marriage, which at the time of the guidelines' publication was a right in Minnesota that only extended to male-female couples. Furthermore, while attention is given to issues of sexual orientation, there is no discussion of gender identity, gender roles, or transgender and intersex concerns (Minnesota Department of Education 2011). While Minnesota's guidelines have certain areas of promise, they are also lacking in several important areas.

Texas' Education Agency has a similar set of guidelines for high school health courses, which include sex education. These guidelines also contain no requirements or suggestions to include information on gender identity, transgender, or intersex topics. They also display a heavy focus on abstinence until marriage, noting that it is the preferred and most emotionally healthy option (Texas Administrative Code 1998). Similarly, on Texas's Department of State Health Services website, there is information on an abstinence-centered sex education program, which seems to focus primarily on delaying sexual activity until marriage at the exclusion of other sexual health topics that would be of interest to intersex and transgender youth (Texas Department of State Health Services 2013).

Similar guidelines can also be found on New York's State Department website, outlining state health education standards. On the positive side, these guidelines emphasize personal and emotional development, which can be a good set-up for discussions about gender identity. However, like Minnesota and Texas' guidelines, the

websites contain no explicit instruction on gender identity and expression, navigating gender roles, or on transgender or intersex concerns (The University of the State of New York 2005).

Of each of the states I examined, California seems the most promising. The Department of Education website contains information on California law stating that any school district offering comprehensive sex education must include information that is bias free and appropriate for students of all genders. It also requires that comprehensive sex education encourages development of healthy attitudes concerning gender roles, and prohibits abstinence-only sex education in public schools. (California Department of Education 2013). The website also offers a list of sex education resources, which I will analyze in lieu of curriculum guidelines because the website did not offer free access to them. The website does link to Positive Prevention, a site describing a curriculum developed for California schools. There was little specific information, but the site states that it offers information, suggested adaptations, and resources for transgender youth (American Red Cross 2013).

One online resource listed by California's Department of Education website is *I Wanna Know*, a website which aims to promote sexual health by offering education and resources for adolescents, parents, and educators (American Sexual Health Association, Inc. 2013b). The website has some positive features, such as a section on condom use that does not rely on traditional gender roles to encourage its use (American Sexual Health Association, Inc. 2013a). As demonstrated in Lever (1995), many attempts to increase condom use fail to emphasize female pleasure or paint women as sexual gatekeepers; this website does neither. However, other sections of the website are less promising. In an

article on love and sex, it's noted that sex can happen between a male and female, between two males, or between two females, but there is no acknowledgement of a biological sex that is not male or female, or of sex between transgender individuals (American Sexual Health Association, Inc. 2013d). There is a section of the website entitled "LGBTQ," but the section contains no information pertinent to transgender individuals, and focuses entirely on discussion of gay youth and sexual orientation rather than gender identity (American Sexual Health Association, Inc. 2013c).

Another resource listed on California's page on sex education was the website *Answer*, an organization dedicated to increasing access to sex education and providing resources for educators, teens, and parents. *Answer* is a member of *Future of Sex Education*, an initiative dedicated to developing excellent national standards for sex education in grades K-12 (Answer 2013). I have included an analysis of these standards in my final section because they represent excellent progress in the inclusion of gender identity topics in sex education.

The four states I examined in this section display a range of quality in the ways they address (or don't address) gender identity and expression and transgender and intersex topics in sex education guidelines. Overall, my analysis suggests that major improvements need to be made in many states when it comes to teaching gender identity in sex education, as only California's website mentioned gender roles or identity at all. Even progressive states such as California may not be providing sufficient information on transgender and intersex issues and concerns. In the next section, I will describe positive examples of the inclusion and consideration of transgender and intersex experience to

show specifically how school programs can improve their treatment of these topics, and to provide examples of research that is moving in the right direction.

### **Exceptional Education and Research**

While all the research I examined had faults, Rose (2005) and Lever (1995) stood out as two authors who focus on the role that gender norms can play in sex education, and point out the value in examining and questioning the way sex education may rely on and transmit traditional gender roles in a way that is harmful to students. It would be extremely beneficial for research to take these issues into account when comparing the effectiveness of various sex education programs. These authors show that the way that content is presented can be just as important as the content itself.

The National Sexuality Education Standards, developed by the Future of Sex Education Initiative, are an excellent set of guidelines for the presentation of information on gender identity, expression, and roles. The guidelines state that students should be discussing and receiving information on gender identity and expression beginning in grades six through eight, and that by grade 12, students should be able to distinguish between the concepts of biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. This includes education on the ways that the media influences ideas about gender, how to find a trusted adult with whom to discuss these topics, and ways to become an advocate for equality and respect of various groups of people (Future of Sex Education Initiative 2011:14-26). Having this concrete set of guidelines available to educators is a huge step in the right direction.

Unfortunately, the National Sexuality Education Standards do not handle intersex topics and concerns well. The only piece of information on intersex individuals is in the guidelines' glossary under "Biological Sex," and the description of intersex is incomplete; it defines intersex as having chromosomes that are neither XY nor XX. (Future of Sex Education Initiative 2011:39). This omission, committed by an organization devoted to progressive, detailed, and inclusive sex education, demonstrates just how little is likely being taught in schools on intersex topics.

Another example of excellent coverage of transgender and intersex topics in sex education is *Scarleteen*, a website dedicated to providing comprehensive and inclusive information on sexuality for people in their teens and twenties (Corinna 2013). While *Scarleteen* is not an example of formal sex education, I've included it due to its achievement in covering these topics and the lack of formal educational resources of comparable quality. Entering the term "intersex" into the search bar on *Scarleteen*'s main page yields dozens of articles, polls, and descriptions of outside content containing the term, as well as many that cover transgender topics. Some mention intersex briefly alongside other identities like male, female, and transgender, while others give in-depth descriptions (Corinna 2005; Corinna 2007; Corinna 2008; Corinna 2013). Two great examples of *Scarleteen* articles that cover intersex topics are an article on puberty and one entitled "Genderpalooza! A Sex and Gender Primer." The puberty article doesn't go in-depth, but gives important information such as the fact that puberty is often different for intersex adolescents, and that puberty is the time during which many people first discover they are intersex (Corinna 2005). "Genderpalooza!" includes more in-depth descriptions of sex and gender, various intersex conditions and issues, and the various

ways that sex and gender can play out and interact (Corinna 2008). The tone of both articles is friendly, inclusive, and reassuring.

Even in articles that don't explicitly cover transgender or intersex topics, *Scarleteen* uses inclusive language. In an article on first intercourse, none of the typical heterosexual and cissexual paradigm is included. Descriptors include "the partner with a penis" or "the insertive partner" (Corinna 2007) rather than "male" or "female." This shows a remarkable attention to detail and nuanced understanding of the ways that sex education can transmit restrictive ideas about sex and gender, and one of the many aspects that sets *Scarleteen* apart from formal sex education programs in its inclusion of intersex and transgender topics, experiences, and concerns.

## **Conclusion**

What is keeping schools all over the United States from providing the same standard of education outlined in the National Sexuality Education Standards, or demonstrated by *Scarleteen*? There are a number of factors involved. First, schools face greater opposition and greater pressure to please a number of different groups than independent organizations do; meaning that even if educators wish to implement a progressive, comprehensive, and inclusive sex education program, they may be impeded by administrators, parents, school boards or trustees, or local laws. Schools are also under pressure to divide up their resources and time during the school day amongst a number of different topics and disciplines, making it harder for motivated educators to cover everything they might want to in a sex education course. Culturally, there is not a lot of awareness or understanding of transgender and intersex issues in the United States.

There are many barriers to improvement in these areas of sex education, but for the sake of transgender and intersex students across the nation, improvements must be made. Failing to do so means perpetuating a status quo in which transgender and intersex students do not feel comfortable in sex education courses, are not as knowledgeable about their bodies as their cissexual peers, and are not given sufficient tools for healthy personal development.



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