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Federal Initiatives and Sex Education

The Impact on Rural United States

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Abstract

Overall, there is much that is yet unknown in rural sex education initiatives. Federal programs connected with NCLB attempt to measure AYP in numerous areas, but sex education is not among them. However, sex education is defined quite narrowly within existing legislation, including AFLA, Title V, and CBAE, as "abstinence-only-until-marriage" and fiscal incentives are given to school districts for following these guidelines. In rural areas, where issues of size, poverty, financial distress, geography, local control, enrollment decline, and rapid ethnic diversification are at the forefront, it should come as no surprise that rural districts often require this money for survival. From there, however, the path becomes less clear in relation to sex education. It is unclear what is being taught and who is doing the teaching. In addition, the narrow definition of abstinence-only-until-marriage ignores sexual agency in students and involves a heteronormative metanarrative that often associates queer with disease. Due to the lack of research in this area, it begs further questions of the field of rural sex education, such as Who is teaching? What is being taught? Is there a curriculum? How are queer issues handled? How do students and teachers make sense of abstinence-only-until-marriage in a way that is inclusive (or not)?

Twenty-five percent of all students live in rural areas, "which tend to be characterized by high rates of poverty, social isolation and shortages of medical services" (Bennet et al, 1997, p. 256). In addition, the conservative movement within sexuality education has greatly affected the field and should not be underestimated (Irvine, 2002). This has led to a normalization process related to expectations for youth sexuality, which distinctly leaves out queer students. The abstinence-until-marriage movement has led to a normalizing of what is acceptable sexual behavior, and without marriage one's sexual behavior could thus be called "abnormal."

Many have focused their research on sexuality education in the United States and how it plays into concepts of normalcy (Campos, 2002; Irvine, 2002; Moran, 2000). Although Campos, Irvine, and Moran focus more on the history and curriculum of sexuality education, their insights also correlate with the normalcy concepts pervasive in Rasmussen (2004) and Warner (1999). Campos utilizes Wolfensberger's (1972) definition of normalization as a philosophical construct of much of sexuality education, which he defines as "means which are as culturally normative as possible, in order to establish and/or maintain personal behaviors and characteristics which are as culturally normative as possible" (p. 28). According to Campos, those who follow normalization believe that students will acquire knowledge to live productive and fruitful lives. For the most part, Irvine (2002) agrees with this definition of normalization, and states that this concept is the cornerstone strategy for the Christian Right's opposition to inclusive sexuality education. According to Irvine (2002), these battles over normalization are not simply about queerness but "over which sexualities and which citizens are valued as legitimate" (p. 167). The Christian Right's support of normalization is directly correlated to a desire for protection of the "normal," or the "preservation of sexual morality, traditional gender relations, and the nuclear family" (Irvine, 2002, p. 168). Campos (2002) believes this attitude toward normalcy harkens back to the attitude of most of the twentieth century, when being queer was perceived as "sick, abnormal, unnatural, perverted, and an abomination to society" (p. 141). Even though the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its psychiatric disease classification in 1972, the majority of mainstream Americans continue to have concerns over the intersection of family, sexuality, and gender, and the Christian Right is able to play into those concerns by showing how "abnormal" queers are (Irvine, 2002). This has resulted in a moral antipathy in American sentiment towards queer sexuality education, with the public generally supporting equal rights for queers but not moving much beyond tolerance in relation to actively fighting for those rights (Yang, 1998). Campos (2002) cites the Stonewall Riots, the AIDS crisis, the changing attitudes of queers in film and television, the debates of choice or preference in relation to sexual orientation, the search for a queer gene, debates over gays in the military, and the Boy Scout ban on non-heterosexuals all as examples of the mainstream public's struggle with normalization.

To adequately discuss the impact of the initiatives mentioned above on rural communities, one must first begin with a definition of what makes a place "rural" for this paper.

Understanding Rurality

Defining "Rural"

Rural studies scholars, typically sociologists, search for ways in which to make rural communities socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable. Yet the definition of rurality remains elusive. Typically, the four most cited definitions of rural come from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS), and the National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES) (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997). The Census Bureau defines rurality as a population less than 2,500 (GAO, 1993). Dependent upon the Census Bureau definition is the OMB definition, which “designates entire counties as ‘metro’ or ‘nonmetro.’ If a county does not have a city with 50,000 or more inhabitants, or an urbanized area with at least 100,000 inhabitants…the county is defined ‘nonmetro’” (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997, p. 80). The ERS “uses rural-urban continuum codes to distinguish among metro counties, nonmetro counties adjacent to metro areas, and nonmetro counties not adjacent to metro areas” (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997, p. 80). Finally, NCES utilizes the Census definition of rural for its data (although it does not for other terms, such as ‘city’). The use of the term rural across research is not standardized, causing great confusion. Since this research is focused within the field of education, the Census Bureau / NCES definition of rural is utilized.

To define a rural school district, however, becomes a bit more challenging. To address this, NCES utilizes an urban-centric classification system, which was developed by the OMB (2000). Rural schools are defined as such based on their proximity to an urban area. There are four categories in this breakdown – city or suburban, which are further broken into large, midsize, and small; and town or rural, broken into fringe, distant, or remote (Provasnik et al, 2007). A rural fringe area is that which is “less than or equal to five miles from an urbanized area [population of greater than 50,000] as well as less than 2.5 miles from an urban cluster [populations between 25,000 and 50,000]” (Provasnik et al, 2007, p. 2). A rural distant area is five to 25 miles from an urbanized area and 2.5 to ten miles from an urban cluster (Provasnik et al, 2007). A rural remote area is “more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than ten miles from an urban cluster” (Provasnik et al, 2007, p. 2). The NCES then took the actual address of the school and mapped it accordingly within the categories of city, suburban, town, or rural. Based on this classification, over 33 percent of all public school districts are considered rural (Provasnik et al, 2007).

Common Issues of Rural Schools

Rural school districts have a unique combination of issues, which create challenges specific to them, particularly when faced with legislative requirements like No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Many of the key elements, which make rural schools unique, may be shared with urban or suburban school districts, but it is the combination of these elements that makes rural school districts unique.

As can be imagined, one of the first challenges facing rural school districts is size. When small populations are combined with assessment plans that require a certain percentage of “test-takers” to pass an exam, it is difficult to make valid and reliable judgments about academics (Jimerson, 2005). As an example, in Wyoming, 25 percent of all fourth grade classrooms have fewer than 10 students (Jimerson, 2005). Therefore, in a classroom with five students, one student failing a competency exam results in twenty percent of all test-takers failing. Conversely, in a school with 500 fourth graders, it would take 100 students failing for a twenty percent reduction. Judging schools on such small pieces of data not only makes it a challenge for rural schools to meet standards but also unreliable as a metric due to the small sample size.

Secondly, poverty in rural areas is fifty percent higher than poverty in urban areas – eighteen percent of all rural residents were considered poor versus twelve percent of those in urban areas (O’Hare, 1988). This is coupled with the fact that almost 75 percent of the rural poor worked for all or part of the year (Shapiro, 1989). Students from poor families typically do not perform as well academically as those who are from more advantaged backgrounds, and achieving

Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP, under NCLB, may present more of a problem (Jimerson, 2005). As an example, Virginia had a total of 352 schools which failed to meet AYP standards and 824 which met these standards between 1988 and 2003. Of the 352 schools, which failed, 48 percent of the schools had students living in poverty versus fifteen percent of those that met standards (Kim & Sunderman, 2005).

Third, in light of smaller populations and poverty, it should come as no surprise that rural districts are in financial distress (Jimerson, 2005). Numerous forces work to squeeze these districts fiscally – an inadequate tax base, resistance to new taxes, and state policies which favor wealthier areas and view rural schools as burdens (Rural School and Community Trust, 2008). The burdens of NCLB also contribute to this financial distress. As an example, it is difficult to attract "highly-qualified" teachers to rural areas (a requirement of NCLB), and retain them, because of differences in rural versus urban/suburban teacher salary. On average, a beginning teacher in a rural area can expect to make 11.3 percent less than in a non-rural area; the average teacher salary is 13.4 percent less in rural areas; and the most experienced teachers in rural areas (those with Masters' degrees and twenty or more years experience) can expect to make 17.2 percent less, or $39,000 versus $46,000 in a non-rural area (Jimerson, 2003). As another example, rural facilities are often in poor condition (Jimerson, 2005). While this may also be true for urban facilities, the lack of a solid tax base makes the challenges even greater in rural schools (Kollie, 2007).

A fourth (and somewhat obvious) consideration of school districts is their distance from an urban core. Eleven percent of all school districts were considered fringe rural, seven percent distant rural, and three percent remote rural (Provasnik et al, 2007). Distance creates a host of problems in recruiting and retaining teachers, as an example, for the physical distance from an urban center may be undesirable for new teachers and developing professional training programs for teachers may be challenging due to a lack of local resources (Jimerson, 2005).

A fifth area effecting rural schools is the tradition of local control. Many local governance systems for school districts have allowed local communities to have some level of control over curriculum and instruction that reflects the values of the local community. Local schools may be viewed as "community-centering institutions" that are a pertinent part of local culture (Jimerson, 2005). The loss of local-decision making through regulation like NCLB makes this challenging.

Rural areas are experiencing declining enrollments. Some 33 percent of all public schools in rural areas report severe underenrollment, meaning these schools enroll more than 25 percent below the number of students the school was designed to accommodate in its permanent facilities (Provasnik, 2007). Many rural communities still suffer from "high unemployment and underemployment, poor quality of employment, outward migration of young people, and low quality services" (Pezzini, 2000, p. 50). This creates a particular problem in which those who are able to relocate do so, leaving behind a population of older and/or poorer people with less education (Jimerson, 2005).

A final challenge of rural areas in recent years is rapid ethnic diversification (Jimerson, 2005). Currently, 22.9% of all rural school students are ethnic and racial minorities, which is a 54.9% increase over the past ten years (Johnson & Strange, 2007). This increase has put new stresses on rural schools that must accommodate a population change as well as an increase in learners with limited English proficiency (Jimenson, 2005).

Federal Initiatives

No Child Left Behind

Three years prior to the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Ramirez (1999) wrote that "policy makers are placing a tremendous amount of faith in assessment" (p. 205) and are working under the assumption that students are unmotivated, teachers are inadequately skilled, local communities do not know what their students should be learning, and the accountability of rigorous testing pressures the system to improve. Even with this criticism readily available, on January 8, 2002, NCLB was signed into law, with a guarantee that "every child in America would read on grade level and compute high-level mathematical problems, every teacher would be highly qualified to educate our students, and every school would make adequate yearly progress (AYP) to prove these outcomes were legitimate" (Smyth, 2008, p. 133). To measure AYP, the federal government is challenging states to mandate criterion-referenced tests to measure student performance and ability. Based on the results of these tests, schools become eligible for differing levels of funding (or not), and this funding is reliant on the outcome of these criterion-referenced tests as well as progress towards AYP (for example, increases in the number of certified teachers). Simply, schools that achieve will be rewarded financially, and those that do not will lose financially, based upon these test scores. Therefore, critics of NCLB say schools are rewarded for teaching students how to take a test, and conflict begins to emerge when teachers begin teaching more to the test than the original objective outlined in the criteria.

Tests such as these are called high stakes tests, which can be interpreted as any test that makes a high-level decision about how a student, school, or curriculum, for example, proceeds forward, with potential negative consequences for not achieving certain goals. Pearlman (2001, What is high stakes testing section, para. 1) defines high-stakes testing as the "use of test scores to make decisions that have important consequences." Existing examples of high-stakes tests include college admission tests (like the SAT and ACT), licensing exams (like the PRAXIS for teachers or nursing exams), and various student tests, which serve as benchmarks within NCLB.

Pearlman (2001, What defines misuse of test scores section, para. 1) also discusses the misuses of high-stakes testing, which involves "making an inference based on a test score that is not supported by the information the test is designed to supply," and gives the example of inferring that a person who scores high on a driver's license exam will have fewer accidents. Many have argued that the high-stakes testing incorporated into NCLB is resulting in such overemphasis on those areas which are tested that many areas outside the realm of the tests, including the arts, foreign languages, social studies, physical education, and sexuality education, are often removed from the curriculum, particularly at low-income schools (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2008). Since 2002, when NCLB took effect, the Center for Education Policy (CEP) reported that those school districts that did narrow the curriculum increased instructional time in English / Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics by 43 percent and reduced instruction in other subjects by 32 percent. Eighty percent of districts reported increasing ELA by at least 75 minutes a week, and more than half of those increased by 150 minutes per week, with two-thirds increasing math to at least 75 minutes a week as well (CEP, 2008). Most districts that did so reported substantial cuts for other subjects such as social sciences, science, art, music, physical education, recess, and lunch, with 72% reporting a decrease of at least 75 minutes per week for at least one of these areas (CEP, 2008). "The combined reductions [across multiple areas] averaged 145 minutes per week, or a 32% decrease from pre-NCLB time allotments" (CEP, 2008, p. 4).

In relation to the area of sexuality education, NCLB does not rank schools on AYP for sexuality instruction, and therefore it is an area that often falls into the "decrease" group mentioned above. Sexuality education curriculum (like art, social studies, etc.) is not measured in AYP, yet NCLB also has specifications written into it that prohibit schools which utilize NCLB funding from offering "programs or courses of instruction directed at youth that are designed to promote or encourage sexual activity" (United States Department of Education, 2002, section 9525). In addition, these guidelines go on to state that sexuality education programs must "include the health benefits of abstinence" and may not result in the operation of "a program of contraception distribution in schools" (United State Department of Education, 2002, section 9525). Therefore, a conundrum arises – schools are not measured on AYP in sexuality education but if they wish to utilize NCLB funding for *any* reason (not just sexuality education), they must follow these guidelines.

Abstinence-Only Initiatives Funded By the Federal Government

Although the passage of NCLB was designed to have a limiting effect on sexuality education efforts in the United States, the federal government's involvement and influence over sexuality education is not new. Taxpayer money has been used in sexuality education for over 25 years (SIECUS, 2005), although federal law does not require sexuality education in public schools (Collins, Alagiri, & Summers, 2002). What is relatively new – over the last decade or so – is the federal government's fiscal emphasis on abstinence-only education. Since 1996, the government has spent over a billion dollars on these programs, despite limited research proving effectiveness, and over $204 million in 2007 alone (SIECUS, 2005). Such programs have been allocated funding via a variety of sources, with three main initiatives receiving the bulk of the funding: the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) of 1981, the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, and Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program of 2000.

Adolescent Family Life Act

The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) of 1981 was a reflection of the conservative shift during the Reagan era and passed without debate in Congress. It was posed as an alternative to previous programs supported by Congress (specifically Title X of the Public Health Act and Titles V, XIX, and XX of the Social Security Act), which funded public contraceptive programs (Irvine, 2002). AFLA shifted "the discourse on the prevention of teenage pregnancy away from contraception and instead to 'chastity' or 'morality'" (Irvine, 2002, p. 90). AFLA required grant recipients in the program to involve religious organizations and prohibited funding to any group providing "abortion-related" services, including counseling, referral, or subcontracts, and therefore placed a barrier to federal funding for many hospitals and family planning clinics (Donovan, 1984).

During the initial phases of AFLA, programs used federal funding to develop religious-based sexuality education curricula. In 1983, the *Kendrick v. Heckler* case was brought forward to counter the entanglement of church and state. It was settled in 1993 (Irvine, 2005). The result, however, was that many of the sexuality education curricula prior to *Kendrick* simply removed the word "God" from materials but kept the spirit of Catholic or evangelic doctrine intact. For example,

> St. Margaret's Hospital submitted a public school curriculum for approval to [Health and Human Services] in 1984 after *Kendrick* had been filed. The curriculum, which the [Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention] approved,

> continued to list death first among possible medical complications and asserted that there are no medical or psychological conditions for which an abortion might be indicated. (Irvine, 2005, p. 100)

AFLA allowed religious and conservative evangelical discourse into the sexual morality taught in schools, helping to shape "healthy" adolescent sexual behavior. It also created the commercially-driven abstinence-only sexuality education marketplace. By the end of 1990s, "there were over twenty major abstinence-only curricula commercially available for public schools" (Irvine, 2005, p. 102). In addition, many of the federally funded programs allocated less than three percent of funding to evaluation, thus creating a need for evaluation that the private sector, primarily the conservative religious market, gladly undertook. A review of evaluations in 2001 concluded that nearly all of the evaluations of abstinence-only programs were so flawed as to be meaningless (Kirby, 2001).

Title V: The Welfare Reform Act

The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 "established a new funding stream to provide grants to states for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs" (SIECUS, 2008, para. 6). Part of the challenge of this Title V initiative was to define abstinence-only education, and any program that accepts funding must adhere to the following guidelines:

> Abstinence education is defined in the law as an educational or motivational program which has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity; teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school age children; teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems; teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity; teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects; teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society; teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increases vulnerability to sexual advances; and teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity. (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1998, Section 510.b.2)

The authors of this bill have ensured that programs that discuss contraception or place equal emphasis on healthy sexual decision-making and abstinence are not eligible. In addition, the authors of the legislation go to great lengths to define abstinence education, but the definition is dependent on an understanding of what constitutes sexual activity. While the authors go to great lengths to define what sexual activity is not, there is limited to no information on what sexual activity is.

Community-Based Abstinence Education

In 2000, Congress increased abstinence education funding through the Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) program, which followed the 1998 definition of abstinence. These funds are even more restrictive than AFLA funds, in that those utilizing them must incorporate *all* eight key parts of the federal definition of abstinence, whereas previously if *one* aspect was incorporated, it counted as abstinence education. The main difference, however, is that rather than money flowing from the federal government to the states for distribution, the federal government now directly gives to community-based programs, including religious-based programs. By removing the states from the distribution process, the federal government has more direct control over the promotion of abstinence-only education. In 2001, funding for CBAE was $20 million; by fiscal year 2007, this was increased 450 percent to $113 million and increased to $141 million for fiscal year 2009 (SIECUS, 2009). No federal funding was distributed for comprehensive sexuality education. Without any fiscal incentive for teaching comprehensive sexuality education, cash-strapped schools are often left without a viable option outside of abstinence-only.

Sexuality Education in the US

Global Challenges

As demonstrated earlier, sexuality education in the US has moved from a more comprehensive approach to an abstinence-until-marriage approach. However, defining *what* is taught is tricky. "Sexuality education" can range from an overview of HIV and sexually-transmitted infections and their transmission, to sexual decision-making, to abstinence, to abortion, to name just a few areas. Since sexuality education's inception in the classroom in the early twentieth century (Moran, 2000), it has always focused on the physical development of its students, but only recently have the expectations changed to "delay adolescents' initiation of sexual activity" (Darroch, Landry, & Singh, 2000). In 1998, approximately two-thirds of all U.S. schools had a policy of teaching sexuality education (the other third left that decision up to individual teachers and principals, meaning sexuality education could vary widely even within a school district), with only fourteen percent "teaching about both abstinence and contraception as part of a broad sexuality education program" (Landry, Kaseer, & Richards, as cited in Darroch, Landry, and Singh, 2000). This implies that, of those schools with a mandate for sexuality education, roughly 86% emphasized abstinence-based programs.

In 1999, 57% of sexuality education teachers did not have prescribed curricula, therefore making it even harder to track *what* is being taught. In addition, approximately one-third of schools require parental permission for students to attend sexuality education classes, so not all students had equal access to information (Darroch, Landry, & Singh, 2000). With such a strong emphasis on abstinence in the curriculum, it has been found that certain topics are being abandoned within the curriculum compared to fifteen years ago, including condoms as a barrier to sexually transmitted infection prevention, birth control, and LGBT identity (Wilson, 2000). It is important to remember, however, that while it is unclear *what* is being taught, it is clear that all states (with the exception of two) have taken funding from the federal government that is required to have abstinence promotion outside of marriage as their "exclusive purpose" (Landry, Kaeser, & Richards, 1999, p. 280).

In addition to the confusion over *what* is in the formal curriculum, there is confusion over *who* sexuality educators are. In many states, sexuality educators may or may not be certified. In Pennsylvania, for example, some knowledge of sexuality is required in the K-12 Health and Physical Education and the School Counselor certifications (*Pennsylvania,* n.d.). However, studies have found that "nonspecialist, or classroom, teachers are the largest category of sexuality education teachers" (Landry, Singh, & Darroch, 2000, p. 218). Although there is currently no data available on *who* is teaching sexuality education in rural areas specifically, in light of the geographic challenges rural schools face by being removed from urban centers and a wide range of potential teachers, it may be assumed that these nonspecialists often teach sexuality education.

In relation to sexuality education curriculum, there is no standard definition for how rural sexuality educators define sexuality education. One must weigh in factors like who is teaching (and their training with the subject), what is being taught (and in what forms), and where it is being taught. However, there does appear to be a bit more consistency in what is not being taught.

The fundamental issue within the abstinence-until-marriage sexuality education curriculum is that there is a refusal to accept secondary school students as capable of having any sexual agency. Sexual agency is a person's ability (or inability) to make his or her own decisions about when to have sexuality (or their inability to make this choice). In the United States, the refusal to acknowledge sexual agency in youth has "everything to do with how our youth experience life as youth in contemporary American culture, as well as with our culture's unwillingness to take seriously the tensions and struggles that are specific to young people" (Best, 2000, p. 161).

> Society, policy makers, and researchers often ignore the importance of healthy adolescent female sexual functioning from a broad framework that includes elements of subjectivity and agency. Often the "default" framework equates healthy adolescent sexual with *no* sexuality or traditionally scripted sexuality. Policy and society continues to push ideas of abstinence and a huge responsibility on women and men to experience sexuality within the limitations of their gender roles. (Averett, 2004, p. 2)

Also problematic within sexuality education curriculum is the inherent heteronormative metanarrative in the curriculum. Heteronormativity is "the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations" (Ingraham, 2002, p. 76). Heterosexuality is the norm, and deviations from this are, frankly, ignored. Typically, the heteronormative metanarrative is not discussed, not pictured, and not mentioned, at least not in any formal classroom setting. When queer issues are discussed in the classroom – or even debated in forums outside of the classroom in relation to whether or not to include it in a classroom – they are often viewed as dangerous and provocative.

> The threat or the possibility of religious or community disagreement is often enough to stop conversations before they begin. When approaching topics involving gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, it is as if schools reflexively react with: 'Well, there may be religious disagreement, so let's not discuss it. It is too dangerous. It makes everyone nervous.' (Loutzenheiser, p. 59, 1996)

Therefore, this fear of the *potential* for disagreement is often enough to end any discussion of anything queer.

When queerness does make an appearance, it is often in the relation to disease, particularly HIV and AIDS, sending a strong message that being queer is associated with illness. In a recent review of key sexuality education resources available online, ranging from Department of Education resources to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), there was no mention of queer identity in a rural context with the exception of rural HIV/AIDS prevention. However, the statistics coming from HIV/AIDS initiatives in rural environments are startling, particularly in light of those who do not identify as queer or LGBT but do engage in what is deemed "homosexual" behavior.

> Among rural men, men who have sex with men (MSM) comprise approximately sixty percent of rural AIDS cases…A powerful stigma remains associated with HIV/AIDS and homosexuality. Rural MSM may avoid stigma, social hostility, and expected violence by hiding their sexuality and assimilating into heterosexual culture. Rural venues where MSM openly socialize are scarce, resulting in some men seeking sexuality partners in public environments, through the internet, and by regularly traveling… (University of California San Francisco, 2006, pp. 1-2).

The Silence of Rural Sexuality Education

Adding to this definitional confusion – over what sexuality education is and who exactly is teaching it – the issue of schools in rural environments makes this even more confusing. When the typical poverty of rural areas is matched with the AFLA, Title V, and CBAE programs, which set a "legislative and ideological precedent for federal funding of abstinence-only programs," (Legal Momentum*,* 2007), it should come as no surprise that many rural areas are grabbing at this low-hanging fruit and initiating abstinence-only sexuality education programs.

Overall, sexuality education in rural America appears to be a non-issue in academic and government research, for there is very little research available. A recent search in the ERIC database for the keywords "sexuality education" and "rural schools" resulted in a total of 25 results. Of these results, three were in peer-reviewed journals – a study on rural sexuality educators' community identities published in 2008 in the journal *Sexuality Education,* a 2000 publication in the *Journal of School Health* focusing in parental communication with teenagers regarding sexuality, and a 1994 study in the same journal about parental attitudes towards sexuality education. Therefore, in order to determine what needs to be done, further research is needed on what is happening, who is teaching, and how it is implemented.

Why This Matters Specifically in Rural Communities

Pivotal to understanding why this matters requires looking from various interdisciplinary intersections, particularly the normative experiences of schooling (Warner, 1999; Irvine, 2002; Kumashiro, 2002), and the uniqueness of rural America (Halberstam, 2003; Gray, 2009). Judith Butler (1990) in her pivotal queer theory text *Gender Trouble,* offers viewpoints on the reliance on "iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms" (p. 95), as that which is required to create a normalization of bodies, which is reiterated within the field of sexuality education via the federal definition of abstinence education. In rural communities, however, these norms become more visible, as the fishbowl effect present in these environments makes adherence to norms, through iteration, scrutinized. According to Gray (2009), rural communities use appeals to sameness to minimize community stigma by not acknowledging that queerness exists in the community at all. However, this notion was not embraced by the educators in this study as one to which they espoused.

Although sexuality education has recently taken a turn towards comprehensive sexuality education under President Obama, the conservative turn of the past twenty-plus years should not be underestimated. The abstinence-until-marriage movement has normalized acceptable sexual behavior, meaning sexual behavior within the context of marriage, and for those who do not or are unable to marry, their sexual behavior falls into the category of "abnormal."

Rural America does not often have a history of inclusivity for queer students (Gray, 2009), and queer issues in rural schools get very limited attention in research (Whitlock, 2009;

Halberstam, 2003; Corber & Valocchi, 2003; Bell, 2000). Most national organizations believe local issues are best handled at the community level, but local rural communities often do not have enough of a power base as well as financial resources to fight school districts (Gray, 2009; Miceli, 2005; ACLU, 2003). Often, when a battle is fought it is on an emotional level and focuses on queers along the Martyr-Target-Victim continuum (Rofes, 2004).

As highlighted earlier, rural school districts and communities face challenges that are unique when compared to urban and suburban districts and communities, and many of these factors were evident here. One of the first challenges facing rural school districts, in comparison to rural and urban, is their small size, which leads to the challenges the educators highlighted about the fishbowl effect of everyone knowing everyone else. Another uniquely rural challenge, which is somewhat obvious, is distance from an urban core and the resources typically available in these core areas, which could help educate teachers, students, and communities on queer issues; help advocate for resources and support when needed; and offer different normative visions of sexuality. In addition, another unique factor of schools is the tradition of local control, which may mean most teachers and administrators in a district were products of that area. With these few examples, it becomes clear that the rural voice is unique and should be recognized as such.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, there is much that is yet unknown in rural sexuality education initiatives. Federal programs connected with NCLB attempt to measure AYP in numerous areas, but sexuality education is not among them. However, sexuality education is defined quite narrowly within existing legislation, including AFLA, Title V, and CBAE, as "abstinence-only-until-marriage" and fiscal incentives are given to school districts for following these guidelines. In rural areas, where issues of size, poverty, financial distress, geography, local control, enrollment decline, and rapid ethnic diversification are at the forefront, it should come as no surprise that rural districts often require this money for survival. From there, however, the path becomes less clear in relation to sexuality education. It is unclear what is being taught and who is doing the teaching. In addition, the narrow definition of abstinence-only-until-marriage ignores sexual agency in students and involves a heteronormative metanarrative that often associates queer with disease. Due to the lack of research in this area, it begs further questions of the field of rural sexuality education, such as: Who is teaching? What is being taught? Is there a curriculum? How are queer issues handled? And, How do students and teachers make sense of abstinence-only-until-marriage in a way that is inclusive (or not)?

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