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# “I'd rather beg for forgiveness than ask for permission”: Sexuality education teachers' mediated agency and resistance

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Sexuality education teachers view their position as inherently risky.
- Teachers feel a unique sense of responsibility to provide quality sex education.
- Teachers rely on this unique sense of self to justify resistance in the classroom.
- This demonstrates a form of mediated agency on behalf of teachers.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores sexuality education teachers' identities and examines the ways in which teachers' experiences mediate their agency and resistance in classrooms. Using grounded theory methodology, the study explores the identities and experiences of school-based sexuality education teachers throughout the United States. Findings suggest that the teachers rely on a unique sense of identity in order to justify challenging the regulatory and policy limitations to their curricula. The study illustrates how agency is mediated by individual social location and experience.

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## 1. Introduction

This study explores sexuality education teachers and examines the ways in which teachers' experiences and identities mediate their agency and resistance in classrooms. This study has two main aims: First, to explore the conceptualizations that school-based sexuality education teachers have about their unique place within the school system and the unique risks associated with that location, and second, to examine the ways in which teachers engage in mediated agency to resist regulatory and political discourses surrounding sexuality education.

## 2. Literature review

Sexuality education policy in the United States has a history of being used as political currency (Moran, 2000). While school-based

sexuality education has been a part of many school districts since the 1960's, federal mandates didn't introduce sexuality-education as required until the 1980s, and only then as a response to fears over HIV and rising adolescent pregnancy rates (Hall, Sales, Komro, & Santelli, 2016). Public school districts vary in their offerings from state to state, with some school districts offering comprehensive sexuality education (incorporating lessons on safer sex practices and birth control) and others utilizing abstinence based curricula. Individual school districts and states have wide latitude in the curricula they choose to implement, and thus the U.S. landscape of sexuality education content and pedagogy varies widely based on local, national and regional politics and policies.

While data consistently show that comprehensive sexuality education leads to lower rates of risk behavior amongst teens (Frost, Duberstein Lindberg, & Finer, 2012), the current U.S. administration is promoting a return to abstinence-only education. This policy shift reflects the ongoing political tension in the United States in regards to sociocultural ideologies and policy making and current political leadership's tendency to favor ideology over

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objectivism (Charo, 2017).

Even within comprehensive sexuality education, which incorporates agency, choices, information about birth control and safer sexual practices, studies have shown that neoliberal directives and political policies severely limit the curriculum and often erase the identities, experiences, and needs of marginalized groups (Shannon, 2016).

In the United States, sexuality education is used to sustain and create discourses about the linkages between sexuality and identity (Alldred & David, 2007; Fields, 2008). By using adolescent sexuality to stand in for issues related to national identity (Irvine, 2002), the purity of racial and ethnic groups (Irvine, 2002), the gender roles of men and women, and the heteronormative functioning of American families (Campos, 2002; Luker, 2006), sex education programs teach not only skills and knowledge related to sexual behaviors and risks, but also provide ideological guides to youth about what it means to be a healthy sexual person (Allen, 2004; Bay-Cheng, 2003; Fine, 1988; 2006).

The role of school-based sexuality educators as those who are the official voice of the school regarding sexuality information as well as the one teacher marked as the resource for student's needs regarding sex and sexuality, gives them particular salience in articulating and creating an environment in which young people's sexuality can be addressed.

### 2.1. Sex education teachers

There is a growing amount of scholarship into the ways in which sexuality education teachers consider and conceptualize their role. While much of the research in the last twenty years has focused on the ways in which educators are prepared to teach, or the outcomes their teaching has on sexual risk taking, newer studies are focusing on the ways in which teachers themselves consider their position and conceptualize their pedagogy.

Data show that teachers feel unprepared to provide sexuality education (Klein & Breck, 2010) and often report little to no formal training on the topic (Cohen, Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2004; Walters & Hayes, 2007). In many schools, sexuality education is offered through health classes and research shows that many teachers, regardless of specialization, lack confidence to address issues of sexuality both inside and outside of the classroom (Klein & Breck, 2010). With little preparation and training, teachers are confronted with a politically loaded topic, one that has been historically used to articulate varying political philosophies (Moran, 2000).

According to Walters and Hayes (2007) sexuality education teachers often feel caught between the needs of their students and the regulations that restrict how and what they can say in response to student questions. In a study of elementary teachers' techniques in responding to sexuality related questions, many teachers felt that they could not adequately address issues, and 46% of the teachers sampled reported that they felt pressured from the community, parents, or schools to be particularly cautious about providing answers to sexuality related questions (Landry, Singh & Darroch, 1999). Teachers also report feeling discomfort about the subject of sexuality, and some studies show that teachers resist formal policies and agendas (Fields, 2008).

Research exploring the ways that sexuality education teachers' conceptualize their role demonstrates that teachers often prioritize biological factors and risk over autonomy and pleasure (Abbott, Ellis, & Abbott, 2016; Preston, 2013). Studies also show that teachers' own assumptions about adolescent sexuality and other identities, including race, class, sexual orientation and gender, often shape the ways that they respond to students and curricula (Abbott, Ellis, & Abbott, 2015; Preston, 2016).

#### 2.1.1. Teachers' professional identities and agency

There is very little data on the actual identities of sexuality education teachers. Data on teachers in general show that the development of a professional identity is influenced by many factors, and that a teacher's identity must be examined as multifaceted, made up of several sub-identities that interact with one another depending on the context, the socio-historical place, and the particulars of a given situation (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Bjeijaard et al. also suggest that, in order to study teachers' conceptualizations of their role, one must recognize that professional teacher identity is an ongoing process that implies both person and context as interrelated, and that agency is an important part of the creation of a professional teaching identity.

Agency, defined as the belief that humans have the ability to shape and influence their lives and environments, is used by teachers to influence the way in which any given curriculum is delivered (Lasky, 2005). Wertsch, Tultvst, and Hagstrom (1993) argue for a sociocultural understanding of agency that focuses on how the social context and cultural tools shape the potentials that individuals have for enacting agency. Mediated agency is the belief that humans have the ability to influence their lives and environment, however the way in which they go about this is mediated by the cultural tools available to them (Lasky, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978; Wersch, 1991). Using mediated agency as a theoretical lens allows for a sociocultural analysis of how teachers' actions in and outside of the classroom demonstrate how they might engage with their own expectations, experiences and ideologies to deal with regulations and curricula that limit their abilities. A particularly important aspect of mediated agency is the use of resistance.

Gunzenhauser (2007) theorizes that resistance is a critical aspect of teacher professionalism and agency. He suggests that to examine the ways in which teachers consider their role in the classroom, one must also be aware of the various structures and options available to them. In the case of this study it means examining the curriculum they use and the way they conceptualize it, as well as their own understanding of the role of sexuality education in the lives of their students.

### 3. Methodology

This study used critical constructivist epistemology and methodology to investigate the ways in which sexuality education teachers conceptualize their place in the classroom and engage in mediated agentic action to meet the perceived needs of their students.

Data for this study came from a larger study examining the role conceptualization, agentic actions, and ideologies of sexuality educators in the United States. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with teachers who taught sexuality education to middle and high school aged youth. Initial recruitment involved posts on list-serves and social network sites devoted to sexuality education including the American Associate of Family and Consumer Sciences, Advocates for Youth, and statewide list-serves for health teachers. As the study progressed, snowball sampling and theoretical sampling led to a wider diversity of teachers and teaching experiences. Overall, 15 participants were interviewed. Of these, 11 were current public high school teachers, one participant was a private school sexuality teacher, one was a health educator in a public high school through an in-school clinic, one was a former teacher who was employed as a state-level trainer for health education curriculum, and one participant was a county health educator who offered sexuality curricula in the public schools. The majority of participants were female and identified as white and heterosexual. Teaching experience ranged from 4 to 37 years, and 7 participants described their schools as in suburban areas, 3 described their

schools as in urban areas, 3 described their schools as in rural areas, and one participant said she taught in an area that was both suburban and urban. The participants came from 6 different states, 8 participants taught in states that are politically liberal, and 7 from states that are politically conservative.

The data were analyzed using grounded theory methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory is an inductive method that allows researchers to discover commonalities and themes amongst and across specific instances. It is appropriate for this study because it generates theory rather than presumes it; grounded theory is well suited for analysis when there is a lack of information or data-generated theories about particular phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), such as the case of this study. Grounded theory is an iterative process, requiring that researchers examine the data and emerging theories in order to both construct and deconstruct the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data analysis moves from raw data, to codes, to concepts, to categories, and finally to the development of theory. Each level of analysis involves higher levels of abstraction from the data itself. For this study, data analysis advanced through several steps; initial coding, secondary coding, and selective coding, as well as through constant comparison, theoretical memoing, and integrative diagramming until theoretical propositions could be built from the data. Using this methodology allowed me to develop a data-driven understanding of the process in which teachers consider their role and negotiate within the school systems to deliver education.

#### 4. Findings

The data from this study suggest that sexuality education teachers relied on their perceived unique personal experiences and qualifications, along with a unique sense of rapport, in order to justify resistance to the regulations and policies that shaped the information and education that they shared with students.

##### 4.1. *Unique personal experiences and qualifications*

The teachers in this study felt that their experiences shaped their identities in ways that uniquely prepared them to be sexuality educators. For many participants, family experiences shaped the way they understood their role. For example, Dan, a veteran teacher who trained sexuality and health teachers for the state he lived in, did not plan to become a health educator, but found himself in that role after a series of retirements left him as the county's sole health education trainer, described his experiences in dealing with a son who led a "rough life" as demonstrating how he was "meant to" be a health educator. He shared the story of his son in order to justify how he was in a unique position to provide this education. He perceived his experience as a teacher as shaping his ability to parent his son, and conversely, his experience as a father shaped his interactions with his students. Similarly, Tasha described how she shared her family experiences with her students in order to build rapport;

My 31 year old daughter has been down a really hard road and now is great, but went through a lot of crappy stuff, and then my son on the flipside just did everything great, normal, straightforward good, just graduated this summer, and they are just very different people ... I put up pictures, you know, [the students] see pictures of my family and we will talk about it.

The teachers described their teaching role as shaped by their own experiences in health or sexuality classes. For teachers who came from minority groups, including ethnic or sexual minorities, their experiences as "outsiders" were particularly salient in shaping their teaching identities.

Although 12 of the 15 teachers identified as heterosexual, the three teachers who identified as lesbian, queer, or gay, indicated that their sexual identity shaped their conceptualization of their role in the classroom and was a key part of their decision to become sexuality educators. Brian said;

I became a sexuality educator [...] to really make sure it was ok to be gay. Sort of like the self-protective, self-justifying, I'm really not crazy, right? This is ok. I think another reason though, is that I have always been comfortable talking about sex, so there's no fear in it for me ... I also think that ... there was just so much of it that was being done badly, and you know, I couldn't do any worse than what was out there, and I really thought I could do better than what was out there..

Ananda explained how her ethnic background shaped her early sexual knowledge and her choice of career:

One of the reasons I do sexuality anything was because I didn't get anything, especially at home. My family is from Afghanistan, first generation, Muslim, and the only conversation we ever had about anything sexuality related was that my parents would pick my husband for me, and that having a boyfriend was like hellfire.

Ananda goes on to discuss her experiences in school health education as a young queer woman:

I had no options. And the options that I did want to have ... I was queer-identified [...] I came out early, like earlier in high school, but that to me didn't equate. Like the sex ed that I had in my mind was very hetero ... and so my sex ed needs were with girls, and so I was like those two don't actually match [laughing] at all.

Ananda's story demonstrates how her experience of sexuality education as being "very hetero" and excluding her experiences falls into line with what Connell and Elliot (2009) described as systematic omission of non-heterosexual experiences in sexuality education. In Ananda's case, her high school experiences involved both a silencing and confusion around sexuality education and her own desires. This, coupled with her familial experience of a particular morality about sexuality shaped her desire to provide an alternative type of sexuality education for her students.

Other teachers who, like Ananda, identified as racial or ethnic minorities spoke explicitly of how their own experience as a minority influenced how they taught. For example Sonia speaks of her desire to normalize sexuality within Black culture:

Because me being a person of color, my degree is in Black Studies, so seeing the homophobia in the Black community was a big charge for me ... I always felt as if it was a misunderstanding and if I wanted to break that it had to be a particular type of person with a particular style ... to penetrate people of color, their belief system, and so I always thought one thing, I look the part, I am a brown skinned, chocolate, African American, I have natural hair. It makes it easier for people who see me to digest the information from me.

Sonia's discussion of how her own identity, as a Black woman, made it "easier" to teach students that might be resistant to this topic demonstrates how the racial or ethnic background of the teachers influenced their experiences both in becoming teachers and in shaping the responsibilities that they perceived themselves to have as a teacher.

Although minority participants tended to point to their

identities as the reason that they did not receive quality sexuality education, the majority of participants described their experiences with sexuality education as adolescents as shaping their role as teachers. For many it was their own lack of sexuality education that shaped both their decision to become a sexuality educator, as well as the way in which they perceived the education that they provided their own students. For example, Sam described his experience with sexuality education as “awful”, and went on to say:

I kinda feel like if I didn't do that for my kids, if I didn't give them something, then you know, they would be just as lost as what we were. And living in a college town, you know, you grow up really quick if you are in the right circles, and so I just feel like they need to be prepared.

Sam was one of many participants who spoke of their lack of sexuality education as a fundamental part of not only their decision to become a sexuality educator, but also their decision to provide sexuality education in a way that offered more to students than they had experienced as adolescents. Sam's response, that if he “didn't give [students] something” they would “be lost” is similar to what another participant, Mary, who spoke about how her lack of sexuality education at home and at school, led her to become what she described as an “advocate”:

I had a puberty talk when I was in fifth grade, in high school I remember the scary STIs, nothing in middle school. Family wise, my mom asked me to go see her, she asked to see my breasts – like let me see your boobs, and I was crying and I pulled up my shirt, and she was like “Yeah, those are gonna grow soon”, and she said, “You're gonna get hair between your legs and you're gonna bleed.” That's what I remember and then we had the talk in school, I think that's probably why I'm such an advocate.

In both Mary and Ananda's stories they felt ignored and silenced, but their perceptions were shaped by their larger experiences with race, religion, sexual identity, and family.

Not all of the participants, however, spoke of the lack of sexuality education as leading to their role as a teacher. Ruth shared her thoughts on why she became a health teacher:

Honestly, because I feel as though my mom had this really great effect on me. She was so open and so real and ... she works in the blood bank of a hospital and she dealt with AIDS patients every day, and she has had patients die. And she would say I would rather you come to me and ask me for anything that has to do with you dying. You can get pregnant, that's not the worst that could happen to you. You could die from this. She was really like that.

Ruth's story set the stage for her to find a role in her students' lives that mimicked the role her mother played for her – to provide a form of sexuality education that did not shy away from the “truth” that she identified as incorporating safe sex practices. Similarly, Mary's experience, both at school where she was only taught sexuality education in regards to risk, and at home, where she received not only a lack of information but what she perceived as hostility led her to view herself as an “advocate” for young people. Both women relied on their experiences as young people to justify their actions and identities as teachers. In particular, both Mary and Ruth explained how their experiences as adolescents shaped what they perceived as “honest” sexuality information.

#### 4.1.1. *Unique rapport*

In order to be an effective teacher, the teachers believed that they had to develop a strong rapport with students that differentiated them from other adults and teachers. All 15 of the teachers in the study spoke of their close rapport, and how it allowed them to deliver information and reinforced their unique sense of self. Every participant in the study described their unique status amongst students, often suggesting that they were the “only” teacher or adult that students could get “real” information from, or that they were somehow more “down to earth” than other teachers. For example, Tabitha, who teaches in a suburban public school, says,

I feel like you just have such a different role in the school than anybody else, I think it's a great role, I think that I can go home at night knowing that maybe I didn't get them to pass their math regent or whatever, but maybe I touched one kids life to save their life.

Teachers in this study spoke of several strategies they used to develop a strong rapport with students including creating innovative activities, working with students outside of the classroom, and positioning themselves as different than other teachers or adults. Carrie is explicit about the ways in which she works to demonstrate her relationship to students, and in doing so, she positions herself in opposition to other teachers in the school. Discussing her relationship with students, Carrie says:

It's different because of the relationship that you develop with them. The kids know that they can come up to me and so they frequently do, with all these issues. If I'm talking about relationship violence then I'll have kids coming up during lunch, after school, emailing me about their issues related to that. You know, it gives kids the opportunity to talk about what's going on in their life, which you probably wouldn't have in a history class.

Teachers' understood their rapport as leading to a uniquely close relationship with students, which they viewed as creating the opportunity for students to share information that would not otherwise be available to adults. The teachers also described how salient and emotional sexuality education could be, and how their rapport with students allowed for students to express a particular vulnerability not expressed in other classes or with other teachers. Lacey's description of her role highlights how she viewed her rapport and her role as unique in the lives of her students:

I feel like taking on the role of being a health teacher, you really put yourself out there to hear things that you might not want to hear, to have to talk about things that you might not want to talk about. I think its just part of the job. To teach, you really have to have a certain personality and a certain way with kids and way with people to be able to handle it. Cause sometimes you deal with things that you don't want to deal with.

Teachers in the study spoke of their relationships with students as “closer” or more “open” than other teachers, including other health teachers. All of the teachers spoke of their rapport as unique in opposition to other adults. Several teachers, however, also spoke of their uniqueness within the realm of other health teachers, and within the larger school framework.

Although the teachers in this study all described how their relationship with their students was particularly unique, the ways in which they established that rapport were consistent across participants. Many teachers described putting conscious effort into understanding popular culture and media so that they could use

those examples in the classroom. Seven teachers described using less formal language in the classroom, or being antagonistic or blunt, in order to demonstrate their comfort level and openness with the material.

All 15 of the teachers described how they were unique, due in part to their adolescent experiences, their commitment to their teaching role, and their rapport with students. Many teachers shared Sam's feeling that "if I didn't do that for my kids, if I didn't give them something, they would be just as lost as [he was]." The teachers articulated that they wanted to offer the students something that they were missing as an adolescent, an education free of stigma, open and honest dialogue, and an adult whom the students could trust.

#### 4.2. *Beyond the curriculum: outsider information*

Although they felt an ideology of responsibility towards students, the teachers often perceived limits to the content of their curricula. The limits they described included state and locally mandated regulations, parental complaints, and administrative policies that prevented the teachers from providing all of the information they felt was important.

##### 4.2.1. *Risky teaching: limits to curricular freedom*

The regulations that the teachers described; having to present their curricula to school boards, having to work within particular limits set forth by the larger community, led to them feeling that they were at risk of crossing boundaries. Nina was particularly blunt when she said, "I'm looking at [the students] and listening to them, and listening to their questions and trying to decide whether I wanted to lose my job that day." Nina's sentiments were echoed by Ruth, who shared:

I definitely worry all the time that I'm gonna slip up, I'm gonna say the wrong thing that I shouldn't have. I worry that when the students ask [personal questions] ... ..I definitely worry about kids going home or exaggerating or mishearing what I said.

The teachers understood that they did not teach in a vacuum, and that local and national politics shaped their curriculum. Sam described his understanding of the way in which local politics impacted his curriculum:

I'm limited on my curriculum. I'm limited about what I can say, granted, you know, I feel like eighth graders, even though they're exposed to a lot more than what they think they are I'm not really sure it's a good opportunity to ... openly talk about alternative lifestyles because we're a conservative community.

Sam went on to discuss worrying about complaints regarding his teaching:

Yeah, conservative parents [complain]. You get that a lot ... you know when the school boards change, you know who gets on that school board and you know who might have an agenda.

Participants in this study articulated the ways in which the local politics impacted the schools. Dan, a veteran teacher who now trains sexuality and health teachers described how curriculum decisions are influenced by politics:

We have a very strong religious base here and quite a few of the ... Evangelical Lutherans, they are they are just dead set against anything but abstinence only, and what happens is some of those folks get on the local sex ed committee for the districts and they kinda push their agendas.

Dana, who as teaches sexuality education in public schools through the health department, had to receive permission to teach from local school boards. Not only did she have to present curriculum to the boards and get local approval, the health department competed against private organizations, including conservative religious agencies, in providing public school sexuality education:

[We're] quite conservative ... And it's been very difficult for anyone to get anything into the school system as far as teaching the sexuality, especially the comprehensive sexuality programs. So the health department has had a little bit of an easier way of working through and getting in. The core curriculum in the state ... allows for sexuality education, but it does not require it.

The teachers in this study felt that the local religious, moral, and political landscape was a hurdle, regardless of their own political or religious affiliation or beliefs. They described having to present in front of boards, meet with administration, and get permission from parents in order to teach sexuality education. The participants spoke of how they were aware of the way in which local and national politics about the importance and place of sexuality education for young people affected their own classroom experience. They spoke explicitly of perceiving their role of teacher as risky. The participants described a sense of danger involved in fulfilling their duties. For example, Brian, who taught in private schools, described his fear of incorporating discussion of both sexual orientation and safe sex into class discussions:

It was pretty clear at the school that I taught at prior that I was taking a risk every day when I either taught sexuality education formally or when I introduced those concepts into other classes that I taught, and I was always very cautious and concerned and I did not talk about it as much, I did not, I can't say I didn't let it inform me, but I was more cautious about how I brought it up in committee meetings and in parent conferences and things like that.

Ruth described that she felt that simply by teaching the curriculum "you're putting yourself at risk to, cause like you said with parents and all. I run the risk all the time of making one wrong choice of word or saying one fishy statement, I definitely run that risk." Every participant in this study described the risk involved in teaching sexuality – risk from complaints from parents, local school boards and students themselves. Importantly not every participant felt that those complaints influenced them – four of the participants said that they felt confident enough that, while they acknowledged complaints could happen, they insisted that their teaching abilities were strong enough and the subject important enough that any complaint or risk to their role would have minimal impact.

Teachers described particular topics that were officially prohibited. Three of the teachers utilized abstinence only curriculum, which forbade discussions of sexuality outside of the realm of marriage. Six teachers could not discuss homosexuality as a healthy alternative sexuality. Another six were forbidden from discussing masturbation. Similarly, six were forbidden from discussing abortion. Finally, three of the teachers who taught comprehensive sexuality education, were forbidden from providing contraceptive demonstrations to students.

Beyond the topics that teachers were explicitly disallowed from discussing, several teachers reported discomfort with various topics. This discomfort often resulted in their perception that they could not or would not offer discussion on these topics. Topics that made the teachers uncomfortable included abortion (5 teachers),

sexual violence (4 teachers), masturbation (3 teachers), homosexuality (2 teachers), and condom demonstrations (2 teachers). Reasons for discomfort included worries about complaints or official sanctions, personal moral or political ideologies, and lack of personal experience with the topic. For example, Carrie discussed an instance where she offered a pamphlet on anal sex to her students in a community college class that she taught, after which a parent of a college student complained, which led to her discomfort teaching the topic in her high school class, “I won’t give out that pamphlet again ... that’s why I think I am hesitant to talk more about abortion or more about anal sex, because I just don’t want to deal with the repercussions.”

Teachers were quite cognizant of the ways in which their role in providing sexuality education was connected to larger political ideologies of sexuality and the place of sexuality education. They described how they understood the role of sexuality for young people connected to risk, both public health and emotional risks for young people themselves, and that by offering sexuality education to young people they found themselves in a place where they themselves were at professional risk and where they battled to be taken seriously within the larger context of the school. They described these risks and their role within the larger framework of sexuality ideologies and politics as limits to their ability to teach and to fulfill their responsibilities within the classroom. Although teachers perceived these limits, however, they often described crossing those boundaries in order to meet the perceived needs of their students.

Every teacher in the study perceived limits to their ability to carry out their responsibility to teach sexuality education. The limits were self-defined, often described as encompassing both political and mandated limits (i.e., curricular limits, state law) as well as perceived limits (i.e., promotion of sex outside of marriage, experiences of sexual violence or homosexuality). While the mandated boundaries dictated what teachers could or could not officially teach, the personal boundaries encompassed both comfort level and personal politics, and thus were less well defined. However, teachers spoke about how they crossed both types of boundaries in the classroom, and justified breaking those boundaries by relying on their belief in their unique responsibility to provide truth to students.

#### 4.2.2. *Breaking boundaries: resistance and agency in the classroom*

Teachers’ often acted agentially both within and outside of the official curriculum in order to meet the ideology of responsibility. The actions they took, particularly those that tested the boundaries of the conventions of curriculum, were often informed by their own experiences with race, class, family structure, and religion. All of the teachers “took risks” but the risks themselves were shaped by the teachers’ personal identities. For example, Sonia perceived an unofficial limit to curriculum in her position wherein teachers could not discuss the connection between racism and sexuality, but her identity as a Black Lesbian allowed her to cross that boundary:

I think it’s great that I get to stand in the skin I am in, and I think I get to do it easier than my white counterparts. I get to then make some connections between homophobia, sexism, and racism. And I get to, sometimes the population that I serve can understand racism because it hits home really hard. They can understand that, but they can’t understand homophobia, so when I start to connect those two and say that this is the same thing, it is the same concept, the same type of bullying, the same type of disrespect and disregard of a person, they begin to get it.

Sonia described how her identity allowed her to cross an unspoken boundary to sexuality education in her schools, where

students can examine larger social structures in order to see how they are connected. It is her identity that allowed her to break this boundary, and it is an action in which she felt particular pride.

Teachers also found ways to go beyond the perceived limitations to their content by using strategies that opened the discussion and allowed them to provide information based on student need. For example, Sam worked in a district that forbade him to discuss birth control or homosexuality with his students. He expressed that he was “very upset” by this, particularly because several of his junior high school students were pregnant. When asked what he does when students ask questions about these issues, he replied:

I structure my class to where they’re able to write down questions anonymously and they throw them in a bucket[...] and throughout our lesson, I pull them out and ask them in front of the class and answer them. So, you know it’s very anonymous, I don’t pull anybody out, and I get to answer some of those questions, as much as I can, that they really have.

In a follow up with Sam, he spoke about the tension he felt in trying to provide sexuality education to his students while bound by limitations to curriculum:

I know what my personal preference is to do but yet I am bound by what my school board says I have to do. So I feel like my obligations are to, you know, teach the curriculum that’s put forth for my students but also to let them know that there are avenues to research in case they have further questions.

So I never make anything, you know, with a period at the end of it. It’s usually open ended, and [...] we talk about alternatives as much as I can. But I feel like they need to get the full spectrum of what that life style and choices are all about.

Marissa also found ways to offer information to students by allowing her students to take the lead in asking questions. Marissa was very vocal about how she perceived her job as “dangerous” within the context of the “Bible Belt”, below she describes how she dealt with that danger:

The way that I do it, is I have them tear off a slip of paper and I have them ask about anything they want to know about, anything. I said, there’s a few questions that I can’t answer and I’ve had to address that in class. And what I try to do is work it into my lesson, so it’s not like I’m singling one questions out and the student was like that was my question.

Teachers in this study acknowledged boundaries in the curricular content, and while some teachers found novel ways to address those boundaries by allowing students to take the lead, other teachers acknowledged that the felt the risks they took simply providing any content to young people outweighed going beyond those particular boundaries. For example, Dana, who had to receive permission from each individual school district’s school board that she provided education in, spoke of how, given her state-sanctioned public health curriculum was in competition with an abstinence curriculum promoted and provided by local faith-based pregnancy centers, she felt that she had to stay within limits to be able to provide a comprehensive curriculum:

To the extent that the school will allow [me to address homosexuality] which is you know, in the Reducing the Risk,<sup>1</sup> they do

<sup>1</sup> Reducing the Risk is a nationally available comprehensive sexuality curriculum in the United States.

not have a lot about it, about homosexuality or bisexuality, we talk about it, I would say basically if they ask questions then I will answer the question or I will refer them to another source, so I don't talk about it or cover it as much as I personally would like it to be done, but I have to stay within the guidelines of what the site based or the school board would let me teach. Cause I would rather give up a little bit there than not be able to be there at all.

Dana had a particularly tedious process by which she received official permission to provide sexuality curricula. The process of presenting the curriculum to each individual school board, and of individualizing each school's program based in a large part on the desires of parents and administrators led her to feel that she was bound by their restrictions to the content they had explicitly approved. Other teachers, however, described ways in which they offered information or resources specifically excluded from their school's policies. For example, Mary spoke about how, when teaching lessons on puberty, she was careful in providing outsider information:

I had those kids that nobody taught them anything and the boys are thinking they're wetting their bed instead of having wet dreams. So, anytime that they would start going into that heavy sexuality area, I would say at this point, since we are covering puberty, I would prefer you to go and talk to a puberty expert at home or see me in a smaller group cause we're gonna stay on topic. Cause I didn't want parents to complain. And I would say to them, and I was very honest with them ... I would say I don't mind answering questions, but I also have to cope with your parents responses, so be aware that at times if I ask you to talk to me after class or something, it's for me to protect myself also.

Mary was careful to articulate that she referred students to their parents or another adult if they had questions she perceived as outside of her bounds, however, she goes on to state that she offered this outsider information to students in other capacities and reinforced to her students the risks she took in providing the information they were seeking. Dan also spoke of ways in which he taught other sexuality teachers to respond to questions that involved information not sanctioned by school districts:

Everything, with the exception of abortion, cause that can't be touched or the chips would fall, if you preface it with you know, this district is an abstinence-only district, then if you phrase your answer to the kids, give them the answer that they need. You have to be careful of the way you phrase it ... that's what I tell the teachers.

Dan's description of how to deal with student questions that conflicted with district policy was to "be careful" of the way it was phrased, but to provide the information nonetheless. He expressed that he perceived adolescents as needing information that school districts were not providing, and, in his role as a trainer for the state, guided teachers on how to provide this information despite district policy that might have forbade it. Similar to Dan, Brian also found ways to provide information that was forbidden by his school:

When I was in that situation [having been asked by a student about a topic forbidden in the curriculum] my choice was to give the student the information privately and to impress upon the student that what I was doing was not the view of the school

and that it was that I was not really sanctioned to do this, so I was doing it strictly on my own.

Mary, Brian, and Dan all spoke of how they found ways to offer outside information that they perceived as explicitly or implicitly prohibited. In their discussion, they reinforced what other teachers stated, that they had to be careful in the way that they approached teaching and their students. In another example, Carrie discussed the limitations she perceived in her role:

I cannot give the kids any other forms of birth control. I can give them a ride to the clinic and I have, but the district would prefer I didn't ... like I said, [I am not supposed to teach about] abortion ... I certainly answer questions if the kids ask, it's mentioned in their supplemental book, but it's not covered as much as I would like.

Carrie was restricted from providing particular sorts of resources and support, and while she did stay within those bounds, she also found ways to provide some of the information when students took the lead in asking for it. Carrie taught both a high school and college level human sexuality course, and while she perceived her school district as fairly liberal in allowing her to address potentially risky topics, she self-censored when she taught in the high school, unless the students themselves brought up the topics.

Several teachers spoke of strategies in dealing with the parents of students who might have complaints with the content that the teachers delivered. For example, Sonia felt sanctioned to provide various resources to students, and in fact her school district did allow students to obtain birth control and other sexuality related resources at school, however, in her description of interactions with parents, she said she felt that "once they came and saw" the education and resources that were delivered to students, parents would, in Sonia's words, "understand." In Sonia's mind, as in all of the teachers in this study, the needs of the students outweighed the desires of both the parents and the school districts to limit sexuality information. Many teachers expressed similar sentiments to Tabitha when she said,

My philosophy is its better to ... beg for forgiveness than to ask for permission. You know, and then I'll stand up for it and be like, look these kids need this message.

Dana, echoing what Tabitha expressed, also shared:

If parents want to bellyache about it then they can come and sit in on the class and listen and see what's being taught in the conversation. If they're not willing to do that, then they don't really have a right to destroy every other child's opportunity to have a right to the information they need to grow healthily in their sexuality. So no, I don't really worry about parents too much, or outsiders. I would rather ask forgiveness than permission.

Other teachers also expressed a sense of righteousness when defending their curricular content and teaching strategies. Many spoke of sending home "opt-out" letters that informed parents of the content and required a signature if a student was to be excused from class. Carrie discussed the way she approached informing parents of the class content:

I give them a letter to take home but there's nothing for the parents to sign. Do I think the majority of kids take that home?



No. [laughing] This is permission for you to stay for sex. If I don't hear back then you will be allowed to stay.

Not all teachers in this study demonstrated agency by offering resources or information beyond the curricular limits. For one teacher, agency was enacted by a refusal to cross her own moral boundaries when delivering curriculum despite a school district that allowed for comprehensive education. Tabitha's political and moral ideologies were in conflict with the curricula she was asked to provide. For Tabitha, the comprehensive curriculum approved by her school district contradicted her own ideology surrounding adolescent sexuality. Tabitha described her ideology:

Sometimes it's a fine line between like my own religious or personal beliefs about sex and the media and theirs, and trying to be very politically correct is probably the ... hardest part, cause I, with my religious beliefs at this point I don't believe in sex before marriage, even though I'm older [laughing] you know? But, you know, I'm not a 16-year-old naïve girl anymore, but I still believe that.

Tabitha shared that she herself remains abstinent in the context of her relationship. She discussed how this allowed her to be more open with her students, that “I would have a harder time telling the kids you should wait till you get married to have sex, if I was living with my boyfriend and having sex with him.” Tabitha's own moral stance, one that idealizes abstinence outside of marriage, allowed her to incorporate her beliefs into her curriculum. For Tabitha, acting agentically within her role as a teacher meant withholding information from students, in this case information about resources available to them including birth control and abortion, despite working within a district that offered comprehensive sexuality education. While Tabitha's actions involved the withholding of information, rather than the willingness to provide education outside of the dictate of the curriculum, her decision to do so reflects her agency over classroom content, an agency mediated by her personal beliefs in abstinence and morality. She shared:

There's the county health center. It is the next town over, probably about five miles away. They can go there and I know they can get checked out, they can get birth control for free and without their parents consent. I don't know how many of them know that, I don't advertise it but they can.

Tabitha described a boundary that she crosses that emerges out of her own socio-location, however unlike other teachers, Tabitha's stance was morally conservative in terms of young people and sexuality. Her resistance to the comprehensive curriculum provided by her district by her repeated emphasis on abstinence until marriage and her silence toward contraceptive options for her students demonstrate how she expressed agency within her own classroom by refusing to provide information and resources that crossed her ideological stance.

The majority of teachers in this study found novel ways to enact agency via providing resources and information that they perceived as either explicitly or implicitly forbidden to address. They spoke of how their unique place in the lives of their students allowed them to be a trusted source for this outsider information, and that their unique understanding of students' needs around sexuality led to a responsibility to provide this information. Relying on this sense of uniqueness and responsibility, they defended their decisions to cross potential boundaries with students.

To sum, the role and ability of the teachers were mediated by the context of local and national politics, individual ideologies, and

personal experiences with sexuality and sexuality education. In addition, all the teachers perceived particular limits to their role both in and outside of the classroom. The teachers, however, often found ways to resist what they perceived to be the political, personal, or educationally imposed limits to the information that they provided students.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study confirm existing research on teaching and teachers, as well as point to new theoretical models of the process by which teachers come to take action within classrooms. Given the nature of the debates surrounding sexuality and sexuality education that are currently taking place in the United States, this research adds important information that can be useful in exploring the impact of teachers and teaching identity, as well as the ways in which teachers themselves are bound by regulations, in providing sexuality education to adolescents.

Sexuality education teachers have a particular power in creating, constructing, and manipulating ways of knowing. They are able to define sexuality for their students and in doing so, can either provide support or potentially silence student experiences and student potential. This study illustrated how teachers experience that power.

In her study of the process in which teachers take on a teaching identity, [Danielewicz \(2014\)](#) claims “experience (and all it contains) is constitutive. Identities depend upon convergence, on constellations of person and actions, on zones of contact among people, things, language and space” (p. 195). To identify as a teacher, according to [Danielewicz](#), involves having someone to teach. The teachers in this study articulate a teaching identity that encompassed a particular constellation – the perceived needs of their students, the political landscape of sexuality education, and their own personal ideologies of sexuality and education. Within that constellation, the teachers in this study engage in acts of what [Danielewicz](#) might call authority, and what others might call power ([Foucault, 1977](#)) wherein they had the “right to speak, [were] regarded as legitimate sources of information, and possess[ed] the ability to persuade or even force others to act in particular ways” ([Danielewicz, 2014](#), p. 171). I argue that, in this study, when teachers took on that authority, they did so utilizing a form of mediated agency that demonstrated resistance to the boundaries placed on them by regulations and personal beliefs.

It also confirms the point that [Danielewicz \(2014\)](#) and others make, that teachers' sense of self and their understanding of content and context are influenced by their own ideologies and experiences. Teachers in this study understood their identities as one that had the potential to affirm sexuality in a way they did not experience as adolescence. They express a desire to provide an education they did not receive, and in some cases, to explicitly address and affirm experiences and identities they share that had been ignored or stigmatized by their own teachers and family experiences. However, as illustrated by the data, the teachers' knowledge was constructed within the various ideologies and frameworks in which they were located.

The findings of this study illustrate the ways in which teacher agency is shaped by both the explicit limitations imposed by their school district and administration, but also by complex and hidden limitations imposed on them by virtue of their own education, personal ideologies, or experiences. The teachers' willingness to offer outsider information to their students is influenced, in part, by their conceptualization of the content of that information, their personal understanding of the importance of that information, and their commitment to their own unique sense of identity. These three constructs are mediated by their own identities and

experiences both in and out of classrooms. Their desire to be competent and transformative teachers is bound by the ideologies and cultures that they are embedded in. In this way, the findings of this study illustrate the ways in which mediated agency (Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993) takes place within sexuality education classrooms.

In a study of teacher identity during educational reforms, Lasky (2005) found that the teaching identity of participants in her study was mediated by the educational reforms that the school systems were implementing. Similar to the teachers in this study, Lasky's (2005) found that her participants relied on building "trusting, respectful relationships (p 907)" with students in order to provide quality education, but that they felt that mandated reforms limited their ability to both develop and utilize that rapport to deliver curriculum. Teachers in this study also describe how particular mandated regulations limited their ability to provide what they view as quality education. Interestingly, beyond the explicit regulations, the findings of this study demonstrate how teachers' personal experiences and ideologies mediated their desire and ability to provide sexuality education.

Finally, the data from this study point to several interesting future directions for research. New and emerging research has focused on the role of emotion in teacher identity (Zembylas, 2005), suggesting that a poststructuralist lens on the role of emotion in the development of teaching identity can provide an interpretive lens from which to explore how socio-political location impacts teachers' understandings and agency in classrooms. The data from this study suggest that a deeper examination of the way in which rapport and pride are components of teaching identity, and the ways in which the regulations and politics of sexuality education impact teacher's ability to establish these connections with students.

bell hooks (1994) writes "the classroom, with all its limitations, remain a location of possibility (p. 13)." This study demonstrated how some of those limitations that she spoke of can exist with the teachers themselves, and also demonstrated that teachers, when aware of those limitations, go out of their way to address them. If sexuality education teachers were to be provided with the support, guidance, and resources they may be able to transform their classrooms into sites of possibility – classrooms where sexuality was taught, informed, and supported so that students were empowered.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.10.017>.

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