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CONSERVATIVE AND CULTURAL CLASHES WITH
COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

by

BRYAN ANDERSON

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2023

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APPROVAL

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Bryan Anderson

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
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ABSTRACT

Conservative and Cultural Clashes with Comprehensive Sexuality Education

by

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This thesis analyzes the multifaceted debate over the use of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in United States public schools, while also emphasizing the ways in which withholding CSE is a strategy to uphold the white supremacist patriarchy. The work begins by historically framing the evolution of sexuality education through the United States' history. This leads to the current discourse around CSE and the ways in which it is the optimal support for American youth today. After setting this foundation, the thesis looks at conservative figures and groups who are seeking to prevent public school adoption of CSE standards, as well as censoring the mention of any topics remotely connected to sexuality. Their work has led to the proliferation of calls for parental rights in education. While conservatives are the most vocal in opposing CSE, it is also vital to consider other cultural perceptions of sexuality. Many minority and immigrant families may hold their own cultural and religious views of sexuality education that would lead them to stand against CSE. If this resistance is ignored, it sets CSE up for failure, which in turn will most negatively impact students of color and LGBTQIA+ students. This failure would directly contribute to white supremacist patriarchal ideals dominating American culture. In the end, this thesis aims to point to ways that CSE can be set up for success and meet the wide needs of youth and community stakeholders.

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Introduction

The intention of this thesis is to analyze the multifaceted debate over the use of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in United States public schools, while also emphasizing the ways in which withholding CSE is a strategy to uphold the white supremacist patriarchy. Author and activist bell hooks was at the forefront of defining how these two systems interlock to dominate over racial, gender, and sexual minorities. To her, it was more important to look beyond the term racism and shift the discussion towards white supremacy, which she saw as the centering of whiteness and its pervasiveness in our social and political consciousness. Meanwhile, hooks emphasized patriarchy as a lever of socialization that awards power and status to heterosexual men over women and sexual minority peoples (hooks). Combined, these two systems of dominance work to position heterosexual white men as the beneficiaries of all societal power. This is why CSE, with its focus on informed sexual health and understanding of the spectrum of sexualities, can be seen as a threat to the white supremacist patriarchy and has become the target of conservative attacks.

To ground the debate around the topic, the first chapter will define CSE and explain the positive outcomes of its implementation. This includes standards for kindergarten through grade twelve around topics like bodily health, relationship building, consent, gender, sexuality, reproduction, and disease prevention. Each of these topics are appropriately adapted to meet the cognitive and developmental level of the students across grade ranges. It is the broad ranging, evolving framework that troubles opponents of the program.

The chapter will begin by focusing on the evolution of sexual education that has led to the development of CSE, by first engaging in Jonathan Zimmerman's book, *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education*. Zimmerman chronicles the ways sexual topics have

historically been handled within schools and public policy, while also detailing liberal and conservative reactions along the way. The chapter then analyzes the core concepts of the curricular framework of CSE as proposed by the Future of Sex Education Initiative. Through student testimonials and the research of medical professionals, it becomes very apparent why CSE has the power to make a difference in the lives of youth in the United States. Finally, the chapter uses the work of child development and pedagogical scholars Karen J. Pitman, Sarah Schulman and Tim Davies in the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD), to emphasize the importance of developing the whole child through strong public schools. This instructional model also connects directly to Michael Sadowski's *Safe is Not Enough*, which details how to best support Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA+) students in schools, including through curriculum. These types of identity affirming curriculum and programming are at the forefront of the recent backlash, leading to further discrimination of the LGBTQIA+ community. Together, these authors' observations, critiques, and suggestions lead to the conclusion that the implementation of CSE would best support the sexual health and social-emotional development of all students and positively impact the lives of LGBTQIA+ students in particular, all of which directly conflicts with white supremacist patriarchal structures.

The second chapter, will shift the focus to conservative figures and groups that are seeking to prevent public school adoption of CSE standards, as well as censoring the mention of any topics remotely connected to sexuality. Similar attacks against Critical Race Theory (CRT) also point to awareness of societal oppression being the main target of these conservative groups. An analysis of their media presence, public statements, and policies, will demonstrate their intent to maintain white supremacist patriarchy through Christian moral values centered on

conventional gender roles, monogamy, heterosexuality, and procreation as the intended purpose of sexual activity. Throughout American history, conservative groups have found ways to incentivize abstinence-only sexual education and rallied around “parental rights” over the education of their children, to varying levels of success.

In order to frame the chapter, it was important to start by understanding how Christian values perpetuate white supremacist patriarchy. This begins with the book *The Religion of White Supremacy in the United States* by Eric Weed and Anthony B. Pinn. They detail the ways in which Christian ideals inherently led to discriminatory practices that continue into modern American society. This leads to an analysis of the ways that conservative politicians leverage Christian values in their policy making. *The Bush Administration, Sex and the Moral Agenda*, by Edward Ashbee, gives a detailed rundown of how George W. Bush created policies and allocated federal spending towards abstinence-only sexual education, while also calling for “parental rights” to dictate their children’s education. This led to many court cases where conservative parents attacked public schools for various content that they felt should only be the right of a parent to discuss with their children. This was also tied to Bush’s push for school vouchers, which could provide parents with a wider choice of schools; mainly conservative, religious schools. This is further supported by Melinda Cooper’s *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* and Natalia Petrzela’s *Classroom Wars: Language, Sex, and the Making of Modern Political Culture*. The perspectives of these authors, in conjunction with the analysis of parental rights court cases, will clearly illuminate the roadmap current conservative figures are following for their attacks against sexuality in public schools.

The second chapter will subsequently look at current events centered on conservative figures like Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, as well as journalists and social media activists,

Chris Rufo and Matt Walsh. Their aggressive tactics help illustrate the intimate alignment of countermovements against the topics of sexuality and race in education. DeSantis has successfully instituted statewide bans on any mentioning of sexuality and gender in kindergarten through third grade, with the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. This is closely tied to Walsh’s documentary, *What is a Woman?*, which chronicles his global investigation into gender and sets the stage for his attacks on sexuality education and trans identities. Meanwhile, DeSantis has also been working to pass the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (W.O.K.E.) Act. This aligns with the platform of Rufo, who has been loudly protesting public schools engaging with Critical Race Theory (CRT) or topics like institutional racism, as well as CSE. Broader acceptance and empowerment of various sexual, gender, and racial identities is a direct threat to the white supremacist patriarchy and its control over American society. Overall, this chapter will demonstrate the myriad of ways that conservatives have weaponized sexuality and look to withhold pertinent information that would benefit women, as well as racial and sexual minorities, which serves to uphold the white supremacist patriarchy.

The final chapter will highlight an unfortunate coalescing of opinions. Many minority and immigrant families may hold their own cultural and religious views of sexuality education that would lead them to stand against CSE. While these arguments may seem reasonable, they also share common ground with some of the moral and religious values that white supremacist patriarchy promotes about sexuality, which can perpetuate a system in which sexual minority youth of color are more likely to be victims of discrimination and violence. The confluence of minority parents’ cultural, religious, and academic concerns leaves space for “parental rights” activists to fan the flames of resistance to CSE and other similar curricula. Even if minority parents do not support the sexual or gender identity of their children, advocating for more limited

instruction on topics like sexuality and race further perpetuates the system that privileges heterosexual white men and demonizes other racial, gender, and sexual minorities.

The examination of various cultural perspectives of sexuality first considers the implications of wider sexuality education on a global scale. Mainly the ways in which the push for sexual health autonomy and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities contributes to the concept of “homonationalism.” Jasbir Puar has detailed the ways in which acceptance and privileging of LGBTQIA+ identities within Western societies can contribute to further discrimination against countries and cultural populations who have less progressive stances on sexuality. The valuation of a nation can come down to their stance on homosexuality, which in turn dictates their cultural and political capital. This directly impacts immigrants from those countries who are living in Westernized spaces like the United States. This will flow into the works of Janice M. Irvine, like the collection of essays, *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities*. These essays represent a variety of cultures and their distinct interactions with sexuality education over time, which showcases the complicated relationship between those cultural identities and topics of sex and schooling. To fully illustrate various cultural perspectives on sexuality, the works of authors from Latinx, Black, Muslim, and Asian backgrounds are featured throughout the chapter to give a clearer image of what is at stake. This will help accentuate how these perspectives could align with conservative agendas and tactics in opposition to CSE. This chapter will also examine studies like “2018 LGBTQ Youth Report” by the Human Rights Campaign, which emphasize the struggles of minority youth that identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The intersection of multiple minority statuses leads to further discrimination inside and outside school. These youth have a higher likelihood of their identities negatively impacting their life outcomes, which demonstrates why schools need to put in more of an effort to meet their distinct

needs. However, this would best be accomplished by providing space for minority parents to see the impacts of their children's race and sexuality being targeted in unison. Combined, this emphasizes the alignment of the conservative movements against heightening racial and sexual awareness in schools. While activists for people outside of the white supremacist patriarchy are attempting to implement changes in educational systems that encourage acceptance of sexual and racial minorities, conservatives are attempting to withhold information that recognizes and empowers those groups. The interrelation of these efforts will only continue to contribute to all minorities, especially LGBTQIA+ youth of color, being held under the boot of the white supremacist patriarchy.

The conclusion will detail strategies to build bridges between schools, youth, and families in order to make the goals of CSE more attainable. All of this only seems feasible with a strong community inside and outside individual schools, supported by the teachers, administrators, counselors, politicians, community based organizations (CBOs), and, most importantly, families. The strategies will also address responses to families who may believe that sexuality education is an impediment to their children's academic growth, especially those that find themselves in lower-achieving schools. Through all of the proposed engagement with families, there must be a call for continued advocacy for the human right of youth to have medically accurate and science-based sexuality education that provides the full autonomy of informed citizens. The adoption of CSE standards and curriculums will be a step towards making this a reality for United States public school students moving forward, which in turn is a step towards addressing the continued presence of the white supremacist patriarchy.

Chapter 1: Why CSE? Why now?

For over a century, sexual education has been conceived, practiced, analyzed, and debated across familial, community, political, and academic spheres within the United States. There have been proponents and detractors from all segments of the political spectrum. The possible relationship between school and sex has been difficult to decipher or codify, leading to countless experiments with little cohesion and no sense of agreement on the desired outcomes. In the early 1900s, the relatively new institution of public education was continuously developing as the United States and other Western countries looked to mold more educated and well-rounded citizens (Mann). Since then, debates about the role of schools and the necessity for some form of sexual education have grown within the constantly changing landscape of public education. The question was, how to cover these topics without corrupting the perceived innocence of youth.

These century-long conversations and debates around sexual education have led to a true ebb and flow between two approaches to sexuality education. One as a tool for controlling sexual activity and innocence of youth, and the other, as a way to liberate youth and dismantle stigma. In the 1920s there was a recognition of the fact that children were becoming more aware of their bodies and sexuality, so many adults from within and outside education felt it needed to be addressed. Initially, this was tackled through the study of animal and plant anatomy, with the belief that children would become familiar with reproduction without being tempted into sexual acts upon viewing human subjects (Zimmerman 3). Leading up to and throughout World War II, there was a concerted effort to ensure that young men were more versed in sexual health and protection in order to stave off sexually transmitted infections while serving in the armed forces abroad. Later, after the conclusion of the War and the proliferation of American dominance, the

United States pivoted to rebrand sexual education as “family life education,” which taught patriarchal gender roles and Western, white ideals of child rearing. The country framed this as crucial to national security and prosperity (Zimmerman 4).

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the research of sexologist Alfred Kinsey, burst on the scene and fully disrupted the cultural conversation around sex. His separate reports on the sexual behavior of men and women brought to light topics that had been treated as taboo, mainly sex for pleasure and homosexuality. The idea of sex for pleasure, not just procreation, helped illustrate that women could, and should, look to attain sexual pleasure (Bullough). Although they were controversial at the time, his reports were very popular and brought these ideas out into public discourse. This led directly into the 1960s and 70s, where feminist and anti-war activism prompted society to shift towards more sexual freedom as people began to acknowledge bodily autonomy and power dynamics both globally and intimately. These shifts provided space for wider topics to be covered in sexual education, like acknowledgement of sexual pleasure and sexual activity outside of marriage. However, this created a battlefield in which conservatives loudly fought against their children being taught anything related to sex in schools. Even with the pushback, this was the era where the most progress was seen in the depth of concepts covered within sexual education curricula that looked to meet the modern needs of youth, based on research (Petrzela 101-103). Eventually though, the conservative agenda came out on top and sexual education began to dwindle across the country yet again.

Consequently, when the HIV/AIDS crisis struck the United States in the 1980s and 90s, there was a renewed interest in protecting youth and targeting risky behaviors with sexual education (Zimmerman 117-120). This led to more concerted efforts to use sexual education to villainize gay men, as well as other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, this

was a time where teenage pregnancy was on the rise and welfare programs that often helped people, like young mothers, were under attack from conservatives. There began to be a shift towards considering birth control in order to bring down the number of children born out of wedlock, who were often perceived as a burden on the government and taxpayers. It was during this period that abstinence-only education began to pick up traction. It was seen as the ideal solution to this problem. A solution that President Ronald Reagan favored, but President George W. Bush truly began to implement and incentivise in the early 2000s (Ashbee; Cooper).

Across many states, there is a lasting legacy of curriculums and policies that function to limit sexual information. Abstinence-only sexual education has persisted within many conservative states. The same goes for some state policies that are still in effect that call for the omission of any mention of homosexuality or to specifically teach that non-heterosexual relationships are dangerous and unacceptable (Crowell). Interestingly, the one standard that cuts across almost all modern state sexual education requirements is lessons about HIV/AIDS prevention, with many instances of that being the only real requirement for the whole state (“State Policies on Sex Education in Schools”). While the debates continue, there are recommendations for the most extensive overhaul American sexual education has ever seen.

More recently, there has been a wider recognition of gender and sexuality discrimination, along with sexual violence, in Western society (S. M. Anderson; Nicholls). More people are standing up and calling out the problems that have often been swept under the rug or kept hidden. Consequently, advocates for the victims of these discriminatory and violent acts see sexuality education as a way to tackle these problems early within child development. If children are allowed to learn about the myriad of ways that sexuality and gender affect the world around them, a foundation of acceptance and understanding could be built for generations to come.

Therein lies the problem for the United States. In *Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States*, Kevin Bruyneel describes how the colonization of the United States was established through white supremacist patriarchy, employing the subjugation and eradication of non-white bodies and the gendered dominance of masculinity. Family, both its definition and protection, played an important role in the development of this country's systems and laws. The family was idealized through a white, Christian lens and predicated on the power of the white man as the head of the household and protector from racialized others. The interplay of race, gender, and family building dictated who had access to power and resources. These systems still undergird the laws and policies of the United States today, which continues to subsist on the power and privilege that is awarded to white, heterosexual men.

Aiming to end discrimination and provide equality across all types of identities threatens the perceived power of those white, heterosexual men and the very systems that have been built to benefit them. Sexuality education could be an effective tool in doing just that. If young people were provided the space to learn about and process the racialized power dynamics of gender and sex, as well as challenge the ideas of what it means to be a family, there would be a destabilization of the power held by the white supremacist patriarchy. A broader acknowledgement of individuals from across the LGBTQIA+ and racial spectrums, could begin to provide those individuals with more social capital and therefore more influence over policies in the United States. That is exactly why sexuality education is a target of their attacks. One of the most inclusive, and therefore divisive, developments within sexual education over the last decade has been the push to adopt Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE). Therefore, this chapter will help frame the contents and benefits of this curricular framework.

A good curriculum makes a significant difference in the lives of all students. This applies across all content areas, from math to reading to history. But sexual education is often left out of that conversation, even if it has been acknowledged as best practice (Hall et al.). Simply stated, medical accuracy matters. Safety matters. Representation matters. In order to navigate the constantly shifting cultural and social dynamics of the information age, students need to be provided with the tools to understand their sexual health and interpersonal interactions. They also need opportunities to see themselves, including the full range of their identities, within their learning. While education has begun to adapt to this in relation to culture or race, with culturally responsive teaching (Hammond), there has not been a targeted push when it comes to sexuality and gender dynamics. One would be remiss to think that with all the media and access that youth have, that they are not interacting with sexual content at younger and younger ages (Collins et al.; Nikkelen et al.). There needs to be a targeted effort to provide space for youth to engage in meaningful dialogue and ask questions about sexuality and gender.

A major first step would be the adoption of national sexuality education standards, but the decisions would still come down to each individual state. Since education is not mentioned in the constitution, it has always been left to each state to decide. Inevitably, this has led to a wide variety of sexuality education approaches from state to state, which often follows the same trends as most other educational comparisons, in which blue states are more likely to have a more quality and effective education than red states (Dhillon). Only thirty states require public schools to teach sexuality education (“State Policies on Sex Education in Schools”). Likewise, those states may not follow the same standards or teach the same content. There are current proposals to provide United States youth with standards that cover the concepts of CSE, which consists of “learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality” (“What Is

Comprehensive Sexuality Education?”). The United States needs a set of standards for sexual education for the present day and the principles that should underlie them are CSE.

This has been established by the Future of Sex Education Initiative, in their original 2011 publication of National Sex Education Standards, as well as their most recent edition published in 2020. The newly proposed CSE standards cover grades kindergarten through twelve in order to ensure that all youth are receiving pertinent information that will aid in their physical and social development. The theoretical framework centers around five key concepts: personalization, susceptibility, self-efficacy, social norms, and skills. These allow students to identify what pertains to them, recognize the risks that they each face, advocate for themselves, push back against peer pressure, and help those around them. Meanwhile, there are seven major topic areas covered: consent and healthy relationships, anatomy and physiology, puberty and adolescent sexual development, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation and identity, sexual health, and interpersonal violence. Each of these topics is adapted to meet the cognitive development of each grade level (“Future of Sex Education”).

While interviewing students about their sexual education and what could be improved, Jenny Sperling received this response from a student: “I think everybody has the general idea of what consent is, but like, when you go deeper into it people get confused and you know there are all sorts of little things that I think can be way better explained and touched on” (Sperling 10). Development of healthy relationships plays an important role in the standards, starting with friendship building skills in the lowest grade levels and progressing into how to handle romantic relationships as students get older. The youngest children also start to learn about things like consent and safe touch, so they can more readily identify situations where they may feel compromised and provide them with the language to communicate those feelings. This thread is

carried throughout all of the grades, with the hope that students are more aware of how their actions can affect others and how vital consent is within healthy relationships. Specific, targeted learning objectives around relationships and consent are crucial to a better supported social development for all.

In another attempt to gather how students perceived their sexual education, a student told the *New York Times*: “We talked about a couple types of birth control... I am not sure it was intentional, or not, but a lot of what we covered seemed to be: ‘look at these disgusting diseases you could get from sex, so stay away!!!’” (Proulx). Of course, the standards also prioritize topics of physical health. Concepts like understanding your own body, its inevitable changes, and how to best tend to your physical health are very present in the standards. As youth begin to experience the effects of puberty, there can be high levels of discomfort and confusion. If there is space provided for these topics to be covered earlier, then youth can be more prepared for what is to come and have the ability to communicate their own experience. Subsequently, as students get older, they need wider access to information to keep themselves attuned to their own sexual health, including pregnancy, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections. However, they are not only presented as scare tactics to ward off sex, but as risks to be aware of when deciding when and with whom to have sex. Medically accurate and relevant information plays a key role in the CSE standards, because without it, youth are at a disadvantage when it comes to taking care of themselves.

Also within these standards, students tackle ideas of gender and sexuality separately. This is especially important because medical developments over the last few decades have made it more clear that gender and sexuality are separate entities (Institute of Medicine). Meanwhile, both of these socially constructed identity labels have been the root of a variety of discriminatory

acts throughout all of history. Therefore, the CSE standards effectively address these two topics in affirming ways. This is extremely important for LGBTQIA+ students. One such student who was interviewed for the “2018 LGBTQ Youth Report” asserted: “When in health class, my teachers never address any sex education when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community. The most oppressed group in the LGBTQ+ community is the transgender community who are ignored and alone and yet still receive even less information on their identities and how they can be safe in a sexually active environment.”

First, gender and the associated stereotypes are actively disrupted. The United States still has work to do to achieve gender equality, considering women are still paid less than men and continue to have to prove that they are worthy of leadership positions (Evans). With the CSE standards, children can learn about the shared strengths and similarities across genders. This helps to combat stereotypes about gendered perceptions of strength and weakness, especially when it comes to emotional development. It has been shown that generalizations about what boys and girls can excel at in school persist to this day (Muntoni and Retelsdorf). Youth need to see that they are capable of anything, regardless of their gender.

Secondly, CSE gives the proper space to recognize gender identity and the fact that it may not always match the sex assigned at birth. Transgender rights have become a much more prominent issue in the United States in the last decade. Many youth that are feeling a dissonance between their gender identity and their sex assigned at birth are certainly in need of medically accurate and psychologically sound information so that they can best understand themselves. CSE slowly introduces the ideas of the ways in which we relate to masculine and feminine attributes. By tackling the binary all students, not just transgender students, can begin to

understand all of those concepts. With a wider youth population understanding, transgender topics will become less taboo and therefore less targeted by specific attacks.

Finally, there are direct references to sexuality and the affirmation of identities that exist outside of heterosexuality. Instead of actively shunning those who may not be heterosexual, CSE standards call for conversations that acknowledge these types of identities and relationships. For younger students this is mostly focused on seeing those types of relationships as part of the wide spectrum of love. As students get older, this becomes important socially, spreading acceptance and ideally creating allies across identities. But including sexuality in these standards also has major ramifications on youth's physical and sexual health. It is important that sexuality education cover healthy sexual habits for students that may not be engaging in heterosexual sexual activity. If standards do not acknowledge nonheterosexual identities, students that identify on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum would not receive relevant sexual health instruction, leading to worse health outcomes.

Often a barrier to acceptance is the confusion of all the terms and facets of identity and with the proposed standards, students would be able to build an understanding over the course of their education: "Each student's experience and recommendation are an invitation into their worlds, and a learning moment that reminds educators and all youth workers of their responsibility to recognize and unlearn racialized and gendered biases that limit expansive and inclusive constructions of youth sexuality" (Sperling 12). With standards stretching across all grade levels, there are genuine opportunities for a development of vocabulary to help ensure that conversations, some of which may be hard, are as effective as possible for all those participating. Through interactions with representations of different family structures and ways that love is seen in the world, all students would gain a more positive and accepting outlook on others.

This debate is not solely about schools and pedagogy, it revolves around medical information. Medical experts in adolescent health consider withholding information covered in CSE a disruption of “fundamental human rights to complete and accurate health information” (“Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Policies and Programs” 401). They’ve determined that the ideal sexual education program should include topics of healthy sexual decision making, sexual orientation and gender, intimate partner violence, accurate medical risks, reproductive health and contraceptive methods. All humans have the right to understand their body, to keep their body safe and healthy, and acknowledge the emotions that come along with all of it. The youth of the United States are not immune to sex and will come face to face with most, if not all, of these topics. It is best for them to have accurate information so they can make fully informed decisions and protect themselves from unnecessary harm. Additionally, medical experts have also recognized the social and psychological benefits of CSE. Programs with CSE-like frameworks that have been effectively implemented around the world over the last 30 years have shown increases in the appreciation of sexual diversity, prevention and reporting of intimate partner violence, healthier relationship outcomes, and media literacy (Goldfarb and Lieberman 16-22).

The importance of CSE comes down to tending to the guidance of young people as it pertains to important life decisions. It became apparent in the 1980s and 1990s that, “Fundamental changes in American families have strained the capacity of parents and kin to provide the care and guidance young adolescents need to tackle everyday challenges” (*A Matter of Time* 6). This includes sexual health, drug use, and identity development, which youth have wider access to now in the information age. While groups have sought ways to ameliorate these societal problems with preventative after school or community-based outreach programs, they do not reach the majority of students. There needs to be a more focused effort to address these

issues in the public school setting, during regular school hours, so that it reaches the whole student population.

Child development and pedagogical scholars Karen J. Pittman, Sarah Schulman and Tim Davies point to the effectiveness of Positive Youth Development (PYD) across all settings that serve youth. A major facet of this framework is allowing students to lead with their identity and the use of their identities as a driving force through their education (Davies and Schulman; Pittman). While the focus of their work was after school programs, there is much to be gained from this perspective. Fostering positive identity development allows students to attain more academically, so why shouldn't this be applied within public schools, using content that is socially and cognitively relevant? Likewise, in meeting the students where they are at emotionally, educators are more able to identify specific community needs, even in relation to sexual health concerns. Implementing PYD-like frameworks in school would also help to look cross-sectionally at risky behaviors and address the issues head on at school through trust and relationship building (Davies & Schulman). By requiring CSE, there is already an expectation that identity plays a crucial role in the content as the students grow and mature, therefore a PYD framework would best serve schools looking to meet the sexuality education requirements.

In *Safe is Not Enough*, author Michael Sadowski points to schools as a space where all students, but especially LGBTQIA+ students need to feel not only safe, but seen. CSE standards would go a long way in meeting both of those needs. Through more inclusive and accurate curriculum, schools can become spaces where LGBTQIA+ students feel more supported. This is especially important if those students do not have that support at home. With less stability and support, LGBTQIA+ youth are also at a high risk of suicide and self-harm. “[S]uicide among LGBTQ youth is a major public health crisis, with rates of suicide attempt or ideation 4 times

higher than those of heterosexual and cisgender youth” (Rusow et al. 643). Without proper support, these young people are turning to extreme measures to escape the pains of rejection as they struggle to live firmly within their identity. If the family is not a safety net, school can play a vital role in the mental health of those students.

Overall, providing students with the appropriate information and the space to learn about sexual health will ideally lead to less engagement in risky behaviors, or at a minimum, more openness to asking for help when they are confused, which could lead to higher graduation rates and college enrollment. If the goal of the education system is to develop students that are ready to make the transition to adulthood, sexual health and identity play a huge factor in how they navigate the world.

With a more robust and clear sexuality education, schools would be taking the first step in addressing necessary social development that leads to safer, healthier choices and wider social acceptance. Since this is a state by state process, this will unfortunately be hard to proliferate across the entire country. However, in more liberal states, there has started to be a more concerted effort to make this a priority. For instance, there is currently a proposal in the New York state, which would require “comprehensive sexuality instruction for students in grades K-12 which includes a model curricula for comprehensive sexuality education and at a minimum conforms to the content and scope of national sexuality education standards” (New York State Senate). If State Senate Bill S2584A is passed, there could be tangible change across the state, or at the very least in New York City, where things are more progressive. With this, teachers could feel more empowered to bring robust and critical sexuality education to their students, of all ages. If more states follow suit, there could be a more systemic change that could address the needs of a wider population of youth in the United States. However, while there are promising

developments in New York, the exact opposite is happening in states like Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis has signed the “Parental Rights in Education” bill into law, which prohibits the mentioning of gender and sexuality in grades kindergarten through three (Florida State, House Bill 1557). With every state that makes progress, there will be an opposite reaction from other states which must be contended with.

The proposed CSE standards aim to provide youth full autonomy over their developing bodies, identities, and relationships. With accurate and relevant health information, youth will be able to make decisions about themselves with more confidence and less shame. CSE also acknowledges and seeks to prevent the struggles of gender and sexual minorities. Additionally, the standards will encourage healthy relationships based on consent and mutual understanding. The overarching goal is to empower youth, so instead of feeling lost and confused about their own development, they can feel the confidence to be themselves and support others. Which is a major threat to the white supremacist patriarchy. If people are more accepting of one another, it becomes hard to hold up the power structure where certain people are at the top, while others are kept away from the power. In the next chapter, I will detail specific examples of conservative groups aiming to stop CSE, along with anything that disrupts the power hoarding agenda of the white supremacist patriarchy.

Chapter 2: Conservatives on the Attack

In March 2022, Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, signed the "Parental Rights in Education" bill, which became known colloquially as the "Don't Say Gay" bill. With this bill, Governor DeSantis and Florida Republicans sought to ban information or ideas about sexuality being mentioned to students in grades kindergarten through three, and limited in the grades beyond. The aim of this measure was to ensure a parent's right to choose when and what type of information is provided to their children (Florida State, House Bill 1557). This could be seen as a reaction to the past few decades and the push by sexuality education advocates to establish more robust and inclusive sexuality education standards across the United States, just like those proposed by the Future of Sex Education Initiative.

Curricular frameworks like CSE, including Critical Race Theory (CRT), have become public enemy number one to conservatives like Governor DeSantis, along with conservative journalists and social media activists like Chris Rufo and Matt Walsh, who have played influential roles in perpetuating conservative political agendas over the past few years. But their political actions are part of a larger legacy of policy ushered in during the George W. Bush administration. While he built on the foundation set by Ronald Reagan before him, Bush was the first to make such a concerted effort to wrangle sexual education at the federal level and mold it to his specific, conservative vision. During his time in office, Bush offered rapidly increasing amounts of federal funding to states who would adopt abstinence-only education. It was during this time that calls for parental rights over the content their children have access to become a more prominent part of the discourse around public education. The majority of these arguments centered on conservative Christian ideals towards sex and heteronormative family structures.

Encouraged by Bush's Christian oriented moral policies, parents felt more empowered to make attempts to effect broader change within public education systems.

However, these are not simply Christian values, but yet another presentation of white supremacist patriarchy at play. The strong historical connection between Christian conservatism and its contribution to the power of white, heteronormative men is described clearly in *The Religion of White Supremacy in the United States* by Eric Weed and Anthony B. Pinn. The settling of the United States was predicated on the ideal of the white, Christian man and his right to this land. This was firmly rooted in the concepts of "discovery", as though the lands which were later colonized did not exist before the Spanish and English, accompanied by their faith, ventured across the Atlantic (Weed and Pinn 2). Subsequently, the same system of belief would be employed by the United States through Manifest Destiny, or the belief that God wanted Americans to expand their reach across North America, including through the violent removal of indigenous populations (Bruyneel 108). As Weed and Pinn explain, "The world of Christianity, that is, of whiteness, was ordained by God to have dominion. To this extent, the world of non-Christians, that is, the nonwhite, is beyond the pale of God and is left to God's chosen people to control" (12). These ideals were ingrained in the foundation of the United States and have persisted through its history to maintain racial and moral hierarchies. This has also been seen through the Christian right's work in providing non-majority white countries funding with explicit ties to Christian values. Another of Bush's initiatives was to provide Caribbean and African countries aid in exchange for adopting "Abstain, Be faithful, or, as a last resort, use a Condom" (ABC) in the fight against AIDS (Loconte). Combined, these examples demonstrate the ways in which white-centered Christian beliefs play a major role in the continued development

of Western power. Therefore, when addressing conservative, Christian values one must consider their roots in white supremacist patriarchy.

While CSE could play an effective and vital role in student development in the United States, conservative groups have historically villainized educators for including topics pertaining to sexuality or anything outside the heteronormative nuclear family in the classroom, while they incentivized states to adopt moral sex education programs, if any at all. Consequently, conservative groups have encouraged parents to employ their parental rights to affect change in public school curriculums or leverage voucher programs to access other educational settings that align with their values, with the assistance of federal funding.

Bush Administration Set a Precedent

From the beginning of his run for presidency, it was clear that George W. Bush had a moral agenda, aimed at catering to conservative, Christian values. While he built up his campaign, he also strengthened his ties to the Christian right, which enabled him to gain more political clout and legitimacy as a candidate. But this was not all for show. He is still seen as the president with the most devout following of his faith since Jimmy Carter and this permeated his policy decisions throughout his presidency. Indeed, he believed that he was “chosen by the grace of God” to become president and therefore looked to bring the country back on course with traditional Christian values. It did not hurt that this outlook also secured him more ardent followers in the GOP (Ashbee 47-52).

In becoming president, Bush was on a moral mission, using his platform to help elevate a Christian perspective on the difference between “right” and “wrong.” Something that he took very seriously was the need to dramatically reduce unplanned pregnancies, especially those out

of wedlock and those that may have led some to consider abortion. He perceived these issues as inherently tied to parents' moral guidance of their children, which needed to be empowered. Some sexual education programs, in his advisors' opinions, were becoming overly explicit and discussed contraception, which they deemed harmful to children's well-being. Therefore, Bush began to push the message that children should be taught that sex is to be saved for marriage and abstinence until marriage was the only option. (Ashbee 103). Being anti-gay was another way of him showing what he considered "right" while also earning him support from the Christian right. While he, at times, showed some willingness to engage with gay activists, there was much more evidence that he continued to see gay rights as a moral problem. When he was a governor of Texas, he had "rejected calls for the repeal of the state laws that barred anal and oral sex between same-sex adults" on the grounds that it served as a "symbolic gesture of traditional values" and supported banning gay parents from adopting (Ashbee 75-76). Looking at these positions in tandem, it was easy to see his moral compass was fixated on stamping out premarital sex, unplanned pregnancies, and homosexuality, which would go on to play an important role in how he perceived sexuality education.

There has been a wide discourse around sexuality education, and the pedagogical approaches necessary, since the 1960s (Petrzela), but under Bush and his Christian moral agenda, the federal government began to take a more direct approach. A huge piece of Bush's platform was the proposal to overhaul education. The well-known No Child Left Behind act, signed into law in 2002, had broad reaching effects that are still being felt throughout schools in the United States today. These include standardized test requirements and more rigorous teacher evaluation systems. For this reason, Bush is very much associated with his sweeping changes to the

American education system (Hayes and Urbanski). However, his incentivization of abstinence-only sex education programs is often less discussed.

Bush was aided in his aims to change the sexuality education landscape through the 1996 welfare reform that preceded his presidency, which followed in the footsteps of Ronald Reagan's attacks against welfare in the 1980s. At that time, the United States was looking to crack down on welfare expenditures and curb illegitimate births. The Christian right were also quite concerned with promiscuity and the moral virtues of society. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) replaced the federal welfare program with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which mandated that welfare recipients participate in work programs (Cooper 101-102). Another provision provided federal funding to states that would adopt abstinence-only sexual education programs (268). Combined, the "personal responsibilities" of the act's namesake take full shape. People in poverty were responsible for working and not having sex outside of marriage. This was seen as the ideal strategy to prevent unwanted pregnancies, which conservatives often pointed to contributing to a burden on the welfare system.

However, it also played into Bush's appeal to religious conservatism, as the morals around unplanned pregnancies came down to the Christian views on premarital sex and traditional heteronormative family structures. The PRWORA funded programs had to conform to the eight-point federal definition of abstinence-only education, which highlighted that "a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity" and that "sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects" (Ashbee 109). This aimed to highlight the nuclear family as the only viable way of existence and sought to strengthen skills required to make a

traditional marriage work. Some programs even went so far as to tell students that sex outside of marriage would lead to death (Zimmerman 119). It goes without saying, that at that point, same-sex marriage was not legal, so this form of sexual education was inherently anti-gay. Contraception also was not to be discussed or offered as a reasonable strategy for safe-sex, because under these programs, only sex within marriage was deemed safe.

When the welfare reform was passed, the funding earmarked for states willing to adopt abstinence-only education was \$50 million dollars a year. This led to 22 states that had not already provided abstinence-only education to begin instituting programs, while 21 states that already had some form of abstinence programs, expanded theirs (Ashbee 109). Once Bush got into office, his administration looked for ways to see this growth continue exponentially. Their strategy was the approval of yearly federal funding dedicated directly to programs or institutions that would adopt Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE), an extension of what was being offered after the PRWORA reforms. This was seen as vital by the Bush administration because some states that were receiving the PRWORA abstinence-only funding were not putting it towards school curriculum, but had been allowed to fund other programs like abstinence media campaigns. The CBAE programs were strictly tied to use in school settings. When funding towards CBAE programs began to be offered in 2001, states dedicated to abstinence-only sexual education were receiving over \$80 million a year. By 2005, they were receiving \$168 million a year to administer abstinence-only sexual education and promote marriage as the gold standard for all American citizens (Ashbee 110-112). This was a huge incentive to states, even if they were not necessarily committed to the messages of abstinence. Schools are often low on funding, so getting federal money to have a predetermined program was a huge win and allowed for the proliferation of the abstinence-only rhetoric.

Another way to cater to the Christian right was to consider private, religious schools and their use in furthering the moral agenda. The Bush administration was very interested in ushering in the expansion of school voucher programs. Inspired to give more choice to parents around their children's educational development, Bush thought that vouchers, which divert federal money to pay for private schooling, could be an effective strategy to get more religious conservatives what they wanted. Namely, a way out of the public schools, which some believed could be corrupting their children, all on the taxpayers dollar. Programs like this were originally started in 1990 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to allow students from poor performing schools to have access to higher quality schooling, which was initially restricted to secular private schools. However, later, in order to meet the high demands of families, the majority of whom were Black, the state opened the voucher program to religious private schools as well. Other states, like Florida followed suit, without much pushback. However, a similar voucher program in Cleveland had to make its case to the Supreme Court when the teacher's union there tried to make the case for the separation of church and state (Peterson 46).

In the 2002 *Zelman v. Simmon-Harris* Supreme Court decision, Cleveland retained the right to provide vouchers to private, religious schools. When the ruling was announced President Bush celebrated and labeled the decision a "historic turning point in how Americans think about education" (Peterson 46). He also compared the decision to *Brown v. Board of Education* ending segregation in American schools, stating "our nation will not accept one education system for those who can afford to send their children to a school of their choice and one for those who can't" (46). In all of these cases, the religious schools getting vouchers were Christian. The more liberal judges that dissented feared this set a precedent for different religious sects to struggle against one another, posing questions on what would happen if some of the schools receiving

vouchers were teaching Muslim or Jewish practices (47). It was obvious that this was not truly a victory for all religious schools, but one for mainstream Christian schools that would now be able to receive payment from the government. This was lauded by the Christian right and seen as a path towards satisfying parents' right to make educational choices for their children.

But Bush framed this as a victory for poorly performing, urban students of color, since they were benefiting the most from this type of program. Their access to higher caliber schools would lead to better performance on standardized tests, which were part of the No Child Left Behind education overhaul (48). If these students of color happened to receive vouchers to schools based in the Christian faith, what was wrong with that? In reality, this was playing into Bush's mission of spreading conservative moral values, especially when these private, religious schools were more likely to be touting the virtues of abstinence as an end-all-be-all solution to everyone's problems. They also would assuredly not be engaging in concepts related to LGBTQIA+ identities or lifestyles.

Finally, a constant message throughout Bush's presidency was "parent empowerment." His educational reforms were all framed in the ideas of helping parents be more aware of their children's education in order to play a more active role in the school systems that service them. When speaking in April 2001, Bush proclaimed: "Armed with that information, parents will have leverage to force reforms we also need to empower parents by giving them more options and more influence" (Bush 607). He often targeted this message to poorly performing and underserved communities, but the message was heard loud and clear by the Christian right. During his presidency there were many cases brought to higher courts by parents looking to defend their parental rights and challenge any mention of sexual material that they felt threatened their religious values.

Cases for Parental Rights

In discussing parental rights it is important to address two landmark cases that have a profound effect on how these types of cases are handled in modern times. In the 1972 case, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, an Old Order Amish man, brought a case against Wisconsin laws requiring parents to send their children to secondary school, claiming that it undermined his religious beliefs. Surprisingly, the Supreme Court allowed Yoder, and all Amish people in Wisconsin thereafter, exemption from the law requiring school attendance beyond eighth grade (United States, Supreme Court). However, in the 1987 case, *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education*, a Fundamentalist Christian in Tennessee, objected to his children being required to read Holt Company basal readers, claiming that they were offensive to his Christian beliefs. His plea to allow his child to opt out of the reading series was denied by the U.S. Court of Appeals. His children would be required to use and be tested on the readers unless he chose to pay to send them to a private or religious school (United States, Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.).

These two cases can help frame the approaches and responses to other cases that have come down to sexual education and parental rights, particularly in relation to the freedom of one's religion. While Yoder saw a win for a religious group, they were not asking for an alternative setting or curriculum, at the cost of the state. The court ruled that the exposure to the entirety of the secondary school system was a threat to their Amish practices. Meanwhile, Mozert saw the court rule that reading materials with alternative views to one's religion are not a viable threat to practicing that religion and holding your own beliefs. These distinctions are crucial to understanding how conservatives Christians attempted to thwart sexual education curriculums throughout the time of the Bush administration. They were often not successful, as

with Mozart, but the following cases help to illustrate how parents have come to feel more empowered by demands for parental rights.

One such instance was *Leebaert v. Harrington*, a 2003 case in which a Connecticut man sued his son's school after his son failed a health class that the family encouraged him to abstain from. During this health class, which lasted for one quarter of the school year, there were six lessons about human sexuality, presented as family-life instruction, along with information about HIV/AIDS. Based on religious principles, Leebaert wanted to handle the discussions of anything sexual in nature at home. While the school informed him that he could opt his son out of the six lessons around sexuality, he was informed that his son would be required to attend all other classes that quarter. The son did not attend a single class over the course of the entire quarter, and thus failed the course. Something important to consider about this case is the fact that Leebaert did not request an alternative course. This seems to imply that he thought it was fine for his son to spend a period a day not engaged in learning, when he could have been in some other class or setting. The court ruled in favor of the school district, since it was unreasonable for the remaining portion of the mandated quarter of classes to be skipped.

One of Leebaert's main objections was that he believed that the curriculum "[did not] support a married man and woman together as the basic unit of the family. The school [taught] that this unit can be comprised of anything or anyone, that anything you say can be a family" (United States, Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.). This statement echoes the principles of a heteronormative patriarchy. While this is often a touchstone of many religious conservatives, there does not seem to be a reasonable response to the idea that parents are within their rights to have their own conversations with their children at home about their family's belief system. He was also given the opportunity to opt out of the specific lessons and refused. It seems antithetical

to believe that parents leave every teaching and learning experience solely to school systems and that they are completely removed from imparting their own values and opinions on their own children. Just because a child learns something at school, does not mean they are not allowed to question it or form a different opinion at home. Hearing alternate opinions to their own, or to those of their family, does not negate them from holding their own opinions. His specific objections are aimed at maintaining heteronormativity, and show that the acknowledgement of alternative family structures is threatening to his family's livelihood. Meanwhile, this was also a period of time when LGBTQIA+ people were gaining more visibility within American society, especially in popular culture (Peele). It seems reasonable to consider that children had more access to these concepts, even outside of school.

It is interesting to note that some of Leebaert's other objections related to course materials covering topics including "Discussion of behaviors which demonstrate respect for self and others" and "Discussing responses to being sexually harassed" (United States, Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.). What would be the problem with a child hearing about respecting others? It is hard to see how this fits with Leebaert's strong Christian values, unless for him, showing respect to people with alternative family structures is the problem. Likewise, having discussions about sexual harassment is a step towards preventing those types of situations and allows children to learn ways to communicate about experiences that make them uncomfortable. Conservatives find themselves on a slippery slope when they object to these types of lessons. Are they truly worried about their children's religious values being compromised? While there are countless scriptures in the bible decrying sexuality outside of marriage, which Christians have used as a disciplinary mechanism to police sexual behavior of the all people, it seems more likely that they are opposed to providing space and voice to groups

that have historically been oppressed and silenced, including the LGBTQIA+ community and victims of sexual violence, who are more likely to be women.

A second case that should be analyzed is *Fields v. Palmdale School District* from 2005. In this case, a group of parents in California objected to a questionnaire that was administered to children in first, third, and fifth grades. The questionnaire was being used to help determine any early trauma signifiers across the student population of the elementary school. A consent letter was sent to all parents, but it did not specify the content of all of the questions, just that it was to identify any causes of trauma. Of the seventy-nine questions, ten of them mentioned sex. The parents that filed the case, all of whom signed the consent form, perceived this as a violation of their right to control the upbringing of their children, since only they should be introducing topics pertaining to sex. The court denied these claims, since “there is no fundamental right of parents to be the exclusive provider of information regarding sexual matters to their children” (United States, Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.). The statement here was more direct, but aligns with the ruling of the *Leebaert* case. It is unreasonable to think that parents are the only source of pertinent information for a child. If that was the case, there would be no point in a child attending school.

In connection with the *Leebaert* case and his objections to conversations around sexual harassment, it is important to consider the goal of the questionnaire. It aimed to identify trauma and help find ways to address it with children in order to improve their academic success. This should be as vital to parents as it was to the school, in case there is something that they were unaware of or misinterpreted within their home. A parent should consider the emotional and physical well-being of their children. The questionnaire could have opened the door for more honest conversations, which could have helped the children in the future if they were faced with

difficult sexual situations. However, parents are within their rights to handle these types of situations however they see fit in their own home.

Within the ruling on the Fields case, this statement was also included: “If all parents had a fundamental constitutional right to dictate individually what the schools teach their children, the schools would be forced to cater a curriculum for each student whose parents had genuine moral disagreements with the school's choice of subject matter. We cannot see that the Constitution imposes such a burden on state educational systems” (United States, Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.). While the Constitution does not dictate the curricular choices of public schools, it also does not provide space for every objection to curricular choices of public schools. If it did, the system would be stretched too thin and would no longer be serving a public good, ostensibly becoming private. Thus, the parents from this case may have felt more pressured to leave the public school system and find private schools that cater to their religious values. This may not have been an option for all parents without some type of voucher, which was beginning to become more viable during this time.

Finally, *Parker v. Hurley* from 2008 offers a more direct attack on LGBTQIA+ identities. Two sets of parents brought the case against their Massachusetts school district when they thought that their rights had been violated when they were not informed in advance that their kindergarten and first grade children would be viewing picture books that showed families with same-sex parents. The books aimed to consider what it meant to be a family and did not include the topic of marriage. They were situated within a nondiscrimination curriculum. The parents believed that they should have been informed and provided the opportunity to opt their children out of the learning, while also asking that their children be exempted from any similar materials until seventh grade. While Massachusetts does have a requirement that all sexual health lessons

require consent from parents, the court ruled that these books were not related to sexual health, and therefore did not require any consent or avenue to abstention.

The parents in this case saw these books served as a form of indoctrination deeming homosexuality as morally acceptable behavior. Again, these families wanted to prove that merely seeing depictions of non-heteronormative relationships threatened the religious livelihood of their families. However, in its response, the court stated, “Public schools are not obliged to shield individual students from ideas which potentially are religiously offensive, particularly when the school imposes no requirement that the student agree with or affirm those ideas, or even participate in discussions about them” (United States, Court of Appeals for the First Circuit.). This speaks volumes towards the ways Christian conservatives want the school system to cater to their belief systems and often proclaim that their rights are being violated. In reality, it is very likely that a variety of groups hold beliefs contrary to many topics covered in schools, but they are not consistently looking to change the system to fit their desires. Further reiterating the point that parents are within their rights to find a school that better fits within their value systems, which again, may have come down to working within some kind of voucher system.

Consequently, this case also raises the question of the true definition and application of sexuality education, and if the label of sexuality education cannot be applied, it is much harder for conservatives to attack. “Their complaint was not limited to a specific class, event, or educational practice but was instead a much broader objection to the discussion of same-sex relationships. Although same-sex relationships may raise questions among young children, merely referencing them cannot be called sex education” (E. J. Brown 143). Many conservatives struggle to see that showing a variety of family structures and acknowledging identities does not have to have a direct correlation to sex. While those things can and should be included in

sexuality education curriculums, they also do not exist in a vacuum. This is directly tied to how these issues are playing out today and the new strategies that conservative politicians are employing to perpetuate the narrative of parental rights.

The Current Conservative Regime

Regardless of the outcomes of these cases, Bush's policies and funding reforms were a major victory for the Christian right. However, it could not last forever. When Barack Obama became president in 2008, his administration began to prioritize cutting back the funding allocated to states that were exclusively implementing abstinence-only education through CBAE programming. By 2012, the funding was back down to \$55 million a year, which was still provided by guidelines of the PRWORA welfare reform. Obama made it a priority to put more federal money towards contraceptive based sexual education and programs that were evidence based (Kliff). However, when Donald Trump came into office, these abstinence-only funds were renewed and raised to \$75 million a year ("Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Programs"). Access to accurate information continues to be of the utmost importance, because this is the true cost of Bush's moral agenda and the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only education.

Unfortunately, the Christian right and conservative politicians are looking to pick up where Bush's policies left off and take them even further. As sexuality topics become more prominent in the media, there has come to be a huge divide in the country as to how sexual education should be handled (Greenwood). With access to abortion being stripped away leading to further conversations about reproductive health, teachers being accused of "grooming" youth into LGBTQIA+ identities, and continued calls for parental rights by religious conservatives, it's no wonder there has been such an explosion in the discourse (Donahue; Natanson and Balingit;

Mays). We are moving away from a mindset of providing families options to opt-out of certain forms of sexual education and towards a censorship of information around sexuality, like the case of Governor DeSantis of Florida (Florida State, House Bill 1557). He has continued this trajectory with further attacks on curriculums and books for school aged children (Izaguirre). It is crucial that the American public stay aware of what these different politicians are attempting to put into place and be prepared to fight for students' right to have access to medically accurate and socially constructive information about sexuality.

Enter, the talking heads of Fox News. People like Chris Rufo and Matt Walsh have been at the forefront of targeted attacks against schools, along with other public institutions, and have become mainstays on Fox News programming. They have stoked the flames of hysteria around the handling of topics related to race and sexuality, and the effects that it is having on the United States, particularly white men. This has been portrayed as advocating for parental rights, attempting to preserve the very poorly defined and applied concept that Bush also relied on for power.

Chris Rufo was once a documentary filmmaker, but upon making a film for PBS about poverty in America, he quickly became more firmly conservative politically. He became convinced that poverty was “deeply embedded in ‘social, familial, even psychological’ dynamics” and could not be alleviated by government policy (Wallace-Wells). His opinion illustrates his perception of government overreach and the idea of individual rights and responsibilities, mirroring Bush. His first targeted attack was aimed at the discussion of race and privilege across social institutions in the United States. Upon seeing examples of anti-racist training that many companies were beginning to implement, he became outraged and decided this topic would be ripe for building up the conservative base (Gabriel).

Through his own research he discovered the works of legal scholars like Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, which belonged to the movement known as Critical Race Theory (CRT). The first key element of this framework is that racism is a normal, everyday occurrence, and even so, is never fully addressed. Secondly, racism provides material advantages for elite whites, as well as social advantages to working-class white, meaning that they are granted privileges simply for being white, even if they do not gain materially. Lastly, race is a social construct, in that society groups people by their physical traits, without considering the many other traits that a variety of people have in common, for instance their personality or intelligence. The social construct of race does not consider intersectionality across multiple identity categories. This simply plays into commonly held stereotypes about different races, which vary across settings and times. Most importantly, these systems of oppression and discrimination have been embedded in the founding of the United States and still play a significant role in its development. The framework is a tool to understand the root of inequities across the Western world (Delgado et al.). However, the full academic scholarship of CRT has not been popularly used in public schools around the United States: “There is little to no evidence that critical race theory itself is being taught to K-12 public school students, though some ideas central to it, such as lingering consequences of slavery, have been” (B. Anderson).

Regardless, Rufo then began to attach that term to everything that involved conversations around race in America and weaponized it for use by the conservative right, proclaiming: “Strung together, the phrase ‘critical race theory’ connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American” (Wallace-Wells). This moved beyond workplace training and into attacking schools that were attempting to have more frank conversations about race. He has become very concerned about how young, white people are

being taught about race and has assisted in helping draft bills that ban or restrict conversations about race around the country (Wallace-Wells). He has stated: “In practice, critical race theory in schools is a form of state-sanctioned racism. The lessons traffic in three key concepts: race essentialism, collective guilt, and racial superiority theory” (Rufo). The fact of the matter is that CRT is not a racist tool being used against white people, but a framework to dissect the historical power of whiteness and comprehend how systems and institutions could be changed to build a more equitable society. Rufo’s explicit push against CRT and his attempts to restrict discourse around race are key tools for maintaining white supremacy within the United States.

After tackling CRT, Rufo has now begun to focus his attention on sexuality in schools, stating “The reservoir of sentiment on the sexuality issue is deeper and more explosive than the sentiment on the race issues” (Gabriel). He is tying the issues of sexuality back to the old trope of sexual predators, this time using the buzzword “groomers” (Gabriel), which is gaining a lot of traction in public discourse. It’s the same style of attack that he used to take on CRT. Continuously use the term so that it becomes the first association with any issues of sexuality, creating hysteria. While advocating for more voucher programs and dismantling of public schools, Rufo has said people “need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust” and that they “have to be ruthless and brutal” (Weingarten and Edelman). He is explicitly targeting a social institution that serves the majority of children in the United States, sowing the seeds of distrust in order to create a more privatized and conservative society. Rufo sees schools as a battleground for the moral center of the United States, and he intends to be on the frontline of those battles.

Matt Walsh is another conservative pundit that has made a similar impact as Rufo, but has remained solely focused on gender and sexuality. Affirming transgender children has been

the main focus of his vitriol within his work with *The Daily Wire*. He labels parents who openly support their transgender children as “child abusers” (J. Brown). Walsh’s anti-trans, but also extremely misogynistic, stance even led him to make a documentary titled *What is a Woman?* In this documentary he travels around the United States, and even makes a trip to Africa, to try and establish what a woman is. He actively creates a narrative to discredit trans identities, belittle homosexual men, and double down on stereotypes of women, establishing them as the victims of LGBTQIA+ rhetoric. The end of the film is his wife defining a woman as “an adult human female who needs help opening this,” while gesturing to a jar of pickles (*What Is a Woman?*). Walsh very clearly illustrates his intent to uphold the patriarchy, proclaiming superiority over women and refusing to acknowledge the truth of those that do not fit within his heteronormative definition of society.

Which leads back to Governor DeSantis and others like him, who have taken on the doctrine of Rufo and Walsh and began to apply it to educational policy. Beyond his “Don’t Say Gay” bill and an explicit statewide ban on CRT, DeSantis has continued to push further with the “Stop WOKE Act,” which stands for Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees. Through this act, DeSantis will be “prohibiting instruction that could make some parties feel they bear ‘personal responsibility’ for historic wrongdoings because of their race, sex or national origin” (Migdon). Again, this is an unveiled attack on programs and curriculums that create discourse around white supremacy and privilege in order to highlight inequities faced by non heteronormative white people. This has been followed by a new bill which modifies how school instructional resources are chosen and vetted (Florida State, House Bill 1467). This will criminalize individuals who do not ensure that all books in schools fall within the more restrictive framework of the previously mentioned bills. Basically, if books touch on topics of sexuality or race, they have got to go. It is

being seen as a book ban, as many books for young readers have begun to touch on these issues and address them in developmentally appropriate ways. Inspired by DeStantis, and aided by Rufo, many other states have begun to draft similar bills, which have been deemed “education gag orders” by Pen America (Trawick). The attacks on schools have only just begun.

Unfortunately, the white Christian right is not the only group that may be in favor of blocking such content in schools. There are a wide variety of cultures that could also have issues with sexuality being taught to their children. Their apprehensions and oppositions coalesce with that of these conservative figureheads and in turn aids in upholding the white supremacist patriarchy, even while it is also seeking to hold them down.

Chapter 3: Varying Cultural Perspectives on Sexuality

While the Christian right, fueled by a history of white supremacist patriarchy, has been the most vocal in publicly calling out the perceived dangers of comprehensive sexuality education, there are people from wide arrays of cultural backgrounds that may be just as conservative around topics of sexuality. In fact, some immigrant parents may be coming from one of the 67 countries that criminalize homosexuality (“Map of Countries That Criminalise LGBT People”). Or perhaps they are not strictly conservative, but more plainly, various cultures may observe sexuality through a different lens than that of the Western world, which is often driven by social movements in countries like the United States. Western progressive discourse on sexuality can also become part of an imperialistic apparatus. Taking into account the ways in which LGBTQIA+ topics and the sexual autonomy of women can be used to support and promote American expansionism, philosopher and queer theorist Jasbir Puar coined the term "homonationalism." This concept illustrates “how ‘acceptance’ and ‘tolerance’ for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated” (Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism” 336). As Westernized nations push to address the human rights of LGBTQIA+ populations, this signals that nations that take more progressive stances on the issues are somehow more advanced or civilized. However, what is being seen within the countries themselves is the gaining of rights of queer populations, like marriage equality, leading to acceptance and further access to privileges of citizenship for those populations, while racialized others continue to be discriminated against through formal and informal policy (Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*).

Oftentimes, various cultural groups can feel this force at work, which can lead to a more apprehensive approach to sexuality education. Therefore, it is important to consider whether the

topics presented in the proposed CSE standards are a priority for parents of color, immigrant parents, or parents from various faiths. Especially since it has been shown that, “parental participation over the course of a child’s education can help build the kind of trust in the school system that would mitigate the divisiveness of particular controversies” (Bialystok 27). Which means that it is crucial that liberal, mostly white, proponents of CSE do not overlook culturally diverse parents’ beliefs. Without taking this into consideration, the push for CSE could be seen as another form of white supremacy and enforcement of recent Western values of sexuality upon all cultural groups.

Consequently, there must be an analysis of different cultural interpretations and understandings of sexuality in order to find ways to build connections with families in order to better facilitate CSE to provide this “fundamental human right” to youth (“Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Policies and Programs” 401). If this is not a priority of the advocates for sexuality education, it becomes easy for culturally diverse parents and families to be equally offended by the curricular framework and become more aligned with the Christian right’s current regime. This is directly connected to a key aspect of proponents of “Don’t Say Gay” legislation: the focus on parental rights. Conservative legislators believe that it is vital that parents make all decisions about what their children can and should learn in school. Asian, Black, Latinx, and Muslim parents may be feeling similarly, regardless of their political affiliation. Therefore, they may be convinced to align themselves with politicians that are touting their ardent support for parental rights.

Furthermore, ignoring these parents can lead to them being less open to discussing more controversial topics around sexuality and gender, which would further the negative impact on their students. For instance, “When one’s social or political belonging is called into question, it is

natural to defer certain educational decisions to one's cultural community, and even to retreat to more illiberal attitudes" (Bialystok 28). Women and LGBTQIA+ people are fighting for recognition and respect in the social hierarchy along with other racial, ethnic, language, and religious minorities. It seems rational to believe that different minority groups may prioritize themselves, which in turn could make them less likely to sympathize with the others' needs. Or even more likely, they may become aggressive towards other groups fighting for equality because they are easily pitted against one another (Chow; Gosin). Unfortunately, cultural and social needs are leading to a dissonance between parents of color's educational priorities and those of white liberals and possibly their own children. Oftentimes the solution for parents of color and immigrant parents is "authoritarian parenting, which emphasizes obedience and power assertion" which may signal a "reaction to ecological demands (e.g., discrimination, fear for adolescents' safety in impoverished or high crime neighborhoods)" (Raffaelli et al. 120). All of this combined creates the perfect conditions for non-white parents to become aligned with the goals of conservative, Christian right, who in turn employ white supremacist patriarchy to the detriment of communities of color and immigrants.

Sociologist Janice M. Irvine is known for her in-depth analysis of sexuality in the United States, having published many books on the matter. In *Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities*, she identifies major domains used within all cultures to construct their interpretations of sexuality, including: Role of the family, gender relations, reproductive strategies, sexual violence, sexual language, and sexual identities (11-24). Each of these domains is important when considering how CSE may or may not align with vast arrays of cultural identities and practices. Pedagogues must conceptualize how this could affect the acceptance of CSE and begin to conceptualize ways of building bridges to meet these cultural needs in order to

provide the crucial health information that all youth deserve. The examples covered do not intend to imply homogeneity within cultures or across cultures, but highlight how the varied perceptions of sexuality are prevalent and wide ranging.

Topics of sexual nature can play a complicated role within the confines of any family, especially as the major way most cultures understand and honor family is through reproduction. However, conversations about sex within families are often seen as taboo. Importantly, the social development of identity and self is often filtered through that of the family. Many cultures highlight the importance of family over the needs of the self, including sexually. For example, “Latinas traditionally have defined themselves in relation to their families, sacrificing and caring for others” (Irvine 18). Similarly, “Unlike the Western affirmation of individualism, Asians stress the needs of the collective or family over those of the individual” (18). Sexuality can be seen as centered on the individual’s identity and self interest. In other cultural contexts, this assertion of the self could be perceived as transgressive and disruptive. This is especially relevant in cultures from Sub-Saharan Africa and their concept of “ubuntu,” which means “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” (Shahid). In other words, individuals only exist and function in the context of their relationship to the community. It also speaks against the ideas of selfishness, or Western individualism, and the urge to tell others how best to govern themselves (Shahid). This is tied intimately to Puar’s homonationalism and the ways in which we devalue the perspectives of various cultural groups. Therefore, in relation to discourse around sexuality, it may not necessarily be about shaming or withholding information, but rejecting the politics of the self. Consequently, this often creates a cultural practice of non-engagement in conversations around sex, which can lead to shame and confusion for youth within these communities since they have no personal outlet for the questions that may arise from their social life or from the

media that surrounds them (Chan 90). The tight-knit nature of many cultural communities may make it hard to reconcile the school as a source of this type of information, but CSE could help meet such an immense need for students that are not able to have those conversations within the context of their families.

The lack of openness can be especially important when observing the ways in which different cultures approach sex in relation to gender. Across the majority of cultures, rigid gender distinctions play a crucial role in the development of cultural identity. The dominance of men, along with the more nurturing and subservient expectations of women, often leads to an unbalanced system of power. Consider the example of Latinx sexuality: “Although men are expected to be sexually experienced, adventurous, and virtually uncontrolled, Latina sexuality is often highly regulated” (Irvine 13). This is similar across many cultures in which men are often immune to the responsibilities of sex, while women are often made to feel shame around their sexual needs. More specifically, “Adolescent females were more likely than males to report receipt of instruction on waiting until marriage to have sex” (“US Adolescents’ Receipt of Formal Sex Education”). This aligns with the Christian right’s push for abstinence-only sexual education. Additionally, it is often seen that men have the authority over all sexual matters. When interviewed some Muslim mothers felt that they did not need to provide sexual information to their daughters because “that responsibility was left to their daughters’ husbands who ‘should know more about sex than she’” (Orgocka 260). Formal sexual education for adolescents would contradict the censoring of sexual topics within the family and the assertions that sexual knowledge should be learned as an adult through gendered hierarchies and interactions.

Moreover, the ways in which males and females are acculturated in relation to their sexuality has a direct impact on their reproductive health. According to the Guttmacher Institute, while instances of teenage pregnancy continue to decline, Black, Latinx, and indigenous teenagers continue to be more likely to experience an unplanned pregnancy than their white peers (“About Teen Pregnancy”). This underscores the importance for youth of color having access to relevant information about pregnancy prevention, including methods for safe sex. Black and Latinx males are often less likely to receive information around methods of birth control than their white peers, while Black females were almost half as likely to learn about where to obtain birth control than their white and Latinx peers (“US Adolescents’ Receipt of Formal Sex Education”). With higher teenage birth rates, there are immensely more social implications, which fall hardest on young women. Only half of teen mothers receive a high school diploma, compared to almost 90% of women who did not have a child (*About Teen Pregnancy*). With less academic success, comes the higher likelihood of living in poverty which leads to further social and health impacts (Cutler and Lleras-Muney). It is important to be clear that this should not be remedied through the Christian right’s abstinence approach, but through all youth, regardless of their gender, gaining a comprehensive understanding of all forms of contraception.

Operating concurrently with reproductive health and contraception are perceptions of sexual relationships and consent. Sexual violence is a persistent and insidious problem around the globe. The openness in which different cultures are able to discuss healthy sexual relationships and define consent, or lack thereof, varies widely. But the truth of the matter is, “Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native women are at greater risk for rape victimization than white women” (Thompson et al. 284). But often conversations about sexual

violence are tied intimately to historical contexts of race and gender, including “the fusion of contemporary discussions of African-American sexuality with historical stereotypes of the Black male rapist and the sexually promiscuous and immoral Black female” (Irvine 24). Racism and sexuality are entwined in the United States, including the way that society views perpetrators and victims of sexual violence. Regardless of race or sexuality, there is an equal opportunity for anyone to be a perpetrator or a victim. That fact must be highlighted across all communities in order to combat stereotypes, while providing education around safety precautions and the ways in which to report an incident. It is vital to realize that sexual violence is tied to geographic proximity and social interaction, not just certain identity markers. People are more likely to be attacked by someone from within their community than from outside (Miller). Ensuring that each distinct racial or cultural group knows their risk of sexual violence is a key component to begin to narrowing racial disparities and the overall instances of rape and intimate partner violence.

Language plays a critical role in the ways that sexuality topics are communicated and understood. Within different languages, there may not even be the vocabulary to describe the topics related to sexuality, let alone CSE standards more specifically. This is especially prevalent in many Asian languages. For instance, “The Tagalog language lacks clinical terms for penis, vagina, and intercourse; and the Mien and Hmong communities ... do not have written languages at all. It may be difficult to discern the grounds of sexual communication in these cultures” (Irvine 17). Likewise, in some languages like Arabic, there are not direct translations for many sexual acts (Alaedine). All of this can make it extremely difficult for those parents to fully comprehend what is being taught to their children or communicate their own views on the subjects. Within many cultural settings outside the West, conversations about sex are based solely around procreation, not pleasure or ideas of the needs of the self. This does not mean that

people from these cultures do not desire or experience pleasure, only that they are not prioritized as topics of conversation. Most often, non-Western cultures do not develop sexual vocabulary that mirrors that of the West because of a vastly different outlook on life and sexuality. This is an important aspect to the disconnect between children of immigrants who have become culturally hybrid and their parents who hold on to their culture of origin. Inherently there are aspects of sexuality that are impossible to communicate across immigrant generations as they become more entwined with Western values and the English language used to express them. As a case in point, “How are Muslim men and women discussing their gender and sexuality issues...And in what languages and cultures are these taking place? There is much to be learned from the dominance of the Western, English-speaking academy that aims to ‘translate’ everything” (De Sony). This again points to Puar’s homonationalism and the domination of Western forms of social justice ideation. However, if schools make a genuine effort, this may present an avenue for them to assist in bridging the conversational divides between parents and their children through CSE and other intentional programming.

A major component of CSE is the affirmation it provides LGBTQIA+ identities. However, this may be its most controversial aspect across all cultures. First, and foremost, many parents of color worry about the concept of multiple minority status, because they simply cannot reconcile queer identities against their already precarious position in the social hierarchy. In a response from an interview with a Latinx father about his Lesbian daughter, there was “acknowledgment that because they already endure marginalization for being Latin[x], he did not want to heighten this experience with anti-LGBTQ+ stigma directed at his daughter or family” (Schmitz et al. 839). With society already working against them, why would they want to put another target on their families? This presents a huge obstacle for many minority parents of queer

youth. Social upward mobility is difficult for most, so it can become obvious why parents would not support sexuality education that may help their children conceptualize a future that may have additional hardship. However, the denial of those identities will still lead to insurmountable damage to those children.

When it comes to race in the United States, often the first thought is Black and white. The Black community is seemingly always on high alert. They are the targets of discriminatory laws and police violence. This is something that is widely understood in their communities. Therefore, it seems reasonable to consider that being queer and Black would increase their targeting. Interestingly, it seems that Black queer youth have similar experiences to their white counterparts when coming out. Black and white families have been shown to react similarly, with the exception of one factor. White families may mourn for the loss of a “normal” life for their child, Black families often do not. “[C]onsidering the elevated risk for poverty, illness, and incarceration faced by Black people, such a future vision of a ‘normal’ life was perhaps less of a ‘sure thing’” (LaSala and Frierson). Surely there are Black families that are worried about their children doubling up on minority statuses, but this interpretation is intriguing. Perhaps, since Black people are already perceived to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy, these parents are acknowledging that they are at the highest disadvantage so it does not affect their perception of the world. This could be a way into a further conversation about sexuality and gender education.

Still, Black youth are often less open about their queer identities and less likely to tell many people. In doing so they are protecting themselves from their families' more conservative opinions of family and gender roles. Conversations around nonheteronormative sexuality are not encouraged within families or community institutions, while the expectations of gendered Blackness are often heightened. Subsequently, this inspires Black queer youth to put on “a

discrete performance of self that attempts to quiet sexuality and avoid sexual taboos. An everyday feeling transforms into an everyday politics— a way of being in the world that privileges privacy and discretion” (McCune x). Therefore, Black queer youth are seen seeking out queer spaces less often than their white counterparts (Rosario et al.). This is all specifically tied to gender expectations from within and outside the Black community. Stereotypical portrayals of Black masculinity are often used to justify violence committed against Black men. Black men are held to a certain standard of strength, almost like wearing armor. So, being queer can very much be in conflict with how young Black men are attempting to survive in the world (Wise). This can be a cause for concern and anger from their families, making it a hard topic for parents to accept being covered in schools.

Within Latinx communities, both indifference and rejection to LGBTQIA+ members of their communities are also observed. Indifference often presents itself within Dominican communities, in that families know about their queer family members, but it becomes an unspoken part of the family dynamic. It is “a given that their homosexuality was sufficiently understood or assumed by those around them so as to render its revelation redundant” and not a subject for further familial conversation (Decena 26). This is a further extrapolation of the resistance of the individual in lieu of focusing on the wider community. The somewhat performative process of “coming out” is often not a priority and “some queers of color have an uneasy relationship with the closet because they resist the depoliticized ‘liberation’ that coming out promises, which currently resides in a gay identity as a sociocultural formation and as a niche market” (18-19). This is yet another connection to homonationalism and the ways in which the West seems to dictate how queerness must be acknowledged. Therefore, there is an indifference to outward celebration of the queer identity and preference for more quiet social understanding.

In this case, the indifference would seem to indicate that these families would not favor further exploration of sexuality in their children's education, because it is not a subject to be shouted about from the rooftops. The roots of this indifference may also lie in religion, as is seen in the Christian right. Studies have shown that many Latinx families use religious rhetoric to justify rejection of queer identities (Schmitz et al.). This is common within many cultures, with strong Christian values encouraging youth to fight against their identity and simply choose to not be queer. The strong familial networks of Latinx communities make this incredibly difficult on these children as they try to understand themselves.

For many Asian American youth, falling within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum can often be difficult to reconcile their model minority status. For example: "Scholars have posited that some Asian cultures are reported to be more socially conservative and thus generally view LGBTQ+ identities as taboo; LGBTQ+ status can be seen as an obstacle for [Asian American] youth to achieving parental, familial, and immigrant community expectations" (Gorse et al. 907). There is often familial pressure to succeed, academically or economically, which is seen as a reflection of the family and the collective good of the group (Saito). In considering that most Asian cultures place sex in the contexts of procreation and shy away from direct conversations about sexual health, there is also the belief that the lack of knowledge about sexuality will prevent sexual activity that could bring dishonor to the family (Okazaki 34). This is why sexual education would easily be in conflict with their value system. It is very likely that Asian parents also neglect to acknowledge homosexuality because of its ties to individualism and how acting upon those urges is in express opposition to the good of the family as a whole. Additionally, these beliefs connect directly to the fear of multiple minority status and the perception that being LGBTQIA+ and Asian puts a larger target on your back, and therefore, your family.

While Islam expressly forbids homosexuality, there is a more complex relationship at play between the two seemingly opposing identities. In queer theory there is an ever growing conversation about the intersection of LGBTQIA+ and Muslim identities. Since the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror that followed, Muslims are often seen as inherently unAmerican. This is regardless of their citizenship status, but also contributes to Muslim people around the world's aversion to Westernization. Part of Westernization, and homonationalism, is the proliferation of LGBTQIA+ rights and public displays. However, "the western 'egalitarian' version of homosexuality is largely absent from Islamic cultures" while studies have found evidence that "suggest a wide variance in how homosexual conduct existed or exists and was or is understood in Islamic societies" (Rahman 950). So, it may be equally likely that denial of LGBTQIA+ identities is closely tied to the objections to Westernization and discrimination against Muslims. Queer Muslim youth obviously feel this, stating: "My parents often say that there aren't any LGBTQ people in our community. My mosque often says that you cannot be LGBTQ and a Muslim" (*I'm Muslim and I Might Not Be Straight*). This makes it extremely difficult for queer Muslim youth to reconcile their identities and have open communication within their families and communities, which leads to a "don't ask, don't tell" way of living (Zainab). As seen through many of the examples throughout this chapter, Eastern and Western values around the individual and identity are fully in conflict, which puts the youth from these communities living in America at risk from adverse sexual health effects.

Often for these reasons, LGBTQIA+ students, especially those that are from racial minority groups, face a barrage of challenges at home, at school, and in public spaces. They are at a higher risk of harassment, homelessness, dropping out of school, interactions with law enforcement, and suicide than their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Rusow et al.). Given these

threats, LGBTQIA+ students may be better served by a school environment that can act as a refuge from these experiences. According to the Human Rights Campaign's "2018 LGBTQ Youth Report," "Only 24% of LGBTQ youth can 'definitely' be themselves as an LGBTQ person at home." In many instances, families can be unaccepting, forcing their LGBTQIA+ children to either hide their identity or be kicked out of the house. When students decide to hide themselves at home, it can feel suffocating to spend extended time in that space. If they decide to embrace themselves and find themselves kicked out, they face the severe realities of homelessness. Violence, hunger, and the constant anxiety of wondering where they will sleep next. There is a higher chance of facing violent encounters and interacting with the criminal justice system. "[T]he disproportionate number of LGBTQ youth within the U.S. youth homelessness population ... are often in constant contact with police" (Robinson 212). The earlier people are exposed to policing and the criminal justice system, the more likely they are to continue to have troubles with the law. For instance, many homeless youth become involved with drugs, theft, and prostitution, which all put them on the radar of the police (Kidd). Beyond the effects of policing on a person's psyche, the myriad of troubles a homeless youth can be pulled into have long lasting effects on their livelihood.

If there are not concerted efforts to build trust around CSE with families from diverse cultural backgrounds, power will continue to be funneled to white supremacist patriarchal structures. In turn, those structures will continue to target and negatively impact communities of color and immigrants. While voting trends are rarely dictated by single issues, the increase in Latinx voters for Republican candidates in recent national elections is one example of the aligning of minority groups and white supremacist patriarchal ideals. Meanwhile, Republicans

continue to push for reform on issues like immigration, affirmative action, and voting rights, through increased gerrymandering, which often negatively impact minority communities.

Conclusion: Building Bridges Between CSE and Families

In order to support all families, including those from diverse cultural backgrounds, with any policy mandating CSE, there would need to be investment from a wide range of stakeholders. This includes the families themselves, the schools, and community based organizations (CBO), especially those connected to health professionals. Each of these would play a unique but vital role in setting up CSE for success, which in turn would help combat the persistent presence of white supremacist patriarchy inside and outside institutions of the United States.

It has been shown time and again that engaging with parents and including them in important decisions can make a significant difference (Goodman and Hooks). Obviously, this would come down to the micro level, with each individual school having to take their own approach, but that is a central feature of education. Ideally, all schools are aiming to meet the needs of their community. This entails schools creating opportunities for parents to play an active role. Having parents involved could ensure that the topics being discussed are culturally relevant and applicable. Schools could form committees of parents and staff to discuss the sexuality education curriculums. These types of meetings would also provide space for parents to ask questions, clear up misconceptions, and give their opinions on what or how topics should be covered. Upon setting the curriculum, all parents in the community, grade specific, should be kept informed of upcoming lessons and topics through school sanctioned forms of communication, like emails or newsletters.

Together, all of this would avoid parents feeling as though decisions are being made behind their backs. It has been shown that if parents are informed about what their children will be seeing, they are more supportive of the content, even when it comes to sexuality education

(Petrzela 198). In the end, this would come down to the schools having to make the time and space for parent meetings to cover the curriculum and concerted parent outreach efforts. This is particularly important for students that may identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. To have support at home and at school would lead to major positive outcomes for them academically (Sadowski). Keeping families informed and invested will go a long way towards providing critical social, physical, and emotional health benefits for their children. When parents and schools are battling one another, the ones that truly lose are the students.

Another aspect of addressing parent concerns and meeting students' needs entails the schools having more diverse teaching staffs that are reflective of the school community. "Same-race teachers may be more able to link cultural contexts to learning in ways that could benefit racial and ethnic minority students" (Figlio). This positive connection not only applies to students, but also families. Having families and teachers from similar backgrounds could allow them to connect more easily and communicate their questions or concerns more freely. This could also allow for the teachers to relate more closely on the sensitive topics being discussed, as they may have had similar experiences as the students.

Consequently, in order to have a teaching force that is more prepared to grapple with sexuality education, it would be best to focus attention on training and retaining teachers from diverse backgrounds. There are current obstacles to this goal, as students of color, most notably Black and Latino/a students, are less likely to attain a bachelor's degree, which is a requirement for becoming a teacher (Figlio). All of this is interconnected. Students of color need more role models that they can relate to throughout their K-12 education in order to improve their chances at academic success, which would lead to higher percentages of students of color enrolling in colleges and universities. In turn, more people of color would be motivated to enter the teaching

force. Even once that is accomplished, there has to be policy in place to bolster the retention of teachers of color and ensure that they are supported in their development as educators.

Additionally, there is a more complex question related to race that arises from this broader conversation. One that has come along with current trends to have students engage in inquiry surrounding social justice. While attempting to raise students' awareness of sexuality, race, and other social issues, are we neglecting foundational literacy skills? This may not be the first question that comes to mind, but it is the reality in many classrooms around the country. Urban schools serving predominantly students of color often have literacy rates well below the national average. Consequently, there is a well documented and often discussed achievement gap between white students and most other racial minority groups (McDonough; Reardon et al.). Likewise, it is important to consider the large portion of immigrant students that are designated as English Learners (EL). As EL students enter the country at widely different ages and developmental stages, their literacy proficiency is greatly affected. In fact, EL literacy proficiency rates in English hover in the single digits for fourth and eighth graders ("Academic Performance and Outcomes for English Learners"). These low literacy rates are leading to ELs and students of color to exit high school without being fully literate: "Adult illiteracy directly affects an individual's employment options, likelihood to live in poverty, likelihood to be incarcerated, access to adequate health care and health outcomes, and life expectancy. Generational illiteracy makes it increasingly difficult to escape these circumstances, and millions of Americans face this reality every day" ("Improving Literacy in the United States").

Without a strong foundation in literacy it is extremely difficult to function in society. Being able to read and write allows individuals the opportunity to explore their interests and identity for themselves, and facilitates engagement in critical conversations about the world

around them. Because of the way that public schools have different levels of success depending on the location and community, these effects are being felt hardest in communities of color (Sisco et al.). Therefore, even if these students are aware of sexuality and racial inequalities, they might not have the requisite skills to engage with the government and organizations to make an impact. Schools should be aiming to create empowered members of society, but that cannot be a reality if we ignore illiteracy across wide swaths of the population.

In this vein, it is important to consider how the CSE standards can be leveraged through literature to more seamlessly engage with these topics. In order to better build literacy, students need reading experiences with a variety of sources. Literature provides a powerful gateway into making various sexuality and gender topics visible. Whether through a book that helps readers understand the impact of consent and its associated emotions, or exposing readers to identities that are different from their own. This allows LGBTQIA+ students to be affirmed, while also inviting heterosexual students to become more familiar with LGBTQIA+ themes, which would ideally increase their allyship (Bittner). Literature allows students to see a wide range of characters, which also makes it possible to see the diversity of all communities in a variety of contexts. The analysis of LGBTQIA+ authors and their work offers students the chance to look critically at how LGBTQIA+ stories are represented and what that does to enrich the community. Most of all, reading literature gives students a window into a wider realm of joys, struggles, and possibilities of the lives of LGBTQIA+ characters. However, this is the exact content Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has targeted with his “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which he now aims to expand past third grade and all the way through twelfth (Izaguirre). Stories that include queer characters normalizes them in society, which many more conservative people are against. So while this could address concerns about literacy, it may still be a strategy that is not favored by

some parents of color. Regardless, it is a strategy to be considered when trying to formulate how to feasibly cover these topics without causing negative impacts on student learning.

Outside of the teachers themselves, other staff in the school building will also play an important role in furthering conversations about sexuality and gender. Counselors, as well as school social workers, are key components to the success of students socially and emotionally. Beyond assisting students at school, they can work as a bridge between school and home, including supporting LGBTQIA+ students and their families (Ginicola et al.). Likewise, they would be able to help students with instances of sexual violence or other sexual health concerns. A counselor can then play as active a role as the student allows in helping them communicate with their families. Parents may be open to meeting with the counselor because they are confused about their child's identity or they have concerns about a change to their emotional state. With the help of a good counselor, families can become more open and aware of labels, identities, and resources to help make their child feel affirmed and safe at home. If students are fearing the possibility of homelessness, the counselor can get the correct agencies involved that can support the student and their family. The risk of suicide and self-harm must be actively monitored by the counselor, but this would require other staff to report any incidents that may be cause for concern. Overall, counselors are the connective tissue between what happens outside and inside school.

Finally, it would be important to get CBOs involved, especially any that relate to health services and could provide relevant and timely guidance on the subjects of sexual health and identity. This would help provide legitimacy to the programming while also cultivating local networks that families and students could interface with outside of school when looking for more support. Finding ways to link the school with local counseling services that could service

families and students in more private settings would be the most ideal arrangement. While having CSE in the schools will play a critical role in promoting positive, healthy development, there will still be more support required that will not fit into confines of the school building or hours.

In the end, bringing CSE to schools across the United States would be a major step in ensuring that all students feel safe, affirmed, and informed with relevant, medically accurate information. Schools are such a vital space for all youth and should actively attempt to provide them with the tools they need for personal success. School does not exist in a vacuum, so while it is a significant space for all youth, they are still tied to their families. Each family, no matter how they are perceived, want what they think is best for their child as well. In order for CSE to begin to make headway, there must be a concerted effort to engage with parents and give them the support they need to understand the significance of the content being covered.

Conservative aggression must be addressed publicly and strategically in order to make progress in this multifaceted battle over sexuality. Homonationalism must be considered when designing curriculums and communicating with parents. Without this consideration there is a risk of alienating families who struggle to contend with the privileges awarded to some while others continue to be discriminated against. However, the youth of this country deserve the opportunity to care for their bodies and minds. In totality, providing youth with tools to strengthen their autonomy over their sexual health, both physically and emotionally, creates the space for deeper understanding of individual needs and identities. In turn, this helps empower all those involved, most crucially women and sexual minorities. The growing sense of empowerment will create opportunities to nurture a population that has the ability to recognize and combat white supremacist patriarchal structures that put limits on the freedoms and development of all citizens.

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